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# Subnational climate justice for the French Outre-mer: postcolonial politics and geography of an epistemic shift

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**ABSTRACT:** This paper presents France's relation to climate change from the perspectives of the French overseas territories: the Outre-mer. Scattered across the Atlantic Ocean, the Indian Ocean, and the Pacific Ocean, these formerly colonized territories are subnational jurisdictions of France. Through examining their greenhouse gas emissions, their ecological importance, their economic conditions, as well as their policies, I argue that understanding the Outre-mer climate change perspectives demands an epistemic shift characterized by two theoretical gestures. Firstly, the Outre-mer perspectives require moving beyond the single geographical imaginary of France that only represents its European mainland. Contributing very little to France's greenhouse gas emissions, these territories are particularly exposed and particularly vulnerable to the effects of climate change, making the case for a subnational climate justice. Secondly, beyond their portrayal as foreign and voiceless victims, the Outre-mer perspectives also recognize the presence of postcolonial subjects as political and historical actors facing climate change, calling forcefully for postcolonial equality and social justice.

*Keywords:* climate change, climate justice, France, Outre-mer, postcolonial politics, subnational island jurisdictions (SNIJs)

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## Introduction

In December 2015, Paris hosted the United Nations Conference on Climate Change (COP21) where a historic deal to cut greenhouse gas emissions was reached. A goal to limit the rise in temperature to under 2° C by 2100 was set. So far, 175 countries have ratified the Paris Agreement. Although Paris was at the centre of this conference and the French government was proud to play a key role in reaching this accord, some of the places in France that are most exposed to the effects of climate change are located far from Paris. Rising sea levels, intensification of extreme climate events and loss of biodiversity pose serious threats to the small French islands in the Caribbean Sea, the Indian Ocean and the Pacific Ocean. Sitting at the geographical and political margins of the nation, these islands are central to France's experiences of climate change. This paper offers a philosophical inquiry into France's relation to climate change neither from the centre of its capital city, nor from its hexagonally shaped European mainland, but from the perspectives of the French overseas territories: the Outre-mer.

This focus attempts to bridge two divides persistent in the academic scholarship. On the one hand, a significant part of the academic literature on subnational island jurisdictions has focused on questions of sovereignty, identity politics and governance, while paying little to no attention to ecological issues (Aldrich & Connell, 1998; Baldacchino, 2010; Bonilla, 2015; Rezvani, 2014; Grydehøj, 2016). This is evident in the case of the French Outre-mer (Daniel & Constant, 1997; 'L'État Outre-mer', 2016; Lemercier et al., 2014). This absence is particularly striking considering the vast academic expertise on ecological issues in these

territories by ecologists, biologists and geographers (see Saffache, 2003). This results in both the production of an understanding of changes in sovereignty and political status on these islands that is oblivious to ecological issues; and a body of knowledge of these territories' ecosystems that seldom engages with their nonsovereign status. On the other hand, in investigating relations of power between main polluting states and Small Island Developing States (SIDS), the academic literature on climate justice has mostly overlooked the specific political, legal and ecological situations of these former colonies facing global warming (Zellentin, 2015; Kelman & West, 2009; Barnett & Campbell, 2010; Betzold, 2015). Moreover, by concentrating on regional, provincial and metropolitan areas of great size and relevance regarding greenhouse gas emissions such as Acre in Brazil or California in the United States of America, the rare literature that engages with subnational jurisdictions and climate change neglects the cases of these formerly colonized and nonsovereign territories (see Schreurs, 2008; Neto, 2015; Anderton & Setzer, 2017). This paper is a first step in bridging these divides, by taking a closer look at the French overseas territories.

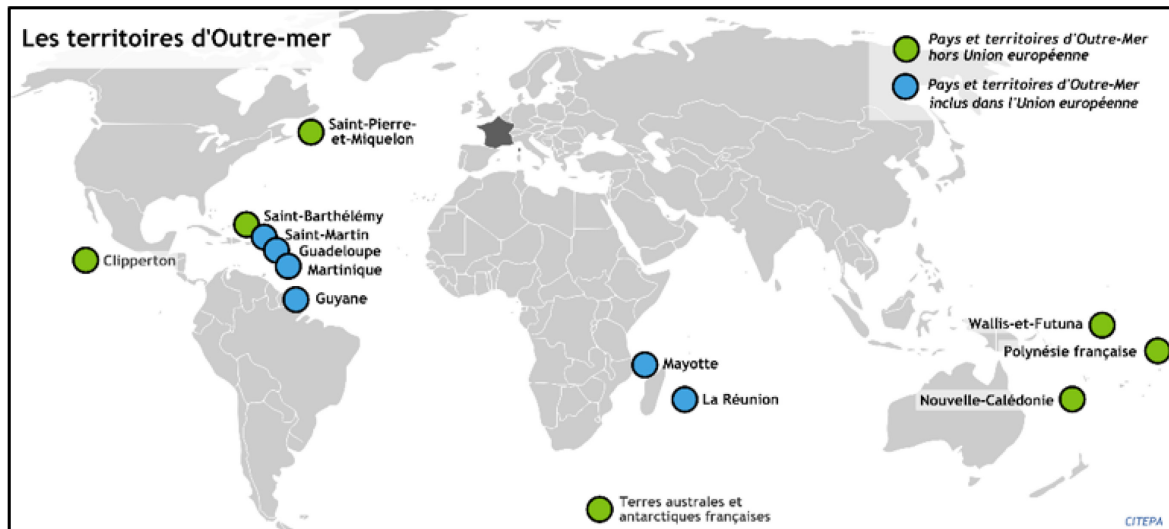
Through examining their greenhouse gas emissions, their economic realities and different national and international policies, I argue that understanding climate change perspectives from the Outre-mer demands an epistemic shift characterized by two distinct yet related theoretical gestures. Firstly, the Outre-mer perspectives require moving beyond the single geographical imaginary of France. The first part of this paper suggests that the experiences of the Outre-mer call into question the dominant geographical narrative of the French nation that only represents its European location. Following this shift, the second part of the paper considers climate justice at the subnational level, tracing the uneven contributions to global warming, the unequal exposure and the differentiated vulnerabilities between mainland France and the Outre-mer. The third part highlights the way in which the political 'in-between' of the Outre-mer and their relations with mainland France impact their access to international funds for climate change mitigation. Secondly, the Outre-mer climate change perspectives also hint at an epistemic shift that recognizes the presence of postcolonial subjects as both political and historical actors. As such, the fourth part of this paper challenges the portrayal of the inhabitants of the Outre-mer as mere victims of climate change, recognizing the historical inhabitants' engagement with environmental issues as well as their political efforts towards a postcolonial equality within the French Republic.

### **Signing in the name of three oceans? Moving beyond the single geographical imaginary of France**

On any given night, after the news on the national television channels in France, comes the weather forecast. Day in, day out, when millions of French citizens turn on their TV sets or computers to hear the news and learn about the forthcoming weather, they are presented with a geographical image of the national territory of the French Republic. That image is comprised of the European mainland and Corsica. It has come to represent the imaginary geography one commonly associates with the French territory. The choice made by most national TV channels not to incorporate the Outre-mer in the geographical representation of the nation is but a token of the insidious exclusion that French citizens related to the Outre-mer and postcolonial immigration face (Ndiaye, 2009; Fassin, 2009, Blanchard et al., 2006; Vermeren & Ferdinand, 2018). The Outre-mer and its inhabitants are absent from the geographical narrative of the nation, that is the scenery and the geographical projection on a map of the idea of the nation. That particular image and location of France, the one that is immediately associated with the name 'France', carries this evident absence of the Outre-mer.

Notwithstanding the symbolic exclusion conveyed, this geographical narrative is particularly misleading when one attempts to grasp the country's relationship with climate change. Understanding the climate change perspectives of the Outre-mer requires an

epistemic shift of the geographical imaginary of France, one that posits France as a multi-located political entity that cannot be reduced to one of its locations, and particularly its European one. Such a move is necessary not only because the Outre-mer are constitutionally integral parts of the French national territory, but also because they hold a central significance with regards to the French experiences of climate change.



**Figure 1:** The overseas territories of France. *Source:* CITEPA, 2016.

In addition to its European land, the Republic of France is comprised of overseas territories located in the Atlantic Ocean, the Indian Ocean and the Pacific Ocean, which harbour 2.7 million French citizens. These territories possess various ecological, geographical and social characteristics, but also possess various constitutional arrangements with the state. These remains of the French colonial empire are mainly composed of small and densely populated islands located in tropical areas that rarely exceed 1,000 km<sup>2</sup>, with the exception of the larger New Caledonia archipelago (18,575 km<sup>2</sup>). In the Atlantic Ocean region, one can find the islands of Martinique, Guadeloupe, Saint-Martin (shared with the Netherlands) and Saint-Barthélemy in the Caribbean, while Saint-Pierre-and-Miquelon lies right off the coast of Newfoundland, Canada. La Réunion and Mayotte rest in the Indian Ocean. French Polynesia, New Caledonia and Wallis-and-Futuna are the French archipelagos in the Pacific Ocean. These archipelagos in the Pacific are more scattered. For instance, French Polynesia consists of 118 small islands, some of which are low-lying atolls. These volcanic islands are mostly made of hilly landscapes at their centre and low-lying plains on the coasts. As illustrated by the map, these islands are characterized by their remoteness from mainland France. The Caribbean islands of Martinique and Guadeloupe are 7000 km away from mainland France while French Polynesia and New Caledonia in the Pacific Ocean are respectively more than 15,000 km and 16,000 km away. Aside from these islands, French Guiana, with over 86,000 km<sup>2</sup> is located on the northern flank of the South American continent.

France is also comprised of mostly uninhabited territories used for scientific and military purposes called ‘Terres Australes et Antarctiques Françaises’ (French Southern and Antarctic Lands), referred to as TAAF, some of which possess permanent scientific and military stations. TAAF is made up of four archipelagos: the archipelago of Crozet, the archipelago of Kerguelen, the Eparses islands, and the islands of Saint-Paul and Amsterdam in the Indian Ocean. TAAF also includes a massive strip of land in the Antarctic called Terre-Adélie, with an estimated surface area of 432,000 km<sup>2</sup>. Likewise, France possesses the very isolated, uninhabited Clipperton Island in the Pacific Ocean. Including Terre-Adélie, the French overseas territories have the same surface area as that of mainland France (about 550,000 km<sup>2</sup>).

Without the huge strip of land of Terre-Adélie, the French overseas territories account for 18% of the overall national land territory.

These territories possess various constitutional arrangements within the French Republic. On the one hand, some of these territories are overseas departments and regions of France, referred to as DROM (Départements et Régions d'Outre-mer). The DROM are composed of the four old colonies (Martinique, Guadeloupe, La Réunion, and French Guiana) and Mayotte, and follow the principle of legislative identity expressed in the Article 73 of the French Constitution. That means that these territories are part of France, and every national and European law applies there, unless otherwise specified. On the other hand, some overseas territories are collectivities of the Outre-mer referred to as COM (Collectivités d'Outre-mer). The COM territories are also part of France and include Wallis-and-Futuna, Saint-Pierre-and-Miquelon, Saint-Martin, Saint-Barthelemy and French Polynesia. They follow the special legislative regime stipulated in Article 74 of the Constitution, where French and European law do not apply automatically without adaptation, unless otherwise specified (Faberon & Ziller, 2007). Following violent upheavals between activists in favour of independence and state police in the late 1980s, New Caledonia has a unique status within France, which allows for greater legislative autonomy and lays out the path for possible independence. A referendum will take place in 2018.

Consequently, these Outre-mer force us to consider France not as a single continuous territorial entity, but as a pluri-located Republic spanning across three oceans. France's engagement and exposure to climate change cannot be reduced to the causes and impacts of the European mainland, but must account for these islands. Indeed, on 22 April 2016, in New York, when former president François Holland ratified the COP 21 accord, his signature carried the experiences of French citizens located in Europe, in the Atlantic, in South America, in the Indian Ocean and the Pacific Ocean.

### **Climate justice in the Outre-mer: low greenhouse gas emissions, high vulnerabilities**

As the latest report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change highlighted, human activities lead to an accelerated warming of the planet (Field et al., 2014, p. 3). Nonetheless, not all countries and inhabitants contribute equally to global warming, nor are all inhabitants affected in the same way (Roberts & Bradley, 2006; Roberts et. al, 2015). Despite their relatively low contribution to global warming, small developing countries, poor people, indigenous people, the disenfranchised and women in poor nations are the first impacted by climate change. Conceiving of France as a pluri-located geographical entity enables us to observe the disparities and differences in relation to climate change between the Outre-mer France and the European France. The Outre-mer case sheds light on the rarely addressed climate justice perspectives of nonsovereign territories.

Indeed, most climate justice movements and academic literature have emphasized the inequalities of contribution to global warming and the geographical and socio-political disparities of its consequences, at both the international and the domestic level (Gardiner, 2011; Shue, 2014). Understandably, calls for distributive justice such as the Bali Principle of Climate Justice have been framed from the standpoint of developing sovereign states (Schlosberg, 2007, pp. 79-99). For instance, academic publications on climate justice in the Caribbean have mostly focused on sovereign small island nations, despite the fact that half of the islands in the region are dependent territories (Baptiste & Rhiney, 2016). Even though nonsovereign islands represented 12% of the population of the Caribbean in 2017 and 5% of the total land area, they account for 29% of the Caribbean islands' marine area under jurisdiction (derived from Flanders Marine Institute, 2016; CIA, 2018).

These international and domestic approaches to climate justice are equally relevant to France. However, the case of the French overseas territories requires examining climate justice

from a slightly different angle. As part of the French national jurisdiction, the Outre-mer brings attention to a subnational level, emphasizing inequalities in the contribution to global warming and its consequences between the Outre-mer and mainland France (Barret, 2014).

The Outre-mer do contribute to global warming. However, amounting to less than 4% of the national population (2.7 million), their greenhouse gas emissions pale in comparison to those of mainland France. In 1990, the reference year for international greenhouse gas emission policies, the overseas territories emitted 12 million tons of Carbon Dioxide Equivalent (CDE), representing just 2.4% of total French emissions (all figures derived from CITEPA, 2016). That year, they emitted 6.2 tons CDE per inhabitant compared to the 9 tons CDE for inhabitants of mainland France. In 2014, while the overall greenhouse gas emissions of France decreased (from 521 to 415 million tons), the Outre-mer emissions rose to 23 million tons – 5.6% of total French emissions. This means that in 2014, the Outre-mer emitted more greenhouse gas per inhabitant (8.5 tons CDE) than mainland France (6.1 tons CDE). Nonetheless, it is important to note that greenhouse gas emissions result not only from patterns of consumption and modes of living – which vary greatly in the Outre-mer – but also from types of land use and modes of energy production. Amounting to 18% of the overall national land territory, the Outre-mer contributed a mere 5.6% of total greenhouse gas emissions in 2014.

The high greenhouse gas emissions per capita of the Outre-mer does indicate a concerning tendency with the Outre-mer use of fossil fuel such as coal and oil. All the Outre-mer use more than 80% of fossil fuel for primary energy: this ranges from 82% in Guiana (2012) to 99% in Mayotte (2011), while Martinique and Guadeloupe stood at 93% in 2012 (Bareigt & Fasquelle, 2014, p. 9). About two-thirds of the energy of the Outre-mer goes into fuel for transport (OREC, 2016, p. 5). Despite having good conditions to develop hydro, solar, geothermic, and wind power, renewable energy is only seen as supplementary to fossil fuel sources. With the exception of Guiana and La Réunion, which make use of hydropower for electricity production, renewable energy in the Outre-mer contributed to less than 10% of the energy used. However small, the development of renewable energy in the Outre-mer is still more advanced in the domain of electricity production than in mainland France (Bareigt & Fasquelle, 2014, p. 18). This is simply because mainland France still clings to nuclear power for 75% of its electricity production (Bareigt & Fasquelle, 2014, p. 21). In short, even though the contributions of the Outre-mer are small, and some initiatives in renewable energy have been implemented, they still have fairly poor climate-neutral policies and practices because of their extreme dependence on fossil fuel.

Contributing very little to global warming in comparison to the rest of France, the Outre-mer represent the places within France's national territory that are most vulnerable to its consequences. Three sets of factors expose the vulnerability of the French overseas territories. Firstly, these territories are vulnerable due to their geography. Most of them are small islands and archipelagos located in tropical latitudes and bear witness to a large rise in temperature. For instance, in Noumea (New Caledonia), from 1970 to 2009, there was an average increase of 1.3° C. In Martinique, from 1965 to 2009, the average temperature increased by 1.44° C, almost twice as high as the global mean temperature increase for the same period (ONERC, 2012, p. 28). Throughout this period, sea levels have risen in the French overseas territories by an average of 3 mm per year (ONERC, 2012, p. 32). It is estimated that sea level rise in these territories may reach anywhere from 40 cm to 1 m above current levels by the end of the century (ONERC, 2012, p. 34). Though these effects are not specific to the Outre-mer (mainland France also had a 1° C rise in mean temperature in the 20<sup>th</sup> century), their insularity and their relatively small size makes any loss of land more impactful on the socio-economic life of inhabitants (Meteo France, 2015). As the water rises on coastal low-lying plains, roads, shops, markets and buildings by the sea could be partly submerged. Likewise, the global rise in temperature may lead to hurricanes of greater intensity

in tropical areas, where most of the Outre-mer are situated (Walsh et al., 2015). The Atlantic hurricanes of Maria, Irma and José in the summer of 2017 point to the tangible threats of such an increase.

Secondly, the Outre-mer have a particular vulnerability because of their rich biodiversity. Indeed, these territories possess highly endemic and vulnerable ecosystems, and most of them are located in biodiversity hotspots. At the national level, these overseas territories harbour 80% of French national biodiversity (Gargominy & Boquet, 2003). This includes terrestrial flora and fauna such as the vast forest reserve of French Guiana and the coastal mangroves of Guadeloupe and Martinique. Guiana holds the largest forest bloc of the European Union and constitutes a major biodiversity reserve. While being six times smaller than mainland France, Guiana harbours three times the number of vertebrate species (ONERC, 2012, p. 49). The Outre-mer biodiversity is also found at sea, in the coral reefs of New Caledonia and Clipperton Island. To grasp the full, global scale of French marine biodiversity, we also need to look at the vast maritime domain of France. Since the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea in December 1982, countries that signed the convention have been able to claim an Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) that extends to 200 nautical miles from land. Over this area, the coastal state has:

sovereign rights for the purpose of exploring and exploiting, conserving and managing the natural resources, whether living or non-living, of the waters superjacent to the seabed and of the seabed and its subsoil (United Nations, 1982, Article 56).

France has an EEZ of 11 million km<sup>2</sup>, the second largest in the world behind the United States. 97% of that zone is located in the overseas territories (MOM, 2016). The overseas marine biodiversity that falls under French sovereignty thus presents not only a major part of the national biodiversity, but more importantly a significant part of the world's biodiversity. 10% of the world's coral reefs and 20% of its atolls are in waters under French jurisdiction (IFRECOR, 2011). The rise of sea temperature and the subsequent acidification of the oceans constitute a threat to these delicate ecosystems.

Thirdly, these territories are vulnerable to climate change because of the poor state of their economies. The economy of the overseas territories of France is mainly based on tourism and the agricultural production of export products such as sugar, bananas and rum in Martinique, Guadeloupe and La Réunion. Some territories have important specific economies like the nickel mining in New Caledonia and the space center in Guiana – Kourou is the spaceport for the French space agency. Despite their differences, most of the Outre-mer have lower GDPs per capita than mainland France, ranging from 10% lower in New Caledonia, 30% lower in Martinique and Guadeloupe, to 50% lower in Guiana and 80% lower in Mayotte (Doligé & Vergoz, 2014, p. 28). Consequently, these territories display much higher levels of unemployment and poverty than mainland France. In 2016, most of the French overseas territories had unemployment rates two or three times higher than the 10% average of mainland France. For instance, the unemployment rates of Guiana, Martinique, Guadeloupe and La Réunion ranged between 18% to 24% (INSEE, 2017a). Moreover, these territories are the places in France that have the highest poverty rates. In a stark contrast to the 14.1% poverty rate of mainland France in 2014, the Outre-mer display rates hovering around 40% – as was the case for La Réunion in 2013 and Guyana in 2014 – and even 84% in the case of Mayotte in 2011 (INSEE, 2017b, p. 64; Brassat & Le Pablic, 2014, p. 1; Actif et al, 2013, p.1; Schneider, 2017). In 2015, 20% of the population of French Polynesia lived under the relative poverty threshold of 385 euros, and 17% of the New Caledonia population lived on less than 600 euros in 2008 (latest field survey) (IEOM, 2017, p. 36; Naudet, 2017, p. 36, p. 41). By threatening the very resources from which local fishermen make a living, as is the case for coral bleaching, global warming places additional stress on already fragile economies.

In short, their high exposure to global warming, their rich biodiversity and their concerning socio-economic conditions make these islands exceptionally vulnerable. With high rates of unemployment, insularity, and fragile economies, these territories possess very little leeway to prepare, adapt and confront climate change. The need for climate justice for the Outre-mer arises from this particular point. Despite their relatively low greenhouse gas emissions and marginal contribution to global warming, these territories are particularly exposed and particularly vulnerable to the effects of climate change.

### **Not the same, not different: facing climate change from the political ‘in between’ of the Outre-mer**

In light of these stark inequalities between the Outre-mer and mainland France, what recourses do these islands have to confront climate change? How does France address climate change nationally and particularly in the Outre-mer? At the margins of the national territory, yet at the centre of the foreseen climate change consequences, what possibilities do these territories have to participate in international accords, to face the immediate consequences and to voice their particular experiences?

The landmark Paris Agreement follows previous commitments from France to confront climate change. With its participation in the previous COP conferences and its ratification of the Kyoto Protocol, France has clearly set out policies to tackle these issues at its national level. On 19 February 2001, France enacted a law that declared the fight against global warming “a national priority” and created a governmental agency dedicated to this issue: Observatoire National sur les Effets du Réchauffement Climatique (ONERC). This agency gathers information on climate change and plays an advisory role for the government. This legislation established the two pillars of French national policy regarding climate change: greenhouse gas emissions reduction and climate change adaptation (Dupuis, 2009). A national ‘climate plan’ was then put in place in 2004, geared towards emissions reduction, and a national plan for climate change adaptation was devised for the period of 2011 to 2015. The latter suggests many actions following different themes such as health, energy, biodiversity and governance. The consequences and the specificities of the Outre-mer are acknowledged. The very fact that ONERC was founded and headed by the late Paul Vergès, a Senator from La Réunion, symbolizes this acknowledgment. However, although these plans recognize the heightened exposure and vulnerabilities of the Outre-mer, these territories are still not the subject of a specific action plan (MEDDTL, 2011, p. 19).

Due to their geographical circumstances, the Outre-mer have called for specific measures. On 27 October 2015, in the run-up to the COP 21 conference in Paris, three Outre-mer deputies, Serge Letchimy (Martinique), Ibrahim Aboubacar (Mayotte) and Maïna Sage (French Polynesia), submitted a report on the consequences of climate change in the overseas territories of France to the French Parliament. The three deputies called attention to the vulnerability of the overseas territories and the need to keep their situation in mind at the coming Paris COP. They highlighted the special situation of the Outre-mer compared to small sovereign territories of similar size and population, addressing their access to international funding to deal with climate change:

Climate change has no frontiers! If the nation honourably takes actions in favour of the most vulnerable sovereign states, it seems inconceivable that the French overseas territories should not be supported in the same way, considering their great environmental and economic vulnerability and the exceptional services produced by their marine and terrestrial biodiversity. These territories, which have served the spatial and military interests of France, are major geostrategic assets that deserve the utmost attention of our country (Sage et al., 2015, p. 54; translation my own).



The deputies point specifically to the exclusion of the overseas territories from international funding mechanisms for Small Islands Developing States (SIDS) such as the Green Climate Fund (GCF). This fund was created by 194 parties at the 2010 United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) as a means to finance projects in Least Developed Countries, SIDS and African states that respond to climate change. Today this fund is worth over 10 billion dollars. Unlike sovereign islands and developing states, the French overseas territories do not have access to it, as the deputies explain:

In the current state of the law, the Green Fund is not accessible for the overseas territories, nor for other overseas territories of contributing parties. Consequently, this exclusion creates a certain inequality with respect to our territories, whose own resources are not much greater than those of sovereign states close to us in each region that are faced with the same difficulties and same current and future challenges (Sage et al., 2015, pp. 54-55; translation my own).

This exclusion from international finance mechanisms regarding climate change is not new. Here, the distinction within the French overseas territories between DROM and COM is relevant. When France signed the United Nation Framework Convention on Climate Change on 13 June 1992 and ratified it on the 25 March 1994, it included all the emissions of its overseas territories. In other words, when France informs other members about the state of progress regarding greenhouse gas reduction, it must include all its overseas territories – meaning both DROM and COM (known at the time as ‘DOM-TOM’). However, France’s signing of the 1997 Kyoto Protocol occurred under the umbrella of the European Union. Because COM do not form part of the European Union or the European market, the provisions of the Kyoto Protocol did not automatically apply to COM and New Caledonia. Therefore, the 1990 greenhouse gas level and the extent to which France is supposed to reduce ‘its’ emissions did not include the emissions and participation of COM – composed, at the time, of Saint-Pierre-and-Miquelon, Mayotte, French Polynesia, Wallis-and-Futuna, and New Caledonia (UNFCCC, 2008). As a result, even though France remains individually responsible for all its greenhouse gas emissions, including all the Outre-mer – and indeed signs in the name of three oceans – the scope of the Kyoto Protocol does not extend to COM and New Caledonia.

The consequences of this exclusion should not be seen only in terms of their actual emissions, which although small, are not negligible (Cambron, 2016, p. 28). More important is the fact that these territories cannot make use of the three programs put in place by this agreement, namely the International Emissions Trading, the Clean Development Mechanism (CDM) and the Joint implementation (JI). This is also the case for other small islands known as the Overseas Countries and Territories of the European Union (OCTs), which are affiliated with European states but are not considered part of the European community: the Dutch Caribbean (Aruba, Curacao, Bonaire, Saba, Sint-Eustatius, Saint-Martin), the British overseas nonsovereign territories, Denmark’s Faroe Islands, Spain’s Canary Islands, and Portugal’s Madeira and Azores. Similarly, France’s ratification of the Paris Agreement and resulting commitment to greenhouse gas emissions reduction does not automatically include the emissions of COM (now composed of islands of Saint-Martin, Saint-Barthelemy, Saint-Pierre-and-Miquelon, French Polynesia, and Wallis-and-Futuna) and New Caledonia. For the French OCTs, this means that they do not have a seat at the table.

The exclusion from these international agreements is a result of an internal process of the metropolitan country. In principle, France’s signature on the Paris Agreement represents those overseas territories that, because of their nonsovereignty, cannot independently sign the agreement. Nonetheless, because of the special legislative autonomies some of the French overseas territories (COM and New Caledonia) possess within the French Constitution, these

territories have to specifically agree to be part of this agreement, through the sole signature of France. All the Outre-mer have agreed to be part of the Paris Agreement, showing their commitment to be part of worldwide climate change mitigation efforts. Their participation was officially acknowledged on 15 June 2016, when the Minister of the Outre-mer, George Pau-Langevin, countersigned the French President's signature of the promulgation decree for the French law authorizing the ratification of the Paris Agreement. However, this agreement on their part did not lead to additional seats or signatures at the United Nations table.

Authorized neither to have their own voice nor to benefit from these international funding mechanisms, the OCTs have to make use of alternative funds made available by their affiliated country or by the European Union whenever possible. To that end, the Association of the Overseas Countries and Territories of the European Union put in place a Partnership Working Party on Environment, encouraging exchanges and 'broad-based' dialogue between the OCTs and the European Commission on specific climate change issues (OCTA, 2013). Furthermore, at the initiative of the French committee for the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN), a specific program for the European overseas actors, called 'Program Best', was launched in 2011, funded by the European Union and aiming to finance conservation projects in these regions. Although that program led to the completion of local projects, the funds are still insufficient for the necessary conservation work and are not of the same level as other European Union conservation programs such as Natura 2000.

It is clear that a stable financial funding mechanism to confront climate change in the outermost regions and overseas territories of Europe is needed. The Economic, Social and Environmental Council of France (CESE), which is the third representative body of France besides the Parliament and the Senate, consisting of designated members from civil society, came to the same conclusion in its 2016 report on the value of climate justice for France. Among its various propositions, the CESE called for a specific climate justice fund for all the territories of France and the implementation, wherever possible, of specific solutions for the Outre-mer (Jouzel & Michelot, 2016, pp. 7-8). Not small island states yet not identical to the other diverse regions and departments of European France, the French Outre-mer are still looking for adequate means of confronting climate change within the existing national and international institutions.

### **Can the French Outre-mer speak about climate change?**

The epistemic shift suggested here goes against two problematic conceptions of climate change and politics. Firstly, contrary to Dipesh Chakrabarty's assertion that the Anthropocene forces us to put aside postcolonial fractures in favour of humanity as a political subject, the Outre-mer perspectives suggest that the disputed histories, social divisions and political conflicts constitutive of human existence on Earth are necessary prerequisites for comprehending global environmental issues such as climate change (Chakrabarty, 2012; Bonneuil & Jouvancourt, 2014). From this particular perspective, France can no longer be seen as a monolithic country facing climate change, with a single location and history, but must also account for the plurality of its locations, cultures and histories.

Secondly, beyond the acute exposure, high vulnerabilities and the absence of adequate funding mechanisms, the epistemic shift suggested here also challenges the current victimization narratives of the Outre-mer facing climate change. Indeed, the geographical remoteness and the specific vulnerabilities only tell part of the story, a story in which the Outre-mer can only play the role of peripheral, silent, and ahistorical victims. Echoing the famous article of Gayatri Spivak (1994), it is also crucial to question the possibility of inhabitants and representatives of small French islands in three oceans becoming subjects in narratives as well as in political efforts undertaken to mitigate global warming. Between the major greenhouse gas emitters such as the United States and China and the growing body of

scientific literature that highlights the French overseas territories as the first victims of climate change, can the Outre-mer speak about climate change?

As it pertains to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), the answer seems clear. Despite their ecological importance with respect to global warming, the Outre-mer do not have a distinct voice among the parties of the UNFCCC. Unlike their regional counterparts such as Fiji, Vanuatu and Tuvalu in the Pacific, Comoros and Mauritius in the Indian Ocean, and Saint-Lucia, Dominica, Surinam and Haiti in the Caribbean, the Outre-mer are neither parties nor observer states. Whether or not the accord signed is automatically applicable to the Outre-mer, they are officially represented by France. However, much like other nonsovereign state actors, the Outre-mer have actively attempted to influence international climate change decisions by taking part in side events and informal spaces of these international conferences (Schroeder & Lovell, 2012; Nasiritousi et al., 2016). They follow two distinct and complementary strategies: national and regional.

On one hand, the Outre-mer put pressure on the French government to ensure that their specific exposures are taken into account. In the lead-up to COP21, parliamentary representatives of the Outre-mer and local NGOs alike have called on the French government to ensure their interests as highlighted by the parliamentary reports of Sage, Letchimy and Aboubabar (Sage et al., 2015). The representatives of the Outre-mer, with the help of the former minister of the Outre-mer George Pau-Langevin, managed to have a specific space within the France Pavillon at COP21. A group of young people from French Polynesia came to Paris to participate in the Conference of Youth (COY11) ahead of COP21. Similarly, a youth student association called Science Ô organized the sole panel on the Caribbean in COP21, where Madame Pau-Langevin delivered a speech.

On the other hand, the Outre-mer have joined forces with regional countries to call on the members of the parties (including France) to limit global warming and to address its consequences. For instance, on 30 April 2015, at the OCEANIA 21 Summit held in New Caledonia, 15 territories, including small islands states of the Pacific such as Solomon Islands, Timor Leste, and Samoa as well as nonsovereign territories such as French Polynesia, Wallis-and-Futuna, and Cook Islands, issued the Lifou Declaration entitled 'Paris 2015: save Oceania!' (SPREP, 2015). Similarly, on 9 May 2015, at the Caribbean Climate event on Martinique, gathering 30 representatives of Caribbean states including Haiti and Dominica, The Fort-de-France Call (l'appel de Fort-de-France) was issued, calling upon the international community to build partnerships and to adopt an agreement mindful of the situations of the Caribbean region (DEAL, 2015). Furthermore, by joining regional intergovernmental organizations that have the observer status, the Outre-mer find an additional way to be present and make their voices heard. This is the case for Martinique, which became a full member of the Organization of Eastern Caribbean States (OECS). This is also the case for New Caledonia and French Polynesia, which became full members of the Pacific Islands Forum in 2017. Both the OECS and the Pacific Islands Forum are official observers at the Conferences of Parties (COPs).

In response to these demands, the French government has taken some recent measures. A 'green fund equivalent' amounting to 60 million euros was put in place for the year 2017 by the French government to help Wallis-and-Futuna, French Polynesia and New Caledonia. The government justified its previous choice to focus only on these three territories on the basis that, unlike the other Outre-mer territories, they did not have access to national insurance regimes when it came to natural catastrophes. On 11 December 2017 at the Climate Finance Day meeting in Paris, the new minister of the Outre-mer, Annick Girardin, announced that this fund will be extended to the other territories of the Outre-mer in 2018 (MOM, 2017).

Beyond a victimization discourse, Sage et al. (2015) show the voluntary commitment of these territories to achieve more sustainable development, to move away from strong

dependence on fossil fuels and to make use of renewable sources. These actions include the continuing improvement of scientific data of high standards. Evidently, aware of their low emissions, the contribution of the Outre-mer should not be judged solely in terms of quantitative impacts on climate change mitigation. The deputies argue instead for the exemplarity and principles that these actions show. As the main battlegrounds for adaptation to climate change, these territories can become leading examples for climate change mitigation in France, as the deputies express:

In any case, far from being relegated to the simple status of first victims of global warming, the overseas territories want to be at the forefront of the fight against climate change, by developing exemplary strategies putting forth solutions based on both traditional and innovative practices on their territories (Sage, et. al., 2015, p. 36; translation my own).

Furthermore, this epistemic shift not only presents the Outre-mer as political subjects but also recognizes their long historical engagement with social justice and environmental preservation within their postcolonial societies. Despite the 1946 departmentalization that granted equal social and political rights, many inhabitants still point out persistent inequalities with mainland France (Dumont, 2010; Bonilla, 2015). In response to the unkept promise of equality, inhabitants led numerous political and legal actions to claim equal citizenship within France, including the protection of the natural heritage of their islands (Larcher, 2014; Ferdinand, 2015). For instance, major general strikes and social movements took place in Guadeloupe, Martinique and La Réunion in 2009, in Mayotte and New Caledonia in 2016, and in French Guyana in 2017, all of which denounced the inequalities with the metropolitan mainland and the high cost of living (Le monde, 2017; William et. al, 2012).

Although climate change is a specific matter that is addressed through dedicated international institutions, conferences and funding, many islanders do not dissociate it from other ecological issues. Climate change is instead viewed in these territories as one element of an ecological necessity to preserve the island (Sage et al., 2015, p. 32). While the 1992 Rio conference marked the birth of the UNFCCC, islanders' engagement with ecological issues began much earlier. Local environmental NGOs on these islands, such as the Martinican NGO Assaupamar, have engaged in the preservation of their environments, including the coastal mangroves, for over 35 years (Ferdinand, 2016). Here, acknowledging these actors is not an act of 'epistemic charity' intending to bring the voiceless on board, while still asserting their powerlessness. It is the real acknowledgment that, long before COP21, islanders and NGOs have effectively made possible the preservation of the very ecological systems and societies threatened by climate change.

Often, the ecological actions of these NGOs were actually against state-oriented economic policies that furthered the use and abuse of the Outre-mer's nature. Whether it was against the extractive industries in Martinique and Guiana, against the compulsive use of pesticides in Guadeloupe, or against the nuclear tests conducted on the Polynesian atolls of Mururoa and Fangataufa until 1996, the inhabitants of the Outre-mer have relentlessly engaged in struggles to preserve the nature of their islands and to assert their rights to live in a safe environment (Aldrich & Connell, 1998, pp. 184-188; Chrisafis, 2013). In other words, despite the sheer scale of global warming, the inhabitants of the Outre-mer are the very agents both of its consequences and the political efforts to face the foreseen changes.

### **Conclusion: the Outre-mer or the postcolonial subjects facing climate change**

In conclusion, this paper has presented the Outre-mer perspectives of climate change in an effort to shed light on the situation of these formerly colonized territories, which are now

subnational jurisdictions of France. Their high exposure and vulnerability to the consequences of global warming despite their relatively low emissions call for a subnational climate justice, allocating specific funding to confront and adapt to climate change. The case of the Outre-mer points to the specific perspectives of the Overseas Countries and Territories of the European Union. Sitting in this political 'in between', being neither comparable to the other European regions of their affiliated countries nor to Small Independent Island States, these territories lack access to the international funding mechanisms for climate change and have difficulty securing the necessary funding to match their exposure and vulnerabilities.

This paper also suggested an epistemic shift in the very way one conceives both of France and its engagement with climate change. This shift challenges the approach that posits the relations of the Outre-mer and France as if they were two different political entities. From that highly disputable perspective, France is seen as a singular geographical European entity that extends its benevolent hand to care for its overseas citizens, for which the latter should be grateful. 'France' would be doing a service to its Outre-mer. This colonial gaze is not only discriminatory in the sense that it readily posits the Outre-mer and its citizens as being outside of France, but it is also factually inaccurate. The Outre-mer hold most of the French national biodiversity and, more importantly, they represent the forefront of French climate change mitigation.

Recognizing the experiences of the Outre-mer and their special importance regarding France's relationship with climate change leads to a need to write a different geographical narrative of France, one that is not narrowed down to the contours of the European mainland. The consequences of such a shift extend beyond the modification of a map during the weather forecast. It challenges the very language one uses to relate and signify the French Outre-mer experiences of climate change. This shift opens up the challenge of formulating the experiences of climate change by the Outre-mer in a manner that neither implies the exclusion of the Outre-mer from France nor subsumes their specificities into a homogenous whole. Away from the colonial portrayal of the Outre-mer citizens as voiceless victims of climate change and mere beggars of social welfare programs, this other narrative recognizes the Outre-mer inhabitants as both political actors and part of France, a multi-located France that spans across three oceans. In the face of the climatic tempest threatening these islands, the Outre-mer inhabitants call out to the horizon. What is often portrayed as a desperate cry for help in wait of an overseas saviour is but a determined call for postcolonial equality and social justice, which resounds even stronger in the wake of the tempest.

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