

The Editors' Note:

Hello Anthropocene: Climate Change and Anthropology

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Whether or not it is ever named Word of the Year (an honor the Oxford Dictionaries bestowed upon *vape* in 2014) or recognized officially as a **geological epoch**, “Anthropocene” has become a catchword for climate change today. Credited to chemist Paul Krutzen and biologist Eugene Stoermer, the term calls attention to the impact of human activity on the planet. Not only is climate change considered one of the most pressing issues of our time, but anthropology as the “study of humanity” is being pressed for answers and solutions. As Bruno Latour told the American Anthropological Association in his December 2014 keynote address, **Anthropology at the Time of the Anthropocene:**

Suddenly, with the question of the Anthropocene everywhere on the table, anthropologists are confronted head on with the question of urgency and political relevance. . . . To the bewilderment of many, it is all the disciplines that are now seized by the same feeling of urgency and the heated necessity of “doing something” and influencing policy on hundreds of issues for which academics are suddenly pushed to the forefront. (AAA-7)

In fact, anthropologists have been busily “doing something” to understand and address climate change, as evidenced in the December 2014 report from the AAA’s **Global Climate Change Task Force**, the **AAA Statement on Humanity and Climate Change** emphasizing the relevance and urgency of anthropological contributions, and the articles featured in this issue of *Open Anthropology*. When we investigate the empirical record of anthropological studies we find:

- A history of archaeological engagement with climate change and social sustainability.
- A discipline continually grappling with how to understand the interactions of global, regional, and local variables, insisting on the importance of considering the uneven effects of global change.

- A critique of broad-brush assumptions about either innocent “victims” of climate change or the inevitability of capitalist domination, assumptions that often impede collaborative efforts to address the systemic causes of climate change.

In the age of the Anthropocene, the importance and relevance of anthropology rests on its traditional strengths: close empirical work that very often becomes a basis for the challenge to conventional wisdom and prevalent assumptions.

We additionally contend that the most significant and unique contribution of anthropology is our optimistic wager on the creativity and resilience of the side of humanity that has been most marginalized and overlooked. So much of what anthropology has to teach has itself been learned from those human beings who directly suffered in the building of the industrial Anthropocene, and whose descendants continue to bear the heaviest burdens. The disciplinary legacy of anthropology is an enduring testimony to their wisdom and resilience through adversity. Put differently, as Michel-Rolph Trouillot enjoined practitioners of anthropology:

We owe it to ourselves and to our interlocutors to say loudly that we have seen alternative visions of humankind—indeed more than any academic discipline—and that we know that this one . . . that constructs economic growth as the ultimate human value . . . may not be the most respectful of the planet we share, nor indeed the most accurate nor the most practical. We also owe it to ourselves to say that it is not the most beautiful nor the most optimistic. (**Global Transformations: Anthropology and the Modern World** 2003, 139)

Archaeology: Collapse, Resilience, and Sustainability

We open this issue with two articles from a 2014 special issue of the **Archaeological Papers of the American Anthropological Association** on the theme, **The Resilience and Vulnerability of Ancient Landscapes: Transforming Maya Archaeology through IHOPE**. This journal of the **Archaeology Division** is currently edited by **Lynne Goldstein**.

The first article is a comparative study “Collapse and Sustainability: Rome, the Maya, and the Modern World” by **Joseph Tainter**. Tainter is a well-known figure in archaeology and his book, **The Collapse of Complex Societies** (1988) is a modern classic in the field. This article offers a succinct overview from his career of wide-ranging yet careful comparative observations through case study. Tainter argues that when viewed from a comparative perspective outlining the processes of societal complexity and sustainability, “the Maya

look more like the Roman Empire than is commonly thought” (209). When turning to our own society, Tainter sees similar challenges, crucially including “adapting to climate change and repairing environmental damage,” and insists that “historical science is key to understanding sustainability” (210).

The second article, “Diversity, Resiliency, and IHOPE-Maya: Using the Past to Inform the Present,” is the introductory article to the special issue of the *Archaeological Papers of the AAA*. The authors **Arlen F. Chase** and **Vernon Scarborough** bring a long history of archaeology and collaborative engagement, and they begin boldly:

It would be an understatement to say that the field of archaeology is facing an identity crisis. No longer is it satisfactory to simply study the past for the sake of personal intellectual gratification or to add to a broader academic knowledge base. The tide has shifted. It is not sufficient to have an elegant research design that explicates some arcane academic argument about the past. Rather, researchers are now asking what insight their investigations can offer in terms of solving modern quandaries and dilemmas. What lessons can the discipline of archaeology offer contemporary peoples? What relevance do archaeological data have to environmental and social issues facing today’s populations? (1)

Chase and Scarborough proceed to detail the specific collaboration that led to this special issue, as a group of Maya archaeologists were inspired by the Resilience Center at the University of Stockholm and its IHOPE (**Integrated History and Future of People on Earth**) program: “The stated goal was to use a multidisciplinary approach to determine what could be gleaned from Maya archaeology that would be of use for modern policy decisions relating to climate change, resilience, sustainability, vulnerability, rigidity, and diversity” (2; see also **Changing the Atmosphere** 37-40). The ancient Maya are a particularly apt example of a people who inhabited a diverse range of tropical environments. The result is a transformation in Maya archaeology, and data indicating “how a single society may at different times in its history be alternatively adaptive, flexible, and resilient or rigid and vulnerable” (5).

The third article, “Social Transformation and Its Human Costs in the Prehispanic U.S. Southwest” builds on the theme of using archaeological lessons for today’s world, and especially how people can fall into a *rigidity trap*: “People may literally have felt trapped, perceiving no way to make changes and no place to go, and so they stayed while things fell apart around them” (321). This 2008 article was published in **American Anthropologist**, currently edited by **Michael Chibnik**. The research team that produced this article was at

the time centered at the Arizona State University's **School of Human Evolution and Social Change**, with **Michelle Hegmon** as lead author and including Matthew A. Peeples, Ann P. Kinzig, Stephanie Kulow, Cathryn M. Meegan, and Margaret C. Nelson. In the conclusion, these researchers identify six factors which can intensify a rigidity trap, making necessary transformations "severe and associated with human suffering" (321).

This selection is only a small sample of a wealth of archaeological research and insight into society and climate change. As succinctly summarized in the "AAA Statement on Humanity and Climate Change":

The archaeological record reveals diverse human adaptations and innovations to climate stresses occurring over millennia, providing evidence that is **relevant to contemporary human experience**. The archaeological record shows that diversity and flexibility increase resilience to stress in complex adaptive systems, and that successful adaptations incorporate principles of sustainability.

Ethnography: Fieldwork at the Peripheries of the Planet

We begin the next section with a 1957 article also published in *American Anthropologist*, "Some Further Notes on Franz Boas' Arctic Expedition" by **Melville J. Herskovits**. Herskovits, a student of Boas, was by that time an enormous influence in the rise of anthropology as an academic discipline, having founded Northwestern University's Anthropology Department in 1938 and its Program of African Studies in 1948. It is interesting that Herskovits is here already entering a reflective mode, discussing how "Franz Boas' field trip to the Eskimo in 1883-4 was so important in shaping his career and thus, indirectly, in shaping the development of American anthropology" (112). While the extended excerpts from personal correspondence may seem too arcane, we include it here because it makes a crucial point regarding how Boas turned from what we might call "environmental determinism" to sociocultural and historical explanation. In the words of **Gladys Reichard**, "his life with the Eskimo made him change radically his predisposition to assign geographic influence as primary to the development of culture" (115). These notes therefore point to a defining crucial moment of anthropology in understanding environmental and social factors, and also the centrality of fieldwork in this transformation. As Herskovits asks: "How many of us, that is, have not had the experience of going to the field with conceptions of the people and their life, and with problems that have had to be revised, often radically, in the face of the actual data?" (116).

The article on Boas and fieldwork in the Arctic sets the stage for “There Are No Peripheries to Humanity: Northern Alaska Nuclear Dumping and the Iñupiat’s Search for Redress” (1997) by **Edith Turner**. This article appeared in **Anthropology and Humanism**, the publication of the **Society for Humanistic Anthropology**, currently edited by **George Mentore**. Edith Turner begins by invoking her long collaboration with **Victor Turner**: “Victor Turner had a great respect for fieldwork. He believed rightly that anthropologists should supply a primary source of valid material for other readers, as literal as possible—a source that would be available whatever the interpretation and discussion that followed” (95). Edith Turner’s article is on the continued importance of fieldwork in the era of globalization. Her fieldwork on healing in an Alaskan periphery soon became concerned with radioactive pollution and would take the residents to Washington, D.C. “Fieldworkers know the global feel firsthand, in those absurd particularities. Humanistic anthropologists for better or worse are following this path, often following the people in the field about in these people’s efforts to preserve their autonomy” (108). This fieldwork and activism reveals a central truth to anthropology, that every part of humanity and the planet is important: “the peripheries of the planet will not do for dumping harmful garbage, because people live there” (108).

Continuing with the theme of anthropology in the northern periphery is **Amy Ninetto’s** review of **Cows, Kin, and Globalization: An Ethnography of Sustainability** by Susan A. Crate. This book review was published in the 2008 edition of **American Ethnologist**, the journal of the **American Ethnological Society** (AES), currently edited by **Angelique Haugerud** and with **Eric Gable** current Associate Editor for Book Reviews. Ninetto examines Crate’s ethnographic account of Sakha cattle herders in northeastern Siberia. Crate’s account “suggests that Sakha themselves are developing a somewhat different vision of ‘sustainability’ from that promoted in the West, one centered less on the acquisition of juridical rights and more on the proper exercise of strong authority and the development of individual entrepreneurship” (4085).

Following this ethnography, **Susan Crate** has become a key figure in the anthropology of climate change. In 2008 she published “Gone the Bull of Winter? Grappling with the Cultural Implications of and Anthropology’s Role(s) in Global Climate Change” in **Current Anthropology**, followed by the 2009 edited volume (with Mark Nuttall) **Anthropology and Climate Change: From Encounters to Actions**. She then in 2011 published the influential *Annual Review of Anthropology* article **Climate and Culture: Anthropology in**

the Era of Contemporary Climate Change and was a member of the AAA Global Climate Change Task Force.

The last article in this section is “Withered Milpas: Governmental Disaster and the Mexican Countryside” (2008) by **Analiene Richard**. This article was published in the **Journal of Latin American and Caribbean Anthropology**, the journal of the **Society for Latin American and Caribbean Anthropology**, currently edited by **Andrew Canessa**. Richard’s research analyzes “the specific case of the Tulancingo River Valley, where climatic anomalies and anthropogenic hazards have intersected with newly generated forms of social vulnerability to create a governmental disaster that serves to foreclose traditional collective forms of political agency” (390). In other words, this is a case in which “climate change” can be used by the government to blame supposedly natural causes rather than confront changes in government policies, erosion of support for rural farmers, and multinational agribusiness. The resulting discourse makes protest more difficult: “The death of the countryside brings uncertainty about the future of campesino agriculture, but also about the ability of campesinos to shape their own destinies as democratic citizens” (406).

Once again, these articles are only a small selection of ethnographic approaches which testify to the importance of fieldwork to situate the relevant facts of climate change. “While climate change affects all of Earth’s inhabitants, ***the impacts will fall unevenly*** and with particular weight on those already affected by existing vulnerabilities, including children, the elderly, those who live with handicaps and restrictive health conditions, and those who do not have sufficient means to move or change their lives” (AAA Statement on Humanity and Climate Change).

Innocent Victims and Global Villains: An Anthropological Critique

The examination of the way climate change stories are used by government and corporate actors in order to shield themselves from accountability is an ideal way to transition to a section on anthropological critiques of varied innocence-and-villainous narratives. Many of the peoples anthropologists study—especially those living on tropical islands—are portrayed as the “innocent victims” of climate change. **Niko Besnier’s** book on **Gossip and the Everyday Production of Politics** discusses how “Tuvalu has emerged as the poster child of global warming” with several documentaries that “elaborate uncritically familiar themes of victimhood, ‘paradise lost,’ and ‘disappearing cultures,’ which endure in the

Western imagination as they produce an orientalized context for thinking about the dynamics at play” (2009, 61). For Besnier and other researchers like **Carol Farbotko** and **Heather Lazrus** (a member of the AAA Global Climate Change Task Force), “these representations are not innocent of politics: not only are they grounded in a formidable genealogy of uncritical and patronizing associations between non-Western societies and timelessness, sedentarism, and lack of agency, but they also rob Tuvaluans of resourcefulness and resilience” (Besnier 2009, 61).

In an article that appeared in the 2013 edition of *American Anthropologist*, “Climate Change and the Victim Slot: From Oil to Innocence” (2013), **David McDermott Hughes** uses Trinidad and Tobago as a curious case to describe many of these issues. Hughes draws on Michel-Rolph Trouillot (cited above) and discusses the creation of a “victim slot” which “whitewashes—as innocent—societies, firms, and industrial sectors otherwise clearly complicit with carbon emissions and climate change. To the extent that the slot persuades us, it allows good people to do bad things to the biosphere” (571). Hughes argues that this victim slot has been particularly salient in Trinidad and Tobago, which is a sizable hydrocarbon producer with a relatively high rate of carbon emissions, but nevertheless was able to join the Alliance of Small Island States, “a bloc that soon came to represent those most desperately vulnerable to climate change” (575). While this innocence remains the dominant narrative, there are signs of change. “Trinidad’s small size might allow it to overcome the indecision endemic to larger polities. Perhaps the proximity of everything in Trinidad throws hydrocarbons into stark relief. One can actually smell them. . . . They might understand climate change as the boomerang of their own pollution rather than as a harpoon thrown from another hemisphere” (579).

On the other side of the victim slot is the villain slot. “Cattle ranchers are often presented as the wealthy, violent, and environmentally destructive villains of Amazonia” (60) is **Jeffrey Hoelle’s** opening line for “Black Hats and Smooth Hands: Elite Status, Environmentalism, and Work among the Ranchers of Acre, Brazil.” This 2012 article was published in the **Anthropology of Work Review**, the journal of the **Society for the Anthropology of Work** currently edited by **Sarah Lyon**. Hoelle’s fieldwork is an example of how anthropologists must at times fill in gaps by studying those who have elite or dominant status. “There are challenges to gaining access to any elite group, and most of the ranchers were naturally suspicious when a foreigner and assumed *ecologista* (environmentalist) expressed an interest in them” (62). The ranchers “are both emulated and disdained” (63). From other standpoints, however, the ranchers are no longer as politically powerful as they once were.

Hoelle argues that it will be increasingly essential to understand those with economic power in forested regions: “Issues of access will remain with elite groups, but if preserving the Amazon forest is an issue of such pressing global importance, it is essential to better understand the perspectives of all those involved, especially those with the most on-the-ground political and economic power in the region” (70).

One prominent anthropological work which revealed constructions of innocent victimhood, elite villainization, and unlikely environmental collaborations is Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing’s **Friction: An Ethnography of Global Connection** (2004). Here we include a book review of *Friction* by **Thomas Yarrow** that appeared in the 2006 edition of **PoLAR**, the journal of the **Association for Political and Legal Anthropology**, and which is currently edited by **John Conley** and **Justin Richland**; **Ilana Gershon** is PoLAR’s book review editor. Tsing’s book was based on a return to her fieldsite in an Indonesian rain forest undergoing rapid and shocking deforestation. However, Tsing’s account showed that this deforestation could not be blamed on “capitalist globalization.” Despite their peripheral location, these people and forests had been linked to global capitalism for hundreds of years. Understanding recent deforestation required understanding a specific set of heterogeneous actors and contingent processes. On the other hand, the victims of deforestation often seemed to be involved in their own destruction. In Yarrow’s words “if ‘capitalism’ imagines itself to operate on the basis of universal principles and laws, then such examples reveal the heterogeneous nature of the conjunctions upon which it depends, the diversity of actors and cultural understandings, and, in short, the *friction* through which it is made and unmade” (292). Since then, Tsing has continued to build on this work and in 2013 received prestigious funding from the Danish National Research Foundation to pursue a project titled **Living in the Anthropocene: Discovering the Potential of Unintended Design on Anthropogenic Landscapes**.

One theme of Tsing’s book was to trace the ways ideas of the global and universal can be both invoked and contested. **Kenneth Broad** and **Ben Orlove** explicitly draw on Tsing’s use of *friction* for their article “Channeling Globality: The 1997-98 El Niño Climate Event in Peru,” published in the 2007 edition of *American Ethnologist*. Broad and Orlove use the word *channeling* because “even more than *friction*, it suggests an intentional directing of distant or new elements along certain paths. The term seems well suited to our case, granted the active seeking of linkages to globality on the part of many individuals and organizations in Peru” (286). This channeling is in fact not always successful, and quite subject to contestation and failure:

Climate events create various forms of engaged universals, through their connection with conjunctural features in specific projects, with contextual elements of states and forms of attention, and with the abstract systems of technoscience and human security. . . . It remains to be seen how public attention and state institutions will respond, in the midst of other pressing conjunctures, to the much slower, but much more powerful, planetary warming that is bearing down on us all. (301)

Ben Orlove served as a member of the AAA Global Climate Change Task Force. His work on glacier retreat, among other ongoing projects, continues to draw attention to the planetary warming bearing down on us all.

The articles in this section are a selection of examples of how anthropology can be used to unmask dominant narratives, seeking a better understanding of both “victim slots” and “villain slots.” As Latour noted in his 2014 AAA lecture, the question of particular human agency is central to the Anthropocene:

As soon as historians, philosophers, anthropologists and activists stumbled on the name “Anthropocene”, they immediately realized that there was no sense whatsoever in lumping into one undifferentiated “anthropos” all the human agents responsible for shaping the planet. Amazonian Indians, Alaskan seal hunters, Shanghai tycoons, Enron executives, and slum dwellers of Valparaiso could not be ascribed the same responsibility in this newly defined “geological force”. You just have to pronounce the sentence “Anthropic origin of climate transformation” to get the immediate retort: “But who is at the origin of that mutation? Certainly not me. Not them. Maybe you are!” (AAA-5)

Anthropological Alternatives

Although all of the articles in this issue of *Open Anthropology* include anthropological contributions, this section highlights the alternatives that anthropology brings to climate change research. **Anthony Oliver-Smith**—another member of the AAA Global Climate Change Task Force—provides a short but potent reminder of anthropology’s use in applied settings. “Anthropology in Disaster Research and Management” appeared in a 2001 special issue “Careers in Anthropology: Profiles of Practitioner Anthropologists” of the *NAPA Bulletin*, now called the **Annals of Anthropological Practice** and currently edited by **John Brett**. Oliver-Smith emphasizes that disaster research and management is not about flying into the nearest and newest disaster site: “The goal today is to become proactive, linking

vulnerability reduction to development, rather than continue to use a reactive and replacement orientation in reconstruction” (112).

The next article is a book review essay by **Julie Sze** on **Global Warming and the Political Ecology of Health: Emerging Crises and Systemic Solutions** by **Hans Baer** and **Merrill Singer** as well as **Flammable: Environmental Suffering in an Argentine Shantytown** by **Javier Auyero** and **Débora Alejandra Swistun**. The review appeared in the 2010 issue of **Medical Anthropology Quarterly**, the journal of the **Society for Medical Anthropology**, currently edited by **Clarence C. Gravlee**, and the book review editor is currently **Mara Buchbinder**. Sze’s review ably tackles and promotes some of the best ongoing work in anthropology:

A generation of anthropologists will likely be investigating the wrenching changes of global warming on a vast array of local environments. I hope that many attend to these with the attention of detail that Auyero and Swistun provide, and the passion and political urgency of Baer and Singer. Together, these approaches will be very important in our contemporary age of extreme environmental and political change and instability. (557)

“Tracking the Fault Lines of Pro-Poor Carbon Forestry” by Stephanie Paladino appears in the 2011 edition of **Culture, Agriculture, Food and Environment** published by the **Culture and Agriculture** section of the AAA and currently edited by **Jeanne Simonelli** and Stephanie Paladino. Paladino is looking at “a prominent approach to climate change mitigation, a variant of payment for environmental services, in which emitters of greenhouse gases, particularly carbon dioxide, compensate for their emissions by financing the establishment or preservation of vegetative cover” (118). Specifically examining a project in the Mexican states of Chiapas and Oaxaca, Paladino examines some of the strengths and weaknesses of these approaches. Although such projects are often promoted as being relatively inexpensive, market-based, and beneficial for poor countries, Paladino emphasizes that “securing and appropriately directing non-market funding to finance the additional or full costs of pro-indigenous and pro-poor carbon projects requires a political will and capacity across political scales that has too often been the missing link in so many conservation and development projects” (129).

We conclude the issue with “A Changing Climate for Anthropological and Archaeological Research? Improving the Climate-Change Models” (2014) by **Paul Roscoe** in *American Anthropologist*. Roscoe’s work returns us to the issues of using archaeology and

anthropology holistically. Roscoe is also a faculty member for a new **PhD in Anthropology and Environmental Policy** program at the University of Maine. In this article, Roscoe is examining the models from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, and while he acknowledges the critique of modeling exercises, “for archaeology and anthropology, though, these limitations are an opportunity for more than critique alone” (536). Roscoe sees anthropology’s holistic and integrative approach providing a helpful corrective to economic models. “In short, a changing climate for anthropological and archaeological research is important to the relevance of our disciplines, but it could offer even more to the future of humanity” (545)

As mentioned in the introductory remarks, we see anthropology’s contribution in terms of specific empirical studies—combined with contrapuntal critique—as crucial but incomplete. The truly unique value is the bet the discipline has placed on the un-included. Or, to return to Bruno Latour:

“Producing anthropology” also means re-describing what those who have never been modern have been up to. The reason has nothing to do with maintaining the modern /non-modern distinction. It is just the opposite: since “we” have never been modern, there is no recognizable “we” and “they”. Modernization is a war cry that has to be resisted everywhere. Anthropocene could offer another occasion to find an alternative to modernization. Another occasion to renegotiate the shape, boundary, limit and extent of the “we” whose humanity is once again in question and that the Anthropocene is pressing upon everybody to answer, and fast. (AAA-14)

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