

Readers: *I'm altering my BA thesis introduction to focus on an originally peripheral point (the justification for studying climate-change perceptions among Westerners). My new readers are University of Chicago anthropologists frustrated by the discipline's Western canon and focus, who believe that climate-change scholarship ought to focus on marginalized groups that are also most threatened by climate change. I need to convince them to fund my research.*

Grant Proposal: Western Reception Studies on Climate Change

Climate change poses a substantial threat to all of humanity and merits attention as such. As anthropologists, we are responsible for exploring and elucidating the phenomenon, as it is deeply embroiled in the workings of human communities and culture. Indeed, anthropologists have been studying the phenomenon for over two decades, examining climate-change interactions and impacts from Inuit ecological knowledges to Brazilian drought policy (Cuerrier; Nelson). Such existing anthropological research tends to study indigenous, non-Western, and marginalized groups: those who are generally excluded from scientific climate discourse, but also on its frontlines — communities most vulnerable to a shifting climate and already combating its earliest impacts. Anthropological climate-change studies are rife with stories of communities grappling with rising tides and shifting biomes. But these frontline studies, if not balanced with others, may contribute to two serious anthropological and social consequences: propagating negative stereotypes about non-Western communities, thus further “otherizing” them; and illustrating only one dimension of a dire global threat, thus forgoing possible positive contributions to Western climate-change policy (Rudiak-Gould 10). Due to these issues, anthropological climate-change studies demand more diverse perspectives. My research, a “reception study” that examines how West receives the *idea* of climate change, would help balance the field, rectifying the aforementioned problems while providing a more individualized focus than the few reception studies already attempted.

Reception studies are needed to counteract two major anthropological problems, the first being the discipline's treatment of non-Western people. Though many defend the respectful study of such communities, rightly arguing that anthropology previously denigrated them, such a restrictive focus actually causes serious consequences: reinforcing stereotypes about non-Western communities and excluding them from universality, thus enforcing their global "otherness." Most existent climate-change anthropology papers study non-Western communities in one of two ways: either investigating their relationship to early physical effects of climate change, or examining how local climactic knowledges interact with global Western ones (Rudiak-Gould 10). While such emphases do provide a respectful space for non-Western modes of thought, they simultaneously enforce the malicious narrative that the global West created climate change for non-Westerners to deal with; or, in other words, that the West acts and theorizes while the non-West can only react and observe. Additionally, emphasizing physical impacts only among marginalized communities might imply that such communities remain outside the realm of intellectual or abstract thought, feeding into negative stereotypes. Finally, many anthropological studies examine local climactic beliefs in opposition to Western climate science (Rudiak-Gould 11). However, this opposition acquiesces to the problematic idea that the West constitutes universality, while everything non-Western is parochial and peripheral. Despite good intentions, anthropology's narrow focus on non-Western communities only excludes such groups from the universality bestowed to the West, otherizing them as reactive, non-intellectual, and peripheral.

This otherization might be mitigated not only through more varied studies of non-Westerners, but also through more studies overall of the West and climate change. My research examining Americans will help reverse this otherization by provincializing the West, as Dipesh

Chakrabarty has urged (Chakrabarty 7). In studying how Americans think through climate change's physical effects *and* abstractions, my research will help to dismantle the aforementioned stereotype of Western doer and non-Western receiver. Instead, my research also characterizes Westerners as climate-change recipients, investigating how they make sense of a changing landscape and various climactic knowledges. Additionally, by critically examining and codifying how Westerners think through climate change, my research will "provincialize" Western discourse by articulating its contours, understanding its contingencies, and generally debunking any supposed universality. This task will break down the assumed monolith of Western discourse and thought by realizing its variations and contradictions, grounding it as the worldview of a *specific* population and geography instead of the bedrock of global thought. In other words, provincializing the West entails contextualizing it as simply similar to/different from — rather than superior to — non-Western forms of knowledge. In sum, rather than reinforcing a privileged worldview, my research on Western climate-change perceptions will actually articulate its contours, contextualize its nuances, and generally debunk its universality, thus "provincializing" it alongside other systems of thought while helping refute negative anthropological stereotypes about non-Westerners.

In addition to debunking lingering anthropological stereotypes, climate-change studies like my own will accomplish a second goal by filling an anthropological lacuna: the reception of climate change as an *idea*, which could also inspire serious social benefits. Contemporary climate-change anthropology, in its examination of frontline communities, has examined the phenomenon through only one dimension, largely neglecting the abstract climate-change reception that other disciplines already study (Rudiak-Gould 9). Anthropology thus forgets that climate change has become an idea as much as an observable event, forgoing a critical dimension

of study (Hulme 26). Just because someone does not directly observe climate-change effects does not mean the idea of climate change is absent from their day-to-day lives; on the contrary, many other disciplines have already studied how populations receive the idea of climate change. However, climate-change reception also constitutes a rich vein for anthropology, embedded as it is within discourse, culture, interaction, and interpretation. Moreover, by focusing only on the physical manifestations of climate change, anthropology often bypasses a social boon by ignoring the worst fossil-fuel emitters, who are often insulated from the natural world and require stricter climate-change policy. Our field therefore misses out on a real social contribution: codifying and interpreting how the perpetrators of a social ill (or those who elect politicians regulating the ill) perceive the problem itself, even when it is not physically apparent, to inform better public policy.

My research would fill this anthropological gap by studying such abstract reception, providing new insights for policymakers and communicators and benefitting broader society. I would examine how relatively privileged and insulated Americans think through the physicality as well as the abstraction of climate change. In so doing, my research would constitute a first step toward a corpus of climate-change reception studies, thus broadening our discipline's understanding of the phenomenon. Furthermore, this research would positively contribute to society by studying how fossil-fuel emitters comprehend climate change *conceptually*, rather than concretely. Anthropology can provide insights into the phenomenon perhaps overlooked by policymakers or sociologists, but still useful to policy and communication work. For example, anthropologists might uncover anecdotal evidence on why people do or do not feel motivated to organize against climate change, as well as which actions they find most or least appealing. Anthropology could bolster such conclusions with a level of nuance absent from sociological

surveys, therefore contributing novel insights to public servants aiming to increase engagement with climate change. Therefore, my research will not only fill an anthropological gap, but also usher in a rigorous yet socially-conscious anthropology that can contribute knowledge to the public good.

As we have seen, modern anthropology has yet to address two problems in its climate-change studies: first, that it investigates only non-Western populations and thus otherizes them; and secondly, that it neglects climate change as an abstract idea, thus ignoring one aspect of the phenomenon and shying away from social benefits. My research, as I have mentioned, addresses both of these issues by studying how a Western population (UChicago) comprehends both tangible and intangible facets of climate change. More specifically, I plan to investigate how University of Chicago students receive and discuss climate change, through a combination of surveys, individual interviews, and participant observation. By these means, I will document and analyze the rhetoric, emotions, beliefs, and associations that students hold regarding the phenomenon's past, present, and future. As most University of Chicago students consider themselves American, and many are socioeconomically privileged, my research will help provincialize the privileged West in regards to climate change, contributing to a nascent field that will diminish the otherization of indigenous, marginalized, and non-Western communities. Moreover, by examining climate change as an interpretable concept (as well as a physical phenomenon), my research – as a reception study – will help fill an anthropological lacuna while contributing ethnographic analysis that may, alongside many other studies, help policymakers and communicators enact better social policies. Therefore, my proposed research would help balance anthropology's treatment of different groups while elucidating a new facet of an established topic that may inspire better policy.

Though my research would not be the first reception study, it would address a growing call among anthropologists for such studies, and it would significantly diverge from the only two prominent Western reception studies in existence, by providing up-to-date analysis; studying lay knowledges through ethnographic methods; and emphasizing the complexities of individual, rather than societal, thought.

Many anthropologists have already called for reception studies both to document the climate-change views of non-scientists (or “lay knowledges”), and then to utilize such insights to increase public engagement with the threat. For example, reception studies have already been called for by Catherine Brace and Hilary Geoghegan, two prominent human geographers who study climate change amongst Britons. They posit that academia needs to better understand “lay knowledges” around climate change, by interrogating how non-scientists do or do not relate to the phenomenon (Brace and Geoghegan 287). “Despite the now substantial literature that is informed by the methods, theories, and epistemologies of social science,” they write, “there is still a marked dearth of engagement with ... the human dimensions of climate change” within the West (Brace and Geoghegan 286). Brace and Geoghegan, while embarking on several smaller reception studies themselves, assert that the social sciences must still commit to many more such studies before a comprehensive understanding of lay knowledges can inform and improve public engagement. Similarly, Joseph Masco has argued that modern environmental problems are not only problems of “science and simulation but also of communication and visualization.” He expands that we need “new imaginaries, new visions of ecological relationality,” and literature about “conceptualization, about how to think on temporal and spatial scales that exceed human senses” (Masco 16). Reception studies will provide an excellent first step of such conceptualization, by first cataloguing how we *currently* think of climate change, and identifying

the concepts and relationalities that seem already salient, which can then be employed to increase public engagement. Despite such widespread desire to study Western lay knowledges of climate change, however, only two major anthropological studies yet exist.

Of these two studies, each treats the individual as a homogenous subject within societal groups, neglecting ethnographic methodologies and the lay knowledges that my research pursues. Moreover, each study is quickly growing obsolete, especially considering the rapid evolution of climate change. The first such reception study is Mike Hulme's "Why We Disagree About Climate Change," which constitutes an important early articulation of climate change as idea. Though Hulme's theoretical analysis of climate change is astute — thinking of it as a meaningful social concept, rather than just a scientific fact — his on-the-ground research proves less useful and less anthropological (Hulme xxviii). Taking an ambitious bird's-eye view, Hulme treats his subjects as monolithic blocs, by harnessing international surveys, groups like "economists" and "evangelical Christians," and various graphs and charts that position social groups on axes and continuums. Taking such a macroscopic angle is an admirable feat, and Hulme draws viable and interesting conclusions. He simultaneously, however, elides certain anthropological approaches: namely, that individuals are not monoliths, and may navigate multiple identities, geographies, and beliefs in their construction of climate-change meaning. My research seeks to draw out this heterogeneity through ethnographic methods, talking to individuals who may identify with multiple groups and understand climate change in conflicting, though fully meaningful, ways. Moreover, Hulme's book was published over ten years ago, and both the idea and the physicality of climate change have greatly metamorphosed in that time — think Jay Inslee, Greta Thurnberg, the Amazon wildfires, the Green New Deal. My research

will take a more up-to-date view on climate change, using anthropological methods to examine individual lay knowledges.

The other important reception study, by Candis Callison, is more ethnographic in substance, though remains group-centric and professionally oriented. Her book, “How Climate Change Comes to Matter,” examines five distinct American communities in which climate change *has* become a problem, interrogating the “structural and social aspects of how it is that climate change becomes meaningful” through different group identities and rhetorics (Callison 4). Callison’s methodology is more ethnographic than Hulme’s, as she conducts participant observation and long-form interviews to interrogate climate change on the anecdotal level. However, like Hulme, Callison also “privileges the role of collectives, shedding light on the structural and societal aspects of how it is that climate change becomes meaningful” (Callison 4). Though this type of analysis is certainly useful for reception studies, it still neglects the notion of the individual as a multifaceted character who must negotiate among and outside of various identities. Most of Callison’s groups also have either an ethnic or professional connection to climate change: she studies Arctic indigenous people, science journalists, evangelical Christians, policy experts, and corporate social responsibility managers and activists (Callison 32). Callison’s research does not primarily examine the “lay knowledges” that my research proposes, of studying people with little or no structural connection to climate change. Her book is also six years old, more recent than Hulme’s but still long before our current age of rampant wildfires and climate refugees. Therefore, my research would build off older reception studies while filling a necessary niche: ethnographic methodologies, complex individualities, and the elevation of lay knowledges.

Climate change is not only a substantial threat to humanity: it is a complex one. Such complexity demands equal nuance in its academic study. However, extant anthropological studies on the matter have limited their research to non-Western and marginalized groups, and the observation of physical impacts. In so doing, they have inadvertently helped “otherize” these non-Western groups, and shied away from the angle of abstraction while forgoing insights that could benefit broader social policy. My research would help rectify these issues by studying how University of Chicago students receive the concept *and* the physicality of climate change, thus provincializing Western thought, providing a new angle to a complex phenomenon, and hopefully contributing to pragmatic policy. Many anthropologists have called for such reception studies; the few that exist, though pioneering, are outdated and prioritize group over individual, expert over layperson. My research, on the other hand, would study individuals in all their complexity, prioritizing qualitative ethnographic methodologies, and “ordinary” people over experts or groups. In sum, I propose to fill several critical lacunae simultaneously, bolstering anthropology’s social utility alongside its academic rigor.

Works Cited

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