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Climate Change and Accusation

Global Warming and Local Blame in a Small Island State

by Peter Rudiak-Gould

By politicizing the last bastion of “untouched nature,” climate change makes blame ubiquitous and therefore infinitely malleable. Onto this moral blank slate, critical anthropologists and political ecologists inscribe industrial/Northern blame rather than universal/pan-human blame. This article queries what our analytical stance ought to be when our field partners—those who seem to best exemplify the inequity of climate change—disagree with this reading of climate change. The Republic of the Marshall Islands contributes minimally to global climate change yet faces nationwide uninhabitability at its hands. Despite awareness of their tiny carbon footprint, grassroots Marshall Islanders (if not their government) have strongly favored a response of guilt and atonement rather than outrage and protest. I argue that various delegitimizing explanations of this perception—ignorance, denial, performance, false consciousness—are ethnographically untenable or unsatisfying. Instead, Marshallese self-blame should be understood as the local appropriation of global warming discourse in terms of a preexisting narrative of seductive modernity and cultural decline. Such an analysis allows us to appreciate how indigenous climate change self-blame, while undoubtedly problematic in many of its implications, may also carry empowering, postcolonial, counterhegemonic potentialities that should not be discounted by those searching for radical counternarratives of climate change.

To a season of political and social upheaval was added a strange and brooding apprehension of hideous physical danger; a danger widespread and all-embracing . . . *A sense of monstrous guilt was upon the land.* . . . There was a daemonic alteration in the sequence of the seasons—the autumn heat lingered fearsomely, and everyone felt that the world and perhaps the universe had passed from the control of known gods or forces to that of gods or forces which were unknown.

—H. P. Lovecraft (1920, emphasis added)

[T]he world’s weather has been hitting record highs. . . . The snow and ice around the world is melting and it’s making the sea levels rise. . . . We . . . are contributing to global warming by cruising around in our cars, throwing garbage all over the place, [and] using tons of tin foil to take out food. . . . Every time you throw something on the ground, drive around and waste gas . . . , use a whole box of tin foil for one plate, think about where you’re going to call home in the next 30 to 50 years.

—Carla Bigler, Marshallese citizen, 2007 (Bigler 2007)

Introduction: Climate Change, Blame, and Critical Anthropology

As H. P. Lovecraft’s prophetic passage expresses, the creeping perturbation in nature-culture that we call “climate change” inspires a desire to assign blame, and with it guilt or outrage (Hulme 2009:155–156; Taddei 2008). Yet in meting out responsibility, in deciding who ought to be counted culpable, science is insufficient; the truth will not set us free. We may all accept the scientific account of climate change causation and yet voice radically different narratives of responsibility. If science alone cannot establish moral content (see Jasanoff 2010; Sarewitz 2004; Verweij et al. 2006), the problem is especially acute in the case of climate change: the threat defies easy ethical accounting (Jamieson 2007:475–476), as the unnumbered decisions of billions—some already dead, some yet to be born—affect the well-being of billions—some of them next door, some of them invisibly distant in space or time, some of them in the mirror. Breaking down the last trace of a distinction between a blameless, apolitical realm of “nature” and a blame-laden, political realm of “culture” (Chakrabarty 2009; Hulme 2010a, 2010b; McKibben 2006 [1989]; but also see Uggla 2010), the Anthropocene can invite ubiquitous guilt (every person is a carbon sinner, every daily act is a carbon sin) or, just as easily, blanket exoneration (Norgaard 2006; Stoll-Kleemann et al. 2001; Vazquez-Garcia 2012). As a “promiscuously corroborable” phenomenon (Rudiak-Gould 2012b), climate change’s impacts can be perceived everywhere (Connell

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2003; Nuttall 2009), and the same can be said of its causes. Climate change epitomizes the Risk Society, in which invisible, time-lagged, geographically unruly, causally tangled threats render impotent the usual methods of assigning fault and open the field of finger-pointing to almost any imaginable narrative (Beck 1992:27–28, 32–33). With nature no longer speaking in an independent, unhumanized, and therefore authoritative voice, humans become the author not only of the threat but also of its accompanying moral narrative.

As a “wicked problem” (Churchman 1967) for citizens and policymakers today, climate change also presents a wicked problem of analysis to the academic. An exhaustive typology of climate change blame narratives would need to encompass the following as well as many more: blame of everyone, blame of no one, blame of fossil fuel companies (Shearer 2011), blame of extravagant Northern citizens, blame of complacent politicians and government bureaucrats (Stoll-Kleemann et al. 2001), “blame” of God or deities, blame of capitalism (Lindisfarne 2010; H. A. Smith 2007), blame of the present generation (at the expense of the yet-to-be-born), and various combinations of these. For present purposes I simplify the vast array of possible blame narratives into a dichotomy that is both crude and suitable to this article’s case study. Those who concur with the scientific consensus on climate change recognize both (1) that everyone contributes to climate change and (2) that some people contribute far more than others. But the science says nothing about which proposition should be morally emphasized, and that choice matters hugely, making the difference between two starkly different “moral readings” (Bravo 2009:277) of climate change.

On one side are blame stances that emphasize proposition 2. I will call such approaches “industrial blame” (indictment specifically of Western, Northern, developed or industrial countries and citizens). This suggests a moral framing of climate change as a crime perpetrated by one human group upon another, a fault not of universal human nature but of the cultural-historical specifics of a particular civilization—usually characterized as “Western,” “capitalist,” or “industrial.” Stances of this sort are voiced by many indigenist activists (Degawan 2008; Tauli-Corpuz 2009), radical grassroots organizations (Baer 2011), and critical scholars (see, e.g., Kelman 2010; Shearer 2011; W. D. Smith 2007). They are also voiced, with remarkable unanimity, by anthropologists who have expressed opinions on the issue in the literature. In a seminal article on the anthropology of climate change, Susan Crate indicts “Western consumer culture” (Crate 2008:570) for causing climate change. Susan Crate and Mark Nuttall together write that those most vulnerable to climate change are also most innocent of creating it (Crate and Nuttall 2009: 11–12). Holly Barker points to the enormous gap between the carbon footprints of the United States and low-lying island countries, adding, “*Our* inability to enact change threatens the existence of countless small island nations and their people” (Barker 2008, emphasis added). Hans Baer and Thomas Reuter (2011) point to the same disparity (Baer and Reuter

2011), implying an industrial blame stance. Nancy Lindisfarne reflects approvingly on the People’s Agreement of Cochabamba, which indicts developed countries for creating the climate crisis (Lindisfarne 2010:3). Climate change-related comments on the Eanth-1 listserv—frequented by anthropologists—often espouse industrial blame while decrying universal blame. For instance, in a discussion in April 2009, several contributors were disturbed at the universal blame inherent in a proposal to combat climate change by reducing black soot emissions from subsistence cooking in the developing world, preferring instead the implementation of mitigation measures in the North.

On the other side are blame stances that emphasize proposition 1. I will call such approaches “universal blame” (indictment of all human beings). This implies a radically different moral framing: climate change as humanity’s self-destruction rather than the West’s oppression of the rest, foolishness rather than wickedness. This is the sort of stance implicitly taken by most Northern governments (H. A. Smith 2007) and Western scientists (Lahsen 2004): the very characterization of climate change as “man”made and “global” implies universal rather than industrial culpability,¹ conveniently ignoring inequalities (H. A. Smith 2007). Universal blame is also, interestingly, adopted by some indigenous communities, those who seem to best exemplify the injustice of climate change and the wisdom of an industrial-blame stance. Examples in the literature are multiplying: indigenous Totonacs of Mexico (W. D. Smith 2007), many rural Africans (Eguavoen 2013; Patt and Schröter 2007; Shaffer and Naiene 2011), and some Tibetans (Byg and Salick 2009) regard their own communities as sharing equally in the climate guilt. Such a blame strategy can even be found in small island states, which are presented by industrial blamers as the epitome of climate injustice: their emissions are as small as their vulnerability is large (Barker 2008; Barnett and Campbell 2010:71–72).

This article concerns one such nation, the low-lying Republic of the Marshall Islands—one of four sovereign states that face a likely future of nationwide uninhabitability at the hands of sea level rise, coral bleaching, ocean acidification, increased temperatures, and intensified droughts and extreme weather (Barnett and Adger 2003; Nunn 2013). The country is not entirely carbon-innocent: it is a flag of convenience for oil industry vessels including Deepwater Horizon (Kelman 2011:28), and some of its citizens cause “luxury emissions” through their participation in Euro-American consumer culture. That said, one would be hard pressed to find a more

1. Some scholars highly sympathetic to the plight of the climate-vulnerable also hint in this direction: Barnett and Campbell, hoping for a more empowering framing than “islander innocence,” write “the Pacific Islands are not entirely innocent. Some people in the region have made poor decisions in relation to deforestation, especially in Papua New Guinea and Solomon Islands, consumption of fossil fuels in the region is increasing, and, like everywhere else in the world, corruption and mismanagement have led to environmental changes that increase vulnerability to climate change” (Barnett and Campbell 2010:72).

blameless society. The average Marshall Islander has a carbon footprint less than one-tenth that of the average American, and the nation as a whole contributed just 0.0003% of the world's carbon emissions in 2008 (United Nations 2011). In the usual moral calculus of industrial blamers, then, Marshall Islanders are as close as can be to pure "victims" of climate change. But, as I explore in this article, grassroots Marshall Islanders (if not their government) usually employ a different moral calculus: they are little interested in the nefarious carbon footprints of foreign countries yet fascinated and morally animated by their own contribution. That is, they eschew industrial blame in favor of universal blame with self-blaming tendencies.

Needless to say, this finding sits awkwardly with the industrial blame favored by most anthropologists. Colleagues are often disconcerted to hear that Marshall Islanders self-blame for climate change—and understandably so. At best, they find the perception puzzling, since the Marshallese seem to have as much reason as anyone in the world to appreciate the justice dimensions of climate change. The progressive anthropologist thus seems faced with a "tragic trade-off" (Tetlock et al. 2000) between two anthropological taboos: delegitimizing an indigenous viewpoint (in this case, climate change self-blame) and supporting the obfuscation of injustice. The aim of this article is to explore analytical strategies for tackling this conundrum. Ultimately I wish to suggest that the "Sophie's choice" between respecting "uncritical" indigenous voices and maintaining our own critical stance may be illusory, as Marshallese self-blame, when viewed in its local context, carries postcolonial and counterhegemonic potentialities of its own—the unexpected fruits of this perhaps unexpected indigenous view of climate change.

Climate Change and Blame in the Marshall Islands

The Republic of the Marshall Islands comprises a group of low-lying coral atolls and islands in eastern Micronesia. The country's 60,000 citizens, almost all of them indigenous Marshallese, are now fairly familiar with scientific discourses of anthropogenic climate change: they learn about the threat not only through firsthand observation of sea level rise, increased temperatures, decreased rainfall, and so forth but also through the dissemination of climate science—in particular by the government's Ministry of Education and various schools; the local nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) including Women United Together Marshall Islands (WUTMI) and the Marshall Islands Conservation Society (MICS); the country's newspaper *The Marshall Islands Journal*; and local radio broadcasts. Especially since 2009, these and other outlets have informed the Marshallese public that scientists have predicted that the sea will rise and destroy the islands or, less apocalyptically, that changes in temperature, rainfall, and sea level will make Marshallese life more difficult in the future. Surveys and interviews that I conducted in the Marshallese language

in 2009 and 2012 reveal that most adults are now fairly aware of at least the basic idea of anthropogenic alteration of the global climate, caused by various industrial technologies, which will have dire effects on the Marshall Islands.

The various voices communicating climate change to the Marshallese public are in some ways unified: all present climate change as a real danger that will pose severe, quite possibly insurmountable, threats to the continued habitation of the Marshallese homeland. In terms of blame, however, the voices diverge. The NGO WUTMI has tended to emphasize universal blame, with an emphasis on Marshall Islanders' own contribution to climate change; that is, self-blame. For instance, during a climate change-themed radio broadcast in July 2009, a contributor from WUTMI told listeners, "It is us people (*kōj make armej*) who are doing it, ruining (*kōkurre*) the world. God gave us intelligence (*kōlmān!okjen*) so that we won't do things like driving cars so much, using air conditioning and Styrofoam cups, because they ruin the environment. We must save our small islands." Meanwhile, government communications on climate change tend to emphasize industrial blame. For instance, Yumi Crisostomo, former Director of the government's Office of Environmental Planning and Policy Coordination, stated, "The root cause of [climate change] is the unstable concentration of GHG [greenhouse gas] emissions by industrialized countries. . . . RMI [Republic of the Marshall Islands] is not responsible. . . . Climate change is a crime, and we will not be silent about it" (Skye Hohmann's interview of Yumi Crisostomo, December 31, 2009). At the UN's 2012 Rio+20 conference, President Christopher Loeak released a National Statement in which countries like the Marshall Islands were portrayed as "victims" of the "largest emitters" (Loeak 2012).

Since government officials are often invited to speak at WUTMI's educational sessions, and since even government officials sometimes advocate some amount of universal blame, one finds many instances where both blame strategies are advocated at a single event or indeed by a single individual. These differing climate change blame messages are interesting in themselves, and could be fruitfully analyzed in terms of a larger literature on the strategic appropriation of climate change discourses by local elites (Barnett and Campbell 2010; Lahsen 2004; Nuttall 2009). This article, however, focuses on grassroots (nongovernmental) Marshall Islanders' perceptions of the issue—so the relevant point here is that both blame strategies are familiar to them; both have been advocated and made intelligible. The question then becomes: having heard these mixed messages, which one do citizens tend to adopt?

Whatever sort of evidence one consults, the conclusion is the same: grassroots Marshall Islanders heavily favor universal blame (becoming self-blame) over industrial blame for climate change. Such a view is prevalent in public statements on the issue. The winning entry in a government-sponsored climate change poem competition declared in the last stanza, "We are the ones causing climate change." In February 2009, a Marshallese university student debate on the necessity of

climate change evacuation took universal blame as a given: a participant stated, “Instead of using fuel, we can use solar. That’s one way [to fight climate change]. We can stop dumping our garbage into the ocean”; this view was not challenged. At a Ministry of Education-organized awareness raising session in February 2009, high school students were asked to break into groups and answer the question “What can we as a community or as individuals do to combat climate change?” All of the groups opined that Marshall Islanders themselves should curtail actions that contribute locally to global warming, while none mentioned the culpability of other nations or the desirability of protest. The following statement was typical: “Use less CO₂. We use a lot of CO₂. For example, reduce the number of cars, use less air conditioning . . . and reduce the number of batteries. These things all use CO₂. Do not wait. Act as fast as you can to reduce climate change. . . . Hurry, hurry, hurry. Don’t just sit down and be lazy.” When Majuro students were asked by a reporter from the *Marshall Islands Journal* what ought to be done about global warming, none suggested foreign protest or complaint but instead measures such as the following:

What we can . . . do about this is . . . not burning chemicals, and not helping the tides take the pieces of our small islands. Like taking soil from beaches or dredg[ing] sites so much for building houses.

We the people are the ones causing global warming. If we would really care about it, then we would have at least done something to prevent it from happening.

We could help clean up the island.

I think that I can try not to burn trashes or I might say chemical that destroys the layer that protects the Earth from total hotness.

In 2007, a Marshall Islander on the Marshallese website Yokwe.net responded to then-president Kessai Note’s protest of other countries’ contribution to climate change by saying:

The real threat to our environment is our own activities. Looking around Majuro, the real threat our environment faces everyday come from the locals and businesses themselves. Until our leaders do something about these real threat[s], what they are telling the rest of the world is not real. . . . Tell those nations the real story at home and stop making good faces. We are the real problem here.

On Yokwe.net in 2008, users posted responses to an article on global warming, including this Marshallese immigrant in the United States:

We have not been keeping our beaches and our land clean and sanitized. We also play a good deal in what is to become the destruction of our beloved islands. . . . One way that our islands could be saved is to stop polluting the sea. When we leave our trash *ilo lik* [on the ocean beach], it kills the barrier reef that[’]s protecting our island. We have to do something about it and fast. We are also responsible for

what is to become . . . the d[e]struction of our beloved islands.

Other commentators agreed:

I also think that the key contributing factor to stab[i]lize the rise in the sea-level is to keep our islands clean, and we need collective efforts on this.

We’re on the verge of destroying our beloved islands.

At the WUTMI climate change forum in April 2009, participants (from a wide variety of urban and rural backgrounds) agreed upon six responses to climate change: none of these involved protest but rather local efforts toward adaptation and mitigation through recycling, reduced use of air conditioners, and public transport. At the same event, an audience member chastised the speakers for using Styrofoam cups during the very forum in which they had advocated their curtailment; the speakers were embarrassed, implying that they were sincere in their statements that Marshall Islanders themselves shared in the guilt for causing climate change. At a 2010 public discussion on climate change at the College of the Marshall Islands, a WUTMI representative remarked that the Marshall Islands is itself a consumer of fossil fuels, asking rhetorically, “How can we ask the bigger nations for help, when we are [also] a contributor to climate change?”

The same blame perception predominated in interviews that I conducted with Marshall Islanders of widely varying ages, occupations, and education levels in both the urban center of Majuro and several rural outer islands. Asked to comment on the recent erosion of a culturally important graveyard on Jaluit Atoll, locals usually faulted Marshall Islanders’ own weakening allegiance to traditional propriety. A man in Majuro, when asked why the weather had changed since the past, replied, “Because of chemicals. These things that come from power plants.” He then pointed to the *Majuro* power plant, calling attention to Marshall Islanders’ own contribution (interview, September 8, 2009). Another Majuro man attributed recent crop failures to increased heat, which in turn, he said, was caused by cars. When asked which cars he was referring to, he named the most developed *Marshallese* communities—Majuro, Ebeye, Jaluit, and Wotje—rather than foreign nations and added, “We used to use lanterns. Now we use generators. This harms our lives” (interview, August 27, 2009).

Lest these examples appear cherry-picked, it is important to note that a more systematic survey points toward the same conclusion. When I asked 77 adults in Majuro whose fault (*an wōn bōd*) climate change is, only 18% blamed a foreign group specifically (such as “scientists,” “those who went to the moon,” “the big countries”), while 52%, almost three times as many, blamed “people” (*arnej*) in general or “us” (*kōj*) and 3% blamed Marshall Islanders in particular. (In turn, 5% “blamed” God, 6% said no one was to blame, and 26%

said they did not know.)² More oblique survey questions imply the same: when asked what people should do about climate change, four of the 26 suggestions for mitigating climate change were aimed at other, larger countries. Of the remaining 22 suggestions, 17 were general prescriptions for reducing pollution or protecting the environment (not specifying whether it was just Marshall Islanders, or people in general, who should do this), and five seemed to be aimed specifically at Marshall Islanders. Universal blame thus predominates, and the interview and ethnographic examples I have provided above indicate that while this universal blame acknowledges the role of non-Marshallese in causing climate change, it puts particular moral salience on Marshall Islanders' own contribution to the problem. We can surmise, then, that the "us" answers to my survey question of who is to blame for climate change were intended to mean "us Marshallese" more than "us humans."

Most convincingly of all, various Marshallese practices explicitly or implicitly assume universal-cum-self-blame. The Marshall Islands have seen no grassroots protest of foreign culpability for global warming. The one exception of which I am aware, discussed below, involved only a single individual. Even a 2009 rally against worldwide carbon emissions emphasized universal rather than industrial blame. Meanwhile, grassroots Marshallese society has in recent years given birth to a vigorous movement toward local mitigation of climate change. An "Environment Day" in Majuro (the country's capital city) in 2007, sponsored by the government's Environmental Protection Authority, encouraged citizens to reduce their contribution to climate change by walking to work, turning off lights, and avoiding Styrofoam cups and plastic bags. A 2009 "Energy Fair" adopted the slogan "Conserve Energy Now!" to advocate grassroots energy conservation for both practical and environmental reasons. Another Energy Fair in 2010, sponsored by the Marshall Islands Conservation Society, as well as various government offices, educated students about global warming and advised them to fight this menace and strengthen energy security by using renewable energy. In 2010 the local government of Kwajalein Atoll won a grant of US\$50,000 from the Global Environment Facility/New Zealand AID Small Grants Program for renewable energy development, explicitly for the goal of combatting climate change and educating citizens about the issue. In 2010, Majuro Co-op School hosted an event encouraging healthy and traditional lifestyles, portraying the reinvigoration of pandanus horticulture as conducive not only to health and the preservation of Marshallese culture but also to climate change mitigation and adaptation. Later in 2010, Marshallese Boy Scouts participated in a field trip to an outer island of Majuro Atoll to learn about energy conservation on both traditionalist and environmentalist pretexts. In the same year, mayors from the country's Ratak chain of atolls sought a United Nations

2. The percentages add up to more than 100 because some respondents offered more than one answer.

grant of US\$51 million to develop solar energy and related global warming education. In 2010 and 2012, the University of the South Pacific's Majuro campus hosted summer science camps for high school students to learn about the benefits of local, renewable, climate-friendly energy sources.

For the sake of balance, I should note that a few industrial blamers do exist at the grassroots level. A middle-aged female interviewee on rural Ailinglaplap Atoll put responsibility for global warming squarely on the United States' shoulders: US Americans were "ruining all of the good things that God created," and she was angry at Marshall Islanders' lack of power in the issue of climate change (interview, July 20, 2009). At the Global Humanitarian Forum in 2008, a young Marshallese man named James Bing danced furiously and then said, "This is how angry I am. Rising sea levels have taken our sand, our beaches, our trees, our food, and most importantly, our soil. Where is my soil, ladies and gentlemen? What have you done to it? I want my soil back." In January 2010, the *Marshall Islands Journal* ran a political cartoon in which a drowning man ("Pacific Island Nation") declares, "You're the one who made it this way . . . help!" (*Kwe eo kwar kōmman bwe en eindrein . . . jiban!*) to a man on the shore ("Bigger Nation"), who replies, "That's because I love money . . . but I'll build you a seawall" (*Kōn aō yokwe jāān . . . ak inaaj kōmman am seawall*). Such statements are greatly outnumbered, however, by the sort I have listed above.

Explanation by Delegitimization

What is a critical anthropologist to do with this Marshallese narrative of blame? One strategy is to attempt to cordon off or neutralize the "awkward" finding by denying it legitimacy. While such a move goes against core anthropological principles of respecting local points of view, of course anthropology's relativism only extends so far. In an "activist ethnography" of homelessness, Vincent Lyon-Callo (2000) seeks to challenge, rather than appreciate, homeless people's self-blame for their economic marginalization. Joel Robbins is similarly unafraid to disagree with his field partners on blame narratives: while taking seriously the Urapmin's enthusiastic Christian self-flagellation, he also tells his readers that it is partially misplaced, since the internecine tensions that followed the arrival of a mining company were not caused by the people's sinfulness (as they themselves saw it) but because the mining company's creation of economic inequality when it gave jobs to only some members of the community (Robbins 2004:xxiv; also see Farmer [1992], from whom I adapt the title of this article). Approaches of this sort could potentially "domesticate" Marshall Islanders' blame narrative by analyzing it in terms that maintain anthropologists' conviction in industrial blame. But I argue that they are ethnographically implausible or unsatisfying in the Marshallese case.

One such explanation would invoke ignorance. Perhaps Marshall Islanders are unfamiliar with foreign nations, unaware of their archipelago's small size, ill-informed of the caus-

ative chain that links industrial emissions abroad with rising seas at home, or incredulous that such causation could occur. These possibilities are easily dismissed. Marshall Islanders are well aware of the world at large, receiving global news via radio on even the most remote outer islands. The archipelago has a long and continuing history of imperial encounters with outside powers, specifically Germany, Japan, and the United States. There are high rates of migration by Marshall Islanders to and from the United States. Foreign in-migration, though numerically small, is easily visible and frequently discussed: locals are highly concerned about the recent influx of Chinese people to Majuro, and there are also other Asian immigrants as well as foreign Pacific Islanders and Western expatriates. Not surprisingly, then, Marshall Islanders speak frequently about other countries, in particular the United States (*Amedka* or *aelōn in pālle*) (as we will see in the next section). They also have a convenient category that includes the United States and all other large industrial countries: *laḷ ko rōḷlap* (literally “the big countries”), upon which they could blame climate change. (They do not, however, have a category corresponding to “the West” or “Western countries.”)

Furthermore, they are fully conscious of these countries’ large size, economic might, and intensive use of climate change-causing technology. As noted above, Marshall Islanders call countries like the United States, China, Japan, Australia, and so forth “*laḷ ko rōḷlap*,” revealing not just a cognizance of these countries’ size but indeed a tendency to define them in terms of it. In contrast, they often refer to their own islands as “*āne jiddik kein ad*,” our small islands. Here size is conflated with power and wealth, so that for instance a presenter at a WUTMI workshop in 2009 referred to “the small countries (*laḷ jiddik ko*), those countries that have few resources, unlike countries like the United States and other big countries (*laḷ ko rōḷlap*).” While many Marshall Islanders are surprised at hearing that the United States has nearly 300 million citizens, they are clearly well aware that the number is much larger than their own population. Furthermore, even well-educated locals who know the exact population of the United States nonetheless favored universal blame even as they acknowledged the small size of the Marshall Islands’ contribution. As one schoolteacher in Majuro said:

Let’s picture a blank white sheet of paper. And each country would come with their big brush of paint and paint it, a . . . black spot on the white paint. . . . The Marshall Islands with its small part as a contributor to . . . global warming, take this tiny part and put a little dot in that white sheet of paper. That is no longer a clear white sheet! It’s tarnished, regardless of how small that thing is. So we do have something to contribute to the whole picture. . . . Even though it’s small it’s still something. . . . We’re also contributing. (Interview, June 18, 2009)

Further deflating any explanation based on ignorance, informants were quick to reject industrial blame even when I proposed it. When I told a man in Majuro that some people

were of the opinion that the United States should carry blame for climate change, he responded unequivocally: “No. Everyone is causing it. Marshall Islanders too. Like when we cut down all the trees, it makes carbon dioxide. That’s why we need to educate” (interview, June 16, 2009). When I asked attendants at a climate change symposium at Majuro’s Assumption School if Marshall Islanders ought to be *angry* about climate change, a woman responded, “There is anger,” but then identified the offender as being within the Marshallese in-group: “For instance, I get angry—at the government here for allowing people to keep dredging and things like that” (interview, June 24, 2009). Rien Morris, the Senator of Jaluit Atoll, answered assuredly my question of who is to blame for climate change: “We are, you and I. Marshallese may not think they are responsible for it, but they are. It’s only a little contribution, but we too have air conditioners and cars. All Pacific Islands contribute . . . We are in it together.” When I proposed US culpability, he was unmoved: “No, everyone does. If you go dive here, you will see all the plastics. Marshall Islands is only a little, but, by joining with all the other Pacific Islands, it makes a big contribution. . . . The pollutions from the Marshall Islands are also a contribution to all these problems” (interview with Rien Morris, August 10, 2009). Informants do sometimes point out that “the large countries” are home to much greater quantities of climate change-causing technologies than the Marshall Islands, but they often then add that this does not absolve islanders, for this disparity is only one of opportunity, not of motivation: if locals were as wealthy as foreigners, they would pollute equally as much.

But do Marshall Islanders truly appreciate that these distant countries can raise local seas? It is true that most lay Marshall Islanders cannot describe the scientific causation of climate change—in my 2009 survey only about a third of adults could do so—and in the climate change perception literature it has been suggested that the counterintuitive nature of global warming causation undermines people’s capacity for concern and outrage (Bostrom and Lashof 2007:38–39; Jamieson 2007: 475–476). But the ethnographic record belies such a theory: accusation requires political and conceptual plausibility, not a detailed consideration of physical causation. Mary Douglas and Aaron Wildavsky, taking into consideration countless ethnographic case studies, write “Plausibility [of causation] depends on enough people wanting to believe in the theory, and this depends on enough people being committed to whatever moral principle it protects” (Douglas and Wildavsky 1982:38; also see Douglas 1992:9). It should also be noted that the idea that a foreign country could entirely destroy an island is not fanciful at all to Marshall Islanders, who came back to Bikini Atoll to find three islets vaporized by US atomic blasts. Scientists and US Americans—the two categories blend in Marshallese discourse—are often credited with prodigious powers, not surprising for a nation that experienced the century’s most awe-inspiring weaponry in its own backyard.

So much for ignorance. An explanation based instead on *denial* would assert that, at some level, Marshall Islanders

realize that other countries are at fault for climate change, but so great is their desire to believe that this terrible threat can be averted that they have convinced themselves on another level that they can stop it on their own. This explanation does not accord with the evidence. If Marshallese self-blame is an act of wishful thinking regarding climate change's tractability, one would expect self-blamers to have high appraisals of their ability to stop climate change, to eagerly declare their power over the matter. But they do not. In public statements on climate change, it is never suggested that Marshall Islanders can stop climate change, only that they contribute to it. The same viewpoint emerges in the elicited contexts of interviews and surveys. In answer to the survey question "Can Marshall Islanders solve 'climate change'?" 58% said no, while only 25% said yes (the remaining 17% gave mixed answers). One of the country's most dedicated climate change activists told me that severe damage was all but inevitable, yet local mitigation and adaptation efforts should be pursued anyway. The young Marshallese citizen quoted at the beginning of this article shamed her fellow Marshall Islanders about their contribution to environmental damage, while also declaring, "Even if everyone in the Marshall Islands stopped . . . contribut[ing] to global warming, it's not going to change unless the rest of the world slows down" (Bigler 2007). By all indications, then, Marshall Islanders have no comforting delusions of singlehandedly stemming the rising tide. There is also something of a paradox here: islanders accuse themselves for climate change yet do not believe they can do much to curtail it. I will return to this puzzle in the next section. A related explanation would posit that Marshallese NGOs are encouraging self-blame in the hopes that the resulting feeling of empowerment will foster grassroots engagement with the issue. But this does nothing to explain why the target audience of these communications chooses to accept such a blame narrative, when other blame narratives are familiar to them.

Yet another explanation would interpret Marshallese self-blame as surface-level rhetoric: Marshall Islanders do not truly blame themselves for climate change, and do not truly care about local mitigation; they merely pretend to in order to gain international sympathy, to demonstrate concern, to prove the possibility of carbon neutrality, and to shame the real culprits into action. There may be some truth to this theory but only in the governmental arena. Government officials indeed have much to gain from feigning an idealistic interest in local mitigation, for they have other, more pragmatic reasons to develop renewable energy: in 2008 the global spike in the price of oil sent the archipelago into economic panic, and ever since then the government has sought to reduce oil dependence. Perhaps, then, the government's mitigation efforts are partly performance, a tactic to win funding for renewable energy projects that are actually desired on economic, not environmental, grounds. But this explanation fails to account for grassroots society, because here such a ruse would require the active participation of almost all of my many informants, spread out over various islands, to pre-

tend to blame themselves for climate change and to feign interest in local mitigation—a rather far-fetched conspiracy theory. Another explanation based on performance might say that informants expressed self-blame to me out of politeness: they did not wish to offend the ethnographer who happens to hail from one of the world's most culpable nations. But this is implausible, not only because locals were perfectly willing to make other negative statements about US Americans to my face but also because their statements of self-blame were encountered when speaking to each other, not just to me.

Another explanation of climate change self-blame would invoke a false consciousness (Engels 1893; Lukacs 1968 [1920]) stemming from hegemonic acts of "symbolic violence": the subtle bodily (Bourdieu 1990, chap. 4) and linguistic (Bourdieu 1994) exercise of power in everyday situations by which the powerless learn blindness to, or justification of, their subordination. Such an approach would theorize that Marshall Islanders have been convinced by the holders of Bourdieu's "symbolic power" to blame themselves for their ills, thereby justifying and mystifying their downtrodden status. There are reasons to doubt the utility of this approach in the Marshallese case. Unlike in other studies of symbolic violence where acts of symbolic domination can be observed ethnographically (see, e.g., Farmer 1992; Lyon-Callo 2000; Tapias 2006), in the Marshallese case there are no obvious channels through which a notion of climate change self-blame has been transmitted by outside, hegemonic voices. It is true, of course, that until fairly recently the United States was under an administration reluctant to acknowledge the anthropogenic origins of global warming. But this stance did nothing to reproach smaller countries, only to cast doubt on the human origins of climate change or the wisdom of tackling it. The only parties explicitly instructing Marshallese citizens to blame themselves for climate change are various spokespeople of the NGO WUTMI; if symbolic violence is currently operating, it would have to be here. As a locally run grassroots organization (technically an umbrella organization for dozens of women's groups in various communities around the archipelago), concerned with empowering Marshallese women, preserving tradition, and strengthening communities, it might seem an unlikely agent of hegemonic domination, but one could perhaps argue that WUTMI is indeed committing symbolic violence: it foments self-blame in order to maintain its ability to attract outside grants (industrial blame might blacklist the group as a radical organization), and unwitting citizens have fallen for this rhetoric. It seems highly unlikely, however, that government officials would think nothing of blaming outsiders, despite needing their financial support as much as or more than WUTMI, while WUTMI would play it safe by blaming insiders. It would also be an odd sort of symbolic violence, since WUTMI activists are themselves Marshall Islanders who partake in the guilt they advocate.

But the possibility that symbolic violence is in operation cannot be so easily dismissed. Its form may be far subtler and

more insidious than the previous paragraph assumes. If Marshall Islanders' self-blame is part of a local moral cosmology (as I argue in the next section), that is to be expected – the essence of symbolic violence and the false consciousness is to be unaware of the oppressive nature of the discourse in which one participates, and any academic attempt to ignore that succumbs to the same ahistorical, normalizing illusion. In this view, while Marshallese climate change self-blame is not a direct result of symbolic violence, the more general self-accusation (see next section) that inspires it is a direct result of symbolic violence, a part of Marshallese habitus “impalpably inculcated, through a long and slow process of acquisition” (Bourdieu 1994:51) over a long history of hegemonic trickery. US-affiliated scientists told the victims of radiation poisoning that they were simply paranoid (Dibblin 1988). Successive colonial governments—German, Japanese, American—ending only in the late twentieth century convinced the Marshallese people that domination was for their own good, and even now the country remains economically dependent on the United States despite being nominally sovereign. In the mid-nineteenth century, the archipelago's first missionaries, Congregationalists working under the aegis of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions, preached a black-and-white doctrine in which existing lifeways were a source of shame, and all things heathen were to be renounced and replaced in toto with Christianity (see Utter 1999:34–36). Although it would be ironic if this experience laid the foundation for a later, opposite discourse of rejecting the foreign and embracing the local, it is certainly conceivable. While a full appraisal of Marshallese colonial history cannot be attempted in the space of this article, even this cursory glance indicates the plausibility of *longue durée* symbolic violence as an indirect contributor to contemporary climate change self-blame.

But the explanation by symbolic violence remains unsatisfying. Even if it carries some explanatory power and serves to historicize and politicize Marshallese self-blame, it does nothing to illuminate what self-blame means to people today. It can reveal only one part of the narrative's social life—its mystifying consequences—while remaining blind to other, perhaps less insidious rationales and ramifications. To understand what self-blame means to Marshall Islanders themselves, in its full local context, a different approach must be taken.

Explanation by Discursive Appropriation

With the explanations above proving unsatisfactory, where should the analyst turn? I argue that we should look to more constructivist theoretical frameworks, those which interpret narrative as a means of breathing meaning into a world that does not inherently contain it, rather than a technology to obscure and legitimate (real) power relations. Such approaches to culpability are implicit in countless ethnographic works that investigate, for instance, justice systems and pun-

ishment (Bohannon 1957); collective violence and retribution (Evans-Pritchard 1940); and reactions to environmental perturbation (e.g., Hsu 2000; Minnegal and Dwyer 2007). They find their most explicit statement, however, in Mary Douglas' writings on risk. For Douglas, risks and their associated discourses of culpability are socially constructed and irrevocably political in nature (Douglas 1992; Douglas and Wildavsky 1982). When a society constructs a risk by selecting a danger for attention, it assigns culpability for the threat according to its preexisting tendencies: preconceived villains (depending on the society, these may out-groups, rivals within the in-group, or the victim himself) will be deemed blameworthy, and appropriate action will be taken: vengeance against out-groups, calls for compensation from or punishment of an in-group rival, or acts of purification and atonement (Douglas 1992:5–6). While much of Douglas' theoretical work has been criticized for its functionalism, its determinism, and the crudeness of its group-grid societal typology (Boholm 1996), the more basic theory has held up well: blame is part of the way that societies, factions, and individuals utilize threats to shore up cosmological and political commitments and appropriate new events in terms of old categories. Here “victim” self-blame is not (or is not *only*) a false consciousness, but a method (as one Science and Technology Studies scholar puts it) to “impose discipline on unruly events by creating understandable causal relationships, identifying agents of harmful behavior, and finding solutions that convey a sense of security and moral order” (Jasanoff 2005:24). From this perspective, the situation appears differently: Marshallese self-blame is a particular way of putting local subjectivity into the globalized, rationalized scientific discourse of climate change (see Jasanoff 2010). To understand why “they” adopt a blame strategy that “we” might find puzzling, we should momentarily set aside the issue of who really is to blame and instead look to the preexisting Marshallese cosmologies, discourses, and narratives by which new ideas like global climate change are interpreted (see, e.g., Lipset 2011).

In the Marshall Islands a particular set of ideas, which I will gloss as “cultural decline” or “seductive modernity,” is an excellent candidate for such. It is an extremely pervasive discourse in Marshallese society, evident in communicatory genres as disparate as political speeches, visual art, letters to the editor of the newspaper, political cartoons, and formal and informal interviews in the course of fieldwork, and voiced in uncannily similar (though not identical) forms by young and old, male and female, rural and urban, educated and uneducated alike. Moreover, the discourse is clearly invoked in much climate change discourse in the country, framed by an identical narrative and conceptual scheme. Space limitations prevent me from fully detailing this metanarrative, as it is truly vast in its repertoire of subnarratives, the variety of situations to which it can be applied, and its political, emotional, and intellectual consequences. It will suffice to summarize its most commonly voiced elements.

Cultural decline is the notion that Marshallese society is in

a downward spiral due to Marshall Islanders' adoption of foreign culture and abandonment of Marshallese tradition (*manit* or *mantin majel*) (see Rudiak-Gould 2012a). The pre-contact "traditional" past (*jemaan, etto*) is spoken of as idyllic in its interpersonal harmony, hierarchical propriety, subsistence affluence, and unswerving traditionalism. With the arrival of Westerners, in particular US Americans, in the nineteenth century, islanders were seduced by foreign things and the arcadia of custom began to fade. Hard-earned money (*jāan, mani*) replaced effortless subsistence (*ejjelok wōnāan*, "free of charge"), and with that, selfish individualism (*kwe wōt kwe, ŋa wōt ŋa*) triumphed over hierarchical deference (*kautiej*) and communal care (*lale doon*). All elements of the Marshallese good life have waned, if not disappeared, at the hands of foreign intrusions: the Marshallese language is rife with Americanisms, magical power is diminished, old skills and lore are forgotten, chiefs and parents are negligent, women and children are insubordinate. The discourse of cultural decline is a narrative of Americanization: denizens of the United States are said to be individualistic and money-dependent in diametric contrast to the communal/hierarchical and subsistence-based ways of traditional Marshallese society. Most present-day ills are said to be primarily the result of this general societal deterioration toward US values and practices. In behavior, of course, Marshall Islanders reveal a much more complex and ambivalent attitude toward modernity, the United States, and foreign culture, voluntarily adopting many of its trappings; but such actions are not contrary to the discourse of cultural decline but indeed the subject of its narrative and the target of its invective.

Cultural decline's critique of outside influence, its depiction of the contact event as the advent of suffering, may sound other-blaming, perhaps even xenophobic. But the discourse is actually primarily one of self-accusation. US Americans and other foreigners were only the catalysts, the bringers of temptation; it was the local capitulation to this temptation, the choice to take what the foreigners were offering, that was the true crime. This is the moral focus of the cultural decline narrative. The self-accusatory—or perhaps it is better to say in-group-accusatory—dimension of this jeremiad is obvious in much public discourse, as well as in interviews. It is also starkly revealed in the survey that I conducted. When asked who was at fault (*an wōn bōd*) for the cultural decline that very nearly all of the survey respondents pointed to, 90% indicated Marshall Islanders, while only 5% blamed foreigners such as US Americans (5% blamed people in general). The following answers were typical:

Us Marshallese. We cannot blame foreigners.

It is Marshall Islanders' fault for imitating Americans (*kappāllele*).

It is everyone's fault. Even chiefs and high people (*riutiej*) make errors.

It is adults' fault for not teaching their children.

It is not America's fault! It is *our* fault. Ourselves. We do not eat breadfruit. It is because we are lazy—American food is so easy to cook.

It is Marshall Islanders' fault, because we abandon tradition (*jolok manit*).

Sometimes, of course, reality refuses to be shoehorned into this moral schema. The preeminent example is the case of US nuclear testing at Bikini and Eniwetok atolls from 1946 to 1958 and the resulting displacement and disease (see Barker 2004). No amount of cognitive gymnastics can make the detonation of a hydrogen bomb blamable on Marshall Islanders, and unsurprisingly the dominant moral-political response has been to call for compensation from the United States, sometimes angrily (Barker 2004). Diabetes, shortening life spans, failing crops, hermaphroditic pigs, and other ills are sometimes attributed by locals to lingering radiation, thus indicting the US government and absolving the in-group. Still, when the situation allows it—and the universe being so flexibly interpretable, it usually does—the first inclination is to point the finger at the in-group.

It is not difficult to see how the idea of climate change can be fitted into the longer-standing narrative framework of cultural decline. A pristine environment and undisturbed climate are added onto the list of yesteryear's perfections. The burgeoning harms of global warming are added to the litany of contemporary troubles. The likely future of inundation and evacuation is grafted onto the prophecy of cultural doomsday that will result if present trends continue. Indeed the destruction of the Marshallese homeland functions as the epitome of all that the cultural decline discourse fears. Cars, motorboats, air conditioners, and all other devices that contribute to climate change are added onto the list of seductive, destructive foreign artifacts that must be resisted. Marshall Islanders' contributions to climate change are added onto the list of tradition-violations about which to feel guilty. The fact that foreigners, too, contribute to climate change is not denied, it is simply ignored, for it is irrelevant to what Marshallese discourse cares so dearly about, which is locals' own loyalty or disloyalty toward tradition.

The fit between climate change and cultural decline is therefore a close one, but the evidence that such a connection is actually made has thus far been only circumstantial. More direct evidence comes from the way in which locals speak of climate change in traditionalist, entropic terms. Occasionally the link is pointed to directly, such as in this conversation I had with a woman in Majuro:

Author: Why is climate change happening?

Informant: Because of all this manmade stuff, like boats, airplanes, and high buildings . . . *I think the climate change is like the custom change* . . . [It's] the same thing. Because of all these new things.

Author: Who is making climate change happen?

Informant: Us people . . . including Marshall Islanders. Because we follow *mantin pälle* [American culture]. We make big buildings. . . . Before we used to rely on local things. And it was good. But now it is not. (Interview, June 11, 2009)

Other times the connection is less explicit yet no less obvious. When asked what is causing climate change, locals often point to the loss of tradition, the general deterioration of societal conditions since the past, and the imitation of foreign ways. The erosion of a coastal graveyard on Jaluit Atoll, alluded to previously, is spoken of as part and parcel of the downfall of an erstwhile Marshallese clan (*jowi*) buried in that location, a downfall that is itself symptomatic of a wider decline in vitality, magical efficacy, and uprightness. In public and private reflections, the possibility of future inundation and evacuation is often cast in traditionalist terms: it is said that such an eventuality would spell the demise of Marshallese tradition, and the possibility of preemptive relocation is passionately rejected on these grounds. Interviewees often segue fluidly between discussion of climate change and discussion of cultural decline. For instance, a woman in Majuro described what she had learned at a WUTMI workshop on climate change, indicating the close connections between climate change and cultural decline in Marshallese minds, as well as the understanding of climate change causers as imported, untraditional things:

We learned that Styrofoam cups are bad. They were brought here from outside the country—they didn't come from here. People throw them away and it's bad. . . . It damages the coral. There was nothing like Styrofoam before in the Marshall Islands—it came from *other* countries. . . . We have too many things from outsiders—like money. We don't rely on our own things anymore. We depend on outside things. We don't grow our own food anymore. (Interview, May 29, 2009)

Thus climate change-causing objects become pollution not simply in the environmental-science sense but in Mary Douglas's famous sense of "matter out of place" (Douglas 2002 [1966]:44). Styrofoam—unambiguously foreign, unambiguously untraditional—is an especially apt example, fitting neatly into the category of things that do not fit neatly into the category of Marshallese tradition.

If my analysis is correct, in-group-blaming Marshallese activists are not motivated by ignorance, delusion, or deceit. Rather, they are motivated by a desire to reassert cultural continuity and distinctiveness. Where an industrial blamer might see only needless self-flagellation, the sad spectacle of a victimized society turning accusation inward, Marshallese activists see an opportunity to turn climate change into the final proof of modernity's folly, a powerful inspiration to revitalize older ways. The side benefits that solar power, canoe use, and the like offered to tradition are not side benefits at all: they are the main point, and if anything it is the curtain-

ment of climate change that is the side benefit. Combating climate change becomes a means to an end; they are using climate change and not just trying to solve it, as Mike Hulme advocates (2009:328). Thus the puzzle, alluded to earlier, of local self-blame without local self-efficacy is solved: even if they cannot stop climate change, the attempt to do so achieves the more important goal of defending tradition and marks one as a loyal and virtuous member of Marshallese society. As one local climate change activist told me, "The way I see it, we're fortifying not our shoreline but our culture" (interview with Mark Stege, June 11, 2009).

To be clear, Marshall Islanders have not stopped driving cars, turning on air conditioners, drinking from Styrofoam cups, and so forth. It is too soon to tell if recent climate change activism will inspire significant change in individual- or household-level consumer behavior. For the time being, locals continue to choose between, say, sailing canoes and motorboats based on many factors, of which traditionalism is just one, and not necessarily the most powerful one. In this way, Marshallese responses to climate change echo their earlier responses to missionization. As I indicated before, missionary proselytizing fostered a categorical moral distinction between new and old, foreign and local, good and bad. While the morality has been reversed in the contemporary traditionalist rhetoric, the basic structure of the moral politics remains the same: in discourse, people categorically reject the local or the foreign, while, in their behavior, they creatively negotiate a synthesis between the two (Utter 1999:37–39). (See Robbins [2004] for a related case study in Papua New Guinea.) That said, the traditionalist, in-group-blaming discourse on climate change is more than just an empty performance. A host of proactive climate change actions are done in its name: mitigation efforts to replace foreign oil dependency with solar power and other local energy sources, adaptation efforts to resurrect traditional shoreline management, and a patriotic rejection of wholesale evacuation as a climate change "solution" (see Rudiak-Gould [2013a], chaps. 4–5, for more detail).

Seen in this light, Marshallese climate change self-blame takes on a different ethical and political profile. To be sure, framing climate change as an aspect of self-inflicted cultural decline breezes over the neocolonial power structures that have contributed to the climate crisis and to other ills Marshall Islanders have suffered through no fault of their own. But the framing is powerfully postcolonial in another, crucial regard: it explicitly aims to take control of the society's cultural future against the pressures and temptations of assimilation into a capitalist world system. And while the Marshallese approach fails to challenge the self-serving Northern assumption that climate change is universally caused (H. A. Smith 2007), it is decidedly counterhegemonic in a host of other ways, challenging several dominant assumptions that give technocrats, scientists, and government officials exclusive right to speak about and act on the issue (H. A. Smith 2007). With its emphasis on locally available, citizen-deployable solutions, it challenges the state-centric and high-technology orienta-

tions of Northern climate mitigation discourse. With its explicitly moral and cultural overtones, it undermines the dominant framing of climate change as inaccessibly scientific and technical. With its emphasis on sociocultural “side” benefits, it undermines the assumption that a nation will never act unilaterally on climate change—the usual “tragedy of the commons” interpretation of climate inaction. It belies the nature-culture opposition implicit in the assumption that saving the climate means wrecking the economy. It demonstrates that citizens can respond to climate change with something other than complacency and evasion of responsibility (see Norgaard 2006; Stoll-Kleemann et al. 2001), which casts doubt on the necessity of a top-down, authoritarian solution. It undermines the sympathetic but ultimately patronizing portrayal of low-lying Pacific Islanders as nothing more vis-à-vis climate change than innocent victims and miner’s canaries (Barnett and Campbell 2010:71–72; Farbotko 2010). If it fails to provide a counternarrative of blame, it does offer a counternarrative of citizen empowerment, bottom-up engagement, and local responsibility. By using climate change to strengthen rather than challenge preexisting concepts, Marshall Islanders have managed both to accept the reality of climate change and to preserve the cherished communally held notions that give them a sense of social and ideological security: a situation greatly to be preferred over that in which people reject the reality of climate change in order to maintain their ideological convictions (Brugger 2010; Donner 2007; Feinberg and Willer 2011; Feygina et al. 2010) or accept climate change but leave any coherent belief system in tatters (Jasanoff 2010). To accomplish this, while simultaneously undermining so many hegemonic assumptions, is no small feat.

Conclusion: Blame Pluralism in the Anthropocene

While Marshallese activists do not welcome rising seas, heat waves, and crippling droughts, they have embraced the climate change *idea* as a powerful rhetorical antidote to blind modernization. This might inspire a similar approach among modernity’s critics in another ideational community: anthropology. Social-justice-minded anthropologists lament the physical impacts of climate change on the poorest and most vulnerable (e.g., Crate and Nuttall 2009), yet they may come to embrace the climate change *idea* for burying, at last, the modernist notion of an independent “nature.” No longer, perhaps, will it be possible to scientize away the moral and political dimensions of “environmental” problems and “natural” disasters (O’Keefe et al. 1976), to imagine ourselves as separate from our surroundings (Ingold 2008 [1993]), to blithely separate people from place (Fairhead and Leach 2008 [1995]; West and Brockington 2006). The West may rejoin the ranks of those societies that never took the fatal philosophical detour of opposing nature to culture (Escobar 1999; Leduc 2011). But as the Marshallese case shows, the abolition of “nature” inherent in the idea of anthropogenic climate

change opens the door not only to the critical political ecology that today’s environmental anthropologists tend to favor but also to narratives like indigenous self-blame that many environmental anthropologists find troubling. If industrial blame—and the progressive political stance that it reflects and reinforces—is what critical climate change scholars are after, they must realize that taking away blameless “nature” is just the first step in the process. The hybrid nature-culture realm that is left in its place, with its seemingly infinite array of possible blame narratives, must still be inscribed with an acceptable morality tale.

At the same time, I hope to have shown that critical political ecologists should not too quickly assume that industrial blame is always and everywhere the best narrative to inscribe onto that blank slate. There may be other narratives of climate change culpability that, in their local context, carry their own laudable potentials and constitute inspiring counternarratives in their own right. Industrial blame is an eminently reasonable and politically courageous position that ought to have a long and influential career. Yet anthropologists who subscribe to this blame narrative must not discount contrary ideas among their field partners. It is possible both to be a critical political ecologist and to appreciate Marshallese narratives of climate change culpability. Victimization and agency are not mutually exclusive (Penz 2010:152–153) and to see in Marshallese climate change self-blame only the former is to prematurely dismiss what might be a perception both locally empowering and globally inspiring.

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Comments

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Rudiak-Gould’s article is an important contribution to critically

evaluating both the responsibility of anthropology in current affairs and the rhetoric surrounding climate change victimization, in this case, within the framework of blame. While dividing the blame narratives at work into two general categories, industrial blame (“wickedness”) and universal blame (“foolishness”), he places Marshall Islanders squarely in the latter, emphasizing a trend of self-blame. Understanding cultural values that have persisted over time are crucial to this discussion, and Rudiak-Gould places them within a local “moral” cosmology. Marshallese cultural values include humility, lack of direct confrontation, respect for elders as well as guests, and a lack of contrarian expression. Rudiak-Gould describes many of these values under the rubric of “cultural decline,” posing a compelling argument linking self-accusation in the face of Western temptation to this overarching moral narrative.

An ethnohistorical examination of Marshallese worldview does reveal the pervasive belief in natural and supernatural consequences that dates back before the arrival of Westerners, that is, if you break that taboo, you invoke sickness, high winds and waves, or even death. But this sense of guilt and self-blame does not necessarily demonstrate active agency in the form of reasserting cultural continuity. Rudiak-Gould’s examples of people “using climate change” for this purpose are limited to solar energy and canoe use and are discussed only briefly. The majority of his study focuses on perceptions and emotions, but the old adage “actions speak louder than words” should perhaps be invoked. How are Marshall Islanders actually behaving?

To this end, Rudiak-Gould’s glossing of the “neocolonial power structures” needs to be reexamined. He limits the “surface-level rhetoric” theory to the governmental level. While I wouldn’t use terms like “deceit,” “pretending,” “feigning” interest, or “empty performance,” the acceptance and implementation of various programs ranging from alternative energy sources to combating shoreline erosion and biodiversity loss mitigation could be analyzed as careful navigation of the foreign aid system. It is not only government organizations that have become adept at advantaging from this system. The growing interest in solar energy may not be a result of people’s interest in the sustainable nature of it but a more basic desire for electricity, which most outer atoll communities have done without until the twenty-first century solar energy installations.

In my own work in several atolls since 2007, I am often asked by “grassroots” individuals to assist in garnering foreign-funded projects that will have local benefits, such as securing a speed boat to monitor marine protected areas, renovating a 60-year old “historically significant” church that would remain in use, or an airfare to another Pacific country to study the intellectual property rights of handicraft design. Marshallese are no strangers to the same terms that we use as academics to pursue funding: sustainable development, cultural preservation, and climate mitigation. They are exposed to these when Pacific-wide initiatives are presented from the top down, complete with coloring books and word-by-word community workshop

instructions on how to talk about climate change and related issues. Indeed, this supports Rudiak-Gould’s analysis that they are “using climate change” as a means to an end. But the language used by those responding to his survey may be a clever mimicry of the very workshop language that produces funds, jobs, and community development.

At a minimum, this disseminated rhetoric contributes to the expression of contemporary local sentiment. Educational campaigns initiated by groups like the Secretariat of the Pacific Regional Environmental Programme teach individual communities what climate change, environmental degradation, and species decline looks like, and the little things people can do to improve their environments. Touted as providing agency to islanders in a culturally appropriate manner, such programs may alter individual mind-sets and the way these communities perceive their own relation to environmental change: “Create a marine sanctuary to preserve biodiversity.” “Plant saline-resistant coastal crops to reduce shoreline erosion.” The implicit flipside of such messages would be “If you don’t plant such crops, you will experience coastal land loss.” These lessons preached, and the logo-laden stickers and posters left behind, may contribute to Rudiak-Gould’s observed self-blame and atonement complexes.

Climate change rhetoric in the Pacific is certainly an important topic and contributions by anthropologists like Rudiak-Gould working diligently in the field are valuable as we move toward the age of “climate refugees.” The declaration of a likely uninhabitable future for the RMI is not the first time that the prospect of permanent land loss has been subjected to public scrutiny. The hearings of the Nuclear Claims Tribunal debated issues of possession, value, compensation, and loss, argued by lawyers, community leaders, and anthropologists alike. Perhaps history will repeat itself, and this debate will be mimicked by parties seeking to create a roadmap for handling the prospect of climate change “refugees.” We can expect that lawyers and government officials will make use of academic treatises on value and blame in affected nations. This makes critical and thoughtful counternarrative works by anthropologists like this one all the more necessary.

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Peter Rudiak-Gould describes how Marshall Islanders blame themselves as much as global society for the problem of climate change. This self-blaming is incongruent with the prevailing discourse on climate change and small islands, which describes it as a problem that is imposed on small islands, and which arises from the externalities of the unnatural practices of moderns, putting the onus on them to save these powerless and naturalized Others. Rudiak-Gould masterfully explains how the self-blame of the Marshallese is a resistance

to the neocolonial sentiments and opportunities that prevail in this dominant framing, instead reasserting their identity and their right to act on climate change.

A political-economic analysis of climate change in the South Pacific suggests a complementary explanation of this phenomenon of self-blame. The Marshall Islands, like many Pacific small island states, has no comparative advantages in the world economy, and the cost of goods and services exceed revenues by a considerable margin. The deficit is largely met through aid money, which often comes from former colonial powers. The Marshall Islands has a Compact of Free Association with the United States, under which they received US\$32 million worth of grants in 2013 (USGAO 2013). Whereas for other small island states this historical association and its contemporary manifestations are largely benign, for the Marshall Islands it has involved a history of nuclear weapons testing, forced migration, exposure to high levels of radiation, unethical experiments on human subjects, and the Kwajalein military base (Johnston and Barker 2008).

The Marshall Islands depends so much on aid from the United States Government that it is apparently the world's fifth most aid-dependent country, with aid accounting for 37% of its gross domestic product (OECD 2013). The internal effects of such aid to the Marshall Islands have not been described, but they are somewhat understood in Niue—a small island state to the southeast of the Marshall Islands. At least 80% of the money that enters Niue comes from aid budgets (mostly New Zealand's; Barnett 2008). This has been observed to create a "malaise" (Betram and Watters 1984) and a "discontented apathy" (Douglas 1987), where competition for the disbursement of aid rents creates conflict and distrust. Here, the production that sustains the economy is performative—the government sells problems to aid donors and disburses the moneys that result. Not everyone benefits equally from these flows: there are contours of social division that follow the gradations in wealth and opportunity sculpted by the trickle down of aid from elites through to their clan and village constituents. Many people associate the aid process with corruption, mendicancy, and the decline of culture.

Given this, it seems reasonable to propose that there is dynamic of division and blame arising from aid in the Marshall Islands. Certainly, the United States Government Accountability Office considers accountability of aid to be a problem (USGAO 2013), although this may be nothing more than the difficulties human beings face when dealing with auditors. Charges of fraud and corruption do recur throughout Marshallese politics, although this may be the product of rivalries that exist between clans and islands in small populations such as this. Nevertheless, there are reasons for wondering if aid dependency is not tied up with the ideas of "cultural decline" and "seductive modernity" that Rudiak-Gould identifies and which he suggests predisposes the Marshallese to self-blame for the problem of climate change.

This proposition that there is an underlying political economy to self-blame in the Marshall Islands is strengthened by

the flows of money associated with climate change. In the South Pacific, global and regional funds and banks and bilateral donors all support projects that seek to advance knowledge about climate risks, reduce emissions, and reduce vulnerability through various means. At last count, there were over 100 such projects being implemented in the Pacific Islands, collectively worth over US\$100 million (Barnett and Campbell 2010). Sophie Webber (2013) has recently suggested that in the presence of such donors vulnerability to climate change is performative. This is not to say that the Marshall Islands are gaming for this money or that their need is not great. But it is to say that the people Rudiak-Gould talks with may well see climate change as another variant of the aid game, where donors contribute and elites disburse and dependence on the United States is sustained. In as much as this may contribute to ideas about cultural decline and predispose the Marshallese to self-blame, then climate change is only likely to compound the phenomenon. Of course, this is a working hypothesis to be tested through the excellent ethnographies of researchers such as Peter Rudiak-Gould.

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The possibility for radical action lies in that wide gap between apparent and numerical responsibility for harm. Nothing changes when every individual abdicates his or her conscience to the world. Everything can change when even one person accepts responsibility for widespread and general immorality. Such emergent obligation runs like a red thread through social criticism: from the Gospel according to St. Luke ("What then must we do?") through Tolstoy to Lenin (both posing the same question). Why, therefore, should social scientists be so surprised by a disproportionate shouldering of burdens? In part, we unavoidably descend from Durkheim. The "social" emphasizes conformity more than criticism. "Contestation" pits a movement against the state, not a Gandhi or Mandela against nearly everyone around them. We are not trained to grapple with the man who is an island or the one-human revolution. Anthropology still operates most comfortably amid a degree of balance and proportionality.

Perhaps for this reason, Peter Rudiak-Gould and I both puzzle over seemingly bizarre reactions to climate change. Marshall Islanders surprise him by blaming themselves for rising seas, coral bleaching, ocean acidification, and so on. They live nearly lives nearly free of fossil fuels. Why should the innocent Marshallese so readily accept responsibility for the environmental crimes of dirtier societies? I have studied exactly such a society—the petrostate of Trinidad and Tobago—which surpasses all but three nation states in per-capita emissions. Rather than accept their role in planetary harm, Trinidadians tend to blame

others: the United States, China, or any country with a larger population (Hughes 2013). Here, the shared frustration of two anthropologists centers on a missing ideal type: the “carbon-calculating individual” (Dowling 2010). Perhaps only in Copenhagen or Portland, Oregon, do citizens regularly measure their carbon footprints and reduce their consumption in search of sustainability. They accept responsibility in exact proportion to the harm they cause, and they do lower the rate of CO₂ pouring into the atmosphere.

But I doubt that such goodwill will abolish fossil capitalism fast enough. The world needs more people inclined to think like Rudiak-Gould’s informants. I write “think” because, as the author indicates, these Marshallese are not actually reducing their already-small carbon emissions. They lament the pollution of Styrofoam cups while continuing to drink from them. Still, at a rhetorical level, their exaggerations suggest a way forward. Today’s environmental crises break the bounds of proportion, moderation, and that particularly American form of pragmatism. Climates once resting comfortably between glacial maxima have lurched to the extreme. Why should humans—charting this instability—steer a balanced course? Perhaps reason becomes madness in a time of madness.

These inchoate thoughts might help add context to Rudiak-Gould’s closing discussion of ethnographic ethics. What is one to do, he asks, with informants who flagellate themselves for sins committed elsewhere? I would put the question differently: what do to with diametrically opposite informants, unperturbed by their own shifting of the ground beneath them? How puzzling it is that anthropologists should continue to burn jet fuel traveling to our annual academic potlatch, next held in Washington, DC? All of these questions might figure in the gathering analysis of Anthropocene politics, ethics, literature, and art. I dislike that term because it flattens the vast discrepancies between parties causing climate change, parties suffering from it, and those doing both. Nonetheless, the Anthropocene does suggest a common problem: like other species-wide catastrophes—such as colonialism or HIV—ecological collapse provokes new moralities. Right or wrong, the Marshallese have crafted a morality both exotic and honed to criticize and mitigate fossil capitalism. The ever-renewed promise of ethnography is to make that strangeness familiar—with luck, familiar enough to shift moralities in and around Washington, DC.

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Scientific investigation of the physical world has revealed that, by changing the composition of the atmosphere, human activities are changing the world’s climate. And by extension, using physical theory and simulation tools, science can offer

insights into what climate risks might lie ahead under different plausible human development scenarios. Nevertheless, these future risks are severely underdetermined by science, thereby opening the space for uncertainty and contestation about what courses of action to pursue. This uncertainty about how to act in the face of such indeterminate risks—and by whom, where, and when—is further fueled by the different accounts of blame for climate change that have surfaced. And it is around these blame narratives that the most intractable conflicts arise.

Scientific investigation therefore becomes of diminishing value for guiding action in the world; instead, moral philosophy, ethics, and politics take center stage. Anthropologists have a distinctive role to play here. They are interested in the ways in which different people in different places make sense of their worlds, how people weave together accounts of causation with narratives of blame. It is out of this matrix of stories that human action in the world becomes possible.

In recent years, Peter Rudiak-Gould has brought the perspectives and tools of anthropology to bear in new ways on many of the most important questions raised by the intersection of human agency and climate change. Through his pioneering work in the Marshall Islands of the western Pacific he has mounted a series of challenges to anthropologists and to environmental advocates, politicians, and scientists alike. He has challenged the Western assumption of a universal ontology of climate change (Rudiak-Gould 2012*b*), expanded the notion of climate scepticism (Rudiak-Gould 2013*b*) and challenged the authority of science to be able to make climate change visible in meaningful ways (Rudiak-Gould 2013*c*).

In this article he now raises a further awkward question: how valid are the conventional accusations of blame for climate change that are favoured by progressive environmentalists and activists? Through careful listening he observes that Marshall Islanders “heavily favor universal blame (becoming self-blame) over industrial blame for climate change.” This seems counterintuitive for many who would see the Islanders as “pure victims” of climate change. Whoever is to blame for climate change—capitalism past and present, colonialism, Western consumption, technological hubris—it is surely not the Islanders themselves. Furthermore, if they do blame themselves—so this intuition would assert—then clearly they have been hoodwinked into a false consciousness through “hegemonic trickery.”

Rudiak-Gould challenges this easy account of blame and its affiliated attempts to deconstruct the Islanders embrace of a self-blame narrative. Rather, he suggests a different reading. By adopting their own causal account of climate change, and by embracing the associated moral energy for personal action in the world, Marshallese are asserting their own “cultural continuity and distinctiveness.” Upholding their own agency in a turbulent world becomes more important than appropriating Western blame narratives that, while exonerating them of their responsibility for their changing climate and

sea-level, might also undercut their efficacy as meaningful agents in the world.

Rudiak-Gould's challenge to colonizing blame narratives of climate change is important for a number of reasons. It shows clearly that the moral meaning of climate change cannot be read unmediated from a universal science of climate change; it has to be constructed out of local and more variegated cultural and religious resources. And it puts into play another narrative of blame—self-blame—which animates (certain) people to act in the world. It thus sits alongside the blame narrative of Agarwal and Narain (1991) in which luxury emissions were to be distinguished from survival emissions and alongside that offered by the Dark Mountain project (Kingsnorth 2010), the descendants of Oswald Spengler's Western cultural declensionists. It also takes its place alongside the hyperforensic climate scientists who seek to apportion blame for every extreme weather event according to an ever finer classification of impersonal causal agents: volcanoes, carbon dioxide, deforestation, ocean variability, black carbon, and so on.

Blaming oneself for the travails of life is not popular, certainly in Western cultures where elaborate reasoning seems capable of transferring responsibility for most ills onto other actors. And self-blame can feed negative emotions such as guilt that, if left unassuaged, can be destructive and paralyzing. Yet if cultural or religious resources can be mobilized to absolve guilt, self-blame may be liberating. Taking responsibility for one's own (limited) actions can release new avenues of dignified and independent action in the world, as Rudiak-Gould suggests. Not that such actions by Marshall Islanders will necessarily compensate for the "unbearable lightness of green"—to use Greg Gerrard's memorable phrase (Gerrard 2013). But it may lead to human actions of greater integrity, inspiration, and purpose—and hence to increase the sum of human virtue.

If in the end it is virtuous human beings that the world needs—rather than cleverer schemes of accusation, control, and coercion—then Rudiak-Gould's work is important in drawing our attention to a different moral narrative of climate change that inspires meaningful action.

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Thank you to Dr. Rudiak-Gould for this article and for the opportunity to comment on it. It is exciting to have such detailed research available on islander views of climate change, especially coming from a perspective that is not mired in climate change paradigms. Instead, this article steps back, places climate change in wider and deeper contexts, and seeks to understand people's views on the people's terms rather

than through a lens of external constructions of climate change.

I am particularly intrigued by some of the vocabulary used. This is outside the scope of the reported research, but the article provoked me into considering whether or not any difference in the results would have emerged depending on the choices of words used in the surveys; namely, "global warming" (in the article's title and used throughout the text), "climate change" (used throughout the text), and "global environmental change" (not used in the text). The issue is not just the specific phrases or translations but also the potential differences in cultural constructs among these phrases. Similarly, words such as "blame," "fault," "guilt," "culpability," and "accusation" and variations—all used in the article—can be challenging to translate and could have different cultural meanings and constructs. How could such differences be gleaned?

As another example of words used, Dr. Rudiak-Gould does well to explain why he feels that "we" and "us" refer to the speaker themselves and to the speakers' own communities. I nonetheless wonder further about the boundaries among (i) "we," including "me" and many others near and far from "me," such as all Marshallese; (ii) "we," referring to "me" and those nearby "me"; and (iii) "we," being collective but not really including "me" or "my" community. That is, how firm are internal-external divisions in "we" and "us" when Dr. Rudiak-Gould emphasizes how his interviewees did not blame external perpetrators of climate change but rather themselves, the Marshallese?

After all, no community is homogeneous, and some of the speakers' comments separate themselves and other Marshallese. One example is "When asked which cars he was referring to, he named the most developed Marshallese communities—Majuro, Ebeye, Jaluit, and Wotje—rather than foreign nations." That names Marshallese as being responsible, but nonetheless externalizes the problem at some level, although the speaker is from Majuro (does he own a car?). Similarly, "I get angry—at the government here for allowing people to keep dredging and things like that" is a quotation that blames the Marshallese but not oneself.

That does not deny the plethora of quotations and examples that Dr. Rudiak-Gould presents to demonstrate self-blame, that the Marshallese are blaming themselves and indicate the importance of changing themselves. One key question is: How many of the interviewees using "we" and "us" have indeed changed their own lifestyle to respond to their own self-blame?

Dr. Rudiak-Gould provides part of an answer in summarizing the views that "if locals were as wealthy as foreigners, they would pollute equally as much." Have those with this awareness changed their lifestyles or merely pointed out that, ultimately, no one including themselves would alter their lifestyles? It is not about "sacrifices," since most actions to deal with climate change improve quality of life and economic well-being. Instead, it is accepting and promoting that the financial ability to consume and pollute does not mean that

it is healthier or more desirable to consume and pollute. Yet, apparently, not even a potentially catastrophic crisis such as climate change sways many people to act differently to help themselves for selfish reasons.

Of particular poignancy is the statement that Marshall Islanders use “climate change to strengthen rather than challenge preexisting concepts.” This is a fundamental finding across many, similar fields: crises and challenges are used as an excuse, impetus, or catalyst to do what was wanted anyway, in the absence of or irrespective of the crisis or challenge. For example, “disaster diplomacy” (<http://www.disasterdiplomacy.org>) research finds that both disaster risk reduction and disaster response activities can support cooperation, conflict, or no impact on conflict/cooperation according to what was desired for non-disaster reasons. The disaster-related activities sometimes catalyze cooperation or conflict, but neither create conflict/cooperation nor change conflict/cooperation desires.

Climate change is one hazard among many and one environmental issue among many. Thus, it is perhaps unsurprising that even those most threatened by climate change’s impacts nonetheless use it to reinforce existing beliefs and to support their fundamental worldview, values, and attitudes. Ultimately, though, much of my discussion is speculation compared to Dr. Rudiak-Gould’s detailed evidence and carefully constructed arguments. One test remains that could be suitable for further research: What do the Marshallese think of Dr. Rudiak-Gould’s work and my comment on it?

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Narratives of climate change responsibility in the global north often suppress personal culpability. Whether, to use Rudiak-Gould’s useful binary, blame is being framed as “universal” (humans have caused climate change) or “industrial” (the fault of industrialized nations), audiences tend to be able to remain free of a sense of personal responsibility for the people who are already bearing the brunt of changes. This has, of course, deep implications. The benefits of Rudiak-Gould’s work lie not only in his nimble analysis but in the affect this analysis creates. When we read the statements of his informants’ self-blame, when he points out that Marshallese “are little interested in the nefarious carbon footprints of foreign countries yet fascinated and morally animated by their own contribution,” we readers sitting in the current comfort of an industrialized nation cannot help but be discomfited. Reading Rudiak-Gould is an ameliorative act.

Carla Roncoli, Todd Crane, and Ben Orlove, as they consider the anthropological and political project of uncovering the “different ways cultures engage in their world through the prism of climate change” (2009:88), make a case for anthro-

pologists standing firm in “their tradition of committed localism and ethnographic reflexivity.” Rudiak-Gould is an example of the effectiveness of these traditions, enabled by “being there” (88), immersed in culture, place, language, and history. Like a *mentalities* historian zeroing in on points of inexplicability as the most productive way into a past mindset (Darnton 1985), Rudiak-Gould identifies the discourse of self-blame as a point of opacity and seeks to explain it. He tests and rejects the “usual suspect” explanations—ignorance, denial, performance, false consciousness. He investigates the long roots of Marshallese conceptions about cultural decline in the face of “seductive modernity,” and it is here that the narrative of self-blame suddenly clicks into a logical continuum.

This dynamic between blame for climate change and blame for loss of cultural continuity can be seen to operate differently in Samoa—a useful comparative. Samoans have long been “creatively negotiating a synthesis” (Rudiak-Gould) between local and foreign. Unlike the Marshalls, where contemporary traditionalist rhetoric rejects the foreign, in Samoa, a hub for the distribution of international climate change funding to the region, and with a different set of colonial and material histories, it seems there is more ambivalence. Students speaking recently at a workshop at the Museum of Samoa dismayed their elders when they stated that in the struggle to adapt to climate changes they would need to give up traditional things, even the iconic open-sided Samoan house—the *fale* (AMNH/Museum of Samoa 2013, 2014).

Engaging with the specificity and logic of local conceptions has a particular imperative now, as a new tranche of journalists, filmmakers, and internet conversationalists are turning their attention to the exotic drama of Pacific Islands. Elizabeth De Loughrey has written on narratives within “climate change nostalgia films” (“High Tide,” “King Tide,” et al.), which “deliberately bracket out the visible signs of modernity” (DeLoughrey 2013). In the European imaginary Pacific Islanders have often stood in for Nature, and in a continuation of this trope (with inevitable images of fisher-people and children playing on sunset beaches), European narrators present atolls as “small, remote, endangered and sinking.” These films “mourn the loss of atoll life as an analogue for global environments in ways that suppress the viewer’s complicity” (DeLoughrey 2013).

Kathy Jetnil-Kijiner, Marshallese poet, provides a potent corrective to the disconnect of the narratives of “big countries.” As DeLoughrey points out, Jetnil-Kijiner weaves instead bonds of obligation across oceans. “Tell Them” begins with the poet preparing a parcel for her friends in the United States, a basket with earrings. She tells her friends that when they are asked where these are from, they are to tell them they are from the Marshall Islands, and “*tell them we are a proud people/ . . . tell them we are the hollow hulls/of canoes as fast as the wind . . . we are children flinging/like rubber bands/*

across a road clogged with chugging cars . . .” She continues her invocation, concluding:

and after all this
 tell them about the water
 how we have seen it rising
 flooding across our cemeteries
 gushing over the sea walls
 and crashing against our homes
 tell them what it’s like
 to see the entire ocean__level__with the land
 tell them
 we are afraid
 . . . but most importantly tell them
 we don’t want to leave
 we’ve never wanted to leave
 and that we
 are nothing without our islands. (Jetnil-Kijiner 2011)

Rudiak-Gould’s essay works in step with Jetnil-Kijiner’s poem. Their writings are both rooted in a concern for justice and are both dedicated efforts to connect a largely unseeing world to some understanding of Marshall Islanders and their changing atolls. Rudiak-Gould has created a robust, important framework for interrogating perceptions of responsibility for climate change. Like Jetnil-Kijiner’s poetry, this has been achieved through an attentive, respectful listening and an uncensored presentation of the islands and its people as they are now, alongside a firm grasp of their historical narratives, and their imagined futures.

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What’s in a statement? It depends on who you ask. For the many (inter)disciplinarians who study faraway traditional cultures to understand the human dimensions of climate change—foresters to folklorists, systems ecologists to krill biologists—statements have simple origins and simply mean what they say. Traditional cultures know nature because they live close to it. Their ethnographers can therefore gain privileged insights into our changing world through nature-near testimonials: the earth is faster now (Krupnik and Jolly 2002); the bull of winter is gone (Crate 2008); it’s so different today (Turner and Clifton 2009). Thus with the aid of human intermediaries does nature speak (almost) directly to us about climate change. For these scholars, Rudiak-Gould’s paper is a timely reminder that knowledge production is not so simple. Statements materialize not mechanically from nature but from knotty, sociohistorical contexts. And much theoretical labour

is required to know—better, to try to begin to know—what any statement might or might not mean vis-à-vis which context(s).

For many anthropologists, who have long read over others’ shoulders and vexed and perplexed themselves with talk of twins and birds, Virgin Births and collapsing granaries, this is hardly news. Similarly for some, though by no means all, critical climate change anthropologists. So, what’s in a statement for them? Why might some climate change anthropologists be troubled by the Marshallese claim of universal blame? Because it’s the wrong story. Our People, whomever they are, should recognize and articulate their subordinate position in the global scheme of things. When they don’t, we worry. And unlike some human dimensions scholars, critical climate change anthropologists cannot just dismiss their interlocutors’ claims as “misperceptions” or “knowledge deficits” because they disagree with them (see Hall and Sanders 2013). More effort is required.

Rudiak-Gould’s efforts here are productive. By dwelling on Marshallese Islanders’ conceptions of “cultural decline” or “seductive modernity,” he provides a plausible cultural explanation for Marshallese climate change self-blame. Better still, Marshallese self-blame turns out to contain a raft of counterhegemonic positions that should satisfy almost any critical climate change anthropologist. But because contexts and explanations can always be multiplied, it is worth considering additional candidates and some of the complications they raise.

One might attend differently, for instance, to the amenities and global connections that make the Marshall Islands today—particularly its dependence on fossil fuel and the United States. Locals drive cars and motorboats and use public transport. They run air conditioners, lights, radios, etc., powered by generators and local power plants. They buy imported consumer goods and would consume and pollute more if only they could (Hall and Sanders 2013:18). Many migrate to and from the United States. In key respects the Marshallese economy, including the local currency—the US dollar—hinges fatefully on the United States. In this context, as in Rudiak-Gould’s cultural context, local self-blame statements make sense: “It’s only a little contribution, but we too have air conditioners and cars. All Pacific Islands contribute. We are in it together.” Self- and industrial blame merge as Marshallese underscore their membership in our interwoven world, and their rights and responsibilities as modern, global citizens. To blame themselves is to blame Northerners and vice versa.

But this supplementary context and statement—“we Marshallese are (also) modern, global citizens”—would likely trouble many human dimensions of climate change scholars. Wrong story! This is because, for these, “we” and “they” are and must be categorically different. Otherwise “traditional peoples” privileged insights into nature evaporate, and “locals” statements that “the climate is changing” lose traction. This raises crucial questions for anthropologists concerned

with climate change: Can we forge conceptual spaces within which to imagine similarity with our interlocutors without undermining “their” and “our” positions, statements and interests? If so, what slot might newly-minted, non-Others be accorded within current climate change scholarship? And why are some climate change positions and statements so clearly obligatory and desirable, and others so patently “the wrong story”?

These are not questions for faraway “locals.” Answering them requires close attention to the academic knowledge practices and truth regimes that render certain statements ipso facto right, while ensuring that others niggle and trouble and demand explanation. On the one hand, this means further reflexivity among critical climate change anthropologists about our own discipline’s knowledge practices. On the other it means scrutinizing the wider contexts that both enable and constrain climate change anthropology: these include the interdisciplinary human dimensions of climate change enterprise, as well as natural science and policy arenas. By highlighting how some but not other climate change statements give rise to anthropological angst and explanations, this article points in the right direction.

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Peter Rudiak-Gould’s article contributes to the growing debate on climate change in anthropology. It addresses the question of how collectivities connect the perceived changes in their worlds with local ways of dealing with justice and accountability. The case of the Marshall Islands is particularly interesting—and disturbing—due to the fact that the archipelago may become inhabitable in the relatively near future. It is hard to overemphasize the importance of understanding how different collectivities connect environmental transformations with their political processes, the latter including how they place *others* in their scheme of things, if carbon wars and dictatorial environmental regimes are to be prevented.

That said, I would like to discuss some features of the article with which I am not satisfied. Let me start by saying that I find the article’s usage of the concept of climate change (as in the phrase “climate change impacts can be perceived everywhere, and the same can be said of its causes”) problematic. It is well documented that collectives around the globe have noticed faster-than-usual changes in their worlds; and I do think climate scientists and their mathematical models are reliable. Yet I see no reason to believe that the two things refer to the same phenomenon—simply because there is no “one” phenomenon we can call climate change. “Climate” is a word that may mean many different things, and most people don’t use it as climate scientists do. According to the latter’s vocabulary, weather is something one experiences first hand;

climate is a statistical construction and therefore not directly experienceable (although we can feel its effects). One problem I see in the article is that, except for brief references to apparently media informed facts (like melting ice caps), the reader is left with insufficient information of what the Marshallese have in mind when they utter the expression “climate change.” In one of the passages when more information is provided, it becomes clear that the causal connections are being made in ways that do not reflect the so-called scientific consensus: local weather changed because of the chemicals released by local power plants; recent local crop failures are caused by local car use. Climate is taken from different scales: while locals understandably establish causal links inside of their perceptual world, scientists strive for decontextualized, highly abstract mathematical constructions. In summary: different people may use the same expression to refer to different things, and the point here is to be able to understand such difference and its implications. Assuming they are referring to the same thing implies a naturalist perspective (Descola 2013), what contradicts the asserted effort to transcend the nature-culture divide.

A second point I would like to raise is about the utility of typologizing blame, first into eight categories, and then into just two *before* presenting its ethnographic occurrences. The argument takes a deductive rather than an inductive path. The problem is that universal and industrial blame are abstractions that reflect Western ways of organizing difference in the world. It is not immediately clear that the Marshallese terms for *people* or *us* imply the universalist alternative; I would rather prefer to see a lot more data on the empirical occurrence of the words *arnej* and *kōj*. The typification may also induce interpretive errors: when respondents to a survey answered that the blame should fall on “those who went to the moon,” they might perhaps be suggesting that going to the moon was a *cause* for environmental change (as divine punishment; see Taddei 2012), rather than indirectly referring to carbon emissions. For lack of ethnographic data, the reader is left with the feeling that the typology produced, to some degree, the phenomena it wanted to explain.

Finally, the author suggests that the self-blame narrative of his field partners has a postcolonial motif: it performatively enacts a revitalization of tradition. It nevertheless remains unclear why universal blame would have such efficacy. One conceptual problem not accounted for in the article is that, while apparently blaming everyone, Marshallese blame only the Western “side” of their society and, in doing so, they reduce universal blame to a disguised form of industrial blame. All things considered, this approach still reduces the complexity of the local world so it can fit a preestablished conceptual scheme. In this case, agency, tradition, and cultural identity are assumed to be transparent and unproblematic.

Ergo, we shouldn’t be impressed that Marshallese people respond to the changes in their world in ways that seem paradoxical to us—the opposite would equally demand explanation. As for the paradox, resolving it may kill its ana-

lytical potential; it would be more productive to explore what it reveals and the modes of existence it instantiates.

Reply

I thank the commenters for their perceptive observations, questions, and critiques. I will respond to them as fully as space allows.

Kelman and Ahlgren note the ideational bent of my article and ask how the situation would appear from a more behavioral perspective. Are locals actually polluting less? There are no good data on this, but the answer for the moment seems to be, “Not much—yet.” Solar energy initiatives often target previously unelectrified outer islands, so there is no carbon savings here. Solar development in Majuro, on the other hand, may make a dent. A cynic would say that the movement is therefore all talk, just another kind of buck-passing. An optimist would note that the movement is barely five years old and may achieve much in the next decade or two. Hughes and Hulme are optimistic that, at the very least, Marshall Islanders have built a solid ideological foundation for future action, and I am inclined to agree. (Newell, however, in her discussion of a Samoan case, makes clear that this tradition-as-climate-change-panacea approach has pitfalls and is not universal among Pacific societies.)

Barnett and Ahlgren raise a related question: is all of this hand-wringing over carbon footprints really as idealistic as I make it out to be, or is it actually a “performative” (Barnett) “navigation of the foreign aid system” (Ahlgren)? In a related critique, Ahlgren and Taddei are skeptical that the Marshallese response is truly postcolonial. I do think there is something to these more pragmatic and materialist accounts. Barnett lucidly describes the political-economic conditions under which small island states must play the “aid game” (Barnett) to survive and insightfully links aid dependency to discourses of cultural decline (indeed, overdependence on outside things is the leitmotif of Marshallese declension narratives). I agree that there are pragmatic concerns at play. For instance, elsewhere I describe a 2012 summer science camp in Majuro in which renewable energy was touted not just for environmental reasons but also for saving money (Rudiak-Gould 2013a:138–140). My article perhaps understates these complementary, more prosaic motivations.

That said, I do not think that the aid-seeking theory can fully explain the blame narratives I encountered. My informants included many who have little experience with the word games of “sustainable development, cultural preservation, and climate mitigation” (Ahlgren) and thus would be unlikely to be engaging in “a clever mimicry of the . . . workshop language” (Ahlgren). It is unclear, furthermore, what kind of aid they were hoping to get from the young, clipboard-holding Caucasian stranger who approached them

to ask questions. “We can use local knowledge and resources to tackle this” is not exactly the refrain of someone looking for a grant. And if my informants were performing, why not play the part of the “innocent victim” in order to garner international sympathy, attention, and charity? I would also point out that, if Marshallese blame narratives really are a kind of “clever mimicry” (Ahlgren) or a result of the “lessons preached, and the logo-laden stickers and posters left behind” (Ahlgren) by SPREP and others, then we are back in the realm of, respectively, pretense and false consciousness, that is, essentially delegitimizing accounts of Marshallese blame narratives. This does not mean that these explanations are wrong, of course, but I had hoped in this article to find a way out of the “tragic trade-off” that I describe.

Sanders helpfully interprets my article as a double-study of knowledge production: among the Marshallese and among the anthropologists. Indeed, an ethnography could be written of climate change perceptions among the Anthro Islanders! Our own knowledge production practices make it difficult to notice or understand not only indigenous self-blame but also indigenous climate apathy, techno-optimism, and opportunism (see, e.g., Nuttall 2008). This dovetails with Kelman’s comment: it is perhaps sobering that Marshall Islanders are using climate change to reinforce what they already believe. Anthropologists, by and large, have done the same; whether that is stubborn or merely tenacious is open for debate. Hughes, somewhat differently from Sanders, interprets the anthropological puzzlement over indigenous climate self-blame as stemming from a violation of the model of the “carbon-calculating individual.” I would submit (and I suspect Hughes would not disagree) that the larger anthropological taboo is the violation of the model of the “oppression-aware indigenous person.”

I have left the most difficult critiques till last, so that nearing the word limit, I can hope to be “saved by the bell.” Kelman and Taddei voice concerns about translational issues, with Taddei wondering if I have committed the ultimate anthropological no-no of “reduc[ing] the complexity of the local world so it can fit a preestablished conceptual scheme.” The danger of glib translation, inadvertent ethnocentrism, and circular reasoning lies everywhere in anthropology, and no anthropologist, myself included, can say with absolute certainty that they have managed to avoid it. That said, some clarification should help lessen these concerns.

Taddei and Kelman query the translatability of words for “us” and “people.” *Armej* (person/people) in Marshallese refers to any human being from whatever country. Blaming “*armej*” is thus universal blame. The Marshallese language has two words for “us”: *kōj* includes the person being spoken to while *kōm* does not. Informants always used *kōj* when referring to climate change blame, implying that I, an American, was at fault as well, along with everyone else in the world; hence universal blame. The fact that, in practice, Marshall Islanders are more interested in their own carbon footprints

than, for instance, mine or Obama's, is why I describe this perception as "universal blame with self-blaming tendencies."

Taddei objects to my typology of blame narratives. It might help to mention that I devised the universal blame versus industrial blame binary *after* I encountered Marshallese blame narratives in the field; it was a priori in the article only for the sake of clarity. More generally, I would say (adapting a well-known adage), "All binaries are false. Some binaries are useful." Cultural particularism and the poststructuralist suspicion of all categorical distinctions help us to encounter things in all of their singularity and diversity, but they are not well suited to anthropology's comparative mission. "Universal blame" and "industrial blame," I feel, capture the basic disjuncture between Marshallese and anthropological climate change narratives, while still allowing cultural idiosyncrasies to be appreciated—for example, when I note that the Marshallese voice "universal blame *with self-blaming tendencies*" and express it in a uniquely Marshallese traditionalist idiom. I do not agree with Taddei that Marshallese blame is merely a "disguised form of industrial blame," because while the polluting artifacts are understood to be foreign, the moral fault for using them is seen to lie in those who locally adopted them.

I have a similar response to Taddei and Kelman's query about the polysemy of "climate change." I have written about this extensively elsewhere (Rudiak-Gould 2012*b*). Suffice it to say here that Marshallese understandings of "climate" and *mejatoto* (its usual local translation) are, indeed, not identical to scientific or Western understandings. Still, as I have written elsewhere, "even as the Marshallese vision of climate change is culturally specific, it is a recognizable instance of that larger discourse" (Rudiak-Gould 2013*a*:176)—a narrative of dangerous human tampering with the atmosphere. Climate change is real enough, and if we are to have an anthropology of it, we had better not start by jettisoning the possibility of cross-cultural comparison.

—Peter Rudiak-Gould

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