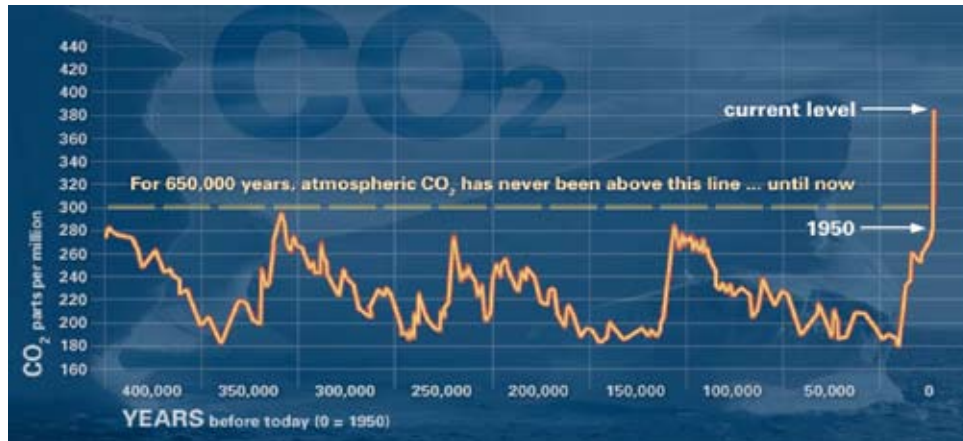# THE GIFT OF UNCERTAINTY
CLIMATE ETHICS, RISK & THE ANTHROPOLOGICAL PROJECT

BY P. JOSHUA GRIFFIN

Today's unprecedented concentration of atmospheric carbon dioxide. (Source: NASA)[1]

Scholars and activists commonly regard climate change as the unfamiliar: as an unprecedented phenomenon requiring the human community to develop new worldviews, ethics, and institutions. Such novelty is thought necessary because, as the scientists have informed us, we no longer enjoy the same atmospheric conditions "on which civilization developed and to which life on Earth is adapted."[2] While the unprecedented nature of the complex phenomena we call "climate change" cannot be overstated, I wonder whether our focus on its uniqueness might not obscure that which is common, quotidian, or even mundane about climate change.[3]

More than one-hundred years ago, while speaking in Edinburgh, William James noted that "[s]cience… catalogues her elements and records her laws indifferent as to what purpose may be shown forth from them, and constructs her theories quite careless of their bearing on human anxieties and fates."[4] When reading the graph above, it becomes unclear whether the

exponential upshot over time is tracking atmospheric carbon dioxide, or my level of anxiety about climate change. Forget the manufactured controversies over scientific consensus;[5] the real uncertainties of climate change are the uncertainties of life, the risk of death, and that existential condition which has perhaps always marked the human experience.

This latent contingency of existence is increasingly obvious, even in those centers of wealth and privilege where, up until until very recently, it had been obscured. Walter Mosley, the bestselling African-American author and critic, recently told an interviewer that while "people of color in the 20th century suffered under the weight of the distribution of wealth," nowadays, "everybody has become that colored person in America." The initial condition "hasn't changed, but it's broadened. The suffering has taken up a much larger space." And, "[t]his so-called middle class, really working class, person—man and woman—has begun to

embrace what black and Latino people knew all through the 20th century."[6]

Even before the most recent economic shocks, Zygmunt Bauman made a similar claim, noting the "passage from the 'solid' to a 'liquid' phase of modernity," or the emergence of a condition whereby social forms can no longer "serve as frames of reference for human actions and long-term life strategies because of their short life expectation."[7] Within this "liquid modernity," Bauman suggests, "[t]he most harrowing contemporary fears are born of existential uncertainty."[8] Likewise, for Ulrich Beck, "[t]hreat and insecurity have always been among the conditions of human existence."[9] Yet despite the global nature of what Beck calls "world risk society," when it comes to climate change, that which is remote for most, is already close at hand for many others.

The Native Village of Kivalina is no stranger to existential vulnerability. Life in this arctic village of 400 is governed by seasonal ebbs and flows, and the subsistence harvests thereof. Each fall also brings a series of ocean storms, and in recent years, life has become increasingly dangerous on the narrow barrier island. The land-fast ice, which once buffered the island from the sea, is becoming increasingly unreliable. Things are different nowadays. "When there are storms people are very anxious, some people walk all night," Alice Adams told interviewers.[10] Climate-induced changes abound in Kivalina, but increased erosion and the irreducible specter of a storm-surge loom largest in the community. While the physical manifestations of climate change in Kivalina are unprecedented, the human experience of uncertainty, vulnerability, loss, and risk are age-old. Ought not these familiar dimensions of lived-experience be explored empirically?

Michael D. Jackson has long considered the ways in which human experience is marked by the "continual, if frequently unreflective, quest for some sense of balance between being an actor and being acted upon."[11] Surely this dynamic is amplified in human encounters with climate change. "We are an adaptable people,"

says Colleen Swan,[12] "we have always changed, but since 2004, we just can't adapt this fast." The social sciences have adopted the notion of "resilience thinking" from ecology. In our context, "resilience" might refer to those myriad practices by which human beings gain and/or maintain wellbeing under conditions of uncertainty, loss and deprivation.[13] In particular, ethnographers might direct our attention toward practices of resilience, resistance, and restoration under conditions of environmental risk at the ecological margins.

Bruno Latour suggests that we approach reality in general, and specifically climate change, not as mere "matters of fact," but rather as "matters of concern, whose import then will no longer be to debunk but to protect and to care."[14] How does another person's experience of suffering become the subject of our concern and/or compassion? "We get a lot of sympathy, from a lot of people," says Enoch Adams Jr.,[15] "but we need more than sympathy, we need empathy." Is empathic solidarity possible across authentic epistemological difference and the power dynamics thereof?

Jackson has further observed that anthropologists are so often "focused on what is culturally unique that… [we] overlook what is existentially universal."[16] On the other hand, careful attention to what is existential universal might help to cultivate the sort of "knowledge [which would] …contribute to tolerant coexistence in a world of entrenched divisions and ineradicable differences."[17] What grounds do human beings have for cooperation amid authentic differences, especially our differing exposure to environmental risks? Could the universal human experience of existential uncertainty a productive starting point for a new form of global solidarity?

On whose terms is another to be protected and from what? Who is to care for whom? Social ethicist Sharon D. Welch points out that "what counts as 'responsible action'" among people of privilege "is predicated on an intrinsically immoral balance of power." Welch argues that in pockets of relative comfort a "moral and politi-

cal imagination… shaped by the [a normative] ethic of control" will only lead to "cynicism and despair." Instead, she suggests an "ethic of risk," a form of "communicative ethics" that could enable "a thorough engagement with other communities, with other systems of knowing and acting," and a "mutually self-critical engagement with difference."[18]

Communities living on the frontlines of climate change have long called for "climate justice." Anything approaching that condition will require, on the part of the globally privileged, far more acceptance of uncertainty than our governing elites are currently willing to allow. U.S. obstruction and delay of the UNFCCC process means that climate justice will be built, if at all, from the ground up drawing on the paradoxical strength found only in weakness—a solidarity born of collective uncertainty. If we have any hope at all it may be this: by coming to terms with our own experiences of uncertainty, risk, and vulnerability, global elites might experience enough humility to embrace what has elsewhere been called the "moral risk" of meaningful climate action.[19]

For all the horror that is "climate change"—its magnification of contemporary oppression and historical trauma, and the deeply rooted structural violence it amplifies—the phenomenon also offers the gift of uncertainty. Climate change reminds us that our illusions of power and control are always, at the end of the day, temporary; it offers those who would risk it the chance to meet in weakness and vulnerability—a place of mutual recognition—and maybe, just maybe, presents us with a new ethic of authentic human solidarity. ◈

NOTES

1 http://climate.nasa.gov/evidence/ (Accessed February 3, 2012)2 James Hansen et al., "Target Atmospheric CO2: Where Should Humanity Aim?," Open Atmos. Sci. J.

2 (2008): 217-231.

3 I would not have thought to explore this question about climate change had Michael D. Jackson not made a similar point about biotechnology. See: Jackson, "Biotechnology and the Critique of Globalisation," Ethnos 67, no. 2 (2002): 141-154.

4 William James, The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature, Modern Library Paperback. (New York: Random House, 2002), 534.

5 Naomi Oreskes and Erik M. Conway, Merchants of Doubt : How a Handful of Scientists Obscured the Truth on Issues from Tobacco Smoke to Global Warming, 1st U.S. ed. (New York: Bloomsbury Press, 2010).

6 Kai Ryssdal, "Walter Mosley Touches on Economic Injustice, Race in 'Shoot My Man'," Marketplace (National Public Radio, February 9, 2012), http://www.marketplace.org/topics/life/big-book/walter-mosley-touches-economic-injustice-race-shoot-my-man.

7 Zygmunt Bauman, Liquid Times: Living in an Age of Uncertainty (Polity, 2007), 1.

8 Ibid., 92.

9 Ulrich Beck, World at Risk (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2009), 4.

10 The words belong to Alice Adams, quoted in: Michael Brubaker, J. Berner, et al., Climate Change in Kivalina, Alaska Strategies for Community Health (Alaska Native Tribal Health Consortiium (ANTHC), 2010), 17, http://www.anthc.org/chs/ces/climate/climateandhealthreports.cfm.

11 Michael D. Jackson, Existential Anthropology: Events, Exigencies and Effects (New York: Berghahn Books, 2005), 182.

12 Colleen Swan sits on the Kivalina City Council; until 2010 she had served 18 years as Tribal Administrator for the Native Village of Kivalina.

13 I am influenced here by Jackson's recent ethnography of "wellbeing." See: Michael D. Jackson, Life Within Limits: Well-being in a World of Want (Duke University Press, 2011).

14 Bruno Latour, "Why Has Critique Run Out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern," Critical Inquiry 30, no. 2 (2004): 232.

15 Enoch Adams Jr. is chair of the Kivalina Relocation Planning Committee and an ordained deacon of the Kivalina Episcopal Church.

16 Michael D. Jackson, Between One and One Another (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012), 2.

17 Jackson, Between One and One Another, 7.

18 Sharon D. Welch, A Feminist Ethic of Risk (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 14–17.

19 Stephen Gardiner, "A Perfect Moral Storm: Climate Change, Intergenerational Ethics and the Problem of Moral Corruption," Environmental Values 15, no. 3 (2006): 397–413.