Erosion by Design: Innovation and Credibility in the Engineering Arenas of Climate Adaptation

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Abstract: This talk explores the intersecting socio-material and ethical demands that engineers confront in adapting sea defenses to climate change in Guyana. It focuses on the tensions in climate adaptation that create the possibilities for theorizing innovation as a key theme of counter-modernities in the Anthropocene. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork, oral histories, and archival research, I show that engineers’ decision-making regarding whether or not to innovate sea defenses is a fraught process dependent upon processes of erosion and the ontological (in)stability of specific infrastructures known as groynes. Their dilemma reminds us that issues of innovation can create paralysis and haunt even the most elite species of climate adaptation. By this I mean that experts in climate adaptation arenas have the desire to create all kinds of affective attachments with people, things, places, and environments. Throughout this talk I focus on their desire for a different, perhaps a more hospitable kind of world—shaped by their efforts to perform and demonstrate their credibility to others.

Bio: Sarah E. Vaughn is an Associate Professor of Anthropology at the University of California, Berkeley. Her research and writing have contributed to understandings of climate adaptation across the circum-Caribbean, particularly among experts in coastal Guyana and Bermuda. Working at the intersection of environmental anthropology, critical social theory, and science and technology studies, Vaughn’s research agenda is invested in examining how technology mediates people’s experiences of climate change. Her writing has appeared in numerous academic journals as well as in literary and environmental magazines, and she is the author of the award-winning book Engineering Vulnerability: In Pursuit of Climate Adaptation (Duke, 2022)