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Changing the Climate of Climate Change

Climate Change as an Issue of Inequality: A Study of Four Latinx Climate Leaders from New York City

By

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Abstract

This paper examines speeches, articles, interviews and tweets from four New York City Latinx public figures: attorney Elizabeth Yeampierre, journalist Yessenia Funes, congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, and playwright Lin-Manuel Miranda in order to understand how these Latinx climate leaders approach climate change in parallel and contrasting ways from mainstream climate activists. This study found that the climate action of these four leaders is fueled by local, contemporary impacts of climate change. The intense focus on the local in their activism differs from mainstream action which often focuses on future global impacts. In addition to focusing on the local, Yeampierre, Funes and Ocasio-Cortez also concentrate on how broader systems of inequality and exclusionary participation patterns within climate leadership generate climate policy that fails to address climatic vulnerabilities faced by those least responsible for greenhouse gas emissions. The climate activism of Yeampierre, Funes and Ocasio-Cortez confronts systems of inequality which are intertwined with climate change such as political lobbying, prioritization of Anglo-American leadership styles, and wealth distribution. Although the systems of inequality are also arguably racialized, Funes and Ocasio-Cortez often avoid using a discourse of race. Miranda, the outlier of this study, mirrors mainstream views by supporting scientists as the leaders of climate action. In contrast, Yeampierre, Funes and Ocasio-Cortez view current global leaders of climate change as removed from the direct impacts and suffering of climate change and thus lacking in the situated knowledge to act appropriately with sufficient urgency. They instead promote the leadership of people on the frontlines of current climate disasters. I argue that while all four climate leaders frame climate change as an actionable issue for US Latinxs by highlighting the impacts on US Latinx communities, Funes, Yeampierre and Ocasio-Cortez diverge from mainstream understandings of climate change by framing it through a discourse of economic injustice.

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I. Introduction

This thesis analyzes the climate action of Yeampierre, Funes, Ocasio-Cortez and Miranda to see how the public discourse of prominent Latinx climate leaders differs from mainstream climate change advocacy. I found that Yeampierre, Funes and Ocasio-Cortez frame climate change through a lens of systematic inequality and local vulnerabilities. Miranda also frames climate change through local vulnerabilities, though aside from this, his climate action rarely deals with systematic inequality. Thus, his role in this paper is to add complexity to the idea that Latinx climate change action only focuses on inequality and that other understandings and approaches to the problem exist among Latinx climate activists. Nonetheless, the activism of the first three climate leaders suggests that in order to increase its relevance to US Latinx communities, climate policy should foreground local vulnerabilities alongside solutions to inequality.

In order to understand how climate change becomes relevant to US Latinxs, I focus on prominent public figures in the Latinx community, who play a role in shaping public opinion and the public agenda on climate change (McCombs 2014; Pease and Brewer 2008, Jackson and Darrow 2005). Two of the public figures in my paper (Yeampierre and Funes) became important through their work on climate justice, and one (Miranda) gained fame and later used it to rally his audiences towards climate justice. The fourth (Ocasio-Cortez) did a little of each.

I chose to focus on Yeampierre, Funes, Miranda and Ocasio-Cortez because each is outspoken about climate change and foregrounds their Latinx heritage in their work. Each is based in New York City. I decided to focus on people from New York City because of two recent hurricanes (frequently linked to climate change) that uniquely affected the NYC Latinx community: Sandy (2012) and Maria (2017). The large population of Puerto Rican immigrants in

New York City ties many NYC Latinxs to the island through history and family. Scientists have argued that climate change both creates and exacerbates hurricanes (Knutson et al. 2010). While mainstream climate-change opinion often stresses the possibilities of future climate-dystopias, these communities experience the deadly impacts of climate change today. Further heightening the focus on climate change, NYC and Puerto Rico are at sea-level.

In order to analyze how these public figures frame the issue of climate change, I assembled an archive of publicly available online documents including articles, speeches, songs, playlists and tweets. All four public figures have written articles on climate change. As a journalist, Funes has the largest collection. I have collected relevant speeches and interviews from Yeampierre and Ocasio-Cortez. I included music because Miranda has written songs and compiled playlists about climate change, social justice, Hurricane Maria, and racial revolution. I also included the first 180 words of the 3200 most recent tweets of all four climate leaders. In analyzing these primary sources, my methodology consisted of combing for specific references to economic reform, environmental justice and race. When coding the tweets, I identified the 20 most common words, 2-word and 3-word pairs. I qualitatively analyzed the top phrases, specifically noting connections with economic reform, environmental justice and race. The activism of Funes, Ocasio-Cortez and Yeampierre indicates that climate policy should foreground local vulnerabilities and solutions to inequality in order to increase its relevance to US Latinx communities.

In studying how climate change becomes relevant to Latinx communities, I build on recent research that argues that Latinx communities are significantly alarmed about climate change, but not politically active on the issue. My results suggest that in order to generate greater participation within this community, climate activists need to meaningfully integrate the political

and economic disenfranchisement of Latinx communities. In addition, they need to make their climate policies relevant to Latinx communities by focusing on local vulnerabilities and how climate policy can also provide solutions to inequality.

In 2010, the Yale Program on Climate Change Communication conducted research to study nonwhite participation in the climate change movement in order to respond to the common assumption that it is a solely a concern of the white upper- and middle-class. The report began with a quote from equity and sustainability expert, Angela Parks: *The climate change movement still remains highly homogenous by race and class and significantly by gender in its leadership. Even in 2009, climate briefings held across the country consistently feature mostly male and all-white casts. Like other pockets of environmental and conservation movements, climate change still suffers from the perception, and arguably the reality, that it is a movement led by and designed for the interests of the white, upper-middle class. Many people erroneously believe that interest in environmental issues is dependent on race, education, and class* (Leiserowitz and Akerlof 2010, 3). The research presented evidence that contradicted the assumption that only white Americans are alarmed about climate change, showing that minorities are often more supportive of national climate policies than the white majority (2010, 3).

The researchers conducted a national telephone survey of 2164 people asking questions about support for climate and energy policies. The primary finding was that “minority groups often had equally as strong, and sometimes stronger, support for a variety of climate and energy policies than non-Hispanic whites” (2010, 15). A 2018 report by the same research organization found that compared to non-Latinxs, Latinxs are in fact more alarmed about climate change (Leiserowitz et al. 2018). In this survey through phone interviews designed to be nationally representative, 2,054 Latinx adults and 1,140 non-Latinx adults self-identified as *Alarmed*,

Concerned, Cautious, Disengaged or Doubtful. Two more research groups, one from Stanford University and one from the Pew Research Center, found similar results. They each concluded that US Hispanics more often than non-Hispanic whites believe that human activity contributes to the warming of the earth and that the government should take action (Krogstad 2018; Global Warming National Poll 2015).

The 2018 Yale study found that although the alarmed group is disproportionately Latinx, many people are not yet taking political action, such as joining a campaign or contacting elected officials. Questioning why people are alarmed but remain politically inactive, this paper examines the work of four Latinx leaders who *are* active in confronting climate change. The public activism of the leaders examined in this study suggest that the political disenfranchisement of the working class and people of color contributes significantly to the gap between concern and practice. Another potential reason for why Latinx people are alarmed but remain politically inactive is that mainstream climate action is currently not tackling the issue in a way that is directly relevant to them.

The diversity of contemporary climate action makes it difficult to identify a single widespread approach to climate change to contrast with the approaches of the climate activists analyzed in this study. To compare these Latinx climate leaders' approaches to more widespread climate action, I piece together illustrative examples from prominent climate organizations to develop a depiction of how the "mainstream" approach to represents and acts on climate change today. Yet, I recognize two limitations to this approach: (a) the great diversity of climate activism in the world today make it impossible to include all of them into my depiction of the "mainstream" approach and not all will fit neatly into the generalizations described here. And (b) there is much diversity among those which are included here such that that broad stroke

statements about widespread climate action is inherently a simplification. With the limitations in mind, it is still helpful to have a basic understanding of the dominant logics of climate change causes, impacts, and policy approaches to compare with those of the Latinx leaders examined further below.

In her study of how climate change knowledge and action travels among diverse publics, Anthropologist Candice Callison argues, “Climate change gets defined in one way in the science, policy, and media discourse that teeters continuously on the edge of cliché but it gets defined in a completely other way ‘on the ground,’ where it’s happening in real time” (2014, 50). In other words, climate change is defined differently for different populations. When Callison worked with Inuits in Alaska, one locally elected official said that the Inuit people do not use the word “climate change.” The leader claimed that “climate change”, as used by CNN, experts and journalists was not relevant to them (2014, 24). Instead, climate change becomes relevant to the Alaskan Inuits when focusing on symptomatic changes such as impacts to whalers, the greater number and intensity of storms, early sea ice breakup, and coastal erosion (2014, 45). Here, I follow Callison’s approach by highlighting the differences between the frameworks of climate change used by mainstream activists and US Latinx activists.

To highlight important examples of mainstream activism, I consider the climate action of five prominent climate and environmental organizations: 350.org, the Sierra Club, Greenpeace, Union of Concerned Scientists, and Citizens Climate Lobby. I chose these organizations because they are large, well known and recommended by multiple sites as some of the most prominent organizations fighting climate change (Simmons 2017, Mather 2017, Gunther 2019, Light 2014). I also examine the approaches taken by the United Nations through the 2014 Paris Agreement. Among all of the organizations, their main goal is to limit greenhouse gas emissions

through protest, policy or scientific innovation. Greenpeace, 350.org, and the Sierra Club call for 100% renewable energy now (Greenpeace 2019, 350.org 2019, Sierra Club 2019). The Union of Concerned Scientists and the Citizens Climate lobby call for significantly reducing greenhouse gas emissions by conserving forests and demanding action from elected leaders (Union of Concerned Scientists 2019) or by instituting a carbon fee which taxes fossil fuel burning at a yearly increasing rate (Citizens' Climate Lobby 2019). The Paris Accord also focuses on reducing greenhouse gas emissions by setting a long-term temperature goal and aiming to reach the global peak of emissions as soon as possible (UNFCCC handbook). While Greenpeace and the Union of Concerned Scientists called for individual discipline in changing consumption patterns, all of the organizations speak of the importance of governmental responsibility in pushing for carbon neutrality. In addition to carbon neutrality, the Sierra Club says, "we must preserve protected lands" (Sierra Club 2019), and the Union of Concerned Scientists says to "stop deforestation" to maintain photosynthetic carbon absorption and reduce greenhouse gas emission (Union of Concerned Scientists 2019). Likewise, the Paris Accord calls for countries to conserve forests in order to create carbon sinks and reserves (UNFCCC handbook). The "Global Warming" section of Union of Concerned Scientists' webpage states, "We are the cause. We are overloading our atmosphere with carbon dioxide, which traps heat and steadily drives up the planet's temperature" (Union of Concerned Scientists 2019). All five of these organizations and the UN agree that climate change is a scientific and chemical process, and must be halted through equally scientific and chemical methods, such as limiting greenhouse gas emission, wilderness conservation and technological development. Later sections will show that the three of the Latinx climate leaders diverge from the climate solutions narrative of emissions, policy, conservation and technology. Rather, they intertwine solutions to climate change with addressing

inequality. By primarily focusing on techno-governmental fixes, these organizations don't engage with the idea of climate change as a product of systematic inequality. By focusing primarily on the science behind climate change rather than its social creation and the unequal effects, the conversation about climate change differs from that of the climate leaders highlighted in this paper. This difference may be the key to making climate change policy relevant to US Latinxs and other minority groups.

Although the front pages of the aforementioned organizations' websites speak about scientific solutions to climate change, inequality's role in climate change effects is mentioned by most of them on other pages. For example, the Paris Accord promises to help developing nations with loss and damage through expertise, technical support, guidance, and information (Warsaw International 2013). However, it does not make rectifying the economic inequality between nations as a primary aim of climate change action, but rather as the source of uneven vulnerabilities to mitigate while focusing on scientific solutions. In the "People and Justice" section of the website, the Sierra Club speaks about environmental racism and inequitable gender climate effects, showing that it is engaging in the conversation about unequal climate effects. In its values, 350.org say that it centers justice and it listens to voices that have been historically marginalized, however this comes second to the bolded message on the front page which reads "STOP FOSSIL FUELS. BUILD 100% RENEWABLES." Unequal vulnerabilities to climatic events are often discussed in climate conversations, however the aforementioned organizations and the UN do not see addressing inequality itself as key to the solution, nor do they foreground confronting inequality as their primary focus. As we will see, Yeampierre, Funes and Ocasio-Cortez consistently use the language of inequality while speaking about climate change, and for

them the focus on unequal vulnerabilities comes before the focus on scientific solutions to carbon emission.

For these organizations, as well as for the four climate leaders highlighted in this paper, there is a tension between using the language that climate change disproportionately affects people of color, and the language that we are all equally at risk. One particularly compelling example is in the “About Us” section of the Sierra Club website. It reads, “We know that environmental issues can’t be separated from social justice – because we all breathe the same air and share the same land.” Here, the Sierra Club justifies the fight for environmental justice (which in definition explicitly recognizes the unequal distribution of negative environmental affects), by paradoxically claiming that these injustices affect everyone. One might believe that it is easier to claim equal risk and fault than to point out the unequal effects of climate change, because that message feels like it should resonate with more people. However, in this paper I argue that through a specific message of *unequal* impacts, climate change can become relevant in new ways to different social groups. While the Latinx climate leaders highlighted in this paper sometimes speak about climate change as an issue affecting the whole planet, in focusing primarily on the unequal effects of climate change, they make climate change relevant to the Latinx community in a way that the mainstream dialogue of climate change as a shared issue may not.

The primary language used by the large-scale climate organizations is that climate change is a shared, global, and future issue. In the “What We’re Doing” page on their website, Greenpeace says, “Our world is warmer than ever before, and people and wildlife are already suffering the consequences. But that’s nothing compared to what we’re leaving future generations if these trends continue” (Greenpeace 2019). By saying *our* world, and calling on the

potential harm to future generations, they abstract climate change away from the *present* and the *local*. Likewise, on the “Global Warming” section of the “Our Work” page, the Union of Concerned Scientists says that the consequences of climate change will “increasingly affect the entire planet—including you, your community, and your family” (Union of Concerned Scientists 2019). Under the page titled “What is the Paris Agreement,” the United Nations says that it “recognizes that adaptation is a global challenge faced by all” (UNFCCC 2019). 350.org writes “we’re all in this together” (350.org 2019), while the Sierra Club states on the “Climate and Energy” page, “Every day brings more news about sea-level rise and climate-fueled disasters. Our task is clear and urgent: We must fight for each other — and the only planet we call home” (Sierra Club 2019). The large environmental organizations and the UN often speak of climate change as a shared issue with shared effects, rather than focusing on the disproportionate harm to low income communities and communities of color.

While the Latinx climate leaders highlighted in this paper sometimes speak of climate change as a shared global issue, three of them more often speak of climate change as a problem for vulnerable populations and caused by privileged populations. As Elizabeth Yeampierre says, “we are not the ones contributing to climate change, but we are the ones living at the brunt of the decisions of the descendants of those who colonized us” (Yeampierre 2017b). The activism of the leaders highlighted in this paper focuses on the fact that vulnerable communities are already living through climate disasters, while the privileged population both benefits economically from the pollution and controls the policies which allow for the pollution.

Of the Latinx climate leaders highlighted in this paper, Funes, Ocasio-Cortez and Miranda often ally themselves with mainstream climate action, even though their climate discourses differ. Only Yeampierre explicitly rejects the action of the large-scale climate

organizations, arguing that they don't address the structural violence and the devaluation of racialized bodies in which she locates the issue of climate change. For example, in a speech at the University of Michigan, she says that supplanting local leadership of people of color "happened at the Paris Accords in 2014 when the big greens decided that they were going to marginalize the climate justice movement because we were the idealists, because we were saying that we were living in the age of climate change. They put all their resources and all the support behind a Paris Accord agreement that had no teeth. It basically didn't address any of the things that were happening in Bangladesh and Yemen and in Brooklyn, in the wildfires in California, what happened in New Orleans, what happened in the Gulf south, what just happened in Houston, what happened in Miami and what just happened in Puerto Rico" (Yeampierre 2017b). Yeampierre demonstrates that her approach to climate change differs from that of the UN. She disapproves of the UN placing the importance on limiting greenhouse gas emissions over the importance of the present effects of climate change on vulnerable populations.

One possible cause of the different main focuses of the climate leaders and the big environmental organizations could be the make-up of the leadership. The mainstream climate organizations are mostly led by people who are disconnected from the present impacts of climate change. Although the effects of climate change are mostly experienced by people of color, the boards of Greenpeace and 350.org are 50% white, and the other organizations have majority white leadership teams. As we will see, the Latinx climate leaders often promote leadership of people on the frontlines of climate change, people of color, or the working class.

In summary, these mainstream climate organizations and the United Nations approach climate change firstly from a lens of limiting greenhouse gas emissions, and only secondly on mitigating unequal impacts of climate disaster on the vulnerable and unequal benefits from

greenhouse gas pollution to the privileged. The majority of the leaders in the organizations are not people living on the frontlines of climate change. In contrast, I will explore how Miranda, Funes, Ocasio-Cortez and Yeampierre focus on vulnerable communities who are already facing local impacts of climate change. In addition, I will show how Funes, Ocasio-Cortez and Yeampierre promote leadership from people who have been excluded, and propose solutions that firstly fighting inequality caused by climate change and secondly fight greenhouse gas emissions. It is possible that while Latinx are alarmed about climate change, they are not active in mainstream climate action because mainstream action does not present relevant solutions, or frame climate change in a relevant way for their communities. The language used by Funes, Yeampierre and Ocasio-Cortez certainly suggest so.

In order to understand how some of the climate activists highlighted in this paper differ from mainstream climate action, in the rest of the thesis I will examine how they (a) focus on specific local impacts, (b) focus on economic and racial inequality, and (c) call for leadership from the frontlines of climate impacts or of people who have been traditionally excluded based on race or socioeconomic status. Before doing so, however, a better introduction to the subjects of my analysis will help us better understand their methods of climate action.

Yeampierre, Funes, Ocasio-Cortez and Miranda are all NYC-based climate activists with Latinx heritage. I will provide a brief bio for each of them to give a basis for the later exploration of how their climate action overlaps and contradicts with the mainstream action described above.

YEAMPIERRE

Attorney Elizabeth Yeampierre works for climate justice through the organization UPROSE, as a policy advisor, as an organizer, and through speeches. She was born and raised in

New York City, and has worked as a director at the Puerto Rican Legal Defense Fund and the American Indian Law Alliance, as well as a dean at Yale University and a chair of the EPA National Environmental Justice Advisory Council (UPROSE “Elizabeth Yeampierre”). She grew up in Harlem, and now lives in the Bronx. In speeches, she references her African and indigenous heritage from Puerto Rico and Haiti. Her parents are from Puerto Rico. She is currently the executive director of UPROSE, which is a grassroots, intergenerational, multi-racial, women-of-color-led, nationally-recognized sustainability organization in Brooklyn. UPROSE is Brooklyn’s oldest Latinx organization, located in the neighborhood of Sunset Park. UPROSE has stopped the construction of a power plant in Sunset Park, facilitated the design of a greenway, and doubled the amount of open space in Sunset Park (Yeampierre 2011). In addition, they provide support for young people of color to become leaders. In particular, they organized the largest gathering of young people on climate justice and have sent youth leaders on scientific expeditions to Antarctica and the North Pole (UPROSE “Mission”).

Yeampierre also created and currently co-chairs NYC’s first climate adaptation and resiliency planning project: The Climate Justice Center, in response to Hurricane Sandy. She spoke at the White House forum on Environmental Justice under the Obama administration, and at Pope Francis’s climate change rally (UPROSE “Elizabeth Yeampierre”).

An analysis of Yeampierre’s twitter account reveals that multiple climate justice phrases are central to the public record of her online statements. The top two words in her tweets are *climate* and *justice* which appear 409 and 327 times respectively. Analyzing her tweets also reveals her focus on community issues. Some of the top phrases include *Sunset Park*, *Puerto Rico* and *climate justice local*. In addition, *climate justice youth summit* is in the top four-word phrases, demonstrating her public focus on youth leadership in climate justice.

In speeches, Yeampierre highlights the power of intergenerational leadership. She says that rather than considering black and brown youth as “at risk” we should consider them as “at potential” (Yeampierre 2017b, 11:44). She reminds the audience that she was one of those youth herself. She believes that organizing needs to be grassroots, and ground-up and that climate activism must focus on changing the landscape of privilege, which she identifies as the main cause of climate change (Yeampierre, 10:01).

FUNES

Yessenia Funes is a journalist who writes for the environmental news website *Earther* and commonly reports on environmental racism and climate change. *Earther* is owned by Univision Communications, the Manhattan-based media company which has historically catered to a Latinx audience. It is part of an English language division aimed at serving young, diverse Americans. Funes was born in Long Island and currently lives in Brooklyn. Her parents are from El Salvador. Unlike the other three public figures in this paper who have family in Puerto Rico, Funes does not, however, she has written extensively on Hurricane Maria. Before reporting for *Earther*, Funes worked as a climate justice reporter for *Colorlines*, an assistant Editor for *YES! Magazine*, and the editor-in-chief of *DoNorth Magazine* (Yosenia “About 2017”). As well as being a journalist, Funes is a poet and an author (Yosenia “Poetry” 2017). Like Yeampierre, Funes is Brooklyn-based. In her bio, she highlights her identity both as a Latina and as queer (Yosenia “About” 2017), themes which emerge in her reporting on many subjects including transgender immigrants’ rights and specific instances of environmental racism which uniquely affecting the LGBTQ community (Funes 2016, Funes 2017b).

In one article, she highlights the importance of Latinx voices fighting climate change, reporting, “More than 80 percent of Latinx voters in key battleground states and districts found it ‘very’ or ‘extremely important’ that the new Congress take action to combat global warming” (Funes 2018h). She’s citing the data research firm, Latinx Decisions (Vargas 2019). She continues, “the reason they care isn’t rocket science: More than 78 percent of these Latinx voters have personally experienced climate change’s effects in their states, per the poll... As our population continues to grow, our voices will become louder during election seasons.” She demonstrates the political importance of understanding the Latinx perspective on climate change.

Funes says, “I report on race and the environment almost exclusively. Anything race-related though, count me in.” Her environmentalism is rooted in her identity as a person of color. Her focus on how climate and environmental issues affect marginalized populations is apparent in her tweets. Her top phrases include *climate change*, *environmental justice*, *Puerto Rico*, *Dakota Access Pipeline* and *Flint water crisis*. The hurricane in Puerto Rico, the Dakota Access Pipeline and the Flint water crisis are all racially charged environmental issues, which Funes takes up in her reporting as well as through twitter (Funes 2017d, 2019d, 2019c, 2019b, 2017c). In this paper I will draw from her articles about how politics, disaster, and historical trauma intersect with race and the environment. Her articles reveal how she advocates for climate action that is centered around racial justice.

OCASIO-CORTEZ

Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez is the youngest woman to be elected to Congress. She focuses on legislative policies which help working class Americans, and specifically represents Queens and the Bronx. She joined Congress in January 2019 after unexpectedly defeating incumbent

congressman Joe Crowley, a white man who had been representing a minority white district for twenty years. Ocasio-Cortez champions the Green New Deal, which is a congressional resolution that plans to confront inequality and the climate crisis.

Ocasio-Cortez was born in the Bronx. Her father was also born in the Bronx, and his parents are from Puerto Rico. Her mother immigrated from Puerto Rico. At her parents' insistence, Ocasio-Cortez attended public school in Yorktown, a 40-minute drive from her extended family in the Bronx. Because of this commute, she learned at a young age about the disparity in schooling and health options between neighborhoods within a single city (Ocasio2018 "About"). Before becoming a politician, she served as an educational director for the National Hispanic Institute, and worked as a bartender and waitress. In addition, she has worked as an organizer for Ted Kennedy and for Bernie Sanders (Ocasio-Cortez 2018p).

While running for election to Congress, *Mobilizing Against Climate Change* was one of fifteen issues on her platform, and it came up briefly in many of her speeches and campaign videos during the election. After getting elected, this issue gained more importance, specifically during the week of Congress's orientation, when Ocasio-Cortez joined a youth climate change activist group called the Sunrise Movement in protest in the office of Nancy Pelosi, a fellow congresswoman. Addressing the participants, she declared "I just want to let you all know how proud I am of each and every single one of you for putting yourselves and your bodies and everything on the line to make sure that we save our planet, our generation, and our future. It's so incredibly important. We do not have a choice. We have to get to 100 percent renewable energy" (Corbet 2018). The day of the protest, Ocasio-Cortez and the Sunrise Movement published the first proposal for the Green New Deal.

In representing working class Americans, Ocasio-Cortez draws from her own experience. In an interview with Morning Joe, she shares what she and her mother went through after father's death when she was a teenager during the financial crisis. "I understand the pain of working class Americans because I have experienced the pain and I have experienced the urgency of this economic moment" (Ocasio-Cortez 2018p, 9:40). Her mother worked two jobs cleaning homes and driving school busses, and she started waitressing and bartending so that they could make ends meet.

Because of her identity as a working-class American, Ocasio-Cortez views the arrangement in which climate-change-inducing profit orientation of big corporations control the economy "benefits few, but comes at the detriment of our planet and all its inhabitants." She continues, "Its effects are life-threatening, and are especially already felt by low-income communities, both in the U.S. and globally. Even in NY-14, areas like Throgs Neck, College Point, and City Island are being affected by erosion and rising sea levels" (Ocasio2018 "Mobilizing Against Climate Change"). She focuses on local impacts of climate change, and how they arise out of inequality.

While being on the inside of the political system as a congresswoman, Ocasio-Cortez consistently pushes back against the political system and the democratic party through tweeting about her experience in Congress, working against corporate lobbying, and fighting for the Green New Deal. In tweets and speeches, she often highlights her background as an educator and an organizer. Her participation in the Sunrise Movement's climate protest, after she was formally elected, suggests that her faith in traditional politics does not trump her faith in grassroots organizing. It also shows her vision that the Democratic party has been failing to promote legislation which empowers the people. When confronted for being "disruptive and unhelpful"

for protesting Democrats rather than Republicans, she said “when everyday people show up in numbers and ask for change with commitment and consistency, we can get somewhere. And we are” (Queally 2018). Ocasio-Cortez’s approach to climate change is reinforced by her most common twitter phrases. The top phrases include *medicare for all*, *Puerto Rico*, *Green New Deal*, and *New York City*. While similar to the approaches of Yeampierre and Funes, Ocasio-Cortez’s approach to climate change focuses on a faith in the power of the masses and integrates climate and economic justice through major policy interventions like the Green New Deal.

MIRANDA

Lin-Manuel Miranda is a singer, songwriter, playwright, and performer, most famous for the Broadway opera *Hamilton*, and also beloved for the Broadway musical *In The Heights* and Disney’s *Moana* soundtrack. He was born in Manhattan to parents from Puerto Rico. He wrote his first musical as a sophomore in college, and has since written and starred in many musicals, movies and TV shows, resulting in a Pulitzer Prize, three Tony Awards, three Grammys, and an Emmy. Miranda has used his productions to raise money for climate action and used his star status to raise alarm about climate change through twitter and articles.

Miranda’s interest in climate change stems from his wife Vanessa Nadal, who is a scientist and an attorney (Moore 2017). His focus on climate change grows out of a belief in science and a fear for the future of the planet (Pulia 2017). When asked about what we all can do to protect the earth for future generations he said, “In addition to being conscientious citizens and supporting organizations like the NRDC, I’d like to see us continue to put policies in place that allow our planet to thrive. And we should listen to our scientists.” I will discuss this quote more in section six. Unlike the other three public figures in this paper, Miranda’s climate change

action is not centered on racial justice. While the other three often focus on local events and the disproportionate effects on poor black and brown communities, Miranda speaks about the health of the global ecosystem. He says, “We’re all humans on this planet. And Vanessa and I have a child who will inherit this world. Everyone with a soul has a stake in this because climate change is happening, accelerating, and affecting us all” (Pulia 2017). In comparison to the other three figures, Miranda’s climate action is more similar to the mainstream approaches previously discussed, and less focused on racial or economic injustice.

Miranda’s work as a climate change philanthropist is not his primary focus, but one of his many projects. For example, there is no mention of climate change or anything related to climate change in his tweets. His primary work is as a songwriter, a playwright, and an actor. Miranda has used his work to raise money for climate change. During the first international showing of *Hamilton*, they raffled tickets, with the proceeds going towards two climate change organizations: *The National Resources Defense Council* and *10:10*. While the organizations highlight disparate vulnerabilities produced by climate change, neither is rooted in racial or economic justice.

Like the other figures in the paper, when Miranda speaks of Hurricane Maria as a product of climate change, he considers climate change as a specific and local, present-day problem, with unjust effects. However, when he is not focusing on Maria, he diverges from the other Latinx climate leaders by addressing climate change as an issue which is best understood through science and which poses a future threat for the entire globe. Miranda’s two Broadway shows reveal racial disparities in the US, but my research shows that he does not extend this focus on racial disparity to his climate advocacy. Miranda demonstrates that Latinx voices on climate change do not arise from a single perspective, as unlike the other three, his climate advocacy is

not motivated by equality and raising disempowered people into leadership positions, but rather it focuses on global unity and science.

Now with this basic understanding of how each of these Latinx leaders engages with climate action, we can dive more deeply into the results. In this paper I argue that while US Latinx is not a homogenous group, framing climate change solutions around economic and racial inequality may make climate change conversations more relevant to some members of this community which is already alarmed about climate change, in a way that moves alarm to become action.

I borrow the word *frame* from Callison, who uses the concept to question what types of information and delivery cause communities to care about and act upon climate change (2014). She argues that local communities experience of climate change often misaligns with the global media use of the word “climate change”. She explores how climate change becomes relevant to different audiences. In her words, “between this gulf of the local and global, the direct present experience and the conceptual future, lies the difficulty of communicating the amorphous nature of climate change as an issue of concern. How to talk about it, where it’s located, what the causal factors might be, when it may begin or how it already has, and any guesses at potential solutions appear, at first glance, to be audience-dependent. Locating what climate change means or when/how it is meaningful is a much more fraught process than what advocates or journalists might consider in their efforts to make an issue or a news story relevant to ‘audiences’” (2014). Callison found that the solutions, causes, and experience of climate change is distinct for particular publics, and a single definition of climate change does not resonate with diverse audiences. For example, Callison found that climate change became important to a community of

evangelical Christians when framed by religious leaders as a biblically mandated Christian responsibility to care for the poor and steward the planet like the garden of Eden, rather than an issue of left-wing political groups or scientists (2014, 37, 123, 125). This paper explores how US Latinx climate leaders frame climate change, posturing that alarm can become action when climate change is framed in relevant ways.

The results are organized into the four following sections. The first section is about how the four climate leaders speak about climate change as an issue with current local impacts. It particularly focuses on how the climate leaders frame climate change around the disaster of Hurricane Maria. The second section is about how Yeampierre, Funes and Ocasio-Cortez overlap to frame climate change as an issue tied to systems of racial or economic inequality. The third section is about how in framing climate change, Yeampierre, Funes and Ocasio-Cortez, focus on the importance of promoting leadership of marginalized people. The fourth section is about Miranda's climate action, which diverges from the other three climate leaders. Together, these sections will tell a story of how some Latinx climate leaders define climate change through a lens of racial or economic inequality in their public advocacy, suggesting that although US Latinxs are a diverse group, this type of framing can make climate change action particularly salient to contemporary Latinx communities and publics. While further research is necessary to see how Latinx publics respond to this advocacy in practice, my research shows how prominent Latinx climate leaders speak to climate causes and goals which are different than those of mainstream climate organizations.

I. Foregrounding Local Impacts

Ocasio-Cortez, Yeampierre, Funes and Miranda all focus their climate change activism on local impacts to the US-Latinx population. This section explores how these leaders use Hurricane Maria in particular as a local impact of climate change to mobilize Latinx publics into action.

The work of Yeampierre and Ocasio-Cortez demonstrates their commitment to action which foregrounds their own communities. For Yeampierre, one cannot address climate change without focusing on local vulnerabilities and impacts. She argues, “it's easy to talk about potential solutions to big problems, it's hard to do the local, the relationship building, actually address the problems” (Yeampierre 2014a). As a politician trying to inspire climate-action, Ocasio-Cortez says, “I don't want to see Miami underwater, I don't want to see my own district underwater” (Colmand and Adragna 2018). Yeampierre says the same thing about Brooklyn: that they are “seriously going to be impacted by climate change as a waterfront community” (Yeampierre 2018b). The impacts of climate change on waterfront communities is due to a rise in intensity and number of hurricanes and a rise in sea level. Unlike mainstream activists, Yeampierre and Ocasio Cortez firstly focus on framing climate change through local impacts.

While scholars including Cruikshanks, Watt-Cloutier, Carey and Callison have written about how leaders frame climate change so that it is relevant to their communities, I have yet to find scholarship on framing climate change for an expansive and diverse public comparable to US Latinxs, which makes it difficult to draw generalizations about them. However, sociologist Noortje Marres defines *public* as a community of strangers created through organizing around particular issues that affects them (2005, 9). Marres definition of a public is relevant here because of the ambiguity of a *US Latinx public*. Indeed, there is no homogeneous community of

US Latinx. In arguing that a public arises to solve particular problems, rather than existing for its own sake, Marres plays with the idea of a public as an “imaginary entity” with “ungraspable agency” (2005, 12, 14). A public has agency to apply pressure on the issues that create it regardless of its lack of clear form. Using Marres’ definition of public, I can recognize the diversity of US Latinxs, while also considering a group of US Latinxs who become a public through alarm about climate change. Similar to how Marres describes the “anonymous, collective, virtual, somewhat mysterious creature we call public,” (13) the US Latinx public I speak about in this paper is not a well-defined entity, but rather a group of people who become a public through a shared issue. In framing climate change as an issue of economic and racial justice through focusing on specific present events rather than future dystopias, Yeampierre, Funes, Miranda and Ocasio-Cortez help to create an agentive public. They use online media platforms to mobilize around the present and local effects of climate change.

All four leaders highlighted in this paper frame climate change as *local* to the public of US Latinx by centering their work in the disaster faced by Puerto Rico and its aftermath. Indeed, climate change is important to Miranda because, “we’re seeing the real effects of it every day: most devastatingly in the increase of the intensity of the hurricanes this past year, particularly Hurricane Maria” (Moore 2017). Yeampierre, who has been a climate change activist since long before the disaster, declared “just a few weeks ago, my worlds as activist and Puerto Rican woman collided when Hurricane Maria hit Puerto Rico” (Yeampierre 2018b). Ocasio-Cortez ran for office on a platform including *Solidarity with Puerto Rico* (Ocasio2018). Under this issue on her campaign page she said, “Months after Hurricane Maria, which ravaged Puerto Rico, our fellow Americans still suffer for want of basic utilities and billions in federal aid that they are entitled to as citizens” (Ocasio2018). In reporting on the hurricane, Funes writes, “The storm

took a \$43 billion impact on the island, but the greatest impact is on the families who've lost loved ones" (Funes 2018k). Miranda, who had always wanted to bring his Broadway show *Hamilton* to Puerto Rico, doubled down on that commitment after Hurricane Maria, deciding that all the proceeds would go to the relief efforts. He says, "the day I made the announcement I think I heard from every Latino member of the cast saying *if you need me, I am there*" (Miranda 2018a). As Miranda saw in his cast, many US Latinos, regardless of familial connections to the island, closely followed and identified with the injustices of the disaster. Through framing climate change through Hurricane Maria, the climate leaders frame the ecological crisis through a lens of racist structural violence, a lack of disaster relief to people of color, and governmental attempts to silence the pain of minorities.

Environmental humanities scholar Rob Nixon describes structural forms of environmental violence, such as those that occurred in the aftermath of Hurricane Maria as *slow violence* (2011, 444). Although many think of the locations of an environmental disaster as a random act of fate, Nixon argues that structural neglect causes disasters to disproportionately affect impoverished and disenfranchised communities (2011, 455). He blames governmental and corporate neglect in building and maintaining infrastructure and other social protections. He argues that governments and corporations keep environmental violence invisible and avoid responsibility by using tools such as procrastination, offloading risk onto communities without a voice in the media, and corporate dissolution (2011, 456, 461,459). Ocasio-Cortez and Yeampierre show that Hurricane Maria's violence is a form of the slow violence described by Nixon.

Ocasio-Cortez and Yeampierre show how Puerto Rico was structurally set up for a disaster. Poverty, stemming from extractive US-Puerto Rico relationships, meant that most

people were living, attending schools, and working in buildings which could not withstand a storm. Yeampierre says, Puerto Rico “was already crippled with debt and a crumbling infrastructure before the storm, and a lot of that had to do with US policies” (Yeampierre 2018b, 8:30). Ocasio-Cortez and Yeampierre point out methods of extraction from Puerto Rico that led to poverty, including the Jones Act, “which hamstring the Puerto Rican economy with restrictions that other American communities do not have to face”, the Wall Street debt, which “has been accrued by vulture funds using irresponsible and unjust behavior reminiscent of the 2008 financial crisis,” and the PROMESA Act, “which handed over the island to ‘La Junta,’ a corporate governance board installed with the support of [Ocasio-Cortez’s] opponent and his private equity donors” (Ocasio2018 “Solidarity with Puerto Rico”, see also Yeampierre 2018b 0:33). A history of colonization and continued disenfranchisement led to extractive US policies and structural vulnerability to storms. In their work, Yeampierre and Ocasio-Cortez demonstrate how a “natural disaster” is not “natural” but rather political.

The real disaster of Hurricane Maria did not occur on the day of the storm, but rather in the aftermath, because of lack of disaster relief. The continued power outage and lack of potable water and health care caused many more deaths resulting from the storm than those that occurred on the first day. For example, lack of power in hospitals and homes for dialysis machines or respiratory aids caused many deaths. In addition, communication loss because of cellphone tower damage led to difficulty in requesting emergency response. Months after the storm, the official count of deaths rose from 62 to 2975 (BBC News 2018).

In not recognizing the high death toll, the government avoided taking action to halt the island-wide blackout. This matches the catastrophic procrastination described by Nixon as a tool to avoid responsibility for structural violence (2011, 456). Trump first celebrated a “great”

disaster response while throwing paper towel rolls into a crowd (Nakamura and Parker 2018). Later, when blamed for the insufficient response, Trump turned the blame to the governor and mayors in Puerto Rico. That upset many people who realized the racism and stark inequality in the US led to structures which could not withstand a hurricane, and an administration which did not provide relief to its citizens. When Trump made fun of the Mayor of San Juan on twitter after the disaster, Miranda responded, “You're going straight to hell, [@realDonaldTrump](#). No long lines for you. Someone will say, ‘Right this way, sir.’ They'll clear a path” (Barr 2017). In addition, Yeampierre is working for a people’s tribunal at the United Nations to charge the United States with human rights abuses for its lack of response in Puerto Rico (Yeampierre 2018b, 4:57). She says, “this is an international crisis, a humanitarian crisis. Puerto Rico is a colony of the US.” Similarly, Ocasio-Cortez said, “The democratic party is not taking this seriously enough... Puerto Rico; a colony that is granted no rights, no representation” (Ocasio-Cortez 2018k, 15:00). In this way, Miranda, Ocasio-Cortez and Yeampierre pointed out how the governmental attempts to mute the suffering allowed for avoiding accountability for an underreported disaster.

Yeampierre is concerned with how the aftermath of the storm will be used to further oppress the people of Puerto Rico through disaster capitalism. Naomi Klein argues that disasters can be used to further the effects of inequality through pushing exploitative policies which would only be accepted in the mindset of a disaster (2007). Yeampierre worries that the privatization of the Island will parallel the privatization of New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina. She fears the privatization of schools, the ferry service, public transportation, and the electric grid (Yeampierre 2018b, 5:08). The disaster capitalism framework shows how climate change and inequality are self-reinforcing through disaster and privatization.

Much like the structural violence Yeampierre argues is present in Puerto Rico, anthropologist Vincane Adams argues that structural violence, unnatural “natural disasters”, and embezzlement and dispossession are key players in New Orleans during and after Hurricane Katrina (2013, 22, 37, 122). She shows how subcontractors led to structural neglect of the levee system (22). She also describes the racialized and gendered violence by the same neglecting military contractors who were in charge of “relief” but rather than focusing on preventing hunger and rape, worked to protect private property (37-41). The profit driven recovery had bureaucratic procedures designed to slowly and scantily distribute resources to those in need (89, 120-122). The story of Hurricane Katrina overlaps with that of Maria in the disaster-prone infrastructure in impoverished communities, governmental neglect in disaster relief for people of color, and systematic procrastination in recovery efforts.

Yeampierre describes top down solutions to the disaster of Hurricane Maria, such as those provided by off-Island non-profits, the possibility of privatization, and even the unfulfilled hope of governmental relief, as “band aids” (Yeampierre 2018b, 0:21). They do not address the underlying inequality, and thus cannot address the issue of climate change disaster. Likewise, by focusing their climate action on the local, present impacts of Hurricane Maria, Ocasio-Cortez, Funes and Yeampierre, and Miranda demonstrate that climate change becomes a problem for them because of economic and racial inequality. In this section we learned the four climate leaders foreground Hurricane Maria in their climate action, revealing the slow violence caused in climate disasters through infrastructural inequality and lack of disaster relief. A similar type of slow violence is present in many disasters, such as Hurricane Katrina. Local impacts on Puerto Rico during Hurricane Maria emphasize the role of structural inequalities due to colonial histories and ongoing imperial relations and demonstrate that addressing racialized economic

inequality is essential to any climate justice agenda in order to care for people living in the aftermaths of climatic disasters and prepare for future vulnerabilities. The next section will explore how Yeampierre, Funes and Ocasio-Cortez frame climate change through a lens of inequality even outside of the conversation about Hurricane Maria.

II. Framing Climate Change through a Lens of Economic or Racial Inequality

In addition to focusing their climate activism on specific instances of unjust impacts such as Hurricane Maria, Yeampierre, Funes, and Ocasio-Cortez frame climate change as intertwined with economic or racial inequality. Yeampierre frames climate change as intertwined with racial injustice by identifying the causes of climate change in colonialism. Funes reports on specific examples which demonstrate how climate change benefits the rich while hurting the poor. Ocasio-Cortez frames climate change as interconnected with economic justice by drafting the Green New Deal proposal to dually deal with inequality and climate change. Yeampierre, Funes and Ocasio-Cortez speak of the causes, the impacts, and the solutions respectively of climate change through a lens of economic and racial injustice.

For Yeampierre the history of western imperialism led to dominant global cultures of European capitalism that contribute to climate change through promoting competition and the exclusion of youth and elders. She says that in the present day USA, we are “conditioned to be competitive, not to collaborate” (Yeampierre 2017b, 11:02). She argues that in order to address climate change, we must work outside of these systems of competition. For Yeampierre, the dominating culture of competition undermines collaborative traditions from African and Indigenous ancestry, traditions less conducive to creating climate change, and more conducive to solving it. These hallmark features of indigenous and African traditions, she contends, would

cultivate relationships in which people can rely on “principles of collaboration, and they can share expertise, and we can work in a way that is collective, and respectful of the grass roots” (Yeampierre 2011, 8:00). While simplifying complex African and indigenous traditions, the language Yeampierre uses about Western culture of competition frames climate change as arising from the global domination of Western culture and the annihilation of alternative cultural knowledge resources.

Furthermore, she argues that the racial prioritization of cultures leads to a failure in addressing climate change because western culture does not value intergenerational collaboration in leadership. She uses a dialogue which simplifies and combines African and Indigenous traditions in order to frame climate change as relevant to Latinx, claiming that Western traditions produce the problems while African and Indigenous traditions hold the solutions. She says, “this is a country that pits generations against each other. In traditions of African and Indigenous ancestry we share power. We believe that we have to be at the table together” (Yeampierre 2017b). She identifies an Anglo-American pattern of leaving youth and elders out of decision-making processes. For Yeampierre, climate change solutions must combine wisdom from past generations with the motivation to protect the environment of future generations. In a different speech, she says that “[intergenerational divide] doesn’t exist in Latin America, in Africa, where people work together, where there’s a place for youth and a place for elders” (Yeampierre 2011). She sees that climate change is something that will take diverse wisdom to confront, and that will affect the next generation. At her organization, UPROSE, she says, “we specifically focus on young people of color because they are often left out of the climate change conversation. They are hired to hold signs, or they are brought in, but they are not integrated into leadership. Their leadership is not supported or developed... We can't address climate change unless we are

intergenerational” (Yeampierre 2017b). Yeampierre argues that organizations, communities and societies who want to address climate change need to decolonize knowledge, intergenerational transmission, and structures of leadership. She diverges from mainstream activism by framing climate change as arising from colonialization and proposing to recognize this in imagining solutions.

Like Yeampierre, many scholars connect climate change to oppressive systems. These scholars have different names for the cause of the ecological crisis. For example, philosopher Michel Serres considers it *the desire to own* (2011), Felix Guattari and Isabelle Stengers call it *capitalism* (2000, 2015), and Rob Nixon calls it *neoliberalism* (2011). Serres, Guattari and Stengers show how countries which dominate people use the same logic to dominate the planet. They identify economic rather than racial domination. Anthropologist, Ghassan Hage, however, designates racism specifically the social structure at fault for climate change (2017). Hage writes about how climate change and racism both arise from the same forces of domestication, domination, colonialism and capitalism (2017). He writes that in order to be an antiracist one must be an ecologist and vice versa, because the dual root of racism and the ecological crisis is the destructive human behavior of othering, subordinating, extracting and ultimately causing extinction. Hage argues that both racism and environmental destruction arise when an occupying force works solely in its own interest, subordinating people or the environment in order to extract wealth and exterminating anything in the way (2017, kindle location 728). As shown above, Yeampierre, like Hage, locates the causes of climate change in colonialism. Ocasio-Cortez and Funes align more closely with the other authors in framing climate change as an issue intertwined with economic inequality rather than making explicit arguments about a racial cause of climate change.

Funes, on the other hand, argues that economic inequality makes those least responsible for climate change those who most suffer its consequences. In one article she illustrates this through an emblematic example: access to air conditioners (Funes 2018q). She connects the predicted deaths caused by heat exposure as exacerbated by climate change, and the polluting effects of air conditioners, providing a dually real and metaphoric example of how disparate buying power can allow the privileged to be comfortable and unaware, while people in the global south are dying. She writes, “By 2030 to 2050, heat exposure may cause an additional 38,000 deaths among elderly people a year worldwide, according to the World Health Organization. By 2100, up to 74 percent of the world’s population could be exposed to deadly temperatures for at least 20 days a year, per a 2017 study published in *Nature*” (Funes). In addition to highlighting the potential deaths for those who don’t have air conditioners, she explains the polluting and warming effects of air conditioners. “These devices come at a cost to our planet. Their use requires lots of (currently) dirty energy and emits hydrofluorocarbons, greenhouse gases that trap heat in the atmosphere far more effectively than carbon dioxide. In fact, AC use in the residential sector alone may increase our planet’s temperature by more than half a degree Celsius globally by 2100.” Through this example, Funes demonstrates how systems of inequality worsen climate change through sheltering the decision-making-elite from its effects in their very act of polluting.

Ocasio Cortez also frames climate change through a lens of economic inequality. In the draft resolution for the Green New Deal, Ocasio-Cortez frames climate change solutions as offering an opportunity to extinguish economic inequality. The goal of the Green New Deal is to make the US 100% carbon-neutral, diminish inequality, and eliminate poverty in 10 years. The proposal says the Green New Deal shall “mitigate deeply entrenched racial, regional and gender-based inequalities in income and wealth.” Later it says it will “take into account and be

responsive to the historical and present-day experiences of low-income communities, communities of color, indigenous communities, rural and urban communities and the front-line communities most affected by climate change” (Saikat 2018). It proposes to upturn inequality through a federal jobs guarantee and through ensuring that federal and other investment is equitably distributed to marginalized communities. In addition, it proposes to consider universal health care, a basic income program, and job training. The logic in the proposal of connecting solutions to climate change and with those to inequality is not causation, as the scholars above suggest, but convenience. The proposal says, “The Plan for a Green New Deal (and the draft legislation) shall recognize that a national industrial, economic mobilization of this scope and scale is a historic opportunity to virtually eliminate poverty in the United States and to make prosperity, wealth and economic security available to everyone participating in the transformation” (Saikat, 2018). Addressing both climate change and economic inequality requires a restructuring of the economic system, so the draft of the Green New Deal insists we do it together. By naming climate change a historic opportunity to eliminate poverty, Ocasio-Cortez once again frames climate change through a lens of inequality.

Ocasio-Cortez and Funes prioritize the language of economic inequality over that of racial injustice. While in her bio, Funes says she reports on race and the environment almost exclusively, race is never explicitly mentioned in the article about air conditioners (Funes 2018q). Similarly, Ocasio-Cortez often prioritized the word “inequality” over “racial injustice” in the proposal for the Green New Deal (Saikat 2018). It is possible that they implicitly refer to racist productions of inequalities without using the language of white supremacy or racism in order to mobilize Latinx publics while not alienating white supporters.

Yeampierre, Funes and Ocasio-Cortez interweave inequality and climate change without explicitly arguing that there is a causal relationship. While scholars, including Hage, Guattari, Stengers, and Serres, claim that domination causes climate change as described above, the activists use different logic to connect the two. For example, Ocasio-Cortez claims we should connect climate change with economic inequality because of an *opportunity* to battle the two together. While the logic that the scholars such as Pulido and Hage use forceful arguments to demonstrate fault and place varying levels of blame on racist structures, Yeampierre, Funes and Ocasio-Cortez use looser logics to connect climate change with racial or economic inequality.

Through identifying the roots of climate change in colonialism, reporting on the economics at play in the victims and beneficiaries of climate change, and interweaving solutions to climate change with those to inequality, respectively Yeampierre, Funes, and Ocasio-Cortez frame climate change as connected with racial or economic inequality. Although they do not use the lens of inequality to the extent of claiming causal relationships as some scholars do, their language differs from that of mainstream climate activists, for whom inequality arises less often, and primarily in conversations about mitigating unequal effects of climate change. The activists in this paper go further than mitigation: Yeampierre speak of the colonial roots of climate change, Funes reports on how privileged polluters are often shielded from climate change effects sometimes through the very act of polluting, and Ocasio-Cortez addresses eliminating inequality not just in mitigating climate effects but for the whole nation. The next section extends this conversation by discussing how their climate change activism deals with inequality in an additional way: combating exclusive systems of leadership.

III. Promoting Leadership of the Historically Excluded

Yeampierre, Funes, and Ocasio-Cortez demand for people who live and suffer on the frontlines of climate change to be incorporated into community and national decision-making processes as leaders. However, their methods for doing so are distinct. While sharing the same rationale, they highlight different actors, and fight for different types of incorporation into leadership. Yeampierre mainly focuses on local leadership, and raising youth as leaders. She argues that supplanting local leadership of people of color contributes to climate change, as those who end up in power are disconnected from the problems of climate change, and thus create policy which does not resonate with the affected communities. In her reporting, Funes celebrates voices of people of color in the climate conversation in order to change stigma around who can be a leader or an environmentalist. She draws media attention to environmentalists of color such as Deb Haaland and Mari Copeny. Ocasio-Cortez, on the other hand, aims to elevate the working class into the climate-decision making process. She fights for wider representation in political leadership in congress and other elected positions and pushes against the corruption of corporate lobbying. These climate leaders elevate people of color in the climate conversation as local and national leaders. In addition, they wrestle with the role of the government as an adversary or ally, and push for the incorporation of leadership of the marginalized into government in order for it to become an ally.

I look to sociologist Laura Pulido in order to better understand methods of political disempowerment and the government's stake in the continuation of that disempowerment in relation to climate change. Pulido argues that environmental racism (such as climate change) arises from racial capitalism (2006). As Cedric Robinson contends, capitalism relies on the exploitation of human lives which are hierarchically valued, often through race (1983). The

exploitation occurs through hazardous working conditions, low wages, slow violence in the form of “natural” disasters in crumbling infrastructure, and environmental toxicities. Pulido points to a disproportionate percentage of people of color who suffer from industrial pollution, and argues that “the state is deeply invested in *not* solving the environmental racism gap because it would be too costly and disruptive to industry, the larger political system, and the state itself” (2016, 6).

Pulido is saying here that many benefit from environmental racism; their wealth or comfort relies on its continuation. This can be extended to climate change, as Funes illustrated anecdotally with air conditioners in the previous section. In a framework of racial capitalism, the people who experience climate change act as sinks for disaster harm (Pulido, 6). They absorb the harms of climate disaster, so that the privileged can continue to benefit from climate change without expending their wealth on better infrastructure or disaster relief. The privileged disproportionately make up the political leadership, maintaining this system of extraction based on differential values of human life. Those who are less valued in racial capitalism are also politically disempowered. This produces a blind spot in climate change policy to the experiences of those on the frontline of climate change, because the people who act as climate disaster sinks most often do not hold positions of political leadership. In this section we will see how Funes, Ocasio-Cortez and Yeampierre combat political disempowerment and deal with the complicated role of the government.

Yeampierre describes how exclusive systems of leadership contribute to climate change because those who make decisions are not impacted by climate change and thus are not invested in successfully combating it. She claims, “we are not the ones contributing to climate change, but we are the ones living at the brunt of the decisions of the descendants of those who colonized us” (Yeampierre 2017b, 9:12). She is not speaking about historical oppression, but about current

systems of power. She has witnessed in her community in the Bronx that external NGOs try to implement top-down solutions to her community's problems. She argues that only through local leadership will communities confronted by climate change feel ownership over the issue and accept the solutions. She says, "you get people together who look like they're likeminded [such as external NGO leaders and local Sunset Park leaders], and all of a sudden [local] leadership is supplanted" (Yeampierre, 10:18). She instructs the academic audience to which she is speaking to "check your privilege and use it to support grassroots" instead of being like the NGO leaders she has witnessed who believed they had all the solutions without following the leadership of local communities (Yeampierre, 10:20). For Yeampierre, solutions cannot be top-down, but must be created by and enacted by the communities they affect. Top-down solutions (a) do not address the problems at hand due to lack of experience with those problems and (b) are rejected by the people they wish to help on the frontlines of climate change.

In her work with UPROSE, she focuses on uplifting the leadership of people of color in her community through college scholarships, youth research opportunities, and training elderly groups to fight for open space and bus-lines. In addition, in helping to plan the People's March in 2014, a climate march of 400,000 people, she made sure that young people of color would be included in the decision-making processes (Yeampierre, 00:25). She explains the issues with top down leadership: "I don't want a climate justice youth summit that is led by privileged people, and our young people come in as passive recipients of somebody's good intentions, because people don't just learn by reading, they learn by absorbing energy and watching and they have to see themselves in leadership and they have to see themselves leading the climate justice movement" (Yeampierre, 12:01). Only through local leadership do individuals and communities gain agency. According to Yeampierre, external NGO leaders taking control of local

communities and supplanting of local leadership in climate change action is a form of modern colonization, and thus promoting local leadership of people of color is a central component of her work on climate action.

Like Yeampierre, Funes advocates for voices of people of color to become leaders of climate justice. Through her work in journalism, Funes foregrounds the voices of people of color and of the global south in relation to environmental movements. For instance, she celebrates the growing media attention towards Mari Copeny, an 11 year old African American environmentalist in Flint Michigan (Funes 2018a). In reporting on a doll created in Copeny's image, Funes hopes that the toy will inspire young people of color to speak out against environmental injustice. In regards to climate change, she centers indigenous people, their knowledge and ethical principles, and their fights for environmental justice (Funes 2018c). In addition, she has written articles on tribal nations joining together to oppose drilling in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, and indigenous environmentalists opposing the Keystone XL pipeline (Funes 2018i; Funes 2018g). In regards to political leadership, she wrote an article on Deb Haaland, one of the two first Native American woman to be elected to Congress, and how wider representation has shifted the political conversation towards climate change as an urgent issue of justice (Funes 2018d). Through focusing media attention of environmentalists and climate change leaders who are people of color, Funes works to shift public opinion about who can be environmentalists, climate change activists, and political leaders.

When Ocasio-Cortez speaks about supporting diverse leadership, she often speaks about the working class rather than people of color. As a young politician, this likely allows her statements to reach a wider audience. Ocasio-Cortez is not shy in celebrating being a congresswoman who comes from the working-class with other women of color in Congress

through posing for photos and posting selfies (Bowden 2019). When people scoff at her for doing a live q-and-a session with her Instagram followers while eating instant mac-and-cheese, she responded saying, “I think what people forget is if we want everyday, working-class Americans to run for office, and not like these robots, that we have to acknowledge and accept imperfection and growth and humanity in our government,” (Minsberg 2018). On Instagram, through showing her unpolished side in which she wears glasses and eats instant meals, she also demonstrates that she is an everyday person, coming from a working class background. Through celebrating her working class background, she hopes to inspire other working class people to run for public office.

Similar to Yeampierre and Funes, Ocasio-Cortez pushes for more leadership from people who have been historically excluded. She believes that corporate lobbying of politicians leaves many people without representation. Through corporate lobbying, corporations donate to politicians campaigns, and thus gain influence over lawmakers. Corporate lobbying leaves many without representation in part because wealthy, well connected politicians are often the ones with the most corporate sponsors. Even more significantly, corporate lobbying leaves people without representation because the lawmakers act in the interests of the lobbyists rather than in the interests of the voters. Ocasio-Cortez ran on a platform that rejected corporate lobbying in politics. In an interview with MSNBC, she described that she ran on platform with a “laser focused message of economic, social and racial dignity for working class Americans... a message that rejected lobbyist funds” (Ocasio-Cortez 2018p, 1:10). Due to the corruption of corporate lobbying, she had to run against her opponent, Joe Crowley, with only 1/10 of his budget (Ocasio-Cortez 2018g). She says that because of lobbyist funds, “working people are not seen in Congress” (Ocasio 2018i, 10:35). Although she was able to beat the tough odds for

election, Ocasio-Cortez argues that corporate money allowed Crowley to hold office for 20 years in a district where he did not represent the population. New York's 14th congressional district is majority people of color. In her campaign video, she spoke of the lack of representation in her district while Crowley was in office, saying, "how can you possibly know what our needs are when your kids don't go to these schools? When you don't drink this water?" (Ocasio 2018d, 3:52). If Crowley didn't have the advantage of having corporate funds, a working class person may have been able to win his seat in congress earlier.

In the plan for the committee which will create and implement the Green New Deal, she proposes that lawmakers who have accepted money from fossil fuel companies be excluded from participation (Kaufman 2018). Through working against corporate lobbying, Ocasio-Cortez attempts to confront a system which is controlled by interests of corporations including many from the fossil fuel industry. Ocasio-Cortez calls for action on climate change from citizens uncorrupted by corporate funding.

Unlike mainstream climate action which often promotes scientists as leaders in the climate conversation, Yeampierre, and Funes call for climate leadership from those on the frontlines of climate change and from people of color. Unlike mainstream politics, Ocasio-Cortez calls for leadership uncorrupted by corporate lobbying and from the working class. Their climate action takes on exclusive systems of leadership as one of many racist systems which contribute to climate change through lack of investment of those in leadership who are removed from the impacts of climate change, and indeed benefitting from the pollution.

The work of Ocasio-Cortez, Yeampierre, and Funes demonstrates that the government cannot be viewed simply as an ally in the fight for climate and racial justice because it profits from the continuation of climate change. Sociologist Laura Pulido argues that because the state

relies on capitalism for its continuation, and capitalism relies on racial differentiation to cut costs and generate capital, the state sanctions violence through inaction on regulation. While the state's role is to protecting its citizens, it works rather in the interest of industry, thus acting violence through industrial pollution on its citizens (Pulido 2016, 6-7). Thus, the government itself cannot be depended upon to bring justice, but rather activists must work to force the government to equally regulate. While the government is the only institution with the power to confront climate change, in its present form it is invested in *not* solving climate change as that would disrupt its economic and political systems.

Funes reports on how the Trump Administration uses people of color like pawns in a game to support its pro-industry policies which deregulate and lead to environmental violence (Funes 2018g). She reports on how the administration claims the deregulation of coal plants benefits black and brown communities while in reality it benefits the privileged who have invested in the companies (Funes 2018m). She writes that the polluting coal industry has actually been “breaking our backs” and what they actually need is an economically just transition to renewable energy. Funes blames the administration for hypocritically justifying its polluting policies by pretending to care about black and brown people.

For Funes, the government is a site of contestation through its actions of overlooking the harm of pollution and unnatural disaster to people of color. However, Funes also fondly remembers the days of the Obama administration and highlights how strong environmental policy has led to a healing ozone hole. Referring to Obama's climate policies, she reflects: “The Clean Power Plan feels like an idyllic dream from many lifetimes ago, but the U.S. is actually right on track to meet the goals of the Obama-era climate policy, despite President Donald Trump moving to kill it” (Funes 2018o). She also writes about successful environmental policy

of the past: “The ozone hole is healing. This is not a drill: The United Nations announced this year that the ozone hole could heal in our lifetimes. This felt impossible when the world first became aware of the problem in the 1980s, but it goes to show what strong environmental policy can do” (Funes 2018l). In mainly blaming the current administration, while praising past administrations and successful environmental policy, Funes does not rule out the possibility of governmental participation in solving climate change.

Yeampierre points to governmental violence through structural violence. Speaking of Puerto Rico, she says, “it was already crippled with debt and a crumbling infrastructure before the storm, and a lot of that had to do with US policies” (Yeampierre 2018b, 8:30). She also speaks about governmental violence in the form of police violence in her home, in the Brooklyn, NY. When her organization, UPROSE, succeeded in doubling the amount of open space in the neighborhood, the community had to start dealing with displacement through gentrification. With gentrification came higher rates of policing specifically to protect the new neighbors, and with that came police violence. She says, “there’s more policing, you can't sit on the stoop, you can't listen to music on a Saturday night, your children get criminalized. That all happens as a result of our victories, and that is not just happening in Brooklyn, it's happening all over the place” (Yeampierre 2018c, 15:38). She continues, “We can't fight environmental justice without fighting displacement, without fighting against the racial violence that is exacted on our people on an everyday basis” (Yeampierre, 15:40). Through this example in Sunset Park, Yeampierre shows how gentrification pushes people of color to live in areas of high pollution and little open space. For her community, after fighting against environmental violence, the properties gained value such that the community members could no longer afford to live there. The government’s role in permitting environmental violence on black and brown communities creates the situation

described above by Yeampierre: communities of color which work against environmental violence must then face gentrification and police violence.

Despite an acute awareness of governmental violence, she leaves open the possibility of governmental action against climate change. When asked if there is a possibility for the government to be a partner in the climate justice work, she says, “The short answer is yes and yes... it is possible for visionary governments who have a backbone to really step up and think of community as a partner... Climate change demands non-traditional partnerships because we're not going to survive without them” (Yeampierre, 14:04, 16:56). Yeampierre imagines a visionary government which respects community sovereignty. This is not a government which relies on racial capitalism. It is one that could be an ally in fighting environmental racism.

Ocasio-Cortez's actions also reveals her complicated role with the government. Ocasio-Cortez is an activist from within the system. While she participates in the government as a congresswoman, she identifies as outside the establishment. She won by expanding the electorate; in her words “by speaking to those that feel disenchanting, dejected, and cynical about our politics, and letting them know that we're fighting for them” (Chomsky and Ocasio-Cortez 2018, 1:31). Ocasio-Cortez balances the line between ally and adversary as she faces the US political system. She pushes against it, but from the inside.

Funes, Ocasio-Cortez and Yeampierre center their climate change conversation with the language of economic and racial justice by promoting leadership of working class people and people of color, and recognizing the complicated nature of the government in climate change policy. Miranda has not been present in the past two sections because, despite his prominence as a champion for racial justice in his Broadway musicals, his climate action does not focus on racial justice or economic inequality outside of his work with Hurricane Maria. The next section

will examine the climate action of Miranda, and how it differs from that of the other three leaders.

IV. Miranda and the Heterogeneity of US Latinx Climate Action

Miranda's climate action differs from that of Yeampierre, Funes and Ocasio-Cortez because besides focusing on Hurricane Maria, he does not publicly frame climate change as an issue of inequality. Like the mainstream climate action described in the introduction, Miranda's climate change action focuses on greenhouse gas emissions, governmental policy, individual acts of conservation and science and technology, demonstrating that Latinx climate leaders frame climate change in a variety of ways.

Through the lens of Puerto Rico, Miranda recognizes the unequal impacts of climate change. He says that we shouldn't "just keep reacting, rebuilding cities every hurricane season, watching as the most vulnerable populations suffer needlessly." In this statement he highlights the disparate impacts of climate change to call for action not in addressing inequality but in limiting greenhouse gas emissions. Rather than reacting to disaster, we should stop the disasters from occurring by scientifically responding to climate change. He calls the public to action about climate change by calling on compassion, saying to remember that "our fellow citizens in Puerto Rico still don't have electricity" (Miranda 2018c). Through the lens of Hurricane Maria, Miranda like the others, focuses on injustice. However, even here the action he calls for is different. He speaks of Hurricane Maria in relation to climate change not to address the inequality or structural violence in climate change, but to think about greenhouse gas emission. He says that instead of just watching the vulnerable suffer from climate change, we should "get proactive too. Both as individuals and as a nation. From the products we buy to the politicians we elect, we can't put off

confronting climate change any more” (Miranda 2018c). The first focus of his climate action is on reducing green-house gas emission through individual action and electing politicians who care about regulating greenhouse gas emissions. While he calls on compassion for those suffering the unequal burdens, his framing of climate action differs from the others because it does not aim to address inequality explicitly.

Instead, Miranda deals with climate change and racial and economic injustice separately. He builds separate fundraising campaigns for climate action organizations and for immigrants’ rights organizations, not counting on those inspired to donate for immigrant justice to also be inspired to donate for climate change (Moore 2017). In one playlist, he compiles music to confront issues of climate change and in another he compiles music to counteract racism (Desantis 2017). Again, he does not rely on or call upon his listeners to be interested in both issues together, but rather he allows them to choose to engage with his climate action or his anti-racism work separately. Unlike the other three climate activists, Miranda does not assume that climate change becomes relevant to his public through economic or racial inequality. Instead, it becomes relevant to his public through the focus on limiting greenhouse gas emission, and through the musical platform he uses.

While Miranda supports voices of people of color in his job as a playwright and in his philanthropy to support the development of artists of color, his climate action does not demand that those leading the climate change conversations be people on the frontlines of climate change (Prignano, 2018). To the extent of my knowledge, he had not made any statements about the importance of people of color leading the climate conversation. Instead of promoting people of color as climate leaders, he suggests scientists should lead the climate change conversations (Pulia 2017). When asked what we can do to protect the earth for future generations, he says,

“I’d like to see us continue to put policies in place that allow our planet to thrive” (Pulia 2017). By using the word *continue* he shows that he believes the government is already working against climate change. Miranda’s climate action demonstrates that not all Latinx climate leaders address climate change through a lens of economic or racial inequality.

Unlike the other leaders, Miranda does not foreground inequality in the discussion of addressing climate change, he does not call for climate leaders who are people who have historically been excluded from power, and he illustrates his trust in past and future governmental climate action. In these ways, Miranda follows a more mainstream approach to climate action. It is possible that he is less focused on reaching Latinx publics, and rather he mobilizes, and is mobilized by, a more mainstream public. Regardless of his incentives, Miranda’s climate action shows that Latinx climate leaders approach climate change in diverse ways.

Conclusion

In summary, Funes, Yeampierre and Ocasio-Cortez frame climate change through a lenses of economic and racial justice. Along with Miranda, they center their climate activism on local, present events such as Hurricane Maria. When not speaking of Maria, Miranda relies on scientific language aiming to limiting greenhouse gas emission in his climate action, demonstrating that multiple frames can make climate change relevant to emerging US Latinx publics. The others choose to highlight inequality throughout their climate advocacy. In addition, they support leadership of working class people and people of color in their climate action and recognize the complicated role of the government as an actor of environmental violence.

While Miranda doesn't foreground language of racial or economic inequality in his climate action, in his musical, *Hamilton*, lyrics about racial revolution speak to the message of the slow violence in climate disasters such as Hurricane Maria. In *Hamilton*, an opponent to the American Revolution sings, "Chaos and bloodshed are not a solution, don't let them lead you astray." Lin-Manuel Miranda replies, "Chaos and bloodshed already haunt us" (Miranda 2015 "Farmer Refuted"). This echoes the climate leaders' descriptions of Hurricane Maria, when thousands of deaths were ignored by the government. The four activists identify this as the bloodshed of climate change. They see the deaths as slow violence due to the lack of disaster relief compounded by the unsound infrastructure that results from centuries of colonialism and racialized labor extraction.

While the Yale study mentioned at the beginning of this paper found that Latinxs are alarmed about climate change, but not taking action, I suggest that through a lens of inequality, Funes, Ocasio-Cortez and Yeampierre are mobilizing new climate change publics, whose agency to act derives from a shared concern of climate and economic justice. As the US Latinx population grows, their participation in climate change action and US politics more generally becomes increasingly important to politicians and other actors involved in climate change advocacy. Indeed, as Yeampierre contends "people who are the legacy of historical trauma are now about to become the majority of the country" (Yeampierre 2014a). She is referencing a census study that minorities will become a majority in the US by 2042 (US Census Bureau 2015). The historical trauma of colonialism, slavery, and ongoing racialized injustices may be the key to why inequality is an important lens through which to frame climate change for Latinx publics and other communities of color. The historical trauma recreates itself through ongoing conditions of inequality: Yeampierre describes it as "growing up, one generation after

the other, being exposed to extreme stress because of poverty, because of oppression, because of racism” and historically having “the worst housing, the worse employment, the worst health conditions” (Yeampierre 2014a). Yeampierre sees that the black and brown people who have been systematically oppressed by the government are also about to become the majority and will be the ones “faced with climate change” (Yeampierre 2014a). When this public is faced with climate change, it likely will not consider climate change through the same lens that current mainstream climate action and political governance does. It may instead deal with climate change hand-in-hand with inequality, as Yeampierre, Ocasio-Cortez and Funes currently do.

The findings that Latinx climate leaders frame climate change differently from the mainstream may have implications about mainstream climate action: that climate change is often framed by and for white, middle-and upper-class audiences. Mainstream climate action doesn’t prioritize climate change’s connection with historical racial injustices and present-day inequalities. Social scientists from William Cronan to Carolyn Finney argue that the mainstream environmental movement in the United States has been a racially exclusionary movement, and an agent of “whitening” the USA. Historian Richard Grove illustrates how the concept of pure wilderness arose through European imperialism (1995). He argues that environmental disasters arising from colonialism such as deforestation and soil erosion led to an Edenic aim to protect the environment for white colonial powers (1995, 474). Other scholars follow this line of reasoning, building on Grove’s theory using the words *conquest* (Kosek 2004), *colonialism* (Arnold 1996), or *domesticate* (DeLuca and Demo 2001) to describe how wilderness is created by and for white people. While there is a long history of scholarship on exclusionary environmentalism, the research about whether the specific category of climate change action also is racially exclusionary is relatively new.

Anthropologists Zoe Todd and Heather Davis have studied this question by unpacking the Anthropocene, a word created to refer to the current geological epoch during which humans are the dominant influence on climate and the environment and their impact is visible in the geological record. Todd and Davis argue that the root of the word Anthropocene, which is “anthopos,” places the blame for the contemporary environmental crisis equally on all humans, rather than recognizing the colonial history of dispossession and genocide from which they claim the environmental transformation arose (2017, 763). They identify the Anthropocene as a universalizing project which hides the power of Eurocentric narratives and names the Eurocentric perspective as neutral and global (763). They do not deny the Anthropocene’s existence, but rather they propose to officially recognize the start of the Anthropocene as 1610, as a reminder of the link between climate change and colonialization. Like the research of Todd and Davis, in my findings, mainstream climate action differs from that of the Latinx climate leaders in that it does not foreground the legacy of racial and economic inequality from which climate change stems and which it reproduces. Thus, one could argue that mainstream climate action is another exclusionary environmental movement prioritizing Western narratives and ignoring other perspectives.

My research shows that Funes, Yeampierre and Ocasio-Cortez fight climate change by pushing to include more voices in the climate conversation and redefine climate change as an issue relevant to US Latinx by foregrounding inequality in both its cause and effect. When Miranda continues in his song about the American Revolution, he sings, “The have-nots are gonna win this,” predicting that those who are haunted with the chaos and bloodshed unrecognized by those in power will soon be the ones in charge (Miranda 2015 “Farmer Refuted”). When the arising minority-majority public responds to climate change, they may

frame climate change not only as an issue of scientific innovation and scientists leading new greenhouse gas policy, but instead as an issue of racial and economic justice. Yeampierre declares, “The opportunities to create something transformational are unbelievable” (Yeampierre 2014a). Indeed the opportunities for transformational climate action are incredible, and also necessary, in order for climate action to resonate with diverse publics and to address its reproduction of inequalities and injustices.

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I list the sources in sections, so as to facilitate ease of future research on specific topics. In the primary sources section, I include a subsection for each climate leader highlighted in this paper. I also include a subsection for *Mainstream Climate Change and its Critics*. In the secondary sources section, the first subsection is *Background and Historical Context*. This subsection includes texts about climate change as a Latinx issue. The following three subsections of secondary sources can be used as a guide for those who wish to pursue studies centering around the topics of *Inequality and Climate Change*, *Environmentalism and White Supremacy*, or *Framing Climate Change*.

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