

CAPSTONE PROJECT: UNEQUAL BURDENS: MYTHS OF THE ANTHROPOCENE AND PERCEPTIONS OF CLIMATE CHANGE IN ATLANTA, GA

I have been conducting my capstone project for about two and a half years under the supervision of Dr. Deric Shannon and Dr. Hilary King. It forms part of my larger thesis and my Mellon Mays Undergraduate Fellowship project. I conducted semi-structured interviews with working-class people of color in Atlanta, Georgia. I intended to investigate how people made sense and meaning out of climate change inequality and found that people's answers were framed by larger social forces, such as discourse around the Anthropocene, neoliberalism and colorblindness. My project is invested in environmental justice, which looks at the connections between structural forms of domination like white supremacy and capitalism, and environmental harm. I am most interested in investigating how people conceive of the problem of climate change and the implications it has in understanding climate change as a problem intimately connected with race and wealth inequality. My capstone paper is what follows and I eventually presented content from this paper at a presentation organized by Dr. Peggy Barlett on the history of sustainability at Emory.

Unequal Burdens: Myths of the Anthropocene and Perceptions of Climate Change in Atlanta, GA

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INTRODUCTION

In 2002, Nobel Prize-winning atmospheric chemist Paul J. Crutzen proposed a new geological epoch, the Anthropocene, to highlight “mankind’s growing influence on the environment” (Crutzen 2002: 23). In his polemical piece in *Nature*, he referenced mass species extinction, land surface use and conversion by humans, and later, the development and deployment of nuclear technology, the rise of plastics and industrial agriculture, and, most critically, the quickly escalating concentrations of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere, to signal human-induced ecological crisis (Lewis and Maslin 2015). Other scholars quickly jumped on the bandwagon, adding to the Anthropocene’s laundry list of eco-devastations and debating fiercely about the technicalities. Currently the debates about the details of the Anthropocene are largely occurring in the confines of geological and scientific disciplines and consensus seems to be building around starting the epoch in the nuclear era (post 1940s) (Monastersky 2015; Crutzen 2002; Lewis and Maslin 2015). The language of the Anthropocene has escaped academia and leaked into popular thought (e.g. Macfarlane 2016). The Anthropocene is a popular theme in mainstream media: The Guardian featured an article titled “Generation Anthropocene: How Humans Have Altered the Planet for Ever”; the New York Times (2017) published a feature titled “Is the ‘Anthropocene’ Epoch a Condemnation of Human Interference – Or a Call for More?”; and the Anthropocene is the subject of Ted Talks and YouTube videos (Macfarlane 2016; Yang 2017). Scholars point out that discourse around the Anthropocene has at least highlighted the rapid degradation of the environment, and that the discourse implicitly makes historical social-political-economic arguments about its origins. More critical scholars (predominantly in the social sciences) have pointed out is that it has done so in ways that blur historical and empirical realities of inequality and power that tell quite a different story about how we arrived at a point of near climate chaos. Natural scientists concluded in 2016, however, that we are living in the new epoch of the Anthropocene.

The Anthropocene makes several problematic assumptions about the historical social-political-economic roots of environmental degradation, though for this paper I will focus on climate change specifically as a particularly dire form of crisis. I conducted semi-structured, in-depth interviews with working-class people of color in metro Atlanta and investigated the ways that respondents conceived of climate change as a social problem. I found that respondents’ answers fell in line with popular discourse around the Anthropocene, which blurred the connections between climate change and economic and racial inequality. In this paper I will talk about such discourse in the creation of the Anthropocene as an epoch with social, political and economic implications, will outline my methods, explicate my data and findings and, finally, conclude.

ANTHROPOCENE DISCOURSE

Since the recognition of irreversible damage to Earth, natural scientists have been increasingly occupied with recognizing a new epoch to mark a fundamental change in Earth's life systems. Marking a new geological epoch requires certain criteria to be met, most centrally is a clear, global marker in the stratigraphic record. Most recently there seems to be scientific agreement that the Anthropocene should begin in the age of the Great Acceleration (starting in the 1940s) which marks the dramatic increase in the global population, the development of plastics, fertilizers and, most notably in the stratigraphic record, nuclear fallout (Steffen et al. 2015). Work solely in the natural sciences, however, are not sufficiently concerned about the social roots and implications of defining the epoch, let alone dating it. Crutzen himself makes a brief mention of inequality of responsibility in his landmark *Nature* editorial, he says: "these effects have largely been cause by only 25% of the world population," but continues to indict all of humanity in the rest of his article (23). Scholars do recognize that defining the Anthropocene "makes scientists arbiters, to an extent, of the human-environment relationship, itself an act with consequences beyond geology," (Lewis and Maslin 2015: 171). Some work does include mention of the entanglement of social, political and economic inequality but does so superficially and doesn't critically interrogate the origins of environmental harm (Steffen et al. 2015; McNeill and Engelke 2016). Prominent environmental historian J.R. McNeill's (2016) book proclaims that "the Earth has entered a new age – the Anthropocene – in which humans are the most powerful influence on global ecology, " while other work similarly indicts "destructive humans," and the collective "we" to denote a homogenous "humanity" that is responsible for global environmental change (Monastersky 2015: 144; Macfarlane 2016).

Contrary to popular and scholarly discourse around the Anthropocene, we did not arrive at the current planetary ecological crisis because of innate "destructive" tendencies of "humanity," or because "humanity" as an undifferentiated whole ruined the Earth. Rather, according to social ecologist Murray Bookchin, the ecological crisis has roots in social inequalities, most specifically in the current configurations of capital, state and hierarchy more generally. Even pro-capitalist magazine *Forbes* released an article titled "Unless it Changes, Capitalism Will Starve Humanity by 2050," in which the author outlined capitalism's ecologically destructive tendencies (Hansen 2016).

Scholars in the social sciences point out the ahistorical and asocial nature of the "Anthropocene" terminology and some even question the value of terming a new epoch at all (e.g. Moore 2015; Chakrabarty 2009). Scholars like Eileen Crist (2015) point out that discourse around the Anthropocene "veers away from environmentalism's dark idiom of destruction, depredation, rape, loss, devastation, deterioration, and so forth of the natural world in to the tame vocabulary that humans are changing, shaping, transforming, or altering the biosphere" (18). Scholars like Jason W. Moore (2015) point out that indicting "humanity as an undifferentiated whole" in the process of environmental destruction blurs the empirical fact that processes like climate change are fundamentally entangled with structural forms of domination like capitalism, white supremacy and patriarchy (81). Moore writes:

The Anthropocene makes for an easy story. Easy, because it does not challenge the naturalized inequalities, alienation, and violence inscribed in modernity's strategic relations of power and production. It is an easy story to tell because it does not ask us to think about these relations *at all*. It reduces the mosaic of human activity in the web of life to an abstract, homogenous humanity. It removes inequality, commodification, imperialism, patriarchy, and much more from the problem of humanity-in-nature. If sometimes acknowledged, at best these relations exist in the Anthropocene discourse as after-the-fact supplements," (82, emphasis his).

Anthropocene-centered discourse also lends itself to imagining solutions within its ideological boundaries: Moore (2015) writes "it is captive to the very thought-structures that created the present crisis," (84). In making capitalism and white supremacy (which I will now focus on exclusively since my project concerns itself with economic and racial inequality) invisible in the story of how the Earth came to be so severely degraded, its solutions lie within those same structures.

There is a considerable literature demonstrating that climate change is a manifestation of assumptions of infinite growth, capital accumulation, class society, hierarchical decision-making processes and capital's dependence on fossil fuels (see for example: Malm 2016; Magdoff and Foster 2011; Bookchin 2005; Moore 2016).

I will focus on just two of the assumptions about the erasure of unequal responsibility and vulnerability, and the nature of such a humanity and its entanglements with social-political-economic institutions, namely capitalism and white supremacy.

1. All of humanity is responsible for ecological destruction. Invoking a generalized, undifferentiated humanity regardless of race, class, gender, and other forms of structural oppression.
2. Anthropocene imbues characteristics to this hegemonic "humanity" such as innate greed and selfishness. Anthropocene discourse individualizes social-political-economic processes and reorients attention to flawed individuals rather than flawed systems.

For this paper I designate the environmental and social-political-economic assertions the creators and writers of the Anthropocene adopts as part of an Anthropocene discourse. The Anthropocene's assertions about responsibility for environmental problems, vulnerability to them, and the unclear path forward are empirically dubious and misleading. In this way I highlight the ways that myths of the Anthropocene are similar to the kinds of empirical misunderstandings necessary to maintain ideologies. The narratives we collectively tell ourselves about how social problems come about affects the ways we go about solving them. In this paper I explore how these ideologies frame the responses of the working-class people of color I interviewed in Atlanta, Georgia. Respondents make historical social, political and economic

arguments about the roots of climate change that often are framed by the depoliticized Anthropocene discourse. Ultimately I argue that the myths of the Anthropocene that characterize respondents' answers in my study obscure the empirical structural inequalities that intersect with climate change. This project uses interpretive, qualitative work to investigate the ideologies that inform participants' construction of climate change as a social problem and pays close attention to racial and wealth inequalities that complicate the problem of climate change.

PERCEPTIONS OF CLIMATE CHANGE

Literature on perceptions and understandings of climate change has examined the communicability of expert scientific knowledge (see e.g. Read et al. 1994) and the perception of risk (see eg. Dunlap 1998, Leiserowitz et al. 2006). Past qualitative work has examined how media reporting around climate change has contributed to scientific misunderstandings about the process of climate change (see e.g. Bell 1994), and the lay understanding of the scientific background of climate change (see eg. Kempton 1991). Quantitative work on perceptions and social constructions of climate change has showed the effect of culture on the belief or disbelief in the scientific knowledge on climate change (see e.g. Kahan et al. 2011) and how people with more information about climate causes in the US tend to engage less in action (see e.g. Kellstedt et al. 2008). Norgaard's (2012) ethnographic work builds on that literature to understand how her respondents in a white, upper class neighborhood in Norway absolve themselves of responsibility and manage their feelings around their inaction on climate change based on their structural advantages.

The emerging field of "climate politiology" attempts to describe and categorize the various social constructions of the political, social and economic dimensions of climate change, moving beyond a simple dichotomy of "belief" and "disbelief" in climate change (see e.g. Verwij et al. 2006; Jones 2011). A number of scholars apply cultural theory to understand how certain framings of the problem of and solutions to climate change fit various value systems such as "individualism" and "holism," (people who adhere to holistic views might favor systemic change while individualists envision technocratic solutions and individual behavioral change). Corry and Jorgensen (2015) extended this framing of climate political typologies to include values of individualism and holism along a spectrum of framing the problem as "wicked" (a complex problem with no easy solutions) and "tame," (a knowable and solvable problem).

What remains understudied is the ideological basis for the "cultural worldviews" upon which these scholars base their analysis. Despite Corry and Jorgensen's attempts to "avoid explanations of climate politics divorced from wider social contexts," (169), they still rely on the material and social constructs of the cultural worldviews they use in their analyses.

The essentializing of "cultural worldviews" obscures the material underpinnings of such understandings of the world. Accepting archetypes such as "holism" and "individualism" is to take them at face value without analyzing the social contexts from which these understandings emerge. In my next section I will discuss how I conducted this study and the population I engaged with.

METHODS AND METHODOLOGY

I chose to study with working-class people of color living in Atlanta and its surrounding suburbs. Although it is an imperfect measure, I defined working-class by the profession that the respondent indicated. This was sufficient enough for my purposes of defining social class in a way that did not need to be measured or quantified, but instead operates with the understanding that professions tend to be grouped by income and status communities. I interviewed 13 respondents over the span of a year, of which seven were Black, three were Latin@¹ and one was Indian (from India). Six were men, seven were women and worked in professions ranging from custodial and food service work to doing clerical work in health services. I met my respondents either at a local Georgia university or approached them in public spaces to ask them to participate in my study.

I used qualitative methods to allow participants room and flexibility to explain their experiences with depth in order to create a “thick description” that captures not just behavior but also the context within which people make meaning (Geertz 1973). The qualitative method of data gathering allows opportunities to interpret social life in ways that connect lived experiences to institutional realities with special attention to how interviewees themselves define their experiences. This project utilized the method of semi-structured interviewing in which the researcher’s role is to “gather narratives, descriptions, and interpretations” that emphasize building a relationship founded on trust with their research partners, especially in a way that is conscious of power between the interviewer and interviewees (Rubin and Rubin 2012; 21-3).

I used the three spheres climate change politics, as defined by Roberts and Parks (2007), of responsibility, vulnerability and mitigation to craft my interview questions. I asked questions about the respondents’ understanding of climate science and politics as well as their emotions and actions around climate change. I asked direct questions about who the respondent thought would be most vulnerable to climate change, as well as who or what social processes they implicated in its cause. I also asked them to imagine solutions to climate change by taking the role of, for example, a policymaker.

One of the themes that began to develop in my study was around my respondents understanding of racial inequality in relation to climate change. Some respondents brought up race on their own in conversation, typically in relation to discussions around vulnerability to climate change. I later began to ask directly about race with questions like “What was the last thing on the media you’ve seen about race?” in order to try to ascertain my respondent’s views about race relations and inequality. I interviewed, transcribed and analyzed my data, and I refined my interview questions as I identified emerging themes. I analyzed as transcripts were available and coded and recoded my data as I continued interviewing and producing data, recognizing what scholars regard as the iterative nature of qualitative analysis (Taylor and Bogdan 1998; Tavory and

¹ This denotes that my participants identified either as Latino or Latina.

Timmermans 2014). I transcribed some interviews and also used a paid transcription and translation service. I used the software Dedoose to code and compile themes.

Rather than develop entirely new theory from the data, I use these interviews not as a representative sample of a particular social group in Atlanta, but as a series of cases in which to locate the larger social forces at work that unite them. Burawoy's (1998) extended case method embeds itself in a reflexive view of science which rejects positivist standards of science that attempt and fail to "control" for the various effects that the researcher, social context and interviewee bring to a (researched) social interaction: the researcher's intervention into social life and the recognition of the standpoint and varied experiences of the researched participant are central to its praxis. The object of analysis is not the social cases themselves (hence eschewing standards of generalizability and representativeness), but the larger social forces that make the particular social cases possible. In my thesis I am not attempting to make claims about generalizability: I do not assert that the data in my thesis is representative of working people of color's views on climate change. Rather, my analysis centers the role of ideology and how it frames my particular respondents' perceptions of climate change. The method "trac[es] the source of small difference to external forces," by locating the general in the specific (19). The purpose of this study, then, is not to generalize across working populations of color, or even to the working population of color in Atlanta, but to understand how these series of cases relate to the larger social forces of inequality.

There are ideological barriers to the systemic understanding of climate change and its relationship to other social problems such as racism and class exploitation, which I will turn to in my next sections.

IDEOLOGY AND HEGEMONY

My study focuses on how ideology informs the understanding of the social, political and economic dimensions of climate change and how reigning political-economic and social ideologies become entrenched in social life. Respondents used the language and frameworks available to them through Anthropocentric discourse to conceptualize climate change. Here I use Gramsci's theory to understand the ways in which dominant political-economic and social ideas are adopted by its dominated subjects, which therefore reinforce the status quo. The ways that we conceive of and define social problems necessarily has implications for the kinds of solutions we construct.

Antonio Gramsci (1891-1937) was a political theorist, activist and politician most known for developing his theory of hegemony, which intervenes in the Marxist "inevitability" that the underclass necessarily would shirk the structures that oppress them, namely in Marx's work, capitalist social relations. Gramsci offered an explanation of how ruling classes could maintain their dominance with a careful balance of explicit coercion and the implicit consent of the subordinated classes. In his theory, the oppressed classes adopt the ideology of the ruling class, thereby reinforcing its institutions and forcing a reconsideration of revolutionary inevitability in

Marxist theory. His theory of hegemony explained how outright coercion (often taking physical forms) gave way to subtler forms of consent (transmitted through institutions such as the media, education and religion). This contestation over material and ideological hegemony manifests itself in the subaltern consciousness that, Gramsci argued, is incapable of connecting local instances of oppression to larger political-economic forces and necessarily is incoherent and contradictory (Crehan 2002). Gramsci writes, “Not only does the people have no precise consciousness of its own historical identity, it is not even conscious of the historical identity or the exact limits of its adversary” (Gramsci 1971: 272-3). The conceptions of social life held by subordinated groups maintain the structures that dominate them, such as non-White people’s belief in a post-racial, color-blind society (Bonilla-Silva 2014).

Gramsci was critical of Marx’s ‘economism’ that reduced and simplified analyses of domination to economic relations at the expense of other forms of exploitative social relations (other “social formations”), such as white supremacy (Hall 1986: 12). Shannon (2011) extends this analysis to other dimensions of stratified social life, centering the role of ideology in the maintenance of white supremacy, gender and sexuality, as well as the institution of the State itself. Since oppression is intersectional, forms of ideology exist on various axes of social life that maintain dominant structures. Thus I suggest ideological lenses around race as well as capital are hegemonic.

My respondents conceptualized climate change in “incoherent” ways that maintain the deracialized and classless conceptualizations of climate change. This shows hegemonic thinking at work in terms of race and class, invisibilizing them as relations of ruling, and maintaining them as natural and uninterrogated social processes. Ideology “dominates the space of what people think is feasible and thinkable, and even provides the parameters to oppose the status quo” (Bonilla-Silva 2014: 152). I use the Anthropocene as a hegemonic discourse for understanding the social roots of climate change and the resultant visions for change. I also look at the ways in which my respondents subvert hegemonic understandings of climate change and center the role of economic and racial inequality. Literary theorist Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1988) disputes the ability of Western writers and researchers to understand and report on the experiences of dominated, or subaltern, people, since Western understandings were inevitably constrained by their political-economic power and ideologies. Spivak highlighted the ways in which people could create counterhegemonic understandings of power relations. In my thesis, I also show how people created understandings of climate change that center the role of economic and racial domination.

Here I do not mean to make causal links between larger ideologies and individual social practice and habits; this kind of assertion is beyond the scope of this paper. I use ideologies since they are by definition (and empirical observation), dominant worldviews that materially shape institutional as well as individual practice and understandings (e.g. Bonilla-Silva 2014; Comaroff and Comaroff 1997). Comaroff and Comaroff (1997) conducted a historical analysis of the arrival of 19th century Christian missions to the South African Tswana people and uncovered the ways in which colonial and capitalist ideologies transformed the encountered Tswana people’s diets, clothing, leisure activities as well as their individual and communal rights. The authors document the “long battle for the possession of salient signs and symbols, a bitter, drawn out

contest of conscience and consciousness...[while conceptually maintaining the] coercive, violent bases of class antagonism and racial inequality” (4). Importantly, they provide an empirical case in which powerful dominant ideologies concretely affect social practice and habit. In this project I examine how these larger ideological understandings might trickle down into how people frame the problem of, and solutions to, climate change, without making an explicit causal link between the two processes.

ANALYSIS

Growth and Human Nature

Respondents were asked to describe which social actors or forces they believed to be responsible for the problem of climate change. Several of my respondents invoked several mythologies of human qualities, most notably citing “human greed” and a “natural” impulse to grow, to explain why we now found ourselves on track to again break the record for the hottest year in Earth’s modern history. Respondents largely located the historical responsibility for climate change in personal shortcomings that fit into Anthropocene discourse that typifies individuals as greedy and short-sighted and indicts humanity as a whole in ecological crisis.

Jackson is a Black man who works as a member of a security team for a university. He grew up on a farm in the South and went to school for agricultural management, though he now lives in urban Atlanta and says that he misses watching things grow and being around his family in the country. Jackson told me about when his family decided to give up their farm because they could not compete with large, mechanized agricultural companies that increasingly encroached upon their neighborhood. Through his description of the loss of his family’s farm, I asked him how he felt about it in retrospect:

Eh, I mean I don’t know if, I can’t say if I like it one way or the other. It’s just that I have to agree with the fact that growth is gonna happen. I hate the fact that people, I mean. ... Back then you didn’t need a lot of education to farm. Well, you had to know what you were doing but you didn’t go to a lot of schools for it, I mean you just learn it firsthand, you learn it growing up. But now you have to go to an agricultural school, be certified. See everything now is licensed. So it was going to happen anyways. So do I like it? Eh. You know. It’s just growth. ... The thing is, because, back then it was like, I think what it did, it made people closer. People worked together. Now with the machines, one man can take the thing and do the work that 20 or 30 people used to do. The only thing I don’t like about it like I said, it took the economy away from some people, the way of life for some people. But, um, as far as, I don’t condemn growth or making things better. Because there are more people on Earth that we have to produce, you know, things for, crops. That’s just the way it is. You can like some things, you can’t like it. It’s just, growth is going to happen. (Jackson 4 Nov 2016).

Here Jackson describes a reluctant acceptance of economic change and growth, despite his family's personal loss of livelihood and community. We talked for a long while about how he faced discrimination in the South and was reluctantly accepting of new technology that displaced his childhood family farm, but he maintains that he does not "see" race and viewed economic growth necessary and inevitable. We later transitioned to talking about the social origins of climate change and I probed him to ask about why he thought emissions continued to grow despite our knowledge of the disastrous effects on the Earth. He said,

I mean, growth happens. Because man wants more, man is never satisfied with what they got, they want more. The world wants more....The bottom line, Clara, they're not going to stop growth because growth produces finances, produces money. And they're not gonna – and that's the thing. I don't see us stopping because, because the world, people want more and as long as people as for it, business are not going to stop. I don't see it stopping. (Jackson 4 Nov 2016).

Jackson's responses also were characterized by focusing on individual rather than institutional culpability:

If people were more mindful, this would never happen. So the Valdez [oil spill], what, the guy was drunk? That's something he could have not, that could not have happened had he been on top of his game. You have to be very mindful of the environment and your surroundings, it would help so very much if people would just think before they do it. (Jackson, 4 Nov 2016).

Here Jackson locates the cause of one of the most devastating oil spills to human error and a lack of "mindfulness." In doing so, he absolved the state's complicity in lax safety regulation and the profit (over safety) motive of Exxon Valdez (Gramling and Freugenburg 1992). Maniates (2001) writes "[w]hen responsibility for environmental problems is individualized, there is little room to ponder institutions, the nature and exercise of political power, or ways of collectively changing the distribution of power and influence in society – to, in other words, 'think institutionally,'" (33). By focusing on individual culpability framed by Anthropocene discourse, respondents help reinforce the political-economic status quo that allows accidents like these, and the political-economic forces that make them possible, to exist.

Jackson's case and the life history that he shared with me illustrated one end of the ideological spectrum that emerged in my project: using arguments that indict all humans as responsible and blurring the empirical reality that social forces like economic and racial inequality play a fundamental role in how climate change came to be and continues to affect people differentially. Despite Jackson's experiences of inequality on both economic and racial axes, his responses are indicative of larger Anthropocene discourse that sees human nature as inherently growth-oriented and greedy. In response to a question about why pollution continues if we have knowledge of the process of climate change, Anthony (Black, man, fast food worker) also had a response that was characterized by selfish conceptions of human nature:

Cause people are greedy. Just as simple as that. People are greedy. They want to build industry and whatnot, and not really protect what's making us stay alive. (Anthony 16 Apr 2016).

Though climate change was framed as being symptomatic of 'innate' human qualities like greed, the creation of climate change is fundamentally linked to inequality. A recent Oxfam report demonstrated that the wealthiest ten percent of the world's population contributed to almost half of global greenhouse gas emissions, while the poorest half of the world contributed only 10 percent of global emissions (Gore 2015). In our interview, Anthony dealt with the tension of linking inequality and climate change, but having trouble conceiving of solutions that centered such inequality.

Anthony is a young father who works during the day as a Lyft driver and at night in a fast food restaurant. In our conversation, Anthony was frustrated by the environmentally damaging actions of what he perceived to be elites, but also remained skeptical about lay people's capacity to produce social change. Anthony, though, described more unequal power relations later in the same interview that counter the hegemony of human nature as greedy that seeks to indict everyone equally in creating the problem. He later clarifies that "it's more of the bigwigs that want to be selfish and build and make money, you know, whatnot...[Y]ou can't really blame the construction crews. They're just doing their jobs. But it's more of the people that's really kind of wanting to build the stuff...It goes back to the bigwigs. They're to blame. I point my fingers at them, industrial capitalists" (Anthony 16 Apr 2016). He separates the desires of the ruling and working class here, briefly breaking through conceptions of humans as acting in their own interests outside of broader social trends and structures. Later in the interview, Anthony explained that he felt frustrated and powerless in the face of the government's seeming complicity with companies that damage the environment. He says,

My one little thing of just standing here blocking the trees won't help anything. If it was a group, then possibly we could do something about it. But for me, can't do anything about it, especially with these big companies. They are just going to push their way through anyway... I just haven't been that type of a person. I haven't fought for anything that I really believe in. I've just kind of let things be" (Anthony 16 Apr 2016).

Central to Gramsci's theory of hegemony is subaltern people's inability to produce coherent and effective conceptions of the world they live in that are connected to larger political- economic and social realities (Crehan 2002: 104-105). Gramsci writes,

This contrast between thought and action, ie. the co-existence of two conceptions of the world, one affirmed in words and the other displayed in effective action, is not simply a product of self-deception...In these cases the contrast between thought and action cannot but be the expression of a profounder contrast of a social historical order. It signifies that the social group in question may indeed have its own conception of the world, even if only embryonic; a conception which manifests itself in action, but occasionally and in flashes – when, that is, the group is acting as an organic totality. But this same group has, for reasons of submission and intellectual subordination, adopted a conception which is not its own but is borrowed from another group;

and it affirms this conception verbally and believes itself to be following it, because this is the conception which it follows in ‘normal times’ – that is when its conduct is not independent and autonomous, but submissive and subordinate. (Gramsci 1971: 326-7).

Anthony’s frustration with the complicity of the “big-wigs” in causing climate change and simultaneous resignation to the structure of power he described reflects Gramsci’s “submissive and subordinate” contradictory conceptions of the world. Though his analysis breaks through conceptions of climate change as a problem of atomized individuals bringing about planetary ecological changes, his inability to link his concerns and strategy of action to a broader class with shared material interests reflects what might perhaps be the work of Anthropocene discourse in individualizing responsibility for structural issues.

Humanity as an Undifferentiated Whole – Unequal Responsibility and Vulnerability

Theresa, a Black woman and a worker in custodial services crafted a similar narrative about responsibility for climate change. Theresa told me about how she came across YouTube videos about climate change which convinced her it was real and made her worry about her children and grandchildren’s future. After asking about her anxiety about the future, I probed further about responsibility:

Clara: ...Whose fault do you think climate change is?

Theresa: Everyone’s!

Clara: Everyone’s?

Theresa: Yeah, if I’m not doing anything to advocate that or to let my voice be known that I strongly disagree with companies that are doing these things to directly affect the atmosphere and climate then I’m responsible, just as responsible as people that are doing it.

Clara: Just as responsible?

Theresa: Yes. Cause I have to live here too.

Theresa explains that she sees herself as having similar responsibility to corporations with the capacity to pollute on a much larger scale because she knows that she is cognizant, but feels that she is not acting. She equates her individual actions to the action of larger social actors in a way that obscures the disproportionate greenhouse gas emissions by industrial processes and the political-economic elite. In my study it was clear that many of my respondents’ sense of their own power and responsibility on environmental issues was divorced from other systems of power such as white supremacy and capitalism. Anthropocene discourse erases wealth and race inequality and indicts humanity as a whole in ecological crisis and here it serves as a useful frame to understand how it characterizes respondents’ understanding of the social roots of climate change.

Andrea, a Puerto Rican Brown woman and intern with a government office on food scarcity, invoked similar historical conceptions of climate change within Anthropocene discourse:

Clara : Is climate change like anybody's fault?

Andrea: Yes, maybe. Like mankind. Like maybe climate change was going to happen anyway. But I feel that all the advances that humans themselves have done, perhaps they did not know, or did not think, that they would have these effects. ...[S]omething that could have taken millions of years to happen, they accelerated. But it was going to happen. Obviously it got hot, or whatever. It got hot and civilizations developed. We have the world, after a million years, we have the world of today. But ... with the discoveries of new things, the worsening began because... Little by little the planet has been damaged. So, I say that mankind...but really, that is to say, I see it as mankind, they accelerated the process. Because perhaps this was going to happen, but a long time from now like millions and millions of years to get to this point. And we just simply like... fast forward. That's how I see it.

Here Andrea talks about her conception of the progression of "humanity," in making discoveries and advances that resulted in ecological damage. She talks about the inevitability of such destruction saying "this was going to happen," and that "we" humans simply "fast forward[ed]" the process. In this way, the discourse of the Anthropocene is present in her explanations of a powerless conception of how ecological damage occurs.

Some respondents potentially overestimated the power of their individual environmental interventions, since Anthropocene discourse emphasizes that everyone do their part as an undifferentiated humanity. Lisa, a Black woman and a food services work in her 40s talked to me about her childhood in Utah and how it taught her to appreciate nature and practice similar environmental behaviors. She described being the only person in her office that would meticulously cut the six pack rings. She said,

Lisa: So I was always in the back cutting the rings and my boss would get so mad, he's like "Why are you taking so much time," I'm like "The little ducks and the rings and they get caught, and the seals!" He's like "Ok I'm just going to leave you alone, I'm just going to leave you alone." I was like "We have to worry about these things!" Everyone thought I was crazy. I was like, but it just takes two seconds, just cut the rings. Even at my house my dad was like "What are you doing?" I'm like "Do you not watch TV; do you not see these things?" He's like "Ok I'm just going to leave you alone."

Clara: So you take the time to do stuff like that.

Lisa: I do. I had stopped using Styrofoam for the longest time. I mean it's little, I'm not saying I'm perfect. Any little bit helps, in my opinion. I stopped using Styrofoam, and I did that at work and I'd bring my cup and put my name on it. And they're like, "but we have all these – "But it's Styrofoam people!" This was of course, late 80s, early 90s and they're like "Oh god, what's wrong with her?"

Clara: How did people, can you tell me more about how people reacted to you?

Lisa: They thought I was crazy, everyone thought I was crazy.

Clara: Why'd you keep doing it?

Lisa: Hey, one person can make a difference.

(Lisa, 10 Oct 2016).

Here Lisa told me about the considerable effort she took to take environmental action, despite the social disapproval from her father and coworkers. Lisa later talked later about wanting more recycling programs and education in schools in order to inculcate those behaviors in children.

Many respondents made sense and meaning out of climate change by internalizing an individualist ethic of applying consumerist fixes to systemic problems. The ideological blinders that promote a culture of individualism and a disregard for structural factors that guide social practices result in these kinds of attempts to deal with an issue like global climate change on an individual level that emphasizes action at the level of consumption. Behavioral changes, while an important component of societal change, often serve to replace larger structural analyses that necessitate collective action and reinforce a social role that relegates political action to consumption practices. Evidence also shows that these individual actions have dubious if not adverse effects on the original social issues they purport to ameliorate, have come to mark social status, and tend to be inaccessible to working class folks of color (Hunter 1997; Fairlie 1992; Guthman 2004; Guptill 2009; Sexton and Sexton 2014; Griskevicius 2010; Guthman 2008). Scholars studying racial attitudes and structural racism know that white supremacy is not built on a few bad apples that are prejudiced, but rather, that it is the institution of racism that is embedded in varying aspects and levels of social life. Yet respondents saw fault in individuals instead of in systems, which has serious effects on our capacity to imagine substantive solutions to the escalating climate crisis.

This necessarily limits the range of solutions that we conceive of in responding to such a global crisis like climate change. In response to being asked about personal decisions made on the base of environmentalism, Jackson said that he wished “they” would stop making plastic bottles altogether. When asked to expand on his thought, he interrupted mid-sentence saying “I know we can’t just stop making plastic bottles but go ahead” (Jackson 4 Nov 2016). He immediately rescinded the suggestion of structural change and reaffirmed his previous assertion that growth is inevitable and that “It’s all about money, Clara. It really is” (Jackson 4 Nov 2016).

Respondents taking on personal responsibility for structural environmental issues reflects the sinister way in which neoliberal politics entrench themselves in the way we conceptualize the sources of and solutions to climate change. In the face of clear empirical evidence for the structural roots of climate change in industrial as opposed to solely individual contributions, the attempt to apply solutions like environmental mindfulness, personal recycling habits and individual changes in transportation habits (absent of campaigns to influence others and changes to large-scale systems) seem, and largely are, futile.

A few of my respondents describe social-political-economic realities that countered Anthropocene discourse about equal responsibility for and equal vulnerability to climate change.

Roberto, a Salvadoran custodial staff member in a hospital in his 60s, worked in shipping for produce companies in El Salvador before he moved to Canada to work with a technology company and finally to the United States where he currently does janitorial services in a clinical facility. Roberto had a vast understanding of global political-economy, technology, and the current and projected impacts of climate change. In our interview he focused on explaining what he perceived to be negligence on the part of rich countries like the United States and China in attempting to address climate change, emerging green technologies and reasons for their non-implementations, and had a sharp understanding of the unequal capacity of different social groups to adapt to climate change. Roberto's responses countered Anthropocene discourse that flattens social inequality and fails to indict structural actors in ecological damage.

Roberto was the most critical in explaining the origins of climate change and squarely indicted what he perceived to be the collusion of the government and corporations in how climate change came to be exacerbated:

The large companies that operate in every one of those countries, their economic interests are so large that it permits the central government to take illegal positions, or that they dictate regulation to avoid the emission of gases...Because if I have a factory and another made oil for it and the government demands, "Look, don't use more oil." There has to be a change. Well, I have to see how much investment I need to make. Then maybe I am going to, I am going to ignore and I am going to continue using oil to produce my articles. What is probably needed is an absolute awareness to make cultural changes as far as what is called the wealth of each country...Let's look at the culture of each country, it also comes from 200 years, the same families operating...The same families operating the same factories. (Roberto 8 Apr 2016).²

The "culture" that Roberto was describing is the nature of political-economic life under capitalism where a ruling class owns and operates productive capital and mobilizes their collective power to influence the state apparatus. Here Roberto clearly linked this critical political-economic understanding to how climate change came to worsen as corporations and governments slowed down effective climate action to protect their interests.

Central to defining the problem of climate change is whether respondents think it will affect them personally or not, what kind of stake they have in its exacerbation and how that is affected by their social location. Anthropocene discourse says that everyone will lose from a heating planet and that we all have an equal responsibility in avoiding catastrophe. In my study these kind of dominant ideas produced understandings of climate change as distant, abstract and not immediately risky. Jackson explains:

Until we get to the point where it's causing a lot of harm to us as a people, then it's going to continue to happen. It has to be something catastrophic to wake up people. And that's sad to say but as long as things are going smoothly and things are happening and nobody's dying or whatever then all of this growth in the world is going to continue to happen. It takes something

² This interview was originally conducted in Spanish.

catastrophic for, to wake up people, to make them see what's really going on. And that's when they'll start taking action. (Jackson 4 Nov 2016).

Anthony, the Black man and fast food worker mentioned earlier, said that climate change did not seem "bad enough" to compel him to act. When asked to explain what he meant by "bad enough," he said "almost like the zombie apocalypse bad" (Anthony 16 Apr 2016). Other respondents worried about whether the heat would be inconvenient, like Samuel (Black man in his 40s, transportation services in hospital) who talked about what a future with exacerbated climate change might feel like: "Still dealing with the heat and I don't, I can't stand the heat. I'm not a summer kind of guy" (Samuel 22 Sep 2016).

Their points reflect a distance between a clear belief in climate change and a low perception of immediate risk of its effects, and also a relative lack of knowledge of recent climate-related events that have occurred, most extremely in peripheral nations. This underestimation is revealing for two reasons. Norgaard (2012) developed the concept of transnational environmental privilege to distinguish the differing ways in which "globally privileged" people in core nations are able to perceive the risks of climate change as far and abstract and as relatively unimportant to their lives. In her ethnographic work, her white, upper-class participants in Norway normalized climate change by creating a sense of order and security in their lives, and maintaining their relative innocence in contributing to climate change. In doing so, Norgaard argues "the construction of denial and innocence work[s] to silence the needs and voices of women and people of color in the Global South, and thus reproduce[s] global inequality along the lines of gender, race and class" (7). Respondents largely perceived the risks of climate change as mildly inconveniencing in a way that was consistent with Norgaard's work. Anthropocene discourse works in similar ways by indicting all of humanity for environmental harm and obscuring unequal responsibility and vulnerability in climate change. Empirical evidence shows that it is low-income communities of color (often residing in peripheral nations, as well as peripheral areas in core nations) that deal with the consequences of environmental destruction (Parks and Roberts 2006). These communities, for example, are disproportionately located near toxic factories, polluting farms, nuclear power sites, landfills, toxic waste disposal sites and other harmful sites where externalities are carried by those least able to resist them (White and Heckenberg 2014; Mohai et al. 2009). Those who are least responsible for climate change (and the smallest contributors of greenhouse gases), are the most vulnerable to climate change impacts globally (Mohai et al. 2009). The common refrain, "if everyone is responsible, then no one is responsible," takes on life and death as whiter elites in rich countries cause a problem that Blacker and Browner poor folks must bear.

CONCLUSION

How we understand social problems is central to what we do about them. The narratives of understanding the political, social and economic aspects of climate change shown in these cases obscure its structural, unequal roots. The objects of analysis in this paper are the ideologies around the Anthropocene that people employ to construct climate change as a social problem in terms of understanding responsibility and vulnerability. Anthropocene discourse delineates and

limits the scope in which social actors can conceive of and act upon systems of domination and moments of crisis like those typified by climate change. Myths of the Anthropocene invisibilize these relations of domination and reduce structural patterns of inequality to equal individuals acting on similar historical playing fields. It is important to note that dominant ideologies around race and class intersect in complex ways that require an intersectional approach, since climate change is so entangled with multiple forms of structural domination. Climate change is a global issue that centrally is concerned with white supremacy and capitalism. By moving beyond a rudimentary analysis of people's understandings of climate science and investigating the material underpinnings of their explanations for the climate crisis, we can begin to investigate how people's structural positions and the structures that dominate them affect their perceptions of climate change and their resultant visions for change (or lack thereof).

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