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Clara B. Perez   April 10, 2017

Unequal Burdens: Neoliberalism, Colorblindness, and Perceptions of Climate Change
in Atlanta, GA

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Abstract

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It is well-established that climate change is caused by the release of greenhouse gases from human industrial processes and is reaching a critical point of danger. Similarly well-documented is its disproportionate impact on communities who largely are not responsible for the phenomenon, namely low-income communities of color principally located in peripheral nations. Past work has investigated people's understandings of the science of climate change and limited work has examined people's cultural worldviews in relation to climate change. Little work, however, has been done to investigate the ideological underpinnings of such cultural worldviews, with particular attention to the views of working people of color who exist at the intersections of economic, political, social and environmental harm. I conducted semi-structured, in-depth interviews with 13 working people of color in Atlanta, placing particular emphasis on the construction of climate change as a political, social and economic problem. My data and analysis show how my respondents used and challenged neoliberal and colorblind ideologies to construct the parameters of the problem of climate change, as well as to frame its solutions within ideological boundaries that obscure (although sometimes uncover) the unequal and structural nature of the problem of climate change. I show how a majority of my respondents relied on individualized, colorblind explanations to understand the causes of climate change (such as myths of human greed and deracialized vulnerability) as well as to frame its solutions in ways that obscure the deep structural alterations needed to combat climate change. I also show the ways in which a minority of my respondents centered economic and racial inequality in discussions about climate change. 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 ultimately reinforce the inequality and domination inherent in the issue of climate change.

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INTRODUCTION

It is well-established that climate change is caused by the release of greenhouse gases from human industrial processes and is reaching a critical point of danger (IPCC 2014). Similarly well-documented is the disproportionate impact of the process on communities who largely are not responsible for the phenomenon, namely low-income communities of color principally located in peripheral nations (Roberts and Parks 2007; White and Heckenberg 2014; Mohai, Pellow and Roberts 2009; Chancel and Piketty 2015; Gore 2015). Past work has investigated people's understandings of the science of climate change and limited work has examined people's cultural worldviews in relation to climate change. Little work, however, has investigated the ideological underpinnings of such cultural worldviews, with particular attention to the views of working people of color who exist at the intersections of economic, political, social and environmental harm. Given the unequal aspects of climate change along the dimensions of responsibility, vulnerability and mitigation (Roberts and Parks 2007), I ask how vulnerable communities based in the U.S. conceptualize the social problem of climate change and by which parameters they conceive of solutions. I conducted semi-structured, in-depth interviews with 13 working people of color in Atlanta and explored topics including general information on climate change, human relationships to the environment and climate change. I placed particular emphasis on the construction of climate change as a political, social and economic problem. My data and analysis show how my respondents used and challenged neoliberal and colorblind ideologies to construct the parameters of the problem of climate change, as well as to frame its solutions within ideological boundaries that obscure (although sometimes) uncover the unequal and structural nature of the problem of climate change. I show many of my respondents relied on individualized, colorblind explanations to understand the

causes of climate change (such as myths of human greed and deracialized vulnerability) as well as to frame its solutions in ways that obscure the deep structural alterations needed to combat climate change, which I will discuss more below. I also show the ways in which a minority of my respondents centered economic and racial inequality in discussions about climate change. My analysis investigates how neoliberal and colorblind ideologies are dominant and how some respondents utilize them, or create counterhegemonic understandings of climate change. This information, specifically with its attention to working people of color in a city with pronounced social inequalities, can be used to construct more effective public communication and action around the various, complex aspects of climate change.

CLIMATE CHANGE AND STRUCTURAL INEQUALITY

Atlanta and Environmental Justice

Atlanta serves as a particularly compelling case study for investigating topics of climate change, white supremacy and economic inequality. Atlanta has a history of racial and class segregation and is currently still segregated along several dimensions of social life, most notably in residential spatial arrangements and economic opportunities (Quinn and Pawasarat 2003; Cohen et al. 2013). Atlanta also is undergoing rapid gentrification that is pushing families of color further outside of the city, while the white population has come to inhabit the north part of the city, even though Blacks control some key institutions in Atlanta, given its history as a predominantly Black city (Cohen et al. 2013; Aka, Jr. 2010). In 2013, Atlanta ranked for the second time as the city in the United States with the highest income inequality – ranking above San Francisco, Boston and New York (Berube and Holmes 2015).

Georgia itself contributes to and is observably affected by climate change. Georgia harbors the top two polluting power plants in the entire country. The first, the coal-fired power plant in Plant Scherer in Juliette, Georgia, emits 0.4 percent of total U.S. carbon dioxide emissions and 0.1 percent of global carbon dioxide emissions from energy use (Schneider et al. 2013). According to a press release from the White House, the Southeast United States uses the highest amount of energy in any of its National Climate Assessment regions, and is a top energy producer of coal, crude oil and natural gas (Carter et al. 2014). Though Georgia as a state is a significant contributor to emissions, its residents do not face the risks of such pollution equally. Scholars at the University of Georgia conducted a unique assessment of the state of Georgia to investigate the intersecting pressures of socio-economic and geographic factors that affect climate vulnerability. Incorporating social vulnerability indexes like measures of racial distribution, income and education levels, the authors found that "part of the rural Black belt region are found to be especially vulnerable to climate change" and that predominantly Black, low-income areas were most at risk (Binita, Shepherd and Gaither 2015:62).

As an illustrative example of climate trends and disparate vulnerability in Atlanta, the city has seen a significant rise in the number of abnormally hot days which poses various health risks to residents (Shramm 2013: 45). Just recently in June of 2012, Atlanta experienced a heat wave with temperatures reaching 104°F, which broke the record temperature in 1936 and was the first day above 100 degrees in Atlanta since August 22, 2007, and only narrowly missed the record high temperature for Atlanta at 105°F (Harris 2012). Research shows that vulnerability to heat waves is disparate across age, race and class and affects these populations differently based on these social locations, and along sociological axes of oppression (Anderson and Bell 2009). Social groups have unequal adaptive capacities depending on their (non-)abilities to install and

operate air conditioners, to escape the heat by engaging in indoor activities, to be able to rely on social networks with resources to check on one another's health and needs, and to be alerted and prepared in the event of a predicted heat wave. Urban areas are more vulnerable to these heat spells because of the effects of urban heat islands that exist in dense built environments which "concentrate solar energy and 'waste heat' from sources such as automobile exhaust to heat up downtown areas in particular" (Binita et al. 2015: 64). Lower income communities tend to be more vulnerable to hot periods because their neighborhoods have less vegetation to regulate temperature, have less access to and are also less able to afford health insurance. Heat wave-related health concerns in the summer are greatest for the elderly, the poor and racial minorities.

Periods of extreme heat have dangerous implications for multiple systems that we rely on to live. For agriculture, for example, summer heat spells will negatively impact crop productivity. Georgia's 2007 drought cost its agriculture industry a reported $339 million in crop losses. Current projections show that corn yields may decline by 15 percent, and wheat by 20 percent by the year 2020. Heat events negatively impact dairy and livestock productivity with a projected 10 percent decline in livestock productivity across the Southeast. Extreme heat events "will affect public health, natural and built environments, energy, agriculture, and forestry" (Carter et al. 2014: 403).

Global Trends in Environmental Justice

Inequality exists on several dimensions in the problem of climate change – most pressingly in who is responsible for creating climate change, who is most vulnerable to its effects and perhaps who ought to be responsible for implementing solutions. A recent Oxfam report demonstrated that the wealthiest 10 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). Paradoxically, 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. 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; Downie et al. 2009; Motesharrei et al. 2014; Pulido et al. 1996; Tan et al. 2014). 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). Roberts and Parks' (2007) study demonstrated relationships between a country's legacy of being colonized and its current and projected level of vulnerability to climate change. They showed that a country with a history of being colonized (with therefore weaker positions in the global economy and more fragile domestic institutions) faced more deaths and infrastructural loss when climate disasters hit. Nixon (2011) introduced the concept of slow violence to highlight the ways in which environmental harm often manifests over long periods of time that pose representational (in media exposure), statistical (in measureable outcomes) and legislative (legal) challenges to achieving justice for those affected. In his book he traces various movements in the periphery to examine their strategies for confronting the often invisibilized damage wrought by environmental perpetrators, legacies of colonialism and systems of patriarchy and white supremacy. This work is part of a body of literature on environmental and climate justice which seeks to illuminate the ways in which inequality, institutions and environmental harm coalesce to

create such social situations (see, for example: Roberts and Parks 2007; Mohai et al. 2009; Bullard 2000; Norgaard 2016).

Patterns of differential environmental harm exist at both national and international levels and some scholars and activists (such as Malcolm X) argue that there are elements of the periphery in the core; that is, that there are shared experiences of oppression across national borders (Tyner 2004). In this project, I seek only to speak to the experiences of the working-class respondents of color that I interviewed – my respondents live in one of the richest and environmentally dirtiest countries in the world but are marginalized within its borders. Therefore, I highlight global environmental injustice to the extent that it illuminates shared experiences of oppression globally while maintaining important national distinctions in the way it is experienced.

Marginalized groups disproportionately deal with the consequences of environmental harm, such as the exacerbation of tropical storms and polluted water and the other harms mentioned above. Much work has been done about what happens *to* people living at the intersections of various inequalities and environmental damage, but more work is needed to study how people make sense out of these interconnecting structural realities. At such a critical time of wealth disparity (Hardoon 2015), the explosion of racial stratification into public discourse (Alexander 2011; Taylor 2016) and environmental ruin (Ceballos et al. 2015), this thesis seeks to distinguish how marginalized populations make sense and meaning out of living within a larger context of inequality and planetary ecological changes.

Climate Change and Its Structural Roots

Contrary to popular neoliberal ideology, we did not arrive at the current planetary ecological crisis because of a market failure or destructive consumer choices. 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. 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). 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).

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), 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 the negative effect of more information on climate causes and risks on action in the United States (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." 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 "avoi[d] explanations of climate politics divorced from wider social contexts," they still rely on the material and social constructs of the cultural worldviews they use in their analyses (169). 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. This project uses interpretive, qualitative work to address this gap in the literature by investigating 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. Next I will describe my participants, methods and methodology and how I went about coding and analyzing my data.

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 11 respondents over the span of a year, of which seven were Black, three were Latin@ 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.[1] I met my respondents either at a local Georgia university or approached them in public spaces based on their race and apparent profession.

I have been training in qualitative methods for almost three years now in serving as a research assistant to Dr. Deric Shannon's qualitative project on food deserts and meaning-making where I conducted 11 semi-structured intensive interviews. I also aided in data analysis, presented on our preliminary results and help to train other research assistants. I currently am taking a graduate seminar in Qualitative Methods where I am reading theoretical work about qualitative

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[1] See Appendix I for a table of my respondents' demographic information as well as notable themes in their interviews.

methods as well as practicing my interviewing and data analysis skills in class with my peers and professor.

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 *responsive 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.[2] 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

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[2] See Appendix II for my complete interview guide.

my respondent's views about race relations and inequality. I interviewed, transcribed and analyzed my data as soon as transcripts became available and asked more directive questions based on 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 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 neoliberalism and colorblind ideologies.

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 neoliberal and colorblind ideologies 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 2006).

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, showing 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). In the same way that color-blind racism "bound[ed]" the realm within which Blacks, in Bonilla-Silva's (2014) study, framed (and ultimately minimized) racial inequality, the neoliberal iteration of capitalism has defined the parameters by which we imagine solutions and alternatives to the current political-economic status quo that produces climate change (Andrew et al. 2010; Andrew and Cortese 2013; Featherstone 2013, Klein 2014). 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.

Neoliberalism

The doctrine of neoliberalism has been the guiding force of political-economic theory and management since at least the 1970s. In theory, neoliberalism more efficiently secures individual freedoms and general human well-being through several mechanisms that seek to center the role of markets and privatization in society, while deemphasizing the role of the state. Neoliberalism began to form after a post-war period of state-led redistributive politics that, in the United States, eventually failed to manage capitalism's internal contradictions and led to a crisis of unemployment and inflation in the 1960s. Harvey (2005) argues that neoliberalism was necessarily a reactionary project that worked to restore elite class power. Neoliberal theory in practice has emphasized the deregulation of international trade, privatization of public goods, and the increasing implementation and protection of private property rights in, and the limited use of the state to secure the framework in which market activity operates (Harvey 2005). Its main proponents (or, rather, enforcers) have been international financial institutions such as the World Bank, World Trade Organization, and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) that grant financial assistance to developing countries with neoliberal regulatory conditions, regulate international trade and "promote" global economic growth (though these institutional

arrangements are currently under assault by right-wing isolationist and populist nationalism in some countries, including the United States under Trump).

Architects of neoliberal theory rooted the political-economic ideology in *laissez-faire* economic conceptions of the individual as inherently selfish and rational as a utility-maximizer. Individuals acting in their self-interest (and not consciously in the pursuit of social good) would engage in exchange with others on a free market and "without knowing it, advance the interest of the society" (Smith 1790: 165). Drawing from neoclassical economics, contemporary neoliberal architects argue that the state necessarily limits a person's individual freedoms; they argue that these freedoms are instead more securely and broadly achieved from a free market liberated from the reach of the state (Hayek 1944). Importantly, the ideology elevates the individual and minimizes the importance of real, material structural barriers to achieving material well-being.

I use the theory of neoliberalism as a cultural lens since several of my participants understood the responsibility for the global process of climate change through an individualist lens that was abstracted from the structural roots of climate change as a social issue. Their views fit with the dominant ideas of the neoliberal project: that we are atomized individuals disconnected from larger social patterns seeking to maximize our utility. This of course is not the only potential ideological source of individualism, there are a number of other potential ideologies such as Herbert Hoover's "rugged individualism," which refers to the idea that each individual should be able to achieve social mobility without the intervention of government. The United States has a deep legacy of cultural individualism that also would be a compelling lens to use for my data (Ralston et al. 1997; Oyserman et al. 2002). Individualistic behaviors are also entrenched in capitalism's atomizing tendencies itself, since it requires a view of rational utility maximizing individuals who interact in markets. There are, however, differences in the ways that

capitalism is experienced and understood in different countries. US individualism certainly is unique, given that other rich capitalist countries like Western European countries have much more generous social welfare states. I use neoliberalism here since institutional climate governance has largely taken on neoliberal characteristics (which I will discuss more below) and a return to more extreme individualizing tendencies in U.S. institutions and culture is visible in the neoliberal era (Omi and Winant 2014). I also have to acknowledge that neoliberalism as an ideology and practice is hotly debated[3] and I use it specifically to understand the ways that respondents frame their understandings of climate change in terms of neoliberalism's views of the individual and their relationships to society.

Neoliberalism as an ideology, then, has the power to define the parameters in which we imagine solutions and alternatives. The theory developed in the same time period that climate change began to have observable effects. In dominant political bodies, the theory has inserted itself into discussions about framing the problem of and solutions to climate change much to the detriment of effective policy (Andrew and Cortese 2013). Dominant schemes to combat climate change often operate from the assumption that individual-level market solutions, particularly in terms of how we consume and/or recycle goods, can lead us to the most efficient outcomes (avoiding catastrophic climate change), all while evading state-initiated action. Neoliberal climate policy argues that economy-environment contradictions can be ameliorated by bringing more of the natural world into the working of markets (Castree 2008: 146-7). Dominant neoliberal discourse sees climate change as a market failure that requires the tweaking of the political-economic status quo (Stern 2007), rather than, as some scholars argue, an internal contradiction between environmental sustainability and capitalism (Magdoff and Foster 2011).

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[3] See e.g. Harvey (2005), Lechner and Boli (2015), Klein (2014).

Pearse (2011) writes "Neoliberal hegemony is evident in the architectures of climate governance…Market-based policies for emissions mitigation are infused into the Kyoto Protocol, Copenhagen Accord and all national legislation already installed and currently debated" (175). This is most notable in the international policy emphasis on the development of carbon markets (Stern 2007) and the proposal for a global carbon tax (Chancel and Piketty 2015).

Political-economic processes, as scholars (particularly women of color) have addressed, intersect in complex ways with structures and ideologies of white supremacy (Crenshaw 1991). I also use the ideology of colorblind racism to understand how respondents framed climate change and either maintained or challenged white supremacy as it is embedded in climate change. I turn to colorblind racist ideology next.

Colorblind Racism

Ideologies of race do similar work of upholding the status quo (white supremacy) throughout time and space. Omi and Winant (1994) put forth their theory of racial formation which emphasizes the dynamism of racial signification and structure throughout various historical contexts. In contrast to racial theories which emphasized ethnic groups, class and nation-based interpretations of inequality that "neglect[ed] the specificity of race as an autonomous field of social conflict, political organization, and cultural/ideological meaning," racial formation centers race as its own axis of signification and stratification (Omi and Winant 1994: 48). Colorblind racism is the latest iteration of a racial project in which the dominant ideology holds that race is no longer a salient influence in people's material realities in the face of persisting material inequalities in healthcare, education, employment and housing, among

other areas of social life. In the colorblind era, interpersonal racism takes on subtler forms and the reality of structural racism is obscured by dominant beliefs in a post-racial world. Bonilla-Silva (2014) writes that color-blind racism "serves today as the ideological armor for a covert and institutionalized system in the post-civil rights era" (3). The dominant racial view in the United States purports that we are living in a post-racial society that has overcome overt racism. Further, it holds that the remnants of contemporary racism consist of bad *individuals* that continue to engage in blatant racism. Therefore, it argues that race no longer meaningfully affects material realities in structural ways and pushes for the non-consideration of race.

Bonilla-Silva's theory of color-blindness operates both at the structural and micro, interpersonal levels to understand how people (mostly whites) justify the current political-economic-racial status quo and how institutions reproduce racial inequalities. Individually, this looks like folks appealing to myths of meritocratic social mobility or invoking cultural stereotypes to account for the existing racial-political-economic status quo. Structurally, the use of colorblindness has been shown to absolve individual social actors of responsibility for discrimination, such as in Gonzalez Van Cleve's (2016) study of institutional racism in a Chicago criminal court system.

Importantly, the racial underclass does the work of the dominant racial class in sustaining racial ideologies that maintain material racial inequalities. In Bonilla-Silva's study, Blacks used colorblind frames to understand racial inequality, although to a lesser extent than whites. Psychiatrist and philosopher Frantz Fanon's (2008) book *Black Skin, White Masks* studies the ways in which Black people experience a white world by embracing a divided self-perception to imitate the culture of the colonizer.

Class and race, however, are intimately connected and, thus, require more complicated and connected analyses. Neoliberalism and colorblindness co-developed as reigning ideologies that materially could not have existed without the other. Milton Friedman, a main architect of neoliberal policy, argued that free markets would "protec[t] men [sic] from being discriminated against [for reasons] associated with their views or their color" (Friedman 1962: 26). Omi and Winant (2014) trace the entrenchment of racist policies in the development of neoliberalism as the state and corporate sector reacted to the gains made by social movements (led by Black movements) in the 1960s. In the decades after the 1960s, the state and civil society built the foundations upon which colorblind racism would emerge. Through the use of coded terms such as "welfare handouts," and "getting tough on crime," and the rationale of "reverse racism" in which accounting for race was made falsely equivalent with "discriminating" against whites, the government rescinded state support for working and Black and Brown communities. In this period the state was able to roll back progressive tax reform and gut welfare programs and disproportionately disadvantage Black and Brown people, especially those in the working class.

Omi and Winant write, "neoliberalism reiterates and reinvents the sordid and racist histories of slavery and empire; it rearticulates racist cultural tropes. In short, it is as much of a racial project as a class project" (221). Obama escalated the assault on Black and Brown people abroad through his program of drone strikes and in 2008 he regulated the economy in favor of banks and large corporations during the "largest regressive racial distribution of resources to have occurred in U.S. history," and he was largely inactive during the rise of racialized and increasingly privatized mass incarceration and public state executions (227-32). Neoliberalism, through its emphasis on decreasing (or cunningly curbing to its advantage) state power, seeks to liberate the (white, elite) individual to achieve their greatest potential in the supposedly

colorblind, classless and ahistorical society in which it situates itself. It is through this intersection of political-economic and racial ideologies that I study perceptions on climate change, in terms of how my respondents defined the problem and framed solutions to it.

ANALYSIS

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:

> Jackson: 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. The thing is the world is going to grow so education has to happen now. 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.
>
> Clara: Why do you, like…
>
> Jackson: 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 20/30 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.

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 displaces

labor, 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 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.

A different case illustrates the opposite end of the ideological spectrum: Roberto, a

Salvadoran custodial staff member in a hospital in his 60s 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 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).[4]

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

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[4] This interview was originally conducted in Spanish. See my methods for more information on translation and transcription.

political-economic understanding to how climate change came to worsen as corporations and governments slowed down effective climate action to protect their interests.

These two respondents characterize the range of my data, although most of my respondents (8 out of 13) were ideologically close to Jackson while the rest held counterhegemonic perceptions of climate change. The data in my study reflected a consideration of climate change on economic and racial axes, and most of my respondents' answers were framed by neoliberal and colorblind ideologies, though a minority challenged these dominant worldviews. I separate my analysis into two sections of how respondents defined the problem of climate change and how they framed its solutions. In my next section I turn to talking about how my respondents conceived of who or what social forces might be responsible for causing climate change.

Problem-Defining

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 neoliberal ideology that typifies individuals as greedy and short-sighted. Jackson (Black, man, security staff member) explains:

> 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

neoliberal ideology, 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 later expands on this neoliberal characterization of the individual:

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).

There are several themes in his response. First, he invokes the neoclassical conceptualization

of the individual as greedy and self-interested and uses it to explain the current planetary

ecological crisis in which we find ourselves. It also is worth noting that he assigns a gender

to this neoliberal conceptualization of the individual, though this analysis is beyond the scope

of this paper. Jackson also speaks to what he perceives to be the inevitability of economic

growth. Earlier in the interview Jackson spoke at length about his family farm's displacement

by the introduction of industrial agriculture and the loss of community and livelihood that he

personally experienced. Despite this perceived loss, Jackson continued to grudgingly defend

growth as a political-economic imperative. Importantly, he sees this imperative as a part of

human nature – eternal and unchanging. Frederic Jameson (2003), a Marxist scholar, wrote

that it is easier to imagine the end of the world than it is to imagine the end of capitalism.

Here neoliberal ideology frames Jackson's response, making growth and greed central to

narratives of how we arrived at our current state of critical climate change.

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.

Here 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.

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 neoliberal conceptions of the individual:

> 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).

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 for social change. Anthony, though, described more unequal power relations later in the same interview that counter the hegemony of neoliberal conceptions of climate change that seek 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 neoliberal conceptions of atomized individuals 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 Gramci'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 contrasts 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 neoliberal 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 neoliberal ideology in individualizing responsibility for structural issues.

Other respondents constructed similarly counterhegemonic narratives of the social causes of climate change. Roberto squarely indicted what he perceived to be the collusion of the government and corporations in dictating weak climate policy:

> 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).[5]

The "culture" that Roberto was describing is the nature of political-economic life under capitalism where an owning and 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

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[5]This interview was originally conducted in Spanish. See my methods for more information on translation and transcription.

corporations and governments slowed down effective climate action to protect their interests. Unlike Anthony, Roberto goes on to talk about the politically-economically motivated inaction on climate change at the international policy level and calls for stronger action at both the national and international governmental level.

Central to defining the problem of climate change is whether respondents think it will affect them personally or not and what kind of stake they have in its exacerbation. 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 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, a Black man and fast food worker, 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.

Some respondents described other social problems that afflicted them more immediately, such as gun violence, economic hardship and homelessness. Anthony explains why he doesn't often think about climate change:

> It's never even crossed my mind too much. I mean I'm too busy trying to stay afloat with my head above the water, take care of my family, and what not. I just don't even think about it too much. [I'm] trying to get a better job. Trying to go back to school and make sure my kid has what he has…And I just don't really think about the weather like that. (Anthony 16 Apr 2016).

Another respondent, Isaiah (Black, man), a school bus driver, described living through the violent murders of three of his friends when asked to describe what kind of news he paid most attention to on his social media. He explained that he did not see much on climate change, but instead watched the news when his relatives were victims of, or involved in, violence in his community. This is an area that future qualitative work could expand on. The time scale on which climate change threatens to affect social systems is qualitatively different than the

immediacy with which racialized violence affects the particular population with which I was studying. Since climate change will and is affecting these populations in much more devastating ways than dominant populations, it is important that future work (within and outside of the academy) deal with addressing the immediate as well as longer-term issues for these communities that climate change is sure to exacerbate.

Roberto had a different outlook and very much saw climate change as urgent and dangerous:

> It's been predicted that in some 20, 25 years, Florida could be underwater. There are places in Antarctica where the ice is disappearing, same with the North Pole. In some coasts in Latin America the sea level is already rising closer to the shore. It's a reality, not a perception.

Roberto offered quite a different perspective than other respondents in terms of relating immediate economic issues and wants to longer-term climate worries:

> At these moments, if I have or don't have a job, I am worried about how to solve my economic problems and climate problems are secondary. Even with jobs, many people who do not realize or are ignorant about climate problems. Because the same material consumption does not allow them to see ahead with respect to how I am living… My economic conditions are improved, and the less time one is going to have to think about climate changes. There is more time to think about pleasure, material consumption. For example, if I am at the table with my wife talking, and I am talking about cars and I begin to talk about a Mercedes Benz, a BMW as a material thing, I don't talk about the car as a useful thing for transportation. My sons and daughters are going to grow up in a world that is not about personal necessity, but rather the material necessity to have an object. In this case the car is part of the vanity of the individual. Then any education that can be given to the child about the environment is lost. (Roberto 8 Apr 2016).

Here Roberto argues that material security leads people to perceive climate change as less urgent and leads to missed opportunities in environmental education. In contrast to my other

respondents, he is critical of material consumption and the need, under capitalism, to have a job

to secure basic needs in terms of our ability to conceive of climate problems and solutions.

Roberto was clearly aware of the urgency of climate change and coupled this with a critical

understanding of the linkages between consumption and the avoidance of climate change.

Several of my respondents underestimated the impacts of climate change when asked to

imagine the potential effects they might see in the future. Respondent's forecast of climate

change effects were largely unurgent and removed from their immediate and future ability to live

stable lives. Respondents also explained that large-scale climate action was lacking because of

this perceived lack of threatening climate effects. By underestimating the effect that climate

change will have on their lives, most respondents did not regard climate change as an urgent

problem that requires substantive, if not fundamental structural, solutions

Respondents also framed the problem of climate change in terms of who would be

vulnerable and either racialized or did not racialize these disproportionate effects. Many of

my respondents used colorblind language in my interviews when we broached the topic of

race. Jackson told me about his childhood growing up in segregated neighborhoods in the

south, but explained that his contemporary racial views are colorblind. He said,

> I haven't been in discussions about [race]. Because now, that's not an issue with a lot of my
>
> friends that I'm associated with... A lot of my friends are pretty much like me – I don't see race, I
>
> don't see people as a race, I see ourselves as a human race. I don't see color, I never have, I grew
>
> up like that, you know (Jackson, 4 Nov 2016).

Theresa, a Black woman and custodial staff member, described climate change as

affecting everyone, she says, "rich, poor, you know, young, old, whatever race you are, whatever

your culture is, it affects you too" (Theresa, 30 Aug 2016). Other respondents echoed her

sentiment, expressing that climate change was an issue that affects everyone equally, which is far from the empirical reality (Roberts and Parks 2007; Bullard 2000).

Anthony was unambiguous in deracializing (and in this particular case also de-gendering) climate vulnerability:

Clara: How about gender? Do you think that climate change is affected by gender?

Anthony: No. No. It doesn't discriminate.

Clara: How come?

Anthony: How could it? You can't just attack, oh, Mexicans. You're screwed. You can't do that. Like weather doesn't see that. It's really just black and white. It doesn't see races like that. It's probably the only thing that's actually equal around here.

Several of my respondents echoed this sentiment of a post-racial, colorblind society in understanding who climate change might affect the most. Empirically we know that it is poor women of color who are most vulnerable to climactic change and countless scholars, institutions and climate justice social movements call for climate action that centers the most marginalized (Roberts and Parks 2007; IPCC 2014; Mohai et al. 2009). Many of my respondents used colorblind language to describe who they believe will be most vulnerable and it was evident that the issue of climate change was divorced from other forms of structural oppression such as racism and class exploitation. In the only rich, industrialized country in the world that still muddies the water on the scientific consensus of the occurrence of climate change, and that has a significant portion of its population that believes we have overcome racism – these results are perhaps not surprising.

In my data, there were similarities between how respondents used both neoliberal and colorblind ideology as frames for understanding climate change. Both ideologies individualize structural issues and erase patterns of inequality. Neoliberal policy has largely changed the terms

of debate in shifting environmental politics from state- to market-oriented and colorblind

practice, most notably in conservation policies, land and water management and in carbon

disclosure requirements (Sadler and Lloyd 2009; Andrew and Cortese 2013). A recent neoliberal

climate scheme is the attempt to give companies the right to claim indigenous forests in order to

offset their carbon footprints, continue business as usual and slow effective (politically-

economically threatening) action on global climate change (Lohmann 2006). The program,

Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation (REDD) operates through the

United Nations Environmental Programme and "attempts to create financial value for the carbon

stored in forests" (UNEP n.d.). Scholars and activists with the Indigenous Environmental

Network call the program "CO$_2$lonisalism of the forests," and call attention to how the program

divides, commodifies and steals Indigenous peoples' lands in the name of "climate action" (Boas

2011). In saying that all of us are equally vulnerable, it erases the ways in which histories of

colonialism and structures of racial domination make climate disasters harder for some

communities to respond to and overcome. These ideologies also render climate solutions

colorblind in a way that has material consequences for those already marginalized.

Ideologies like neoliberalism and colorblindness invisibilize these relations of domination

and reduce structural patterns 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 (as well as other forms of domination beyond the scope of this paper)

and the ideologies that frame my participants' responses maintain those forms of domination.

A smaller minority of my respondents had counterhegemonic understandings of the connections between economic and racial inequality and climate change. In my interviews, after establishing the respondent's familiarity with climate change and its effects, I asked whether they thought that different classes and races would be affect by climate change differently. In an interview with Roberto, he saw class inequality as a way that could prepare some for climate disaster better than others:

> Clara: Do you think climate change and the effects are going to happen kind of the same everywhere to like the same level?
>
> Roberto: Yes. It is different. That depend on, how do you say it, the social status that one has. Well, it's the same as, how do you say it? If I am wealthy, climate change can change and will not affect me. But there are others, how do you say it, who climate change is going to affect. It depends on the social status that I have in society.
>
> Clara: How can you see that if you are not rich? Like what would be an example of that? Roberto: … Because maybe I am protected in a mansion. And as such my mansion is, how do you say it, is built on a mountain. Maybe I will see the floods from the mountain…although in the long term, well, the same effect for all of humanity. But there is no doubt about that. There is no doubt. For example, it is predicted that if there is not, how do you say it, they don't take measures with respect to climate change, Florida is going to disappear. Already in my country, for example, the sea is no longer the same sea as when I was young.

Roberto's example of how a mansion might provide more relative protection from the effects of climate change is illustrative of this counterhegemonic understanding of climate change and its entanglements with class inequality.

Marcus, a Black man in his 60s who drives for Uber and is starting his own ministry talked at length about racial inequality, and later about how he thought different races might overall have varying capacities to deal with climate change effects:

Marcus: What do you mean what do I think will be affected?

Clara: Like who? Like do you think global warming affects like white people differently than people of color? Men, women?

Marcus: You know what I can't say white people, not white people. I can say it won't affect rich white people.

Clara: Why not?

Marcus: Because they have the money to buy resources.

Clara: Tell me about that.

Marcus: Well you know I've seen some, you know. You've seen solar houses, right? Well you know, they can afford that. You know, they can afford solar houses and you know I've seen, uh, oh God, I ain't gon' say that. I've seen a version, I've seen a version of it on the Black side, you see what I'm saying? Not so, a version of a solar house interpreted by Blacks. …

Clara: Is it like they put their own solar panel?

Marcus: Yeah, yeah.

Clara: That doesn't sound, like, easy to do though.

Marcus: No it's not easy to do but nobody said it would be easy. It's not easy to make bricks out of straws but Pharaoh gave it to the children of Israel to do, you see what I'm sayin'? So it's not easy and that's my sole point. You're giving me damn straws to make bricks with and when I do it, your mouth drops, even though it takes me longer to do. You know it's not perfect, but you didn't give me the right material in the first place.

Clara: Oh it sounded like you were making fun of them.

Marcus: Oh I am! I am making fun, I am making fun! Simply because, I'm making fun because this is what we, Black America, this is what we do. We take your little mess that you give us and we create. May not be what you have, but even what you got was created by us, you just didn't give us the formula. You have access to the formula we don't have. And all because you didn't give us the truth. You know, we know that the truth lies deep within us because, I mean, hell if it wasn't for us you'd still be eating yourself. And you call us barbaric? You see what I'm saying, so. But, and I say that the Black people, we come up with our own solar houses. May not be built the way yours is built and may not have the same material as yours has, it may not even look at classy as yours, but guess what, it still has the same element of comfort. But then again who is going to invest? Who, Black, is going to invest in coming trying to come up with their own solar house because all of the material you have hidden away.

Clara: Can you tell me more about, you said rich white people, like, have -

Marcus: Access? Resources?

Clara: Yeah, like what if, um, a flood or like a drought or something comes by?

Marcus: Well you know, um -

Clara: How do you imagine that playing out in terms of what you just said?

Marcus: Yeah, I mean, you know, say, uh, a shed, a nuclear shed. Right? Ok. I don't have one. Know why I don't have one? I gotta have enough land for our house, but you white. Not only do you have a shed, you have a shed for your servants too. Cause you don't wanna do the work after it's all over. Ok. I don't have servants, I have a family. You're gonna look down on me because I can't provide for my family like you can provide for yours? But you don't want it set up that way in the beginning.

Clara: How so?

Marcus: Well...ain't no house nigga no mo. Ain't no field nigga no mo.

Here Marcus was blunt about perceiving differential access various races might have to adapting and preparing for climate change. He says squarely that "rich white people" will not be affected and that they have more resources to adapt, such as solar technology. The kinds of resources and capacity various populations might have to adapt and frame solutions to climate change is what I turn to in my next section.

Solution-Framing

I think a lot of the issue is now, with the environment, is like people won't recycle, they won't reuse things. People just don't, lot of people just don't care. I mean it doesn't take a whole lot to do that. You know, but some people don't have the heart. They don't see into the future of environmental issues. So we talk about things like that, how we can, I mean things that we do, as individuals to do our part in making sure that the environment is safe for our children, today. Cause I recycle, I reuse, and things like that." (Jackson, 4 Nov 2016).

Here Jackson critiques the failure of others to practice environmental behaviors, citing their shortsightedness and a lack of empathy while emphasizing the role of the individual in combating the structural issue of climate change, especially his own.

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

averse 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. Similarly, capitalism, in its neoliberal form

or otherwise, is an institutional driver of climate change, particularly as it is built on the edifice

of the fossil fuel energy economy. 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. They emphasize individual action and obscure the larger political-economic contexts in which our individual choices necessarily are constrained.

Many of my respondents also talked about the reasons why they avoided individual environmental behaviors, but also action aimed at structural solutions. Roberto talked about the various levels (individual and collective) on which he thought climate action needed to take place:

> Roberto: Let's say, for example, everything stops at individual or personal protest. But I don't have the capacity to say, for example, to say to everyone who is here, "You know these problems with climate change. I invite you to the park next Saturday to raise the government's awareness that it must do something." No.
>
> Clara: No?
>
> Roberto: Quite simply we do not do it. For example, here we are, us two, speaking. We are speaking about doing… Really. But it is necessary to, how do you say, to raise awareness in ourselves both individually and as a group. … Let's say that I belong to the community, Georgia Power. I am an employee there. But I want, how do you say, to protest against, what is it called, everything…everything, like product, how do you say it, energy product that affects humanity because Georgia Power sells it. But if I work with Georgia Power, I am not going to do it because

they are going to fire me. That is a reality. For example, Georgia Power. … What we need is to all become involved. On all levels. As consumer and as producers. And the administrative people on the part of the government. It is the only way that we can really do one change or another. Not immediately, because it cannot be done overnight, but rather in the medium term (Roberto 8 Apr 2016).

Here Roberto also talked about the risks of taking action against polluters, he says they would fire him. Anthony talked about other risks of taking more direct action on climate change, this time physical:

Clara: Yeah. Why do you think there are so many people like in that middle group not doing anything? I mean from your experience.

Anthony: Maybe the repercussions of actually trying to stop something like say if you got the President and you got somebody else that's against what he's doing, then you got the whole military and police that just kind of give brute force and just tries to stop the group that's against them. And it's like, it's not necessary. That's why I don't want to deal with that brute force type stuff. Like whether it's the law, actually being physically harmed. It's not worth going through all that pain to stop someone that's doing what they're doing. If you're gonna die, then you're just gonna die. I mean if you're going to destroy the Earth faster than what we're already doing right now, fine. But I'm not gonna get abused or whatever just to try to stop you.

Clara: Yeah. What makes it not worth it?

Anthony: Maybe my freedom. Yeah, my freedom. So, I mean it's like going up to a cop and saying what you say. Like the freedom of speech, but they don't see that. They see them as disrespecting them, and they pretty much lock you away. That's how I feel about it. It's like you say what you want to, they're like "Oh no, he's one of those. Get rid of him." They're hurting us, but you're still doing what you're doing. And you're not going to be here for that much longer because you're some old dude or old woman still trying to build it (Anthony 16 April 2016).

Earlier in his interview, Anthony talked about how he blamed the "big wigs" for being mostly

responsible for erecting polluting factors and centering profit in their considerations. Here

Anthony talked bluntly about the risks of resisting environmental destruction in a way that

confronted power, like the police, or the President or the military. Structural resistance, then, is

dangerous and my respondents who began to put structural solutions forth reported knowing the

risks of such propositions.

     Another respondent, Marcus talked about not feeling at all personally responsible and

placing the onus for action on the government, though with some hesitation and distrust:

Clara: So who's responsible for, like cleaning up the mess?

Marcus: The Black people, no I'm just kidding. I'm just kidding! Can we have a little joke, you

know. But we're always the ones that clean up messes! Anyway. … But you know, the

government is responsible. You know how espionages and you know how secrets are and you

know how the Watergate was and you know that President Trump having meetings with the

Russians during the time of the elections, all that is covered up. … You're not gonna say that, but

the government is to be held at a high level of responsibility. These people are reelected in office

to represent the thought-process of us. They don't have my thought process. Do they have yours?

And I'm talking to you out there's listening. If they have your thought process, then you're good.

But I don't see anything that represents my thought process whatsoever. It's all a lie. I have been

bamboozled, I have been hoodwinked, I have been tricked. Your name might as well be Jacob.

And I can't rest. That's what I stay on my knees, that's why I pray, that's why my faith is so strong,

that's why I look to the hills knowing who is coming to my help, my help is coming from the

Lord. Surely it doesn't come from the White House. It surely doesn't come from Congress, it

surely doesn't come from Senate - because they got their own little old -. If they were so truthful,

why the hell would they have lobbyists? You know what I mean? But you have so much until you

have to have a lobbyist to come, to disguise your face. So now I'm looking at a lobbyist rather

than looking at your face because in your face, you've got Vodka and a blunt or cocaine-sniffing

and doing whatever you want to do, and you're happy and you don't think I know that you are

contaminating truth and justice and peace for the sake of power, politically. So I will not claim

one ounce of responsibility for the United States of America's global [climate] problem (Marcus

11 Mar 2017).

Here Marcus expresses that he is keenly aware that he does not feel responsible for climate

change and semi-jokingly comments that it is always Black folks "that clean up messes!"

(Marcus 11 Mar 2017). He talks through not trusting the government to represent his interests

and being skeptical of their intentions.

In my study, individual, consumptive behaviors were usually the easiest to communicate

for respondents since they gave concrete examples of their environmental behaviors and often

linked them to structural change since they were "doing their parts," or because "every bit

helps." In contrast (and occurring with less frequency) suggestions for collective action were

qualified by fear of risking one's livelihood or safety and skepticism of institutions that

respondents regarded as untrustworthy. Ideologies like neoliberalism and colorblindness limit the

range of solutions that we can conceive of in responding to such a global crisis like climate

change. Respondents taking on personal responsibility for structural environmental issues

reflects the ways in which individualizing ideologies entrench themselves in the way we

conceptualize of solutions to climate change. The few respondents that resisted such

characterizations posited important questions for those wishing to enact climate solutions that

consider economic and racial inequality as integral.

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 reinforce the inequality and domination inherent in the issue of climate change by obscuring its structural, unequal roots. The objects of analysis in this paper are the ideologies that people employ to construct climate change as a social problem in terms of responsibility and vulnerability, and the framing of solutions to climate crisis. Ideologies like those associated with neoliberalism and colorblindness delineate and limit 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. 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).

This study is limited in a few ways. First, my number of cases is low, though I am not making claims about generalizability or representativeness. Instead my aim is to study the ideologies and larger social forces that operate in these series of cases. I might have collected more cases to gain more variation in my themes and to explore them more deeply in subsequent interviews. Also, understanding individualizing tendencies in how people conceptualize of social problems is certainly not limited to neoliberal or colorblind ideologies. Further research could consider other ideologies and cultural forces that might also affect how people think about climate change.

Future qualitative work might work more closely at the intersections of racial domination and climate change. My theme of colorblindness emerged in later interviews when race was brought up organically and I later chose to follow this theme and ask about race directly. This yielded clearer data on the relationships between climate change and racial domination and future work could clarify these relationships with different populations. Scholars might investigate the ways in which different structural advantages on the basis of race, class and gender (which I did not analyze for this paper) bear on a person's ideological framing of climate change. Scholars studying perceptions of climate change in non-white communities might devote more scholarly attention to the interplay between the immediate (racialized violence) and long-term harms (racialized climate vulnerability) that threaten these communities.

While this study shows the deep roots of neoliberal and colorblind ideology in daily understandings of climate change, there might be several ways of meaningfully intervening into this problem given its many dimensions. Conversations about the structural roots of climate change are becoming more public (Klein 2014) and recent social movement work on climate change works squarely at the intersections of patriarchy, white supremacy and capitalism (Bond 2012). Knowledge production is deeply rooted in academic institutions, which often precludes accessibility to the working people of color who it can benefit the most. Education tied to mass social action can likely have the ability to visibilize the structural and intersectional nature of the problem of climate change and center those who face the most unequal burdens in conceptualizing the future we all must share.

APPENDIX I – DEMOGRAPHIC AND THEMATIC INFORMATION ABOUT RESPONDENTS

Pseudonym	Date	Race	Gender	Profession	
Roberto	8-Apr-16	Latino	Man	Custodial Staff at Hospital	- Perceived failure of current climate governance - Political-economic source of climate change - Unequal vulnerability
Anthony	16-Apr-16	Black	Man	Fast Food Worker	- Distrust of climate governance - Structural solutions but within limits - Equal vulnerability
Theresa	30-Aug-16	Black	Woman	Custodial Staff at Private University	- Climate change as a failure of greed and unequal power - Individual solutions – role of faith and information
Isaiah	9-Sep-16	Black	Man	Transportation Services (Busing)	- Limited knowledge of climate change - Individual solutions
Oscar	22-Sep-16	Black	Man	Patient Transportation Services at Hospital	- Climate change as human failure - Individual environmental behaviors
Lisa	10-Oct-16	Black	Woman	Staff in Food Services at Private University	- Distrust of climate governance - Individual environmental behaviors
Natalia	25-Oct-16	Latina	Woman	Intern at Department of Agriculture – Georgia	- Unequal vulnerability - Equal responsibility - Individual behavioral and market solutions
Josefina	19-Nov-16	Latina	Woman	Domestic Worker	- Climate change as human failure - Spirituality as solution
Jackson	4-Nov-16	Black	Man	Security Specialist at University	- Climate change as human failure

					Equal responsibility and vulnerability
Lydia	10-Nov-16	Black	Woman	Front Desk at Hospital Unit	- Limited knowledge of climate change
Prahi	10-Dec-16	Indian	Man	Hospital Research and Programming	- Skeptical of individual and structural solutions - climate change as a wicked problem, likely unsolvable
Rita	10-Mar-17	Black	Woman	Student and bartender	- Strong perception of racial and economic injustice in climate change - Individual and structural solutions
Marcus	11-Mar-17	Black	Man	Uber driver and Pastor	- Strong perception of racial and economic injustice in climate change - Individual solutions - role of faith

APPENDIX II – INTERVIEW GUIDE

This interview schedule acted as a guide for my interviews but because of the nature of semi-structured interviews, I followed topics that my respondents brought up and used this schedule as a basis for further exploration. What follows are my general questions and some characteristic responses to them.

1. What do you do for a living?
2. How long have you lived in Atlanta? Do you like the area you live in?
3. What kind of hobbies or activities are you involved in?

RACE
1. So as you know, racial issues have been in the news a lot lately. Can you tell me about a conversation that you've had recently with a friend or family member?
   a. Did you agree or disagree?
   b. Is this something you talked about before?

2. Can you tell me about a conversation about race with a stranger? How did it go?
3. What was the last thing on the media you've seen about race?
   a. What were they talking about? Did you agree or disagree?

TRANSITIONAL
1. What are the issues that are most important to you? Can you name some?

CLIMATE CHANGE - GENERAL
1. You might have heard a little about climate change in the news too. Have you had any recent conversations with anyone about this, or about other environmental issues?
   a. Why or how did it come up?
   b. Did you have similar views?

2. Do you believe that climate change is happening?
3. Where have you learned about it?
4. Can you tell me about a conversation about climate change with a stranger?
5. What are some ways that you've heard about climate change?

VULNERABILITY
6. Who do you think will be affected by climate change?
7. Are men and women affected differently by climate change? Why or why not? How?
8. Do you think climate change affects people of color differently than white people? Why or why not? How?
9. Can you think of any recent events that might be related to climate change?
10. What kind of effects do you think you'll see from climate change in the future?
    a. Any now?

11. Do you think you're seeing the effects of climate change now?
    a. Do you think you'll be affected by climate change in the future? How or how not?

ACTION
12. Do you do anything differently daily because you know about climate change?

13. Why do you think there hasn't been much attention or action on climate change?
    a. Do you believe the government should have a role? Businesses? People? Like who?

14. If there were one or two ways you could act on climate change, what would they be?

RACE + CLIMATE CHANGE
1. There's been a lot on the news lately about issues of racism. What have you heard, or what do you think about all of this?
2. Do you know any leaders or spokespeople for BLM?
    a. Do you think they talk about climate change? Why do you think that is?

3. What does an environmentalist look like?
4. What does a Black Lives Matter participant look like?
5. Have you heard anybody suggest that Katrina was related to climate change?

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