

# “You Can’t Be What You Can’t See”: Analyzing Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez’s Environmental Rhetoric

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*Contemporary environmental messages pose new relationships between humans, the environment, and the economy that warrant analysis in our climate crises. We analyze the ideological messaging in the Green New Deal and “A Message from the Future With Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez” to argue that their environmental rhetorics perform climate casuistry. We define climate casuistry as an environmental version of casuistic stretching that modifies anthropocentric ideologies to create strategic opportunities for the promotion of environmental justice. By working within the hegemonies of our current political system, the GND and Message provide a template for reshaping traditional relationships and imagining more just and sustainable futures.*

**Keywords:** environmental rhetoric, climate casuistry, casuistic stretching, Green New Deal, environmental justice

The effects of climate change are visible, present, and felt by different communities around the globe. The consequences of climate change have come in the form of devastating wildfires, hurricanes, the extinction of hundreds of plant and animal species, and damages to marginalized communities. The most recent Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change’s Assessment Report notes that these effects will likely be irreversible by 2050.<sup>1</sup> While small-scale initiatives like personal recycling are helpful, large-scale changes like federal policy and regulation are required to reverse the effects of climate change before it is too late. This urgency has prompted some politicians to propose legislation to begin reversing these negative effects, one of the most prominent being the Green New Deal policy resolution (hereafter abbreviated as GND).

The GND was proposed by Congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and Senator Edward Markey to the House and Senate on February 7, 2019. The policy resolution was written based on the findings from the Special Report on Global Warming by the IPCC and the November 2018 Fourth National Climate Assessment Report. The GND’s goal is to propose environmentally beneficial economic and infrastructural changes. Unlike economic policies that traditionally frame the

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<sup>1</sup> IPCC, 2021: Summary for Policymakers. In: *Climate Change 2021: The Physical Science Basis*.

Contribution of Working Group I to the Sixth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change [Masson-Delmotte, V., P. Zhai, A. Pirani, S. L. Connors, C. Péan, S. Berger, N. Caud, Y. Chen, L. Goldfarb, M. I. Gomis, M. Huang, K. Leitzell, E. Lonnoy, J.B.R. Matthews, T. K. Maycock, T. Waterfield, O. Yelekçi, R. Yu and B. Zhou (eds.)]. Cambridge University Press. 2021.

environment and the economy as disparate and oppositional forces,<sup>2</sup> we explore how the GND challenges dominant discourses and invites the imagination of new ways of structuring the economy and society. Julia Robertson Hathaway argued that “The GND reflects a marked departure from other federal legislation in that it recognizes the inequities of systemic power relations as root causes of climate change, and their redress as the only promising way forward.”<sup>3</sup> Working within current anthropocentric and capitalist frames, the GND moves toward an intersectional and environmental justice-oriented approach to governance and policy.

The GND’s lofty goals are also expressed in “A Message from the Future with Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez” (hereafter abbreviated as Message), which was released in April 2019. In the video, AOC speaks from a fictional future where the passage of the GND has sparked economic growth, increased diversity in politics, and instituted sustainable energy practices. Both the GND and Message “help render climate change visible through an intersectional lens, creating space for such alternatives” such as more just environmental futures.<sup>4</sup> Consequently, we perform a rhetorical analysis of how the GND and Message deploys the values of ideologies of environmental justice while working within dominant frameworks.

Environmental justice broadly refers to how forms of power and hierarchy are intertwined in the collective oppression of marginalized communities and nonhuman nature. Ryan Holifield, Jayajit Chakraborty, and Gordon Walker summarize the concept by noting that environmental problems “have the capacity to affect all of us,” but, “they do not affect us all equally, or in the same ways.”<sup>5</sup> They further note that these inequalities and inequities place “the heaviest environmental burdens upon marginalized, disadvantaged, and less powerful populations.”<sup>6</sup> Many consider the controversy over Warren County’s toxic waste dumping to be the birthplace of the environmental justice movement, where “social injustice and environmental degradation” went hand in hand in selecting the “predominantly black, poor, and rural Warren County” as a dump site.<sup>7</sup> More recently, environmental justice scholars have noted the harms that the Flint water crisis has done to both Black and low-incomes communities and the repeated dismissal of water toxicity concerns.<sup>8</sup>

A turn to environmental justice is to challenge these practices and to see the struggles of marginalized communities and nonhuman nature as intertwined in their oppression by systems and ideologies of power. This intersectional lens resonates with ecofeminist theorizing, which addresses the dual oppression of women and nature, but also emphasizes the way that identity politics

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<sup>2</sup> Emma Frances Bloomfield, “The Rhetoric of Energy Darwinism: Neoliberal Piety and Market Autonomy in Economic Discourse,” *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* 49, no. 4 (August 5, 2019): 320–41, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02773945.2019.1634831>.

<sup>3</sup> Julia Robertson Hathaway, “Climate Change, the Intersectional Imperative, and the Opportunity of the Green New Deal,” *Environmental Communication* 14, no. 1 (January 2, 2020): 14, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17524032.2019.1629977>.

<sup>4</sup> Hathaway, 19.

<sup>5</sup> Ryan Holifield, Jayajit Chakraborty, and Gordon Walker, *The Routledge Handbook of Environmental Justice* (Routledge, 2017), 1.

<sup>6</sup> Holifield, Chakraborty, and Walker, 1.

<sup>7</sup> Phaedra C. Pezzullo, “Performing Critical Interruptions: Stories, Rhetorical Invention, and the Environmental Justice Movement,” *Western Journal of Communication* 65, no. 1 (March 1, 2001): 2, 1, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10570310109374689>.

<sup>8</sup> Chad Raphael, “Engaged Communication Scholarship for Environmental Justice: A Research Agenda,” *Environmental Communication* 13, no. 8 (November 17, 2019): 1087–1107, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17524032.2019.1591478>; Benjamin J. Pauli, *Flint Fights Back: Environmental Justice and Democracy in the Flint Water Crisis* (MIT Press, 2019).

of race, class, and ability are always already present in hierarchies of power.<sup>9</sup> The oppression of women and nonhuman Others are often products of hegemonic power structures that elevate some while marginalizing others. Of the many oppressive ideologies that contribute to environmental injustice, we focus on anthropocentrism, capitalism, and American exceptionalism.

In her spectrum of environmental beliefs, Julia Corbett defined anthropocentrism as an emphasis on human-centric behavior, where the concerns of what is best for people are ranked hierarchically as more important than “the rest of creation.”<sup>10</sup> This approach to the environment reinforces a divide between humans and nature, which becomes codified in language and in practice, thereby rejecting humanity’s natural position as part of the environment.<sup>11</sup> Some scholars connect anthropocentrism to other belief systems, such as individualist ideologies common to Americans and the dominion mandate of humans over nature in Christianity,<sup>12</sup> which contribute to the exploitation of the Earth as nothing more than a resource for human consumption. At the other end of the spectrum, ecocentrism views life as a web of “nonhierarchical mix of interdependent relationships.”<sup>13</sup> Ecocentric perspectives challenge anthropocentrism and the centrality of the human experience in human-nature relationships, or what Milstein refers to as humanature relationships.<sup>14</sup>

While ecocentrism flattens differences between human and nonhuman life and entities, environmental justice centers issues of humanity, communities, and identity as integral to environmental issues. Instead of being fully ecocentric, therefore, we might characterize environmental justice as a reformist or transformative environmental ideology on Corbett’s scale. These environmental ideologies are more ecocentric than anthropocentric because they “question the dominant environmental ideologies and call for extensive social change.”<sup>15</sup> It is important to address varying environmental ideologies because they entail “ethical perspectives” on “growth and progress, on how other entities (living and nonliving) are valued” and appropriate actions that follow them.<sup>16</sup> In other words, perspectives on the environment are indicative of moral frameworks and pieties that drive beliefs and behaviors.<sup>17</sup>

This inquiry views the GND policy resolution and Message as strategic rhetorical messages deployed within dominant environmental ideologies to advocate for environmental justice. In imagining an environmentally and socially just future, these environmental rhetorics must work within the current system, meaning that remnants of the previous system necessarily remain. Environmental communication is often governed by a series of tensions that recognize the current

<sup>9</sup> Norie Ross Singer, “Toward Intersectional Ecofeminist Communication Studies,” *Communication Theory* 30, no. 3 (2020): 269–89, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ct/qtz023>.

<sup>10</sup> Julia B. Corbett, *Communicating Nature: How We Create and Understand Environmental Messages* (Washington, D.C: Island Press, 2006), 27.

<sup>11</sup> Kenneth Burke, *Language As Symbolic Action: Essays on Life, Literature, and Method* (University of California Press, 1966); Corbett, *Communicating Nature*; Tema Milstein, “Nature Identification: The Power of Pointing and Naming,” *Environmental Communication* 5, no. 1 (2011): 3–24.

<sup>12</sup> Corbett, *Communicating Nature*; L. White Jr, “The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis,” *Science* 155, no. 3767 (1967): 1203–7; Emma Frances Bloomfield, *Communication Strategies for Engaging Climate Skeptics: Religion and the Environment* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2019).

<sup>13</sup> Corbett, *Communicating Nature*, 27.

<sup>14</sup> Milstein, “Nature Identification: The Power of Pointing and Naming.”

<sup>15</sup> Corbett, *Communicating Nature*, 40–41.

<sup>16</sup> Corbett, 29.

<sup>17</sup> Bloomfield, “The Rhetoric of Energy Darwinism.”

system in relation to imagined futures.<sup>18</sup> Influential tensions in the GND policy resolution and Message are anthropocentrism and environmental justice, the economy and the environment, and the present and the future. These tensions provide inroads for analyzing how the GND policy resolution and Message “critically interrupt” the dominant narrative of environmental exploitation and silencing.<sup>19</sup> Exploring how the GND navigates these tensions offers rhetorical resources for how change can be imagined through productive negotiation of anthropocentric, economic interests with more environmentally just ideologies through a process we call climate casuistry. Climate casuistry describes the process of rhetorically stretching anthropocentric ideologies to make room for the enactment of environmental justice.

In what follows, we first provide an overview of environmental justice and propose how climate casuistry illustrates the complicated balancing of old and new environmental ideologies. Then, we analyze the environmental rhetoric of the GND and Message, with attention to how they strategically puncture the hegemonies of our current system to imagine new environmental futures through climate casuistry. We conclude by discussing the implications of the rhetorical double-bind of environmental discourse that must work within hegemonic structures to activate change.

### **Environmental Justice, Ideologies, and the Green New Deal**

Chad Raphael defined environmental justice as concerned with four types of justice: 1) distributive justice, which is the “fair apportioning of environmental burdens and benefits,” 2) procedural justice, which is “equal protection against environmental harms through law, regulation, and enforcement,” 3) process justice, which is “meaningful recognition of, and participation in, environmental decision making by all who are affected, including historically excluded groups,” and 4) restorative justice, which is the repair and reconciliation of past environmental injustices.”<sup>20</sup> Environmental justice is thus concerned with equity, protection, inclusivity, participation, and repair, in addition to creating the conditions to prevent future environmental injustices and to envision “environmentally healthy and economically sustainable communities.”<sup>21</sup> Equity involves the mutual caring for, listening to, and liberating of marginalized groups, accounting for differences and inequitable distribution of power, resources, and access.

Correcting environmental injustices involves addressing hegemonies and dominant powers because “oppressions inherently work together to produce injustice.”<sup>22</sup> For example, marginalized populations are disproportionately vulnerable to climate change, with Indigenous populations considered especially at risk.<sup>23</sup> Ayana Elizabeth Johnson and Katharine K. Wilkinson echo this point by writing, “Climate change is a powerful ‘threat multiplier,’ making existing vulnerabilities and injustices worse.”<sup>24</sup> The recognition of this interconnectedness disrupts a perspective that seeks to

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<sup>18</sup> Milstein, “Nature Identification: The Power of Pointing and Naming”; Emma Frances Bloomfield, “The Reworking of Evangelical Christian Ecocultural Identity in the Creation Care Movement,” in *The Routledge Handbook of Ecocultural Identity*, ed. Tema Milstein and José Castro-Sotomayor (New York, NY: Routledge, 2020), 195–207.

<sup>19</sup> Pezzullo, “Performing Critical Interruptions.”

<sup>20</sup> Raphael, “Engaged Communication Scholarship for Environmental Justice,” 1088.

<sup>21</sup> Robert Cox, *Environmental Communication and the Public Sphere* (SAGE, 2012), 246.

<sup>22</sup> Kathleen M. de Onís, “‘Looking Both Ways’: Metaphor and the Rhetorical Alignment of Intersectional Climate Justice and Reproductive Justice Concerns,” *Environmental Communication* 6, no. 3 (September 1, 2012): 309, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17524032.2012.690092>.

<sup>23</sup> Andrejs Kulnieks, Dan Rononhiakewen Longboat, and Young Young, *Contemporary Studies in Environmental and Indigenous Pedagogies: A Curricula of Stories and Place* (Springer Science & Business Media, 2013).

<sup>24</sup> Ayana Elizabeth Johnson and Katharine K. Wilkinson, eds., *All We Can Save: Truth, Courage, and Solutions for the Climate Crisis*, Illustrated edition (New York: One World, 2020), xviii.

separate humanity from the environment and fails to recognize disproportionate impacts on marginalized communities.

These separations appear in the linguistic construction of dualities such as human-nature, nature-culture, and ecology-individual, which foster both symbolic and material effects. Tema Milstein and José Castro-Sotomayor attribute this separation, in part, due to the largely unabated extractive and destructive orientation that powerful interests and the majority of governments maintain toward the planet.<sup>25</sup> Carolyn Merchant similarly outlines how “new images of mastery and domination” fostered by industrialization “functioned as cultural sanctions for the denudation of nature.”<sup>26</sup> Merchant further argues that where “science, technology, and capitalism have provided the tools, male agency [has provided] the power and impetus,” linking dominant economic, political, and social structures of power in the exploitation of nature.<sup>27</sup> Jason Edwards argued that American exceptionalism and free market ideologies are intertwined; it is free market capitalism that makes the US “superior” to other countries and enables the spread of American values worldwide.<sup>28</sup> Challenging capitalism, therefore, can be read as an inherent challenge to the American identity and way of life.

While operating within dominant anthropocentric and capitalist systems, the environmental rhetorics from the GND and Message work to create spaces for more progressive policies by championing the values of environmental justice. Therefore, we may critique the GND and Message for not shaking loose enough from dominant structures, but we may also see them as strategic instruments working within current systems to enable progress through the leveraging of those systems toward less environmentally exploitative and more environmentally just ends.

We call this type of rhetorical strategy “climate casuistry,” which situates Kenneth Burke’s casuistic stretching within ecological principles.<sup>29</sup> Climate casuistry refers to how arguments for the environment and climate mitigation policies can be made from within hegemonic structures. Climate casuistry stretches old principles of dominant power structures to incorporate new principles from ecocentrism, ecofeminism, and environmental justice such as innate value and care for nonhuman entities, the prioritizing of and collaboration with marginalized communities, and the consideration of power dynamics in environmental advocacy. Climate casuistry negotiates traditional values by aligning them with environmental goals, thereby deploying the tools of the old system in service of change.

While casuistry often has negative associations, such as the compromising of one’s ethical principles, casuistry can also be viewed as strategic and sometimes even necessary to disrupt systems of power. Paul Lynch argued that casuistry is sensitive to situational features and considers particular cases, circumstances, and nuances that may trouble hard-and-fast rules and regulations.<sup>30</sup> Climate casuistry, therefore, can be seen as a strategic method of reasoning that adapts traditional hegemonic principles by taking into account the unique circumstances of our climate crises to push

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<sup>25</sup> Tema Milstein and José Castro-Sotomayer, eds., *The Handbook of EcoCultural Identity* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2020), xvii, <https://www.routledge.com/Routledge-Handbook-of-Ecocultural-Identity/Milstein-Castro-Sotomayer/p/book/9781138478411>.

<sup>26</sup> Carolyn Merchant, *The Death of Nature* (Wildwood House London, 1980), 270.

<sup>27</sup> Carolyn Merchant, *Reinventing Eden: The Fate of Nature in Western Culture* (Routledge, 2013), 2.

<sup>28</sup> Jason A. Edwards, “Monsters to Destroy? The Rhetorical Legacy of John Quincy Adams’ July 4th, 1821 Oration,” *Journal of Contemporary Rhetoric* 7, no. 1 (2017): 47.

<sup>29</sup> Kenneth Burke, *Attitudes toward History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 32.

<sup>30</sup> Paul Lynch, “Something Completely Different: Notes Toward a Burkean Ethics,” *KB Journal* 5, no. 1 (2008), [https://kbjournal.org/paul\\_lynch](https://kbjournal.org/paul_lynch).

for change and growth. Without fully abandoning or upsetting current systems, but still recognizing that those frameworks are inadequate to address the current situation, casuistry helps us “find an ethics that changes as the situation changes.”<sup>31</sup>

A shift in perspective can often signal a change in “terministic screens,” where even conservative, Christian ideologies can find new vocabularies and interpretations of old systems to incorporate more ecocentric values.<sup>32</sup> It is important to note that “the master’s tools can never dismantle the master’s house.”<sup>33</sup> However, those tools may be strategically reoriented to serve different purposes and open up new opportunities for supporting environmental justice, creating new spaces for the development of new tools and orientations. Philip Tschirhart and Emma Frances Bloomfield applied casuistic stretching in an environmental context, arguing similarly that casuistry can develop “new perspectives to combat complicated problems such as our current climate crisis.”<sup>34</sup>

As the damages of current industrial and capitalist systems grow, we must turn to alternative approaches to global survival and wellbeing. These new perspectives can work to “weaken” old perspectives through the “exhaustion” of them and the incorporation of “new material” that challenges entrenched ideologies.<sup>35</sup> We may thus appreciate the GND and Message as “counter-narratives” that alter frames of reference toward what an environmental just economy, government, and society look like.<sup>36</sup>

This inquiry focuses on how the GND and Message deploy climate casuistry to promote relatively radical, counter-hegemonic strategies as a much-needed shift from stagnant approaches to climate policy. By focusing on climate casuistry as a rhetorical strategy, we attend to “rhetorical choices about what to stretch, how far to stretch it, and where and when the stretching occurs.”<sup>37</sup> We thus center the strategic stretching of anthropocentrism, capitalism, and American exceptionalism as dominant systems of power to create space for environmental justice, including the promotion of community-focused perspectives and redistributing environmental burdens and benefits. The environmental rhetorics of the GND and Message stretch and expand old frameworks to encompass new principles, thereby demonstrating a rhetorical strategy that may work current dominant systems toward environmentally just and sustainable futures.

### Analyzing the Green New Deal and Message

Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez’s election was part of a historic political moment for women and marginalized groups. The 2018 elected members of Congress made history as one of the most diverse freshman classes in history,<sup>38</sup> but they were not universally celebrated. Former President Donald Trump openly called Ocasio-Cortez a “nasty woman,” and said that many of the newly elected

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<sup>31</sup> Lynch.

<sup>32</sup> Bloomfield, “The Reworking of Evangelical Christian Ecocultural Identity in the Creation Care Movement.”

<sup>33</sup> Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Crossing Press, 1984).

<sup>34</sup> Philip Tschirhart and Emma Frances Bloomfield, “Framing the Anthropocene as Influence or Impact: The Importance of Interdisciplinary Contributions to Stratigraphic Classification,” *Environmental Communication* 14, no. 5 (July 3, 2020): 699, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17524032.2020.1716033>.

<sup>35</sup> Kenneth Burke, *Counter-Statement*, First edition (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 1968), 194.

<sup>36</sup> Michael Bamberg and Molly Andrews, *Considering Counter-Narratives: Narrating, Resisting, Making Sense* (John Benjamins Publishing, 2004).

<sup>37</sup> Tschirhart and Bloomfield, “Framing the Anthropocene as Influence or Impact,” 701.

<sup>38</sup> Emma Newburger, “These Are the Women Making History as the 116th Congress Is Sworn In,” *CNBC*, January 3, 2019, sec. Make It - Closing The Gap, <https://www.cnbc.com/2019/01/03/these-are-the-women-making-history-as-the-116th-congress-is-sworn-in.html>.

congresswomen should “go back to their countries.”<sup>39</sup> This backlash to Ocasio-Cortez’s election is part of the power dynamics circling not only female politicians, but also climate policy and how people respond to and frame policy resolutions such as the GND.<sup>40</sup>

The GND is a fourteen-page long policy resolution that was officially released on February 7, 2019. The name of the GND is based on Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s New Deal, which was implemented during the Great Depression. Roosevelt was president from 1933 to 1939 after the stock market crashed and the US was experiencing rampant unemployment and poverty. Roosevelt’s New Deal was an attempt to rebuild the economy by outlining a series of projects including financial reform and public works initiatives. The New Deal was sometimes “known as the three Rs because Roosevelt believed that together Relief, Reform, and Recovery could bring economic stability.”<sup>41</sup> Roosevelt had a large task in front of him to revive the American economy, which is not unlike the large task currently facing American politicians in terms of mitigating the harmful effects of climate change.

In the GND, Ocasio-Cortez writes that, “the House of Representatives recognizes that a new national, social, industrial, and economic mobilization on a scale not seen since World War II and the New Deal is a historic opportunity.”<sup>42</sup> Ocasio-Cortez’s choice to use the word “green” as a modifier to the “New Deal” signifies that there is a contemporary issue that is of equal size and importance as the financial crisis of the Great Depression. Instead of a financial crisis, the country is in a climate crisis. This does not mean, however, that economics are of no importance. Alternatively, this naming invites consideration of the importance of money with the importance of the environment. As noted by Rebekah Fox and Ann Burnette, American prosperity is typically characterized by economic success.<sup>43</sup> In the GND, Ocasio-Cortez challenges readers to widen the definition of “prosperity” to include the health and wellbeing of people and the environment in addition to economic prosperity. This framing is oppositional to a capitalist hierarchy where money outranks the environment. Thus, from the name of the bill, we already see challenges to economy-environment binaries and the elevation of the current climate crisis to economic catastrophe. The harkening back to the New Deal also bolsters the bill’s viability and effectiveness: to call the GND radical or socialist is to also associate the policies of the New Deal, which were successful at launching the nation’s recovery, with those labels.

Rhiana Gunn-Wright, a drafter of and contributor to the GND, noted, “the most important part of a policy proposal is not the details – at least not at the beginning. It’s the *vision* that the policy

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<sup>39</sup> F. Sonmez and M. Debonis, “Trump Tells Four Liberal Congresswomen to ‘Go Back’ to Their Countries, Prompting Pelosi to Defend Them,” *Washington Post*, July 14, 2019, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/trump-says-four-liberal-congresswomen-should-go-back-to-the-crime-infested-places-from-which-they-came/2019/07/14/b8bf140e-a638-11e9-a3a6-ab670962db05\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/trump-says-four-liberal-congresswomen-should-go-back-to-the-crime-infested-places-from-which-they-came/2019/07/14/b8bf140e-a638-11e9-a3a6-ab670962db05_story.html).

<sup>40</sup> Hanna E. Morris, “Constructing the Millennial ‘Other’ in United States Press Coverage of the Green New Deal,” *Environmental Communication* 15, no. 1 (January 2, 2021): 133–43, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17524032.2020.1812686>.

<sup>41</sup> Nancy E. Rose, *Put to Work: Relief Programs in the Great Depression*, First edition (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1994), 1.

<sup>42</sup> Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, “Text - H.Res.109 - 116th Congress (2019-2020): Recognizing the Duty of the Federal Government to Create a Green New Deal.,” legislation, February 12, 2019, 4, 2019/2020, <https://www.congress.gov/bill/116th-congress/house-resolution/109/text>.

<sup>43</sup> Rebekah L. Fox and Ann E. Burnette, “Feel Free to Agree: Promoting American Exceptionalism as Educational Ideology in the Texas Education Knowledge Standards,” *Journal of Contemporary Rhetoric* 11, no. 1/2 (2021): 16–35.

presents and the *story* it tells.”<sup>44</sup> In proposing a new future through the enactment of certain policies, the GND tells a story of environmental justice and restoration. To complement the text of the GND, in April 2019 Ocasio-Cortez partnered with renowned author and activist Naomi Klein and artist Molly Crabapple to create a video titled, “A Message from the Future,” capturing the GND through visual storytelling. In the video, Ocasio-Cortez narrates an evolving painting that illustrates the positive effects that the passage of the GND has for the environment and marginalized communities. The video lasts seven minutes and thirty-five seconds and has garnered close to one million views on YouTube.<sup>45</sup> These two rhetorical artifacts expand the genre of environmental legislation by inviting lawmakers and the public to restructure their view of climate policies and pairing legal text with an engaging video message that visually portrays a future where progressive climate policy is enacted.

In the following analysis, we first attend to messages in the GND and Message that participate in the first step of climate casuistry, stretching the old framework, by working within dominant systems of capitalism, anthropocentrism, and American exceptionalism. These dominant systems are stretched to make room for new principles, values, and environmental justice ideologies. The second section analyzes the GND and Message for descriptions and images of a new green future that the old frameworks are stretched to encompass. In other words, the first section discusses the old principles and their strategic modifications, and the second section more closely focuses on the new principles being advocated and how climate casuistry makes space to include them.

### Climate Casuistry

The old principles espoused in the GND and Message are the interconnected hegemonies of anthropocentrism, capitalism, and American exceptionalism. Working within a conservative legal structure, the GND engages but also strategically modifies traditional hierarchies. When discussing the impacts of Earth’s temperature increasing, the GND explains that many actions must be done to prevent the “most severe impacts” of climate change.<sup>46</sup> Those impacts are primarily defined as loss of human life and societal stability. For example, the GND notes that changes in climate will cause several issues, including, “causing sea levels to rise and an increase in wildfires, severe storms, droughts, and other extreme weather events that threaten human life, healthy communities and critical infrastructure.”<sup>47</sup> The GND thus groups human life, healthy communities, and critical infrastructure as victims of climate change’s effects. The rhetoric of the GND thus engages in some anthropocentrism by emphasizing loss to human life and communities. But, by expanding the scope of communities to include marginalized ones, the GND also centers environmental justice, namely procedural justice in terms of equal protection under the law. By centering how climate change will negatively impact human life, these messages highlight climate change as significant and urgent to address. By working within existing anthropocentric priorities, these rhetorics bring the issue of climate change to bear on human wellbeing.

In Message, Ocasio-Cortez says that due to the damages of climate change, “we lost a generation of time we’ll never get back,” again appealing to the human impacts of climate change. This

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<sup>44</sup> Rhiana Gunn-Wright, “A Green New Deal for All of Us,” in *All We Can Save: Truth, Courage, and Solutions for the Climate Crisis*, ed. Ayana Elizabeth Johnson and Katharine K. Wilkinson, Illustrated edition (New York: One World, 2020), 93, emphasis in original.

<sup>45</sup> Kim Boekbinder and Jim Batt, *A Message From the Future With Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez*, accessed August 6, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d9uTH0iprVQ>.

<sup>46</sup> Ocasio-Cortez, “Text - H.Res.109 - 116th Congress (2019-2020),” 2.

<sup>47</sup> Ocasio-Cortez, 1.

acknowledgement of climate change's human impacts is followed by, "entire species we'll never get back; natural wonders gone forever."<sup>48</sup> These statements link human impacts to nonhuman life and present people as part of an interconnected natural system. In centering human impacts of climate change, Message emphasizes the disproportionate effect that climate change will have on certain lives. Ocasio-Cortez discusses how without cutting emissions "hundreds of millions of people would be more likely to face food and water shortages, poverty, and death," as paintings of faces of people of color appear one by one on the screen, revealing who those most likely to face those climate impacts are.<sup>49</sup> The GND thus points out the lack of distributive justice within our current system.

As a U.S. bill, there is the inherent assumption that the bill will be nationally-oriented and that the use of the phrase "human lives" signals "American lives." Understandably, the GND is highly US-centric and focuses primarily on inequities within the U.S. policy economy.<sup>50</sup> But, the GND also includes critiques of Western hegemony and American apathy toward climate change, challenging American exceptionalism. The GND argues that America needs to take ownership of responding to climate change because we have been "responsible for a disproportionate amount of greenhouse gas emissions, having emitted 20 percent of global greenhouse gas emissions through 2014."<sup>51</sup> This quotation exemplifies an important aspect of environmental justice, that those who have not caused climate change will be disproportionately affected by it, while those who knew about climate change and ignored it will benefit.

The GND notes that the US has a "duty" and obligation to "take a leading role in reducing emissions," putting the US in a powerful position to act.<sup>52</sup> This call to action is to redeem the US for its role in pollution, thereby seeking redistributive justice. The GND also stretches American exceptionalism by positioning its leadership as global by "promoting the *international* exchange of technology, expertise, products, funding, and services" and "to help *other countries* achieve a Green New Deal."<sup>53</sup> Fox and Burnette note that a feature of American exceptionalism is its focus on "individualistic thinking" at the costs of "global participation."<sup>54</sup> Instead of only focusing on the US, the GND broadens the scope of the policy resolution to include both the US and countries around the world.

The GND emphasizes critiques of capitalist policies and the unregulated growth of industry. Working within an economic frame, the GND notes that there will be "more than \$500,000,000,000 in lost annual economic output in the United States by the year 2100" due to climate change.<sup>55</sup> These economic losses are echoed a few lines down where the GND argues that climate change poses, "a risk of damage to \$1,000,000,000,000 of public infrastructure and coastal real estate in the United States."<sup>56</sup> The material consequences of climate change are thus framed in economic terms, appealing to economic values of profit and "economic sins" of profit loss.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Boekbinder and Batt, *A Message From the Future With Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez*, 4:45.

<sup>49</sup> Boekbinder and Batt, 3:10.

<sup>50</sup> Kate Aronoff et al., *A Planet to Win: Why We Need a Green New Deal* (Verso, 2019).

<sup>51</sup> Ocasio-Cortez, "Text - H.Res.109 - 116th Congress (2019-2020)," 2.

<sup>52</sup> Ocasio-Cortez, 5, 2.

<sup>53</sup> Ocasio-Cortez, 9, 10, emphasis added.

<sup>54</sup> Fox and Burnette, "Feel Free to Agree: Promoting American Exceptionalism as Educational Ideology in the Texas Education Knowledge Standards," 34.

<sup>55</sup> Ocasio-Cortez, "Text - H.Res.109 - 116th Congress (2019-2020)," 2.

<sup>56</sup> Ocasio-Cortez, 2.

<sup>57</sup> Bloomfield, "The Rhetoric of Energy Darwinism."

A focus on money, however, is stretched to be a priority along with, and not instead of, sustainability. In other words, the GND proposes an adjustment to a purely capitalist lens that instead sees “the environment, the economy, and equity *at the same time*,” where environmentally just practices are also economically beneficial ones.<sup>58</sup> This interconnectedness of environment, economy, and equity is echoed in Message, which notes that “caring for others is valuable, low carbon work.”<sup>59</sup> These climate messages challenge capitalist notions of what an effective and successful economy is and who it works for, thereby opening up room for modification to value different forms of labor such as care takers and teachers.

More opportunities for modifying capitalism can be found in the GND’s second section, which notes that the US is currently experiencing, “a 4-decade trend of economic stagnation, deindustrialization, and antilabor policies.”<sup>60</sup> Those who are considered part of capitalism design a system where, “the top 1 percent of earners accruing 91 percent of gains.”<sup>61</sup> These statements challenge the accessibility of the American dream by insisting that capitalism is not currently working for the American people. Similarly, Message rejects the idea that our economy is working and notes that the GND will transform the economy “that we already knew was broken.”<sup>62</sup> Part of transforming the economy is putting more money into the system, but instead of routing this money to fossil fuel industries, it is routed into the development of a clean energy economy.

Currently, there are numerous tax subsidies for fossil fuel companies in order to produce cheaper energy, making fossil fuel companies one of the largest industries in the world.<sup>63</sup> Moving away from fossil fuels, the GND proposes “to invest in the infrastructure and industry of the United States to Sustainably meet the challenges of the 21st century.”<sup>64</sup> Instead of fossil fuels, these sustainable shifts must come from “clean, renewable, and zero-emission energy sources.”<sup>65</sup> (Ocasio-Cortez, 2019, p. 7).<sup>66</sup> In Message, Ocasio-Cortez explains how the passage of the GND will inspire a shift away from fossil fuels to renewable energy such as solar panels (Klein & Crabapple, 2019, 5:41). Shifting our current economic practices and redoing American infrastructure will benefit the economy through creating jobs. In Message, Ocasio-Cortez notes, “funnily enough, the biggest problem in those years was a labor shortage,”<sup>67</sup> which is an inversion of the oft-circulating argument that progressive policies such as the GND will cost American jobs. This framing envisions how the environment and the economy can coexist in a way which is mutually beneficial, thereby stretching a hierarchy of economy over the environment to a more balanced interrelationship.

Critiquing current industry practices also includes critiquing the pollution produced due to insufficient regulation. The GND advocates for “cleaning up existing hazardous waste and abandoned sites to promote economic development and sustainability.”<sup>68</sup> This idea acknowledges the need to repair the mistakes of our past, such as toxic dumping and wasteful practices, to protect

<sup>58</sup> Gunn-Wright, “A Green New Deal for All of Us,” 94, emphasis in original.

<sup>59</sup> Boekbinder and Batt, *A Message From the Future With Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez*, 5:50.

<sup>60</sup> Ocasio-Cortez, “Text - H.Res.109 - 116th Congress (2019-2020),” 3.

<sup>61</sup> Ocasio-Cortez, 3.

<sup>62</sup> Boekbinder and Batt, *A Message From the Future With Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez*, 2:25.

<sup>63</sup> Matthew Taylor and Jillian Ambrose, “Revealed: Big Oil’s Profits since 1990 Total Nearly \$2tn,” *The Guardian*, February 12, 2020, sec. Business, <https://www.theguardian.com/business/2020/feb/12/revealed-big-oil-profits-since-1990-total-nearly-2tn-bp-shell-chevron-exxon>.

<sup>64</sup> Ocasio-Cortez, “Text - H.Res.109 - 116th Congress (2019-2020),” 5.

<sup>65</sup> Ocasio-Cortez, 7.

<sup>66</sup> Boekbinder and Batt, *A Message From the Future With Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez*, 2:25.

<sup>67</sup> Ocasio-Cortez, “Text - H.Res.109 - 116th Congress (2019-2020),” 4:50.

<sup>68</sup> Ocasio-Cortez, 9.

the environment and the economy. The GND also calls for the identification of “other emissions and pollution sources and [the creation of] solutions to eliminate them.”<sup>69</sup> While this statement does not explicitly call out any particular sources of pollution, such as emissions from fossil fuels, it does position dirtier forms of energy as up for replacement, which challenges capitalism’s reliance on fossil fuels and emphasizes finding alternative and cleaner energy sources.<sup>70</sup>

While the transition to renewable energy could be expensive in the short term for certain stakeholders, the GND forwards this as a necessary action to mitigate the effects of climate change. The GND explains that it is the responsibility of the US to implement large-scale changes, such as transitioning from fossil fuel energy to long-term sustainable energy sources. These changes reimagine the economy by putting renewable energy sources at the center and thereby eliminating environmentally damaging fossil fuels. The GND outlines how such a shift especially needs to be done in the manufacturing and auto industries to make the biggest impact. These changes would lower greenhouse gas emissions as well as pollution, which are two of the biggest contributors to the climate crisis.

Both the GND and Message challenge anthropocentrism by resisting a sole framing of human impacts and instead center the disproportionate impacts of climate change on certain communities. These environmental rhetorics also create strategic punctures of American exceptionalism by incorporating international obligations and global concerns. The most prominent form of climate casuistry is the challenging of capitalist systems of values. Both the policy resolution and the video deny an economy-environment binary and instead frame environmental and economy benefits as co-constitutive and equally valuable. In stretching the old frameworks of anthropocentrism, American exceptionalism, and capitalism, it is necessary that some remnants of the previous order remain. However, these values are also interrupted by the inclusion of shifts in perspectives, new alignments, and the values of environmental justice, to which we now turn.

### **Stretching toward a Green New Future**

Intertwined in the critical interruptions of these old principles are statements that stretch our current systems toward a green new future. The GND and Message envision a future that is more environmentally just, redistributes benefits and burdens, shifts to renewable energy from fossil fuels, and centers community needs and marginalized communities. This section details how the climate casuistry of the GND and Message introduces these new principles as achievable and beneficial.

Early in the policy resolution, the GND describes how “climate change, pollution, and environmental destruction have exacerbated systemic racial, regional, social, environmental, and economic injustices,” clearly linking the interconnectedness of climate change’s consequences as “systemic injustices.”<sup>71</sup> These injustices are simultaneously felt in terms of human impact, economic loss, and environmental damages. For example, the GND discusses how wildfires will eventually burn over two times the number of trees that they are currently burning, and there will be, “a loss of more than 99 percent of all coral reefs on earth.”<sup>72</sup> While it can be argued that coral reefs and forests benefit humans, the GND focuses on these losses as valuable in and of themselves

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<sup>69</sup> Ocasio-Cortez, 9.

<sup>70</sup> Andreas Malm, *Fossil Capital: The Rise of Steam Power and the Roots of Global Warming*, Illustrated edition (London ; New York: Verso, 2016).

<sup>71</sup> Ocasio-Cortez, “Text - H.Res.109 - 116th Congress (2019-2020),” 3, 4.

<sup>72</sup> Ocasio-Cortez, 2.

without directly describing their utility for humans. In *Message*, Ocasio-Cortez explains that one of the consequences of climate change has been the extinction of several species and natural wonders as the video shows paintings of rhinoceroses and other endangered species.<sup>73</sup> These statements exemplify ecocentric values and the prioritization of non-human life and acknowledge their intrinsic worth to the world.

The GND proposes “restoring natural ecosystems through proven low-tech solutions that increase soil carbon storage, such as preservation and afforestation.”<sup>74</sup> Additionally, the GND calls for the prioritization of “restoring and protecting threatened, endangered, and fragile ecosystems through locally appropriate and science-based projects that enhance biodiversity and support climate resiliency.”<sup>75</sup> A focus on restoring ecosystems addresses threatened species as intrinsically valuable and worth protecting. Ecosystems are highlighted as interconnected spaces that include not only human life but also nonhuman life. Additionally, the GND’s inclusion of “science-based” informs a reading that these strategies are tested and supported by science as opposed to other interests. By aiming to improve carbon storage, the goal is to create a system for life to be able to grow sustainably. Furthermore, this part of the GND rejects high-tech solutions such as carbon capture, and instead highlights how low-tech solutions are to be lauded for their already proven abilities. Low-tech solutions such as preservation and afforestation turn away from technology as the ultimate savior of the environment and instead positions the value of protecting and growing our current forests.

These references show how technology can be put toward purposes of environmental justice as opposed to continuing to support carbon capitalism. The GND pledges that the US should meet “100 percent of the power demand in the United States through clean, renewable, and zero-emission energy sources,”<sup>76</sup> thereby eliminating fossil fuels’ use. Stretching economic benefit into renewable energy challenges that our economic systems are tied to fossil fuels and emphasizes the environmental impacts of our economic choices. To accomplish the goal of 100% clean energy, the GND outlines several options. First, the GND notes that its renewable energy goal can be reached by “dramatically expanding and upgrading existing renewable power sources.”<sup>77</sup> The GND acknowledges that this would be a large change, noting that we would need to “dramatically expanding and upgrading existing power sources.”<sup>78</sup> More specifically, the GND notes that the government will need to provide new facilities, as well as upgrade the current plants to “smart” capabilities.<sup>79</sup> The phrase “smart” again evokes how technology, used efficiently and purposefully, can be an old principle adapted into an environmentally and socially just future.

In addition to technology, the GND imagines traditional forms of transportation within new energy systems. The GND proposes that it is the duty of the government to improve the environment by “overhauling transportation systems in the United States to eliminate pollution and greenhouse gas emissions from the transportation sector as much as is technologically feasible.”<sup>80</sup> This quotation combines a focus on greenhouse gas emissions from the fossil fuel industry and the role that transportation systems play in our climate crises. In order to implement “zero-emission vehicles,” manufacturers would have to stop creating gas powered vehicles and start creating fully

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<sup>73</sup> Boekbinder and Batt, *A Message From the Future With Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez*, 2:40.

<sup>74</sup> Ocasio-Cortez, “Text - H.Res.109 - 116th Congress (2019-2020),” 9.

<sup>75</sup> Ocasio-Cortez, 9.

<sup>76</sup> Ocasio-Cortez, 7.

<sup>77</sup> Ocasio-Cortez, 7.

<sup>78</sup> Ocasio-Cortez, 7.

<sup>79</sup> Ocasio-Cortez, 7.

<sup>80</sup> Ocasio-Cortez, 8.

electric vehicles.<sup>81</sup> While this shift to electric vehicles has already begun in some parts of the country, we are still far away from having a majority or only zero-emission vehicles on the roads.

The GND repeatedly mentions that these changes must include assurance for vulnerable communities to have affordable and easy access to these sustainable sources of energy. The GND advocates for the reparation of justice for “the poor, low-income workers, women, the elderly, the unhoused, people with disabilities and youth.”<sup>82</sup> Naming these communities aligns with tenets of environmental justice, showing that the bill is not only an economic document, but also a social one that redresses inequities among people. For example, the GND notes that there is currently, “a large racial wealth divide amounting to a difference of 20 times more wealth between the average White family and the average Black family.”<sup>83</sup> The GND also notes how climate change intersects with gender inequality: “a gender earnings gap that results in women earning approximately 80 percent as much as men, at the median.”<sup>84</sup>

As an implication of economic disparity, the GND emphasizes how racial and gender hierarchies are being further perpetuated by climate crises. In pointing out the disparities in earnings, the GND links environmental exploitation with the exploitation of women’s labor and the labor of people of color. The GND provides an expansive look at the linked inequities caused by capitalism on a variety of human and nonhuman vulnerable communities and populations. In so doing, the GND calls out the “hiddenness or invisibility of hegemonic masculinity” that undergirds systems such as capitalism and the exploitation of nonhuman Others.<sup>85</sup>

Climate change disproportionately affects people living in poor communities, which are often made up of historically disenfranchised groups such as Latino and Black individuals.<sup>86</sup> The GND notes that climate change will cause “mass migration from the regions most affected by climate change.”<sup>87</sup> Coastal cities are especially at risk due to rising sea levels, and many of the most densely populated cities are coastal, including Los Angeles, New York, Seattle, and Miami. These cities are home to many impoverished citizens who could not afford to pack up their life and move to a safer location.<sup>88</sup> The GND also notes how “more than 350,000,000 more people will be exposed to deadly heat stress by 2050.”<sup>89</sup> This ties back to the issue of mobility, as individuals in these extremely hot regions may not be able to pack up and move in order to live in a safer place. Including these statements in the GND recognizes how climate change is disproportionately felt by those least responsible for it, thereby evoking climate justice and the interconnectedness of environmental degradation and race, class, and social inequities.

In addition to advocating for Black and Latino communities, the GND mentions how climate change will also adversely affect Indigenous communities. The GND writes that one of its goals is, “to promote justice and equity by stopping current, preventing future, and repairing historic oppression of indigenous communities.”<sup>90</sup> This repair work actively involves “obtaining the free,

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<sup>81</sup> Ocasio-Cortez, 8.

<sup>82</sup> Ocasio-Cortez, 3.

<sup>83</sup> Ocasio-Cortez, 3.

<sup>84</sup> Ocasio-Cortez, 13.

<sup>85</sup> Jennifer Y. Abbott and Cory Geraths, “Modern Masculinities: Resistance to Hegemonic Masculinity in Modern Family,” *Journal of Contemporary Rhetoric* 11, no. 1/2 (2021): 42.

<sup>86</sup> David Schlosberg and Lisette B. Collins, “From Environmental to Climate Justice: Climate Change and the Discourse of Environmental Justice,” *WIREs Climate Change* 5, no. 3 (2014): 359–74, <https://doi.org/10.1002/wcc.275>.

<sup>87</sup> Ocasio-Cortez, “Text - H.Res.109 - 116th Congress (2019-2020),” 2.

<sup>88</sup> Lael Brainard, Abigail Jones, and Nigel Purvis, *Climate Change and Global Poverty: A Billion Lives in the Balance?* (Brookings Institution Press, 2009), <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7864/j.ctt6wpgcq>.

<sup>89</sup> Ocasio-Cortez, “Text - H.Res.109 - 116th Congress (2019-2020),” 2.

<sup>90</sup> Ocasio-Cortez, 5.

prior, and informed consent of indigenous people for all decisions that affect indigenous people and their traditional territories, honoring all treaties and agreements.”<sup>91</sup> These statements highlight the inequities felt by Indigenous communities and centers Indigenous autonomy and self-sovereignty by requiring Indigenous perspectives, agreements, and traditions. Environmentally just policies to mitigate climate change must incorporate Indigenous perspective due to their disproportionate climate outcomes. For example, if climate change makes certain lands uninhabitable, this will adversely harm Indigenous communities because they have deeds to specific areas of land. If those lands become uninhabitable, Indigenous communities may lose a significant amount of their land rights and access to many sacred spaces.<sup>92</sup>

On page three, the GND addresses how the issues that we are currently facing will only continue to get worse with climate change, thereby amplifying existing hierarchies: “Life expectancy declining while basic needs such as clean air, clean water, healthy food, and adequate health care, housing, transportation, and education, are inaccessible to a significant portion of the United States Population.”<sup>93</sup> This quotation highlights the many kinds of consequences that individuals will face from climate change and lack of economic mobility. With the increasing effects of climate change, one’s socioeconomic status will inevitably affect their access to different resources.<sup>94</sup>

Challenging capitalist hierarchies, the GND notes how those at the top are creating a system in which they become richer, while the poor stay where they are or grow poorer. The GND notes that the US currently has “the third-worst level of socioeconomic mobility in the developed world.”<sup>95</sup> In order to make up for the lack of economic mobility, the GND’s first proposition is to build millions of strong, high paying jobs for all Americans. Next, the GND states that the US must “provide unprecedented levels of prosperity, and economic security for all people” by moving away from capitalist values.<sup>96</sup> This quotation suggests that all people deserve to prosper financially, not just the already wealthy. By advocating for everyone’s mutual prosperity, the GND reframes the economy as working for all instead of being a zero-sum game. Instead of reinforcing a class hierarchy and engaging orientational metaphors of an upper and lower class, the GND imagines a future of horizontal rather than vertical distribution, a notable feature of socialist rather than capitalist systems.

In addition to noting that communities should be protected and treated equally by our economic system, the GND argues that communities should also be part of creating these changes. The GND notes that the US should build “resiliency against climate change-related disasters... by leveraging funding and providing funding and providing investments for community-defined projects and strategies.”<sup>97</sup> The focus on “community-defined” initiatives centers community members’ perspectives and listening to them, thereby instituting process justice of including community partners within policy conversations and climate solutions. Changes are not only top-down from politicians

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<sup>91</sup> Ocasio-Cortez, 13.

<sup>92</sup> Robin Wall Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge and the Teachings of Plants*, First Paperback edition (Minneapolis, Minn: Milkweed Editions, 2015); Kulnieks, Longboat, and Young, *Contemporary Studies in Environmental and Indigenous Pedagogies*.

<sup>93</sup> Ocasio-Cortez, “Text - H.Res.109 - 116th Congress (2019-2020),” 3.

<sup>94</sup> Melissa Denchak, “Are the Effects of Global Warming Really That Bad?,” NRDC, March 15, 2016, <https://www.nrdc.org/stories/are-effects-global-warming-really-bad>; Melissa Hemphill, “Up in Smoke: Western Fires Pose Public Health Hazard,” September 29, 2017, <https://www.aafp.org/news/blogs/freshperspectives/entry/20170929fp-fires.html>.

<sup>95</sup> Ocasio-Cortez, “Text - H.Res.109 - 116th Congress (2019-2020),” 3.

<sup>96</sup> Ocasio-Cortez, 4.

<sup>97</sup> Ocasio-Cortez, 6.

to the people, but also bottom up, where communities provide insight that is directly incorporated into strategizing and policy planning.

The GND notes that the US must begin “mitigating and managing the long-term adverse health, economic and other effects of pollution and climate change, including by providing funding for community-defined projects and strategies.”<sup>98</sup> Consequently, the GND encourages collaboration between the United States government and vulnerable communities in order to bridge gaps and enact equitable and just changes: “A Green New Deal must be developed through transparent and inclusive consultation, collaboration, and partnership with frontline and vulnerable communities.”<sup>99</sup> Included in this category of people are “indigenous communities, communities of color, migrant communities, deindustrialized communities, depopulated rural communities, the poor, low-income workers, women, the elderly, the unhoused, people with disabilities, and youth,” showing attention to intersectionality and a variety of identity markers that make many people disproportionately susceptible to climate change’s consequences.<sup>100</sup>

The GND calls for politicians to work with marginalized communities to come to mutually beneficial solutions. Although laws are often, by definition, top-down institutions of new policy, the GND reframes policy expectations as requiring and benefitting from the consultation of localized groups. In Message, Ocasio-Cortez notes that, “When it came to healing the land, we had huge gaps in our knowledge. Luckily, Indigenous communities offered generational expertise to help guide the way.”<sup>101</sup> In transition from old economies, oil pipelines, to new economies, planting mangroves, Message centers Indigenous voices and authority as active stakeholders and participants. The environmental rhetoric of the GND and Message appeal to environmental justice through addressing the social and economic inequities of communities and advocating for the redressing of those exclusionary and silencing practices through inviting them to be collaborators in creating change.

Climate casuistry first created strategic openings for questioning and seeing past old frameworks and then illustrated new principles, values, and ideologies that can be encompassed by stretching old frameworks. Instead of fully abandoning a focus on people, these environmental rhetorics challenge anthropocentrism by incorporating vulnerable and marginalized communities and acknowledging the intrinsic value of nonhuman life and ecosystems. Instead of abandoning technology and economic profit, these environmental rhetorics paint a new picture of what creatively and purposefully deployed technologies and economic policies can do for the safety, health, and prosperity of all life.

## Conclusion

The GND evokes the values and principles of environmental justice by incorporating them into existing dominant frameworks that center (some) human life, displace responsibility for climate change, and value economic profit above all. This new perspective values all life, acknowledges the disproportionate impacts of climate change, invites vulnerable and marginalized communities to be collaborators, and intertwines the economy, the environment, and equity. By aiming to empower those who do not benefit from the current system, the GND envisions a future where the government supports initiatives to protect all people.

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<sup>98</sup> Ocasio-Cortez, 9.

<sup>99</sup> Ocasio-Cortez, 10.

<sup>100</sup> Ocasio-Cortez, 10.

<sup>101</sup> Boekbinder and Batt, *A Message From the Future With Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez*, 5:27.

This future is visually shown in *Message*, as a young girl of color, Ileana, works to shift the energy industry from oil-based to solar-based and is inspired to run for Congress in the wake of the GND's passage.<sup>102</sup> The GND proposes a variety of strategies to solve the social, political, and ecological issues that have been occurring and will continue to worsen due to climate change. We proposed that the process by which the GND challenges existing hierarchical structures and hegemonies in creating a vision for a new configuration of the environment and economy is best characterized as climate casuistry. Working within current economic and political systems, the GND creates strategic space for expansion and stretching old frameworks to encompass the ideas and values of environmental justice. Instead of seeing the binaries of economy-environment and human-nature, climate casuistry rhetorically constructs productive coexistence and charts a route of transition that stretches old principles to incorporate new ones.

The climate casuistry of the GND and *Message* thus balances appeals to dominant values while proposing policies that would help disadvantaged communities and begins imagining new ways for the economy to function. While the GND can be rightfully critiqued for perpetuating some aspects of dominant frameworks and not pushing hard enough in some areas of environmental justice, we argue that these appeals can work alongside more radical calls for change to chart reconfigurations of our current systems. In this project, we aimed to provide an in-depth analysis about one of the most ambitious climate propositions in contemporary times. Our analysis of the GND and *Message* is a preliminary step to grow our knowledge about contemporary climate discourses and how they rhetorically function to enact change within dominant frameworks. With the effects of climate change growing more dangerous and present every day, we can no longer wait to disrupt capitalism, anthropocentrism, and American exceptionalism. Instead, it is imperative that our actions and rhetorics evoke an intersectional, environmental justice-oriented future that we build together.

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<sup>102</sup> Boekbinder and Batt, *A Message From the Future With Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez*.