

Female Climate Activism Constructed in Online Stories: A Thematic Analysis

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Abstract

The current climate discourse portrays anthropogenic climate change in several ways. One way of presenting it is to interpret it as a catastrophe requiring immediate action. It is crucial to delve deeper into how climate change is understood as something that can be tackled through action. This study analyses how women describe their personal experiences with climate activism from a personal point of view. The data of this paper consists of eleven online stories, posted on a blog. The study presents seven themes: 1. Positive Attitude Towards Climate Activism, describing the importance of climate activism, 2. Changes in Personal Life Caused by Climate Activism, meaning the personal development undergone by being climate active, 3. The Motivation Behind Becoming Climate Active, describing the drive behind getting active, 4. Climate Activism Goals, defined as objectives they want to seek by climate activism efforts 5. Focusing on Environmental Justice, constructed as advocating for fair treatment of people in climate change policy, 6. Difficulties while Being Climate Active, displaying obstacles preventing one from being climate active and 7. Facilitating Climate Activism, which is defined as factors that make it easier to engage climate actively. The themes were constructed by conducting a Thematic Analysis (TA). In all the different descriptions of climate activism, the common thread was the emphasis on the significance and meaningfulness of engaging actively. Future research should analyse the effect of climate activism in empowering activists.

Keywords: Climate Change, Climate Activism, Online Narratives, Qualitative Research, Thematic Analysis.

Female Climate Activism Constructed in Online Stories: A Thematic Analysis

Anthropogenic (human-induced) climate change is the most significant crisis of our current times. According to the latest Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) report (2023), emissions of greenhouse gases from human activities are responsible for global warming and thus, for the increased risk to health, livelihoods, food security, water supply, human security and economic growth (*AR6 Synthesis Report: Climate Change 2023 — IPCC*, n.d.). Humans are not only inducing the change of the climate, but some of them are also realizing the tremendous impact of this crisis and acting by mitigating its consequences. These adaptation and mitigation responses have been talked about far too little in public communications although previous research figured out that communicating about climate activism might inspire and motivate individuals to act (Hawkins et al., 2014; Moser, 2010; Vu et al., 2021). Understanding the stories and experiences of activists can reinforce empathy and awareness, encouraging more people to get involved (Hawkins et al., 2014). As it is significant to motivate people in times of crisis, the current study focuses on these stories of climate activists, posted on an online blog. More precisely, I explore the stories of women and analyse how they construct climate activism in their stories. As my aim of the study aligns with the approach of qualitative research, I chose TA as the approach to identify the meaning-making patterns of climate activism in the stories, posted on a blog.

Much of the early conversations about climate change on the public agenda were narrowly focused on scientific findings, such as the findings compiled in the IPCC reports (Moser, 2010). Nowadays, communication about climate change grew beyond politics and the scientific community and has opened up the nature of a discourse held in public (Chen et al., 2022). Since the climate change discourse encompasses a wide range of scientific, social, economic and political dimensions, making it a multifaceted and interdisciplinary subject, climate change as a construct becomes more and more complex (Schäfer, 2012). The media serves as the primary source of delivering information about climate change to the public. To understand the role of media in producing, reproducing and transforming the meaning of climate change, the focus of previous research was predominantly on how mass media constructs climate change (Schäfer, 2012). However, less research focused on the construction of climate change in personal, individual user-generated online conversations.

The meaning of climate change is differently constructed in various types of mass media. For example, a research study of 75 articles from leading British and American newspapers showed that climate change is presented as accelerating and contributing towards other

destructive processes such as natural or socio-political ones (Kramar, 2023). It is depicted as an evil-doer, attributed with a destructive humanlike agency such as “destroying people’s lives” (Kramar, 2023, p. 45). This climate change construction aligns with the war narrative that draws parallels between climate change and war (Atanasova & Koteyko, 2017; Flusberg et al., 2017). It portrays climate change as an existential threat that calls for urgent and collective action similar to how nations come together during the war to combat a common enemy (Flusberg et al., 2017; Kramar, 2023). Although much criticism of this narrative has been voiced, it is still pervasive in the media discourse on climate change (Atanasova & Koteyko, 2017; Flusberg et al., 2017; Kramar, 2023).

Analyses of climate change portrayals have often focused on the role of traditional mass media such as newspapers, as was mentioned above in the study by Kramar (2023). However, online communication channels such as blogs and social media are increasingly used nowadays (Kolic et al., 2022; Schäfer, 2012). Many studies showed that scientific knowledge is not always adequately portrayed in online media (Bray & van Storch, 2010; Gavin & Marshall, 2011), including knowledge about climate change. For instance, Bray and von Storch (2010) surveyed 375 international scientists who assessed the quality of scientific discussion on blogs, in comparison to peer-reviewed articles as rather poor. Due to the high prevalence of climate change discussions on the social networking site Twitter, previous research has predominantly concentrated on the representation of climate change within the so-called Twittersphere (Kolic et al., 2022). It was found that Twitter users largely agree with the science, that portrays climate change as an issue (Cody et al., 2015; Effrosynidis et al., 2022). Additionally, Twitter users talk particularly about natural disasters in the context of climate change debates, implying that they associate climate change with an increase in the severity and frequency of natural disasters (Cody et al., 2015).

Among the online and offline discourses, studies have shown that mainly two contrary opinions about climate change occur in the media. Firstly, people who trust the scientific evidence about climate change and secondly, people who are sceptical towards it (Jang & Hart, 2015; Kolic et al., 2022; Tyagi et al., 2020; Williams et al., 2015). The blogosphere (i.e. collective community of blogs, bloggers and their interconnected conversations) known as a place for mobilized polarization, became a forum for both groups as well: climate sceptics and people who acknowledge climate change (Elgesem, 2015; van Eck & Feindt, 2020). Therefore, several studies suggest that social media facilitates polarization of climate conversations (Kolic et al., 2022; Koenecke & Feliu-Fabà, 2019; Tyagi et al., 2020; Williams et al., 2015). Overall,

climate change is discussed offline and online in terms of its consequences, causes, credibility and potential solutions (Fownes et al., 2018). These potential solutions for climate change are often presented under the term of climate activism which I will have a closer look at in the following.

As the discourse on climate change is constantly evolving, the discussions about climate activism are dynamic as well, reflecting a range of perspectives. According to the researchers Dono et al. (2010) climate activism can be defined as the individual and collective effort to address the urgent challenges of climate change by raising awareness, adapting and mitigating its impact to ensure a sustainable future for people and the planet. From the perspective of political scientists climate activism is defined more as a collective mobilization of individuals, groups and organizations that aim to influence political and policy processes (Blake et al., 1997; Tranter, 2008), while climate activists define climate activism as putting pressure on politicians to shift more responsibility from civic people to the state. However, there is no research about how people defined climate activism who experienced it personally. Climate activists specifically emphasise the power of communities in drawing the attention of the state. Especially, on climate activist blogs the importance of the community voice is highlighted (van Eck & Feindt, 2021). The content of climate activist blogs is also about communities suffering from climate change. They frame climate activism as a way to focus on local impacts and experiences, inequitable vulnerabilities, and demands of community functioning (van Eck & Feindt, 2021). Next to discussing the impact of climate change, it is focused on environmental topics, sustainability and green living in blogs. These blogs are called “green blogs” which serve as a digital space where individuals, organizations or experts share information, insights and resources related to environmental issues (Luck & Ginanti, 2013). However, green blogs have not received much scholarly attention yet (Fløttum et al., 2014; van Eck & Feindt, 2020). Therefore, the current study takes a closer look at stories, posted on a green blog.

It is common to frame climate activism in a persuasive language style (Chadwick, 2010) because the aim of people who acknowledge climate change is often to convince people to get active and mobilize them (O’Neill & Nicholson-Cole, 2009; Vu et al., 2021). This persuasive language style is applied by using hope and efficacy appeals (Chadwick, 2010). Previous literature highlighted that these appeals are important drivers in motivating people to take action (Baden, 2019; Chadwick, 2015; Ojala, 2012; Vu et al., 2021). They provide visions of what the world will be like if climate activism succeeds as well as a sense of optimism and belief that positive change is possible (Baden, 2019; Stewart et al., 1984). Furthermore, in transformative

narratives climate change is described in solution-focused language as well. They tell a positive and engaging story, articulating a vision of “where we want to go” and presenting solutions for how to deal with the current crisis (Tàbara et al., 2018). However, the persuasive way of writing is not only based on solution-focused language but also on problem-focused language, emphasizing the importance to get active when taking the current problems and future consequences of climate change into account. These conversations are rather about a vision of what the world will be like if the movement fails and are intended to get active to prevent a fearful future (Chadwick, 2010). Climate protection movements such as Fridays For Future (FFF) emphasize this narrative by warning people of apocalyptic images of future catastrophes (Cassegård & Thörn, 2018; De Moor et al., 2018; De Moor et al., 2021). These images are also created in apocalyptic narratives, presenting the potentially catastrophic consequences of global warming and environmental degradation (Stoknes & Radars, 2015). Apocalyptic stories are highly dominant in the media. Thus, it was frequently researched how climate change is constructed in these apocalyptic narratives. Nevertheless, rather less research has been conducted on how climate activism as a construct is portrayed in these apocalyptic narratives. Due to having focused on apocalyptic stories in past research, narratives that focus on solutions how to mitigate and adapt to climate change have received little attention in previous literature (Hinkel et al., 2020). Moreover, similar to the apocalyptic stories less scholarly attention was paid to how climate activism is constructed in stories using a solution-focused approach. To conclude, less research exists on how climate activism is constructed in various narratives. Hence, the current study focused on the description of personal experiences with climate activism in different kinds of stories, among other stories apocalyptic and transformative narratives.

A concept closely related to activism is efficacy. Activism can cultivate efficacy by empowering individuals to be capable of effecting a change. Efficacy is divided into collective efficacy (i.e. refers to people’s shared beliefs in their group’s ability to produce desired results through collective action) and self-efficacy (i.e. individual’s belief in their own capability to produce desired results through individual action) (Bandura, 1977). Research has shown that individuals feel more capable to engage in climate activism when they join a group (Jugert et al., 2016). The group provides people with a sense of control over their individual outcomes. This finding is also supported by Drury and Reicher (2009) who mentioned that perceiving one’s own group as capable to be climate-active leads to a feeling of empowerment. Therefore, Jugert et al. (2016) state that individual climate activism is particularly effective when engaging

in a collective movement as it still provides the individual with a feeling of effectiveness. Within discourses surrounding climate activism, there is also a notable emphasis on the enhanced sense of personal control and empowerment experienced by individuals when engaging as part of a collective (Jugert et al., 2016). However, qualitative research on personal experiences with engaging actively in a group or as an individual is scarce.

Overall, the public debate about climate change and the appropriate responses to it is dominated by scientists, policymakers, and climate activists, each of whom is likely to be actively seeking to establish their particular perspectives on the issues (Anderson, 2009; Carvalho, 2010; Schäfer, 2012). However, the dominance of these communicators does not allow for a completely open and equitable conversation (Bucci & Trench, 2021). People who identify as women, people of colour, or indigenous people are often excluded from conversations due to their gender, educational level, language and ethnicity (Bucci & Trench, 2021; Ettinger et al., 2023). Therefore, it is crucial to shift the focus of research to conversations held by people who are affected by intersectional discrimination (Ettinger et al., 2023). The current study focuses on women to broaden the discourse about climate activism further.

Scope of this Study

Concludingly, plenty of research was done about how climate activism is constructed in discourses (Chadwick, 2010; Ettinger et al., 2023; Moser, 2010; Schäfer, 2012; Vu et al., 2021;). Although much previous literature paid attention to the effect of storytelling on motivating people to get active (Hinkel et al., 2020; Woodley et al., 2022), less research dealt with exploring how climate activism is defined by personal experiences in stories. In addition, further qualitative inquiry is needed to explore the meaning-making of climate activism on green blogs (Luck and Ginanti, 2013). In this study, I ask *“How do women describe their personal experiences with climate activism in online stories?”*.

Methods

Design and Procedure

A qualitative design was employed for this study, as it seems appropriate to study experiences with climate activism from the bottom up. The final data set was created by reading through all the stories of the blog “Climate Generation” and selecting the narratives that met the inclusion criteria. Following the selection of the eleven narratives, I revisited them once more to ensure that they truly met the established criteria. Subsequently, I copied the texts into Microsoft Word. During this process, I replaced the author’s names with names, created by me,

and deleted other identifiable features. Finally, I uploaded the final data set into Atlas.ti and started with the data analysis.

Data Collection and Description of Data

While searching for data that could answer my research question, particular attention was placed on narratives as they possess the capability to offer a rich and nuanced understanding of individuals' experiences, perspectives and meanings. Additionally, the scope of the search was limited to online data due to its increased use in holding discourses about climate change, discussed in the problem statement. A further reason was the wide array of narratives it provides, potentially aligning with the research question. In the end, eleven narratives of the same blog were chosen to assure consistency among the stories. After having considered the website "We Can. Women's Earth & Climate Action Network, International" and the website "UN Women" which both entailed only a curated, filtered, and branded selection of narratives, it was decided for the blog "Climate Generation" as it shows narratives posted by the women themselves. The blog was identified as a green blog when taking the definition in the introduction into account as it serves as a digital space where individuals, organizations or experts share information, insights and resources related to environmental issues (Luck & Ginanti, 2013). The green blog presents narratives that encompass experiences of climate activism, which are in line with the research question at hand. The final data set of narratives was chosen based on the following inclusion criteria: (1) the selected narratives should be written by women (2) they should contain at least 300 words since it is the typical minimal word count of a blog post (Shah, n.d.) (3) lastly, only narratives were added to the final data set that dealt at least once with climate activism according to the definition of Dono et al. (2010), as mentioned above.

In the end, eleven narratives constitute the final data set. The authors of the narratives are women living in Minnesota, some of whom have a migration background. They possess a climate educational background, having either pursued studies in environmental fields or worked within organizations dedicated to climate engagement. Therefore, the narratives also address climate activism at least once according to the definition mentioned above. Additionally, the narratives exceed the minimum word count by ranging from a word count of 496 to 1434 words. Furthermore, all of them have been posted in the year 2022 in the months from June until November. Many of the narratives were published on the same day, for example, four narratives were posted on the 29th of September. With reference to the language, in some stories, a couple of parts were written in a more persuasive language style. The

persuasive language style shows itself through expressions such as “We are not alone”, “Time is running out”, or “We should not stop” etc. Moreover, some features of the narratives were recognised but not included in the analysis. For example, the blog provided a small introductory text at the end of every narrative about the background of the authors which was written by another person. In between the stories, photos of the women or the groups they are active in are shown. By considering the photos, the name and the use of the pronoun “she” in the introductory text, it was assumed that the authors are identifying as women. For three of the women, I could be sure that they identify as women as one of them used the pronoun “she/her” which is an indication of her gender identity as a female and the other two wrote in her stories about identifying as women. Each narrative was provided with a title; however, the analysis primarily concentrated on the textual content rather than the titles themselves.

Ethics

Although the narratives were published on an open website, presupposing that the narrators were aware of making their stories accessible to everyone, no explicit consent for this study was obtained. Due to their missing contact information, it is impossible to ask them for their consent. Nevertheless, the data is treated confidentially by not stating any names or other identifiable features of the participants. Lastly, this research project was officially approved by the ethics committee BMS of the University of Twente¹.

Data Analysis

To analyse the narratives, it was decided to conduct TA. It allows for sense-making of meanings and experiences such as the climate active experiences of the women by identifying meanings (themes) across the narratives (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2012; Clarke & Braun, 2016). The creation of themes enables a structured approach to analysis and uncovers the author’s meaning-making patterns in the stories (Braun & Clarke, 2012). I adopted a constructionist worldview and thus, aimed to understand how they construct and negotiate their experiences of climate activism in and through discourses. Further, a phenomenological approach was used to explore the author’s lived experiences. Additionally, I used TA mainly as an inductive method, meaning the data was open-coded and the themes were derived from the narratives themselves.

During the analysis process, my approach was guided by the six phases of TA proposed by Braun and Clarke (2012). However, using reflexive TA allowed me to analyse iteratively and systematically while also staying flexible by being able to revise codes and themes. First, I

¹ Request number: 230176

familiarised myself with the data by reading through the narratives a couple of times and simultaneously writing about emotions and thoughts coming up in a journal. I generated initial codes based on excerpts. After breaking the code set down to 65 codes, I checked if the names capture the meanings of the unit of analysis and changed them accordingly. For example, the code “Goal of acting” was edited to “Conservation of nature as the underlying goal of being active” since the meaning of the unit of analysis “*We must ensure that we give back to nature what it has given us — beauty, diversity, and life.*” was not captured at first.

The basic unit of analysis was a specific way of presenting individual experiences with climate activism. The smallest unit of analysis consisted only of a subject and predicate such as “*What I do matters*” which was coded with “Meaningfulness of one’s own actions”. However, most of the units of analysis were whole sentences. Since the author’s experiences with climate activism were also often constructed in more than one sentence, I coded many consecutive sentences with the same code. As I used an iterative approach, it is important to note that I still kept modifying the codes through these steps. I generated themes from the set of codes. I reviewed the themes a couple of times to assure on the one hand that the names of the themes express the meaning behind them and on the other hand to check if the codes describe the same meaning-making pattern. Next, I found a subordinate term for the themes and checked again if they represent a higher-order concept that goes beyond the individual codes of the group, providing a more comprehensive understanding of the experiences with climate activism. Additionally, various text extracts across the narratives are exemplifying the themes which consist of either only sentences coded with the same code or sentences coded with different codes. Below is an example of an extract that illustrates one theme but involves two different codes: “Being active because of will for a better future” and “Climate active because of the threat of the climate crisis”:

I am fueled with a will to keep on pushing because this is my future, and as a young person, this story is personal.

The extract above demonstrates the theme “Motivation to become climate active” in which the authors construct their experiences with climate activism as a drive to act, originating from a range of different reasons. Eventually, I started to write my results based on the finding of the themes. The analysis resulted in the creation of 148 Quotations, 65 codes and seven themes.

Reliability and validity in this study (Nowell et al., 2017) were ensured by a) a thorough description of the research process in the methods, enabling transparency and transferability of the findings b) triangulating the data with previous studies and other perspectives such as the one of my supervisor c) keeping a reflexive journal throughout the research process to account and reflect upon subjective interpretations and biases. In this way, the trustworthiness of the study could be ensured.

Results

Throughout the analysis, seven themes could be identified based on the author's descriptions of their experiences with climate activism (Table 1).

Table 1

Themes of the Author's Experiences with Climate Activism

Main Theme	Climate activism is experienced as ...	Primary Codes included	N
1. Positive Attitude Towards Climate Activism	...significant since it can make a difference towards a reduced climate change	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Power of collective actions - Meaningfulness of one's own actions - Climate activism can redirect life - Focusing on positive effects of climate action - Being fully committed to climate activism - Being climate active releases positive feelings 	31
2. Changes in Personal Life	... being able to cause effects on the personal development		19

Caused by Climate
Activism

Sub-theme: <i>Personal insight effect</i>	... people expressing to look inward and focusing on ways to better oneself	- Being climate active can redirect life - Stepping out of comfort zone when becoming climate active - Being climate active makes you reflect upon things	5
Sub-theme: <i>Emotional effect</i>	... changes in experiences, regulations and expressions of emotions	- Being climate active can be depressing - Being climate active releases positive feelings - Feeling of gratefulness for being able to be climate active - Climate activism helped to get more passionate about environmental justice - Being climate active strengthens emotions	10
Sub-theme: <i>Intellectual effect</i>	... an expansion of the current level of knowledge	- Climate activism helped to get more aware of environmental justice - Being climate active makes you reflect upon things	4
3. The Motivation Behind Becoming Climate Active	... the driving force that stimulates, directs		31

	and sustains Engaging into Climate Activism		
Sub-theme: <i>Past-oriented motivation</i>	... drive to be climate active, originating from past experiences, memories or achievements	- Having gained knowledge from courses as motivation to become active - Past memory as motivation to get active - Climate active because of the thread of CC - Being surrounded by people with same motivation to act for the climate	12
Sub-theme: <i>Present-oriented motivation</i>	... drive to be climate active, originating from current needs and desires	- Love for nature as motivation to become active - Curiosity as motivation to become active - Climate active because of the thread of CC - Being surrounded by people with same motivation to act for the climate	10
Sub-theme: <i>Future-oriented motivation</i>	... drive to be climate active, originating from the focus on achieving future outcomes	- Vision of future as motivation to get active - Being active because of will for better future - Climate active because of the thread of CC	9
4. Climate Activism Goals	... creating objectives, the women seek to	- Conservation of nature as underlying goal of being active	13

- achieve through their climate activism efforts
- Environmental justice in communities as climate action goal
- Increasing awareness about environmental justice as climate action goal
- Empowered communities as climate action goal
- Being active because of will for better future

5. Focusing on Environmental Justice

- ... advocating for the fair and equitable distribution of environmental benefits and burdens
- Climate active by advocating for climate justice
- Blending environmental justice with social, economic, racial justice
- Building communities based on environmental justice
- Increasing awareness about environmental justice as climate action goal
- Environmental justice in communities as climate action goal
- Visiting class about environmental injustice
- Climate activism helped to get more passionate about environmental justice
- Climate activism helped to get more aware of environmental justice

6. Difficulties while Being Climate Active	... encounter obstacles, preventing oneself to continue being climate active	- Challenge of making a change for the climate - Creating balance between climate activism and private life - Feeling of not doing enough - Being climate active can be depressing	12
7. Facilitating Climate Activism	... personal - and environmental factors that facilitate climate action	- Staying focused helps to get climate active - Use of personal skills helps to get climate active - Communities as support in being climate active - Being surrounded by people with same motivation to act for the climate - Being emotional as a strength in climate activism - Grounding oneself helps to engage in climate activism - Focusing on positive effects of climate action helps to continue with being climate active	10

Note. CC = Climate Change

Positive Attitude Towards Climate Activism

(Frequency: 31)

In the online stories, the women describe their climate activism experiences as meaningful since it provides a sense of purpose, responsibility and ability to mitigate the consequences of climate change for them. It is expressed to have recognized the urgency and gravity of the climate change issue and therefore, regard climate activism as an essential and necessary part of stopping it.

Besides that, they believe in the meaning of activism performed by communities. In their opinion, people in communities strengthen each other by pooling their resources, knowledge and skills to take collective action. Within the theme, they frame communities as providing a supportive and empowering environment for individuals to take action. Nevertheless, some of the women contradict this by stating that climate activism needs to go beyond single climate-active communities and should rather be “a global and all-inclusive effort”.

The following extract from “Caroline” shows an example of the theme.

Once we got the ball rolling, we talked for hours about good news in the climate movement. Eventually, we brought the conversation around to mutual aid, community care, movers and shakers laying down the groundwork for change, and organizations around the globe innovating ways to mitigate and solve our climate issues.

Most importantly, we left the conversation on a better note than when we started it, which is the best you can do. Since then, he’s pushed me into the position of reluctant climate optimist. I’ve gathered articles, infographics, videos, and studies to prove that, against all odds, things are going to be okay.

In the extract, Caroline underlines the positive impact climate activism has. Climate activism is framed as meaningful because of its implied effort to reduce the magnitude of climate change. However, as it is presented in the extract, being climate active is not only meaningful because of its achievements but also because it improves one’s own mood when talking about it. Talking is displayed as a means of dealing with climate activism. Speaking about the positive effects of climate activism leaves someone feeling happier afterwards as it is emphasised in the extract. Thus, the text extract underlines the meaningfulness of having conversations about climate activism besides the meaningfulness of climate activism for the environment.

Changes in Personal Life Caused by Climate Activism

(Frequency: 19)

In the online stories, the women describe the changes that climate activism has brought for them personally. Here, the authors have in common to have engaged in climate activism already since being active is depicted as if it was carried out in the past. Climate activism is portrayed as having the power to change lives. These experienced changes vary from each other due to the differences in their impact on the author's lives. Among the theme, three different subthemes could be identified based on the women's construction. The three subthemes resemble the main theme in the sense of having experienced personal development due to engaging in climate activism. However, personal development is not only displayed as introducing positive changes but also includes negative aspects or experiences as well such as feelings of depression.

Unlike the main theme, the first sub-theme specialises in moments of insight as change activism brought. They constructed their personal insights as having gained a deep understanding of something that was previously unknown. For example, engaging in non-profit organizations" ... has given me the tools to reflect on my own experiences in a new light." Across the subtheme, the women demonstrate personally grown due to experiencing these insights.

The second subtheme differs from the main theme as it specialises in the experience of mixed emotions after having been active. Some women have the impression that their climate actions do not make a difference and that more activism would be needed to change something. They report a feeling of uselessness. Besides this feeling of not doing enough, they expressed a feeling of relief, at seeing other people engaging in climate activism. Overall, most of the women report that positive feelings predominate after having been climate active as they claim to always have a good conscience advocating for the planet.

The third subtheme deals with the women's descriptions of the effect climate activism have on their way of thinking. Climate activism is conceptualised as encouraging to think critically. They outlined being keen to educate themselves further about topics they have encountered personally in their past. For instance, one author demonstrated an interest in figuring out more about environmental justice because she grew up in an "underprivileged, predominantly Black neighbourhood...]" in which she made her own personal experiences with environmental injustice.

At points, work I was doing within my major felt more like doomsday prepping than helping in any way. I even had one environmental science professor sit the class down and suggest

we all find therapists as we digest the sobering reality of our future... Spending several weeks of the summer engaging with community members within and surrounding MCA² enveloped me in a feeling of relief To be part of something so much bigger than myself was humbling and gratifying, which is a feeling I now carry with myself wherever I go. Being an environmentalist now may be more scary than it was when I was in second grade, and more complicated than when I was in high school, but it has brought me closer to the communities that I love belonging to and the work I want to be doing for the rest of my life.

In the main theme, it was pointed out that climate activism affects author's lives meaningfully as "Caroline" declares in the abstract above as well. In the extract, the change activism can introduce in one's own personal life is conveyed by experiencing feelings of helplessness and powerlessness that develop into feelings of empowerment by becoming part of a group. Being part of the group is portrayed as the positive change climate activism brought into Caroline's personal life. The extract shows a moment of insight by realising that climate activism, more precisely engaging in groups improves the well-being as it is experienced as "humbling and gratifying" to belong to a community.

The Motivation Behind Becoming Climate Active

(Frequency: 31)

In the online stories, the women describe their climate activism experiences by mentioning their motivation behind getting active. The theme of motivation was frequently displayed compared to other themes (see Frequency of 31) since it is constructed as playing a crucial part in becoming or sustaining active. Within the theme, they display their motivation as driving them to either begin getting active or sustain being active. Therefore, some women describe being at the beginning of their climate activism experience and others have already been active.

Furthermore, they construct their motivation as an inner or outer drive by mentioning to be "pushed from the outer" or that their "inner is fuelled with a will" to be active. Besides constructing their motivation as an inner or outer drive, some women describe following their motivation as either actively deciding for it or more as an automatic drive which emerges from the habit of engaging in climate activism. For example, one author talks about her automatic drive to grow food because her family grew food for many generations. Across the theme, three subthemes could be identified based on the meaning-making of the authors concerning their

² Minneapolis Climate Action. For more information, see <https://www.mplsclimate.org>

motivation. All three subthemes resemble the main theme by dealing with the reasons behind getting active.

The first subtheme is distinct from the main theme by dealing with a type of motivation, developed from author's experiences made in the past. Often, this past-oriented motivation is reported as having decided to commit oneself to one specific topic in the climate change debate. For example, one author mentions being motivated to make the climate space accessible for women and people of colour due to her past experience of feeling not empowered as a person of colour who identifies as a woman.

The second subtheme of present-oriented motivation also differs from the main theme due to specialising in motivation, developed from situations, currently experienced by the women. For example, the women express to have recognized the urgency of acting since the climate crisis is omnipresent, not only in the media but also in real life. They talk about how they observed natural disasters in their homes or the destruction of nature through the construction of new buildings.

The third subtheme of future-oriented motivation can be distinguished from the main theme as it refers to a motivation, developed by having a vision of a better future. They describe how their image of a "better world" motivates them to act. Especially, it was often mentioned to feel motivated by "hav [ing] the will" to protect the future generation from the climate crisis.

"Zoe's" account below demonstrates the motivation behind becoming an "advocate for our planet" and thus represents the main theme of the motivation behind being climate active.

As I grew older and have seen how time and time again our expansion has taken more, it has made me not only a conservationist, but an advocate for our planet. Learning about how locally we put profit and "progress" over people and environment led me to what I do today.

In the abstract, climate change is constructed as a human-made expansion which is growing and thus, "tak [ing] more" of nature over time. In the extract, this expansion served as motivation to get active. Climate activism is conceptualised as protecting the environment from this expansion.

A further motivation for becoming active is having gained knowledge about environmental injustice which shows itself by "put [ting] profit and 'progress' over people and environment". Learning about the consequences of the climate crisis is framed as motivation to be active.

Climate activism goals

(Frequency: 13)

In the online stories, the women describe their climate activism experiences by mentioning their goals, set for the future. The different goals vary in their attainability, depth, topic and who created them. They constructed the goals as ideal situations, laying in the future.

When taking a closer look, the women describe the goals as guiding their climate activities since focusing on them helps to stay motivated. They mention feeling highly committed to completing their planned actions as they see themselves as responsible for achieving their goals. The women who present their goals convey the image of being optimistic and hopeful towards the future. “Tina’s” example below represents the meaning of goals for being climate active.

So I thought to myself, how could I not only increase awareness of environmental justice within our communities but also encourage and position our communities to find their voice in environmental justice?... But I won’t stop until climate justice is normalized in our communities—until all communities are aware of climate justice and feel empowered to stand up for their communities.

The text extract was chosen as it conveys the importance of goals in giving climate activism direction. It creates the impression that the highest goal to achieve in the environmental justice debate is communities “stand [ing] up” for more climate justice. Raising awareness about environmental justice is illustrated as a secondary concern next to the necessity of “encourage [ing] and position [ing]” the communities. Hereby, empowering communities to stand up is described as playing a more significant role than raising awareness of the climate crisis. The goal of empowering to get active and raising awareness are displayed independently from each other as if they would have nothing to do with each other. Moreover, climate justice is presented as the ultimate goal, becoming clear by using the powerful expression “I won’t stop until climate justice is normalized”.

Focusing on Environmental Justice***(Frequency: 23)***

In online stories, the women often describe their climate activism as engaging for environmental justice. Within the theme, they commonly mentioned to have turned environmental justice into their personal issue for which they act, especially when having been affected by environmental injustice in the past. Different reasons for focusing on environmental justice are outlined. The women who identify themselves as a woman of colour are emphasised

to be disproportionately affected by climate change. In the narratives, it is mentioned that the communities in which the women grew up are not able to deal with the consequences of climate change due to limited access to resources, lack of political power and the partial capacity to cope with extreme weather events. The women frame climate change as being deeply connected to their own experiences of injustice and inequality which motivates them to engage in environmental justice.

Other climate activists define environmental justice as “putting profit over people” by prioritizing short-term financial gains over the long-term health and well-being of people and the planet. It leaves the impression as if they hold the system responsible for “putting profit over people”.

The extract below is an example of how the women experience climate change as reinforcing inequality.

There were so many resources that were lacking in my old neighbourhood, where so many Black and Brown children grew up, including me. Why were we less deserving of resources that promote better environmental health and access to nutritious, fresh foods? Looking back, it was this lesson that embodied so much more than textbook learning; it was relevant to my personal experiences, and I saw myself, and my community in it. I began to view everything through the lens of environmental justice. I began to wonder and imagine what a more just world would look like. I developed a deeper awareness of environmental justice.

“Emma” talks about being personally affected by environmental injustice in her past. In the text extract, climate activism is presented as a means of advocating for more environmental justice. Furthermore, it is outlined that personal experiences with climate change teach one more than theoretical “textbook learning” in understanding the consequences of climate change. Being confronted with climate change by personally experiencing it is framed as starting point to perceive the whole climate change issue “through the lens of environmental justice”. Overall, it is described that a central problem of the climate crisis is the unfair distribution of resources depending on skin colour. Climate change and racism are displayed as interconnected issues and mutually influence each other.

Difficulties while Being Climate Active

(Frequency: 12)

The women describe climate activism as difficult. However, the experienced difficulties are more constructed as challenges, which the women are confident to master according to their statements. The representation of difficulties varies among the stories. Some women describe difficulties, experienced in the past and some are currently dealing with them. Others mention feeling low because of the constant confrontation of the climate crisis. For example, one author talks about the permanent awareness of the climate crisis and describes it as “...hearing this is scary; it stresses me out, and makes me want to cry, ...”. It is mentioned to feel pressured because engaging in climate activism is “deeply important work”. They display feeling hopeless and demotivated when thinking about the endless way to go towards climate neutrality. In addition, certain women construct their experiences with discrimination as difficult. The people who identify as women of colour describe their way into the climate space as complicated as they first needed to “...fight...” to be taken seriously. “Maddy” describes feeling challenged by dealing with multiple different tasks at once.

As I was trying to valuably contribute to COPAL³, I was also juggling a demanding job as a chef, and living at home helping my family. With these different commitments, I was confronted with the challenge of wanting to meaningfully commit myself to the values of Environmental Justice, but also having to survive within and on the systems I am so ingrained within. Therefore, a personal component of my work with COPAL this summer was my goal of creating a realistic balance between life and activism—just as they balance so many of their own initiatives and projects.

Maddy constructs climate activism as important and thus, she would like to “...meaningfully commit [herself]...” to it. However, this commitment to climate activism is portrayed as demanding since it requires constant effort, dedication and perseverance over an extended period. Furthermore, it is underlined that climate activism comes with a sense of accountability and responsibility as well as requiring individuals to prioritise certain activities. Nevertheless, as is typical for the theme, the difficulty is depicted as a challenge because in the extract the

³ Communities Organizing Latino Power and Action. The organization is located in Minnesota and mobilizes people to bring social, economic and political change. For more information, see <https://copalmn.org/en/about-us/>

goal of “creating a realistic balance between life and activism” and being confident to overcome this difficulty of “juggling” with many daily tasks is illustrated.

Facilitating Climate Activism

(Frequency: 10)

In the online stories, the women describe their climate activism experiences by mentioning specific tools that facilitate their activities. I introduced the term “tools” within this theme to label the resources, the women described as supporting to stay climate active. An example of a tool is emotions as it is described as a “strength” to empathize with the community of North Minneapolis in which some of the women are living. Besides using emotions as a bridge to connect with the own community, the community itself is presented as having a facilitating function as well by inspiring and encouraging the women to continue with their climate activism. They describe climate activism as easier to conduct if they are using their individual tools. They display that talking with other people makes them aware of potential facilitators. Knowing about tools that facilitate climate activism is portrayed by the women as soothing and comforting in times of the climate crisis. “... leaning on community ...” as facilitating mentions “Laura” in the text extract below.

It motivates me to stay focused and use my skills to facilitate and enable action to combat this crisis as best as I can until 2030 and beyond by leaning on community. I remind myself that others share this convoluted mix of emotions too: fear, anger, hope, optimism, disappointment, joy. I am not alone. We are not alone in doing our part individually and as a collective to identify our role(s) in this uphill battle and take action.

In the above extract, Laura describes climate activism as playing a central role in “combat [ting] this crisis”. She frames climate activism as an individual and collective “uphill battle” which leaves the impression, that she perceives climate activism as an effort. However, Laura Atthighlights individual tools, facilitating her to carry out climate activism. She constructs the “community” as a prop to lean on in order to overcome “this crisis”. Moreover, staying focused and using her skills are displayed as helping her in being climate active as well.

Furthermore, she is also putting herself in the context of others by underlining “I am not alone” in experiencing climate activism as an “uphill battle” and inferring from “I am not alone” to “We are not alone”. It seems as if Laura talks to a collective and wants to call them for action.

Utilizing the powerful metaphor “uphill battle” for climate activism creates the image of a battlefield, where climate activists fight against the enemy of climate change.

Discussion

I found seven different themes related to the women’s meaning-making of climate activism. Their meaning-making of climate activism is based on their personal experiences with it.

Overall, the results of this study demonstrate a variety of ways of presenting climate activism in the context of online stories on a green blog, written by women, living in the United States of America. All the themes have in common that climate change is depicted as a threat, destroying nature as well as the future of the following generations. Especially, in the themes “Difficulties while Being Climate Active”, and “Positive Attitude Towards Climate Activism” the anxiety is emphasised that has been developed by being daily confronted with the consequences of the climate crisis in the media. As the war narrative compares climate change with war, introduced at the beginning of the study (Flusberg et al., 2017; Kramar, 2023), some women draw similar parallels by comparing climate change with a battlefield. In the theme “Changes in Personal Life Caused by Climate Activism” they explain to have developed this view on climate change by having acquired knowledge about it. This is in accordance with the suggestion of Hungerford and Volk (1990), who proposed that having gained knowledge about climate change leads to an increase in awareness about its issues and thus, to the attitude of classifying climate change as catastrophic. However, unlike Hwang et al., (2000) who state that knowledge is gained through solely education, most of the women also report having gained their climate change knowledge by personally experiencing its impact. They declare to have grown up in vulnerable populations like communities of colour or indigenous communities that bear a great burden of environmental hazards, pollution, and degraded environments. Thus, they personally experienced the impact of climate change and consequently, demonstrate to feel anxious and frustrated.

In the theme “Difficulties while Being Climate Active” this climate change anxiety is described as hampering the ability to engage in climate activism as they report no longer seeing the point in their actions. This result is in line with the finding of previous research, suggesting that severe levels of climate change distress and depressive symptoms may impede climate change actions (Fritze et al., 2018; Hrabok et al., 2020; Latkin et al., 2022). Nevertheless, besides describing climate activism as a challenging and overwhelming experience, in the theme “Facilitating Climate Activism” and “the Motivation behind becoming Climate Active” the support of the communities they are engaging in is depicted as making a significant

difference by helping them to feel empowered and motivated to continue with their climate activism. According to the women's descriptions, low feelings decrease and rather a feeling of relief arises after having exchanged with other climate activists. In the narratives it was emphasised to feel less low if they know about other people, sharing the same feelings as them. It reflects the term communal coping, defined as a group of affected persons coping with a shared stressor such as the climate crisis (Hrabok et al., 2020; Afifi et al., 2012). Overall, the communities are constructed as providing emotional support by encouraging the women to express feelings of hopelessness, anxiety and depression and simply listening to their concerns.

Although being embedded in a community that facilitates their climate activism, they avoid leaning entirely on the community in activism-related topics. In the themes "The Motivation Behind Becoming Climate Active" and "Climate Activism Goals" they describe having an accurate idea of how to engage in climate activism individually. Here, the above-mentioned concept of self-efficacy plays a role since the women believe in their own capability to produce desired results through individual actions as Bandura (1977) defined it. In the most common theme "Positive Attitude Towards Climate Activism", the authors report believing in their individual climate actions and describe being convinced that their activities are effective. This finding is opposed to the result of the study by Jugert et al. (2016), who state that individual climate actions do not have any effect if they remain merely personal. Jugert et al. (2016) suggest that individual climate activism is only effective when engaging in a collective movement. Nevertheless, they mention being active in a collective as well but here they still highlight their individual contributions. This way of highlighting their individual power contrasts the mentioned-above perspective of FFF and other climate protection movements which states that climate activism needs to be shifted from the individual to the state (van Eck & Feindt, 2021). However, there might be a link between the women's presentation of powerful individualism and living in the Western world since Siperstein (2016) states that portraying the climate crisis as solvable by individual lifestyle management solutions is a common tendency in Western discourses. Furthermore, this self-confidence in their activism could also be one reason why they rarely mention in their stories to identify as women. Previous literature state that people especially emphasise their female gender when underlining a vulnerable position in the climate activism debate (Arora-Jonsson, 2011). In the narratives, only two women mentioned the fact that identifying as a woman is more challenging to find one's own way in the climate activism space. For example, one woman mentions that her "work [she] do[es] now is inspired by challenges [she] ha[s] faced as a young woman of colour". Due to the research of

Arora-Jonsson (2011), it might be that the other nine women do not want to represent themselves as more vulnerable. They might want to be taken seriously, which often does not occur when they point out to be a woman (Arora-Jonsson, 2011).

Besides believing in the meaning of individual actions alone, some of them report to have also recognized the power of collective actions. Within the theme “Facilitating Climate Activism”, the women mention connecting with other climate activists to act on a larger scale. For example, they talk about the cancellation of projects that would destroy nature due to the protesting of collectives. The above-mentioned concept of collective efficacy can be observed here as the women describe believing in the groups’ ability to be climate active through collective action (Bandura, 1977). The contrasting notion of presenting climate activism as something highly individual and as something that is carried out in a collective might be explained by their way of growing up in more vulnerable populations. People who grew up in vulnerable populations like communities of colour or indigenous communities learn how to rely on one another for support, resources and mutual assistance. Furthermore, they learn how to be active in a collective and how to cope with difficulties in a group (Bordas, 2016). Even though the women live in the Western world, many of them have grown up in vulnerable communities that perceive collectivity as important. Overall, the women believe in the positive change that climate activism can cause, whether it concerns their own individual actions or collective ones.

Limitations and Future Implications

Although the current research provides valuable information about the descriptions of climate activism experiences, a number of limitations need to be acknowledged. To elaborate, a small-scale qualitative design was used which represents a limitation itself. It prevents generalizing the findings due to its focus on a specific group, context, and small data set. The current study is based on a group of women, with most of them having the same socio-demographic background. Since the blog is managed by the organization “Climate Generation” based in Minnesota, the authors are active there and thus, represent a certain part of the world population wherefore the transformative power of the results of this study should be considered critically. It is not possible to generalize the findings to global activism because the content is rather one-sided and refers mainly to local activism. Besides being active in the same city, they report obtaining a similar education that is environment related which is why further research should investigate how people with a different education describe climate activism. It could contribute to a more inclusive and holistic understanding of climate activism experiences. Another limitation is that the authors are only assumed to identify as women by the picture, the

use of the pronoun “she” in the introductory text and the name. However, I can only be sure about the identity of three women. One of them used the pronoun “she/her” which is an indication of her gender identity as a female and the other two wrote in her stories about identifying as women. For future research, it is suggested to ask the authors for their gender identity when the possibility exists. Additionally, the stories are predominantly written in a persuasive style since the aim of the blog aims to inspire and mobilize people to take action. It shows itself, particularly by presenting climate activism as a solution to the climate crisis and using expressions such as “We can do it”, “We are not alone”, or “We will fight”. However, by applying persuasive language, the danger exists of selectively presenting information to support a particular viewpoint while ignoring or downplaying other perspectives. It might be that tactics are used to convince people to engage such as exaggerating the severity of the problem or applying fear tactics to elicit a response (Mulholland, 2003). Furthermore, collecting all the narratives from the same source provides on the one hand an advantage and on the other hand can be seen as a limitation. All narratives were selected from a green blog where users share the same opinion of believing in climate change. Thus, the content is more one-sided which can lead to the development of an echo chamber (i.e. users may find themselves surrounded by like-minded individuals and isolated from diverse opinions). Hence, a more multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary research approach could be provided.

Considering the research’s focus on a specific gender, future research might investigate the differences in describing climate activism between different gender groups, for example, people who identify as men or transgender. As it was illustrated in the results, the women describe to particularly care about environmental injustice in their communities. In previous literature, it was underlined that women tend to be compassionate, caring and inequality-averse (Eagly, 1987, as cited by Altunbas et al., 2022). Here, it could exist a possible correlation between the female authors and their behaviour of advocating for injustice. Nevertheless, it is absolutely necessary to study this in more detail in the future. According to feminist literature, women tend to be more empathic which makes them more likely to engage in action and environmentally friendly behaviours (Altunbas et al., 2022; Atif et al., 2021; Ergas et al., 2012;). Being empathic as a climate activist allows one to connect with others, address diverse perspectives and advocate for climate justice (Baldwin et al., 2022). Therefore, it would be crucial to research in the future how much care and empathy influence the experience of climate activism and consequently, to what extent these experiences differ from the ones of other genders.

Moreover, the women describe feeling empowered by believing in the efficacy of their own climate actions. Empowerment is a central part of positive psychology, for example, it is represented in the Self-Determination Theory by being rooted in psychological needs such as control, agency and competence (Budziszewska & Głód, 2021). These compounds are crucial for psychological well-being and resilience. Budziszewska & Głód (2021) emphasizes that activism comes with not only positive growth but also mental health problems from a potential imbalance to burnout. Therefore, it is crucial to investigate how empowerment could be used as a technique to strengthen psychological well-being and resilience to resist mental health problems in the age of climate crisis.

Conclusion

This study explored how women describe their personal experiences with climate activism in online stories. In the findings, it stood out that climate activism is framed as essential and meaningful to mitigate the climate crisis. However, it was also framed as meaningful on other levels besides mitigating climate change. The women mentioned being able to connect better with their community, to overcome feelings of stress and powerlessness and instead cultivate a feeling of commitment to protecting nature and people from the drastic change on the planet. The thesis showed that their way of framing climate activism is often linked to the origin of the women, as they either highlight their individual power due to living in the Western world or the power of being active in a group due to growing up in communities that value collectivity a lot. Overall, the author's descriptions of their experiences with climate activism had all in common that climate activism can make a difference, personally and for the planet.

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Appendix A

Used Online Narratives

Narrative 1

The actions we take today matter. What I do matters.

Sometimes, I feel I am not doing enough or that even if I am doing as much as I can, that my actions are not making a meaningful impact. According to the United Nations, to prevent the global temperature from rising past 1.5 degrees C — as called for in the Paris Agreement — we need to reduce global emissions by 45% by 2030 and reach net zero by 2050.

Honestly, hearing this is scary; it stresses me out, and makes me want to cry, but it also makes me value time even more. It motivates me to stay focused and use my skills to facilitate and enable action to combat this crisis as best as I can until 2030 and beyond by leaning on community. I remind myself that others share this convoluted mix of emotions too: fear, anger, hope, optimism, disappointment, joy. I am not alone. We are not alone in doing our part individually and as a collective to identify our role(s) in this uphill battle and take action.

I am an Indian immigrant to the US and grew up watching shows and news on BBC. While *Globe Trekker* started teaching me about the cultural and historical elements of different countries, BBC News informed me about the varying economic, social, and political situations across the world. This made me very aware of my privilege from an early age. In addition, I grew up with a very active YWCA in my community, which provided us essential programs such as aftercare, language classes, and community gatherings. They helped teach me the importance of giving back to and being there for one's community. Being born in the global south but raised in the global north has been an interesting journey because the Indian and American cultures and lived experiences are so different.

However, as a young Indian-American woman, I recognize all of the opportunities I have at my fingertips through a combination of hard work, luck, my upbringing, my community, and location. We do not choose who we are born to or where we are born, and those circumstances should not bind us to one way of life versus another. Nowadays, I use my privilege to increase fairness and justice within the climate space. I want young people everywhere to dream of their best lives with the confidence that they can achieve them. I want people everywhere to treat each other with respect, kindness, and dignity. I did not always use my privilege in this way. Because of my upbringing, I thought I wanted to become a

pediatrician for the longest time. However, in high school, as I was exposed to a greater range of classes and extracurriculars and learned more about the lifestyles of different career paths, I quickly started questioning my allegiance to pediatrics. I applied to half of my colleges as a neuroscience/ cognitive science major because I wanted to understand why we make the decisions we make and on the other half I applied as an international studies major to better understand the human operations and interconnectedness of the world. I ultimately graduated with degrees in Economics and International Studies, with a focus on justice, ethics, and human rights because these subjects helped me better understand why the world and its systems are the way they are. I have been active in community service since I was 13 years old, initially in the education and community development sectors. However, after attending the 2018 Global Climate Action Summit (GCAS) in San Francisco during my final year of college, I knew that the climate space was where I needed to be. I have been interested in the United Nations since high school, so I joined the United Nations Association of USA and when I saw the opportunity to attend GCAS, I went for it. My love for the outdoors, previous classes like environmental economics and remote sensing, and interest in the United Nations prompted me to use my savings and go, and that decision has redirected my life. To me, climate change is intellectually stimulating because of its identity as the grandest collective action problem of our time, and I want to help address the complexity from a justice angle. I have been directly and more intentionally involved in the climate justice space since 2018. My work now focuses on increasing youth participation in decision-making, using storytelling to uplift young leaders and inspire action, strengthening emotional resilience of young leaders, designing funding mechanisms that center the needs of those most impacted, and more! The work I do now is inspired by challenges I have faced as a young woman of color finding my way in the climate space and the vision I have of a more coordinated and just movement.

Narrative 2

Right eye (R); -0.25, Left eye (L); -0.3

Squinting apprehensively at the remarkably slow clock, I was convinced that time was the slowest it had ever been. My brittle teeth and quivering lips begged for an escape as I muttered, “breathe,” my subconscious pleaded for me to just answer the question until the entire classroom was submerged with a wave of laughter. Traumatizing.

I grew up listening to heroic tales about undoubtedly paving one’s career path from a young age.

Yet as a kid, I was never able to set an anchor on where I saw myself in the future, solely because no matter how hard I tried, words stubbornly lost their way to my lips. The mere act of asking the waiter for a spoon or the cashier for my extra change was a nightmare. The vision that I held of the future was fundamentally impaired. Essentially, I chose to struggle through my problems if the solution involved confrontation. Meanwhile, the whole world waited on the back of my hand to “just answer the question.”

R; -0.5, L; -0.65.

In the midst of a meltdown, I knew something had to be done. Garnering the little hope and faith that remained within me, I sought out my next step. The difficulties I encountered in trying to locate my purpose amongst a sea of others who appeared to have done so long ago catapulted my determination.

R; -0.7, L; -0.7.

The weeks progressed and my journey of self-discovery slowly began to grow. But, as I glanced at the gateway of school, a bustling hive where time seemed to speed up for everyone except me, I oddly felt a cold shiver sweeping down my spine. I was anxious. Still, I forced a firm upper lip and rushed to the board of societies completely overtaken by the dilemma of whether this will be my newfound revelation or another opportunity of embarrassment.

“Looking for an International Renewable Energy Agency (IRENA) Youth Delegate”

I didn't identify myself as meeting the set criteria. Eye contact, clear tone, socially confident, the list went on. Yet, with a heightened pulse and a pounding heartbeat, I carefully wrote my name while hundreds of others hawk-eyed me intimidatingly. *“You have been selected to serve as a council member at the IRENA Assembly.”*

R; -1.5, L; -2.0.

I attended all the briefings, delegate meetings, and read all the obligatory materials that were said to provide “the appropriate level of required preparation.” Yet, nothing prepared me for the repetitive announcements about how “we will most likely not survive another decade on this earth.” Baffled with worry, I returned home and researched “what is a climate crisis?”

All I gathered from the plethora of resources I was presented with, was that we are dying.

I attended the second day of the conference, determined to ask one question, “What should I do?” Disappointingly, the first answer received was that I “was too young to understand such matters.”

Once again, the voice returned and repeated, “breathe,” and for the first time, I spoke up.

“It is simply not fair that we are privileged enough to be at such a high-end conference gathered with experts and policy makers that dare to speak on behalf of mine and many other vulnerable communities’ futures,” I said.

At that moment, I knew exactly where my future lay. I noticed how apparent the lack of empathy and compassion for others was, which created that barrier against resolving climate representation and awareness amongst underrepresented communities.

My community deserves to be represented. Marginalized voices deserve to be heard in the climate conversation.

Similar to my worsening eyesight, I realized how our current policy shapers’ vision of our future is completely impaired. Luckily for me, my vision of the future couldn’t be more vivid.

This vision pushed me to establish my own organization, EcoSpectrum, that focuses on a group that has never been considered or spoken about in climate discussions: youth on the spectrum of autism. Those on the spectrum are, without a doubt, one of the most impacted communities by climate change. This is why I decided to build a platform that aims to elevate their voices through accelerating the accessibility of climate and ocean literacy to youth on the spectrum, and youth with limited knowledge about climate change, because I believe that climate action should not be exclusive or limited to a particular community, but rather a global and an all-inclusive effort into actually making a difference, and pushing us all towards a much needed change.

Although I’m not a part of the community, I believe that you don’t have to be. Empathy is the core of the climate movement, and you can’t advocate for climate action, without being compassionate with those that suffer most from the lack of action by our policy makers in the climate crisis.

I no longer have the option to not “answer the question,” instead, I’ve become the voice pressuring those in the field to answer it too.

Narrative 3

In an Airbnb in Washington DC, I stood in a circle alongside a group of young people from around the country.

It was December 2018, about five months after our Youth Climate March on Capitol Hill. We were reflecting on our accomplishment of starting to build this youth-led movement focused

on climate intersectionality. Importantly, we were discussing our plans for the new year of climate action.

As I stood there alongside my now closest friends, I listened to our grounding facilitator as she said “close your eyes and go to the place that inspires you to keep fighting, the place that reminds you of home, and the place that grounds you.”

I could only think of one place: the river in front of my grandmother’s house in Egypt. I grew up around there.

I watched kids jump into it, mothers chatting by it, and fathers using it for their agriculture. It was a river that sustained the community. Equally important, it was grounding to me. It reminded me of many firsts: learning to ride a bike, playing card games with family at night, and watching small children swim for the first time. The river saw it all. Now, when I think about that river, I am reminded of why I have been advocating for a just and sustainable future for so many years. It’s simple: it reminds me of home. However, years later, that home has faced severe discoloration and water pollution to the point beyond recognition.

When I stand and think about my home being in danger, I actually cannot bear to stand and think any longer.

I am fueled with anxiety thinking about the possibility other young children won’t think of the river so fondly. I am fueled with passion to advocate for the community’s health and prosperity as their source of sustainability is polluted. I am fueled with a will to keep on pushing because this is my future, and as a young person, this story is personal. And, because it is so personal, at times it is hard to stay grounded. How can I ground myself when that very ground is being shaken by human caused consequences? Some days, I try to distract myself with school work or normal college activities. Others, I lie in bed dwelling, questioning, and feeling empty.

I have realized that grounding oneself is only the first step. It is important to recognize that the place that reminds you of home is constantly changing and you must change with it.

Therefore, I look back at the river as sheer motivation and, then, I start running.

I work on climate and health research in finding solutions and interventive policies to protect people from water-borne diseases and air pollution. I coordinate with climate activists around the world on planning local advocacy actions. Most importantly, I find myself grounded in the

future as young people push for a collective future. Because, right now, the only people that got us are us.

Narrative 4

Growing up in South Florida, my brother and I were always immersed in nature, bike riding around our neighbourhood that was less than a mile from the Everglades.

That gave us a chance to go canoeing and hiking, exploring different paths and on the lookout for alligators and snakes! We were also very lucky to go each weekend to the beach that was just 30 minutes away. I can still feel the cool breeze and the hot sand as we spent hours looking out into the various shades of green and blue of the waves and horizon. These experiences with our beautiful environment shaped the way I look at the world. I always found myself at peace climbing a tree or laying out on the grass imagining adventures in the clouds above. I learned how to watch for the beauty all around me and the amazing surprises that you experience when you slow down and explore. I never thought that what I experienced would one day not be around, that my children would not get a chance to do the things that I remember so fondly.

Now, when visiting the places that my brother and I would go, all I see is concrete houses with manicured lawns and palm trees that make these places look detached from the natural environment I remember. It makes me feel like we are trying so hard to erase the “chaos” of the Everglades because it gives us control.

In fact, over the last 100 years, the Everglades have shrunk to less than half their original size as agricultural and residential development in the region expands.

The process has been further accelerated over the last 30 years by the growth of the sugar industry and skyrocketing development of Florida’s east coast. As I grew older and have seen how time and time again our expansion has taken more, it has made me not only a conservationist, but an advocate for our planet. Learning about how locally we put profit and “progress” over people and environment led me to what I do today.

My experiences as a teacher for 12 years has shown me that we don’t value nature-based education and that our children don’t have the environmental literacy to understand why it is important to fight for our planet. Children, both my own and all the students that I have taught, show me why it is important to call attention to issues that can drastically change our future. Those beaches I went to as a child are now polluted and we have to check each time if they are safe enough to visit. Those trails and trees where I found myself are gone and have

been replaced by plastic or concrete structures that separate us more and more from nature. I believe in solving climate change and educating others on not only our local issues like extreme heat, natural habitat degradation, and pollution, but on national and international issues too. We must ensure that we give back to nature what it has given us — beauty, diversity, and life.

Narrative 5

Summers in Detroit were magical.

I would run up and down the streets of Santa Rosa Drive with all the other kids on the block — jumping rope, setting up our lemonade stand, and playing the infamous game of tag. To me, as a Black kid from Detroit, life was great.

Sure, the air didn't always smell the best and the streets were often polluted with waste, but this was Detroit after all. The Motor City, the city that provided factory jobs for so many Black families. Who was I to complain about the smog, who was I to complain about fossil fuels? It felt normal. It felt... like "Detroit."

But when I was 15, my father, a self-made entrepreneur, moved us to the suburbs. That's right, we had finally made it "out." The business that he had spent years building from the ground up finally broke through, enabling us to move to a nearby suburb. Though only a few miles away, this was the first time I felt like Detroit wasn't actually that great.

The suburb, just 12 miles north of where we lived in Detroit, looked completely different — felt completely different. The air felt clearer, the water tasted better, and even the streets looked cleaner. At 15, I thought, "how could this be?" We were only a short drive away from the place I once called home. I thought all kids' environments looked like my environment in Detroit.

People say change is good. But this change was different. The grass actually was greener on the other side of the fence. And I'm grateful, I always *will* be grateful. But what about the other kids who were still in Detroit? What about my family, my friends? My classmates who had no idea that the rest of the world's environment didn't look like Detroit?

My journey didn't end in the suburbs. My curiosity about the environment led me to go to school for environmental policy and then later to study public health. I needed to learn more about the environment, but more importantly, I needed to learn more about the effects it was having on communities, communities that were filled with people who looked like me, to be

exact. But that still never felt like enough for me. What good did it do if only *I* was aware of environmental and climate issues?

So I thought to myself, how could I not only increase awareness of environmental justice within our communities, but also encourage and position our communities to find their voice in environmental justice?

This led me to develop [Girl Plus Environment](#), a national nonprofit working to educate, engage, and empower Black and Brown girls, women, and non-binary folx to stand up for environmental and climate justice in their own communities. Today, I have reached over 20,000 individuals from Black and Brown communities across the U.S. But I won't stop until climate justice is normalized in our communities—until all communities are aware of climate justice and feel *empowered* to stand up for their communities.

Narrative 6

“And she came into the kitchen, her smile reaching from pigtail to pigtail, with a handful of little yellow flowers bunched together in a bouquet that she held out to me.”

This was the story that my grandmother told at all the family gatherings about the time when she had the earliest-season tomatoes on the block, the time when I picked each blossom to create this bouquet to give her. Being the generous loving soul that she was, she accepted the flowers with a thank you. I have zero memory of being chastised or punished.

I come from a long line of women who grew food to feed their families. My own family's garden was huge, and the chore list each morning in the Iowa summer was long and garden-centric. The smell of the giant crocks of fermenting pickles and the horror of exploding pressure canners are deep in my childhood memories.

So, I too grow food for my family and loved ones. And, I use regenerative practices as I was taught because I know that dirt is alive and soil health is everything. I keep a notebook of observations and ideas—it really is a grand experiment from season to season and year to year. I got hooked on seed saving from an amazing community of radical community gardeners from the Frogtown neighborhood in Saint Paul, MN. And, while seed swaps are opportunities to gather socially, I have learned so much about how seed saving is at the center of building a resilient local food system.

This summer the water barrels in my yard are empty. The storm clouds have blown over and around us all season. The small strips of remaining yard have only stayed green because they

are made up of broadleaf plantain, clover and creeping charlie, but even they are suffering. The strangest insect pests showed up this year, too—bugs that I haven't even been able to identify yet. While this corner of the Midwest is said to be the place to come to as the planet continues to warm, one of the few places we will be able to grow food, the climate crisis is already impacting my little backyard farm.

As I write, I know people and communities in places like Costa Rica and the Philippines are experiencing consequences that are far more devastating than an empty rain barrel.

My friend Sarah, a practitioner in the ecovillage movement, is currently organizing mutual aid responses to super typhoon Noru's devastation in the Philippines. A section of the Pan-American highway in Costa Rica will be closed for three months for emergency repairs following a landslide that claimed the lives of nine individuals; several other major routes are closed due to landslides after record breaking heavy rains. Locals are bracing for the indirect impact of hurricane Ian. It doesn't have to be this way.

I am a mother to three young adults. My son, 22 years old, regularly looks at me and wonders out loud how he should plan for his future, what he should aspire to in the long term, when in 20 years we are likely to be on a planet that cannot sustain life as we know it. My middle daughter at 24 is simultaneously fierce and unsure, and is yet unable to process how her transportation and fashion choices are impacting that very bleak future her brother anticipates. My eldest daughter, who lives and teaches in Los Angeles, California, suffers from long COVID-19 shortness of breath; I fear that fire season will exacerbate this. All three of them laugh at me when I talk about creating a community-reliant family compound on our little urban lot. I want them, and all young people, to be liberated from these very real fears and anxieties, to live with hope. I want us to figure this out, to put people before profits, and create together a resilient and regenerative future.

Narrative 7

I first learned about environmental justice my freshman year of college.

I had to take an environmental liberal education course because it was one of the only classes that fit into my busy schedule. The class was uninteresting to me, until one lesson on environmental racism. I was so shocked to learn that environmental racism was a form of systemic racism. How could the environment and racism even be correlated?

I learned so much in that lesson that resonated with me. Predominantly BIPOC communities contribute the least to pollution and climate change, however suffer most of their effects. As

one powerful historical example of this, “redlining,” which is a discriminatory practice, that created zones of injustice in the Twin Cities and elsewhere in the United States, labeling specific neighborhoods based on income and race, as unworthy of certain goods and services such as bank loans, and more susceptible to heavy industry and polluting sites, and the result often left predominantly Black and Brown communities more exposed to environmental toxins. Today, these same communities are still more likely to suffer chronic health conditions such as asthma, immune dysfunction, and even neurological illnesses.

I saw the ways that my life experiences were connected to the topics I was learning about. I began to reflect on the underprivileged, predominantly Black neighborhood I grew up in and the contrasts I noticed when we moved into a new home when I began high school, located in a predominantly white suburban neighborhood. There were so many resources that were lacking in my old neighborhood, where so many Black and Brown children grew up, including me. Why were we less deserving of resources that promote better environmental health and access to nutritious, fresh foods? Looking back, it was this lesson that embodied so much more than textbook learning; it was relevant to my personal experiences, and I saw myself, and my community in it. I began to view everything through the lens of environmental justice. I began to wonder and imagine what a more just world would look like. I developed a deeper awareness of environmental justice.

By 2021, a Spring break trip to St. Thomas virgin islands near the Caribbean Sea with one of my friends illustrated that possibility: I was working at my very first internship at the time with an environmental nonprofit organization, which helped me be more aware of and to feel more passionate about environmental justice. I feel like I brought this awareness and passion to the trip.

On the Island, we stayed at a local Airbnb that sat atop a steep hill and overlooked the whole island. The owners of the Airbnb were a couple who lived in the same place and rented out separate sections of their home for travelers. I asked them so many questions and received kind answers. I remember even asking them about how long they were together and them telling me a beautiful story of how they met.

I remember being captivated by St. Thomas’s beauty and culture; I loved every aspect of the island. People’s homes and buildings seemed to live amongst nature. I would stand on the balcony and could touch the leaves of the trees, watch the birds fly very closely past us and could pick a coconut just by standing on my tippy toes.

We kayaked down a river to a beach where we did some hiking and I remember that beach being so clean. Though I assumed every beach was littered with trash because of our global pollution issue, in St. Thomas, the only polluted beaches were those frequented by tourists. As I learned, island tourism and environmental pollution are heavily correlated. Further, many islands within the Caribbean are more susceptible to climate change, facing rising seas, ocean acidification, coral bleaching, more intense and devastating tropical storms, and sea level rises. Though I witnessed miles of murals that local youth painted along walls reading “protect our oceans” and picturing beautiful marine life, I also saw firsthand that many tourists don’t respect the places they are visiting.

Another surprising aspect of that trip was the feeling of being surrounded by many other Black people, and feeling relatively safe compared with life in Minneapolis. Black Afro-Caribbeans populate about 75% of The Virgin Islands. I didn’t experience the feeling of sticking out because of my race there at all and it felt amazing to see so many people who looked like me wherever I went.

I experienced a similar feeling of belonging only one other time in the United States. I remember being at the first Black market event in MN. It was the beginning of last summer and I had just begun my term as vice president of the “Black Motivated Women” student organization. I signed us up in hopes of giving our organization an opportunity to fundraise and network. The organizer of these markets is a wonderful Black woman who welcomes us to participate whenever we want. I was filled with the warmth of her kindness, but that was only the beginning.

We prepared for hours the night before making homemade cookies, cupcakes and cake jars from scratch. Once the event began, we were surrounded by so many people. They all asked us about our board’s mission and praised our hard work. It was the most remarkable feeling to come together with so many other Black people in Minnesota, when all of us are used to being the small minority within a predominantly white University. Everyone was supportive and compassionate. I had many conversations with other Black women in Minneapolis who had their own various passions ranging from providing inclusive skin and hair care products, to promoting nutritious drinks and dishes to our community. We gave away some free cupcakes and cookies to younger children while packing up and were offered free food from food trucks and samples from their parents’ booths in return. It was a wholesome experience and I felt inspired to continue working toward the inclusion of Black communities in spaces

and conversations where they are often left out, just as so many of the women I met were doing.

I often do work centered around advocacy for Black and East-African immigrant communities here because those are identities I hold.

However, my environmental justice internship at Tamales y Bicicletas helped to expand my thinking about the role I can play. Tamales y Bicicletas (TyB) is a Latinx-based nonprofit organization focused on tackling food insecurity and transportation inaccessibility in the East Phillips neighborhood. It's located in East Phillips, which is one of the most racially-diverse neighborhoods in Minnesota and also is experiencing the most racial health disparities due to the abundant toxic pollution within the region. Through my internship at TyB, I learned more about the issue of food insecurity, a lasting impact from redlining policies, and the ways that we as a community can come together to address it through urban farming, cultural empowerment in Latinx and immigrant communities. We are currently in the midst of finishing a deep winter greenhouse so we can begin seed trials and eventually provide access to fresh crops in the harsh winter months.

Working with TyB provided an opportunity to learn more about the Latinx community here in Minneapolis. It also has been a challenge finding where I fit within TyB. I have had to learn to take a step back to listen and learn, to branch outside of my circles and step outside of my comfort zone. I think it pushes me to play a role in helping to connect specific underrepresented communities more and how various immigrant communities and other marginalized groups interact and benefit from each other and can provide mutual support to each other rather than merely coexist. I am working on introducing more Somali organizations and community members to the farm and hope to see more immersion of these two immigrant communities. My experiences at TyB have made me want to learn more about Minnesota's Latinx history and community needs.

I have been grateful to experience a wide range of the environmental justice movement and participate in wonderful efforts that tackle environmental racism, racial health disparities and food insecurity. I hope to continue doing nonprofit work within underrepresented Black and Brown communities and work toward providing access to better environmental health and nutrition. I am also interested in pursuing a public health degree so I can improve health equity amongst underprivileged and underrepresented communities that experience racial health disparities around the globe. I would love to pursue this especially in regions of the Caribbean and Africa where there are large Black communities.

Narrative 8

During the summer of 2014, I visited family in Oromia, a region of Ethiopia home to the Oromo people.

We stayed in my grandmother's house (my mother's childhood home), which was right off the main road and located a few blocks away from a mountain range on the edge of the city. My father's childhood home was really close to the base of the mountains and growing up, he would enthrall us with stories from adventures there, and I had always wanted to visit. When he left the country, his house was one of the only buildings developed that close to the mountain. Now, over 20 years later, my siblings and I wanted to get a better look at the mountain we had heard so much about, so we decided to take a trip up the mountain with my mom and cousins (and some neighborhood friends that followed us). However, during our trip up, as we traveled higher, we could see more of the landscape below us, and we realized that the city had begun to expand outward with the last house placed almost halfway up the mountain; quite a different picture from the stories my dad told us. The higher altitude provided little comfort for twelve-year-old me as I was completely terrified of heights, refusing to go all the way up. My mom and youngest sister stayed behind with me at the middle point of the mountain where the houses ended and the rugged landscape began. As everyone else reached the peak, I stood there and looked out over the skyline, the city full of colorful homes and bustling with people. As we waited, I began to feel more at ease, and noticed the peaceful atmosphere around me. The sky was gray, the air was warm, we were surrounded by misshapen cacti, and I could hear the childish laughter of my siblings and our neighbors running up the mountain. Having been so used to the hectic sounds of the city below, the quiet was new but greatly appreciated.

I've always found immense joy in the natural world but as I've gotten older, I've found immense grief in it as well. Growing up in the United States with two Oromo parents, I was taught from a very young age to love my culture and my people and my language and my land with a fierceness that younger me shied away from but older me came to embrace wholeheartedly. During the entirety of my trip back home in 2014, the one consistent observation that always came to mind was how much love my people had. The love they had for each other, for strangers, for food, for culture, for joy, for everything the land had to offer and everything they could offer to the land...it was heart wrenching in the most beautiful way.

However, the love and generosity my people have for everything in this life doesn't erase the overwhelming loss and grief that we have experienced for generations.

Oromia used to be a sovereign nation until the end of the 19th century when it was conquered by Abyssinia, an African empire spanning current-day Ethiopia and Eritrea, under the rule of Emperor Menelik II. During this period of time, Menelik II set out to conquer inhabited lands to the west, south, and east of its current realm, creating the modern borders of Ethiopia. With the loss of sovereignty came repression, persecution, mass executions, and unfathomable loss on all fronts. In 1941, under the rule of Haile Selassie, the Oromo language was banned from use in education and political life. Our land and language and culture, the things we love and cherish so fiercely, were taken from us by force. The ban on our language remained for 50 years but we still fight endlessly for the land that was once ours upon which to live, govern, and grow with complete autonomy.

My experiences as an Oromo woman without a sovereign land is one rooted in injustice and the involuntary disconnection I have to my land has been a driving force for getting involved with the Environmental Justice movement. Learning more about Environmental Justice in college through my classes helped me to clarify these connections that I felt in my heart, to imagine what a more equitable world would look like. Here in Minnesota, learning about how Indigenous sovereignty and autonomy play a role in Environmental Justice and health, I was able to find a link between my academic interests and personal passions surrounding the environment, health, community, culture, and self-determination.

This summer, I worked with Roxxanne O'Brien, the co-founder of Community Members for Environmental Justice (CMEJ), an organization deeply rooted in injustice in North Minneapolis. North Minneapolis is primarily a low-income community of color disconnected from the waters of the Mississippi River, with multiple sources of pollution like roofing and metal recycling industries, which cut off access to the river and generate numerous environmental health issues for individuals living in the area. Unfortunately, this can be seen in many lower-income communities across the globe, as those who are least responsible for the unethical environmental practices of corporations are disproportionately affected by its harmful—and sometimes fatal—consequences.

CMEJ is involved in a variety of work related to Environmental Justice. This includes Environmental Justice Tours, the Climate Emergency Preparedness Initiative, and the Terrell Mayes Jr. Memorial Garden. They are also involved in policy work related to development surrounding Upper Harbor Terminal, a now-defunct barge shipping facility

located on 48 acres of land along the Mississippi River, and Northern Metals, a multinational corporation that operates a metal recycling facility in North Minneapolis. Though Northern Metals has moved its shredding operations to Becker, MN after community pressure, the Minneapolis facility still stores several types of combustibles. Both of these locations have caused unimaginable harm to the North Minneapolis community and its environment by polluting the air, water, and land, jeopardizing the health of the individuals living there. Throughout my internship, it's evident that so much of CMEJ's labor is fueled by the love and loss that North Minneapolis has experienced. In conversations I've had with Roxxanne, I've learned a lot about how important emotion can be in this line of work and have found great comfort in it. Whether it's joy or frustration or sadness or admiration, I've been able to understand that emotion is a strength when it comes to the Environmental Justice movement. Emotions allow one to feel and be human, to empathize with the community, to be sensitive and understanding, yet to also be passionate and dedicated and loud. A lot of CMEJ's initiatives have really resonated with me for that reason, especially Terrell's Garden. This garden was created in the name of Terrell Mayes Jr., a 3-year-old boy who was murdered by a stray bullet in front of his North Minneapolis home in 2011. The garden is not only dedicated to Terrell but also dedicated to other children that have been injured or lost their lives due to gun violence. Built by CMEJ, Juxtaposition Arts, and Marsha Mayes, the mother of Terrell Mayes, the garden provides a space for people to love, heal, grieve, and find solace through community and gardening.

Working with CMEJ these past couple of months has truly been memorable and has given me the tools to reflect on my own experiences in a new light. As I move along in the future, within the Environmental Justice movement and my personal life, I am positive that I'll be thinking a lot about this summer. I love everything about being Oromo, and I am grateful that working with CMEJ and seeing how dedicated they are to their community and the Environmental Justice movement has strengthened the love I have for land—for Oromo land—for sovereignty and autonomy, for joy and grief and anger, and for community.

Narrative 9

The St. Paul park Hidden Falls runs along the east side of the Mississippi and is a wonderful, mysterious place.

I always find a sense of wonder there, as I have since I began elementary school, visiting the park with my class. Every year, we walked there in the fall, picking furry, sour sumac berries,

jumping into puddles and damp beds of leaves. The Hidden Falls stream that runs parallel to the Mississippi contains a feeling I have loved my whole life, an aura held within its damp smell and the humid texture in the air. The path of the stream works its way down stepped wading pools and turns into the trees, to join with the Mississippi. The pools were my favorite part, and I would spend an hour jumping in and out of the water, which looked so clear—even though it was likely a dubious mixture of gutter chemicals and street-runoff.

Later in life, I would end up staying close to the river that had become so familiar in my childhood, to go to the University of Minnesota whose campus flanks the Mississippi.

Taking an environmental justice class at the University was the first time I started to understand how harmful our society truly is to the environment and to each other. The conversations we had in that class went beyond the more mainstream descriptions of climate change, global warming, and pollution. We learned about the devastation of the Earth, as well as the tragedies that have happened in our own communities and histories in the Twin Cities. I learned about the history and significance held in the banks along the Mississippi, which extends far beyond the bike trails and picnic benches found there now.

To the Indigenous peoples of Minnesota, the convergence of the Minnesota and Mississippi rivers—Bdote—is a deeply sacred place, the center of the Earth. Tragically, it is also a site of genocide against Dakota peoples, their sacred places stolen by the white settlers that founded the Twin Cities. It is vital for me to learn about this place where I have been able to live comfortably, ignorant of this terrible history, even as that tragic past is still present in the ways that Native peoples are discriminated against and harmed by our systems today. From learning about the layers of the past that have happened along those river banks, I realize how important it is to be conscious of the strong undercurrents of history beneath us that influence everything about our lives and experiences.

Learning about environmental justice through landmarks and waters I had known nearly my entire life, and recognizing the past of these landmarks and presence of the people who knew those places intimately before me, has been life-changing. I remembered the peace of being at Hidden Falls as a kid, and how the reality of that place had not been fully understood by me as I grew up. Hidden Falls Park and the Mississippi River symbolize violence to so many people, regardless of its green beauty. There is also the issue of access to greenspace within the Twin Cities, and the privilege of having Hidden Falls Park exist in a modern context as well. Because of these complexities, the simple stream I was playing in as a child can be seen as a greater symbol for being complacent and enjoying life as the injustices of our society

flow by. The space is beautiful, and rightly admirable in that beauty. But I appreciate it today with the awareness that it represents a contradiction about the world we live in, that sometimes complacency can be presented as comfort, and it comes as a reminder that many of us come from a privileged reality in an environmentally unjust world.

The more I have learned about our local EJ movement, the more I have realized that there is so much available for us to do, to join others to create a brighter future.

After processing this in class came the real challenge of getting involved in what I knew was deeply important work. That same semester, I was lucky enough to take a class on Latinx Immigration that gave me the opportunity of interning with Comunidades Organizando el Poder y la Accion Latina (COPAL), a Minneapolis nonprofit that directs resources and education to the Latinx community. This internship allowed me to watch how COPAL works in their community, offering community-building through grassroots organizing, holding justice and equity as their core values. I have learned so much by being involved in COPAL and seeing how they blend environmental justice with social, economic, and racial justice. They do work that builds a better world for a local community, finding joy in those connections, while recognizing and understanding the past injustices of the Twin Cities and organizing to change them.

I assisted with COPAL's media and environmental justice departments, contributing to their radio station and newsletter. For their radio, *Radio Jornalera*, I assisted in the studio and wrote short scripts for the radio's Environmental Justice program. I also helped do research in their media department, looking for relevant news that pertained to Environmental Justice in the Spanish speaking world. Lastly, I helped coordinate a team and set up a plan for a new podcast platform they hope to start.

As I was trying to valuably contribute to COPAL, I was also juggling a demanding job as a chef, and living at home helping my family. With these different commitments, I was confronted with the challenge of wanting to meaningfully commit myself to the values of Environmental Justice, but also having to survive within and on the systems I am so ingrained within. Therefore, a personal component of my work with COPAL this summer was my goal of creating a realistic balance between life and activism—just as they balance so many of their own initiatives and projects.

Even as I have improved on juggling these demands, I know I have to be more proactive in recognizing the injustices around me and work to erase them. It's something I'm struggling with as I write this, and I know I will continue to as I work my way through the University

system. My question is: *How do I make the switch from doing what's easy, going with the flow and participating in the society constructed around me, to throwing myself fully into activism?* I want to step into this work like I stepped into a stream as a kid, strong in the current, my toes enjoying the mud, fascinated by the way the water shifts and ripples around my presence. Instead, I feel like the grass that grows at the bottom of the stream, rooted in my own inherited whiteness and colonialism, being pulled whichever way the current takes me. The “current” is the demands by our colonial society I need to fulfill: the need to support myself financially, take care of my friends and family and myself. However, I remember that the simplicity of my childhood came from an ignorance of the places I enjoyed, and now I must continue with my activism with the full knowledge, curiosity, and responsibility it deserves.

Narrative 10

My elementary school was the unsuspecting home of my early environmentalism.

I remember the posters that adorned the hallways of the second grade classrooms, of polar bears on scant pieces of ice, sea turtles caught in ocean debris, orangutans clinging to fallen trees, and Mother Earth herself beside a red hot thermometer. Alongside these images were the typical slogans: *Save the Polar Bears, Save the Oceans, Save the Rainforests, Save the Earth!*

I remember going on walks around the elementary school on Earth Day, when the late April sun was just bringing the world back to life. We'd stumble about the green areas surrounding our school and talk about how the trees give us air to breathe and that it was important not to litter. Sometimes, we'd walk all the way to the lake and watch the fish swim circles around our feet. It was easy and simple to be an eight-year-old environmentalist, you mostly just had to like animals and going outside.

A couple weeks after Earth Day, a duck laid eggs in the bike rack right up against the school walls. She was only there for a couple of days before she abandoned her nest. We were, as second graders, collectively mad at the duck. How could she leave her eggs all on their own? A kindergarten classroom got an incubator for them, and we sat with hopeful anticipation for weeks on end. Even though mama left, most of the ducklings still hatched. It was the first time I'd seen anything like it and I learned a lot.

I learned that animals have incredible instinctual memories ingrained into their brains, and that ducks have been returning to this place to raise their young for centuries. I learned that it

used to be a wetland until the water was pumped out and a building was built on top of it. I learned that bike racks outside of where second graders eat lunch and play was not a good place to raise a duck family, and the duck probably got scared and had to leave. I learned that mom ducks and other animals are seldom the bad guys in these situations.

My youth was imbued with wonder. Watching ducklings hatch, admiring tadpoles as they sprouted legs, waiting for caterpillars to turn into butterflies, and witnessing the seasons constantly changing instilled a sense of awe and appreciation for the majesty of nature. I also felt a sense of responsibility. Human-caused tragedies reigned over natural environments, from ducks unable to return to their nesting sites to the destruction of the rainforests. Having, in one hand, the optimism of childhood wonder and, in the other, the harsh realities of our ecological crises, I left elementary school with a feeling about the environment that hasn't changed much since.

I was a staunch advocate for the environment from that time forward, troubling my parents with my refusal to eat meat, my aversion to buying new things, and my daily schedule of spending mornings knee-deep in the creek and afternoons scraping my knees while climbing trees.

As I grew older, my day-to-day routine may have changed, but I became stronger and stronger in my conviction. It wasn't until high school that I met other "Save the Earth" kids turned radical environmentalist teenagers. During these years, we joined some coalitions, planted some trees, spent time outdoors, and learned about the world through each other. I learned about cultural connections to land from my friends and their stories, from Anishinaabe and Dakota educators who taught us about their land which we occupy, and from my own cultural environmental connections through Tikkun Olam, the Jewish value of repairing the world. While the loudest, most dominant voices seek to separate people from the land and from their roots, beginning the process of expanding my knowledge of the cultural, social, and spiritual aspects of environmentalism opened a new world for me. Though polar bears and sea turtles were a more marketable group to rally for, the people around me helped me start to internalize the real impacts of environmental injustice. This was formative in the shaping of my perspective of environmentalism as I uphold it today, with people at the forefront.

In college, I went on to study environmental sociology, connecting the dots between environmental science and the ways in which it interacts with social systems. This is when environmental justice appeared in my life in a big way, as the overarching theme that guided

my college studies. Although studying something so important is gratifying, it certainly carries a weight with it. The knowledge that seemingly immovable social structures and unchangeable systems are directing the course of our earthly and human futures is a tough pill to swallow, and makes any effort to slow or change trajectory seem futile. At points, work I was doing within my major felt more like doomsday prepping than helping in any way. I even had one environmental science professor sit the class down and suggest we all find therapists as we digest the sobering reality of our future.

It was shortly after this class that I received a phone call at 1:00am from one of my best friends from high school. He told me that his girlfriend said the planet would become unlivable by 2040 and that, if our generation had children, it would be cruel to bring them into a dying world, so he was no longer having kids. He started to spiral into conspiracy and called me to keep his feet on the ground.

Having the climate crisis drilled into my brain for my entire life, it wasn't easy to sit down and list all of the things that were going *well*. But, we got there. The first thing I could think of was coral regeneration. For decades, scientists have been ringing alarm bells about global reefs dying, but, in recent years, marine biologists have made leaps in facilitating fast reef regeneration, helping to slow coral bleaching and provide support to desolate reefs. Once we got the ball rolling, we talked for hours about good news in the climate movement.

Eventually, we brought the conversation around to mutual aid, community care, movers and shakers laying down the groundwork for change, and organizations around the globe innovating ways to mitigate and solve our climate issues.

Most importantly, we left the conversation on a better note than when we started it, which is the best you can do.

Since then, he's pushed me into the position of reluctant climate optimist. I've gathered articles, infographics, videos, and studies to prove that, against all odds, things are going to be okay. He makes me remind him and, in turn, remind myself of all of the work that's been done to create the environmental justice movement as it stands, regardless of the daunting work ahead of us.

The road ahead of us is long, and it may be hard work, but it will also be joyful and awe-inspiring, and we know that whatever we can contribute will be worth our while.

Bringing this energy and mentality with me through the duration of my academic career as well as in my environmental work has helped me to keep my feet on the ground while fighting the good fight. It's through work like my internship at Minneapolis Climate Action

(MCA) that I'm able to feel authentic in my climate optimism, to know that there are people going to bat for accessible climate solutions, environmental justice, and community healing. Spending several weeks of the summer engaging with community members within and surrounding MCA enveloped me in a feeling of relief. In spite of all the obstacles, there are people who really care, who are making the phone calls, sending the emails, showing up to the meetings, and facilitating the conversations. To be part of something so much bigger than myself was humbling and gratifying, which is a feeling I now carry with myself wherever I go. Being an environmentalist now may be more scary than it was when I was in second grade, and more complicated than when I was in high school, but it has brought me closer to the communities that I love belonging to and the work I want to be doing for the rest of my life.

Narrative 11

I still remember when I got the call to be part of a COP26 delegation. I was wandering through the desert, experiencing for the first time a landscape completely opposite to what I knew.

I remember vividly the dry heat, the very blue sky, and me looking for shade to answer the call and fill out the paperwork from my cell phone.

I remember it because 2021 was a year of many firsts. Earlier that year I made the risky, but necessary, decision to take a leave of absence from my PhD. I had decided that, along with taking care of my health I was going to travel. One of the stops? The Grand Canyon, fulfilling a promise I made to myself almost 20 years before. Reconnected with nature and with free time on my hands, I also got fully involved with the coordination of the Citizens Assemblies aimed at having our own Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) of the Paris Agreement, made by the people and for the people of Puerto Rico.

But my climate story began way before that; even before I was aware of it. My mom tells everyone the story about how, at five years old, I wanted her to stop by the road to pick up the trash because I didn't want us to live on "la isla basura" ("the garbage island"). Little did I know, nor my mom, that the worry of not becoming "garbage island" would transform into a battle cry for our islands not to become disposable and for our right as islanders to stay and thrive in our homeland not to be dismissed.

I grew up in Rio Grande, a town in the northeastern part of the island of Puerto Rico. My town, which in English means Big River, is home and portal to one of our wonders: El Yunque National Rainforest. In fact, with 200 inches of rain a year, it is the only rainforest in the U.S. system. 20% of the island feeds off the rivers born within its mountains, which I could see each morning, enveloped in clouds, on my way to school.

I was living in paradise. But there's a catch; we have hurricanes.

I was eight years old when I lived through my first hurricane. With 115 mph winds, the Category 3 Hurricane George crossed the island from east to west. I remember we had to leave our old wooden house to stay with our grandparents, not knowing if our home was going to be there when we got back. Thankfully, it was. Despite the winds, the house only sustained minor damages.

We visited the river a lot after the event. For me, it was just a playdate with cousins when in reality it was the only way to wash clothes as water and electricity didn't come back for weeks. But resilient people as we are, we kept thriving, even in the struggle.

As I kept growing, always around rivers, I started falling in love with science and with understanding nature. I remember seeing pictures of the Grand Canyon, a whole landscape carved by water, then the Sahara Desert and the Amazon, and promising myself that one day I was going to visit all of those places. Entering middle school, I was certain, Planet Earth is an interconnected miracle, and to protect that miracle was to protect ourselves. But I wasn't an activist yet.

It wasn't until college that the activist in me bloomed. I became a college student in the midst of a profound economic crisis and the implementation of severe austerity measures that threatened our education, our jobs, our ecosystems, and our livelihoods. With plans for a pipeline construction already in place by the government, I needed to do something.

I was a sophomore when I participated in my first student strike and a junior for my first environmental protest against the pipeline. A few years later, I was conducting and facilitating meetings, organizing activities, mediating conflicts, navigating negotiations, giving speeches...skills that I still use today. The will of the people prevailed and the pipeline project was canceled.

The message was clear: activism works and together, not only can we defend ourselves, we can win.

When I started graduate studies, I was sure I wanted to work with communities. My experience taught me that, in community, we have the capacity to solve our problems, whether social or environmental. This became obvious during Hurricane Maria in 2017. What I remember the most about the night of that hurricane was the sound. The whole house was vibrating and there was this howl — like a monster was trying to rip the house apart. I was more scared this time than when I was eight years old. It was followed by months, without electricity, eight-hour queues for gas, not knowing about my family for weeks. This time around it was definitely worse. We were again washing clothes and taking baths in the river. I remember looking at El Yunque from afar, not having the courage to go in. It looked burnt. I cried.

Despite that and despite the grim climate change projections for the Caribbean, with more frequent and more intense hurricanes and with sea-level rise already impacting our coastal life, I'm still hopeful. Seeing communities come together, establishing community kitchens, clearing streets, and fixing each other's houses was a true display of resiliency and strength. Today, communities organized around the cleaning of their neighboring river are writing proposals to transition to solar energy. Communities that started maintaining their recreational areas now have reforestation programs. When our governments failed us, we identified what we needed, and we made it happen, even in the worst of circumstances. I was even more convinced; communities need to be in the forefront of climate action and they need to be supported in that process.

I'm going to [SB56](#), the U.N. climate change conference ahead of COP27, with the same conviction and the same message: communities are and need to be in the forefront of climate action, and governments should follow. Our ecosystems, our homes, and our lives depend on it.