

The College of Wooster

Open Works

Senior Independent Study Theses

2021

'It's Time For One of Us': A Feminist Rhetorical Analysis of Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez's First Term in Congress

Sarah Ives Hopkins

The College of Wooster, shopkins21@wooster.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://openworks.wooster.edu/independentstudy>



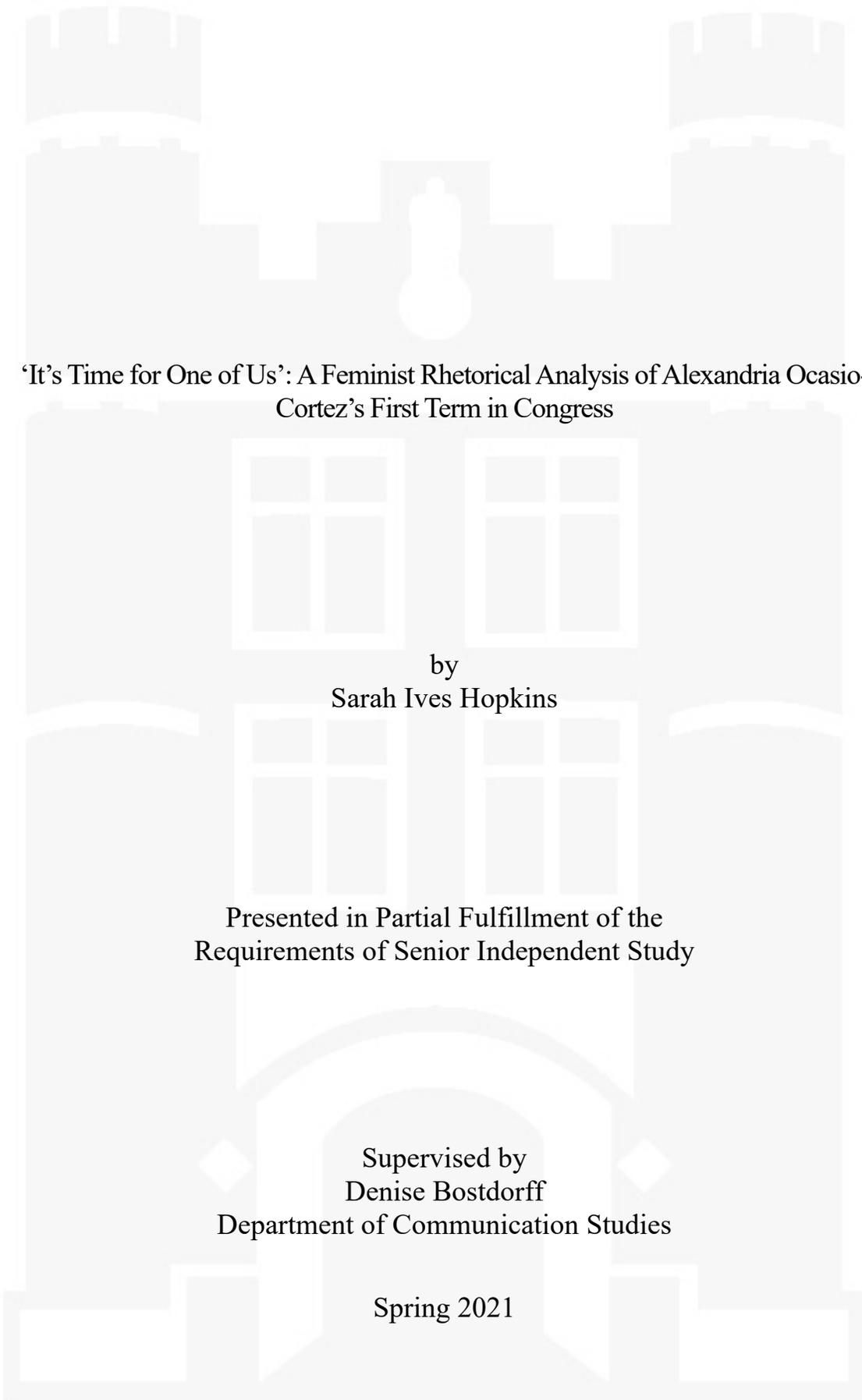
Part of the [Arts and Humanities Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Hopkins, Sarah Ives, "It's Time For One of Us': A Feminist Rhetorical Analysis of Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez's First Term in Congress" (2021). *Senior Independent Study Theses*. Paper 9585.

This Senior Independent Study Thesis Exemplar is brought to you by Open Works, a service of The College of Wooster Libraries. It has been accepted for inclusion in Senior Independent Study Theses by an authorized administrator of Open Works. For more information, please contact openworks@wooster.edu.

© Copyright 2021 Sarah Ives Hopkins



'It's Time for One of Us': A Feminist Rhetorical Analysis of Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez's First Term in Congress

by
Sarah Ives Hopkins

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements of Senior Independent Study

Supervised by
Denise Bostdorff
Department of Communication Studies

Spring 2021

ABSTRACT

Although the U.S. political sphere remains predominantly white and predominantly male, it has grown more diverse with each recent election cycle. Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez has been one of those new voices in Congress, advocating for progressive policies such as the Green New Deal, the abolition of ICE, and universal healthcare. This study sought to better understand the rhetorical strategies Ocasio-Cortez utilized throughout her first term in Congress to challenge hegemonies. Through a feminist critique, I contend she utilized variations of reframing, generating new perspectives, enacting, and juxtaposing incongruities to maneuver issues mainly of sexism and classism. These strategies, in turn, signal that meaningful resistance can be achieved within existing institutions through active rhetorical strategies.

Key words: Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, rhetoric, politics, hegemony

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I'd like to begin this section by admitting I somehow still cannot spell the word 'acknowledgements' without autocorrect. This felt like something to acknowledge. So, thank you autocorrect, for without you I would truly not have made it this far into my academic career. Ok, now onto the juicy stuff! First, thank you to my mom and dad for quite literally everything. You two afforded me the two things of which I am most proud: my work ethic and my sense of humor. You also enabled me to go to college, which is a pretty integral element of this project. Thank you to my older sisters, Anna and Callie, for influencing me in ways I doubt any of us can fully fathom and for always taking care of the baby of the family (except when that meant locking her out of your room or tickling her until she cried).

Thank you to all of the friends who helped me along the way—Tara Strauch, Dzifa Adjei, Keira Wright, Kenny Ortega, Halen Gifford, Oria Daugherty, and Max Gregg. I love and admire all of you so much. Thank you for not only tolerating, but for actively encouraging my shenanigans over the past ~3 years. Being a transfer student was not easy, but you all made it so worth it.

I would also like to extend my gratitude to the faculty at the College of Wooster. Thank you to Dr. Hester for sparking my interest in political rhetoric and thank you to Dr. Bostdorff for helping this interest grow into a full-blown thesis! Thank you to Dr. Atay for all the stimulating and entertaining conversations about film and TV and thank you to Dr. Singh for just being the best. You are the professor I've taken the most classes with during my college career and there's a good reason for that. Additionally, I'd like to thank the professors in Spanish, Art History, and English, who definitely will not read this but who were always kind, encouraging, and welcoming to me when I took electives in their departments. You all make this campus a wonderful place to be.

Table of Contents

ABSTRACT	II
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	III
CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION	1
PURPOSE.....	1
RATIONALES	2
DEFINITIONS	3
CHAPTER II: LITERATURE REVIEW.....	5
POLITICAL ADVERTISEMENTS IN THE UNITED STATES.....	5
THE FEMININE STYLE OF RHETORIC.....	7
<i>The Traditionally Feminine Style and the Double Binds of Leadership by Women</i>	8
THE CONSTRUCTION OF IDENTITY	12
<i>Identity and Intersectionality</i>	13
PROGRESSIVISM AND PROGRESSIVE RHETORIC.....	14
CONCLUSION.....	16
CHAPTER III: METHOD	19
ADVANTAGES OF METHOD	19
ARTIFACTS	20
SPECIFIC METHODOLOGICAL STEPS	21
CHAPTER IV: ANALYSIS	22
“THE COURAGE TO CHANGE”: AOC’S 2018 CAMPAIGN AD	22
<i>Context</i>	23
<i>Reframing the Leadership and State of NY-14</i>	24
<i>Enacting Political Change</i>	26
WHAT MAKES A DECENT MAN: AOC’S RESPONSE TO REP. TED YOHO	29
<i>Context</i>	29
<i>Reframing Yoho’s Remarks as a Societal Issue</i>	31
<i>Juxtaposing Incongruities About “Good Men”</i>	34
SKIN CARE AND SEXISM: AOC’S BEAUTY ROUTINE WITH <i>VOGUE</i>	36
<i>Context</i>	36
<i>Generating New Attitudes on Beauty and Femininity</i>	37
<i>Reframing Women’s Time and Energy</i>	41
CONCLUSION.....	44
CHAPTER V: CONCLUSION	46
MAJOR CONCLUSIONS	46
LIMITATIONS	49
APPENDIX A: PRE-ANALYSIS WRITING QUESTIONS	60

CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

After the 2016 presidential election, like many people, I felt defeated. It was the first election I was actively paying attention to and as the results came in, I slowly came to terms with the fact that I would enter young adulthood with a president who did not respect the opinions, thoughts, or actions of those who do not have straight, white, male bodies. I was 17, could not even vote yet, and already my faith in our political system was practically nonexistent.

However, in the fall of 2018 I enrolled in a Political Rhetoric class, and that is where I first became familiar with Ms. Ocasio-Cortez. She had already defeated Joe Crowley in the primary election and was well on her way to becoming the youngest individual ever elected to Congress. I was enthralled. She spoke her mind, defended progressive ideals, engaged with her community, and did not allow corporate interests to sway her stances. In short, she gave me hope. She espoused everything I thought American political leaders should be. However, women like Representative Ocasio-Cortez are not supposed to run for office, let alone hold office, and that is why I think she is worthy of study. Ocasio-Cortez maneuvered rhetorical issues of gender, race, and class to win election to the House of Representatives and continues to manage these issues each day she serves as a congresswoman. In this chapter I will outline the purpose of this study, explain why the study is significant, offer some definitions of key terms, and overview the method I plan to utilize.

Purpose

After being nominated to run for the House of Representatives, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez overcame many rhetorical and political obstacles in order to defeat incumbent Joe Crowley. The purpose of this study is to examine how Representative Ocasio-Cortez has

rhetorically challenged hegemony in American politics as a progressive woman of color during her 2018 campaign and her first term in Congress.

Rationales

This study should prove useful for several reasons. First, this study adds a necessary and updated perspective to existing research on women politicians in the U.S. by focusing on Ocasio-Cortez's importance as a political figure. Within her first term, Ocasio-Cortez gained millions of followers on social media and proposed notable legislation such as the Green New Deal. Although considerable work exists on the rhetoric of women politicians such as Hillary Rodham Clinton (Anderson, Carlin and Winfrey, Gibson and Heyse, Kaufer and Parry-Giles, Manning, Richards); Ann Richards (Dow and Tonn); and Sarah Palin (Carlin and Winfrey, Gibson and Heyse), no scholarship has examined Ocasio-Cortez's rhetoric.¹ Consequently, this study contributes to research on women politicians and their rhetoric.

Additionally, this study addresses the socially significant topic of the intersectionality of identity in politics. Although many studies have discussed the obstacles that women politicians face (Carlin and Winfrey; Dow and Tonn; Gibson and Heyse; Kaufer and Parry-Giles; Manning; Richards), this research has focused primarily on white women. The year 2018 marked a striking change in American politics, though, with a record number of women and people of color elected to Congress. Therefore, this study diversifies the research on women politicians' rhetoric by focusing on Ocasio-Cortez who, as a woman of color from a working-class background, operates within multiple systems of oppression. Through the identification and analysis of rhetorical strategies utilized by Ocasio-Cortez throughout her first term in Congress, this study may potentially aid future women candidates and/or candidates of color as they enter the political sphere.

Finally, many scholars have analyzed the rhetoric of the Progressive Era of the early twentieth century (Hogan) and several popular news sources contain articles on the progressive shift within parts of the Democratic Party (Alter; Sach), but there remains a scarcity of literature on progressivism in the 21st century. This study examines not only how Ocasio-Cortez's rhetoric functions in relation to her identity as a woman, but also how her rhetoric works in relation to her identity as a Democratic Socialist who supports progressive policy. Therefore, my study helps fill a gap in research on modern progressivism and its rhetoric as well.

Definitions

A key concept in the study of identity in politics is that of binaries. According to *Oxford English Dictionary*, a *binary* is a form of classification “by which each group and sub-group is perpetually divided into two, the one with a positive and the other with a negative character.” Thus, a binary's function is to sort people, places, or items into one of two categories. In the realm of politics, for instance, classifications of *Democrat* or *Republican* and *liberal* or *conservative* are very common and leave little room for nuanced perspectives that do not fall neatly into one category or another. The concept of binary will be a recurring theme in the literature review and analysis chapters that follow.

Additionally, it is important to understand the concept of hegemony in relation to the method. *Hegemony* refers to the dominant structures or powers in place that facilitate “diffusion of a particular way of looking at the world, which in turn affects dominant mores, values and beliefs” (Axford et al.). In short, hegemony represents the status quo of how matters have normally been conducted. This study looks specifically at hegemony within the American political system and how Ocasio-Cortez's rhetoric disrupts that system.

Methods

In this study, I will undertake a feminist critique of Ocasio-Cortez's 2018 campaign ads, as well as her rhetoric in subsequent public appearances she made during her first term as a congresswoman. Sonja K. Foss states that feminist criticism aims to expose the ways in which a cultural artifact challenges a dominant structure. As she explains, "Feminists who see the movement as relevant to all people see it as a commitment to eliminate relations of oppression and domination in general" (Foss 142). This critical deconstruction of hegemony can focus on an artifact in several different ways, including the way in which the artifact allows for multiple perspectives, creates uncertainty, enables a new viewpoint, allows the rhetor to internalize the point being made, and juxtaposes differences (Foss 147). This method will help uncover the ways in which Ocasio-Cortez has successfully disrupted political norms as a first-time representative.

Conclusion

With each election cycle, American political leadership grows slightly more diverse and looks a bit more like the people it represents. The 116th Congress was the most diverse in U.S. history in terms of gender, race, and ethnicity (Bialik; Desilver), possibly signaling a more lasting change in the American political system. Additionally, politicians like Ocasio-Cortez have brought progressive ideas such as tuition-free college, universal healthcare, and the abolition of ICE into mainstream political conversations (Alter). Through a feminist analysis of Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez's rhetoric, I hope to shed light on the strategies that contributed to her success, as well as gain an understanding of how they might aid future political outsider candidates. In the next chapter, I review literature relevant to my study and lay the groundwork for the analysis that follows.

CHAPTER II: LITERATURE REVIEW

Despite constantly evolving modes of communication and persuasion, engagement with the electorate has long been a crucial aspect of politics. Therefore, in this chapter I will first give a brief overview of the history of political advertising and some of its recurring characteristics. I will then review key communication studies scholarship on the rhetorical presence of women in politics and the limits placed upon women politicians' leadership styles. Next, I will discuss the communication theory of identity, the role of intersectionality in systems of oppression, and why considerations of intersectionality are so crucial to the ensuing study. Finally, I will consider the history of progressivism and progressive rhetoric, the contexts out of which they grew, and the current status of progressivism in the United States.

Political Advertisements in the United States

A key part of modern political campaigns is candidates finding compelling ways to connect with the electorate. In *Packaging the Presidency: A History and Criticism of Presidential Campaign Advertising*, Kathleen Hall Jamieson explains that the creation of radio first generated a national audience to whom candidates could directly speak (16). This forced candidates to be more accountable; that is, they had to create a relatively consistent set of messages, instead of tailoring what they said at each in-person event only to the audience before them and possibly telling one group something quite at odds with what they told another. Additionally, radio changed the way candidates spoke. They no longer needed to shout to a crowd of supporters, but rather it became necessary to speak calmly and conversationally into a microphone that would then carry their message throughout the country (Jamieson, *Packaging the Presidency* 17).

The year 1948 marked the first time that U.S. presidential candidates utilized television in their campaigns with Harry S. Truman delivering a speech broadcasted in October of that year (Jamieson, *Packaging the Presidency* 29), thus marking the start of political candidates and operatives having to strategize within television's simultaneously visual and auditory nature. Campaign advertisements have often taken one of two forms: some center themselves on narrative and rely mostly on use of character and scene to communicate a story, such as a candidate overcoming a personal obstacle to succeed in the workforce (Vafeiadis et al. 355) while others draw on well-known genres to create an intended effect upon the audience (Richardson). An example of the former emerges in Texas congressional candidate Julie Oliver's 2018 ad which chronicles her personal struggles with homelessness and poverty and discusses her journey into politics ("Need – Julie Oliver for Congress"). An instance of the latter is the 1988 Bush-Quayle "Revolving Door" ad that features many characteristics of slasher films such as ominous music and stark lighting, while generating fear in the audience by implying murderers were walking freely on the streets (Richardson 605). Traditionally, scholars have distinguished between image ads that focus on the characteristics of the candidates themselves and issue ads that look more at a particular policy or issue that the candidates see as important (Vafeiadis et al. 356). Even issue ads, however, shape a candidate's image since they define a candidate's priorities. No matter the strategy utilized, these campaign ads function to highlight the candidate's ideas and experiences to potential voters. Another important part of an individual's political presence is their rhetorical style.

The Feminine Style of Rhetoric

In her book *Man Cannot Speak for Her*, Karlyn Kohrs Campbell demarcates the defining characteristics of the feminine style of rhetoric. According to Campbell, the feminine style has its roots in the feminine experience of “craft-learning” (12). Women in the late 19th century did not receive any type of formal education, so instead women taught and learned from one another about sewing, cooking, and cleaning. As Campbell points out, these crafts lack universal standards, so craft-learning required many personal anecdotes and instructions (13). This need to be personable and accommodating in order to communicate about and master a task, therein, became a defining characteristic of the feminine style. As with other forms, the feminine style of rhetoric has the goal of identification with the audience but relies on the distinctive usage of an intimate tone, personal stories, an interactive style, and a form of address that treats one’s audience as peers (Campbell 13). Campbell emphasizes that there is nothing inherently feminine about this style of speaking, but rather it stems from the historical spaces that women have occupied: “[This rhetorical style] can be called ‘feminine’ in this context because it reflects the learning experiences of women.” She adds that, “as a less authoritative and aggressive style, it was a less confrontational violation of taboos against public speaking by women” (14). The amount and manner in which women could speak was historically controlled by men. Therefore, although women have gained equality in many aspects of life, the ripple effects of sexism continue to be present in rhetoric.

For example, former Texas Governor Ann Richards frequently utilized rhetoric grounded in the feminine style during public appearances. Bonnie J. Dow and Mari Boor Tonn explain that the feminine style can be seen specifically through Richards’s use of

experience as evidence, application of personal anecdotes to explain political occurrences, and creation of a nurturing relationship with her audience while speaking at the 1988 Democratic Convention (289). Richards utilized a style of rhetoric informed by her experiences as a woman to discuss matters such as Texans' financial struggles, sexism, and the importance of strong political leadership (Dow and Tonn 289-294). Thus, although women's societal roles have changed drastically over the last one hundred years, women are still socialized to adopt the accommodating and flexible style that originates from craft-learning.

The societal expectations placed upon women's rhetorical style, in turn, also affect their leadership styles. In the following, I will first examine previous research on traditionally feminine styles of leadership (Eagly; Anderson) and connect these ideas to the concept of the double bind. I will also intertwine examples of how women politicians such as Sarah Palin, Hillary Clinton, and Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez have been affected by the double bind and how they responded rhetorically to sexism in their respective campaigns and careers.

The Traditionally Feminine Style and the Double Binds of Leadership by Women

Traditionally feminine styles of rhetoric are often constrained by an expectation to be both accommodating and in control. As Alice Eagly outlines, "In general, people expect and prefer that women be communal, manifesting traits such as kindness, concern for others, warmth, and gentleness and that men be agentic, manifesting traits such as confidence, aggressiveness, and self-direction" (4). Citizens generally expect leaders, however, to adopt the masculine style of leadership despite feminine leadership styles also possessing merit (Eagly 2). When a society values conventionally masculine leadership skills such as strength and self-assurance, though, women seeking leadership positions inherently face a

disadvantage because they are not seen as fulfilling the requirements needed for the job. The realm of U.S. politics is a very male-dominated work context, perhaps contributing to the difficulty women face when trying to enter this sphere as leaders. Consequently, women politicians are frequently discounted as serious candidates when they exhibit traditionally feminine leadership characteristics. Karrin Vasby Anderson contends that, when it comes to the U.S. presidency, “every woman is the wrong woman—and will be until cultural understanding of the presidency changes” (“Every Woman is the Wrong Woman” 133). The expectations for how a president looks, acts, and leads have inherently accommodated the men who have held office. Constructing a public image, therefore, becomes a delicate task for women politicians.

This conflict between expectations set for women and expectations set for leaders also connects to the concept of the double bind. According to Jamieson, the double bind allows women only to be defined in one way or the other, greatly simplifying their identities. Jamieson writes, “Binds draw their power from their capacity to simplify complexity. Faced with a complicated situation of behavior, the human tendency is to split apart and dichotomize its elements” (*Beyond the Double Bind* 5). The double bind can manifest in a myriad of ways, including Jamieson’s five core concepts of the womb/brain bind, the femininity/competence bind, the silence/shame bind, the sameness/difference bind, and the aging/invisibility bind, all of which force women to be categorized into simple categories instead of granting them the agency to be complex and multidimensional beings. Take, for instance, the womb/brain double bind. Oftentimes, people raise questions about the dedication and work ethic of employed women who have children. However, if a woman has no interest in motherhood and instead focuses all of her energies on her career, members of

the electorate frequently see her as forsaking her femininity. This example also embodies certain elements of the femininity/competence bind, which posits that a woman can be feminine, or she can be intelligent, but she cannot be both. Thus, these binds often intersect with one another and overlap, as lived experiences are complicated entities. Double binds allow men already holding positions of power to maintain those positions while at the same time making it difficult for outsiders to gain entry.

Former Alaskan Governor Sarah Palin provides an insightful recent case of a woman politician grappling with double binds. Palin was Republican John McCain's running mate in the 2008 presidential election and faced several gendered stereotypes in the media coverage of their campaign, which categorized Palin as a sex object, a mother, a pet, and an iron maiden (Carlin and Winfrey 328). Most notable were the comments on Palin's physical attractiveness, which detracted from the public's ability to take her intellect seriously, and her role as a mother, which caused media sources to call into question her commitment to her political career (Carlin and Winfrey 331-333). These comments embody both the femininity/competence bind and the womb/brain bind, as they diminished Palin's political work experience. Palin grappled with these binaries in her speech at the 2008 Republican National Convention. Although attempting to assume a maternal persona by utilizing a personal tone and detailing stories about family, Palin bolstered ideals of hegemonic masculinity by praising her running mate John McCain as a physically strong man, devaluing Barack Obama's academic and oratorical prowess, and emphasizing the importance of rugged individualism, which is usually associated with manliness (Gibson and Heyse 239). Palin tried unsuccessfully to create space for her female identity while also appealing to a conservative electorate more accepting of masculine rhetoric.

As a presidential candidate in both the 2008 and 2016 elections, Hillary Rodham Clinton also had to deal with many rhetorical obstacles related to gender. Anderson argues that, in the 2008 and 2016 presidential elections, Clinton was placed within a “first-timer/frontrunner” double bind: In the 2008 election, she was seen as a “pioneer” who lacked practical experience, but in the 2016 election, after proactively gaining valuable work credentials, she was perceived as a “frontrunner” who was antithetical to big political change (“Presidential Pioneer or Campaign Queen?” 134). Previous work on Clinton has also focused on her rhetorical presence as an “iron lady.” Rebecca S. Richards explains how “iron ladies” rhetorically function by personifying characteristics that are traditionally feminine yet also reinforce hegemony. Iron ladies utilize irony to balance the contradictions of being a woman with the expectations of a patriarchal society (Richards 5). Clinton, for example, presented herself as a serious and unemotional figure early in her career. However, after facing criticism for coming across in such a cold and unfeminine manner Clinton shifted her self-presentation to be more traditionally feminine. When she got choked up during an interview in the 2008 primary, many political pundits posited that she was insincere and even faking her show of emotion (Richards 15-16). As Clinton tried to navigate issues of the double bind, she reinforced hegemonic values of femininity while simultaneously breaking from that tradition by being a woman in a position of leadership.

Yet another manifestation of the femininity/competence bind can be seen in the standards to which women in politics are held with regard to their clothing. Women in positions of power are expected to “dress the part,” not repeat outfits, and are traditionally held to higher standards of physical appearance than their male counterparts. However, at the same time, their apparel often overshadows any actual credentials the women possess. In

November 2018, a reporter tweeted a photo of Congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez with a caption that read, “that jacket and coat don’t look like a girl who struggles” (North). Ocasio-Cortez was well-dressed and, therefore, this reporter called her credibility and authenticity into question. However, had Ocasio-Cortez been dressed down, her seriousness as a government representative would have been doubted. Every woman candidate, like every male candidate, has their strengths and weaknesses. However, for years women in the public sphere have been criticized regardless of what they do or do not do, which diminishes their ideas and identities as politicians.

The Construction of Identity

The study of identity originates in psychology and sociology; however, it greatly enriches the study of communication as well. According to Michael L. Hecht, communication and identity are constantly interacting with and shaping one another (“A Research Odyssey” 78). Hecht elaborates that “messages are symbolic linkages between and among people that, at least in part, are enactments of identity” (“A Research Odyssey” 78). An individual’s identity and how they choose to communicate, therefore, are inextricably intertwined. Overall, four layers of identity exist: the personal, the relational, the enacted, and the communal. The personal relates to how individuals define themselves, the relational pertains to how individuals are defined in terms of particular relationships, the enacted refers to how individuals express themselves through behavior, and the communal relates to how individuals are seen culturally or societally (Hecht, “Communication Theory of Identity” 178). These layers are stable to an extent, but also interdependent and constantly evolving with an individual’s lived experiences.

Because identity is layered, identity gaps may also occur, which Hecht defines as discrepancies between at least two layers (Hecht, “Communication Theory of Identity” 181). For example, an aspect of a student’s personal identity might be that they identify as gay; however, if their family is incredibly conservative, this attribute will not be part of their enacted identity while with family because they do not feel comfortable sharing it within that context. This state of affairs creates a disparity between their personal identity and their enacted identities. The theory of identity can help contextualize how women politicians present themselves and some of the struggles they face in relation to identity and identity gaps. The following subsection will expand upon this concept of identity and summarize key scholarship on the importance of intersectionality in rhetorical criticism.

Identity and Intersectionality

Although conceptualizing the effects of the double bind does enrich the study of women in the public sphere, it has too frequently focused solely on the experiences of white women. Women of color in politics must work within multiple systems of oppression and, therefore, it is important to take issues of race into consideration as well. Each of these aspects of identity contribute to an individual’s lived experiences, and these parts of identity frequently converge and overlap with one another. As Patricia Hill Collins states in her groundbreaking 1993 article, “Once we realize that there are few pure victims or oppressors, and that each one of us derives varying amounts of penalty and privilege from the multiple systems of oppression that frame our lives, then we will be in a position to see the need for new ways of thought and actions” (26). Collins argues that race, class, and gender function as overlapping structures of oppression and, therefore, focusing solely on one when engaging in criticism can be myopic. It is important to remember that people are shaped by factors such

as race, gender, and economic class; however, at the same time, no two individuals experience oppression in the same way. Each individual has a different lived experience. Collins stresses the importance of moving away from dichotomous definitions and instead learning to recognize and identify disparities in status in order to build a more empathetic world (27, 36). Therefore, in order to more fully understand cultural artifacts such as political ads, we must pay careful attention to the multiple dimensions of identity that contribute to their creation.

While rhetorical studies of women politicians have not yet looked at intersectional identities of gender, race, and class with regard to women in politics, Emily Deering Crosby's analysis of a newspaper story about Olympic track runner Lolo Jones demonstrates well the presence of these binds. Jeré Longman's incredibly critical 2012 *New York Times* article attacked Jones's behavior as a public figure (228). Crosby utilizes an intersectional approach in order to dissect the ways in which Jones's position as a black, woman athlete from a poor background intersected in different ways to catch her in varying binds: the feminine/athlete bind, the poor/hustler bind, and the virginal/exotic bind, all of which worked together to place Jones in a lose-lose rhetorical situation. As the arena of U.S. politics continues to diversify, it is crucial that communication studies take an intersectional approach to understanding and critiquing political rhetoric.

Progressivism and Progressive Rhetoric

The modern progressive movement has grown rapidly and significantly over the past several years, with Senator Bernie Sanders running high profile presidential campaigns in 2016 and in 2020. The terms *progressive* and *progressivism* stem from the Progressive Era, often characterized as the time period between the 1890s and start of World War I, but

historians have not reached consensus on exact beginning and end dates nor specific policies or events that define this era (Hogan ix). Despite this lack of consensus, J. Michael Hogan notes that progressive rhetoric “represented a new common language of political and social analysis that was reform oriented, moralistic, and optimistic about the possibilities for human ‘progress’” (x). Progressive rhetoric established lofty policy goals with the desire to improve life for the majority of citizens.

Although the circumstances have changed drastically in the intervening 100 years, many of these rhetorical characteristics are present in the messages of 21st century progressives as well. For instance, in her one-minute speech at the 2020 Democratic National Convention, Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez described the left as standing for “guaranteed healthcare, higher education, living wages, and labor rights,” as well as “striving to recognize and repair the wounds of racial injustice, colonization, misogyny, and homophobia” (qtd. in Coleman). This remark encompasses traditional progressive ideas about establishing a better standard of living for all citizens through government action, while also bringing up issues of racism, homophobia, and misogyny, which were frequently ignored by earlier versions of progressivism (Hogan xii). During her political career, Ocasio-Cortez has also run completely grassroots campaigns, refusing any money from PACs or corporate interests. Similar to the original, the modern progressive movement centers itself on the idea of reforming political systems in order to demystify politics and provide a more universally equal standard of living.

The modern progressive movement also grew, in part, as a reaction to the neoliberalism of the late twentieth century. Neoliberalism is characterized by a strong emphasis on economics and profitability which, in turn, permeates into political, social, legal,

and cultural norms (Nguyen 4). Although neoliberalism is commonly associated with more conservative political ideology, it has also been prominent in the Democratic Party as well. Beginning in the 1980s, groups like the Democratic Leadership Council and the Progressive Policy Institute wielded great influence over the Democratic Party's priorities (Geismer). This neoliberal influence peaked during the Clinton administration, whose policies exemplified many of these core tenets of growing the economy through deregulation and strong relationships between public and private sectors. In his 1992 presidential campaign, Clinton advocated for a different method to governing, one that "expands opportunity, not bureaucracy" (Geismer). Additionally, neoliberal rhetoric frequently utilizes communication as a strategy to control the dominant societal values and arguments (Nguyen 7).

Progressivism, therefore, grew in response to neoliberalism's privatization and deregulation and chose to focus instead on the government's role in improving the lives of average Americans and "progressing." Geismer notes in her *Vox* article on neoliberalism in the modern Democratic Party that "Bernie Sanders's campaign in 2016 represented one of the first sustained challenges to the party's orthodoxy especially on economic matters." Both the policies proposed as well as the ways in which these progressive candidates run their campaigns are indicative of a shift away from the Democratic Party of the late twentieth century. The progressive movement, started in part by Sanders and currently sustained by him and other leaders such as Ocasio-Cortez, challenges neoliberalism's emphasis on profitability by calling for transparency and equality in American politics.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I first provided an overview of the history of political advertisements in campaigns and how they play an integral role in establishing a candidate's platform and

priorities (Jamieson, *Packaging the Presidency*). Whether by focusing on issues and narratives or by drawing on genre, political ads help shape an image of each candidate.

Next, I looked at the feminine style of rhetoric and how it relates to leadership skills. The feminine style of rhetoric grew in large part out of the historical space women occupied and is characterized by an intimate tone, personal stories, an interactive style, and addressing one's audience as peers (Campbell 13). This style of rhetoric also bleeds into expectations of leadership in women. In contrast with the expectations of confidence and aggression in men, women in positions of leadership are often expected to be warm and nonabrasive (Eagly 4). These expectations contribute to what Kathleen Hall Jamieson labeled "the double bind." The concept of the double bind explores how all too frequently women are considered in terms of binaries: they are either feminine or competent, a womb or a brain, the same or different (*Beyond the Double Bind* 5). To consciously or unconsciously sort women into these binaries is to greatly simplify and reduce their complex identities. I then provided several examples of modern women politicians grappling with binds, including Sarah Palin in the 2008 presidential election, Hillary Clinton in the 2008 and 2016 elections, and Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez during her first term in Congress. In each of these cases, the women in question were placed in binaries wherein they were not granted the agency to define themselves.

In the following section, I discussed identity and intersectionality. Michael L. Hecht's theory of identity provides a useful framework for conceptualizing identity. The theory stresses that communication shapes and reflects individuals' identities and can be enacted at four different levels: the relational, the communal, the personal, and the enacted ("Communication Theory of Identity" 178). This also allows for what Hecht calls "identity

gaps” to form, wherein two or more levels of identity are not cohesive. Because politicians work in the public sphere and, thus, their identities are subject to scrutiny and interpretation by a large audience, considerations of identity gaps are very important. Additionally, it is crucial to take an intersectional approach to studies of identity. Humans are complex beings; therefore, it is important to take into account how all the different parts of their identities are working together (Collins 26).

In my last section, I examined the history of progressivism and progressive rhetoric. Stemming from the Progressive Era at the beginning of the twentieth century, progressive rhetoric is reform-oriented and focuses on a goal of human progress (Hogan x). Although conditions are vastly different now, some of these same characteristics are present in the modern progressive movement, led by individuals such as Bernie Sanders and Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez. The modern progressive movement recognizes the potential of the United States to be a great country if it engages in reform such as abolishing ICE, establishing tuition-free public college, and providing healthcare for all. Finally, I connected the current progressive shift in parts of the Democratic Party to the neoliberalism the party embodied in the late twentieth century. Politicians like the Clintons prioritized economic growth through limited government involvement, while progressivism focuses on how policy can address societal issues and create a better universal standard of living (Geismer).

This literature review provides the necessary background information to understand my study as a whole. I will put these ideas of the feminine style of rhetoric, the double bind, identity, intersectionality, and progressivism in conversation with one another in my analysis of Ocasio-Cortez’s rhetoric from her first term. In the next chapter, I will describe and justify my method, identify my artifacts, and discuss how my analysis will be completed.

CHAPTER III: METHOD

In my previous chapter, I reviewed fundamental literature on political advertisements and their history, women politicians, the feminine style of rhetoric, the intersectionality of identity, and progressive rhetoric. In this chapter I will describe my method and how feminist criticism aids my analysis of Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez's 2018 campaign ad and notable public appearances from her first term. First, I discuss the benefits of my chosen method. Then, I describe the artifacts I have chosen to analyze and finally, I explain the specific steps of my method that lead to my analysis.

Advantages of Method

In this study, I conduct a feminist critique of Ocasio-Cortez's rhetoric. Feminist criticism is a type of rhetorical criticism that examines the ways in which an artifact challenges hegemony. According to Sonja K. Foss, feminist criticism's focus is to "identify and explicate strategies that disrupt established hegemonies and, in turn, create new ways of thinking, acting, and being" (147). Five main strategies carry out this disruption: "generating multiple perspectives, cultivating ambiguity, reframing, enacting, and juxtaposing incongruities" (Foss 147). Each of these strategies can work within an artifact—whether it be a speech, a painting, a radio show, a movie—to disrupt traditional structures of power. The feminist critic is then tasked with analyzing how these disruptions take place and what they hope to achieve. However, Foss is careful to point out that the label of "feminist" criticism implies special attention paid to the feminine experience, but at its core feminist criticism generally strives to dismantle hegemonic forces. This often includes taking a holistic approach of examining the intersectionalities of experience and identity present in a work.

Seldom is gender the only factor at play in an artifact, but oftentimes aspects of identity such as race, socio-economic status, and age affect an experience as well. For this reason, I have chosen feminist critique as the method for my study. Ocasio-Cortez is a woman of color who was bartending at a restaurant in midtown Manhattan less than a year before joining the U.S. Congress. Ocasio-Cortez works within and against multiple systems of oppression and although feminist criticism's name originates in studying the experiences of women, I believe this method will help deconstruct how Ocasio-Cortez responds to issues of race, class, and age in U.S. politics as well.

Artifacts

I will begin my analysis by looking at Ocasio-Cortez's 2018 ad "The Courage to Change," which aired during her primary election campaign against incumbent Joe Crowley. The ad has more than 1.3 million views on YouTube and successfully established Ocasio-Cortez's platform as a progressive candidate. I will then examine messages from Ocasio-Cortez's first term in Congress, such as her first House floor speech, her response to Representative Ted Yoho's comments, and her morning beauty routine with *Vogue*. In each of these artifacts Ocasio-Cortez works to dismantle a dominant system of power, whether it is sexism, racism, classism, or some combination of powers. I have selected these specific artifacts because they each represent a different type of public appearance and speak to a slightly different audience. The ad was part of Ocasio-Cortez's 2018 campaign and, therefore, an important element of her platform. Her response to Yoho took place on the House floor, providing an example of her rhetoric while in front of her colleagues in Congress. And, finally, Ocasio-Cortez's video on the *Vogue YouTube* channel shows a down-

to-Earth version of herself, performing the quotidian task of getting ready and speaking directly to whoever may be watching it online.

Specific Methodological Steps

In order to conduct my analysis of artifacts from Ocasio-Cortez's first term in Congress, I pay special attention to the rhetorical strategies she uses to work against and within various systems of oppression. As previously mentioned, Foss outlines five main strategies the rhetor may utilize to accomplish this: generating multiple perspectives, cultivating ambiguity, reframing, enacting, and juxtaposing incongruities (147). Therefore, I will examine each artifact using these strategies with the goal of identifying how they disrupt dominant ideals. Additionally, I have formulated a list of pre-analysis questions (Appendix A) that I will apply to each artifact and which will aid me in my analysis.

CHAPTER IV: ANALYSIS

“If I was a rational person, I would have dropped out of this race a long time ago.” This admission by Ocasio-Cortez in Netflix’s documentary, *Knock Down the House*, perfectly encapsulates both the potency of the obstacles she faced during her campaign and her unparalleled determination to become NY-14’s representative. The previous chapter detailed the method I utilize in this study. In this chapter, I provide a feminist analysis of my selected artifacts pertaining to Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez’s primary campaign and first term in Congress. This analysis addresses the purpose of my study, which is to examine how Representative Ocasio-Cortez has rhetorically challenged hegemony in American politics as a progressive woman of color during her 2018 campaign and her first term in Congress. My three artifacts include Ocasio-Cortez’s 2018 campaign ad “The Courage to Change,” her response to Rep. Ted Yoho on the floor of the House, and a collaborative get-ready-with-me video she made with *Vogue* (“The Courage to Change”; “Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez”; “Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez’s Guide”). My analysis will examine each artifact in turn, with a context section specific to the message preceding each analysis. Within each analysis, any quotes or paraphrases I utilize come from the artifact being analyzed in that section unless specified otherwise.

“The Courage to Change”: AOC’s 2018 Campaign Ad

Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez quickly became a household name in 2018 when she challenged established Democrat Joseph Crowley in the NY-14 primary election and went on to win the general election. An important element of her entrance onto the political scene was her homemade primary campaign ad entitled “The Courage to Change.” The video garnered more than 300,000 views in the first 24-hours alone and was written and produced by

Ocasio-Cortez (Haltiwanger). In the following, I first provide context on Ocasio-Cortez and her district, then move into my analysis of the ad itself.

Context

New York's 14th congressional district is one of the most diverse districts in the nation and encompasses more than 650,000 people from parts of Queens and the Bronx ("Our District"). Around 70 percent of the district's population are racial minorities and just under half of the overall population is Latinx (United States Census Bureau). The district reliably votes Democratic ("U.S. House Voting History"); therefore, the primary election is usually of greater consequence than the general.

Ocasio-Cortez was born in the Bronx to Puerto Rican parents who eventually moved north to Westchester County to provide better educational opportunities for their children (Alter). As she grew up, Ocasio-Cortez frequently visited family and friends in the Bronx, which was her first exposure to the disparities in opportunity afforded by one's geographic location. Ocasio-Cortez attended Boston University where she graduated in 2011 with a degree in economics and international relations (Alter). Following some work with the Bernie Sanders campaign in 2016, Ocasio-Cortez was approached about running herself by Brand New Congress (BNC) after her younger brother nominated her. BNC's goal is to enlist progressives who are not "wealthy, well-connected white men to run for the House and Senate so that a future progressive President [will] have allies in the legislature" (Alter). At the time she was contacted by BNC, Ocasio-Cortez was bartending at a taco restaurant in midtown Manhattan, but she decided to take on the challenge (Freedlander).

In contrast with Ocasio-Cortez, incumbent Joe Crowley is a lifelong politician who had been in Congress since 1999 (Alter). Crowley's position as a congressman seemed

secure: he was the Chair of the House Democratic Caucus and was considered a top contender to be the next Speaker of the House (Freedlander). By all measures, Crowley and his team were not concerned about this primary challenge. However, throughout her primary campaign and specifically in her campaign ad, Ocasio-Cortez was able to dismantle Crowley's position of power, ultimately allowing her to win the primary election. Ocasio-Cortez's homemade campaign video "The Courage to Change" was published a couple of months ahead of her primary challenge to Crowley. The video runs about two minutes and was published both in English and Spanish on her YouTube channel. The main hegemonic forces Ocasio-Cortez takes on throughout this ad are the classism and neoliberalism of the Democratic Party, specifically within New York's 14th District. Throughout the video, Ocasio-Cortez disrupts this hegemony through the strategies of enactment and reframing.

Reframing the Leadership and State of NY-14

In his 2018 ad from his primary race against Ocasio-Cortez, Crowley emphasizes that he will continue fighting against Donald Trump and advocating on behalf of New Yorkers in Congress. He states, "In Congress, I'll keep on fighting for a better future for all of us" ("Joe Crowley 2018"). His quick, 30-second ad inspires a sense of normalcy. Crowley emphasizes that although Donald Trump's presidency has created cause for concern for many different groups of Americans and difficulties may lie ahead, he will fight for his constituents as he has for the previous 20 years. This message is an important backdrop to Ocasio-Cortez's. In contrast to Crowley's view of the situation, Ocasio-Cortez frames New York as being at a breaking point. The rhetorical strategy of reframing involves looking at a situation from a new viewpoint, allowing for different interpretations of a situation (Foss 150). Ocasio-Cortez

achieves this change in vantagepoint through two key approaches: using a story of decline and contrasting the experiences of the working class with that of the ruling class.

After introducing her at the start, the ad switches tonally when an image of Crowley flashes across the screen. Ocasio-Cortez asks viewers who New York has been changing for over the past 20 years. Clips of racially and ethnically diverse constituents appear as Ocasio-Cortez explains, “Everyday gets harder for working families like mine to get by. The rent gets higher, health care covers less, and our income stays the same.” Ocasio-Cortez accomplishes this shift in tone and view through a strategy that public policy rhetoricians refer to as a *story of decline*. In public policy, a story of decline is a narrative strategy that depicts a situation as having significantly worsened and posits that unless action is taken soon, a crisis will occur (Stone 160). Ocasio-Cortez adeptly utilizes a story of potential decline to show constituents that the situation is far from perfect since basic needs such as shelter and healthcare are becoming more and more difficult to afford. Therefore, the changes Crowley has made did not necessarily benefit his constituents.

The second key part of a story of decline are a policymaker’s suggestions to remedy the situation (Stone 160). After explaining the problems with their current situation, Ocasio-Cortez proposes solutions that are possible with a change in representation. These solutions include: “Medicare for all, tuition-free public college, a federal jobs guarantee, and criminal justice reform.” If elected, she would advocate for these policies. Therefore, through this implication, Ocasio-Cortez calls for a change in representation. The story of decline narrative that runs throughout the ad enables Ocasio-Cortez to push back against the politics of power, both within her district and in the Democratic Party as a whole.

Ocasio-Cortez also discusses the contrast in experiences of people like Joe Crowley with the experiences of the people he actually represents throughout Queens and the Bronx. Ocasio-Cortez states, “This race is about people versus money. We’ve got people, they’ve got money.” This marks a divide between Crowley and those he represents and establishes Crowley as an outsider to the community. As clips of community members mobilizing to canvass and hang up Ocasio-Cortez posters play, Ocasio-Cortez elaborates: “It’s time we acknowledge that not all Democrats are the same. That a Democrat who takes corporate money, profits off foreclosure, doesn’t live here, doesn’t send his kids to our schools, doesn’t drink our water or breathe our air, cannot possibly represent us.” This powerful statement indicates that just because Crowley has represented the district for so long, it does not mean he understands citizens’ needs since issues like education or sanitation do not directly affect him and his family. In contrast, by living in the district and having familial ties to the area, Ocasio-Cortez does understand their community. Highlighting this disconnect between Crowley and NY-14 Ocasio-Cortez validates the view that change is necessary.

Reframing New York’s situation as imperfect and in need of improvement allows Ocasio-Cortez to push back adeptly against the antiquated and elite form of politics that Crowley represents. She works within the confines of a party that is historically dominated by well-connected people who wish to maintain that status. However, through the narrative structure of a story of decline and contrasting the experiences of Crowley with those he represents, Ocasio-Cortez illustrates that change is both necessary and possible.

Enacting Political Change

The feminist strategy of enactment involves the rhetor embodying the change they wish to see pertaining to a certain set of circumstances (Foss 152). As discussed in Chapter

II, beginning in the 1980s the neoliberal tenets of profitability and economic growth via deregulation became a prominent element of the Democratic Party (Geismer). These values continue to inform many of the decisions and priorities of Democratic leaders, with which Ocasio-Cortez takes issue in her ad. Throughout the commercial, Ocasio-Cortez calls for more authentic and honest representation and, by running as a candidate herself, shows that this change is both plausible and possible. Community members who understand the needs of their constituents provide valuable expertise as leaders and legislators. Specifically, within the ad, Ocasio-Cortez enacts her purpose through personal experience and narrative structure. Consequently, she also forges identification with her community with the end goal of energizing local voters.

Ocasio-Cortez begins the ad by stating, “Women like me aren’t supposed to run for office.” This simple but poignant statement immediately defines Ocasio-Cortez’s campaign as an act of resistance. As a woman of color from a working-class background, she is working in and against the constraints of sexism, racism, and classism. She goes on to describe how she was not born into wealth or privilege, but rather to an immigrant mother in an area where the ZIP code shapes one’s destiny. She describes how she has worked in restaurants and classrooms and that she never planned on going into politics. Nonetheless, she takes on this challenge of running for office. Despite the obstacles of classism, sexism, and neoliberalism, Ocasio-Cortez runs a campaign she believes in while advocating for substantive change. Simply by showing up, Ocasio-Cortez is taking the first step towards the changes in the role of government she envisions.

Additionally, the ad takes place over the course of one day. We see Ocasio-Cortez do her makeup, wait for the Subway, talk to constituents, attend community events, and eat

dinner with community members; we begin the day with Ocasio-Cortez, and we end the day with her. This quotidian narrative illustrates that Ocasio-Cortez is putting in the time, day in and day out, *for* her community and *in* her community. By showing herself committing her time and her workday for these purposes, Ocasio-Cortez enacts the change she wishes to see. She advocates for more localized representation by actually performing it herself.

As Ocasio-Cortez embodies the point that a more equitable and diverse political sphere is possible, she also forges identification with her audience. The 14th congressional district, as previously mentioned, is one of the most diverse districts in the country (“Our District”). It also contains more working-class New Yorkers than other districts in the city: NY-14’s median income is \$66,749 while that of NY-12, which covers a large swath of Manhattan, is \$124,502 (“My Congressional District”). As a young, working class Latina, Ocasio-Cortez shares many aspects of identity with her constituents such as race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic background. Throughout the ad, Ocasio-Cortez utilizes pronouns such as “we” and “us” to posit herself as part of the community. She talks about her own upbringing, work experience, and difficulties making ends meet, inspiring a sense of understanding and collective identity with her constituents. As she discusses this common understanding in the commercial, the ad shows her walking around the district, talking with constituents one-on-one, speaking in front of crowds, and attending community events. Ocasio-Cortez underscores her similarities with the district’s residents by drawing parallels between their experiences and speaking to shared markers of identity. Ocasio-Cortez, therefore, is both a community member to be trusted and a local leader capable of bringing about change in Congress. Through enactment, Ocasio-Cortez both proposes a solution to a perceived

problem—the lack of authenticity in governmental representation—and performs a response as well by running for Congress.

What Makes A Decent Man: AOC's Response to Rep. Ted Yoho

In July 2020, Ocasio-Cortez made headlines with her poised and impactful response to Republican Representative Ted Yoho's demeaning comments about the congresswoman (Read). Ocasio-Cortez not only addressed the incident that occurred on the steps of the Capitol, but also spoke to the climate of aggression and belittlement of women that exists in both the workplace specifically and American culture generally. First, I provide fuller context to her remarks and then transition into my rhetorical analysis of her response on the floor of the House of Representatives.

Context

On July 20, 2020 Ocasio-Cortez was climbing the steps to the Capitol to enter and cast a vote when she was halted by Yoho (R-Florida) who was accompanied by Roger Williams (R-Texas). Yoho was angered by comments Ocasio-Cortez had previously made connecting poverty to crime rates, and he began to confront her (Read). According to Ocasio-Cortez, Yoho called her “crazy” and “disgusting” and implied she was out of her mind. When Ocasio-Cortez realized she would not be able to calm or dissuade Yoho, she informed him he was being rude and kept walking. Yoho, however, then called Ocasio-Cortez a “fucking bitch” within earshot of a reporter (Read).

Two days later, on July 22, Yoho took to the House floor to address the words he used with Ocasio-Cortez earlier in the week. Yoho began, “I rise to apologize for the abrupt manner of the conversation I had with my colleague from New York” and also stated that his remarks were misheard and misconstrued both by Ocasio-Cortez and by the press (“Rep.

Yoho Apologizes”). He went on to state that “Having been married for 45 years with two daughters, I’m very cognizant of my language” (“Rep. Yoho Apologizes”). Yoho did not mention Ocasio-Cortez by name at any point during the statement, only calling her his “colleague from New York.” Yoho then goes on to discuss his experiences with poverty and homelessness and explain why he was so passionate about the previous remarks Ocasio-Cortez had made. Throughout his speech, which ran a total of nearly two minutes, Yoho dodged any personal responsibility for his actions by denying that he called Ocasio-Cortez a fucking bitch or crazy, and by utilizing his wife and daughters as protection. According to *Merriam-Webster*, a crucial element of an apology is “an admission of error.” However, at no point did Yoho apologize for any wrongdoing, he merely apologized for the abrupt nature of their conversation saying, “The offensive name calling . . . words attributed to me by the press were never spoken to my colleagues, and if they were construed that way I apologize for their misunderstanding” (“Rep. Yoho Apologizes”). Therefore, Yoho’s words showed no recognition of wrongdoing nor did he ever fully acknowledge Ocasio-Cortez by even saying her name. Despite popular press referring Yoho’s response as an apology (Byrd; Quinn), it was actually nothing more than an excuse. Throughout the rest of this section, I will refer to this response as his “remarks.”

Subsequently, on July 23, Ocasio-Cortez called for a moment of personal privilege on the House floor in order to address the behavior of Yoho and Williams, both in the initial incident and in Yoho’s remarks the previous day (Raju). Ocasio-Cortez’s nine-minute response describes the events that transpired on the steps of the Capitol, discusses the harassment of women, both at the personal and societal level, and outlines why she felt compelled to speak on the issue. Throughout her speech, Ocasio-Cortez pushes back against

issues of sexism and misogyny through two main rhetorical strategies: centering the conversation on women in order to frame the incident as a societal problem and disproving the myth of the “good man.” These strategies, therein, allow for new perspectives as well as juxtapose incongruities about “good men.”

Reframing Yoho’s Remarks as a Societal Issue

A large portion of Ocasio-Cortez’s response focuses on centering the conversation on women’s experiences with sexist language which, in turn, allows Ocasio-Cortez to classify the incident with Yoho as a symptom of a larger, societal issue of abusive language towards women. This strategy encompasses elements of reframing and enacting. Reframing entails viewing a situation through a different lens, while enacting calls for a speaker to embody the central point of their argument (Foss 150, 152).

In her speech on the House floor, Ocasio-Cortez clarifies that the reason she felt a duty to respond to Yoho’s insults and subsequent remarks was because they were not an isolated incident, but rather an example of a deeply entrenched, societal issue. Ocasio-Cortez begins by stating that when Yoho employed these insults against her, he also employed them against all congresswomen and, indeed, all women, because all women have dealt with demeaning language like this throughout their lives. Ocasio-Cortez points to her own experiences, saying:

I want to be clear that Representative Yoho’s comments were not deeply hurtful or piercing to me, because I have worked a working-class job. I have waited tables in restaurants. I have ridden the subway. I have walked the streets in New York City, and this kind of language is not new. I have encountered words uttered by Mr. Yoho and men uttering the same words as Mr. Yoho while I was being harassed in

restaurants. I have tossed men out of bars that have used language like Mr. Yoho's and I have encountered this type of harassment riding the subway in New York City. This technique of listing her personal experiences with harassment from men in restaurants, at work, and on public transit lends legitimacy to her claim that this was not an isolated incident, but rather a symptom of a larger issue. She suggests that Yoho, a member of Congress, displays the same behavior as a drunk man in a bar at closing time, and illustrates how improper Yoho's behavior truly was while simultaneously reframing the incident to support the idea that this is a broader, societal issue.

During her statement, Ocasio-Cortez also discusses how dehumanizing language about her race has been weaponized against her, too. She explains, "[T]he President of the United States last year told me to go home to another country, with the implication that I don't even belong in America. The governor of Florida, Governor DeSantis, before I even was sworn in, called me a whatever that is." Here we see that Ocasio-Cortez's personal worth is called into question not only because of her gender, but also due to her race. As she reframes demeaning language towards women as a broader, societal issue she also points out that because of the intersectionalities of her identity, this is a multifaceted problem for her that encompasses issues of sexism and racism.

In these examples, Ocasio-Cortez focuses the discourse on her own lived experiences, which also happen to be universal experiences for many women. She appears unflustered as she talks about this incident and her own experiences with sexism. Her businesslike demeanor denies onlookers the chance to dismiss her as overreacting or overemotional. Ocasio-Cortez goes on to state, "This is not new, and that is the problem. Mr. Yoho was not alone. He was walking shoulder to shoulder with Representative Roger Williams, and that's

when we start to see that this issue is not about one incident. It is cultural. It is a culture of lack of impunity, of accepting of violence and violent language against women, and an entire structure of power that supports that.” This rhetorical strategy of directness and personal experience, therefore, establishes abusive language as a part of daily life for women and begins to shift the focus of the controversy. The largest issue in this situation is not the rude remarks Yoho made once while angry, Ocasio-Cortez maintains, but rather the continuation and legitimization of demeaning language levied against all women. By speaking out, Ocasio-Cortez is first reframing the situation as a societal issue and not a singular incident. Secondly, she reframes Yoho as a problematic man capable of accosting women and not a prestigious representative incapable of such actions.

Ocasio-Cortez then explains that she felt especially compelled to speak that day in Congress because of the apology that Yoho offered the previous day. She states that she could not allow her nieces, young girls in her district, or victims of abuse to watch her accept Yoho’s excuses as a legitimate form of apology in such a public arena as Congress. By criticizing Yoho’s comments and discussing her personal experiences with gender-based harassment, Ocasio-Cortez enacts the point she wants to make: that we must vocally oppose misogyny. She speaks up against sexist language and behavior as they pose a significant problem affecting women in a myriad of settings and requires the commitment of all people to end. Had Ocasio-Cortez not spoken up in this manner, the story would perhaps have remained focused on how Yoho depicted it. Ocasio-Cortez’s expressed concern about how this issue directly shapes women’s experiences in the world allows her to enact her point in an authentic manner and then create space for new perspectives about women’s treatment in the workplace and degrading language’s effects on women.

Juxtaposing Incongruities About “Good Men”

Throughout her remarks, Ocasio-Cortez also calls direct attention to Yoho’s use of women in his life in order to defend himself and his character following the initial incident on the steps of the Capitol. This strategy, therein, allows her to juxtapose incongruities about “good men.” The juxtaposition of incongruities refers to the unification of two ideas that are often thought of as being completely different and is a strategy frequently used in feminist rhetoric (Foss 153). In this case, the two concepts compared and brought together are sexist behavior and “good men.” Ocasio-Cortez accomplishes this juxtaposition of incongruities through first, pointing out the flawed logic behind Yoho’s remarks and second, comparing Yoho’s behavior with that of a decent man.

Ocasio-Cortez takes great issue with Yoho’s use of women as shields, and she dissects the flaws in his logic. She explains, “what I do have issue with is using women, our wives and daughters, as shields and excuses for poor behavior.” As previously mentioned, Yoho uses the fact that he has a wife and daughters as an excuse for his actions. This type of remark focuses on women only in relation to men, as if women only exist as wives, mothers, daughters, or sisters and not as independent people. The presence of women in a man’s life does not make a man immune to sexist and harmful behavior towards women. This defensive language characterizes women as a sort of monolith, ignoring differences in interpersonal relationships, power, and status. It problematically implies that if a man has one positive relationship with a woman, he is incapable of harmful behavior towards other women. According to Ocasio-Cortez, the logic of Yoho’s efforts is flawed, because she is someone’s daughter, too. She argues that through the insults he levied at her, Yoho authorized other men

to use this same type of abusive language with his wife, his daughters, and women from his district.

Ocasio-Cortez also discusses the attributes of a good man. She explains, “Having a daughter does not make a man decent. Having a wife does not make a decent man. Treating people with dignity and respect makes a decent man, and when a decent man messes up, as we all are bound to do, he tries his best and does apologize.” This establishes how Ocasio-Cortez believes a good man acts and how he would respond in this specific situation. Setting this point of comparison for Yoho’s actions and subsequent remarks, Ocasio-Cortez leads her audience to infer that despite being an elected official, Yoho’s behavior does not signify strength of character. She also crucially includes the phrase “when a decent man messes up, as we are all bound to do.” This portion of her statement implies that she is not seeking perfection from Yoho and other men in the world, but rather simply expects that when they make a mistake, they acknowledge it, apologize, and move on.

Ocasio-Cortez goes on to thank Yoho for exemplifying an important lesson: that people who are seen as “good men” can do bad things. This is where Ocasio-Cortez’s juxtaposition of incongruities is most visible. She states, “I want to thank [Mr. Yoho] for showing the world that you can be a powerful man and accost women. You can have daughters and accost women without remorse. You can be married and accost women. You can take photos and project an image to the world of being a family man and accost women without remorse and with a sense of impunity.” Ocasio-Cortez pushes back against the idea that because Yoho is a family man who has daughters, he is immune to committing sexist actions himself. By pointing out that knowing women or being in a certain profession does not mean a man cannot use belittling language with women, she shows that bad men come in

all shapes and forms and exist in all areas of society. Through her critique of Yoho's family man image, Ocasio-Cortez summons citizens to think more critically about the narratives with which we are presented, because many of them are rooted in problematic systems of sexism, racism, and classism.

Skin Care and Sexism: AOC's Beauty Routine with *Vogue*

In mid-August 2020, *Vogue* released a video on its YouTube channel featuring Ocasio-Cortez performing her daily skincare and makeup routine. The video has garnered more than three million views in the subsequent months ("Congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez's Guide") and afforded Ocasio-Cortez a platform to share her own makeup routine, while also discussing the importance of women and femme people taking care of themselves and gender-based political issues in the United States. In the following section, I lay out more context and then move into my analysis of the video itself.

Context

As a brand and a publication, "*Vogue* places fashion in the context of culture and the world we live in—how we dress, live and socialize; what we eat, listen to and watch; who leads and inspires us" ("Vogue U.S."). A publication historically geared towards women, *Vogue* contextualizes news and trends about fashion and beauty. *U.S. Vogue* is the number one fashion publisher on YouTube and has more than 52 million followers on various social media platforms, so the content the publication posts reaches a wide audience ("Vogue U.S.").

In this get-ready-with-me video published by *Vogue* last year, Ocasio-Cortez discusses the political, the personal, and all of the overlap between the two that she experiences as a woman in U.S. politics. Moreover, Ocasio-Cortez does this within the genre

of a makeup tutorial video. In 2006, makeup tutorials first appeared on YouTube and have multiplied significantly in the subsequent years (Krause). These tutorials cover techniques and tips for makeup application as well as specific product recommendations. In many ways, online makeup tutorials democratized the makeup process, allowing anyone with a phone, tablet, or computer to learn the tricks of professionals. In particular, Ocasio-Cortez's video is part of a video series called "Beauty Secrets" which *Vogue* describes as an "intimate series" that allows viewers to see the beauty routines of "beloved beauty, fashion, and pop culture faces" ("Beauty Secrets"). Most of the people featured in this series are in the entertainment industry; therefore, it is notable that Ocasio-Cortez, a member of Congress, was selected to do an episode.

In this video, Ocasio-Cortez not only offers tips on moisturizing, contouring, and applying lipstick with ease, but she also challenges the genre by adding commentary on issues ranging from the pink tax to the pressures of being the youngest-ever member of Congress. She works within the boundaries of the genre while also pushing its boundaries by integrating political commentary almost seamlessly into her makeup application. The video was released in mid-August, just ahead of the 2020 election, in which Ocasio-Cortez was up for re-election. She disrupts traditional ideas about femininity and beauty in U.S. culture by encouraging new perspectives on the topic and also reframing ideas about women's time and energy as they relate to makeup.

Generating New Attitudes on Beauty and Femininity

Ocasio-Cortez resists antiquated ideas about femininity most noticeably by advocating for thoughtful, nuanced perspectives on the topic of beauty. Her first notable rhetorical approach most closely correlates with feminist criticism's strategy of generating

multiple perspectives. This strategy focuses on disrupting hegemony by providing different perspectives on commonly-held truths (Foss 147). My analysis of her remarks revealed two main perspective shifts: self-acceptance as an act of resistance and beauty as a form of expression. These perspective shifts work to undermine the commonly-held truths that women must present themselves in a certain way in order to merit respect, especially in the workplace.

Throughout the tutorial, Ocasio-Cortez champions self-acceptance as a way to push back against societal pressures for women to look a certain way. She discusses how in the face of capitalism, women valuing and loving themselves is in and of itself an act of defiance. The nondescript bathroom background and conversational tone of the video set the perfect backdrop for her to weave stories of the political and personal together. This setup enables her to come across less as a politician and more as a sincere friend simply offering advice. She states, “Our culture is so predicated on diminishing women . . . and so it’s quite a radical act . . . it’s almost like a mini protest to love yourself in a society that’s always trying to tell you you’re not the right weight, you’re not the right color, you’re not the right, you know, whatever it is” In the face of patriarchy and a capitalist society that devalues women, accepting oneself and making decisions independent of societal expectations is an act of rebellion. Ocasio-Cortez’s message might seem ironic, given that she offers this advice in the middle of a makeup tutorial, and that the beauty industry is a billion dollar business often predicated on women’s insecurities (Biron). Despite this, Ocasio-Cortez also instills feelings of agency and power in her audience; they can wear as much or as little makeup as they choose. She herself admits that she does not do this thorough of a makeup look every day and frequently leaves the house barefaced.

Towards the end of the video, while applying shimmery eye shadow, Ocasio-Cortez continues this thread when she notes how, especially as a woman of color and the youngest ever member of Congress, she has to find power and worth within herself and by herself: “It’s so hard to be taken seriously. . . . It’s just really difficult because some people are just born in bodies that are naturally taken more seriously.” However, Ocasio-Cortez confronts this hegemony by locating power in herself and her own decisions. She encourages viewers to find their feelings of validation and confidence from within, rather than from outside sources. Ocasio-Cortez states, “You cannot get your feelings of beauty and confidence from anyone but yourself. . . that is one of the most ultimate gifts that you have to give to yourself.” It is easy, if not the default, for women to feel consumed by patriarchal standards and judgements about femininity, but throughout her *Vogue* video, Ocasio-Cortez emphasizes that these concepts of femininity are not the only options.

Not only does Ocasio-Cortez encourage self-acceptance as an act of resistance, but she also generates new ideas about makeup as a form of expression. After applying her base layer of concealer, foundation, blush, and bronzer, Ocasio-Cortez moves to eyeshadow and lipstick. She talks about the work the queer community has done in utilizing beauty to their advantage saying, “The way that they use beauty as a form of self-expression, from drag queens to . . . nonbinary people and how they choose to use beauty to express themselves is a lesson to everybody.” The language Ocasio-Cortez uses in these conversations is also important. During the video she talks about the experiences of “women and femme people,” intentionally including people who may not identify as women but who also share in these struggles. Makeup, then, becomes a tool that women and femme people can utilize to express their feelings, personalities, or identities. Therefore, Ocasio-Cortez encourages viewers to use

makeup in whatever ways they feel comfortable as a form of self-expression while also acknowledging the work specific communities have done on this subject.

Furthermore, Ocasio-Cortez talks about her own experiences utilizing makeup as a form of self-expression. She speaks of her concern about her appearance, as the youngest member of Congress whose image is constantly scrutinized: “People already try to diminish me and diminish my voice as young and frivolous and unintelligent.” However, in one recent instance, she was able to express herself and disregard the opinions of others by doing her eyeshadow how she wanted—with glitter. She exclaims that “[I]t looks fire! It looks good! It helps me feel better.” This simple act of applying makeup, therefore, is actually quite powerful and enables Ocasio-Cortez to feel comfortable and more like herself when under the scrutiny of the public eye. A bold red lip has also become synonymous with Ocasio-Cortez’s image and, as she explains, has been an important point of cultural expression. She states, “[O]f course, being Latina, this is like very much our culture where we come from. I will wear a red lip when I want confidence.” Thus, makeup plays an important role in granting people the agency to look however they would like and to express themselves personally and culturally.

Ocasio-Cortez, therefore, encourages more thoughtful discourse about beauty in the U.S. By discussing self-acceptance as an act of resistance and makeup as a form of expression, she illuminates new perspectives on how women choose to present themselves. In turn, these perspectives aid women and femme people’s processes of self-definition. However, as we will see in the following section, Ocasio-Cortez also warns of the dangers of makeup when it is weaponized against women. Makeup can be a fruitful site of self-

expression and acceptance, but all too often it is also used as a means of subjugating women politically, socially, and economically.

Reframing Women's Time and Energy

In addition to deconstructing societal perceptions and attitudes about beauty, Ocasio-Cortez delves into issues of patriarchy, time, and control as well. Specifically, she works to reframe, or shift viewpoints, about modern patriarchy by focusing on the pink tax and its connections to women's time, money, and status in the workplace. Through this reframing, she enables viewers to see patriarchy as a multilayered system wherein certain aspects intersect and affect one another.

While doing her eye makeup, Ocasio-Cortez first delves into the topic of pink taxes. A "pink tax" refers to the higher prices affixed to products marketed towards women (Wakeman). This means that items such as shampoo and conditioner, soap, and razors frequently cost more for women despite possessing little to no differences from a brand's comparable products for men. Additionally, in most states, women are subject to a pink tax on pads and tampons, as well, because they are products only used by people who menstruate. Ocasio-Cortez provides another apt example of the pink tax at work: dry-cleaning. In many states, she points out, women's dry-cleaning costs more than men's simply because it is a service differentiated by gender. Therefore, women are at an economic disadvantage with men even doing something as simple as going to the drug store or the dry cleaner.

After discussing the inherent sexism of pink taxes, Ocasio-Cortez begins to connect the economic exploitation of women to social and workplace issues as well. She states that a pink tax is not just about money but affects women's time and the treatment they receive, as

well. Styling their hair and doing their makeup in the morning takes up time women could spend differently. She states, “If waking up in the morning and doing your makeup gives you life, then that is amazing, and you should do it. But what we are also seeing all too often is that women who wear makeup...also make more money.” As previously mentioned, Ocasio-Cortez notes that she is doing a full face of makeup due to the nature of the video, but some days she goes to work sans makeup. The amount of makeup that women wear should be entirely up to them. However, personal decisions about how women present themselves are frequently not just about personal preference. She explains that these

calculations and decisions stop being about choice, and they start being about patriarchy. Where if we look attractive to men, then we will be compensated more. And to me, that’s the complete antithesis of what beauty should be about. I think beauty should be about the person who is applying it. And so, these things add up over time. And on top of all that, we’re not even paid at the same level as men, and so our expenses are higher, our time is less, and we’re not even getting paid at an equal rate.

In order to be successful in the workplace, many women may feel they must appeal to the male gaze in what has also become normalized as “professional” for women. The male gaze refers to the constant objectification of women by heterosexual men (Mulvey 62). This means women must sacrifice time, energy, and money in order to appeal to men’s fantasies of femininity when they are already paid on average less than men. The pressure placed on women to look a certain way, the gender pay gap, the pink tax—these are all issues in their own right but placed in conversation with one another they speak to a culture of subjugating women’s time, money, energy, and appearances.

However, when women care about makeup and fashion, they are also frequently discounted as unserious. As discussed in Chapter II, for years women have been subjected to different manifestations of the double bind, both in personal and public life. The double bind, according to Kathleen Hall Jamieson, simplifies the complexity of women's identities down to binaries (*Beyond the Double Bind* 5). Each type of bind forces women to be classified as one unsatisfactory thing or another. This denies them the ability to be more complicated beings and also constrains them to two undesirable classifications.

Ocasio-Cortez directly addresses the femininity/competence double bind in her video. As she applies moisturizer and foundation, Ocasio-Cortez looks up at the camera and notes, "Femininity has power, and in politics there is so much criticism and nit-picking about how women and femme people present ourselves. Just being a woman is quite politicized here in Washington. There's this really false idea that if you care about makeup or if your interests are in beauty and fashion that that's somehow frivolous." This is a classic example of the femininity/competence bind, as women in the workplace are expected to fulfill dueling societal expectations. Being feminine and being intelligent are seen as being at odds with one another. Ocasio-Cortez highlights how issues of beauty and appearance are considered "frivolous" and make women seem less serious in the workplace; however, as she has already established, women who spend more time on their makeup and hair typically make more money. Thus, these issues of double binds and pink taxes work to diminish women's economic and social control in the workplace. By discussing these ideas, one atop the other, Ocasio-Cortez reframes them not as isolated occurrences, but as an intentional and pointed manifestation of patriarchy.

Through reframing issues of sexism, Ocasio-Cortez sheds light on issues affecting many Americans' everyday lives. She demonstrates the overlap between issues of sexism, control, time, and money while also reminding women and femme people of the power of self-acceptance and makeup. Her decision to share these facts in her *Vogue* video makes Ocasio-Cortez's ideas accessible to anyone who is watching and enables her to reach a different audience than she would on cable news or on her Twitter. The first step in addressing societal issues is talking about them. By taking a multilayered approach to explaining these specific manifestations of sexism, Ocasio-Cortez calls attention to the patriarchal structures in place and, hopefully, generates enthusiastic support to restructure these policies and norms.

Conclusion

During her first term as a congresswoman, Ocasio-Cortez pushed back against hegemonic rhetorical constraints using a myriad of strategies. First, in her 2018 campaign ad, Ocasio-Cortez reframed the leadership situation in NY-14 as undesirable and enacted the political change she wished to see by running for the House of Representatives. This honest and forthright messaging helped her win both in the primary and general elections. Second, in her response to Rep. Ted Yoho's remarks on the steps to the Capitol and on the floor of the House, Ocasio-Cortez situated Yoho's remarks within the societal issue of sexism and juxtaposed incongruities about good men. These strategies worked together to call to attention how inappropriate and problematic Yoho's behavior was. Finally, in a makeup tutorial video made with *Vogue*, Ocasio-Cortez called for more expansive perspectives on makeup and femininity and reframed how femininity and beauty are often weaponized

against women in the workplace. Though an unlikely platform, she found a way to dissect the personal and political in a relatable way.

CHAPTER V: CONCLUSION

The purpose of this study was to examine how Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez has rhetorically challenged hegemony in American politics as a progressive woman of color during her 2018 campaign and her first term in Congress. I accomplished this by conducting a feminist critique of three separate artifacts pertaining to Ocasio-Cortez's first term in Congress: her 2018 campaign ad entitled "The Courage to Change," her response to the Rep. Ted Yoho situation in July 2020, and a makeup tutorial she filmed with *Vogue* in August 2020. In this chapter, I discuss major conclusions about her rhetorical strategies, outline two implications of the study, and identify a limitation to the study, as well. Then, I recommend possible pathways for future research and offer my own final thoughts on the state of politics in the United States.

Major Conclusions

This study revealed two major findings about Ocasio-Cortez's rhetoric during her first term. First, Ocasio-Cortez utilized the strategy of enactment across all three messages. In each instance she, the rhetor, enacts the changes she wants to see. In her 2018 campaign ad, Ocasio-Cortez embodies the political change she desires for her district by running for Congress. She voices the concerns of her constituents and forges identification with them to illustrate that a community insider would best represent them. Next, in her response to Rep. Ted Yoho's remarks, Ocasio-Cortez also enacts her idea that women should stand up for themselves in the face of abuse from men, especially in the workplace. She powerfully makes her point by speaking on the House floor about the societal issue of abusive language being weaponized against women. Finally, in her YouTube makeup tutorial with *Vogue*, Ocasio-Cortez enacts how professional women should not be constrained to the femininity/competence double bind with regard to beauty. She weaves political discussion throughout the video, demonstrating that

cosmetics can be a site of both self-expression and economic self-preservation. She enacts the idea that how women present themselves should be entirely their decision, and not informed by societal expectations or impacted by gendered economic policies. Although she employs enactment differently in each artifact, Ocasio-Cortez nevertheless utilizes her own presence and actions to personify the changes she wishes to see and to deconstruct hegemony.

Ocasio-Cortez also pushes against hegemonic norms by offering audiences new ways of seeing the world around them. To accomplish this, she relies on three strategies: reframing, generating new perspectives, and juxtaposing incongruities. Ocasio-Cortez routinely uses reframing, or looking at circumstances from a different point of view (Foss 150), to provide new emotional or conceptual lenses for examining U.S. politics. For example, in her campaign ad Ocasio-Cortez reframes the leadership situation in NY-14 as substandard; likewise, in her response to Ted Yoho, Ocasio-Cortez reframes his remarks as part of a societal issue of demeaning women. She also makes use of another strategy of feminist rhetoric, generating new perspectives, which involves a rhetor advocating for an attitude different than the dominant one (Foss 147). In the messages examined here, for instance, Ocasio-Cortez generates new perspectives when she advocates for viewing self-acceptance as a form of resistance and makeup as a form of expression in her makeup tutorial. Finally, Ocasio-Cortez juxtaposes incongruities, or unifies two ideas typically thought of as mutually exclusive (Foss 153), as in her “good men” response to Yoho’s remarks, which allows her to call attention to the problematic and often overlooked behaviors of men in positions of leadership. While reframing, generating new perspectives, and juxtaposing incongruities are distinctive strategies, they all work in tandem with one another to enable audiences to look at the world in more nuanced ways. Ocasio-Cortez,

in turn, utilizes these strategies to achieve feminist criticism's goals of granting rhetors more agency in defining themselves and transforming dominant structures of power.

Implications

The findings of this study contain two main implications. The first is that substantial and meaningful resistance to hegemony can be performed within existing institutions. Although this study centers on how Ocasio-Cortez disrupts hegemonies, in each of my three artifacts she utilizes an existing institution as a site of resistance. Ocasio-Cortez uses a campaign ad, a speech on the House floor, and a formulaic makeup tutorial to resist systems of patriarchy and classism. Although complete eradication of systems of oppression is the end goal for feminist rhetors, my research shows that speakers can subvert these unjust norms using the very structures previous generations utilized to enforce them. This implication signifies that disrupting hegemony does not have to be an inaccessible act; resistance can occur in the very institutions propagating the oppression. Hence, this form of resistance to hegemony can play a crucial first step in granting oppressed populations agency to begin transforming power relations.

The second implication pertains to the rhetorical presence of future politicians. As more women, people of color, and working-class people enter politics through organizations like Brand New Congress, they will likely face similar criticisms, insults, and obstacles as Ocasio-Cortez. The strategies of enacting, reframing, juxtaposing incongruities, and generating new perspectives, therefore, may be useful moving forward as more minority-status Americans try to find their voices in politics and get elected at the local, state, or national level. Electing more women and people of color to office is in and of itself a type of enactment, wherein their presence in positions of leadership defies the values of institutions based in sexism, racism, and classism. Though more indirect rhetorical strategies are available, like cultivating ambiguity,

which makes messages intentionally vague and open to different interpretations (Foss 148), or strategic silence, Ocasio-Cortez purposefully uses strategies that put the rhetor in a very active role, such as enacting political change or reframing the Yoho situation by directly calling out his poor behavior. Ambiguity may be useful strategies in other contexts, such as in art for social critique, but deconstruction of hegemonies calls for critical and active engagement. Political figures might also choose to utilize silence as a strategy in a situation in which they want to imbue themselves flexibility and not pigeonhole themselves to one position. However, due to their nature, hegemonies are simply assumed; therefore, vocal defiance of said norms is the most powerful and effective strategy to combat them. Active engagement with hegemonies, such as classism and sexism, can help to publicly identify their flaws and diminish their power and is a broader strategy that future progressive politicians may wish to use.

Limitations

The central limitation to my study was the scope. Although I did study three artifacts, one from her campaign and two from Ocasio-Cortez's first term, I did not conduct an exhaustive examination of all her public rhetoric. Ocasio-Cortez is incredibly active on Twitter and Instagram and has also made numerous noteworthy appearances on talk shows or in speeches on the House floor. A more comprehensive study would extend its scope to include a wider range of artifacts. Therefore, the results discussed above are not an all-encompassing list of rhetorical strategies used by Ocasio-Cortez, as she may have heavily utilized other rhetorical strategies in other messages not examined in this project. Nonetheless, this study does provide an in-depth understanding of her efforts to combat hegemony in her campaign ad, response to Rep. Ted Yoho, and *Vogue* makeup tutorial.

Recommendations for Future Research

As mentioned in my limitations section, due to the constraints of an undergraduate thesis I was unable to consider more than three main artifacts from Ocasio-Cortez's early congressional career. Consequently, I recommend future researchers in the field examine more messages from her first term as well as from her second term. As the youngest-ever member of Congress, Ocasio-Cortez is one of the most prolific and proficient social media users in U.S. politics. Therefore, her Twitter and Instagram are especially worthy of study. Additional speeches and interviews she has given as well as her social media posts are other fruitful sites of resistance wherein rhetorical responses to hegemony may be identified.

Additionally, as Ocasio-Cortez has risen to fame, so too have five other young congresspeople: Rashida Tlaib, Ilhan Omar, Ayanna Pressley, Jamaal Bowman, and Cori Bush (Seitz-Wald). Commonly known as "the Squad," I believe these other representatives, most of whom are women and/or people of color, may benefit from examining the rhetorical strategies Ocasio-Cortez utilized. I recommend that future research examine how these five individuals have constructed their public images as well as responded to hegemonies. This research will aid leaders who follow in their footsteps and must also maneuver these issues.

Finally, I recommend other scholars look at the relationship Ocasio-Cortez has forged with people outside of government to advocate for change. As previously mentioned, it is noteworthy how Ocasio-Cortez is able to challenge hegemonies from inside the institutions that often perpetuate oppression. Previous communication scholars have studied social movement rhetoric (Stewart et al.; Morris III and Browne), but they have not delved into the collaboration that takes place between elected officials and community leaders and activists. Therefore, it may be useful to investigate how government officials like Ocasio-Cortez work in tandem with those outside the system to stand up for substantive change and challenge hegemonies.

Final Thoughts

First and foremost, this project has made me incredibly cognizant of how different each individual person's experience of the world is. As Ocasio-Cortez notes in her *Vogue* video, “[S]ome people are just born in bodies that are naturally taken more seriously.” This simple difference in body can affect your treatment by coworkers, the raise you do or do not receive, and your audience's perception of you as you speak. In all facets of life, we should think carefully about the assumptions we have and the opinions we hold about people and groups different than us. This is an important first step in deconstructing our minds and grappling with issues of sexism, colonialism, racism, and classism.

As I stated at the beginning of this study, I have felt incredibly frustrated with U.S. politics since 2016. This last election cycle appears to have tipped the nation in a hopeful direction, but the events of January 6, 2021 are a stark reminder that political relations in this country continue to be fragile and volatile. Though I am glad to have found several politicians I respect—Ocasio-Cortez being one of them—I am not too proud to admit when they make mistakes. Amid an increasingly partisan political landscape, it has become more and more normal to demonize those with whom we disagree and to deify those with whom we agree. Politicians are not infallible; they are just people (albeit with very important jobs) and they make mistakes. And when they do, it is normal to criticize or to disagree with them. Party ties do not mean you must automatically uphold policies or politicians. In fact, unthinking support of a leader or party can be very dangerous. Open and loud critiques of policies and leaders' actions is the way so much political change occurs. Therefore, I implore anyone reading this to think critically about the politicians you endorse and who is affected by the types of policies they

advocate. Though Ocasio-Cortez has taken an important step towards more inclusive and honest politics, it is up to future leaders and all of us to continue that trend.

Works Cited

- Alter, Charlotte. “‘Change Is Closer Than We Think.’ Inside Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez’s Unlikely Rise.” *Time*, 21 Mar. 2019, <https://time.com/longform/alexandria-ocasio-cortez-profile/>. Accessed 18 Oct.2020.
- Anderson, Karrin Vasby. “Every Woman Is the Wrong Woman: The Female Presidentiality Paradox.” *Women’s Studies in Communication*, vol. 40, no. 2, Apr. 2017, pp. 132–135. *Communication & Mass Media Complete*, doi:10.1080/07491409.2017.1302257.
- Anderson, Karrin Vasby. “Presidential Pioneer or Campaign Queen? Hillary Clinton and the First-Timer/Frontrunner Double Bind.” *Rhetoric & Public Affairs*, vol. 20, no. 3, Fall 2017, pp. 525–538. *Communication & Mass Media Complete*, doi:10.14321/rhetpublaffa.20.3.0525.
- “Apology.” *Merriam-Webster*, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/apology>. Accessed 7 Feb. 2021.
- Axford, Barrie et al. *Politics: An Introduction*. Taylor & Francis. 2018.
- “Beauty Secrets.” *Vogue*, <https://www.vogue.com/video/series/beauty-secrets>. Accessed 22 Feb. 2021.
- Bialik, Kristen. “For the Fifth Time in A Row, the New Congress is the Most Racially and Ethnically Diverse Ever.” *Pew Research Center*, 8 Feb. 2019, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/02/08/for-the-fifth-time-in-a-row-the-new-congress-is-the-most-racially-and-ethnically-diverse-ever/>. Accessed 28 Sept. 2020.
- "Binary, adj. and n." *OED Online*, Oxford University Press, Sept. 2020, www.oed.com/view/Entry/19111. Accessed 18 Oct. 2020.

Biron, Bethany. "Beauty Has Blown Up to Be A \$532 Billion Industry — And Analysts Say That These 4 Trends Will Make It Even Bigger." *Business Insider*, 9 July 2019, <https://www.businessinsider.com/beauty-multibillion-industry-trends-future-2019-7>. Accessed 27 Feb. 2021.

Byrd, Haley. "Ted Yoho Apologizes After Reportedly Verbally Accosting Ocasio-Cortez Over Stance on Unemployment, Crime in New York." *CNN*, 22 July 2020, <https://www.cnn.com/2020/07/21/politics/aoc-ted-yoho-confrontation/index.html>. Accessed 16 Feb. 2021.

Campbell, Karlyn Kohrs. *Man Cannot Speak for Her*. Greenwood P, 1989.

Carlin, Diana B., and Kelly L. Winfrey. "Have You Come a Long Way, Baby? Hillary Clinton, Sarah Palin, and Sexism in 2008 Campaign Coverage." *Communication Studies*, vol. 60, no. 4, Sept. 2009, pp. 326–343. *Communication & Mass Media Complete*, doi:10.1080/10510970903109904.

Coleman, Aaron Ross. "Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and the future of the left." *Vox*, 22 Aug. 2020, <https://www.vox.com/2020/8/21/21395848/alexandria-ocasio-cortez-future-of-left-aoc-bernie-dsa-working-families-party>. Accessed 27 Sept. 2020.

Collins, Patricia Hill. "Toward a New Vision: Race, Class, and Gender as Categories of Analysis and Connection." *Race, Sex & Class*, vol. 1, no. 1, 1993, pp. 25–45. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/41680038. Accessed 28 Feb. 2021.

"Congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez's Guide to Her Signature Rep Lip | Beauty Secrets | Vogue." *Youtube*, uploaded by Vogue, 21 Aug. 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bXqZllqGWWQ>.

"The Courage to Change | Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez." *Youtube*, uploaded by Alexandria Ocasio

- Cortez, 30 May 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rq3QXIVR0bs>.
- Desilver, Drew. "A Record Number of Women Will be Serving in the New Congress." *Pew Research Center*, 18 Dec. 2018, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2018/12/18/record-number-women-in-congress/>. Accessed 28 Sept. 2018.
- Dow, Bonnie J. and Mari Boor Tonn. "'Feminine Style' and Political Judgement in the Rhetoric of Ann Richards." *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, vol. 79, no. 3, Aug. 1993, pp. 286-302. doi:10.1080/00335639309384036.
- Eagly, Alice H. "Female Leadership Advantage and Disadvantage: Resolving the Contradictions." *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, vol. 31, no. 1, Mar. 2007, pp. 1–12. *Academic Search Complete*, doi:10.1111/j.1471-6402.2007.00326.x.
- Foss, Sonja K. *Rhetorical Criticism: Exploration and Practice*. 4th ed., Waveland P, Inc. 2018.
- Freedlander, David. "Ocasio-Cortez Not Only Beat Crowley—She Beat Old School New York Politics." *New York*, 27 June 2018, <http://nymag.com/intelligencer/2018/06/ocasio-cortez-beat-crowley-and-old-school-nyc-politics.html>. Accessed 15 Nov. 2020.
- Geismer, Lily. "Democrats and Neoliberalism." *Vox*, 11 June 2019, <https://www.vox.com/polyarchy/2019/6/11/18660240/democrats-neoliberalism>. Accessed 27 Sept. 2020.
- Gibson, Katie L., and Amy L. Heyse. "'The Difference Between a Hockey Mom and a Pit Bull': Sarah Palin's Faux Maternal Persona and Performance of Hegemonic Masculinity at the 2008 Republican National Convention." *Communication Quarterly*, vol. 58, no. 3, July 2010, pp. 235–256. *Communication & Mass Media Complete*, doi:10.1080/01463373.2010.503151.
- Haltiwanger, John. "The Story Behind the Making of 28-year-old Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez's

Viral, Inspirational Campaign Video.” *Business Insider*, 27 June 2018,
<https://www.businessinsider.com/alexandria-ocasio-cortez-campaign-video-2018-6>.

Accessed 15 Nov. 2020.

Hecht, Michael L. “Communication Theory of Identity: Multilayered Understandings of Performed Identity.” *Engaging Theories In Interpersonal Communication: Multiple Perspectives*, edited by D. O. Braithwaite & P. Schrodtt. Sage Publishing, 2015, pp. 175-187.

Hecht, Michael L. “2002--A Research Odyssey: Toward the Development of a Communication Theory of Identity.” *Communication Monographs*, 60, 1993, pp. 76-82.
 doi: 10.1080/03637759309376297.

Hogan, J. Michael. *Rhetoric and Reform in the Progressive Era*. Michigan State UP, 2003.

Jamieson, Kathleen Hall. *Beyond the Double Bind: Women and Leadership*. Oxford UP, 1995.

Jamieson, Kathleen Hall. *Packaging the Presidency: A History and Criticism of Presidential Campaign Advertising*. Oxford UP, 1996.

Kaufer, David S., and Shawn J. Parry-Giles. “Hillary Clinton’s Presidential Campaign Memoirs: A Study in Contrasting Identities.” *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, vol. 103, no. 1/2, Feb. 2017, pp. 7–32. *Communication & Mass Media Complete*,
 doi:10.1080/00335630.2016.1221529.

Knock Down the House. Directed by Rachel Lears, Netflix, 2019.

Krause, Amanda. “Inside the YouTube Beauty Community That’s Turning Makeup Artists into Millionaires.” *Insider*, 21 Mar. 2021, <https://www.insider.com/youtube-beauty-everything-you-need-to-know-jeffree-james-nikkietutorials-2020-3>. Accessed 21 Feb. 2021.

- Manning, Mandy R. "The Rhetoric of Equality: Hillary Rodham Clinton's Redefinition of the Female Politician." *Texas Speech Communication Journal*, vol. 30, no. 2, Winter 2006, pp. 109–120. *Communication & Mass Media Complete*.
- Morris III, Charles E. and Stephen Howard Browne. *Readings on the Rhetoric of Social Protest*. 3rd ed., Strata Pub Co., 2013.
- Mulvey, Laura. "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema." *Film Theory and Criticism: Introductory Readings*. Edited by Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen. Oxford UP, 1999: 833-44.
- "My Congressional District." *United States Census Bureau*, 2017, <https://www.census.gov/mycd/?st=36&cd=14>. Accessed 15 Nov. 2020.
- "Need – Julie Oliver for Congress." *Youtube*, uploaded by Julie Oliver, 26 Sept. 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FqZcpwknUo8>.
- Nguyen, K.H. *Rhetoric in Neoliberalism*. Springer Nature, 2017.
- North, Anna. "America's Sexist Obsession With What Women Politicians Wear, Explained." *Vox*, 3 Dec. 2018, <https://www.vox.com/identities/2018/12/3/18107151/alexandria-ocasio-cortez-eddie-scarry-women-politics>. Accessed 13 Sept. 2020.
- North, Anna. "How 4 Congresswomen Came to be Called 'the Squad.'" *Vox*, 17 July 2019, <https://www.vox.com/2019/7/17/20696474/squad-congresswomen-trump-pressley-aoc-omar-tlaib>. Accessed 4 Oct. 2020.
- "Our District." *Congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez*, <https://ocasiocortez.house.gov/about/our-district>. Accessed 15 Nov. 2020.
- Quinn, Melissa. "GOP Lawmaker Apologizes for "Abrupt Manner" of Heated Exchange with Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez." *CBS News*, 22 July 2020, <https://www.cbsnews.com>

- /news/alexandria-ocasio-cortez-aoc-ted-yoho-confrontation/. Accessed 16 Feb. 2021.
- Raju, Manu. "Ocasio-Cortez Reveals New Details About Viral Incident with Rep. Ted Yoho." *CNN*, 24 July 2020, <https://www.cnn.com/2020/07/24/politics/aoc-ted-yoho-latest/index.html>. Accessed 14 Dec. 2020.
- Read, Bridget. "Crazed Republican Accosts AOC on Her Way to Work." *The Cut*, 22 July 2020, <https://www.thecut.com/2020/07/aoc-accosted-by-rep-ted-yoho-on-the-steps-of-the-capitol.html>. Accessed 10 Dec. 2020.
- "Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (D-NY) Responds to Rep. Ted Yoho (R-FL)." *Youtube*, uploaded by C-SPAN, 23 July 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LI4ueUtkRQ0>.
- "Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez First House Floor Speech (C-SPAN)." *Youtube*, uploaded by C-SPAN, 19 Jan. 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a5FBWkbAjEI>.
- "Rep. Yoho Apologizes For 'The Abrupt Manner of the Conversation' With AOC | NBC News Now." *Youtube*, uploaded by NBC News, 22 July 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rIsOuHBRCaw>.
- Richards, Rebecca S. "Cyborgs on the World Stage: Hillary Clinton and the Rhetorical Performances of Iron Ladies." *Feminist Formations*, vol. 23, no. 1, 2011, pp. 1–24. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/41301636. Accessed 18 Oct. 2020.
- Richardson, Glenn W. Pulp Politics: Popular Culture and Political Advertising. *Rhetoric and Public Affairs*, vol. 3, no. 4, 2000, pp. 603-626. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/41939633. Accessed 6 Sept. 2020.
- Sach, Maddie. "Why The Democrats Have Shifted Left Over The Last 30 Years." *FiveThirtyEight*, 16 Dec. 2019, <https://fivethirtyeight.com/features/why-the-democrats-have-shifted-left-over-the-last-30-years/>. Accessed 28 Feb. 2021.

Seitz-Wald, Alex. "AOC and 'the squad' are getting some company. Here's who is joining the team." *NBC News*, 12 Dec. 2020, <https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/2020-election/aoc-squad-are-getting-some-company-here-s-who-joining-n1250958>. Accessed 5 Mar. 2021.

Stewart, Charles J. "A functional perspective to the rhetoric of social movements." *Central States Speech Journal*, vol. 31, no. 4, 1980, pp. 298-305, doi: 10.1080/10510978009368070.

Stone, D. "Symbols." *Policy Paradox: The Art of Political Decision-Making*, 2012, pp. 157-182. "U.S. House Voting History." *270 to Win*, https://www.270towin.com/states/New_York. Accessed 8 Jan. 2021.

Vafeiadis, Michail, et al. "Narratives in Political Advertising: An Analysis of the Political Advertisements in the 2014 Midterm Elections." *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*, vol. 62, no. 2, June 2018, pp. 354–370. *Academic Search Complete*, doi:10.1080/08838151.2018.1451858.

"Vogue U.S." *Condé Nast*, <https://www.condenast.com/brands/vogue#U.S>. Accessed 19 Jan. 2021.

Wakeman, Jessica. "Pink Tax: The Real Cost of Gender-Based Pricing." *Heathline*, 6 Aug. 2020, <https://www.healthline.com/health/the-real-cost-of-pink-tax#Making-tampons-andpads-more-accessible>. Accessed 8 Feb. 2021.

APPENDIX A: PRE-ANALYSIS WRITING QUESTIONS

1. Who is the audience? How does Ocasio-Cortez relate to her audience in this artifact?
2. Does she prioritize identification with one part of the audience over another?
3. Which layers of identity from CTI are enacted in this artifact?
4. What structure(s) of hegemony is she working within and against in this context?
5. What strategies does Ocasio-Cortez utilize to dismantle or work against the dominant powers?
 1. What types of frames does AOC use when talking about political change?
 2. Does she cultivate ambiguity?
 3. In what ways does AOC enact the structural change she wishes to see?
 4. Does AOC utilize perspective by incongruity?
 5. How and about what topics does she generate new perspectives or ways of thinking?
6. If it's a video, what role do the visuals play in communicating the message?