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A Cultural Institution Taking Action on Climate and Inequality: The Climate Museum in New York City



The climate crisis saturates global existence in the present day. Everywhere we see the impacts of a changed and changing climate on people—our lives, livelihoods, and bodies—and the places we live. Adjectives like “record-breaking” (Bhatish/Choschagrin 2021)  (*1) and “catastrophic” (Cotton 2021)  (*2) are now commonplace when describing soaring temperatures or the aftereffects of flash floods and hurricanes. This year’s extreme weather has seen devastating impacts in multiple regions on every continent. *(3)


Cultural institutions are in a unique position to educate broad audiences about the realities of the climate crisis through a variety of media, and to provide audiences with options for what to do: how to integrate community-building around climate into their daily lives and to make climate a part of their political praxis. Museum programs, campaigns, exhibitions, events, and other forms of cultural programming can inspire action among constituents in ways that other institutions may be unable to. As organizations that are respected by the public as credible sources of information and as institutions imbued with significant public trust (Dilenschneider 2017)  (*3) museums are uniquely situated to use their social position as culture-showcasing and culture-creating to advance the public good.

In this way, museums are the ideal venues for educating the public on the axes of “urgency and agency” (Mann 2021)  (*4) on the climate crisis, emphasizing both the necessity of taking action on climate right now and offering possibilities for ways to take action. Both, according to climatologist and author Michael E. Mann, work to counteract decades of messaging tactics by the fossil fuel industry, first to deny the reality of the changing planetary climate, and now to engage in the delay of meaningful government action across many nations. Investing the public with urgency and agency on climate can have deep impacts socially in developing the political agency of museumgoers and in combating the fatalism that may arise from seeing continued climate inaction amid undeniable loss and damage wrought by the effects of the climate crisis on already-fragile systems. A forthcoming study shows that young people (ages 16-25) around the world say that the climate crisis causes them significant anxiety and emotional distress, creating a sense of despondency with respect to the future and exacerbating feelings of betrayal by governments and those in power for their lack of urgency. (Marks et al. 2021)  (*5) Addressing feelings of powerlessness regarding climate among the public of all ages is something that museums are capable of doing.

Feelings of helplessness or disillusionment do not solely arise from climate, just as the climate crisis does not exist in a vacuum. While the crisis is truly planetary in the scope and range of its effects, its consequences are neither uniform nor evenly dispersed, even within a single locale. Histories of inequality shape the realities we see today. Dispossessions based on race, gender, class, disability, sexuality, ethnicity, refugee or immigration status, and other forms of demographic variation structure human environments. All of these spaces are governed by policies—conventional, legal, and structural—that reveal something about inequality and that serve to maintain the entrenchment of forms of inequality. Where inequality meets the climate crisis, both crises intensify. For example, in the United

States, elevated temperatures and extreme heat result in 12,000 premature deaths per year, a number that is projected to increase due to climate change. (Shindell et al. 2020)  (*6) Urban heat vulnerability is a persistent source of concern during the summer months, with each heatwave bringing more casualties. Consistently across cities in the U.S., communities of color are more vulnerable to heat impacts. This is due to racist federal housing policies that segregated urban space and maintained divisions from the 1930s on, restricting where African Americans and immigrant communities could purchase or rent homes. These policies marked certain neighborhoods within American cities as “desirable” and others as “declining” or “hazardous” in a process known as redlining. Racism was enabled and maintained through these oppressive policies. For decades afterward, lawmakers systematically denied investments in redlined neighborhoods, including planting trees or building green spaces like parks. As a result of having more paved surfaces and less tree cover, formerly redlined neighborhoods are uniquely vulnerable to soaring temperatures today, over 90 years later. This can create a heat differential of 5 degrees Fahrenheit to as much as 20 degrees Fahrenheit between neighborhoods of color and their white counterparts within the same city. (Plumer/Popovich 2020)  (*7) A 2020 study conducted by Jeremy Hoffman, Vivek Shandas, and Nicholas Pendleton  (*8) shows that this is the case in 94% of American cities, definitively linking the legacies of racist housing policy to present-day heat exposure. Climate effects exacerbate extant unequal forms, deepening their severity and impacts. And the entrenchment of various kinds of inequality means that climate solutions need to substantively address the effects of historical and contemporary inequities in order to be truly accessible for all.

This paper examines what museums can do to address both the climate crisis and existing structures of inequality in their programs by highlighting the curatorial and educational practices of the Climate Museum in New York City. Founded in 2015 by Director Miranda Massie, the Climate Museum’s mission is to “inspire action on the climate crisis with programming across the arts and sciences that deepens understanding, builds connections, and advances just solutions.” (Massie/Reyes 2020)  (*9) Massie has said that “Our programming aims to give people of all ages an accessible entrypoint into the climate conversation ... At our core, we’re working to build a wider culture of climate-forward thinking and active engagement.” (Massie 2020)  (*10)


With these explicit goals, the Climate Museum incorporates both a call to action and specific steps to guide attendees and participants toward action into all of its programs, which have included exhibitions, panel discussions, public arts campaigns, youth and adult workshops, and more. The highlighted actions all have a civic orientation, designed to inspire audiences to think of action as it relates to how they are emplaced within their communities and their larger political environments. You can find more details about the Climate Museum’s action asks, current programs, and pivotal 2019 exhibition, *Taking Action*, in the interview with Climate Museum Senior Exhibitions Associate Anais Reyes and myself in this special issue. (For more on the Climate Museum and its peer institutions creating the grounds for taking action on climate, please see: Newell (2020).)  (*11)

I work at the Climate Museum in New York City, where I am the Museum’s Postdoctoral Fellow in Climate and Inequality, one of two positions focused on climate and inequality that are funded by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation. I will elaborate the Climate Museum’s public discussion series, *Talking Climate*, *(2) as exemplifying a commitment to elucidating themes at the intersection of climate and



inequality. The series provides a model for how museums and other cultural institutions can create programs that educate the public on climate in nuanced and multifaceted ways. This includes showcasing how climate exacerbates and transforms historical and contemporary inequalities and dispossessions, making climate something that is not only the domain of a singular science, but something we must trace and understand through society, culture, politics, economics, and history. By bringing together interdisciplinary experts in conversation, the *Talking Climate* series offers a blueprint for analyzing multiple crises together at the same time. This suggests a pathway forward for climate policy: that without centering inequality, robust policy will be, at best, incomplete. And this also suggests an avenue for public advocacy: that the twinned crises of climate and inequality are not separable issues, and that real solutions will necessitate a comprehensive approach to their entanglement.

In the following sections, I will briefly explore scholars' and practitioners' recent calls for incorporating climate into cultural institution programming, give an example of how museum programming can respond to the urgent concerns of this historical moment, and elaborate on the Climate Museum's *Talking Climate* series as an example of successfully curating compelling and urgently needed conversations on climate and inequality while also providing audiences with pathways toward climate action.

The Climate Crisis in Museum Studies and Practice


Over the past few years, there has been a deepening conversation within Museum Studies on how museums, science centers, galleries, and other cultural institutions can account for the realities of climate change in their programming. Indeed, International Council of Museums (ICOM) President Alberto Garlandini said earlier this year that "Many studies confirm that museums are amongst the most trusted institutions across the globe. Museums are in a unique position to support sustainable environmental policies, to disseminate scientific information, and encourage sustainable practices in their local communities." (Garlandini 2021)  (*12)

Museums are also able to reflect and respond to shifting public conventions. Even the term "climate change" may be outliving its utility as an adequate descriptor. Increasingly, institutions are turning to "climate crisis" or even "climate chaos" to emphasize the severe reality of our current planetary condition. With the terrain of public discourse on climate constantly shifting, and new norms and new advances established with regular frequency, what are the best practices for a museum or cultural institution to reflect upon and engage these shifts?




Henry McGhie points out that "social norms are important, and cultural institutions have a responsibility and a role to play in supporting collaborative, constructive social norms." (McGhie 2018)  (*13) The terminology, juxtapositions, and narrative modes of framing can impact the construction of these social norms as audiences encounter museum programs. McGhie also adapts Fiona Cameron, Bob Hodge, and Juan Francisco Salazar's "nine principles for museums and science centers as agents to promote understanding and action on climate change," (Cameron et al.)  (*14) listing the key elements of why and how climate can be centered in museum programming. I want to highlight three principles in particular:

McGhie writes:

- "Allowing people to draw on a range of perspectives, ideas, scales and disciplines and to form their own conclusions is important, but it is also

- important for museums to express their own position in contested positions.”
- “Museum-goers need to be able to connect with the scale that is appreciable to them.”
- “Museums need to be part of an ecology of partners from different sectors. Museums ... can facilitate dialogue across sectors.” (McGhie 2018)  (*13)

I read these particular principles as follows: 1) Museums can and should take a stance on climate; 2) Museum audiences need on-ramps to climate in ways that are consonant with their lives and experience; and 3) Museums can create and sustain spaces for interdisciplinary dialogue. As we shall see, each of these principles resonates strongly with the goals and execution of the *Talking Climate* series at the Climate Museum.

The above principles are also motivators of action. A majority of Americans are worried about the climate crisis but have yet to take action, (Leiserowitz et al.)  (*15) and being provided with multiple points of entry into climate discussions, a clear perspective from a trusted source like a museum, and a set of concrete pathways for taking action can be transformative for museum audiences. Sarah Sutton urges an openness to risk-taking for museums to adequately address climate in their exhibitions, programs, and institutional operations. (Sutton 2020)  (*16) She acknowledges the multiplicity and simultaneity of crises that affect people today, citing COVID-19, the pandemic’s economic impacts, racism, and climate as “four interrelated crises,” each with parallels that can inform the others. (Ibid.: 631)  (*16)

The precursors to the Climate Museum’s *Talking Climate* series, which emphasized the importance of regular public discussions on the themes of climate and inequality, were the panel discussion events *Black Lives and the Climate Crisis* (July 2020) and *COVID’s Lessons for Climate and Inequality: From Sacrifice Zones to Justice* (September 2020). These hour-long discussion events, held via an online livecast and archived at the Climate Museum’s YouTube channel, *(3) responded to the demands of the moment in the United States: the Black Lives Matter movement and the nationwide summer of protests against police killings spurred by the murder of George Floyd by police officer Derek Chauvin, and the ravages of the pandemic on communities of color across the U.S. These conversations, which brought together experts from distinct fields ranging from activism, medicine, journalism, advocacy, policy, and science, reflected on the climate crisis in relation to the unequal realities of contemporary American society. The panelists in *COVID’s Lessons* discussed the disproportionate deadly effects of the global pandemic on people of color—particularly Black, Indigenous, Latinx, and immigrant communities—in the United States as a grim foreshadowing of lasting climate impacts unless swift and decisive action is taken at a national scale. Both events go beyond Sutton’s formulation, showing how the historical exacerbations of racism and its impacts are not simply related to COVID and climate, but are constitutive of the very grounds of these global conditions, and are intimately tied to the severity of their impacts for populations on the frontlines of multiple unfolding crises.

The *Talking Climate* series at the Climate Museum

The lessons learned through the 2020 online panel discussions curated by the Climate Museum, and the public reception of the events, inspired the formalization of a discussion series centering themes at the intersection of climate and inequality. This series is called *Talking Climate*.


In addition to bringing together an interdisciplinary panel of experts, the events also typically feature a poetry reading that is resonant with the themes of the


conversation at the beginning of the event. Since these conversations have been hosted online due to the COVID-19 pandemic, audience interaction occurs primarily through the chat on YouTube, and the poetry reading became a feature to bring people together into the virtual space of the livecast and situate the space of the forthcoming conversation in a way that is distinct from other kinds of panel convenings—academic conference panels or TV news talking heads, for example, which create a very different kind of emotional experience. *Black Lives and the Climate Crisis* opened with a reading by Aracelis Girmay, and *COVID's Lessons* began with Ross Gay reading two of his poems. The audience response to “You Are Who I Love” by Girmay ⁽⁴⁾ and “The Joy of Caring for Others” (Gay 2020) ⁽¹⁷⁾ and “A Small, Needful Fact” (Gay 2015) ⁽¹⁸⁾ by Gay emphasized the benefits of an emotionally poignant opening as an entry point into discussions of injustice, and what to do about it. In addition to opening with poetry, these discussion events concluded with a call to action, urging attendees to use what they learned and felt during the conversation as a springboard for having a climate conversation with someone they know and to call their congressional representatives to urge them to pass climate-forward policy.

In a recent profile in the *Washington Post*, Climate Museum Director Miranda Massie said that “the real change comes in what people feel in relation to each other, and in relation to their own capacity, their own agency in the world ... That’s where the transformation comes, and that’s when people are able to decide to act.” (Schlossberg 2021) ⁽¹⁹⁾ Even prior to the formal launch of the *Talking Climate* discussion series, the idea of being able to create an experience where attendees could feel something, learn something, reflect on climate and inequality with nuance through the conversation between the panelists with Massie as the moderator, and be bolstered by an action ask at the end of the event was a key goal of the planning going forward.

The Climate Museum launched *Talking Climate* in January 2021 with a conversation titled *Talking Climate: Displacements*. ⁽⁵⁾ Curatorially, we knew we wanted to challenge some of the prevailing common sense that the climate crisis will lead to mass displacement across national borders. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) has noted that much of current and projected climate displacement will actually happen within the national borders of countries (UNHCR 2020) ⁽²⁰⁾ and furthermore, displacements due to the climate crisis are not simply a future prediction but are crises that have occurred and continue to occur in multiple forms. *Talking Climate: Displacements* focused on three different forms of displacement that highlight the twinned crises of climate and inequality in the United States: internal displacement in the Gulf Coast following hurricanes, most notably the traumatic long-term displacement those affected experienced after Hurricane Katrina in 2005; climate gentrification in Miami; and land reclamation amid the threat of displacement for the Shinnecock Indian Nation in New York.




The expert panelists speaking to these issues were Vann R. Newkirk II, Senior Editor at *The Atlantic* and the creator and host of the Peabody Award-winning podcast *Floodlines* that investigates the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina fifteen years later. *The Atlantic's* press release after the Peabody win noted that “the podcast presciently revealed the structural dynamics that shape all disasters in the United States: systemic racism, governmental incompetence, viral misinformation, and failures of empathy.” (The Atlantic 2020) ⁽²¹⁾ In the conversation, Newkirk was joined by Marleine Bastien, immigrant rights activist and Executive Director of the nonprofit advocacy organization Family Action Network Movement (FANM) in Miami, who explained that due to rising sea levels and increased flooding in the city of

Miami at scenic beachfront residences immediately along the coast, developers are now looking to build on higher ground. One such site of climate gentrification in Miami is a neighborhood known as Little Haiti, an area where Haitian immigrants and refugees have settled in over the past 40 years, many themselves displaced by the Duvalier dictatorships, hurricanes, and the 2010 earthquake. And Shavonne Smith of the Shinnecock Indian Nation's Environmental Department spoke to the originary displacements arising from settler colonialism in the United States and highlighted the Nation's climate adaptation plan, first put into action in 2013. Smith said it is commonplace for some people to dismiss American settler colonialism as something of the past, but she rightfully rejects this claim, saying "'a few hundred years ago' is still impacting people today." (Smith 2021)  (*22)

Talking Climate: Displacements laid the foundation for an argument about climate and inequality that the Climate Museum makes through the series: that one cannot understand the severity of the risks of the climate crisis or the far reach of its impacts into already-vulnerable communities without also understanding the way inequalities of multiple kinds produce and maintain those vulnerabilities. The series makes a case for how history shapes and situates what we see in the present. These can be histories that are hundreds of years old, and histories that are more recent, all of which point to the human production of crisis and the unfair distribution of crisis effects. And just as the scale of the devastation of both climate and inequality are enormous, so too are the stakes of rewriting those past scripts and righting the dispossessions through concerted action. Massie concluded the *Displacements* event with such a call to action: to make it a habit to call your congressional representatives if you live in the United States, emphasizing that "We need a whole new civic culture of truth, compassion, and reconciliation in recognizing the dynamics that our amazing speakers have been talking about today." (Massie 2021)  (*23)


Creating a new civic culture, and a deepened civic engagement among its constituents, is certainly in accordance with the Climate Museum's mission. The *Talking Climate* series furthers the goal of activating pathways for participants to engage in the democratic process and reimagine themselves as civic actors capable of effecting change as part of a political praxis. To return to Cameron et al.'s (2013) principles via McGhie (2018): even in this single example, we can see the *Talking Climate* series showcasing how the Climate Museum takes a stance on climate and inequality, how the Museum utilizes the storytelling and testimony of panelists to create a conversation about climate and inequality that an audience can access from multiple entry points, and how the Museum creates space for interdisciplinary dialogue as a central tenet of the series.

Since *Displacements*, the themes at the intersection of climate and inequality that have been featured as part of the *Talking Climate* conversation series include *Grief*, *Infrastructure*, *Identity*, *Food*, *Law*, and *Health*, with more series episodes forthcoming. Taken as a whole, the series makes a case for the numerous arenas in which the climate crisis must be centered as a site of action, and conversely, the necessity of climate-forward policy to robustly account for multiple injustices stemming from multiple inequalities when bringing a just climate future into being. During *Talking Climate: Food*, *(6) Arcenio López, Executive Director of the Mixteco-Indígena Community Organizing Project (MICOP) in Southern California and a former farmworker, discussed the various crises that farmworkers navigate daily. On one hand, there is increased danger from heat exposure due to soaring temperatures as well as accumulated chemical exposure from pesticides. On the other hand, according to López, there is the fact that the agricultural system in California and elsewhere in the United States is rooted in racism and the disempowerment of

farmworkers, many of whom are undocumented Indigenous immigrants. (López 2021)  (*24) “The pandemic right now, the situation, it’s just a moment to unpack all of these inequalities that have been here, not just for the last 20 years, but the last 100 years ... the climate situation, justice, is connected with health ... and having legal documents to work.” (Ibid.)  (*24) He says that the organizing and advocacy work at MICOP doesn’t entail coming in and telling farmworkers what to do, but instead focuses on what farmworkers say their needs are, and building modes of action that center those needs. (Ibid.)  (*24)

López’s analysis highlights another feature of the *Talking Climate* series: namely, that it makes space for the specificity of different forms of inequality and their interrelation. It allows for a constellation of concerns to be held together in considering the nuances of what forms of inequality may look like in a given situation. While the climate crisis is global in scale and requires global solutions, it is also intimate, specific, and local and requires local solutions, too. The *Talking Climate* series asks implicitly: What would the work of substantive repair entail? It also highlights the work of people who are actively engaged in that repair. The series treats expertise itself as interdisciplinary and stemming from multiple domains of experience. By showcasing the work of a broad variety of people who have devoted their lives to taking action on climate and inequality, the series also demonstrates how the panelists are actively working toward solutions, and how these solutions, gains, and victories are significant and necessary.

Looking ahead, the *Talking Climate* series aims to continue exploring new themes—like labor on November 5, 2021—while also returning to and building upon previous conversations. While the discussions are very timely given the climatic impacts we see in the news or in the new research that is published, many of the events also have an evergreen quality. The inequalities featured in the series run deep and require returning to for further consideration and analysis. We are hoping to circulate the series alongside the resource guides, along with further reading on the subject matter curated for each event (under the Climate Museum blog), to educators who could incorporate the materials into their lesson plans on climate. Hosting the series online during the pandemic has yielded an archive of video recordings that can be distributed and circulated asynchronously, which is an accessible feature of the online platform. In future series programming, as we consider in-person options, we would also like to maintain an engaging digital record of each discussion. These are important as educational tools and for documenting the discussions of the most pressing concerns of the moment.

Ultimately, the Climate Museum’s discussion series on themes at the intersection of climate and inequality, *Talking Climate*, evinces the qualities of what Christiana Figueres describes as “stubborn optimism”: a “relentless commitment” (Figueres 2020)  (*25) to building interdisciplinary conversations for deep understanding of the most pressing issues that affect the world today, conceptualizing those conversations as galvanizing movement toward action on the part of those who experience this museum programming. There is no time like the present to take action on climate—the feeling of urgency is omnipresent, and the agency is in our hands.

Acknowledgements: I thank Katharina Anzengruber and Elke Zobl for their invitation to contribute to this special issue and for their generous engagement and comments. Thanks are also due to Philip Friedrich and Miranda Massie for their

invaluable input. In addition to myself, the *Talking Climate* team at the Climate Museum is: Akua Banful, Miranda Massie, Margaret O'Donnell, Saskia Randle, and current and former interns Nina Castro-Sauer and Evan Lim. It has been a pleasure to curate this discussion series together with them.

Header Photo: *Talking Climate: Displacements* photo by Virginia Hanusik, design by Saskia Randle

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- * 2 Recordings of Talking Climate series events are archived on the Climate Museum website (<https://climatemuseum.org/talking-climate>) and the Climate Museum YouTube page for viewing.
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