

12-2023

“YO SÍ SOY BORICUA, PA’ QUE TÚ LO SEPAS”: A DECOLONIAL AND INTERSECTIONAL ANALYSIS OF ALEXANDRIA OCASIO-CORTEZ

Jocelin Monge

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“YO SÍ SOY BORICUA, PA’ QUE TÚ LO SEPAS”: A DECOLONIAL
AND INTERSECTIONAL ANALYSIS OF ALEXANDRIA OCASIO-CORTEZ

A Thesis
Presented to the
Faculty of
California State University,
San Bernardino

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts
in
Communication Studies

by
Jocelin Monge
December 2023

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ABSTRACT

Historically speaking, political representation in Congressional districts in the U.S. has been predominantly White and male. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (AOC) is an example of a type of new *mestiza* consciousness (Anzaldúa, 1987) given she is the youngest Latina congresswoman ever been elected to serve New York's 14th Congressional District. This study employs an intersectional analysis on AOC's viral moments with 'The Squad', Puerto Rico, *Vogue*, and Met Gala. Through a theoretical lens composed of elements of intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1991) and *mestiza* consciousness (Anzaldúa, 1987), this study focuses on three significant recurrent themes found in AOC's *estilos de resistencia* or sensibilities in enacting resistance tactics. These are inter-ethnic cultural exchanges to resist ethnic borders, translinguistic communication to resist nation-state centered perceptions of language use, and a feminist Chicana/Latina aesthetic of difference. Through these tactics AOC disrupts dominant traditional norms using her own definition of woman empowerment in a political realm. Furthermore, this case study on AOC explores the intersections of media, gender, race, and communication and how she contributes to the movement towards social justice, liberation, and freedom.

Keywords: *Anzaldúan theory, Chicana feminism, intersectionality, rhetorical criticism*

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

There are many I would like to thank during this process of the MA program at CSUS. My professors from CSU, San Marcos: Dr. Michelle Holling, and Dr. Michelle Ramos-Pellicia. Community members' advice: Dr. Olivia Rosas, and Dr. Marisol Clark-Ibanez.

My all Latinas with PhDs thesis committee: Dr. Liliana Conlisk Gallegos, Dr. Raisa Alvarado, and Dr. Paloma Villegas. I am grateful for all your support, time, and contribution in this journey.

I want to want to thank professors that made me feel welcomed to CSUSB and created a supportive space: Dr. Thomas Corrigan, Dr. Mariam Betlemidze, Dr. Jo Anna Grant, Dr. Julie Taylor, Dr. Ahlam Muhtaseb, Dr. Mihaela Popescu and Dr. Jess Nerren.

Lastly, those back home who have been my cheerleaders: mi familia and mis amigas, muchas gracias. Thank you to my partner for being there every step of the way. Little by little, a little becomes a lot.

DEDICATION

To all Latina *mujeres* who have persisted, existed, and resisted. To mi hijo, Josué, I love you papas.

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CHAPTER ONE:

INTRODUCTION

*I have come to believe over and over again
that what is most important to me must be spoken,
made verbal and shared, even at the risk of having
it bruised or misunderstood.*

–Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*

On June 26, 2018, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (AOC) won the Democratic Party's primary election by 56.7% against Joseph Crowley 43.3% for New York's 14th Congressional district and became the youngest Woman of Color, at only 28-years-old, to ever be elected to serve in Congress (Ballotpedia, n.d.; Goldmacher & Martin, 2018; Hess, 2018). AOC dominated the Democratic conversation on social media platform Twitter by being the second most popular politician with over 14.3 million interactions in early 2019 after her inaugural speech (Rothschild & Allen, 2019; Alter, 2019; Gillette, 2019). Her presence impacted national media outlets and drew national recognition on a large scale not limited to political coverage. Fashion magazines featured AOC on their front cover including *Vogue*, *Glamour*, and *Allure* along with news magazines *Bloomberg*, *CNN*, and *The Economist* (Rodriguez & Goretti, 2022). AOC is a young Latina, daughter of Puertorriqueña migrant parents, and native of the Bronx, New York. This historical moment has marked the beginning of AOC's long-term career stirring controversial waves in a predominately White male-employed governmental realm.

On February 16, 2019, AOC did her inaugural address in New York shortly after her oath ceremony on January 3, 2019 (NBC News, 2019). The oath ceremony was live streamed on the social media platform YouTube. AOC started a movement where the spotlight has constantly been on and her work in Congress, the Democratic Party, and her overall impact on this country has been rigorously recorded. During her ceremony through her symbolic use of wardrobe. She wore a white suit symbolizing the women's suffrage movement, red lipstick, and hoop earrings because she wanted to represent her culture from the Bronx, New York. As an active Twitter user, AOC used the platform to express her reasoning behind the outfit. She openly communicated to the world what she represents, tweeting, "lips + hoops were inspired by Sonia Sotomayor, who was advised to wear neutral-colored nail polish to her confirmation hearings to avoid scrutiny. She kept her red" (Ocasio-Cortez, 2019). AOC concluded in the same tweet post, "Next time someone tells Bronx girls to take off their hoops, they can just say they're dressing like a Congresswoman" (Ocasio-Cortez, 2019).

In 2019, the country turned their attention to the youngest Woman of Color politician and started a conversation on AOC's bodily attire in Congress. This fixation on her aesthetics is a departure from how White, male politicians are treated in this field. Sociologist Tressie McMillan Cottom (2020) writes that when beauty occurs in an "unruly body", such as a non-White person's body, then it is an existential threat and AOC is conventionally attractive and this makes people uncomfortable. Additionally, the conversation is changed to commenting on

AOC's body instead of the politics and how power operates in those discussions. The reality is that there is a system AOC is a part of and that system is one of oppression that situates her in a position where she is ridiculed on her image. There is a gendered assumption where powerful people, commonly White men, are judged as smart especially if they 'win'. The conversation changes because AOC disrupts this assumption simply because of her presence and now, position of power as a congresswoman. This gendered construction is embedded in this system of oppression AOC navigates. This is what makes people, particularly those on the conservative right, uncomfortable.

This event is a pivotal moment because it happened after the hate speech against her had already started. Through her speech, AOC counteracts by breaking down dominant norms of what and how a congresswoman is 'supposed' to look and speak in a field that is historically constructed for White men. AOC mentions in her tweet specific beauty aesthetics such as red lipstick and hoop earrings. These are significant cultural markers of the idea of *Latinidad* and the meaning behind this complex ethnic history. How often have woman and particularly Women of Color been included in the histories of U.S. politics? AOC's presence in the political arena in Congress has fired up discussions around representation in Congressional districts and beyond onto social identities on race, ethnicity, class, and socioeconomic status.

The conceptualization of *Latinidad* is fluid with a set of historical cultural boundaries that are "consistently reinforced, challenged, or negotiated" through

the experiences of Latina women such as AOC (Mendible, 2007, p. 5). In her work, she is constantly negotiating and bargaining what aspects of her Latina culture she will expose to her audience such as “lips and hoops” (Ocasio-Cortez, 2019). Latina Congresswoman AOC has joined the Latine social movement which is a political one to “express the strength of *la comunidad* with greater force” through her acts of resistance in congressional work, speech, dress, and fashion, the embodiment of *Latinidad* (Oboler, 1992, 32). AOC’s humble origins are those of a daughter of Puerto Rican parents, being first-generation, and a working-class woman. These demographics shape her politics and are parallel to those experiences and demographics of the Chicana, Mexican American. Despite the historical differences between the nations, they share the “analogous forms of colonialism and ensuing hybridity that Latino groups may share” (Aparicio, 2003, p. 93; Perez, 1999). Due to her experiences in coloniality, AOC engages in a form of strategic essentialism, coined by postcolonial feminist philosopher Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1988), by accepting essentialist foundations for identity categories as a strategy for collective representation in “order to pursue chosen political” goals (Pande, 2017).

The next chapter includes the formulation of a theoretical perspective suitable for this study based on the frameworks of *mestiza* consciousness, linguistic terrorism, *mestizaje*, Borderlands, new tribalism, and *nepantla* (1987) that stem from Queer Critical Chicana feminist and Decolonial author Gloria Anzaldúa (1987; 2015; 2009) and intersectionality by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989).

This is under the premise that AOC is a Latina who has a parallel historical relationship to coloniality to Chicana and Black woman and beyond. Hence an intersectional framework is most suiting because specific forms of oppression shape the way she is represented and the way she responds. I take a decolonial approach (Anzaldúa, 1987; Crenshaw, 1989) to re-center a voice of Woman of Color, AOC, because this population of woman has been particularly marginalized in their political participation throughout many decades. Progress was made during the ratification of the Women's suffrage movement in 1920 where only White American women were granted the same rights and responsibilities as men and rest of Women of Color including Native American, Asian, Latina, and Black women had their own separate fight (Brown, 2014). Yet, marginalization persisted after the 1920s. Women of Color continue to fight this battle. For example, institutional barriers have prohibited Women of Color in engaging in political participation, thus they are uniquely situated as both women and ethnic minorities.

They are also held at higher scrutiny. Besides AOC, Woman of Color in politics such as Former First Lady Michelle Obama have also been criticized specifically for her looks and for not following White hegemonic femininity standards. "Since her appearance during the Obamas' first presidential campaign, her hair, body (including arms), speech style, and even eyebrows have been the extensive of public comment" (Hurtado, 2020, p. 159). This public commentary and critique of Women of Color in politics and beyond is ongoing

and the need for a critical examination of Women of Color resistance to these power systems is necessary.

The connections amongst Anzaldúa (1987) *mestiza* consciousness, new tribalism, linguistic terrorism, and *nepantla* and Crenshaw (1989) intersectionality add nuance to this study on AOC because of her multifaceted positionality as a first-generation, Latina, Woman of Color, young, Puertorriqueña congresswoman in a field that has historically been dominated by White men. Furthermore, the concept of intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989) serves to look closely at the diverse issues AOC faces due to the intersecting systems of oppression and how those operate in the spaces she works. As well as how dealing with these diverse issues publicly causes her to build on her inter-ethnic alliances with other Women of Color political colleagues. The application of these concepts to the analysis of the data found in the study is further discussed in the chapter four analysis section.

In chapter three, methodologically, through a critical analysis, this thesis investigates the rhetorical representations and styles AOC exemplifies to demystify, intervene, resist, and restructure dominant U.S. political norms and systems of thought. While researching content on AOC, there was a significant amount of publicly accessible data readily available through Internet sites and applications such as YouTube, Twitter, and journalistic commentary articles. This selection was limited to some of AOC's most viral political moments. It was further narrowed down to videos with high viewership from 500k to 3 million

views and that were directly related to the themes discussed in the analysis. In addition, related news articles and Twitter posts about AOC are also used as part of the data collection of this study for additional investigation and commentary. Images of AOC are selected based on the recurrent themes and are from popular search engines such as Google images and Twitter posts.

Rhetorical Studies as a field within Communication Studies has been questioned recently by many scholars in the field regarding its #CommunicationSoWhite and #RhetoricSoWhite discourse (Sowards, 2019; Báez & Ore, 2018; Flores, 2018; Holling, 2018; Lechuga, 2020). Therefore, the goal of this thesis in terms of its employed methodology in this case-study of AOC is a commitment to a racial rhetorical criticism that is “more intersectional and attuned to the everyday complex workings of race and power” (Flores, 2018, p. 351). In addition, this analysis of AOC attempts to continue the work, as stated by Sowards (2019), “a number of rhetorical and communication scholars are theorizing Anzaldúa’s work as important communicative concepts” (p. 479). Hence, the previously mentioned concepts of Anzaldúa (1987) are utilized as part of the framework to deepen the understanding of AOC’s rhetorical strategies by including race and ethnicity as factors. In Michael Lechuga’s article (2020), *An anticolonial future: resembling the way we do rhetoric*, he suggests a praxis-driven ‘theory’ on Rhetorical Studies where praxis and theory are simultaneous. This thesis attempts to follow this pattern by recentering the marginalized and marginalize the centered by focusing on AOC and learning from this real human

being how resistance community work is done and impactful in politics instead of centering the White, conservative political rhetoric of the right and logic of coloniality.

In my positionality as a first-generation, Chicana, graduate student researcher and social media consumer, I recall the first time I heard about AOC through Instagram. Particularly noteworthy was the backlash AOC received because of her outspokenness and her style of communication because it involves explicit facial expressions and hand gestures. She received criticism through the commentary on the Instagram post for this because of her resistance to confining herself to stereotyped female gender characteristics such as being emotional, gentle, friendly, smooth, nurturing, and perpetually enthusiastic. Instead, she communicates in a representation of stereotypically male speech such as “loud speech, and swearing words” (Kramarae, 1981).

Negative representations of womanhood are often reproduced throughout media. Studies have shown that stereotypes generalize a specific group, person, or culture and this damages the perception of that group mostly in a negative manner (Robson, 2000). Furthermore, when gender and ethnic intersect, a bigger problem of audience perception arises. In a study comparing stereotypes of both Latina and Latino politicians one conclusion found that Latina politicians are negatively stereotyped mostly by White respondents (Cargile, 2021).

The social media discussions about AOC caught my attention because I am a Latina myself. I saw my ethnic background represented in Congress and

this made this moment significant because Women of Color holding political power in the United States are not common. Therefore, I am inspired by the fact that a young Latina woman overcame the barriers to successfully obtain a seat in Congress because the governmental field has been historically, and I argue is still occupied and structured for predominately White cisgender men (White House, n.d.) and White supremacist ideologies. Although AOC is *Boricua* (Puerto Rican) and I am *Mexicana* (Mexican), we both share the identity of Latinas.

My bilingualism will be reflected in this thesis meaning there will be words/phrases in the Spanish language to denote the plurality of research methods done by Woman of Color graduate students like me and will be italicized in this thesis. This follows what Stacy Sowards' (2019) article, *#RhetoricSoEnglishOnly: Decolonizing rhetorical studies through multilingualism*, argues of scholars making a statement of not privileging English and instead present the full context and meaning of original language usage while simultaneously remembering the colonial histories and legacies of these languages, such as Spanish in the Americas. In this thesis, I center the voice of WOC, case study of AOC, as a way of decolonial praxis. I am certain there is much to explore with the case of AOC.

In chapter four, I discuss the *estilos de resistencia* (styles of resistance) I found in AOC's most viral political moment through a critical analysis. The recurrent themes found and discussed are inter-ethnic cultural exchanges, translinguistic communication, and an aesthetic of difference. Examples of AOC's

most viral moments including her membership with The Squad, Puerto Rico, and *Vogue*. How AOC actions and work is a model of resistance to dominant norms in public spaces is explained further. In addition, historical references to these themes will be discussed further in the thesis to connect past and present events and their relation to AOC position.

CHAPTER TWO: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND LITERATURE REVIEW

Theoretical Framework

My critical and philosophical lens which incorporates elements of *mestiza* consciousness (Anzaldúa, 1987) and intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989) to analyze AOC's communicative style(s). My theoretical framework is based on decolonial thought because it is necessary to deconstruct larger systems of oppression such as racism and sexism seen in the discourses about AOC and her identity. I build this lens by considering the groundbreaking writings from Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* and *Light in the Dark* (1987; 2015). It is vital to dismantle and deconstruct Eurocentric ideologies from a decolonial perspective to further analyze AOC's resistance through her rhetorical styles against dominant politician norms. The themes from historical events are relevant to understand the situations and problems in today's world in the case of AOC's work in Congress. Pivotal historic moments have shaped how Western media operates with a Eurocentric, capitalistic, and patriarchal paradigm socially, economically, and politically. It is appropriate and necessary to discuss these Anzaldúan concepts (1987; 2015) to further analyze the social phenomena problem of misrepresentation and criticism in AOC's world and how it relates to her work in this country in her role as a Latina congresswoman.

La Consciencia de la Mestiza, Mestizaje, Borderlands – Anzaldúa Epistemic Perspectives

Queer Critical Chicana author, Gloria Anzaldúa, conceptualized the groundbreaking concept of *mestiza* consciousness, through references to her own multilayered persona. She is known for her work exploring Chicana identity and the politics surrounding sexuality, race, class, and goes in depth of the historical origins of Indigenous people, particularly the Aztecs in Latin America. Her writing is a call to distort the hierarchal way of thinking that encompasses White Western European ethnocentrism.

In her writings she states, “Ethnocentrism is the tyranny of Western aesthetics” (Anzaldúa, 1987, p. 68). Additionally, “A massive uprooting of dualistic thinking in the individual and collective consciousness is the beginning of a long struggle, but one could, in our best hopes, bring us to the end of rape, of violence, of war” (Anzaldúa, 1987, p. 80). In the case of AOC, her role as a congresswoman takes place in a public environment and she must navigate and negotiate spaces where she encounters ethnocentrism because of her aesthetics and being a Woman of Color from a colonial territory. Anzaldúa (1987) discusses how dualistic thinking means going beyond the binaries in society. In this analysis of AOC, her resistance to dominant ideologies and ethnocentrism involves dualistic thinking in her individual and collective life.

Anzaldúa writes the untold history of Chicanos, Mexicans, Latine, and Indigenous peoples. The new *mestiza* or *mestiza* consciousness, “reinterprets

history and, using new symbols, she shapes new myths ... Deconstruct, construct” (Anzaldúa, 1987, p. 82). It is suggested to understand history in a different way than how it has been presented because according to Anzaldúa (1987), history has been taught with an ethnocentric interpretation and instead unlearn and relearn history with different lens. Deconstruct the formation of these ideologies and construct new, different ideologies that go beyond. This way of seeing the world implies there are multiple perspectives, beliefs, and ideologies that contain truth and validity. The new *mestiza* represents an expansion on the biological definition of *mestiza* and refers instead to the people who “inhabit multiple worlds” because of their gender, sexuality, color, class, bodies, personality, spiritual beliefs, and other life experiences (Anzaldúa, 2015, p. 245). The concept of *mestiza* consciousness is relevant to the case of AOC because of her demographic background. In essence, she “inhabits multiple worlds” and “deconstructs and constructs” different ways of working as a politician in this country in her work with other politicians, speech, and wardrobe.

This study seeks to support the decolonial turn because it focuses on AOC’s modes of resistance to dominant power structures in her occupation as a congresswoman. Decolonialization includes the goal of dismantling Eurocentric ideologies as an act of resistance to dominant forms of assimilation to Western society and center the marginalized voice of WOC. Instead of a binary way of seeing race such as ‘Black or White’, I approach this study as an opportunity to ‘see’ race (Flores, 2016) in a pluralistic format. Latina congresswoman, AOC, is

known for her outspokenness in media because she advocates not only for herself but for her district and community. However, she is disrespected and criticized by White men in conservative media. An example of President Trump being xenophobic will be illustrated in the analysis section of this study. These forms of overt violence have been reproduced throughout history of colonialism through institutions in the workplace, education, local, and national governmental politics. Anzaldúa (1987) wrote about this history, and it is vital to discuss how it has affected AOC's use of rhetoric.

Anzaldúa (1987) conceptualized Borderlands leading to the formulation of a new *mestiza* consciousness. The rhetoric of the borderlands has affected immigrants more specifically in the Texas-México border. Borderlands provides a framework for analyzing the social construction of gender, race, and systems of power based on a patriarchal, capitalistic society. She wrote about race, particularly in being a Latina in an Anglo-American society and what that means to Latinas and White Americans. She wrote,

Chicanos and other people of color suffer economically for not acculturating. This voluntary (yet forced) alienation makes for psychological conflict, a kind of dual identity-we don't identify Anglo-American cultural values and we don't totally identify with the Mexican culture values. We are a synergy of two cultures with various degrees of Mexicaness or Angloness. (Anzaldúa, 1987, p. 85).

Immigrants and migrants in the U.S. and/or Chicanos experience not only a physical border, but also a mental border and a border space, hence the in-between spaces of Borderlands. Anzaldúa (2015) described these places as “intensely painful yet also transformational” because of the constant actions of “negotiating, shifting, and positioning” of what is reality or what realities exist in human experiences (p. 73, 242). The border is the division of two nations, or more for others, that are imagined to be two opposing worlds, countries, cultures, languages, and customs.

Mestiza consciousness is related to AOC. She was born in the United States. Her mother was born and raised in Puerto Rico and her father was a second-generation Bronxite. Although Puerto Rico is a U.S. territory, it is not recognized as an official state, still her mother migrated overseas the Atlantic Ocean to arrive to the mainland of the country in the state of New York. This was an internal migration, yet in mainstream ideology it is not seen this way. Anzaldúa (1987) described the Borderlands lives in the minds of immigrants and migrants who must learn to adapt while living in a new environment filled with a nuance of rules, laws, culture, and regulations.

Also, she illustrates the idea of not identifying in either culture with its totality. Because in México, the Chicano is not fully Mexican because they have crossed the border or the border crossed them, they are also not fully Anglo-American because they immigrated from México or were born into a Mexican household in the U.S. Similarly, AOC is not Anglo-American because she is not

White and not exclusively *Boricua* because she was not born in Puerto Rico, she was born in New York. She is a U.S. born citizen therefore, an American.

Anzaldúa (1987) conceptualized this experience as *la conciencia de la mestiza* or *mestiza* consciousness, a mixed consciousness of two identities. “Because I, a mestiza, continually walk out of one culture and into another, because I am all cultures at the same time, *alma entre dos mundos, tres, cuatro, me zumba la cabeza con lo contradictorio*” (Anzaldúa, 1987, p. 99). This is the force alienation that causes psychological conflict and can be a painful experience. It is a dual identity, an American-born Chicana who is not enough of either space in Eurocentric society or in the case of AOC, an American-born *Boricua* who is not a White American nor a native-born Puerto Rican. She also employs a working-class political consciousness that allows her to understand the world from this *mestiza* lens.

This *New Mestiza* consciousness resists this ‘otherness’ and ‘not enoughness’ dominant ideology in Western society People of Color often encountered. The process of this intersection of multifaceted identities includes a collision of phenomena, a unification of the separate and the process gives birth to an ‘element’ that is greater than the sum of its severed parts (Anzaldúa, 1987). It is a clash or *choque*, an internal struggle between the parts of the self. The process happens to migrants not exclusive to Mexican American immigrants, Chicanos in the U.S. but globally. Her work provides an insight into the many intersections of ethnicity, gender, geography, and language.

These systems of oppression are constituted based on power relations within the government's laws and policies pertaining to the topic of immigration. Thus, these frameworks from Anzaldúa's decolonial literatures suggest the possibilities and opportunities the self has to re-create and co-create ways of thinking, doing, advocating, and the overall production of knowledge from Indigenous and other lived experiences in coloniality. The life of AOC and her lived experiences is an example of this new *mestiza* consciousness in today's world. Together with ancestral origins in her family and her present collaborations with The Squad in Congress has presented an alternative way of dressing, speaking, and connecting to her district's community serving as their representative in a public space such as the U.S. House of Representatives. Additionally, this constant shift from one space to another is evident in AOC's daily life in her work as congresswoman. Furthermore, her situation is complex because despite these unpopular spaces for Women of Color, she manages to build strong relationships with other Women of Color in Congress. The collaborations and relationships she has with her community and colleagues are different spaces.

In her profession, when she is doing community events in her district of the Bronx, New York, the space she occupies consists of diverse backgrounds including ethnicity, language, and socioeconomic backgrounds. According to the U.S. Census Bureau (2021), as of July 2021, an estimated of 56.4% are of Hispanic or Latine origin, 43.8% are of Black or African American origin, 58.2% of

families and living arrangements speak a language other than English at home, and 26.4% of the population in poverty in Bronx County, NY. These demographics are significant to AOC's work because she is the representative of her district where she must work *with* the community, collaborate, and advocate for better living and working conditions in Congress for an equitable and just society.

Similarly, when she is working with her colleagues to introduce bills on the House floor, in the office at Capitol Hill, or when she travels around the globe for her job, the spaces she occupies comes with customary norms in professional settings including but not limited to aesthetics, speech, and both subtle and explicit politician formalities. These spaces AOC finds herself in are remarkably different worlds or what Anzaldúa would call *conocimientos* of the new *mestiza* consciousness. The physical, emotional, mental, spiritual shifts and movements are constant in the life of AOC from one space to another that are repeated on a daily, weekly, monthly basis.

Although Anzaldúa's work is from the late 1980s, it is suitable for the theoretical framework for this research because of how today there are still discourse on the topics of racism, sexism, and injustice economic position. AOC positioned herself in public spaces where the spotlight and political discourse is magnified on many aspects of her life. The media instances where she has been rejected, unwelcomed, and critiqued because of her appearance, intelligence, and background have transformed her to be creative in multiple occupations. "As

a people who have been stripped of our history, language, identity, and pride, we attempt again and again to find what we have lost by digging into our cultural roots imaginatively and making art from our findings” (Anzaldúa, 2015, p. 48). This lens contributes to the interpretation and explanation of how AOC responds to such negative remarks.

Integrating these theories with one another can bring a complex understanding about AOC and her positionality within politics and media. This is related to intersectionality because it is regarding multiple social formations Collins (2015). Intersectionality is an additional framework besides Anzaldúa’s *mestiza* consciousness, used in this thesis to critically focus on sexism, racism, nationality, and class categories of analysis.

Intersectionality Framework – Understanding the Intersections of Identity

Crenshaw (1989) coined the term intersectionality to theorize the marginalization of Black women at the intersections of race, gender, consideration of class, sexual orientation, citizenry, abilities, and educational level. Many scholars have incorporated and expanded on this concept (Collins, 2015; Soto Vega & Chávez, 2018; Marsi, 2019). Marsi (2019), wrote how intersectional theory, “at its best is a starting point into the substantial labor of dismantling unjust systems by attending to how those systems construct and impact the interplay of multiple, ever shifting identities” (Marsi, 2019, p. 419). Collins (2015) elaborated how intersectionality is not limited by analyzing only one social construct but rather examining a multisystem that is significantly

complex. It examines multiple social formations such as racism, sexism, and economic positions are all forms of injustices and inequalities. These are embedded in systems of oppression towards disadvantaged communities of color. Intersectionality involves critically understanding lived realities from not only one angle but multiple angles and seeing how they interact and interconnect with one another. Furthermore, intersectionality is a framework that examines multiple levels of oppressive systems, institutionalized forms of oppression rather than an inward perspective of identities entwining.

Intersectionality has been associated with women's studies, gender studies, cultural studies, media studies, and other interdisciplinary fields. It is a big umbrella that can cover many different fields of study and come to a common goal; analyze and focus on power relations and systems of oppression. Lugones (2003), has used racial formation on feminism with African American women, Latinas and Asian American women who were raising claims about race, class, gender, sexuality, and their struggle to create space for empowerment that was shaped by a patriarchal nationalism. Anzaldúa & Moraga (1983) produced radical writings of *Women of Color*, Lorde (1984) did analysis of oppositional and relational differences, Davis (1981) was a scholar-activist on studies pertaining to race, class, and gender within the prison industry, and Morrison (1970) examined internalized oppression about the power to oppress or empower.

All these authors have contributed to the study of intersectionality in their own dimension and creative ways. This is crucial to note because these themes

of race, class, ethnicity, and gender is relevant with AOC in her work. As a public servant in her community and Congress, she is openly resistant from multiple dimensions of what is unique in her work. Intersectionality is relevant to AOC because she works for a low-income area in New York that is predominantly Latine and is subjected to multiple and interlocking systems of oppression when doing her political work and the reason as to why she resists negative representations, unfair policies with home evictions, and discrimination against her community. The effects of intersecting systems of oppressions are seen in the life of AOC. Many other Woman of Color have previously done this in the past, and she is now following a genealogy of resistant work.

More recently, in *Communication Studies*, Soto Vega & Chávez (2018) argue that the Latine identity is complex, and it openly signals the attention to coloniality, ethnicity, and gender. They suggest paying attention to the historical implications to explain racism by researching coloniality, White supremacy, and imperialism as systems of domination entwined with race and ethnicity in addition to intersectionality.

Furthermore, AOC is from Puerto Rican decent. It is necessary to acknowledge her ancestral history as a *Boricua* because this impacts her influence, opinions, and positionality in her current profession as a congresswoman. AOC has publicly addressed her indigenous Caribbean Taíno roots through her social media Instagram stories where she discusses the importance of reconnecting with her history when it has been taught to her that it

has been erased and nonexistent. As media have called it, this “awakening” occurred through her public service experience advocating with the Indigenous population across the country, including the Lakota Sioux (Lepore, 2022). These historical references AOC makes in her work are relevant to the present day because of the activism she partakes with the Indigenous nations. This shows her political development and growth as a congresswoman. Using this intersectional and decolonial framework, contributes to the understanding of the position of Latina congresswoman AOC in a space that has historically been occupied by White men and her modes of resistance as part of a legacy of resistance of Woman of Color work.

Literature Review

Most recent academic literature on AOC found consists of three different categories including social media engagement, political ideologies, and negative media frames. This following subsection is a recount of previously written works about the political figurehead of AOC. At the end of this section, I will describe how this thesis expands upon these readings.

Social Media Engagement

Four studies from different academic fields have studied AOC and her use of social media including Twitter. One previous thesis (Lewinstein, 2019), employing both quantitative and qualitative methods, has contributed to the conversation on agenda setting in Congress by adding a new layer of social media and the role it plays into how policy is made. Additionally, Lewinstein

(2019) explored AOC, and the integral role social media can play in connecting her to people. They argued when marginalized communities and everyday Americans followers of AOC are centered, this strengthens efficacy in government and increases the likelihood of “creating transformative, systemic change” (p. 56).

A second qualitative thesis (Kraemer, 2019) identified and explained four major rhetorical negotiation strategies -- redefinition, defiance, embrace, and exposure -- that female politicians use to counter stereotypes. They use examples of AOC to illustrate how she utilizes these strategies through her Twitter posts. However, in this study, Kraemer (2019) expressed that Women of Color face additional stereotypes and should be researched and addressed.

Using the framework of social media critical discourse studies, a case study which consisted of four politicians, one of them being AOC, examined the use of social media as a communication platform but did not explore race and ethnicity as a category or system in their analysis rather, examined performing authenticity (Zummo, 2020). Lastly, a quantitative study on fandoms (Rodriguez & Goretti, 2022) uses political discourse on Twitter as political texts to evidence how AOC’s political fandom is fueled by affective structures of power, resistance, gendered power dynamics, political ideologies, culture, hope, and encouragement. In summary, AOC’s social media engagement has been researched in these contexts and frames and the discussion of AOC’s positionality as a Women of Color congresswoman was limited in these studies.

Political Policies

More literature on AOC revealed the political ideologies, policies, and parties of the congresswoman. For instance, Bhatti (2022) conducted a quantitative study looking at the introduction of the Green New Deal by AOC. This content analysis collected and analyzed information about topics, actors, and biases from a variety of media include CNN and Fox News coverages of the Green New Deal (Bhatti, 2022). Moreover, another study by (De-Lara et al., 2022) examined a similar conversation on climate change communication strategies and illustrated AOC's political stance on this topic.

Negative Media Frames

Recent research on AOC has discussed how her embodiment as a Woman of Color has stirred hate and aggression against her. Rasulo (2021), conducted a study analyzing both liberal and conservative media news outlets who were projecting acts of verbal aggressions. "AOC has spoken out against her critics in a series of messages denouncing the public insults, humiliating images ... in one of her Tweets, she blamed this mediatized hate on Fox News Channel, a conservative media network" (Rasulo, 2021, p. 158). Bashri (2021) researched news frames that were prevalent in news coverage of AOC from two main reporters, *The Washington Post*, and the *Bronx Times-Reporter* and states, "The findings point to a significant use of issue/ideology frames both publications' news coverage of AOC ... The media does not accord female politicians the same seriousness in news coverage as it does their male counterparts" (p. 127).

AOC is not only judged by her professional experience and achievements but also on her ideologies and is not taken at the same level of seriousness as men. Bashri (2021) suggests in their research chapter regarding political narratives that it is necessary not only to examine categories such as race, gender, and class as separate categories but “to understand the interrelations between them” (p. 123).

It is apparent in existing research that conservative news and politicians act with racism at the forefront however, the gap of the research found here that my study addresses the lack of attentiveness of the role coloniality plays with the position of AOC and how ethnicity and race are intertwined with the systems of domination to express resistance through visual and verbal rhetoric. In this thesis, representations of AOC are examined with the lens of intersectionality and how her response and work in Congress are forms of resistance to these negative media perceptions. The following chapter discusses the methodology used in this research.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

Rhetorical Criticism

The method choice for the purpose of this thesis is a critical rhetorical media analysis on a selection of social and mass media representations of AOC after her appointment as New York's 14th Congressional District Representative. Communication scholar, Lisa Flores (2016) suggests, "the art of rhetorical criticism is concerned with politics and publics, with cultural discourses and social meanings, with rhetors and audiences" (p. 6). This method is appropriate to this study given the decolonial lens I will employ to analyze media content (Anzaldúa, 1987;2015). Additionally, racial rhetorical criticism "illuminates and locates the complexity" of systems of oppression and privileges (Soto Vega & Chávez, 2018).

The media artifacts for this study are a combination of YouTube videos, Twitter social media posts, and noteworthy online newspaper articles and commentaries. The YouTube videos selected are those with high viewership which involve AOC's presence including speeches and interviews and speak to the themes discussed in the literature review. YouTube has been evolving throughout the years providing an outlet for people to create social content, news content, and artistic content and has been publicly and readily accessible for this research thesis. Videos will be analyzed by paying attention to the video second by second, analyzing the communication aspects of content, tone of voice,

visuals including attire and wardrobe, and lastly, the AOC's performance. Because media consumption in today's age occurs mostly online, I chose to conduct all my corpus research through selected videos from YouTube that included the topic of AOC and went viral over 500k up to three million views and Twitter posts that speak to these videos' topics about AOC.

Additionally, Twitter posts referencing the visuals described and shown in these videos will also be considered for the analysis of this paper. Related distinguished newspaper articles on the topics of the videos will be used to promote a complex and meticulously understanding. The timeline chosen will be from the beginning of AOC's political career as a congresswoman elect to present day from years 2018-2023. This timeline is appropriate for this study because it is the first youngest, Latina, Puerto Rican woman successfully becomes a representative in Congress. During these years AOC appears in an abundance of digital mediums, YouTube, Twitter, and online newspaper articles that are readily available online to the public. Furthermore, the research findings of the *estilos de resistencia* or styles of resistance to dominant political norms found in the data collection on AOC will be revealed in the next chapter of this thesis.

Problem Statement

According to Bejarano (2013), "Minorities are still underrepresented in political office in relation to the majority population" (p. 7). However, in 1989, the first Latina ever elected to U.S. Congress was a Cuban American from Florida

named Ileana Ros-Lehtinen (García Bedolla et al., 2005). Although, more recently the number of Latinas in elected positions is increasing they remain underrepresented (Bejarano, 2013). Latina congresswoman AOC, explicitly spoke about this problem of misrepresentation in her community in NY-14 during an interview that took place in 2018. The problems mentioned by the AOC include the economic inequalities among elected officials in Congress and the significant lack of representation in their district community. Out of all families in NY-14, 15.0% whose income is below the poverty level (U.S. Census Bureau, 2021).

The economic inequalities are regarding the injustices occurred within the hierarchal structure of wealth and power of political corruption. For instance, the former representative of NY-14, Joseph Crowley, “he takes about three million per cycle” from major corporations such as Wall Street, pharmaceutical companies, luxury real estate development companies, and even from the same group of people who also financed the Trump presidency (NowThis News, 2018). This problem is not a bipartisan issue, Democratic or Republican, rather it is about who has capital in this institution of politics.

Second, there is a problem of lack of representation to the communities that live specifically in NY-14. This district is 70% people of color including populations of predominately immigrant, Hispanic, Latine, Bangladeshi, and amongst more (NowThis News, 2018). Joseph Crowley, who is a White wealthy man, was never elected to the seat that represents this community but instead he

was “appointed the seat by a family friend” in New York City and had served in Congress in this position for over 20 years (NowThis News, 2018). Therefore, AOC is the first ever Person of Color who got elected, not appointed, and successfully won the Congressional election to represent and serve the communities of color in NY-14.

In the United States, the First Amendment of the Constitution protects freedom of speech and press. These are values and elements that have been enforced and celebrated throughout the American public. Media is used as an instrument to inform and persuade the audiences such perspectives and ideologies. However, AOC’s multidimensional, cultural identity in media politics has been mocked, degraded, and ridiculed by media outlets (Rasulo, 2021). Former representative Joseph Crowley upheld the politics of respectability (Higginbotham, 1993). Respectability ethics refers to a “belief system where marginalized communities must comply to dominant cultural norms to receive respect” (Matos, 2019, p. 89). If a community’s cultural identity is practiced through the means of appearance, speech, or behavior, they are seen as less respectable and not socially acceptable.

This ideology is problematic in the case of AOC because she is a person who rejects the politics of respectability and expresses her cultural identity as a Woman of Color and a Latina in a political field that has been normalized to be occupied by White men. Despite the media aggravating the violent micro and macro aggressions towards Women of Color such as AOC, my study fulfills a

gap in the literature that examines how AOC responds, resists, and defies political norms. When examining AOC's intersectional social orientation being a woman, a Latina, and being one of Congress's youngest members, it is worthwhile to understand all of AOC's *movidas* (Sandoval, 2000). To further explore the case of AOC the following research question is considered for inquiry.

RQ: What rhetorical constituents of intersectional feminism and Women of Color are employed by AOC in response to dominant, traditional politician norms?

CHAPTER FOUR: ANALYSIS

Estilos de Resistencia

AOC has made major headlines in various newspaper articles when she won the primary election in 2018. She became the youngest, Latina, first-generation, working class, and daughter of migrant parents congresswoman in U.S. history. This multifaceted identity of AOC brings nuance to the political discussion around identity, representation, and dominant ideologies. She has garnered media attention nationwide through different digital media outlets. Because media consumption in today's age occurs mostly online, I chose to conduct all my corpus research through selected videos from YouTube that included the topic of AOC and went viral over 500k up to three million views and Twitter posts that speak to these videos' topics.

Some examples to be analyzed include AOC's video with The Squad responding to the former president's remarks with over 500k views, AOC's speech on Puerto Rico and *Vogue* with over three million views and more are further analyzed in the thesis. In addition, visuals are accessed via Google's image search engine first page of AOC's moments and historical events that relate to her styles of activism and resistance. The images selected were the most searched images due to the significant usage throughout local and national news articles. These collections were accessed publicly and correspond to the

framework of *mestiza* consciousness, *Borderlands* (Anzaldúa, 1987; 2015), and intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989). These viral moments include topics of ethnic identity, gender, and socioeconomic status that are part of interlocking systems of racism, sexism, and classism. Both *mestiza* consciousness and intersectionality provide lens to deconstruct these particular social constructions. This data collection is appropriate to answer my research question, because it exhibits the quality and social phenomena of Latina rhetorical constructs that have been highly politicized in media.

The recurrent *estilos de resistencia* found in AOC's response are styles that differ from 'types' or 'classifications' of resistance because style is fluid and pluralistic. I argue stylistics are not monolithic, static, nor linear to social communities and identities. Style has been discussed by Genova (1979), in their article "*The significance of style*", who has addressed the epistemic studies, questions, and research surrounding style. According to Genova (1979), the main function of style is to express meaning through showing and telling. Feixa (1998) suggests the elements of style include language, music, aesthetic, culture productions, and focal activities. Some spectacular examples of style which resist disqualification are "*los grafitis neoyorkinos, los murals cholos, y los fanazines* (New York graffiti art, gangster murals, and fanzines)" (Feixa, 1998, p. 103). For example, in the cultural production of New York graffiti art, one of its functions is to reverse the negative value that is assigned to this artistic style and transform the stigma into a symbolic representation that communicates a resistance to

such disqualification. This function is also seen with the cholo murals and locally produced magazines.

Additionally, style has meaning, and it can also be experimental and temporary because they may change according to the social conditions style is adhered to (Feixa, 1998). Maria Lugones (2005) suggests, “*En el núcleo lógico mismo del movimiento hacia un multiculturalismo radical y de los feminismos de Mujeres de Color, se da un desplazamiento desde una lógica de la opresión hacia una lógica de la resistencia* (At the very core of the logic behind the movement toward a radical multiculturalism and that of Women of Color feminisms, there is a shift from a logic of oppression to a logic of resistance)” (p. 61). In the case of AOC’s demographics, she is a politician in spaces predominantly White and male, her visual and spoken rhetoric resists the Eurocentric Western logics of traditional political norms and customs which are oppressive to all Peoples of Color. The skill of being bilingual in English and Spanish, is demonstrated in her political speeches, house floor hearings, and social media activism and resists the normative use of the dominant language use in the country – English. Language is a rhetorical constituent and AOC speaks in Spanish in a stylistic manner throughout her viral moments. Her visual aesthetics is part of her style that varies. It is depending on the conditions, situation, and context of such speech where her style is flexible.

The *estilos* discussed in this study are about resistance, hence, *estilos de resistencia* will be the overarching term used to identify the styles recurrently

found in the data collection about AOC. The three *estilos de resistencia* are labeled as first, inter-ethnic cultural exchanges to resist ethnic borders. Second, translinguistic communication to resist nation-state centered perceptions of language use. The third is an aesthetic of difference. Each *estilo* will be described using examples from AOC's viral moments.

'En el Espíritu del Pueblo': Inter-Ethnic Cultural Exchanges to Resist Ethnic Borders

In August of 2020, during the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Democratic National Convention took place virtually where instead of in-person events, the program featured a number of speakers and musical performances across the country. One of those speakers was AOC, she spoke for a short length of time an approximately two-minute speech. In the introduction, she thanked and welcomed people who are attending virtually and more specifically she mentioned how there is a "mass people's movement" who are working together for social, economic, and human rights. This movement she claimed is striving to "recognize and repair the wounds of racial injustice, colonization, misogyny, and homophobia" (PBS, 2020). Towards the conclusion, she said, "*En el espíritu del pueblo* and out of love for all people" (PBS, 2020).

Two days after her speech, AOC posted on Twitter with only the caption reading, "*En el espíritu del pueblo*" (Ocasio-Cortez, 2020). This tweet has accrued over 63k likes and over 5k retweets. One of the comments on the post included a screen recording of AOC doing a Live session where she explained

the deep significance of this phrase '*el espíritu del pueblo*'. In this event with AOC, she explicitly spoke in Spanish at the end of her speech, publicly demonstrating to her audience her bilingualism in her position as a congresswoman. This is a radical act of resistance to the English, dominant language practices in the country. This was the first time in her career as a congresswoman where she stated this powerful phrase, '*el espíritu del pueblo*' because of it being merely the Spanish language, moreover, the significance of this call for unity and collaboration nationwide amongst all peoples during a time of isolation and injustices. A cultural translation is needed in addition to a literal translation when she explained,

It's translated as 'the spirit of the village' but it's really about in the spirit and ethos of the people, the real people, everyday people, el pueblo [the village], la comunidad [the community]... we have to recognize the power we already have, el poder que ya tenemos como una comunidad Latina, and that goes for our Muslim brothers and sisters who are underrepresented ... our indigenous brothers and sisters, ... Asian American family all these voices deserve to be uplifted and centered (People for Bernie, 2020)

This movement and sense of community that AOC voices in her speech and more so with, '*el espíritu del pueblo*' is a radical call to resist different and multiple forms of oppression. Her positionality as a Latina congresswoman and more so a Woman of Color speaks volume to the public. As Anzaldúa (2009) put

it, “Women of Color and working-class people have been at the forefront of this multicultural movement” (p. 204). It is a movement of everyday people and AOC voices this in her speeches in a very public space such as the Democratic National Convention. This theme of community building, inter-ethnic allyship, and inclusion within the country is significant in her role as a congresswoman. The allyship AOC is voicing is not one that is exclusive to one ethnic identity, it is a collaborative, unifying, and collective alliances. It is including not only Latine peoples but also, Indigenous, Muslim, Black, Asian – all peoples. Anzaldúa (2009) describes new tribalism and *mestiza* consciousness as a connection to new notions of ethnicity and identity. The *mestiza* negotiates, navigates, and translates into different spaces, locations, cultures, languages, and genders. AOC’s rhetorical *estilo de resistencia* in her inter-ethnic alliances portrays this new tribalism, “a way of seeing and interpreting the world, a methodology of resistance” (Anzaldúa, 2009, p. 209). Her way of passing through the halls, having conversations, and interactions at Capitol Hill is unique because of the alliances she has formed as a congresswoman.

There are over 400 congresspeople in the U.S. House of Representatives. Despite the large number and the fact that the majority are White men, AOC’s identity as a young Latina disrupts the historical lack of representation in this field. Her rhetorical styles are significant in her professional collaborations with other Women of Color.

In 2018, AOC was not the only progressive Women of Color elected for the first time in Congress. Ilhan Omar, Ayanna Pressley, and Rashida Tlaib, all Women of Color, were elected for the first time to serve in Congress. Omar's election marked several historic firsts, she was the first Somali American, naturalized citizen from Africa, Woman of Color elected from the state of Minnesota and one of the first two Muslim women to serve in Congress as the U.S. Representative for Minnesota's 5th Congressional district (Ilhan for Congress, n.d.). Pressley's election made her the first Black, Woman of Color from the Commonwealth of Massachusetts to be elected to Congress to serve as U.S. Representative for Massachusetts's 7th Congressional district who is an advocate, policymaker, and survivor of alopecia, which is an autoimmune disease that causes sudden hair loss (Ayanna Pressley for Congress, n.d.; Ayanna Pressley, n.d.). Tlaib is a daughter of Palestinian immigrant parents, and her election marked history by becoming one of the first two Muslim women, second to Omar, and the first Palestinian American woman to serve in Congress as U.S. Representative for Michigan's 12th Congressional district (Rashida Tlaib for Congress, n.d.). Together with AOC, these four women including AOC, have been referred to as 'The Squad' by numerous news platforms (NowThis News, 2020; CBS Mornings, 2019).

After the elections in 2018, AOC coined "The Squad" name in an Instagram social media post where the four congresswomen are pictured together with the caption of the post reading, "Squad" and tagged the usernames

of the rest of the members (Ocasio-Cortez, 2018). It is interesting to note how AOC uses her social media activism to showcase the “Squad”, a popular term in youth speech slang and the hip-hop music genre to refer to friendships. The Squad gained media coverage on online news sites such as *USA Today*, *Vox*, and even *The Washington Post* in the year 2019. Together, they exchanged their opinions on the nickname “The Squad” (Hauk, 2019).

The term “squad” started to be part of mainstream media and the meaning behind the term depended on who used it and their intentions. The congresswomen became a target for President Trump and his supporters and sending messages that “these people who are trying to change everything, and who are different, are dangerous” (North, 2019). His rhetoric encompassed the false claim that the term ‘squad’ meant excluding others in Congress. However, *The Washington Post* shared an article where one of the congresswomen, Rep. Tlaib, commented on the political meaning of the term, “One of the things that I love about everybody that supports equity and justice, that ‘we are the Squad’ — you hear people saying, ‘I’m part of the Squad, too’ — is we translated it into the movement work we all came from” (Izadi & Epstein, 2019). The discourse around the nickname “The Squad” got political, especially from the right-winged media, the moment these four Women of Color unified as a collective activist group. These relationships, and their essential communities, represent a multicultural movement in the country where they challenge the dominant politician norms.

They resist dominant ideologies and attacks from the occupant of the White House.

For example, on July 2019, the former president posted an extensive post on Twitter with racist, sexist, xenophobic remarks against “Progressive Democrat Congresswoman” with phrases such as “Why don’t they go back and help fix the totally broken and crime infested places from which they came” (Trump, 2019). The next day after, The Squad responded to these remarks in a press conference as they presented themselves in a public space, took turns to speak on the podium, and shared space to give a powerful and impactful message as seen in figure 1.

This image, captured during this pivotal press conference, showed The Squad as they voiced as a unified group their response to the racist, xenophobic, and misogynist remarks. This position was fortified by their remarks. For example, Rep. Pressley stated, “[do] not take the bait” from the remarks while wearing a bright red dress and lipstick. She referenced the term ‘bait’ to symbolize not to feed to the ideologies and comments of the former president.

Omar responded how the remarks are part of, “the agenda of White nationalist[s]” and “it’s time to impeach this president”. Omar is the only women out of The Squad who was born outside of this country, in Africa specifically, and became a naturalized citizen as a teenager, therefore, her word choice such as ‘impeachment’ carries weight in this statement because she is the only member

of The Squad who was not born in the country since the negative remarks are about going back to where ‘they came from’ referring to all WOC.

Figure 1 *The Squad During a Press Conference At Capitol Hill*



Note. U.S. Representative AOC (Democratic-NY), left, speaks as Reps. Ayanna Pressley (Democratic-MA), Ilhan Omar (Democratic-MN), and Rashida Tlaib (Democratic-MI) listen during a press conference at the U.S. Capitol on July 15, 2019, in Washington, DC (Lakritz, 2021).

AOC also responded with her rhetorical styles of using a literacy device such as repetition to her advantage when she repeats the phrase ‘I am not surprised’. For instance, AOC stated in this press conference, “I am not surprised

when the president says that four members of Congress should ‘go back to their home country’” and called out and responded to the president’s tweet (PBS NewsHour, 2019). Again, like Pressley and Omar, AOC’s rhetoric expressed how the comments of the president are common and therefore, the sentiments do not come off as a shock. I discuss AOC’s aesthetics the third theme of this analysis in the section called aesthetic of difference.

Overall, The Squad demonstrates the power and agency there is in intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989). These inter-ethnic relationships being visible to the public audience nationwide are significant rhetorical strategies AOC implements in her work in Congress. This inter-ethnic alliance is an example of rhetorical agency as intersectional habitus (Sowards, 2019). This is a form of coalitional politics because of how they explicitly use terminology such as ‘Women of Color’ and or ‘People of Color’ in their public speech. According to Bourdieu’s work (1990), habitus suggests agency is influenced by past and habitual elements or dispositions from childhood, family members, educational systems, and figures who teach the unspoken and unwritten rules of appropriateness.

Bourdieu (1990) says habitus places agency both within and beyond the individual as the individual is shaped by organization, ideologies, and politics. The Squad is a collective and collaborative group through their exchanges of culture and knowledge, they perform resistance to dominant ideologies such as those shown in the president’s tweet simply through their speech performance(s),

wardrobe, ethics, and work with inter-ethnic colleagues in this press conference. Although each member of The Squad has a different ethnic background, the themes of inclusivity, connection, and community is present in this group, and therefore demonstrates how inter-ethnic relationships can be powerful to showcase nationwide.

Furthermore, more recently, new Congress members who are also first-time candidates have joined The Squad. Cori Bush, who is a Black, single mother, and ordained pastor got elected in 2021 for U.S. Representative for Missouri's 1st Congressional district (Cori Bush, n.d.). Also, Jamaal Bowman, who is a Black father and activist got elected in 2021 for U.S. Representative for New York's 16th Congressional district (Jamaal Bowman, n.d.). Their advocacy and resistance are shown through their collaborative communication and actions. AOC and her inter-ethnic alliances are prominent in the data collected on her most viral political moments through political decorum. The Working Families Party, which is an organization that is community-based and made of everyday, working families, endorsed The Squad with its new members for re-election in 2022 as seen in the poster in figure 2.

Figure 2 *The Squad* Poster



Note. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (NY-14), Ayanna Pressley (MA-7), Ilhan Omar (MN-5), Rashida Tlaib (MI-12), Cori Bush (MO-1), Jamaal Bowman (NY-16) (Working Families Party, 2022).

This poster highlights using the color orange, the states, and districts below the picture of each member, pinpoints how they are representing their communities across the country. These relationships, and essential communities represent a multicultural movement in the country where they challenge the dominant politician norms. The Squad is only growing as time progresses and new People of Color representatives are elected in Congress. Additionally, Anzaldúa (2015) described new tribalism where there is a “push against any boundaries that have outlived their usefulness. Rigid borders hinder

communication and prevent us from extending *beyond ourselves*" (p. 75). The Squad is an example of new tribalism because every member is in essence pushing the boundaries of their own sense of self and identity by engaging with their colleagues from different ethnic minorities. The theme of ethnicity and race and the significant role in this collaborative group resists the normativity of White hegemonic politics. This activist work The Squad is involved with is pushing the boundaries of the concept of race as a single experience but rather "a significance of those histories for contemporary understandings of race" (Flores, 2016, p. 17). They exchange personal lived experiences, connections, networks, ideas, models of organizational ethics, hence, an exchange of multiple ways of knowing. Reflecting on the histories of these members, to further analyze this work of The Squad and its inter-ethnic collaborations "*el espíritu del pueblo*" historical events have done this in their own unique rhetorical methods.

Historical Inter-Ethnic Collaborations

The politics of People of Color solidarity has gained significant attention nationwide through the relationships AOC has built in her work with The Squad because this is the first time in history where inter-ethnic, intersectional, and interpersonal identities unify in the U.S. Congress. They are in positions that make them highly influential and on the spotlight to the American public audience. Their appearance, speech, and unification speak high volume through media. However, these relationships have existed in the past on a local and state

level. Two examples of historical inter-ethnic collaborations are the civil rights movement in Los Angeles in the 1970s and the New York Young Lords from the 1970s. These historical references are significant to mention because they are both examples of the power and revolution that takes place when inter-ethnic connections were established.

In Los Angeles, California, *El Centro de Acción Social y Autónomo*/the Center for Autonomous Social Action (CASA) was an organization that formed in 1972 that focused on immigrant workers. Their political ideology, “can be best summarized by its slogan *Sin Fronteras* (without border)” which was understood as the Chicana/o movement and Mexicana/o working class as one group of people (Pulido, 2006, p. 7). They sought to unite workers of the world and specifically those of Mexican origin. Pulido (2006) discusses how CASA represents an approach to interethnic populations and their extensive work with other Latina/os. As an organization, they emphasized multiracial activism with the Black Panther Party, Asian Americans, People of Color, and “cultivated intense alliances with Puerto Ricans and Mexicans” (Pulido, 2006, p. 173). During this era in Southern California, the Mexican population dominated all other Latina/o groups especially because of its proximity to the borderlands. There was not a substantial amount of Puerto Rican, Guatemalan, Cuban, or Salvadorean participants, it would not occur until late in the 1980s. CASA’s large goal of an international movement, *Sin Fronteras*, meant Chicana/os, and other Latina/os working together which later resulted in CASA meeting its, “political soul mate,”

CASA and PSP complemented each other, they both were internationalists, opposed imperialism, struggled with questions of identity, nation, territory, and self-determination. There was a cultural affinity between the two organizations. According to Pulido (2006), “Although Puerto Rican, Mexican, and Mexican American cultures are distinct, commonalities still exist, including the Spanish language, the historical role of Catholicism and colonization, and *mestizaje*” (p. 177). There is an evident cultural exchange among these populations that strengthen their alliance inter-ethnically. The musician pictured in the flier, Roy Brown Ramirez is a Puerto Rican musician/artist, who played music at this event. Salsa music have served to bring a diverse population of Latine people especially among Mexicans and Puerto Ricans, since the salsa music genre is more associated with Cubans and Puerto Ricans (Padilla, 1985). The musical cultural aspect is prominent in this coalition as well. Anzaldúa talks about *mestizaje* in her book, *Borderlands/La Frontera* (1987) but additionally, in *Light in the Dark = Luz en lo oscuro: rewriting identity, spirituality, reality* (2015), as previously mentioned in the example of AOC with The Squad, new tribalism is an example shown with the CASA and PSP collaboration. Pulido (2006) argues *mestizaje* is a commonality among Puerto Rican and Mexican culture. New tribalism suggests that everyone plays a part in the “ecosystems (complete set of interrelationships between a network of living organisms and their physical habitats)” (Anzaldúa, 2015, p. 67). The interaction between race, class, gender is what creates identity, it is not exclusive to one single attribute. Inter-ethnic

alliances between CASA and PSP and in the case of AOC and The Squad are extraordinary examples of new tribalism. Furthermore, the New York Young Lords in the 1970s is another historical example of inter-ethnic alliances as a social movement.

During 1969-1976, the New York Young Lords story begun when a group of Puerto Rican college students gathered to raise “a kind of consciousness” to understand the lives in their communities in El Barrio (East Harlem) (Enck-Wanzer, 2010, p. 2). They were a revolutionist, antiracist, and antisexist social organization. Their activism came in many forms through a radio program and newspaper called *Palante*, it articulated their vision of “democratic egalitarianism, anticolonialism, and social redistribution” (Wanzer-Serrano, 2015, p. 5). The Young Lords which took place in New York City in the 70s is an example of “decolonial praxis that resisted ideological oversimplification and generated new possibilities and spaces for activism” (Wanzer-Serrano, 2015, p. 7). This organization struggled with its collective identity, mission, values, and goals, as many social movements have in the past. However, an example of decolonial intersectionality on gender, race, and class is on their newspaper issue when they discuss their position on women and the internal politics surrounding gender within the organization see figure 4.

Figure 4 *Palante Newspaper*



Note. Front cover of *Palante* 2, no. 12 (September 25, 1970), announcing the issue's publication of the "Position Paper on Women."

The New York Young Lords' newspaper cover, *Palante*, begins with "a subversive visual element" that is shown with an image of a "racial triad that signified the Puerto Rico nation composed of Spanish, African, and Taíno heritage, which is a rhetorical construction" as explained by Wanzer-Serrano (2015, p. 104). This imagery illustrates a racial harmony amongst the organization and their overall identity. New tribalism suggested by Anzaldúa

(2015), is about reimagining the self and identity and the Young Lords had discussions surround the history and indigenous category of who they were in this visual of their newspaper. Conversations about colonialism and heritage happened. This is an example of inter-ethnic alliances as a social movement, the New York Young Lords in the 70s in New York City, the birthplace of AOC.

These *estilos* of doing activist work and knowledge exchange have existed before AOC made her appearance in the U.S. Congress however, now she is on a national spotlight along with her colleagues with The Squad where the entire country is keeping a keen eye on their every move, speech, statement, hearing, social media post, interview, etc. These acts are resistant of dominant politician norms of whom only stay within their own ethnic group rather than branching out to form new movements as such in the case of The Squad.

Hence, these are *estilos de resistencia* because the new *mestizaje*, new tribalism “transgresses the biological ... it eschews the racial hierarchies” (Anzaldúa, 2015, p. 73). These inter-cultural, intersectional, and inter-ethnic relationships AOC has cultivated, “disturb the dominant discourse of race” because it is not exclusively one ethnic group, Puerto Ricans, or Chicanos, but rather multicultural, Latina, Black, Muslim, and Palestinian in the example of The Squad (Anzaldúa, 2015, p. 73). Therefore, it is a form of resistance to the dominant ideologies of politician norms. It is an *estilo de resistencia* because it involves art, music, and community engagement. Inter-ethnic relationships involve constant negotiation including cultural exchanges and language

differences. The next *estilo* discussed in the following section will look at AOC's radical communicative methods of inclusivity in her work as significant moments to discuss in depth because this aspect of her identity as a bilingual Latina congresswoman has been challenged in political discourse.

'Yo Sí Soy Boricua, Pa' Que Tú Lo Sepas': Translinguistic Communication to Resist Nation State Centered Perceptions of Language Use

In December of 2022, AOC delivered a four-minute speech on the House Floor when she publicly promoted a bill called the Puerto Rico Status Act pertaining to Puerto Rico and AOC named the country's history of colonization. According to Seidl (2022), translinguistics represents an alternative to the customary paradigms of language, rather it reflects a fluid use of linguistic resources in diverse communities. In AOC's speech, there are three major sections that speak to the theme of translinguistic communication in her rhetoric.

First, she stated in the beginning, "expressing solidarity with other U.S. colonies, colonized people, indigenous communities, and descendants of the enslaved" (Forbes Breaking News, 2022). Here, AOC acknowledged these different populations that share the historical implications of colonization, including Puerto Rico. The use of translinguistic communication is used to communicate with varied communities. AOC mentions three populations that share commonalities but also are unique from one another.

Second, she made an impactful note when she defined decolonization, "I also want to note that decolonization is more than a vote, it doesn't happen just

with a vote, it is a social, political, cultural, economic and psychological process that extends far beyond the floor of this house” (Forbes Breaking News, 2022). AOC discussed how decolonization is a process that takes place in everyday lives. This is translinguistic communication because the word choice is an alternative to the customary paradigms of language.

Thirdly, she uses her bilingualism publicly, “in the refrain that is said among people across the world and Puerto Ricans across the world, *yo sí soy Boricua, pa’ que tú lo sepas*” (Forbes Breaking News, 2022). In this speech, AOC uses radical communicative inclusivity with her expression of solidarity in the beginning, acknowledging decolonization in the middle, and speaking in both English and Spanish in the conclusion, emphasizing that she in fact, *Boricua*. After her speech, she was asked to provide a translation because she spoke Spanish at the end. Her phrase, “*Yo sí soy Boricua, pa’ que tú lo sepas*” became viral on YouTube short video with over three million views (USA Today, 2022). Her way of talking in Spanglish, both English and Spanish simultaneously is an illustration of translinguistic communication. These three examples of AOC’s communication represent a pluralistic ideology of communication and goes beyond the language binary – English or Spanish.

Figure 5 AOC and Rep. Velázquez at Capitol Hill



Note. New York Democratic Reps. Nydia Velázquez, left, and Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez pose with the final tally after the Puerto Rico Status Act was passed by the U.S. House of Representatives, Thursday, December 15, 2022, Washington, D.C. (Velázquez, 2022).

Representative Nydia M. Velázquez, the first Puerto Rican congresswoman for New York's 7th Congressional District was alongside AOC in this accomplishment of passing the Puerto Rico Status Act see figure 5. Rep. Velázquez is pictured holding a paper with the number of votes. Born in 1953 in a

small town called Yabucoa, Puerto Rico, Velázquez made history multiple times during her tenure in Congress. In 1992, she became the first Puerto Rican woman elected to the House of Representatives. And most recently in 2006, she was named Chairwoman of the House Small Business Committee, making her the first Latina to chair a full Congressional committee (Velázquez, n.d.).

Like Velázquez, AOC has made history becoming a Puerto Rican congresswoman at a very young age, therefore, their unification is amplified during this speech about their home country of Puerto Rico. This is a cyclical generational passing of knowledge and experience from one congresswoman to another. AOC's translinguistic rhetorical *estilo de resistencia* is performed when she spoke in her native language.

The spaces in Congress, Capitol Hill, Washington DC, are all spaces where the perception of the English language is centered and expected. However, when AOC restructures this expectation with her bilingualism, she is asked to provide translation. She resists this dominant ideology by speaking bilingual on national broadcasting.

In 2019, AOC did her first and ever inaugural address in the Bronx, New York. This speech was the first time she connects as an official congresswoman to her own community. Her bilingualism is significantly present in this speech where she speaks in Spanish,

Gracias a todos por venir aquí hoy, gracias por ser presente, quiero

agradecer a cada uno de ustedes, gracias por elegir estar hoy con la comunidad y por hacerse presentes porque este es el factor más importante para crear y mejorar a nuestra comunidad, el elegir estar presente el uno para el otro gracias.

(Thank you all for coming here today, thank you for being present, I want thank each one of you, thank you for choosing to be with the community today and for being present because this is the most important factor in creating and improving our community, choosing to be present for each other thank you) (NBC News, 2019)

AOC and her use of Spanish in public speeches addressed to her community is radical inclusivity because the community she serves in her district is majority Latine and Spanish-speaking. Most of her 19-minute speech was in English but, added Spanish as a way of being mindful of the audience she serves. She expresses her gratitude and exemplifies her commitment to serving the community. In the middle of her speech, she asks the audience to turn next to the person they are sitting by and greet them and emphasizes the power of community invitations and connections. This simple act of communication opens the door to endless opportunities for activism and social justice which is AOC's goal as a congresswoman in New York City. She invites local artists during this speech to participate in a mural contest to bless these spaces in the district where AOC is working. Communicative art that provides the accurate cultural representation is what AOC's work is all about. These messages are done with a

mixture of English and Spanish. This inaugural speech of AOC is an example of 'hearing' race in rhetorical criticism (Flores, 2016).

As previously mentioned, AOC's phrase at the Democratic National Convention, "*en el espíritu del pueblo*" followed by "*Yo sí soy Boricua, pa' que tú lo sepas*" with the Puerto Rico Status Act and her inaugural speech all use her use of translinguistic communication that has rhetorical power. Anzaldúa (1987), wrote about the concept of linguistic terrorism and how she spoke Chicano Spanish to communicate in her community and institutions. She expressed, "we needed a language with which we could communicate with ourselves, a secret language" (Anzaldúa, 1987, p. 55). Similarly, AOC does this in her use of Spanglish in her speeches. However, when this occurs it is not socially and politically accepted because the dominant language is English and not Spanish. "Ethnic identity is twin skin to linguistic identity— I am my language. Until I cannot take pride in my language, I cannot take pride in myself" (Anzaldúa, 1987, p. 59). AOC displays pride in her Spanish language when she spoke on the national spotlight despite the backlash.

Historical Forms of Linguistic Terrorism

The process of language shift from Spanish and English has distinguishing characteristics in the case of Puerto Ricans. They hold selective features and signs of Spanish in different forms of discourse at different times, resisting to completely yield to English, "the language of the colonizer" (García et al., 2001, p. 45). The colonization of the island of Puerto Rico began in 1493

when Columbus claimed the island of Borinquén, as it was known to the Taíno people, for the Spanish (Figueroa, 1977). Historically speaking, like Native Americans, indigenous Hawaiians and Filipinos, the conquest of Puerto Rico by the U.S. included the force assimilation and imposition of the English language. It became the official language, without the consent of the Puerto Rican people, in public schools from 1898 to 1948 (Hernandez-Chavéz, 1994; Karnow, 1989).

The Puerto Rican community in New York grew steadily in the 1940s, 88% and in 1950s, 83% of Puerto Ricans in the country were living in New York City (García, 1997). Residential segregation kept the New York Puerto Rican community close to family and traditions. According to García et al. (2001), both Spanish and English and the mix between them is what defines a Puerto Rican New Yorker “Everybody I know is like Spanish. *Un poquito español, un poquito inglés* (a little bit Spanish, a little bit English)” (pp. 64-65). This participant referred to Spanish not as something spoken but something lived, a Puerto Rican identity itself. The Spanish language in this community is embedded in cultural expressions such as music, relationships, food, and ways of life. The colonial status of Puerto Rico has greatly affected Puerto Ricans’ ability to maintain Spanish (García et al., 2001). The past migration, in the 1940s, to New York had low literacy rates in Spanish in this community which was a product of a colonized school system with a misguided policy of English language education for people who spoke Spanish only.

For AOC, as a Puerto Rican New Yorker, speaking bilingually or Spanglish is a part of her persona in her congresswoman role. Clearly in her inaugural speech in 2019, at the Democratic National Convention in 2019, and her speech on Puerto Rico's Status Act in 2022 AOC speaks both English and Spanish. Anzaldúa (1987) conceptualizes language as a connection to one's identity and communicating the realities and values that are true to oneself one that is "neither *español ni inglés*, but both (Spanish nor English)" (p. 55). Chicanos in the U.S. share a different yet similar experience of linguistic discrimination in their community as Mexicans.

In 1968, the Chicano Walkouts occurred throughout the city of Los Angeles, California. A Chicano activist, lawyer, and teacher at the Los Angeles Unified School District was arrested during the walkouts named Herman Sillas who is seen as a legend in the City of Huntington Park (Davis-Hayes, 2013). In his book chapter, Sillas (2015) described his experience in education growing up in Los Angeles "But I learn one thing: Spanish words weren't worth anything in school" (p. 101). Language discrimination and ethnic segregation were prominent during this time because of the mistreatment towards Mexican American students. The drop-out rate of Mexican American students in East Los Angeles schools was nearly 50% and members of an education committee argued that teachers ignored these students and the district "didn't seem to care" (Sillas, 2015, p. 102).

Mexican American educator and activist, Salvador B. Castro, also known as Sal Castro, is also well known for his role in the 1968 Los Angeles school walkouts. They began in March 1968 when Sal Castro and thousands of students from Lincoln High School, Belmont, Roosevelt, Wilson, and Garfield walked from their respective schools in a peaceful demonstration demanding equal education (Sillas, 2015). The efforts from these walkouts resulted in hiring Mexican American teachers and bilingual teachers with skills in Spanish and English. Legislation was introduced to establish a bilingual credential for teachers and schools with a significant number of student population with limited English-speaking ability were required to have bilingual teachers. However, this unfortunately only lasted until 1998 when California pass Proposition 227 that would eliminate bilingual education and took over twenty years to repeal.

Language discrimination and forms of linguistic terrorism (Anzaldúa, 1987) have taken place historically in cities such as New York City and Los Angeles, California. There are parallels in the experiences of Puerto Ricans and Chicanos peoples that resulted from colonialism throughout centuries in the U.S. More recently, AOC faces backlash when speaking Spanish in public spaces as a congresswoman. Therefore, she takes rhetorical pride in her speech and communicative choices because she challenges and resists this politician norm by speaking bilingual in her speeches. This is radical inclusivity in terms of communicative practices for a politician who is vocal about bilingualism. The next *estilo* discussed in the following section will look at AOC's aesthetic choices as a

public figure particularly her viral moments with *Vogue*, the Met Gala Dress, and historical visual parallels to the 1940s Mexican American Pachuca.

‘The Medium is the Message and Fashion is the Medium’:
Aesthetic of Difference

In the beginning of AOC’s first term as Congresswoman, she started transgressing traditional political norms specifically in her aesthetics choices such as her red bold lipstick. In August of 2020, after almost two years in her first term as Congresswoman, AOC tweeted the following, “Happy Friday! Beauty is political. Thanks Vogue Magazine for a conversation on what it means to work a red lip on Capitol Hill” and she added a link to the full video by *Vogue* in the tweet (Ocasio-Cortez, 2020). This YouTube video reached over 3.5 million views with high waves on the video graph where AOC shares her signature red lip choice product indicating it has been frequently replayed often by the viewers. The debate over the definition of beauty is ongoing and AOC states clearly her position especially what beauty means in her work as a congresswoman. This collaboration between a politician and *Vogue*, which is an influential American fashion and lifestyle magazine founded in 1892, is uncommon. Also, the company enforces hegemonic beauty standards that most often do not uplift Women of Color nor focus on the same political position as AOC. Therefore, this video received a lot of controversy around the politics of the role of beauty and the role of a congresswoman, and their expectations.

As stated previously, AOC wore a red bold lipstick and gold hoop earrings during her swearing in ceremony and was discouraged to use bright bold colors and hoop earrings. Like the example of Sonia Sotomayor who serves as an associate justice of the Supreme Court of the U.S. she “kept her red” (Ocasio-Cortez, 2019). This theme of red is remarkable throughout AOC’s most viral moments in her career, and this is an *estilo de resistencia* to traditional politician attire color schemes. Historically, the use of bold red color shades in politician attire is highly uncommon and been discouraged in the case of Sotomayor. AOC is restructuring the perception of what a woman in Congress is supposed to have in their appearance. In her *Vogue* video AOC states,

We live in systems that were largely built for the convenience of men. And oftentimes were designed with the subjugation of women and queer people in mind. And so, every time we make a decision, when you make a decision for you, when you're like, you know what, I'm going to do this, I'm not going to do this thing that's expected of me because if it's expected of me just because it's been the norm who has the norm been serving?

(Vogue, 2020)

AOC’s visual rhetoric as a congresswoman is demystifying the complexities of politician dress and norms because for many years the profession of a congressperson involves daily wardrobe choices, being photographed or video recorded daily, and the spotlight has been on men. Therefore, AOC’s existence with her red lipstick and wardrobe is not the norm or tradition of politics. Another

part of AOC's identity besides her gender is being Latina. She speaks with confidence about the connection of being Latina and wearing a bold lip when she states,

So, one of the reasons why I even started wearing a red lip was when I was running in my primary election the first time and outside of our community, no one knew who I was and we were out, we were knocking doors, we were making sure that people were being heard. And one of the things that I had realized is that, you know, when you're always kind of running around, sometimes the best way to really look put together is a bold lip. And of course, being Latina, this is like very much our culture where we come from, I will wear a red lip when I want confidence, when I need a boost of confidence (Vogue, 2020)

This is a form of activism because red lipstick in Latinas has been negatively stereotyped. As previously mentioned, when gender and ethnicity intersect, the audience perception becomes a bigger problem as seen through the study on both Latina and Latino politicians (Cargile, 2021). Thus, AOC's presence and work in this institution is a radical move. She reminds her viewers of their power of femininity, beauty, and overall, their agency and voice in this world.

In *Vogue's* video (2020), "Congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez's Guide to Her Signature Red Lip | Beauty Secrets" see figure 6, AOC is speaking in an environment that seems like an average bathroom, and produces this video, with a get-ready-with-me style, where she introduces her makeup

products, applies them, and speaks about what it means to wear a bold lip as a congresswoman through the entirety of the video.

Figure 6 *AOC and Vogue*



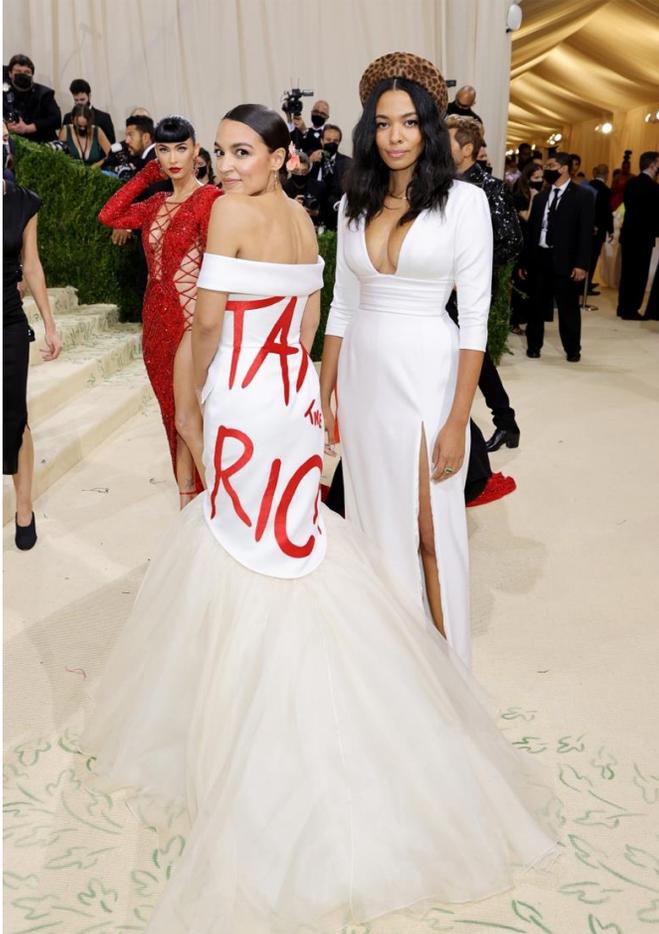
Note. Screenshot of video, Congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez's Guide to Her Signature Red Lip |Beauty Secrets (Vogue, 2022).

A beauty marker such as lipstick is prominent among woman who apply makeup in their daily lives. A red lip is a bold color compared to neutral color shades. AOC's aesthetic choice has exemplified a fashion marker that has been used for many years by Women of Color in example such as the historical visual parallel of la Pachuca from the 1940s discussed later.

Another viral moment in AOC's career as a politician was when she attended one of the "biggest events in fashion, known in popular culture as 'Fashion's Biggest Night'" (Widjojo, 2022). The Met Gala has become associated with popular culture and therefore, an event with immense publicity and press coverage.

In September 2021, AOC attended the Met Gala in New York City. Being a native of New York, before she became a congresswoman, she would witness the gala happening in the city be a viewer and outsider of the event. Now as a congresswoman, AOC was invited to attend because often elected officials are invited and attend due to their "responsibilities in overseeing the city's cultural institutions that serve the public" (DuClos, 2021). The venue of the gala takes place every year in the Metropolitan Museum of Art with added gala themes. This is an event where tickets to attend cost up to \$30,000 per person (Widjojo, 2022). Because of the contrasting ideologies of the event's highly expensive ticket prices and AOC's democratic socialist political agenda where she stands for a just economy favoring working families, AOC attending the event became a viral political statement in her career. News coverage and social media escalates during this time of year since celebrities, wealthy people attend the event with their unique, extravagant designer dresses, shoes, fashion accessories. AOC as a congresswoman attending the event, made a bold political statement in her choice of wardrobe see figure 7.

Figure 7 AOC Met Gala Dress



Note. From left, Congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and designer Aurora James attend the 2021 Met Gala Celebrating in America: A Lexxion of Fashion at Metropolitan Museum of Art on September 13, 2021, in New York City (Mike Coppola/Getty Images).

AOC took to the 2021 Met Gala on a Monday evening with a “bright red message for Americans: ‘Tax the Rich’” (Hills, 2021). Brooklyn-based designer, Aurora James, helped AOC bring this message to the event in a white off-the-shoulder gown with red bold lettering on the back of her dress reading “Tax the Rich”. The accessories included gold hoop earrings and a pink flower pinned into her hair. AOC’s choice of white echoes the long history of American congresswomen wearing the shade in reference to the women’s suffrage movement. As previously mentioned during AOC’s swearing-in ceremony in 2019, she wore a white suit and a bold lip referencing Sotomayor’s remark, “She kept her red” (Ocasio-Cortez, 2019). AOC is not the first woman politician to attend the Met Gala, Hillary Clinton attended for the first time in 2001 when she wore a cheetah-print gown (Kambhampaty, 2022). Also, AOC’s usage of red is significant throughout her career as a congresswoman and using that color in her dress is a radical example of visual rhetorical power.

The conversation about AOC’s wardrobe for the event went viral online through different newspaper platforms from both the liberal left and conservative right highlighting the controversy and ‘hypocrisy’. Despite this backlash from the media, AOC was clever, and goal oriented in her purpose of attending such a Hollywood fueled social event. She collaborated for the second time with *Vogue* (2021) on producing a video with over 700k views titled, “Congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez Gets Ready for the Met Gala | Vogue” where AOC states,

This year's gala is the opportunity to have conversations about the communities that we're from geography, class, race, present events, climate change, and in politics there's this classic adage which is that the medium is the message and fashion is a medium that's why it's important that we defend that medium when people try to diminish it I'm excited to use this opportunity to also send a message (Vogue, 2021).

This was AOC's moment to start conversations not only at the Met Gala but throughout the country through the highly press coverage event on important issues that occur in the city of New York. She collaborated with a Black designer who is an activist for the Black community in New York and who few have walked the carpet at the Met Gala. Her dress with red bold lettering resembling the New York graffiti style and artwork mentioned previously regarding this *estilo de resistencia*. The gold hoop earrings and pink flower she wore as accessories also representing her Latinidad as a daughter of Puerto Rican parents.

This illustration of AOC's Met Gala dress is a form of strategic essentialism (Spivak, 1988). Although, this event is highly capitalized by wealthy celebrities, high class people, AOC still decided to attend because of the impact this created with her political discourse of fairness and equity to working families that they deserve. She knew and wanted people to talk about her message on the dress and what 'Tax the Rich' means politically and economically. The social change AOC is trying to make is about her story, her role as a Latina congresswoman, and the significance of this in a Eurocentric field of Congress

where politicians are in high places because of their privileged background of being White and male. The intersection of class sparks a different conversation highlighting the problems and injustices faced in communities like the Bronx, New York which AOC represents. The fashion elements in her visual rhetoric shed light on historical parallels from the 1940s Mexican *Pachuca*, which was also around the time the Met Gala was established (Widjojo, 2022).

Historical Reflections

Historically speaking, the zoot suit in the 1940s worn by both *Pachucos* and *Pachucas*, as expressed by Ibarra-Bigalondo (2019), “acquired strong political connotations” (p. 41). The life and expectations for U.S. women in the 1940s, when the country became involved in World War II, meant women remained in the country, their job was at home with the kids, and there was a need of labor in manufacturing in number of factories. There was a shift in the already gendered roles of men and women. The *Pachuca* style provided a medium of reclaiming a different identity and was embraced by young girls with the only purpose of “looking cool, looking different” (Ibarra-Bigalondo, 2019, p. 35). They moved towards a sense of freedom and agency because during this time women became the ‘breadwinners’ at home since men were off to war overseas. They shattered the norms of female ‘decency’ by adopted the male *Pachuco* style. However, within their own ethnic groups they, “became *Malinches*”, betrayers of their community and traditions and viewed by the White

community as a threat to the “stability and purity” of American patriotism.
(Ibarraran-Bigalondo, 2019, p. 36).

Figure 8 *Woman Wearing a Zoot Suit*



Note. Josie is wearing her zoot suit while waiting for the Red Car at E. 41st St. and Long Beach Ave, in Los Angeles. The restaurant on the corner is El Tonga (Shades of L.A. Mexican American Community Collection, Los Angeles Public Library Photo Collection).

A portrait of a *Pachuca* shares aesthetic similarities with AOC see figure 8. For instance, the black and white image allows the viewer to infer that the *Pachuca* is wearing red lips, a similarity to *Vogue*'s video with over three million views featuring AOC's signature aesthetic red lipstick. Additionally, the general atmosphere of the portrait is one best described as a representation, "of quotidianity and naturalness" (Ibarraran-Bigalondo, 2019, p. 48). This is seen in the example of AOC's get-ready-with-me *Vogue* video. As seen with the *Pachucas*, AOC also defies the norms of political garb and dress.

In the case of Women of Color in positions with political power, there has been a rejection of Latine and Mexican representation in governmental positions and has been illustrated by the conservative left media. At a Trump Rally, Republican Rep. Taylor-Greene described AOC as un-American and "she really doesn't embrace our American ways" (KTVU FOX 2 San Francisco, 2021). A White woman, Rep. Taylor Greene explicitly categorized AOC as 'un-American' supports the discourse of Eurocentrism. In the 1940s, the *Pachuca* became a threat in mainstream society. As explained by Ibarraran-Bigalondo (2019),

The former [the parents of the *Pachuca*] panicked at the thought that their daughter was not Mexican enough, leaving their tradition and was becoming 'too American.' The mainstream society, represented by the mass media (amongst other institutions and individuals), regarded her as un-American, unpatriotic and immoral (p. 47).

Similarly, AOC experiences rejection and criticism from the mass media, specifically conservative media. However, AOC like the *Pachucas*, challenges the norms and embodies an empowerment and a self-driven path in her political career as a Latina congresswoman. The sole act of being a Woman of Color in predominately White space is an act of rebellion and distorts the dominant Western culture of U.S. politics.

This move of AOC, or how Anzaldúa (1987) would say a state of *nepantla*, where there is a shift transition and negotiation of the self. Garb is a visual rhetorical constituent that carries social meanings depending on the conditions of a person's environment. In AOC's situation, it is complex because she is often scrutinized by her dress and not taken at the same level of seriousness than men. Therefore, she is strategic on her choice of attire and vocalizes her reasoning behind an occasion whether that is a speech on the House floor on Puerto Rico wearing a red dress or an appearance at the MET gala wearing a white dress with a red bold message. This is an example of *nepantla*, where AOC is constantly making negotiations including her body because she works in a public position.

How is AOC going to represent herself to the world as a Latina, *Boricua* women who has a working-class background in an environment out of the social norm that is predominantly White, male, and upper class? AOC like the *Pachucas*, symbolizes the agency of women to "reinterpret the roles and find a space of their own for their lives and vindications" (Ibarraran-Bigalondom, 2019,

p. 52). The intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989) of gender, ethnicity, and appearance is one to make sense and deconstruct for a deeper understanding of the social systems that are upheld by dominant ideologies. The Met Gala dress worn by AOC was an act of negotiation of the inner self. Her decision to attend the highly expensive event in a way demonstrated a conformity to dominant ideologies but at the same time, it was an opportunity to speak to the masses about the real problems normal working people face in her city of New York. Clothing is probably “the most conspicuous and most visual of all possible badges of group belongingness” (Ibarraran-Bigalondom, 2019, p. 43). This is an *estilo de resistencia* AOC does in her work as a congresswoman. The communicative role of both outfits seen in the *Pachuca* and AOC pave a road towards self-agency and liberation despite seen as either role models or betrayers. The *Pachucas* dressed to exist, dressed to resist and gained self-autonomy.

CHAPTER FIVE:

A MODEL OF LATINA RESISTANCE AND FUTURE RESEARCH

AOC is a model of *estilos de resistencia* in her role as a Latina Women of Color congresswoman. Her different rhetorical tools of her multilayered identity empower her to occupy spaces that were constructed for people who do not look, speak, nor represent her. The relationships and collaborations AOC has built inter-ethnically with The Squad members has created a current model for other members of Congress to replicate to produce power. Future studies may look at more cases of other Woman of Color in Congress such as Reps. Ilhan Omar, Ayanna Pressley, and Rashida Tlaib that might produce different results. Past models of these collaborations have already done the work towards social justice. The New York Young Lords in the 1970s produced “a rhetorical construction” (Wanzer-Serrano, 2015) with their newspaper called *Palante*, illustrating a racial harmony amongst the organization and their overall Puerto Rico identity composed of Spanish, African, and Taíno heritage. These intersections of different ethnic groups have rhetorical power because they resist ethnic borders and go beyond hierarchal ways of thinking moving towards a pluralistic way of thinking where there are multiple ways of knowing, “deconstruct, construct” (Anzaldúa, 1989). AOC is an example of a decolonial praxis where her work is marking a legacy of coloniality, it is a pattern of people and experiences from the past to the future.

Speaking Spanglish in a field of politics is a radical move where it is not encouraged. AOC resists the norm and boldly speaks this way in her speeches in Congress, a space that is public with plenty of press coverage for the country to hear and see. Despite the aggressive remarks against AOC's identity from prominent governmental leaders in the White House, she continues the work towards a future that advocates for working families, Women of Color, immigrant workers who live beyond her Congressional District, it is not exclusive to New York City but throughout the country and world.

In addition, I share commonalities in positionality as a Latina woman graduate student researcher with Women of Color experiences. Certainly, these have influenced my interpretation of the rhetorical text analyzed in this thesis. Someone with a different ethnic and gender background may have different or opposing perspectives and opinions on the same events, viral moments, aesthetics, and communicative methods of AOC.

This study used qualitative research methods that produced thematic findings and results, future research studies may look at the case of AOC using quantitative research methods perhaps using her Twitter social media account which has an abundance of data, tweets, comments, etc. Quantifying the account of AOC can open the discussion to a wider visualization of the power of politicians in their use of media. Future research can analyze AOC in her career moving forward from this project as new events, ideas, and positions may cause

a shift of focus. These may produce different and new results of the definitions of resistance, empowerment, activism, and rhetoric in a political realm.

The visual rhetoric AOC communicates in the examples of the *Vogue* YouTube video are messages about feminine empowerment using beauty as a tool and marker of motivation, self-determination. She redefines the hegemonic Latina stereotypes when she says, “Next time someone tells Bronx girls to take off their hoops, they can just say they’re dressing like a Congresswoman” (Ocasio-Cortez, 2019). AOC uplifts and empowers her viewers in a simple get-ready-with-me video, humanizing the experiences many women face struggling to meet these unrealistic beauty standards. Identifying the context of the persona and life of AOC is essential but the details and not so hidden messages speak high volumes in the mass media and society. AOC’s Met Gala dress became the conversation of the night for this event because of her message “tax the rich”. Historically, in the 1940s in Los Angeles, “*Pachucas*’ subversion and deviation through the unconscious” became the seed of what would later in time “be described as the Chicana feminist movement” (Ibarraran-Bigalondom, 2019, p. 54). The details that may appear minimal can represent and speak volume to those who know and understand the experiences of Latina woman. Anzaldúa’s (1987) *mestizaje* theory describes this experience in-depth with examples of code switching with different languages, spaces, identity caps, and cultures. It is an ongoing conversation and movement. Not only did AOC's viral moments

become political statements that inspired others and the upcoming revolution, but they also became personal choices regarding relationships, speech, and attire.

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