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The role of local narratives in emerging climate governance

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Abstract

Local climate narratives are influential, shaping climate responses at all scales. They can be unpredictable, however, reflecting local histories, power dynamics, needs, and priorities as much as expert knowledge of climate disruption and possible responses. As new modes of climate governance emerge in response to increasing climate impacts and risks, local climate narratives influence understandings of climate change and what should be done about it, as well as the prospects for implementing fair, effective climate responses. In this study, we examine the case of Miami-Dade County, Florida, USA, an early adopter of climate policies that faces deep inequity and worsening climate impacts. Using historical research, interviews, and policy document analysis, we (a) identify two long-term historic environmental narratives—one dominant narrative focused on economic growth and the other on environmental justice—that shape the local climate debate; (b) create a typology of contemporary climate narratives about emissions, sea level rise, climate gentrification, and resilience; and (c) analyze historic and contemporary narratives’ prevalence in emergent local climate policies. While most people in Miami agree that climate change is an immediate problem, various groups talk about and experience climate change very differently. These climate narratives are divided along the geographical and social lines of segregation, leading to conflicting understandings of climate risk and action stemming from socioeconomic and environmental inequities. Histories of growth and the environmental injustices that accompany it have strongly shaped contemporary climate narratives, at times contradicting scientific understandings of climate change and, until recently, leading to climate policies that prioritize economic growth. Community organizations have drawn on histories of environmental injustice to demand greater attention to equity in narratives informing climate discussions, such as debates about climate gentrification, but we find that policy documents still cite equity-related topics and narratives much less frequently. Paying attention to these histories offers an important and often neglected basis for understanding local climate debates, the potential for climate governance to either compound or alleviate existing inequities, and new directions for more equitable climate communication and policy.

1. Introduction: narratives, communication, and climate change

In 2018, a meeting of the City of Miami’s Sea Level Rise Committee—the body then tasked with suggesting new ways to adapt to rising seas—grew acrimonious, revealing competing narratives about climate change and what to do about it. A prominent local figure in climate politics had proposed that the committee ask the city to calculate how much it was spending each year to deal with the effects of climate change. The chair, a land use lawyer, did not agree to the proposal, arguing that the committee’s purview was sea level rise, not climate change (Field notes, 1 April 2018—see section 2, Iannelli 2018). The response drew criticism that the
committee was not treating the climate crisis urgently enough, and that the committee’s makeup did not reflect Miami’s diversity: Many of its members represented the development industry while communities bearing the brunt of climate impacts had a smaller voice. In response, the city mayor, Francis Suarez, changed the committee’s remit, renaming it the Climate Resilience Committee (Fuller 2019a). But the incident raised important questions: How do residents and decision-makers characterize climate change in their responses to increasing challenges such as sea level rise? Which responses do these narratives favor or render less likely? And how do dominant understandings reflect local power dynamics and potential inequities in emerging climate governance?

This paper’s analysis creates a historically rooted framework for understanding the diverse knowledges and worldviews that shape disparate, sometimes contradictory and competing climate narratives, situating them in local power dynamics, struggles for justice, and emergent climate governance.

We examine narratives as stories that both reflect and shape the world. Narratives are the mechanisms people use to understand events and things, putting them into context and ascribing causes and consequences (Polkinghorne 1988). These stories have political and social power and shape our ability to imagine the future, both as individuals and as members of groups (Riessman 2007, Beckert 2016). Narratives influence communities’ thinking about the fabric of societies, from policies to infrastructure, allowing some possibilities and curtailing others (Starosielski 2015). A growing body of research aims to better understand climate narratives and suggest ways of using narratives to advance more effective climate responses (Flottum and Gjerstad 2017) and potentially unify groups that have previously been at odds (Bushell et al 2015).

Narratives have elicited growing interest as sources of data in energy and climate research, as well as important means to communicate with and influence others (Moezzi et al 2017). Although climate change is often presented as the domain of scientists, science is only one of many different possible stories (Rappaport 1999) that help to put climate change into context in people’s lives. As Hulme argues, ‘the idea of climate change is now to be found active across the full parade of human endeavors, institutions, practices and stories’ (Hulme 2009). At the local level, perceptions of environmental change are highly contextual, depending on cultural experiences such as long- and short-term weather patterns (Koubi et al 2016, Bremer et al 2020), location, and power imbalances (Ensor et al 2018).

Narratives are not universal, even in cases where globally focused narratives and practices dominate portrayals, as is the case with climate change (O’Lear 2016). One culture may interpret a narrative differently than another, for example, leading to vastly different responses. The narrative policy framework, designed to account for the role of narrative in the policy process (Jones and McBeth 2010), describes such differences as ‘bounded relativity,’ meaning that they are not random but ‘have some stability over time’ (Shanahan et al 2018). Policy interventions mobilizing new narratives may fail or put certain groups at a disadvantage if they are not sufficiently mindful of the local context (Filippucci 1997). van der Leeuw (2020) advises those attempting to introduce new environmental narratives in local contexts that ‘[n]arratives at different levels and domains have to be compatible with each other to enable innovations to be successful,’ suggesting a strategy of ‘anchoring new narratives in long-term identity-related regional ones.’ The introduction of new narratives in the context of local identities may produce results that diverge from the understandings of outside experts (see e.g. Koslov 2019). Class and privilege may also play an important role in the ways in which people adopt environmental narratives (Cohen 2017). For Klenk (2018), these—at times—apparently irrational interpretations offer opportunities for storytelling to inform scientific approaches to climate adaptation, indicating ‘what matters and is therefore relevant to the people [scientists] engage with in adaptation research.’ In this way, narratives are not just used in the service of science and policy but become part of what shapes knowledge production and policymaking, in ways that may render climate knowledge and responses more useful, equitable, and relevant across communities.

Further, the analysis of this paper has important implications for the field of climate change communication, in which environmental justice has not been a central concern to date (Hamilton and Pedelty 2017). Yet environmental inequities are, in part, the result of modes of communication and participation—through news media, risk communication, and political engagement—that ignore, misunderstand, and devalue marginalized groups’ needs and voices (Bullard et al 2007). For example, despite years of criticism from researchers, the information deficit model of climate change communication—which assumes that experts giving audiences more information about scientific issues will eliminate controversy and generate support for responses (Bulkeley 2000)—dominates science and policy communication (National Academies 2017). Scholarship on science communication has had limited success in influencing the status quo (Seethaler et al 2019). Even as climate communication researchers work to find alternatives to the deficit model (Ceyhan and Saribas 2021), many climate experts, science communication professionals, and policymakers perpetuate it as the norm (Bulkeley 2000, Cook and Zurita 2019). This situation has important consequences for equitable and effective climate communication and responses for several
reasons. First, the deficit model’s ineffectiveness prolongs inaction and denial, compounding harm to the most vulnerable in society, who experience climate pressures first and most severely (Norgaard 2006). And second, the hierarchies of knowledge implied in the deficit model elevate expert above local knowledge and sideline local expertise and concerns in communication and policymaking. Given that climate impacts will be unevenly distributed, researchers have argued that more diverse forms of knowledge should be included in science communication and the policy process as a matter of social justice, with greater engagement among experts, decision-makers, and the public—in which residents’ knowledge enjoys equal footing in the policy process (Jasanoff 2007, Pierce 2013, Klenk et al 2017, Raphael 2019, Hill et al 2020, Tubridy et al 2022). This paper’s analysis of diverse climate narratives demonstrates the ways in which histories of injustice create deep divisions in the perception and experience of climate change at the local level, reflecting power imbalances between populations that become central within emerging climate governance as well.

1.1. Miami’s evolving climate narratives
Miami presents a compelling example of the interplay between global and local climate narratives. This study focuses on Miami-Dade County and the thirty-four incorporated municipalities contained within its borders, particularly the City of Miami and Miami Beach. The region has become a symbol of extreme climate exposure, existing at a nexus of environmental narratives. National and international climate discussions shape those of the region and inform local understandings of Miami as ‘Ground Zero’ for climate change (Donald 2022), and Miami’s narratives in turn circulate into global climate consciousness. Miami-Dade County stands out for its residents’ broad acceptance of climate change (Marlon et al 2020) and the development of multiple policies and strategies designed to combat climate impacts—particularly through measures to adapt to sea level rise and related flooding (Smiley 2017, Kallergis 2020). Cities have become a symbol of hope for environmentalists frustrated at decades of slow progress and failures to reduce emissions and adapt to climate impacts at the international level (Gordon and Acuto 2015). Miami has been an early adopter of local climate responses, with a high profile in international policy forums such as the International Council for Local Environmental Initiatives, formed in 1990, and the 2005 U.S. Mayors Climate Protection Agreement (Diaz 2012, p 169).

Miami’s conversations about climate change have evolved over recent years. The early focus on cutting emissions has given way to a drive to control disruptive flooding and, most recently, extreme and chronic heat. Meanwhile, a housing affordability crisis because of high costs and low wages compounds the struggles many Miamians face, making it harder for people to cope with worsening weather extremes. A movement has emerged to put equity at the center of climate change planning, focusing on affordable housing and climate gentrification—the theory that developers are buying cheap land on high ground that is home to Miami’s historic Black communities (Donald 2020, Grove et al 2020). The question of how much community groups may influence policy, despite the rise in interest in equity problems, remains a concern. Selection criteria for decision-making committees such as the Climate Resilience Committee favor academic and professional credentials over community knowledge (Grove et al 2020). This is just one example of a growing criticism that cities’ climate change responses have done little to change patterns of economic growth and consumption that are both environmentally unsustainable and socially unjust—and risk reinforcing these dynamics (see e.g. Ranganathan and Bratman 2021). Miami municipalities, heavily dependent on tax revenues from real estate development, emphasize maintaining the pace of growth, even in flooding-exposed areas, to raise the funds for climate adaptation measures (Paquette 2014, field notes, 2019). This dynamic is exerting increasing pressure on local people, ecosystems, and infrastructure. As new climate governance shifts from planning to implementation, studying narratives offers an opportunity to understand the directions these responses are taking, as well as potential points for intervention and equitable innovation before pathways become locked in.

Climate narratives, shaped by deeper historical understandings of place, political economy, and the pursuit of a good life, are profoundly important in shaping policy windows and determining the policies that eventually emerge. Local politics and history, distilled into climate narratives, are vital to understanding what people talk about when they talk about climate change. Miami is a key case study for understanding the messy real-world dynamics of climate narratives and the policies and pathways they open or close off. In this paper, we aim to make tangible the narratives that dominate discussions about climate change in metropolitan Miami. We ask: How do different local groups talk about climate change—that is, what are their climate narratives—and what is the relationship among current-day understandings, their historical origins, and contemporary policy priorities and actions? After introducing our methods, we present and analyze a typology of climate narratives: two long-term, historic regional visions of environmentalism and four contemporary climate narratives. Next, we investigate how these narratives appear in and shape local policy documents, analyzing their relative prominence, the narrative continuities and breaks in Miami’s climate policies, and the treatment of histories of growth and environmental injustice. Finally, we discuss
what the study of local climate narratives can reveal about local power dynamics and questions of equity in climate communications and policymaking.

2. Method

To identify (a) the history shaping Miami’s climate debate, (b) the most prominent contemporary climate narratives in the locality, and (c) the narratives’ relative prominence in climate policy documents, we adopted a mixed methods approach combining archival research, interviews, and document analysis (figure 1). From historical research of over three hundred archival documents and secondary sources about Miami’s growth and development (supplementary table 1), the first author iteratively and inductively identified overarching understandings of Miami’s past and future trajectory that shape today’s local climate narratives. In tandem with the historical analysis, the first author conducted seventy-seven hour-long semi-structured institutional review board-approved interviews between 2017 and 2019, with individuals involved in policy-level discussions about climate change. Nine groups were identified for interviews based on their roles in the local climate debate, informed by factors such as their presence at climate events and meetings and their appearances in local and national media. The groups were: community leaders and activists (18 interviewees in total), elected local government officials (2), local government workers including city and county resilience professionals (11), architects (3), planners (3), researchers (13), journalists and other media figures (11), lawyers (2), and others with a personal and professional involvement in the local climate debate and the policies that emerge from it, including involved residents and individuals in the private sector (14). In addition, the first author attended relevant events between 2017 and 2022, taking field notes.

The archival and interview research informed each other, an approach that offers opportunities to test theories (Welch 2000) and contextualize local environmental debates (Crandall et al 2018). The narratives that began to emerge from initial interviews and archival research shaped the questions asked of subsequent interviewees, as well as the focus of archival research (figure 1). For example, the frequent mentions of Miami’s history of drainage, its extreme segregation, and the displacements of Black residents by the cities and county to vacate coveted land guided research on the historical narratives that justified and naturalized these actions in the name of economic growth. Rather than refer to narratives directly in interviews, the interview protocols involved a mental models approach (Morgan et al 2005), asking open-ended questions and noting recurring topics, such as the discrepancy between grassroots and elected officials’ conceptualizations of climate change, as they emerged. We interrogated the ways in which the narratives we identified shaped individuals’ understandings of local climate solutions. The interviews were transcribed and coded using NVivo, identifying the most commonly mentioned themes in interview data, fieldwork, and documents, such as narratives referencing climate gentrification, emissions, sea level rise, and resilience, as well as the responses that stem from these narratives; topics such as translating climate change for different audiences; and social and geographical differences in climate understandings. In this way, the first author iteratively identified historic narratives and traced their movement into current climate conversations, reading across the different types of text to identify storylines (Hampton 2004, Bergman 2017, p 189, Harcourt et al 2020) and create a typology of both long-term, historic climate narratives and contemporary climate narratives. We arrived at the unifying theme of historical and contemporary narratives through this process, finding that people’s current-day understandings of climate change spoke to historic narratives linked to identities and experiences of economic growth and attendant environmental injustice.

With this typology, we then analyzed documents outlining or designed to feed into municipal policy (with direct or indirect focus on climate) from the 1990s to the present using a keyword search. We assessed the distribution of each contemporary narrative across the climate-policy-relevant documents to understand which climate narratives have dominated the local debate, which narratives different actors have adopted, and the ways in which historical narratives have shaped contemporary climate discourse and policy. We created a corpus of 188 documents. To identify the documents, we conducted a directed internet search using Google. We applied specific searches using the names of organizations operating in Miami’s climate space: ‘[Name of Organization],’ e.g. Miami-Dade County + ‘Climate change’ OR ‘Sea Level Rise’ OR ‘Resilience’ OR ‘Climate Gentrification’ OR ‘Emissions’ OR ‘Global Warming’ OR ‘Changing Climate’ + ‘Policy’ OR ‘Policy Recommendations’ OR ‘Strategy’ + ‘Miami’). Additionally, we conducted a general search using terms such as ‘Insurer’ + ‘Climate Change’ + ‘Miami.’ We also searched using organization websites and the Florida section of Georgetown University’s website (Adaptation Clearinghouse 2022), which collects relevant documents produced by state and municipal governments. Keyword searches have limitations because they do not account for discussions of concepts such as gentrification without using the word. Future research might adopt a different approach such as unsupervised topic modeling, which would account for such latent topics (Guo et al 2016) and further enrich this mixed methods approach.
Our initial search yielded 424 documents. We then narrowed down the document corpus by filtering out duplicates and selecting only documents that deal specifically with the Miami-Dade region and climate change. We divided the documents according to 12 source categories (figure 2): advocacy organizations such as the Union of Concerned Scientists (8.6%), governmental coalitions such as the Southeast Florida Regional Climate Change Compact (10.2%), consultancies such as the Urban Land Institute (ULI) (8.0%), engineering firms such as AECOM (1.1%), federal agencies such as the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (7.5%), Florida-based agencies such as the South Florida Water Management District (6.4%), grant-giving foundations such as the Rockefeller Foundation (3.2%), industry voices such as the Miami Chamber of Commerce (2.1%), insurers (1.1%), municipal government including all cities in Miami-Dade County and
the county itself (39%), state government (1.1%), and universities (11.2%). Through this process, we narrowed the corpus down to 188 documents.

To analyze how prevalent each of the four contemporary climate narratives is within policymaking circles, we searched each document for keywords associated with each contemporary narrative, determining their frequency: 'Emission' , 'Sea-Level Rise' OR 'Sea Level Rise' OR 'Sea Rise' ; 'Climate Gentrification' OR 'Gentrification' + 'Climate' within three words OR 'Gentrification'; and 'Resilien"'. We also searched for additional keywords relevant to themes discussed within each narrative—such as retrofit, which implies an alternative approach to growth-focused environmentalism—and we conducted a manual qualitative content analysis to determine how the historical narratives identified through archival research and interviews figure into the communication of contemporary climate narratives across the policy documents, including in discussions of Miami’s history.

3. Results

In the sections that follow, we first present the typology of historical and contemporary climate narratives we created from archival research based on over three hundred documents and seventy-seven hour-long interviews with diverse individuals involved in local climate debates and policymaking in the metropolitan Miami region. Next, we provide findings of how these narratives appear in and shape local climate policy-relevant documents from different actors (i.e. across public sector, private sector, and civil society).

3.1. A typology of historic and contemporary climate narratives within Miami’s societal context

Through recursive archival research and stakeholder interviews, we identified two long-term, historic regional narratives that encompass opposing attitudes toward the environment and racial capitalism, and four contemporary climate narratives through which we traced long-standing attitudes (table 1). We describe each narrative, including its origins in the archival and interview data, below.

3.1.1. Historical narrative 1: the Magic City

Early 20th century business leaders advertising Miami’s attractiveness as an investment prospect and tourist destination emphasized urban growth and strict segregation as mutually reinforcing social goods that would attract wealthy new residents and businesses to grow the economy in Miami (Castillo 2004). Miami’s drive for growth is by design: In 1924, the State of Florida passed a constitutional amendment to abolish state income and inheritance taxes, locking municipalities into a constant search for new development to raise tax dollars (McDonell 1973). We call this narrative the ‘Magic City,’ characterized by technological optimism and dependence on technologies such as water pumps and air conditioning to make Miami habitable (Mormino 2008, pp 5–7), promotion of Miami’s environment for its unique ecology and warm climate despite its continuing destruction (Davis and Arsenault 1998), and a focus on Miami as a national and international leader in the arts and culture (Mormino 2008, p 39) and, later, in environmental politics.

Even prominent advocates for conservation and careful planning shared the business and political elite’s focus on growth and leadership status to attract wealth and new residents. For example, George Merrick, the founder of the City of Coral Gables and Miami’s chief planner during the New Deal, created a plan to displace Miami’s largest Black community, now called Overtown, from the downtown core to planned communities on the outskirts of the city (Dade County Planning Council 1936). Merrick’s plan was unsuccessful, but Miami’s planners later demolished large swathes of Overtown to build the Interstate 95 Expressway in the late 1960s, a pattern replicated by governments all over the country (Arthur 1995, Dash et al 1997). And during the 2000s, City of Miami mayor Manny Diaz encouraged a condominium boom that he argued would reduce emissions and sprawl while attracting desirable new residents and turning Miami into a global city and leader in climate politics (Cave 2009, Diaz 2012). Local activists accused Diaz of using this policy to accelerate the pace of gentrification (Feldman 2011).

3.1.2. Historical narrative 2: the Third Miami

Although media depictions of Miami tend to focus on its glamorous image, there was another side to this history. Miami’s politicians, businesspeople, and other boosters achieved this rapid growth through low-wage labor especially by minoritized groups, the dispossession of the Seminole and Miccosukee tribes, and the progressive destruction of the Everglades (Connolly 2014, Babb 2016, Leigh 2017, Green 2018). Climate change is a symptom of this history of Indigenous dispossession through settler colonialism and capitalism (Whyte 2019). The urban historian Raymond Mohl has explored the way that such images
connect to collective memory and relate to Miami’s power dynamics. In contrast to Miami’s images as a glamorous tourist destination or regional magnet for Latin America, his term, the ‘Third Miami’, describes a different city experienced primarily by its Black population, where memories of police brutality, race walls, displacement, and precarity run deep and Black communities’ foundational role in Miami’s creation and culture are often overlooked or deliberately erased (Mohl 1989, Dunn 1997).

Generations of Black Miamians have suffered from environmental injustices, from lack of access to safe housing, clean water, and trash collection to greater exposure to extreme weather (Mohl 2001, Moser Jones 2014). Displacement from areas of residence has also been a recurring theme for Black and some Hispanic and Latinx communities once the land they occupied in places like Overtown became desirable to white political and business leaders (Connolly 2014). Overtown residents saw their community as viable and vibrant, contrary to the portrayals of planners (‘Impact of Transportation Projects on Overtown’ 1997). Today, in areas experiencing gentrification, activists and other interviewees have discussed their concern that the next powerful hurricane could accelerate the pace of gentrification as it did in New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina, flattening older properties to make way for expensive new developments (Field notes, 2018). This history is fertile ground for resistance to Miami’s dominant focus on economic growth in policymaking. This is the case for environmental justice activists pushing back against the tendency to prioritize economic growth in environmental and climate-related policies, instead emphasizing the

| Table 1. Long-term historic and contemporary climate narratives in metropolitan Miami. This typology, of two historical and four contemporary narratives that shape Miami’s climate debate, summarizes their approximate decade of emergence, characteristics, and evolution. |
|---|
| **Narrative (approx. decade of emergence in Miami)** | **Characteristics and evolution** |
| Historical Narrative 1: The Magic City (1890s) | The Magic City, Miami’s dominant historical narrative, focuses on economic development and growth, including in environmental planning. This growth was dependent on the exploitation of nature and minoritized residents, especially Black communities. Policies in the Magic City mold focus on attracting and catering to new residents and positioning Miami as a global leader. |
| Historical Narrative 2: The Third Miami (1890s) | The Third Miami narrative represents the long and often overlooked history of Miami’s Black communities, which have experienced neglect, environmental deprivation, and displacement. It informs an environmental justice perspective highlighting the needs of existing residents, not just new ones. |
| Contemporary Narrative 1: Emissions (1990s) | Emissions were the focus of climate policy in the 1980s and 90s, as well as Miami’s positioning as a national and international climate leader (i.e. through joining the Mayors’ Climate Protection Agreement in 2005). After 2008, emissions were deprioritized in favor of the visible effects of climate change, like sea level rise, but emissions policies have re-emerged in recent years. |
| Contemporary Narrative 2: Sea Level Rise (2000s) | Miami has become a national and international symbol of climate exposure due to media coverage of severe flooding, starting in the 2010s. Many residents, particularly those living in neighborhoods by the shore, now connect climate change with sea level rise. This has led to increased action from political leaders and public support for climate responses, especially because sea level rise immediately affects some of Miami’s most influential groups such as wealthy, mostly white, neighborhoods and real estate developers. Despite their acceptance of climate change, however, some Miami Beach residents have stopped action to address sea level rise in their neighborhood. |
| Contemporary Narrative 3: Climate Gentrification (2010s) | Climate gentrification in Miami has risen to national and international attention due to scholarly research on the area and the work of local activists. The latter have drawn on ‘Third Miami’ histories of environmental injustice and displacement to argue for greater community representation in climate governance, advocate for equity-focused climate policies, and criticize climate responses that prioritize higher-income areas. Some residents in affected communities connect climate change with gentrification rather than sea level rise or emissions and risk being alienated by science-focused climate communication. |
| Contemporary Narrative 4: Resilience (2010s) | Resilience has become the organizing principle of Miami’s response to climate change after Miami municipalities successfully applied to the Rockefeller Foundation’s 100 Resilient Cities (100RC) network, which led to initiatives such as the appointment of Resilience Officers to integrate resilience across governance areas and a focus on equity concerns in resilience policies. The Resilience Officers interviewed were most likely to adopt resilience narratives and saw resilience as one way to balance communities’ competing priorities. |
Table 2. The interweaving of old and new narratives. The relationship between the four contemporary narratives (also showing number of interviews coded with each keyword) and the two historical narratives is exemplified within Miami’s climate debate.

| Narrative (no. interviews with narrative present) | Relationship to Magic City narrative | Relationship to Third Miami narrative |
|-------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| Emissions (20 interviews)                       | Early 2000s: City of Miami Mayor Manny Diaz increased density in the urban core to reduce emissions and attract wealthy new residents, also driving up housing prices | Miami-Dade County’s recent emissions reduction strategy recognizes past injustices and aims to address them through green jobs and better services |
| Sea Level Rise (58 interviews)                  | Many climate responses have focused on maintaining the pace of development, protecting Brickell financial center, and allaying investor concerns due to need for development dollars to fund government and adaptation | Some lower income Black communities are less likely to be concerned about sea level rise because they occupy higher ground |
| Climate Gentrification (43 interviews)          | Climate gentrification is seen as symptomatic of the Magic City focus on frenetic development attracting new, wealthy residents while keeping wages low | Community groups link histories of displacement from coveted land such as the decimation of Overtown to climate gentrification today |
| Resilience (42 interviews)                      | Some stakeholders call resilience more of the same development-focused climate policy while others fear resilience measures will accelerate gentrification | Rockefeller 100 Resilient Cities and other funders have boosted focus on equity |

desirability of minoritized neighborhoods and catering to the environmental needs of existing communities, not just incomers (Donald 2020).

3.1.3. Contemporary narrative 1: emissions
While Miami policymakers’ focus on climate adaptation has grown in recent years, emissions—the top priority in ‘the eighties and early nineties,’ garnering national and international attention (Interview 25)—had lost prominence. Now, one interviewee worried, ‘policy works almost completely on adaptation and not enough on mitigation’ (Interview 14). Only one elected official indicated that cutting emissions, especially through alternative energy sources, was their priority (Interview 26). Interviewees said that while people—from residents to municipal employees—view sea level rise as real grounds for action, they ‘will not connect [climate change] to human activity…they are apart’ (Interview 5). The focus is ‘almost completely on adaptation,’ with little focus on mitigation (Interview 14). Instead, officials are concentrating on adaptation to tackle the ‘issues people are seeing’ rather than the ‘silent’ issue of emissions reduction (Interview 5).

Emissions policies have in the past been seen in political circles as a means to project Miami as a leading national and international voice on climate change and this focus has begun to return, however (table 2). ‘Miami loves to set goals of being the best X in the world,’ said one interviewee, a goal that has created new impetus for more ambitious emissions cutting policies (Interview 5). Some interviewees drew attention to different tactics to make visible the links between emissions and concerns that feel more pressing, such as the Children’s Trust suit against the state of Florida for its reliance on fossil fuels, which it argues puts the state’s future and economy at risk (Interview 17). Another interviewee said she had tried to decrease the focus on high-emissions adaptation infrastructure such as pumps in community adaptation planning workshops (Interview 7). Energy efficiency, especially in buildings, has remained an important common thread, due to its cost saving potential combined with its impact on emissions (Interview 5).

3.1.4. Contemporary narrative 2: sea level rise
Local scientists have been documenting rising seas in Miami since the 1980s (Interview 36). But Miami and climate change have become firmly linked in the minds of many Miamians through their perception of sea level rise and increased flooding since around 2015. National and international media attention that has focused on the spectacle of flooding in Miami Beach and in Brickell, the City of Miami’s financial district, during king tides and after Hurricane Irma has helped to cement a common idea of Miami as ‘ground zero’ for climate change (Field notes, 2017). As one interviewee put it: ‘I say this is a place where we have no climate change deniers…but I should probably say we have no sea level rise deniers’ (Interview 25). Many see
rising seas as the greatest threat to economic growth in the region. One resilience official noted the relationship between flooding and economic losses as follows: ‘[T]here’s about 27 spots where we know right now we have king tide impacts, which it is a nuisance right now, but if we do not deal with it in 20 or 25 years, it is going to be to the point where people cannot walk on the streets anymore. They cannot drive to work. And then you start having economic losses. Real estate values go down. People or businesses cannot operate daily and it starts affecting the value of the city’ (Interview 1).

After several years of trying to downplay the problem, it has in recent years become ‘politically favorable’ to talk about sea level rise (Interview 5) to allay the concerns of investors and increase Miami’s international profile as a climate leader. On Miami Beach, former mayor Philip Levine was elected in 2013 on a platform of aggressive anti-flooding measures (Interview 6). Many interviewees credited sea level rise, specifically the 2017 king tide flooding, for the passage of the Miami Forever Bond, a $400 million spending program that allocates $200 million for flooding and drainage problems (Interview 5). International media attention, coupled with severe flooding impacts from king tides and sunny day flooding have made sea level rise and climate change interchangeable terms for many in Miami. According to one activist, sea level rise is the ‘gateway drug’ for interest in climate change in Miami (Interview 14). Despite the focus on sea level rise, however, community-level understanding about its impacts frequently does not mirror the conclusions of scientific research. Interviewees noted that ‘people do not know that the flooding is everywhere, you know…that the western communities are at risk as well as the islands [like Miami Beach]’ (Interview 7). Several interviewees also said they believed sea level rise receives significant attention because, in addition to its visibility, many of Miami’s wealthiest neighborhoods are exposed to coastal flooding, while extreme and chronic heat is less visible and tends to affect less wealthy Black and Latinx neighborhoods (e.g. Interview 40).

Following the Magic City tradition (table 2), politicians such as Levine have expressed confidence in technology’s ability to ‘fix’ the problem. This confidence in technological responses, which one interviewee called ‘a lot of faith in innovation and newness and technology’ (Interview 32), was reflected in some interviews, albeit in a more nuanced way. For example, some interviewees argued that Miami had been managing water since its inception and would continue to do so in the future. In contrast, others were concerned about the level to which residents believed technological solutions, especially pumps and backflow valves, appeared to residents to solve climate change, suggesting that many people connect climate change exclusively to sea level rise. One interviewee argued that such interventions added to a lack of understanding about how flooding occurs as they ‘hide the changes in the water level’ (Interview 7).

Technical fixes have not proven to be universally popular in practice, however. People living along Miami’s coastal shorelines tend to be wealthy, engaged, and aware of the threat flooding poses—and especially to their properties (Interview 2). On Miami Beach, however, officials face new obstacles as some residents have rejected plans for flood control measures in their neighborhoods, despite accepting the scientific principles of climate change. One interviewee said: ‘The connection between how their lives will change because of [sea level rise]—it is just like, “error, does not compute”’ (Interview 39). Several stakeholders noted that policymakers all over the region are watching how Miami Beach handles both the standoff and its other plans to introduce new adaptation infrastructures.

3.1.5. Contemporary narrative 3: climate gentrification

In recent years, the voices of activists challenging Miami’s focus on development at the expense of existing residents have grown louder, creating new conversations about climate change. The most recent narrative to break into Miami’s climate debate is the discussion about climate gentrification, the theory that developers are targeting cheap land on high ground and creating a new wave of ‘climate refugees’ in Florida (Interview 50). As a result, climate change has become a ‘social justice issue’ (Interview 25) as activists have drawn on the Third Miami narrative to challenge the cities and county’s overwhelmingly pro-growth responses to climate change by highlighting the communities that have borne the burden of the low wages and unequal access to amenities that support the Magic City growth model (table 2).

Miami’s history of segregation shapes its climate narratives as well as the impacts different communities experience. This has become increasingly apparent through the work of environmental justice organizations, whose advocacy pushes sidelined narratives and histories to the fore. Historic Black communities such as Liberty City—the area to which many Overtown residents were displaced in the 1960s—and Little Haiti—where many Haitian immigrants settled in the late 1980s—are on South Florida’s coastal ridge. This is the spine of rock that reaches from the top of the state down to its southernmost tip that formed the heart of much of the early development of Florida. As a journalist described it: ‘If you talked to advocates in the City of Miami, they are talking about…how traditionally Black and Brown communities were pushed to higher elevations because the white people did not want them to be near the water. So now that they are stuck in this higher elevation world, and they believe the developers are coming in to take it’ (Interview 39).
Where Miamians live dictates which kinds of climate impacts they experience. Wealthier, predominantly white areas on the coast are experiencing increasing coastal flooding and worsening storm surge. But in high ground neighborhoods, many of which have poorer housing stock and few trees, people are suffering due to increased temperatures, a lack of air conditioning and shade, and severe economic and structural impacts from hurricanes. Sea level rise does not feature strongly among the concerns of people living on high ground in areas like Liberty City and Little Haiti. One Miami resilience official said it would be ‘very unlikely’ for people living in low-income areas to talk about flooding. In this way, the ‘advocacy issues are split up geographically,’ she said (Interview 5). Gentrification also looms larger than climate impacts that are more likely to affect low-income inland areas, such as extreme and chronic heat (Interview 7). Overall, however, one interviewee described high-ground residents as ‘very vulnerable’ but ‘unaware of their vulnerability’ (Interview 2). Several community organizations are using sea level rise maps to show those living on high ground the value of the properties they are currently living in and to discuss climate change more broadly.

One activist contrasted the traditional science communication of climate change, which she said was ‘jargony,’ with more ‘accessible’ discussions such as climate gentrification, which ‘is very real and imminent for folks living in these neighborhoods’ (Interview 18). By contrast, while all interviewees recognized the importance of the debate about climate change gentrification, most non-activists said they were not convinced climate change has been the driving force behind the rise in development in places like Little Haiti and Liberty City. One called it a ‘buzz phrase’ that is useful to activists but may not accurately convey what is going on and that ‘does not receive a lot of my attention right now’ (Interview 5). Due to growing interest in climate gentrification, the City of Miami passed legislation in 2019 to advise its planning committee to study the phenomenon. Through these new modes of talking about climate change, community activism on old problems—such as the continued dominance of slum property owners in Overtown and Liberty City—has gained new salience in public debates (Wright 2019). As a result, political pressure has started to build to ensure affordable housing is part of Miami’s climate policy responses such as the Miami Forever Bond (Interview 2).

There was little faith among many interviewees in whether creating more affordable housing would alleviate gentrification pressure, however. One interviewee, a planner and resilience officer, said: ‘In 40 years of working, i have never seen any regulation, any government program [steer] the market…In this system we are in, in this country, it is private property. That’s the key and the demand’ (Interview 3). New housing does not address the problem of affordability, other interviewees pointed out. Due to Miami’s low wages and high cost of living, staying in Miami is becoming increasingly difficult for people who do not occupy a high-income bracket—a problem exacerbated by state-level policies that prevent municipalities from raising the minimum wage. For one interviewee, this poses a threat to Miami’s long-term viability: ‘How do you sustain the economy if the people who work here cannot live here?’ (Interview 25). This problem has already begun in the Florida Keys—where affordable housing was wiped out in Hurricane Michael—and Miami Beach but is ‘a big question Miami has not started to think about yet’ (Interview 39).

3.1.6. Contemporary narrative 4: resilience

Resilience has become a core part of South Florida cities’ climate narratives due to the influence of the Rockefeller Foundation’s now-defunct 100 Resilient Cities initiative, which selected the city of Miami for the program in 2016. Among other things, membership meant the city received funds to employ a chief resilience officer for two years. After protesters stormed the county budget hearing in 2015 to demand funding for climate policies, the county also employed a chief resilience officer, and Miami Beach and other cities have followed suit. Southeast Florida cities and counties have joined together to form the Southeast Florida Regional Climate Change Compact, which is ‘held up across the country as an example of how regions can plan effectively together’ (Interview 25). Climate change is not the only concern covered by resilience. An online survey of residents listed fears such as economic collapse, cyberattack, and pandemics as well as climate and flooding, and these concerns are reflected in resilience plans (Interview 56).

Unlike the climate change gentrification narrative, officials were much more likely to adopt the resilience narrative themselves. As one resilience official said: ‘This is just a different take on the same water challenge that we have had for a hundred years. And a hundred years from now I am sure that we will have the right features […] in place to deal with this challenge just like they did a hundred years ago’ (Interview 1). Outside advisors like the ULI have also harked back to the history of Miami’s growth as a lesson for current policymakers, encouraging urban densification along the route of the East Coast Railroad, which brought the first waves of growth to the region (Urban Land Institute 2016; table 2). Some stakeholders described the resilience narrative as more of the same development-focused policy, but others saw it as an opportunity for groups seeking to increase attention to social-justice-focused policies, especially housing (table 2). They credited both the Rockefeller Foundation (Interview 32) and grassroots activists pushing for more affordable housing (Interview 10) for this shift. Focusing on social justice has also asked tough questions of stakeholders.
working to make Miami more resilient to climate change, notably just who it is policymakers have in mind when they are planning adaptation measures. People on low incomes have been notably absent from planning scenarios despite their centrality to Miami’s economy. As one interviewee remarked, ‘They were really missing a huge component, which is where are people going to live once all this infrastructure is in place? Because right now, it is looking like they are not gonna be able to live anywhere’ (Interview 11).

Understanding of Miami’s spatially and economically fractured climate change conversation has created a difficult balancing act for officials attempting to make policies. Many stakeholders, particularly resilience officials, see resilience as a means to balance the competing priorities of different neighborhoods. Civil society groups have criticized the prioritization of flood control measures in the Brickell financial district, for example, because its residents are wealthier than those in other areas and possess greater resources to help them deal with climate impacts such as flooding and more severe hurricanes. Resilience has provided the basis for an attempt to create a new narrative to help to unite different sections of Miami behind city and county plans. Prior to the implementation of the Miami Forever Bond, a consulting firm interviewed Miami residents all over the city. It called the communications strategy it devised as a result ‘We Are All in This Together’ (Sightful Communication 2016). One official argued that this message helped to convey, among other things, that benefits to one group—even in a wealthy area—were for the good of all: ‘This is where the “we are all in it together” also comes in because if people no longer see Brickell as a strong investment, we have an overall economy problem with the city, which affects jobs and opportunities and the city’s overall tax base and our ability to serve the whole city. So, we have to balance our investments with both. And we definitely think about how we are doing that—the city had already made a lot of investments in drainage improvements in district four [where several low-income neighborhoods are located] so we did not feel like we needed to go there’ (Interview 2).

This view also encapsulated the way some spoke of their jobs, as needing to be ‘available to everyone,’ whether they are elderly people concerned about trolley routes or ‘the guy who owns a Lamborghini and is working on a development project’ (Interview 1). Miami’s history of neglecting low income, especially Black, neighborhoods (table 2), means community organizations have criticized plans to invest adaptation dollars in wealthy areas, especially the Brickell financial district, as several officials noted. They argued, however, that their job was to protect all residents and that Miami depended on business from Brickell to keep the city going. Conversely, several community representatives said they were concerned resilience improvements were only happening in their areas now that they were becoming attractive to investors (Interview 49). These contrasting ideas about priority areas might be summarized as the difference between equity and equality in climate policymaking—between raising up underserved communities and treating everyone the same—which might lead to different conclusions about priority areas.

3.2. Contemporary climate narratives in regional policy documents
Despite the abundant presence of gentrification and emissions narratives in interviews and at public meetings, sea level rise and resilience are the focus of the policy documents we analyzed (figure 3). This indicates that, even when a narrative such as climate gentrification has gained prominence in the public sphere, it may not have the same traction at a policymaking level if it does not have the support of powerful groups. In contrast, resilience, backed by Rockefeller Foundation funding, has become a key theme in policy documents. Across the Miami climate- and policy-relevant document corpus (n = 188 documents; figure 3), sea level rise was the most frequently mentioned term, accounting for 47.5% of the narrative keyword instances identified (out of 22 322 total keyword instances). Resilience makes up 33.4% of the total number of keyword instances, while mentions of emissions amount to 17.5%. Gentrification and climate gentrification are the least frequently mentioned terms in the document corpus at 1.6% of the total.

Until 2008, the climate policy documents frequently mentioned emissions (figure 4). Since then, mentions of sea level rise have become increasingly frequent. After Miami released its Resilient 305 Strategy in 2019 (Greater Miami and the Beaches 2019), however, resilience has become the most frequently mentioned keyword (figure 4). Discussion of gentrification or climate gentrification begin to rise in 2017 (figure 4), peaking in 2019, the year after Keenan et al published their journal article on climate gentrification (Keenan et al 2018). This indicates that attention from researchers and increased activism linking housing concerns with climate vulnerability had begun to affect policy conversations. This rise in mentions coincides with a greater variety of words that suggest attention to equity: mentions of related terms such as ‘Justice’ and ‘Equity’ also rose over that period (supplementary figure 1). Further, the debate about climate gentrification appears to have pushed discussion of gentrification more generally into the policy debate. ‘Climate Gentrification’ peaked at 70 mentions in 2019, accompanied by 144 mentions of ‘Gentrification’ the same year (supplementary figure 1). The equity-focused keywords contract in 2020–2021, however. Mentions of emissions begin to rise again in 2021 with the release of new city and county emissions plans.
Figure 3. Prevalence of the four contemporary climate narratives’ keywords across the Miami climate- and policy-relevant document corpus. Sea-level rise and resilience dominate discussions in the climate policy documents, followed by emissions and (climate) gentrification.

Figure 4. The prevalence of contemporary-climate-narrative keywords over time. As mentions of emissions decline, sea level rise and, later, resilience increase, while climate gentrification is mentioned infrequently across climate- and policy-relevant documents in Miami.

All 12 sources have adopted the language of sea level rise and resilience, but the emphasis varies (figure 5). The majority of the contemporary-climate-narrative keyword mentions from most governmental sources are of sea level rise: federal agencies (76.8% of keyword instances), Florida agencies (83.4%), state government (75.5%), and municipal government (48.5%). The exception is documents from climate change-focused governmental coalitions such as the southeast Florida Regional Climate Change Compact, in which mentions of resilience (51.4% of keyword instances) outnumber those of sea level rise. Sea level rise also appears frequently in documents from universities (59.2% of keyword mentions), advocacy organizations (60.8%), industry (44.4%), and insurers (78.4). Resilience is the most frequently mentioned keyword in
Figure 5. The prevalence of the four contemporary-climate-narrative keywords across twelve source categories of climate-and policy-relevant documents.

documents from consultancies (69.4% of narrative keyword mentions) and engineering firms (71.2%), both of whom Miami municipalities engage to supply expertise. Resilience is also the most prevalent word in documents from foundations (74.6%) such as the Rockefeller Foundation. While every source mentions emissions, the term is far less common. The most mentions come from municipal government (35.7% of keyword instances)—primarily due to Miami-Dade County’s Long-Term Emissions Reduction Plan, which started in 1993 (Miami-Dade County 2007)—followed by documents from industry (19.4%).

The phrases climate gentrification and gentrification account for the fewest mentions across sources. They accounted for the greatest percentage of contemporary-climate-narrative keyword mentions in documents from advocacy organizations (5.9% of keyword instances) and universities (3.9%). Documents from municipal governments mention the terms most often (177 keyword mentions), but these mentions account for just 2.0% of overall keyword instances. Consultancies (0.6%), foundations (1.7%), and coalitions (0.1%) also mention the terms in relevant documents, but the phrases do not feature in documents from Florida agencies, engineering firms, industry, insurers, or state government.

4. Discussion

At the local level, climate governance is at a constant intersection of new and existing narratives. Our analysis of contemporary climate narratives and the long-term, historic regional narratives that shape them shows that when people talk about climate change, they are talking about different things, blurring the boundaries between community and expert knowledge assumed in the information deficit model (Bulkeley 2000), and highlighting the centrality of histories of growth and environmental injustice to contemporary climate debates. We have identified two long-term historic environmental narratives, about economic growth and environmental justice, which shape the contemporary climate debate in Miami, especially through narratives related to greenhouse gas emissions, sea level rise, climate gentrification, and resilience. History provides essential context for the dynamics and conflicts we witnessed in the contemporary climate debate. These include challenges to adaptation measures that appear to threaten beliefs such as the protection of property values on wealthy Miami Beach—showing conflict between the sea level rise and Magic City narratives; the dominance of growth and technology-focused climate solutions—showing how policymakers have worked to square evidence about emissions and rising seas with the drive for growth; and understandings of climate change that deviate from dominant scientific descriptions and instead revolve around historic questions such as whether communities have benefited or not from growth-focused policymaking. Without attention to these histories, new policymaking efforts or communications initiatives such as creating uniting narratives (Moezzi et al 2017) may backfire or compound existing inequities unless they pay sufficient attention these histories, which provide a rich illustration of climate change’s roots in centuries of environmental injustice.
Our analysis of climate policy-relevant documents further illuminates differences between public conversations about climate change and the policy sphere. Hotly-debated questions such as climate gentrification receive much less attention in policy documents. This paper shows that narratives offer important insights into emergent climate governance that may offer potential new paths for more effective and equitable climate communication and policymaking.

4.1. Communication
The complexities inherent in this paper's findings highlight the need for climate communication that is rooted in wider societal contexts. Relying on scientific explanations alone may lead to disengagement from some audiences as well as forms of denial, including among individuals who say they agree that climate change is real and pressing (Norgaard 2006). In Miami, we found the greatest differences in climate narratives lay between those who have benefited from the Magic City model of growth-focused environmental policy and those who have not, and between community and expert knowledge. These different understandings of climate change are messy and complicated and had important consequences for communication and understanding of climate change, as in the cases of wealthy Miami Beach residents who agree with scientific descriptions of climate change but reject science-informed sea level rise policy measures when they threaten privileges such as the maximization of property values (Interview 39; Harris and Gurney 2018), or lower-income residents who are more likely to connect climate change with gentrification and risk being alienated from science-focused discussions (Interview 15).

4.2. Policymaking
The links between histories of growth and interpretations of climate change are also apparent in local policymaking. In a place like Miami, which is widely agreed to have reached a consensus that climate change is a threat, policies have changed dramatically in direction and focus as new mayors have taken over and international trends have emerged, embracing some aspects of scientific evidence and ignoring others. Viewing these changes through the lens of the Magic City narrative shows commonalities, however. While the focus of policies has changed, their emphasis on preserving growth and enhancing Miami's international reputation as a climate leader and a bankable global hub for business has not. In the City of Miami, for example, Democratic Mayor Manny Diaz (2001–2008) focused on gaining international recognition for emissions reductions and attracting wealthy new incomers with plans to green the area. To do this, Diaz joined the U.S. Mayors Climate Protection Agreement (Diaz 2012, p 169) and encouraged a boom in condominium construction in Miami's urban core (Diaz 2012, p 170), claiming that greater densification would reduce emissions (City of Miami 2008). Yet the new zoning code he introduced (City of Miami 2010) to achieve greater density did not mention climate change or require new buildings to take future sea level rise into account (Fuller 2019). This policy simultaneously exacerbated existing inequities in the housing market, driving up rents and increasing development interest in low-income areas (Feldman 2011) - although the Mayor's office denied the problem (Diaz 2007). When Tomás Regalado, a Republican, became mayor of the City of Miami in 2009, he abandoned climate policies altogether. After 2013, when Miami was the focus of an influential article about the impacts of sea level rise in Rolling Stone magazine (Goodell 2013), Regalado began to adopt climate policies (see Smiley 2017) to reduce disruption from flooding and reassure potential investors. Since then, sea level rise became the dominant narrative about climate change in Miami locally, nationally, and internationally, while discussions of emissions reduction waned (Interview 5). Despite Miami's position as a climate leader in national and international policy forums, therefore, climate narratives until recently have reflected narrow definitions of and responses to climate change that, if viewed outside the context of the drive to preserve growth, have led to contradictory results.

4.3. Equity
This analysis also sheds light on local conflicts over emergent climate governance, particularly in relation to equity. We found that these conflicts stem from deep disconnections in understandings of local histories, climate change, and the goals of climate responses due to experiences of inequity. In Miami, resistance from locals criticizing climate policies is rooted in historic narratives: the Magic City-informed focus on maximizing property values in the case of wealthy Miami Beach residents, or Third Miami concern that climate policies will continue the disenfranchisement of Black communities (Bastien 2019, Catalyst Miami 2020). It shows that when people are talking about climate change, their understandings reflect their values and experiences as much as their comprehension of climate science. In addition to decades of work from community groups, the shift toward discussions of equity in climate policy has also come due to the influence of outside organizations. In particular, the 100 Resilient Cities initiative has encouraged local policymakers to look at equity in climate adaptation with policy input and the creation and funding of the positions of resilience officers (100 Resilient Cities Network Exchange Program 2018). As a result of these
influences, climate policies in the Miami Dade area have also become more holistic rather than focusing on one narrow aspect of climate change such as flooding. Many of the newest climate policies emerging from local governments combine adaptation and emissions reductions with a new language about equity. Despite the rise of narratives that draw on the Third Miami experience and increased attention to equity and problems such as gentrification, however, our textual analysis shows that there has only been a marginal increase in discussions of these problems in local policy documents—a problem Miami has in common with other 100 Resilient Cities members (Fitzgibbons and Mitchell 2019).

4.4. History in climate policy debates
While equity is an increasingly common theme in discussions about climate adaptation, we found engagement with histories of inequity to be sparse. This relative inattention to the local historical context of climate policy interventions means that stakeholders attempting to influence local climate governance risk misunderstanding and potentially compounding environmental injustices. Several of the documents we analyzed mentioned Miami’s history, but only those from advocacy organizations discussed its history of segregation, for example. Most other discussions of Miami’s history followed the Magic City narrative without mentioning Third Miami histories of inequity. This included authors who recommend attention to housing and other equity-centered concerns, such as the ULI (2019) and the City of Miami Planning Department’s report on climate change gentrification (Trone et al 2019). These histories instead focus on the engineering innovations that made the construction of Miami possible and, in the case of the ULI, highlighting the construction of the railroad along the coastal ridge to the west of Biscayne Bay as an example of more sustainable building practices on high ground. As a result, the profound inequities, and the environmental destruction that the authors recognize, appear to exist without history rather than being fundamental to Miami’s growth and development, subtly undermining the goals of equity and environmental sensitivity. The exception is Miami-Dade County’s most recent climate documents, released under its new mayor, Daniella Levine Cava, who was the founder of one of Miami’s biggest community organizations, Catalyst Miami. Under her leadership, the county’s publications acknowledge histories of inequity and the need to address it as part of its climate strategy (Miami-Dade County 2021).

4.5. Decision-making, representation, and environmental justice
This analysis raises questions about which narratives shape the planning and decision-making process, and what they reveal about power dynamics and realized policy priorities within cities. While many of the authors espouse the pursuit of equity in their recommendations and plans, few engage with the causes of inequity, which are deeply connected with the climate crisis itself. Without greater representation of marginalized groups in decision-making, this dynamic is unlikely to be challenged (Jasanoff 2007, Pierce 2013, Klenk et al 2017, Hill et al 2020, Tubridy et al 2022). Outside organizations interacting with local policymakers and residents may encounter only socially dominant climate narratives and histories unless they seek out the voices and histories of those most affected by social, economic, and political disparities and climatic threats, meaning that expert knowledge is less likely to challenge environmental policies that prioritize growth. The prevalence of the information deficit model in climate change communication risks exacerbating this situation. This paper shows that while Miami’s climate narratives are fractured by histories of segregation and disenfranchisement, local narratives also offer potential entry points for new engagement that connects with people’s priorities.

5. Conclusion
Climate governance is emerging in cities all over the world as the pressures of climatic change increase and municipalities react in planned and unplanned ways. These steps towards responding to climate change will have important impacts but understanding what they will be is challenging. Studying local climate narratives and understanding their roots in history offers one way to make these elusive developments tangible. This study advances one means to do so: using local history and interviews to identify both the dominant narratives that characterize the local climate debate and the historic narratives that shape the way people understand climate change and what to do about it. Then, through textual analysis of local policy documents, we have analyzed the prevalence of each of these narratives at the level of decision-making.

Our investigation suggests that despite increased attention to concerns related to equity, such as gentrification, the model of pro-growth development, shaped by the area’s long-standing Magic City narrative, remains dominant, repeated by local decision-makers and influential organizations guiding local climate policies. Given the ways in which growth-focused environmental policies have sacrificed vulnerable communities’ health, wealth, and environmental quality, new climate policymaking risks perpetuating these inequities. Strategies to raise awareness of climate change and popularize solutions may deepen the divisions
between who is included in decision-making and who remains excluded. If populations understand climate change in ways that deviate from scientific and political characterizations such as the focus on global emissions, the drive to maintain growth, or the failure to connect climate change with histories of injustice, the priorities their understandings reveal may be discounted and excluded as irrational. Climate narratives expose the social stratification of climate dangers—from both exposure to the effects of climate change and the degree to which proposed policies benefit or hurt different populations. They can be the threads that allow us to understand how and why this may happen, and how we may find new ways forward that have the potential to resonate with narratives that center the needs of the most vulnerable rather than growth for the few. This analysis is a reminder that, as new forms of governance emerge, climate communicators, researchers, and policymakers cannot ignore the histories of environmental injustice that shape local climate debates.

Data availability statement

The data generated and/or analysed during the current study are not publicly available for legal/ethical reasons but are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Contributions

R D and K J M conceptualized the study design and methodology. R D collected and analyzed the interview, archival, and field data; R D and C M collected and analyzed the policy documents. R D drafted the manuscript and visualized data with inputs from K J M and review by all authors.

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