According to Sze and London (2006), environmental racism is the unequal distribution of environmental benefits and pollution burdens based on race. This intersection is especially important since climate issues are of a timely matter, but these are made worse for BIPoC communities. When we consider solving issues concerning the environment, we need to evaluate this intersection in order to make sure that our solutions benefit everyone, rather than the privileged which is what happens historically. One of the many environmental issues intersecting with race is air pollution. This problem is exacerbated by the current COVID-19 pandemic which impacts the respiratory system. One example of environmental racism concerning air pollution can be found in Little Village and Pilsen, two neighborhoods on the lower west side of Chicago. After local organizations like PERRO and Live to successfully worked to shut down local coal plants, the demolition of one of the pollution producers was batched, filling the community with thick smoke. Considering this happened during the pandemic worsens the situation, but also makes clear the disrespect and disregard for communities of which BIPoC make up a majority of the population. As whites do to combat this issue, among others? To start, we need to re-educate ourselves. Systemic racism has caused much of our history to be swept under the rug, likely due to embarrassment and guilt. Many of us have grown up community for being "othering" them. We ideally this is understandable during a pandemic can also be done through purchasing from businesses that support black and brown owned foundations and donating to organizations that target black and brown people. If you cannot donate money, which can be understood, this support can also be done through social media and feeds and wide range of background to listen to their stories and experiences of being uncomfortable. We need to be comfortable with being uncomfortable.
This is an acrylic painting on an 18-inch by 24-inch canvas. In my piece “Reach”, I discuss environmental racism and its importance, specifically focusing on air pollution. There are many past planning decisions that have caused an increase in air pollution in neighborhoods where racial and ethnic minorities make up the majority. I find the issue of air pollution to be particularly timely considering we are currently living through a pandemic that attacks the respiratory system, worsening current air pollution effects. The background colors are blue and white to represent the sky, while the text is of varying white shades to represent clouds. I emphasize certain words or phrases in the text by writing them in all capital letters and making them larger in order to further the purpose of the piece. In the text I discuss what environmental racism is, I provide an example of environmental racism as it relates to Chicago, and I describe what white people need to do to combat these, and similar, issues. This includes but is certainly not limited to re-educating ourselves, unlearning past incorrect history, and supporting people whose identities vary from ours, especially concerning race and ethnicity. In creating this painting, I wanted to ensure that I did not try to explain the experience of someone of a different ethnicity or race, but rather focus on what I know in my privileged experience. While I am no expert in this area, I am learning and will continue to learn, as we all should.