

Preface:
**Capitalism, Climate Change,
and the Rhetorical Challenge**

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This special issue derives from a day-long symposium hosted by Rhetoric@Reno, the University of Nevada, Reno's graduate student chapter of the national professional organization Rhetoric Society of America (RSA). Titled, "Capitalism, Climate, and Public Discourse," the symposium was organized around a talk by Naomi Klein that addressed issues highlighted in her book, *This Changes Everything: Capitalism vs. the Climate*. Symposium speakers discussed the theme of capitalism and climate change, but also addressed the power of narrative journalism to engage the reading public and often illustrated claims through close readings of Naomi Klein's work. Many of the contributing articles are expanded versions of papers delivered at that symposium; others are new articles written by those who participated in the event; and, one article is by a scholar who, although unable to attend, viewed the event online ("Capitalism, Climate, and Public Discourse?"). Collectively, the assembled articles explore the possibilities and limitations for public deliberation around a topic that differentially affects everyone. Like capitalism, the climate cannot be escaped. Some experience climate change when their vacation is interrupted by an out-of-season hurricane; others experience it as slow cultural destruction due to rising tides; some experience it through inconvenient regulations and others through species extermination, a phenomenon Klein reflects on in the opening pages of her book. Both capitalism and climate reverberate on a planetary scale and thus are daunting subjects that require careful theoretical engagement, inclusive frameworks, and new forms of communication.

Dedicated to exploring how rhetoricians might engage diverse audiences around these intertwined issues of global importance, the articles from the symposium seemed to be a good fit for a journal

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that has addressed such queries for over three decades. As the 2007 volume of *Works and Days* illustrates with its retrospective on the founding and evolution of the Society for Critical Exchange (SCE), this journal was born in the heyday of theoretical inquiry and raised on the passions of praxis. Those who contribute to it and those who follow it bear these inescapable affiliations and histories. Dating from the late 1970s when the political world was becoming redesigned through the policies of Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan, the journal has approached textual studies from the perspective of a rapidly and sometimes radically changing capitalist landscape. In the 1970s, both the university and the larger terrain were dynamically evolving into what has become a sometimes empty catchphrase—postmodernism, global capitalism, or neoliberalism. But, for scholars of this journal, such terms reflect more than theoretical fashion. They signify concrete, and often deeply felt, experiences of changing cultural and social relationships that widen an already significant chasm between those who benefit from capitalism and those who do not. Like the SCE, whose past presidents include such powerhouses as Frederic Jameson, Barbara Herstein Smith, Edward Said, and Gerald Graff, *Works and Days* quickly became a vibrant home for critical theorists interested in both opposing capitalism's pernicious patterns and inventing models of social justice appropriate to the shifting political economic contours of capitalism.

At a time when it was becoming clear that large scale anti-capitalist metanarratives failed to capture diverse identities and place-based particularities, these scholars often focused their critical gaze on local politics. As young intellectuals in a university system undergoing dramatic alterations, this group placed an especially critical eye on the university and its form of knowledge production. Soon SEC spawned The Group for Research into the Institutionalization and Professionalization of Literary Studies (GRIP), which fixed its gaze on the triple helix of university-corporate-government relations. As a one time member of the Steering Committee of GRIP, David Downing and subsequently the journal that he has spent his professional life editing are inseparable from the question of what the contemporary university is and does. Critical university studies, as it is now called, offers a rich and complicated object of study. This journal and many others have dedicated special issues to its theorization and Johns Hopkins University Press and Palgrave Press both maintain book series that publish research in this area. Including a range of

perspectives, this scholarship never loses sight of the university as a critical node in the capitalist aperture and cultural and literary production as deeply implicated in that institutional structure. What is remarkable about this focus is that it refuses to atrophy within the dominant theoretical frameworks afforded by the university, humanist studies, and disciplinary trends. On the contrary, both this journal and critical university studies evolved theoretically through a dedication to knowledge production that tackles the pragmatics of contemporary life, adjusting its political and intellectual focus on the everyday lives of those who struggle against the tides to forge a more humane world than the one they have inherited.

Such a project resonates with the work of rhetoric as it attempts to negotiate powerful interests and complex problems through the creative forces of language. Situated in two disciplinary homes and engaging others across the university (the rhetoric of inquiry project, for example), rhetoric has claimed an increasingly expansive role in the vexed structure of the contemporary university. Focusing its critical attention both inward (the political economy of composition and the political economy of communication) and outward (critical pedagogy and critical rhetoric), rhetoric in both departments trains generations of students in the importance of reading, writing, and speaking within a democratic society. These parallel practices notwithstanding, rhetoric tends toward the hermeneutic in communication departments and toward the productive in English departments where it dwells mostly in writing studies. Challenging this bifurcated existence, Steven Mailloux has argued for stronger relationships between English and communication and professional organizations such as RSA have taken up this call by purposefully designing more interdepartmental programming. Downing goes further, asserting that such coalitions “have to go beyond disciplinary specializations” (31). Klein’s book, which directly engages the behemoths of capitalism and climate for a public audience, provides a pathway for going further as it weaves its way through university, corporate, and government knowledge production before landing in the realm of public pedagogy or the production of knowledge outside the university. The entwinement of capitalism and climate, Klein reminds us, poses multiple complex challenges for life on this planet and these challenges cannot be answered from disciplinary silos. The difficulties of countering climate change require discussion and collaboration among economists, political theorists, cultural theorists, and scientists, among

others. Rhetoric has a role to play in facilitating this conversation as well as bringing it to bear on non-academic audiences. Those of us who want to see the university evolve beyond its ivory tower past and its corporatized present, need to reimagine disciplinary boundaries that crisscross the university and beyond.

The essays collected here use Klein's *This Changes Everything* as a springboard into this kind of critical engagement. The volume is organized in three parts, each of which is held together by a temporal orientation. The first section looks to the past, reflects on the journal, and commemorates its editorship under David Downing. It pivots toward this volume's focus on capitalism, climate change, and rhetoric by including a review essay of Klein's book, the animating text for many of the articles that follow. The second section fixes its gaze on the present, identifying and evaluating the rhetorical strategies that position capitalism and climate change solutions in dynamic opposition. Focused on the challenges of dialogue, these articles sometimes critique Klein's book for its totalizing tendencies and antagonistic stances, including overvalorizing democratic potential. The essays gesture at the possibilities of both scientific study and different relationships to place. The section ends by encouraging us to think about new forms of indigenous identification, especially in the urban spaces that increasingly dominate the capitalist landscape. The third section looks to the future by offering provocations and inventions. These essays attempt to move beyond our disciplinary traditions and popular histories to tell different narratives about the entangled terrain of climate and capitalism, to extend historical materialist theories, to imagine new scientific models, and to use these experiments in interdisciplinary and extradisciplinary knowledge production to forge a politics of hope capable of energizing diverse groups of people for the challenges of capitalism and climate change.

Works Cited

- "Capitalism, Climate, and Public Discourse." Rhetoric@Reno: A Rhetoric Society of America Chapter at the University of Nevada. <http://rhetoricreno.wixsite.com/mysite/home-1>.
- Downing, David B. "Beyond Disciplinary English: Integrating Reading and Writing by Reforming Academic Labor." *Beyond English Inc.: Curricular Reform in a Global Economy*. Ed. David B. Downing, Claude Mark Hurlbert, and Paula Mathieu. Boyton/Cook Publishers, 2002. 23-38.



Section I:

The 40th Anniversary

Retrospective