

Maintaining Markets, Destroying Worlds: The Strategies and Stakes of Economic Denial

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The title of Naomi Klein's *This Changes Everything: Capitalism vs. the Climate* speaks well to a central provocation of her project: its challenge to readers to engage not only the real likelihood of impending climate disaster, but also the ways that attitudes toward the environment are informed by beliefs about the economy and vice versa. From the triumph of party politics in placing business and environmental interests in false and short-sighted opposition, to the appropriation of environmental concerns within economies of profit and consumption, Klein pushes readers to apprehend the complex rationalities that authorize what she says is not just a tepid but a full-bore commitment to destructive courses of environmental and economic action: "Faced with a crisis that threatens our survival as a species," she argues, "our entire culture is continuing to do the very thing that caused the crisis, only with an extra dose of elbow grease behind it" (*This Changes Everything* 2). Of course, Klein is hardly resigned to the inevitability of disaster. She urges audiences to see the climate crisis as an exigency with enormous potential, suggesting that it "could form the basis of a powerful mass movement" that would serve to unify "seemingly disparate issues into a coherent narrative about how to protect humanity from the ravages of both a savagely unjust economic system and a destabilized climate system" (*This Changes Everything* 8). Insofar as we keep to the status quo, however, and as long as we fail to interrogate deeply held assumptions about both economy and environment, we persist in a kind of destructive dual denial.

I am interested in taking up, from a rhetorical perspective, this thread of Klein's argument: namely, the suggestion of climate change as a locus for considering how commitments to and ideas about economy and environment vie with, intersect with, and depend upon each

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other. More precisely, I think that Klein gestures to the value of giving greater consideration to not only *climate denial* but also what we might call *economic denial*, a distinct yet interrelated rhetorical phenomenon. The notion of economic denial has, if little academic presence, then several existing political interpretations. In regard to international affairs, for instance, it has designated programs of blocking other nations' access to economic and other resources to contain and obstruct violent or communist regimes.¹ Tossed around in the news media and blogosphere, it levies criticism against public figures who would seem to ignore certain "facts" about the economy, or who would use economic "facts" to deny other things. What I wish to entertain in this article, however, is the value of theorizing economic denial as conceptually parallel to climate denial—that is to say, as a scholarly and political vocabulary for understanding how citizens, political leaders, and nations use rhetoric to announce, defend, and sustain commitment to destructive courses of economic action and policy, despite their demonstrated risks.

Across contexts, denial is a well-theorized aspect of political debate. While it can be defined simply, e.g. as an assertion that a statement or allegation is untrue or incorrect, in scientific and technical controversies it has become a go-to designation for the politicized refusal to recognize or accede to the reality of, if not a set of irrefutable facts, then at least a well-established consensus vetted by assiduous research and considerable evidence. In this vein, the language of denial provides interlocutors who wish to uphold a settled scientific or historical concurrence with various rhetorical applications, from the pejorative "denialist" to deride proponents of radical and controversial alternatives, to the pathologizing of denial as "denialism," a psychologically-motivated choice to deny uncomfortable truths. Deeply politicized, highly divisive, climate debates are a familiar context for denialist discourse, despite the preponderance of scientific evidence to support climate change phenomenon. Yet economics is not an exact science, though it tries to be: there is arguably no precise equivalent of the "scientific consensus" in economic matters. What, then, is the theoretical potential of economic denial? Moreover, if climate denial bears some fundamental relationship to a society-wide blindness to the risks and pitfalls of current capitalism, how can we better understand this relationship, analyzing these rhetorical stances as they function separately and in tandem?

I address these questions in what follows. First, I explore the rhetorical functions of denial in scientific and technical contexts, fo-

cusing on its designation as purposive disruption of consensus vis-à-vis tactical and recognizable forms of argument. I then formulate an inverse take on denialism in economic debates. Specifically, by explicating the rhetorical critique of economic discourses that maintain dominant theorizations by discounting alternative or contradictory propositions, I entertain economic denial as a rhetorical mode not for creating controversy but erasing it. Building from Gibson-Graham's notion of capitalocentrism, I offer economic denial as a means of organizing discourses that contravene perceived challenges to the hegemony of the free market and its attendant principles. Briefly, I exemplify the value of this approach through the example of economic bubbles, where rhetorical strategies designed to foreclose debate about the potential for market crisis also work in defense of a self-regulatory ideology. Bubbles are relevant, I argue, not only as the iconic crises of capitalism—the economic sources of what Klein has long called “shock politics,” described in her recent *No is Not Enough* as “the quite brutal tactic of systematically using the public's disorientation following a collective shock . . . to push through radical pro-corporate measures”—but also because they are under-explored cases for the ways economic and environmental forms of denial bolster, gloss, and intersect each other (2). Arguing that the two denials function in interrelated rather than parallel ways, I echo Klein's claim that an unjust economic and a destabilized climate system are not “disparate issues,” rhetorically speaking: instead, their discourses function something like a magnet, with multiple ways of thinking in one attracting singular ways of thinking in the other (*This Changes Everything* 8).

As Klein suggests in *No is Not Enough*, the current presidential administration augments these standing concerns, introducing new complications. Before concluding, therefore, I consider how “Trumponomics,” as Donald Trump's emerging economic platform has come to be known, produces an intensified challenge for political economic analysis and thus pushes us to think about the two denials in new ways. Arguing that critical analysis must be refocused in light of this new political regime, which has been characterized by its systematic effort to consolidate political power, privilege undemocratic interests, and place climate denial in a position of superlative political influence, I conclude by proposing new directions for the rhetorical critique of economy and environment.

Corrupting Consensus: Denial as Anti-Science

Denial is a salient theme around a number of high-stakes events where the preponderance of evidence points to a politically or psychologically undesirable reality, especially where rejection is so rhetorically marked as to invite the label *denialism*. As scholars explicate denialist phenomena, some have been attentive to the ways denial works as a symbolic language for organizing dissent. In his well-cited work on the AIDS crisis in South Africa, the anthropologist Didier Fassin writes that denial is at once “prescriptive and polemic:” to label an opponent’s rhetorical performance as an expression of denial is simultaneously to claim one’s own credibility as a speaker and to levy an accusation against the opponent (15). Fassin also helpfully distinguishes *denial* from *denialism*, writing that while the former is often understood as “the empirical observation that reality and truth are being denied,” the latter is typically held to represent “an ideological position whereby one systematically reacts by refusing reality and truth” (Fassin 115). There is frequent slippage between the terms, but the latter tends to connote “morally sanctioned forms of denial”—e.g., cases where denial has complex political or psychological explanations (Fassin 115). Denialism, therefore, becomes a ready name for factional worldviews that reject various discomposing realities, from well-documented instances of oppression and violence like the Holocaust or the Newtown school shooting to public health crises like the AIDs epidemic, either because the reality is profoundly disturbing or because it mandates acceptance of corollary truths that betray existing convictions (that Jewish peoples have been victims of regimes rather than architects of conspiracy, that the accessibility of firearms fosters school violence, or that gay citizens are a vulnerable rather than risk-posing population, for instance).

Theorized at length in the sciences, denial there indicates the rejection of mainstream arguments in favor of fringe perspectives not endorsed or vetted by the scientific community. Thus, those who dispute that climate change exists—or who hold that climate change exists only as a natural cyclical phenomenon rather than a result of pernicious human activity—are familiarly referred to as “climate deniers,” “climate change denialists,” or other such terms. As in Fassin’s example of the AIDS crisis, the label performs both prescriptive and polemic work. To call the rejection of climate science *denial* or *denialism* is to employ a rhetorical device that acts metonymically in several

ways: it insists upon the presence of substantive evidence—evidence so solid that any rational mind must entertain it—even as it acknowledges the psychological discomfort of accepting the same. In this way, the rhetoric of denialism bears an interesting connection to the rhetoric of neoliberal economy: if the central theme of free market economics is *rational action*, the notion that actors who proceed logically by pursuing their own self-interest will best serve the market, denialism speaks to a kind of *irrational reaction*, the replete rejection of an established proposition for reasons and in ways that seem more visceral (if yet psychologically explicable) than rational logic alone would dictate.

Though denialism often retains its subtle psychological warrant, both popular and scholarly criticisms have sought to displace any implied legitimation by elaborating denialism as a rhetorical phenomenon. This involves drawing attention to political, monetary, and other recognizable motives for participating in public denialist activities: in climate debates, for instance, interlocutors have pointed out that publicly contravening climate change data can be quite lucrative for scientists.² It also includes illuminating denial as strategic discursive practice, one that is comprised of recurring argumentative moves. Mark Hoofnagle, who maintains the well-traveled climate change denial blog *Denialismblog*, has been widely credited with developing a definition of denialism as “the employment of rhetorical tactics to give the appearance of argument or legitimate debate, when in actuality there is none” (“Climate Change Deniers”). He offers “failsafe tips” on how to spot climate change deniers by recognizing “routine” rhetorical tactics that, while not necessarily indicative of “false” argument, should nevertheless encourage audiences to adopt a critical stance. These include the suggestion that opponents are involved in “a conspiracy to suppress the truth;” the reference to outdated, flawed, and discredited papers to make opposing research appear weak; the citation of “false expertise,” as where supporting evidence or credibility comes from experts in other fields; the use of “moving the goalpost,” or dismissing evidence by demanding some other (often unfulfillable) piece of evidence; and the invocation of various logical fallacies (“Climate Change Deniers”). This schema has appealed to other scholars who have affirmed that denialism involves the concerted application of Hoofnagle’s telltale moves—conspiracy theories, cherry picking, fake experts, impossible expectations, and logical fallacies—in various combinations.³ By cataloguing

strategies thusly, critics refine an understanding of denialism as the employment of more and less civil discursive tactics, from logocentric disputations of data to emotionally-charged attacks on character, in efforts to shift majority or settled agreements into active disputes.

Such a view has likewise resonated with rhetorical scholars, including Leah Ceccarelli, who sheds light on how dissident and denialist acts function to manufacture scientific controversy in the public sphere. For Ceccarelli, the inventive process of manufacturing controversy is instantiated when an “arguer announces that there is an ongoing scientific debate in the technical sphere about a matter for which there is actually an overwhelming scientific consensus” (198). Availing themselves of a *kairotic* opportunity to introduce discord, deniers exploit a standing expectation of not only American media but Western argument and rhetoric more intrinsically: that there are multiple sides to a debate, all of which merit consideration and coverage. Ceccarelli’s notion of manufactured controversy has not gone unchallenged: for Steve Fuller, for instance, it enables problematic presumptions that “normal” consensus in science exists as well as that scientific consensus can be considered “anything more than an institutionally sanctioned opinion about theories whose ultimate prospects are still up for grabs” (754). Thus, where Ceccarelli is straightforward in offering rhetoric to the service of scientific accord, Fuller cautions that there is a slippery slope in the very notion of accord, as well as in the kinds of value judgments required to pick and choose concurrences worth defending. Ceccarelli’s prime concern, however, is rhetoric’s obligation to productive deliberation. Rhetoric can best support healthy debate about scientific, technical, and historical matters, she reasons, by intervening against politically-motivated attempts to fabricate discord where none exists.

Ceccarelli herself uses the language of denial sparingly. Yet given the general resonance of such formulations, it is worth asking how the conception of denial as “the employment of rhetorical tactics to give the appearance of argument or legitimate debate,” or manufacture controversy, might prove limiting as well as generative (Hoofnagle). For my part, I suggest that focusing attention to denial along one or more of only three axes—the *public*, the *scientific*, and the (*false*) *controversial*—risks glossing other means and motivations for denialist reactions. In regard to climate change, notably, denial animates not only vocal rhetoric in the public sphere, but also the diverse array of human behaviors that misalign with climate science and ignore its implications. Klein is incisive on this point in *This Changes Everything*,

enumerating the countless ways that even well-meaning citizens betray their knowledge of climate risk in their everyday lives:

We look for a split second and then we look away...Or we look but then turn it into a joke...Or we look but tell ourselves comforting stories...Or we look but try to be hyper-rational about it...Or we look but tell ourselves we are too busy to care...Or we look but tell ourselves that all we can do is focus on ourselves...Or maybe we do look—really look—but then, inevitably, we seem to forget. (3–4)

Private, embodied, and non-verbal—but no less rhetorical for that—Klein’s litany of “we look but” galvanizes even those who do not identify as deniers to see how they are held in its thrall. It reminds us, too, that if manufacturing climate controversy falls within the parameters of denialism, denialism itself yet remains a more encompassing, penetrating, and diffuse phenomenon.

In sum, when seen as psychological behavior, denialism illuminates stances taken by individuals who decline to accept an undesirable reality. When seen as rhetorical behavior, however, it orients us toward the diverse body of symbolic behaviors that function, separately and together, to deny publicly significant problems and propositions. Elaborated by scholarly and popular criticism through a variety of high-profile technical, scientific, and environmental cases, denialism has emerged as a transcendent phenomenon with a recognizable façade: the displacement of consensus for controversy, via tactical patterns that exploit cultural expectations for balanced and multi-sided debates. Climate change, as always, is an iconic case. Yet beyond identifying economic motives for creating controversy, scholars have rarely given full attention to the ways denialism involves, as Klein astutely suggests, pitting capitalism and climate against each other. Neither have they asked how denialism might illuminate rhetorical phenomenon in the context of economy. In the next section, I turn to conversations in the rhetoric of economics to develop an alternate understanding of denial: as a set of rhetorical practices not for *creating* controversy but *erasing* it in order to maintain the inviolability of market ideals.

Disallowing Dissensus: Denial as Market Maintenance

From its inception, inquiry in rhetoric and economics has been preoccupied with the strength and intensity by which economic discipline presents and defends the legitimacy of its arguments—the le-

gitimacy of neoclassical economics, widely acknowledged as the dominant paradigm, in particular. Breaking new ground in the 1980s, Deirdre McCloskey developed a “rhetoric of economics” for the explicit purpose of prompting economists to apprehend how their methods and means of arguing are both fundamentally persuasive and stylistically structured so as to bely this fact. For McCloskey and those following her tradition, applying a rhetorical lens meant discerning the recurring master tropes, including metaphors and other stylistic devices, that pervade economic discourse under the guise of everyday, “arhetorical” syntax (e.g. Klamer and Leonard). McCloskey was especially attentive to what she called economics’ “realist style,” which draws on the “rhetoric of quantification” and other tactics to present itself as factual, logical, and absent subjectivity (141). Adorned with the legitimating features of scientific and mathematical arguments, the realist style excises uncertainty about social scientific methods, predictions, and conclusions, especially relating to the function of the free market economy.

The rhetoric and economics project pursued by McCloskey and others, of course, would give way to a new critical focus, expanding from stylistics to animating premises, from formulations of theory and method to constructions of identity and subjectivity, from disciplinary dialogue to a wider range of theoretical, political, and popular discourse on the economy. Still, it continues to habitually address tactics of ratification on one hand, and of rejection, rebuttal, and repudiation on the other. For James Aune, an early respondent to McCloskey, the style free market defenders employ to insist upon a self-regulating market and deride government invention is characterized by less its aura of scientific objectivity than its reliance on contradictory tropes. Across various economic debates, recurrent *topoi* maintain the inviolability of the free market by inciting indignation toward those who fail to internalize its principles, generating a rhetoric of what Aune calls *economic correctness* that “reduces social complexity to a few simple principles: the inexorable law of supply and demand, the perfidiousness of government intervention, [and] the glorious and open future promised by the elimination of government intervention” (31). As “correctness” would imply, this rhetoric fiercely polices violations against its principles. Erecting a code of social and discursive behavior, it deploys reactionary arguments—including the theses Albert Hirschman named as recurring tactics of conservative argument, which feature appeals to *perversity*, *futility*, and

jeopardy—to mark contradictions as subversive or taboo (7). We can gather, then, that the rhetorical force of free market argument proceeds at least in part from its normative capacity to deny possible alternatives to its central convictions.

Moreover, Aune is not the only one to suggest that neoliberal rhetoric works in such a way. More recent projects likewise address how liberal economics maintains its sense of irrefutability through dually propagative and destructive means. Tracking the wildly successful proliferation of neoclassical principles and ideas, Paul Turpin argues that economists from Adam Smith to Milton Friedman and onward have employed a moral rhetorical style that systematically devalues notions of relational or social justice while simultaneously elevating commutative or market-based notions of justice. Tracing the evolution of Social Security policies, on the other hand, Rob Asen shows that political and policymaking discourses have come to be dominated by “market talk” that likewise depends on a crucial binary: it “privileges norms of self-enrichment over potentially competing norms of justice in prescribing the rights and obligations of citizenship” (12). Much like “economic correctness,” both “moral rhetoric” and “market talk” name coherent bodies of discourse that simultaneously promote a singular economic vision while denying the legitimacy of ideas, behaviors, and actions that contravene or lie outside of it.

As critical interventions, such projects complicate and disrupt the rhetorical traditions of neoclassical economics and free market capitalism—traditions often so entrenched, dominant, and staunchly defended that to many people, indeed, “There is No Alternative.” Thus, where Ceccarelli offers rhetoric to *stabilize scientific* consensus, Aune calls it to *destabilize economic* consensus by way of “a clearly communicated moral and practical assault on the dominance of free-market rhetoric” (4). In light of these arguments, it seems useful to consider how denial might designate rhetorical practices tilted not at creating controversy, but at erasing it. More precisely, I submit “economic denial” to help name and identify those discourses that attempt to thwart perceived challenges to the hegemony of the free market economy and its key premises: that markets, left to their own devices, best regulate themselves; that individuals, acting in their own self-interest, best serve the needs of the market; and that states, regulating markets only to enable free exchange, best create conditions of stability, wealth, and equality. Economic denial is not a novel or

particularly sophisticated term, perhaps; yet as I have suggested, it picks up on a strong thread of existing conversations that, in interrogating neoliberal economics and its encroachment in public and policy spheres, have also dwelled on the fiercely oppositional, often derogatory treatment of alternatives.

We can further develop the notion of economic denial, I suggest, by turning to J. K. Gibson-Graham's *A Postcapitalist Politics*. As they detail, Gibson-Graham are concerned that "alternative languages of economy have been subordinated to that of capitalism" as a consequence of "the theorization of economic dynamics that, while associated with the historical rise of competitive capitalism, have become naturalized as universal logics of economy in mainstream economic discourse" (193). Such subordination is affected, they further argue, by the discursive system they call *capitalocentrism*. Endemic in neoliberal as well as left economic discourse, capitalocentrism privileges "commodification (marketization), the concentration and centralization of capital, capitalist expansion (capital accumulation), [and] labor-saving technological change" (193). Importantly, however, it is not solely a promotional project. At once permissive and prohibitive, capitalocentrism organizes diverse rhetorical practices that have "devalued and demoted" alternative recourses, from "precapitalist economic forms" to "indigenous economies" and more (193). Expanding tendencies enumerated in their earlier *The End of Capitalism*—"to represent economy as a space of invariant logics," "to theorize economy as a stable and self-reproducing structure impervious to....everyday politics," "to constitute 'the' economy as a singular capitalist system or space," and "to lodge faith in accurate representation" among others—Gibson-Graham argue that the binaries of capitalocentrism are now fully realized (xxi). Today's capitalocentrism thus represents the final convention of "a series of myths that constitute the (illusory) fullness and positivity and 'capitalist' society"—a totality that is built, absolutely, on the "masking" of the underlying "social antagonisms" (Gibson-Graham 55).

The alternative-foreclosing ways of thinking that form the seeds of capitalocentrism—insistence upon the *invariance* of economic logics, the *imperviousness* of the economy to political and social forces, the *singularity* of free market systems, and the *accuracy* of economic methods and framings—coalesce for Gibson-Graham as a powerful affect, a kind of "all-knowingness about the world" that feeds a "disparaging sense of certainty" that "anything new would not work" (3).

As we have seen, such an affect depends upon its denial of economic difference. We can come to better understand the rhetorical mechanism of capitalocentrism, then, when we look to the discursive practices that function, recurrently and at discrete moments, to preclude difference—to erase the economic possibilities that allowance for variance, porousness, multiplicity, subjectivity, inaccuracy, etc. permit.

Market bubbles provide an example that illustrates such capitalocentric practices in action. Signature boom-and-bust cycles of crisis capitalism, bubbles call worldviews to be questioned, norms to be interrogated, and policy directions to be revisited. Where they seem unexpected, opening “a gap . . . between events and our initial ability to explain them,” they enable the shock political exploitation of abnormality to advance radical agendas (Klein, *No is Not Enough* 7). Yet where they also occasion loss of faith in the self-regulating ability of the free market and conflicting feelings toward the political economic system, they call for stabilizing discourse, including the normative assuagement of economic denial. Indeed, economic denial sheds light on a number of discursive tensions common to market crisis events. If ironically, bubbles are associated with denial as a diagnostic tool: with little professional agreement as to how to predict market crashes, a wry joke persists that discord among economists is the only true signal of a disaster on the horizon. Yet bubble debates, recognized as “fraught with peril,” rarely unfold respectfully (Krozsner 3). Those who predict bubbles often find their expertise questioned, not least because the very idea of a bubble sits uneasily with beliefs about self-regulating markets and rationally-acting individuals.⁴ Trespassing against economic correctness by suggesting that markets cannot self-correct, governments must intervene, or actors should cease some utility-seeking practice, bubble allegations are anathema to many free market defenders. Rejection of bubbles is intensified, finally, by the sense that denying them may forestall them. Often dismissed as outbreaks of emotional behavior, bubbles place acute rhetorical sensitivities on display, as scholars of rhetoric and communication have also noted: Thomas Goodnight and Sandy Green describe them as “*mimetic* spirals,” (116) rhetorical movements triggered by creative imitation, while what Michael Kaplan calls “*iconomics*” (479) captures the market’s reflexive response to unconfident public discourse from market authorities. Both conceptions, further, acknowledge the fear that bubble prophecies are self-fulfilling: if articulating the possibility of a crash sparks a reaction that actualizes the possibility of a crash,

then market defenders must deny the possibility of a crash from the gate.

Such tautologies—a bubble is not a bubble unless someone denies it is a bubble, naming a bubble makes one incompetent to name a bubble, and denying a bubble prevents a bubble from forming—animate a variety of rhetorical strategies aimed at containment and control. Most recently, the mid-2000s formation of a speculative bubble in housing showcases the economic denialist conception of an unfolding economic emergency. As prices rose and sales escalated in housing markets across the country, public debate heated: some market authorities alleged an impending drastic downturn, while others rejected this as utterly impossible. Indeed, so strong was the consensus that a bubble in housing was unlikely or impossible that few warnings seemed to penetrate it, at least until it was too late. Of course, technical consensus that a market bubble had occurred emerged only later. Still, a good deal of popular and scholarly attention came to focus on what economist Paul Krugman called “bubble denial,” the authoritative rhetoric that, prior to the crash, sought to excise any doubt about the stability of housing.⁵ Elsewhere, I explicate the outstanding strategies of bubble denial at length: establishing themselves as cool-headed voices of reason, deniers exploited definitional indeterminacies, offered new interpretations of troubling data, and employed creative insults to chastise and discredit those who risked the market by engaging in un-confident speech (“Speaking Confidence”). What I wish to underscore here, however, is that bubble deniers strived not to inflame controversy—actually, that was the job of those few who warned of an impending disaster—but instead to quell it. Soothing economic anxiety and urging the maintenance of the housing market status quo, denial in this instance functioned to foreclose the need for preventative action and uphold the inviolability of the market by deriding the idea of a bubble as overdramatic, abusive, and incorrect.

While I draw the foregoing observations only from one event, bubble allegations appear to incite a consistent rhetorical response. A more recent example comes from New Zealand, where authorities recently debated the possibility of a housing bubble. In 2014, U.S. business magazine *Forbes* published an opinion piece by self-described “anti-bubble activist” Jesse Colombo alleging that rising housing prices—especially in the heated Auckland market—were creating a mortgage bubble. His forecast that banks would experience mortgage

losses, “the country’s credit boom [would] turn into a bust,” and over-leveraged consumers would default provoked a powerful authoritative response, including an “official bubble denial” from acting Finance Minister Steven Joyce that worked from a familiar playbook (“Colombo”). Calling Colombo an “alarmist” and “bubble-ologist,” Joyce led a fierce rebuttal that accused cherry-picking, misinterpreting data, and more.⁶ More on this debate is beyond the scope of this paper, but my point is that the rhetoric of bubble denial is recognizable, recurrent, and violent. Moreover, it serves layered functions: vehemently dismissing possible danger in a specific commodity market, it also reinstalls and secures the dominant capitalocentric faith.

What I wish to suggest, based on this analysis, is this: if the rhetorical triumph of denialism in scientific matters is to manufacture controversy where none exists, in economic matters it is to erase controversy where some *should* by all rights exist, with the result that critical and necessary debates about economic practices, policies, and events are effectively foreclosed. Both where it names context-specific phenomenon—including the public rhetorical outcry against any suggestion of an imminent market bubble—and as a designation for a more encompassing body of practices that defend neoliberal ideology by discounting alternatives, economic denial orients us toward the ways in which real and perceived challenges to capitalocentrism are addressed and, ultimately, disposed.

“Capitalism versus the Climate:” Denial as Rhetorical Magnet

To this point, I have elaborated climate denial and economic denial as two strategic discourses. As rhetorical forms, they are stylistically similar but functionally different, even inverse: climate denial disrupts the scientific consensus by manufacturing controversy, while economic denial protects neoliberal hegemony as a consensus by refusing, deflecting, and discrediting alternative perspectives. Yet it is not sufficient, I now suggest, to read the two as separate but parallel phenomenon. Instead, we must also explore their relationship to each other.

Klein offers one take, writing that current politics pit economy against the environment. Once a bipartisan (if low-level) concern, environmental issues as she points out are not *inherently* but rather *progressively* politicized: “climate denialism has become a core identity

issue on the right, utterly entwined with defending current systems of power and wealth” (“Capitalism vs. the Climate” np.). In the process, climate denial becomes as much an economic as a political ideological stance. Indeed, Klein’s work is peppered with examples to substantiate climate denial’s economic entanglements. Free market think-tanks host conferences that are light on science but heavy on emotional affect, bolstering the rhetorical production and circulation of denialist discourse. At such events and elsewhere, deniers overtly hail climate change as an anti-capitalist plot. Of course, conspiracy theories rarely make compelling arguments, but for Klein the intrinsic opposition is not far off the mark: due largely to the nation’s consuming failure to take action in earlier decades, “the things we must do to avoid catastrophic warming are no longer just in conflict with the particular strain of deregulated capitalism that triumphed in the 1980s. They are now in conflict with the fundamental imperative at the heart of our economic model: grow or die” (*This Changes Everything* 21). The science that bolsters this conclusion is internationally accepted and quite specific: warming must be kept below two degrees Celsius. This goal, Klein says, exists in defiance of the economy’s very nature. “What the climate needs to avoid collapse is a contraction in humanity’s use of resources,” Klein explains; “what our economic model demands to avoid collapse is unfettered expansion” (*This Changes Everything* 21). Capitalism versus the climate, indeed.

When we attend to rhetorics of denial, however, we see that there is more at stake in this debate than binary opposition alone: the strategic discourses of economic and climate denial animate, subsume, and obfuscate each other in countless ways. The rhetoric of market bubbles, to return to my earlier example, illuminates some of these. While it is easy to chalk bubble debates up to economic ideological divides—after the housing crisis, economists themselves adopted this frame—and to focus solely on their economic consequences, boom-and-bust cycles in fact not only implicate environmental arguments, but also exact environmental effects.⁷ Any debate about the growth of real estate, for instance, necessarily implicates stances toward land use and zoning, the expenditure of natural resources, and overdevelopment and suburban sprawl. Clearly foregrounded where anti-sprawl policies are blamed for creating housing bubbles, or where rhetors who advocate controlled growth are labeled anti-development, these entanglements are also often invisible, subtly woven into a code of economic correctness that adjures against any discourse,

environmentally-conscious discourse included, that threatens the economic expansionist project.⁸

Moreover, when we subject economic denial to the same broad interpretation to which Klein subjects climate denial, we begin to see how economic denialism fosters not only economic crisis, including by preserving the economic milieu that produces them, but also environmental crisis as well. Of course, some consequences of an economic crisis are actually desirable from an environmental standpoint. Emissions are reduced, for instance, when citizens buy and travel less. Yet, while there is always discourse on the environmental “upsides” versus the economic “downsides” of crisis, the capitalocentric impulse dictates a focus on the latter (Klare). The reigning focus on economy, finally, derails attention to environmental commitments in overt and subtle, measurable and immeasurable ways. Grant funding for science shrinks and environmental policies fall to the wayside, a trend not contained to the U.S.⁹ As the contingencies of a fickle economy demand precedence over “less immediate” emergencies like the environment, both “big-D Denialist”—loud public performances of climate science denunciation—and “little-d denialist”—everyday human behaviors that “look away” from reality—are vouchsafed. Thus, while denialist discourses do not always unfold in actively oppositional ways, they nevertheless operate in a “winner takes all” milieu, a milieu that insists upon this one basic rule: one cannot be for economy and for environment at the same time.

How, then, can we capture the relationship between the two denials? At its minimum, the climate change consensus demands a closely regulated economy, which imposes limitations on corporate production and output. At its maximum, it demands an entirely different economic model, one that does not drive inexorably and perpetually toward growth. Therefore, when one accepts that there can be no alternative to a neoliberal economy that emphasizes competition, privatization, and deregulation, one is obligated to deny climate change. Conversely, when one accepts climate change as a scientific consensus powerful enough to re-organize ideological commitments as well as physical behaviors, one is obliged to challenge the economic denialist project and by consequence, the hegemony of the capitalocentric project. Thus, while climate and economic denial at times seem to *cause* or *necessitate* each other, it might be more accurate to theorize them as equal and opposite rhetorical forms, which work in the current neoliberal moment in direct relation. More precisely, we

might see the two denials as something like a rhetorical magnet. Magnets function through reverse polarity: the north pole of one magnet attracts the south pole of a second magnet but repels its north pole. Like poles repel each other, while unlike poles attract. Just so, climate and economic denial work magnetically insofar as one side attracts multiple diverse theories and one repels alternative theories. Consensus about one attracts dissensus about the other, and vice versa.

Subtle or overt, magnetic rhetorical forces often organize the mutual exclusivity between capitalism and the climate in counterproductive rather than productive ways: instead of driving an openness toward stronger policies and new alternative economic approaches in recognition of the scientific agreement on climate risk, they attempt to fragment and undermine that accord toward the preservation of the capitalocentric hegemony. Rarely have these forces been more polarizing, politically speaking, than in the current presidential administration. In the final section, I discuss the implications of economic and environmental policies in the Trump era and considering how rhetoric can respond.

Toward a New Rhetoric of Economy: Resisting Denialism in the Age of Trump

This Changes Everything was published in the culminating years of the two-term Barack Obama administration, a dually hopeful and uncertain time. On one hand, Obama—though not always a hero to environmental activists—ultimately acknowledged climate change in no uncertain terms, recognizing that “no challenge poses a greater threat to our children, our planet, and future generations” and declaring the U.S. a nation uniquely “equipped to lead the world towards a solution” (“A Historic”).¹⁰ To affirm this commitment, he helped to broker the landmark 2015 Paris climate accord, which replaced the earlier Kyoto Protocol and obliged participating nations, including the U.S. and China, to drastically reduce greenhouse gas emissions. On the other hand, this fledgling stance was vulnerable to oppositional agendas within a divisive political milieu. Executed with little Republican support, Obama’s strong rhetorical and policy stance against climate change was open to be sustained or abbreviated according to the ideological commitments of his successor.

Given the outcome of the 2016 election, Klein’s contentions about the collusion of economic and environmental danger are more

salient than ever. Her opening narrative is as jarring as it is prescient: “I denied climate change for longer than I care to admit. I knew it was happening, sure. Not like Donald Trump and the Tea Partiers going on about how the continued existence of winter proves it’s all a hoax” (*This Changes Everything*, 3). Long before his presidency, Trump made a name for himself as a denier not by virtue of inaction or inattention, but as the face of an extremist faction known for the intensity as well as the oddity of its claims. Per one critique, Trump between 2011 and 2015 tweeted his derision of climate change no fewer than 115 times, with aspersions ranging from the usual played-out references to continued winter—“It snowed over 4 inches this past weekend in New York City. It is still October. So much for Global Warming”—to his infamous claim that “[t]he concept of global warming was created by and for the Chinese in order to make U.S. manufacturing non-competitive” (Matthews). His presidential run found him scaling back on conspiracy theory but pledging to reverse Obama’s actions, including withdrawing from the Paris accord. Despite tepid follow-through on other campaign promises, he was swift to act on this. Pressed by cabinet members like then-Chief Strategist Steve Bannon, Trump on June 1st, 2017 announced U.S. removal from a “draconian” agreement that imposed unfair restrictions on businesses and consumers, rationalizing in typically blunt and jingoistic style, “I was elected to represent the citizens of Pittsburgh, not Paris.” Praised by many constituents, his rhetoric affirms the rhetorical triumph of an unproductive opposition between the nation’s economic and environmental interests.

Unsurprisingly, denial in the Trump era has proven a versatile language for accusatory rhetoric from both sides of the aisle. Even as Trump proponents deride Hillary Clinton supporters for being “in denial” about her narrow loss and the reality of the forty-fifth presidency, Trump critics accuse his voters of the selfsame for sustaining hope in his grandiose campaign promises, including to lead lower-income Americans from economic stagnation. Given that his policy platform has from its inception been designed to favor the wealthy and solidify existing structures of privilege, denial retains its rhetorical value to progressives as a shorthand for the perverse psychological phenomenon of voting against one’s own economic interests. Yet if accusations of denial are rife in the Trump presidency, they also speak to the tenacity of political stalemates on environmental and economic fronts. While Trump remains one of the world’s most prominent cli-

mate deniers, it is likely that he was elected not *in spite of* but *because of* this stance. Furthermore, as his cabinet appointments and policy proposals appear to replicate circumstances that have not only worsened environmental conditions but fostered economic crisis in the past, many voters nevertheless hold out hope for results that will reward working class-Americans in the short and long term. Once more, this scenario calls us to revisit the interplay between the two denials, considering how new challenges for connecting economy and environment arise from the tensions and paradoxes specific to the political moment.

Economist Gerald Epstein recently took up this problem in the pages of the economics publication *Challenge*, arguing that while Trump's politics occasion no shortage of debate, progressives have yet to sufficiently account for his anomalous economics. What has quickly become known as "Trumponomics"—a moniker endorsed by Trump himself, who describes his economic platform as a matter of "self-respect as a nation"—is nascent, its precise directions obscured by reversals on certain issues, e.g. NAFTA and Chinese currency manipulation. It has been compared to Reaganomics, but Epstein finds this comparison deceptive: Reaganomics was characterized by strategies of economic optimization, while Trumponomics emerges as a heady cocktail of "authoritarianism, right-wing populism, and even neo-fascism" motivated by desire to consolidate political power (104–5). Moreover, where Trump's economic policies are "designed to enhance the power of supporters, including those with authoritarian, xenophobic, misogynist, and antidemocratic intentions, along with business interests that will support or, at a minimum, tolerate these interests," they depart even from the most overtly neoliberal of earlier regimes (Epstein 105–6). Disconcertingly, Trumponomics is not without progressive elements. Interwoven in a program that systematically benefits billionaires, support for things like infrastructure projects and family leave policies bolster the potential for this new governance to outmode analytical and policy tools stockpiled in the fight against neoliberalism.

Klein, who addresses the Trump presidency in her newest book *No Is Not Enough*, offers a different read. For her, Trump, "extreme as he is, is less an aberration than a logical conclusion—a pastiche of pretty much all the worst trends of the past half century" (9–10). Representing an unprecedented triumph of competitive, winner-take-all instincts, his presidency as Klein sees it is neoliberalism's culmi-

nation—the ultimate realization of an economic model that, once laid bare, is in truth nothing more than the consolidation of resources and power among the wealthiest humans at the expense of not only all others, but also the environment. In that light, Trump becomes visible as the end “product of powerful systems of thought that rank human life based on race, religion, gender, sexuality, physical appearance, and physical ability—and that have systematically used race as a weapon” (*No is Not Enough* 9–10). His political commitments require and exploit the reverse polarity between climate and economic denial, often in the least generative and most violent ways, e.g. where “the unleashing of a domestic fossil fuel frenzy . . . requires the sweeping aside of climate science and the gagging of large parts of the government bureaucracy” (Klein, *No is Not Enough* 5). Much as the monster produced by Dr. Frankenstein, Trump is the monster produced by neoliberalism. Clearly, taking responsibility for this monstrosity requires that we simultaneously *stop* denying climate change and *start* denying the economics of neoliberal hegemony.

To focus the response to this “protofascist social formation,” Epstein makes a proposal with which Klein, despite their different views, might agree: that critiques focus dually on power relationships and climate change (106). Given that proto-fascist policies disempower certain constituents and agendas to empower others, it becomes crucial to track how economic policy proposals and actions secure redistributions of income, wealth, and risk in the immediate and long term. Policies that privilege business interests even as they strip regulations designed to preserve all realms of human activity in the future are only one example, but the urgency of the climate data coupled with Trump’s status as a self-avowed denier means that allowing climate to remain “a secondary factor (or no factor at all) in our analysis of economic policies is no longer justifiable, if it ever was” (Epstein 106). Where policy-making and analysis are concerned, economy and environment can no longer proceed on separate tracks. Briefly, Epstein complicates denialism as Trump supporters might define it—as an oppositional politics that rejects economic proposals outright, on the basis that they were devised by an unwanted candidate. He quotes economist Dean Baker, who is not a Trump supporter but who lays the groundwork for provisional acceptance of his policies based on the merits of particular notions: “We can have arguments over policy and even the underlying economics, but we can’t fall into the trap of saying that Trump’s policies will fail just be-

cause we don't like him. *Economic denialism makes no more sense than global warming denial*' (Baker, qtd. in Epstein 107). Baker makes an interesting point, cautioning all factions of economic and environmental debates against rejecting facts on the basis of political distaste. For folks like Epstein and Klein, however, rejecting a political and economic platform that is "likely to solidify the power of a proto-fascist regime, while undermining union and human rights [and] cementing the interests of a powerful capitalist class," is not reducible to (ir)rational (re)action (Epstein 107). It is not denialism to cultivate a precautionary stance against the federally-sanctioned augmentation of kleptocratic, right-wing populist, authoritarian, fascist and other undemocratic interests, or to ward against their impacts on the environment.

Such arguments may do little to resolve the rhetorical ambiguities of denialism, but they do pinpoint key challenges in the current regime. Specifically, if we are compelled that economic and policy critiques must shift their sensibilities in order to account for rhetoric and policy in the Trump era—whether as an aberration of neoliberalism or its culmination—it stands to reason that rhetorical theory must do the same. For Epstein, honing a sufficient critique means breaking with habit, as "many progressive economists who have cut their teeth on analyzing the centrist but neoliberal policies of Clinton and Obama, or even right-wing-oriented policies of the Bushes" find their training outdated (106). One need only replace "progressive economists" with "critical rhetoricians" to extent this point to the rhetoric and economic projects developed across the same eras. Moreover, if the ascendance of climate denial into a position of little-checked political power only reinforces the need to understand climate change as an environmental as well as an economic problem, rhetoric must likewise seek to account for this. In light of these arguments, I offer several suggestions for future directions in rhetorical studies.

First, where rhetoric of economics and rhetoric of the environment often unfold as two separate conversations, they can hardly continue to do so. If the public issue of climate change harbors, as Klein writes, considerable potential to unify "seemingly disparate issues into a coherent narrative about how to protect humanity from the ravages of both a savagely unjust economic system and a destabilized climate system," rhetoric would do well to exploit this possibility and mine it as a locus of economic and environmental concerns (*This Changes*

Everything 8). Important recent contributions already reflect this impetus, including the “Capitalism, Climate, and Public Discourse” Symposium out of which this special issue grew, as well as the contributions in this issue itself. Still, this momentum must be strengthened: rhetorical environmental critiques must give greater attention to political economic forces, even as economic rhetorical critiques must seek to foreground questions of environmental impact. Attuned to the deep ramifications of public and political discourses, rhetoric is uniquely equipped to track redistributions of power engineered by acts of political speech and policy-making. It is not unreasonable to suggest, as Epstein does, that repercussions for climate change be adopted as standing analytical criteria.

Second, rhetoric must continue to revise conceptions of political economy. If we are compelled that Trump represents a departure from “business as usual” neoliberalism, it follows to update critical approaches to square past understandings with present circumstances. If we prefer to think of it as a culmination, we must regardless recognize the changes in a now-full realization. Rhetoric is adept at discerning how political economic power serves its own interest vis-à-vis the self-replicating (and paradox-inducing) mechanisms of neoliberal discourse. Yet we often presume this worldview to be driven by “true” convictions—by the legitimate belief that a minimally-regulated market in which actors pursue self-interest will optimize conditions of equity, access, and opportunity. Yet given the elevation of interests like white nationalism to new visibility and power, such assumptions have never been more questionable. The nation’s recent economic history, including its progression from crisis to speculative crisis, suggests economic denial as a capitalocentric expression tilted at social outcomes as *actually produced*, not as *theoretically promised*, by the “invisible hand.” Among other things, we must take care to ascertain where neoliberal rhetoric serves the agenda of interests that, in pursuing racist, sexist, fascist, and other oppressive projects, overtly reject the very equality that free markets purport to purvey. For rhetoric, as other critical enterprises, “‘power arguments’ must be analyzed at the core, and not just assumed away, or simply assumed to operate in the same way they did under a completely different kind of political-economic regime” (Epstein 107).

Finally, rhetoric must continue to develop ways to break with reductive and restrictive capitalism-climate polarities. To move away from the capitalocentric erasure of difference, Gibson-Graham un-

derscore the importance of *affect*, writing that “if our goal as thinkers is the proliferation of different economies, what we most need is an open and hospitable orientation toward the objects of our thought” (6). To displace “masterful knowing,” we can “draw on the pleasures of friendliness, trust, conviviality, and companionable connection” to cultivate a new “repertory of tactics,” including “seducing, cajoling, enrolling, enticing, inviting,” and more (Gibson-Graham 6). To reject binaries in favor of creative, inclusive thinking is to open “a politics of possibility,” which “rests on an enlarged space of decision and a vision that the world is not governed by some abstract, commanding force” (Gibson-Graham xxxiii). For Klein, similarly, the quelling power of negation requires the unfolding power of affirmation. “The firmest of no’s”—even where we ourselves resist oppressive politics in the strongest possible terms—“has to be accompanied by a bold and forward-looking yes—a plan for the future that is credible and captivating enough that a great many people will fight to see it realized, no matter the shock and scare tactics thrown their way” (Klein, *No is Not Enough* 9). We might conclude where capitalism, climate, and the relationship between them are concerned, any project on exclusive thinking must address permissive thinking and vice versa. Thus, even as we continue to explore denial as a means for organizing economic and environmental rationalities, rhetoric must embrace the openness and affirmation that, as Klein says, will be “the beacon in the coming storms that will prevent us from losing our way” (*No is Not Enough* 9).

Notes

Cuba, of course, is the favorite example.

See e.g. Begley’s “Global Warming Deniers: A Well-Funded Machine,” a cover story published in an August 2007 issue of *Newsweek*. Today, the piece is available as “The Truth About Denial” at the author’s website.

See e.g. Diethelm and McKee.

⁴ For instance, economist Robert Shiller once wrote, “Speculative bubbles, and those who study them, have been deemed undignified” (“Challenging”).

⁵ For a rhetorical critical discussion, see Colombini, “Speaking Confidence.”

⁶ Other respondents likewise replicated familiar strategies; see e.g. Michael Forbes or Bernard Hickey.

⁷ See for instance discussion over the “Revere Award in Economics” at *Real-World Economics Review* (“Nominations”).

⁸ Such arguments are advanced, for instance, in texts like Wendell Cox’s *War on the Dream*.

⁹ The environmental consequences of the 2008 crisis have not gone unnoticed. The Finnish Environment Institute (SYKE) released a paper “Environmental Impacts of the Financial Crisis Evident,” which finds that while diminished economic activity caused by the global financial crisis aided reductions in natural resources and energy use, Finland’s commitment to binding emissions regulations stalled as the nation gave its full attention elsewhere.

¹⁰ As Klein discusses, Obama previously disappointed activists by failing to declare a strong stance on the matter.

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