A Place to Begin: Writing New Narratives to Challenge the Climate Crisis

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As Jason Ludden's review at the beginning of this special issue indicates, Naomi Klein's *This Changes Everything* centers on the conviction that climate change has the power to fundamentally alter all that we think we know about our economy and its relationship to our planet. In fact, Klein argues, we don't have any other option but to completely rethink the narratives that drive our political, social, and economic spheres if we are to have any hope of mitigating the destruction of Earth as we know it. A tad apocalyptic? Certainly. Still, Klein's point about the narrative arcs that have brought us to this moment in history is worth pausing over. We have arrived just short of a climate apocalypse—I can't help but shudder each time Klein cites 2017 as zero hour, the year at which climate action becomes a moot point—because of the neoliberal narrative that has guided our thinking for the last three decades. Klein explains, "we are products of our age and of a dominant ideological project. One that too often has taught us to see ourselves as little more than singular, gratification-seeking units, out to maximize our narrow advantage" (*Changes* 460). In this narrative, each individual is nothing more than what Michel Foucault calls "*Homo oeconomicus* […] an entrepreneur of himself" (226). As subjects in the neoliberal, and for Foucault, biopolitical, story, we are individualized "enterprise-units," driven by a universal self-interest (241).

Because this crisis is one of ideology, slightly adjusting the rules of the current system by switching to more energy efficient lightbulbs or doing more shopping at farmers' markets—or even by relying on the Gaia Capitalist efforts of elites like Richard Branson and Bill Gates—all while allowing the core narrative of neoliberal deregulation to remain intact simply is not enough. As Klein sees it, the ide-

ology itself needs to be overhauled: "any attempt to rise to the climate challenge will be fruitless unless it is understood as part of a much broader battle of worldview, a process of rebuilding and reinventing the very idea of a collective, the communal, the commons, the civil, and the civic after so many decades of attack and neglect" (*Changes* 460). In so many ways, this is a frustratingly tall order. If climate change really does mean that we have to change *everything*, how do we even begin to make these changes? Where is the beginning of everything?

Klein takes up some of these questions in her latest book, *No Is Not Enough*, published in June of last year. In this work, she extends the argument of *This Changes Everything* and incorporates her earlier projects, *The Shock Doctrine* and *No Logo*, to consider how they might be applied and updated in the age of Trump. Klein's central assertion is that as shocking as Trump's election was and is to many people, it is not an aberration by any means. Rather, it is a predictable outcome:

> Trump is not a rupture at all, but rather the culmination—the logical end point—of a great many dangerous stories our culture has been telling for a very long time. That greed is good. That the market rules. That money is what matters in life. That white men are better than the rest. That the natural world is there for us to pillage. That the vulnerable deserve their fate and the one percent deserve their golden towers. That anything public or commonly held is sinister and not worth protecting. That we are surrounded by danger and should only look out for our own. That there is no alternative to any of this. (Klein, *No* 257)

Although it is comforting to some degree to think of Trump's election as a freak accident of our political system, an error that would never have happened if it weren't for Russian meddling on Trump's behalf or the Democratic Party's sabotage of Bernie Sanders' campaign, it is more accurate to understand Trump's rise to power as something that has been underway for decades. Trump is the ultimate empty brand, and his presidency stands as the pinnacle of the globalizing, atomizing forces that have systematically dismantled social services and belief in the public sphere since Reagan and Thatcher. If we are to learn anything from Trump's election, Klein concludes, it is that the neoliberal narrative has clearly and profoundly failed us.

Therefore, it's not good enough to call for change without providing a real plan of action, which, as several authors in the previous section point out, is a central shortcoming of *This Changes Everything*.

Given the urgency of the dangers our current political reality presents, we need tangible ways forward, and fast: "The firmest of no's 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 shocks and scare tactics thrown in their way" (Klein, *No* 9). Perhaps now more than ever, the course of action we must take cannot be one of only critique. Rather, we need the courage and imagination to channel that anger and the critique it inspires into the writing of new narratives, stories that allow us subject positions other than that of isolated, self-serving units and that make our aims of more equitable, sustainable communities a reality.

Klein's updated call to craft new narratives—a project she has undertaken in helping to draft Canada's Leap Manifesto, for example—is connected to the history of this journal, one Kathryn Lambrecht traces through the decades of its publication in her retrospective on praxis. Rhetoricians featured on the pages of *Works and Days* and elsewhere have long participated in conversations about the role of the scholar in shaping public knowledge and discourse. Arguments about rhetoricians as activists from the field of composition studies, in particular, provide a useful theoretical framework for Klein's insistence that critique and narrative-building must go hand in hand. Through the social and public turns of composition, scholars have helped illuminate how intellectuals can tangibly connect academic work and public activism. In "The Rhetorician as an Agent of Social Change," which has become one of the foundational arguments about scholars as activists, Ellen Cushman explains that scholarly activism is born through an "identification that often can flourish in a context where both the scholar and people together assess and redraw lines of power structures" (19). For her, academics contribute most when they are see themselves as part of the local communities in which they live. As such, scholars must always be concerned with the consequences of their critique: "the emphasis in our analysis, in other words, must remain on outcomes" (Coogan 690). Scholarship, for these theorists, cannot be separate from its material effects; the expertise rhetoricians execute through critique must be applied toward a collaboratively-determined and distinctly public goal.

Linda Adler-Kassner defines this kind of rhetorician, one who weds critique and public action, as an "activist intellectual" (83). For Adler-Kassner, the central aim of activist intellectual work is to write

"a different narrative that reflects the interests and passions of those involved," academics and local communities included (83). In this sense, activist intellectuals are those "members of the academe who take steps to bring more voices, more discourse, and a greater degree of communication to public debates, and in turn bring about social change" (Weisser 131). Rhetoricians become activists, then, when they use their scholarly expertise not only to critique but also to construct new narratives, enabling a broader range of perspectives to participate in building them and opening up the opportunities for more diverse stories to be told.

The symposium from which this special issue emerged sought to explore the possibilities, limits, and responsibilities for rhetoricians as activist intellectuals. As academics, symposium participants considered potential responses to Klein's unequivocal call to action: "This symposium asks what we as critical rhetoricians situated in universities can do to affect change. As scholars in the humanities, it asks what our ethical obligations are. Lastly, it asks us to consider future action because, for Klein, there is no future without action" ("About"). If the world must radically and fundamentally change in light of the climate crisis, how can the rhetorician as activist intellectual play a part in making that change?

The articles in this final section approach this question in a variety of ways, each offering different inroads to activist intellectualism while all moving beyond critique to consider its implications and suggest how it might serve in the writing of new stories to guide us forward. As Christian Weisser explains, "rather than supposing that our activist efforts must occur in just one way, we might begin to see a variety of opportunities for work that influences political and social decision making and action in society" (127). The four pieces featured here illustrate the idea that activist intellectualism can take many forms, each using differing degrees and combinations of theory-, method-, and pedagogy-building to facilitate the construction of more just narratives.

In the first piece of the section, Crystal Colombini uses the recent housing collapse and economic crisis as objects of analysis in order to theorize economic denial as a conceptual parallel to climate change denial. She argues, much as Klein suggests, that environmental concerns *are* economic concerns and vice versa. Because the climate is intimately linked to the consequences of economic decisions, Colombini asserts, theorizing economic denial alongside climate

change denial creates opportunities for investigating and understanding the relationship between capitalism and climate in new ways. Given the Trump administration's overtly hostile stance toward climate science and its deep enmeshment with elite economic interests, pursuing theories that illuminate the intersections between rhetorics of climate and capitalism rather than continuing to consider them in isolation can provide a strong foundation from which to craft revised narratives.

Nancy Welch and Tony Scott bridge the construction of theory with pedagogy-building, a long-standing concern of this journal, as a strategy for activism and the rewriting of oppressive rhetorics. They raise the concern that the education of students in composition and rhetoric remains too focused on neo-Aristotilean, text-based arguments when objective, fact-driven deliberation is rarely possible. Welch and Scott point to events such as the Malheur and Standing Rock occupations as evidence of the failure of rational argument. At the Malheur National Wildlife Refuge in Oregon, the Bundy family and their supporters staged an armed takeover of refuge offices to demand state and private control over public land. On the banks of the Missouri River, camps of Standing Rock Sioux protested the expansion of the Dakota Access Pipeline through the tribe's vital water source. In these examples, occupiers made parallel arguments about the right to land use but from markedly different histories and material positions; therefore, traditional conciliatory approaches to argument cannot account for these nuances, Welch and Scott argue. As an alternative, they propose a historical materialist approach to reading rhetorical events in order to illuminate the complicated socioeconomic and political circumstances in which arguments are produced and circulated. Ultimately, Welch and Scott conclude, students of rhetoric must be equipped to engage with the deep historical roots of such human and civil rights clashes as have become materially visible in the various occupations and protests. Further, students must also be able to consider how their own subject positions might determine the terms and stakes of their participation in activism.

Lynda Walsh utilizes critique to build a method for rhetoricians as they construct pluralized narratives of climate. In a careful analysis of the rhetorics of Aboriginal Australian Acrylic Painting (AAAP) and a model of collaborative work between western scientists and indigenous people, Walsh illustrates "folding," a method that challenges the synoptic rhetorics that characterize western climate dis-

course. She also provides a framework for more collaborative rhetorics of climate that can account for a variety of local knowledges, particularly those from communities most threatened by climate change. In much the same vein as Cushman, who argues against the isolation of gown from town, Walsh concludes that rhetoricians should consider how rhetorics of science must shed assumptions of western supremacy in order to facilitate exchange between diverse cultural knowledges and participate in creating more dialogic topologies of science.

That activist intellectual critique works toward more just narratives in each of these pieces is a sign of hope: to wrestle with problematic narratives is to believe that better ones can exist. Jonathan Alexander explores this idea in the final piece of the section and directly engages the conversation about the role of the critical rhetorician as public intellectual. In his piece, Alexander provides a contemplative review of the connections between three of the symposium's panelists to make a case for the rhetorician's active pursuit of hope through critique. Using utopian studies as a methodological guide, he suggests that we might interrogate our everyday practices and appreciate that they are all consequential to narrative building. Possibilities for change, Alexander concludes, lie in the activist intellectual's own rewriting of narratives of the self.

In his argument that critique serves as evidence of hope, Alexander does not suggest that blind optimism in the face of dire circumstances drives the activist rhetorician; rather, the disappointment, pain, and outrage that motivate us to critique and imagine different, better ways forward are themselves valuable sources of hope. Perhaps what is most promising, then, among the diverse proposals the pieces in this section make, is their collective reflection of the activist intellectual's channeling of emotional, immediate realities into the process of narrative building.

As a graduate student, I spend the majority of my hours, like most academics probably do, reading, writing, and discussing ideas with colleagues. In seminars, my professors, fellow graduate students, and I explore any number of current events and injustices, theorizing them, becoming cynical about them, considering ways forward from them. For the most part, this is cerebral work, and as valuable and stimulating as it can be, denial is disturbingly easy when content becomes frightening or uncomfortable. The many moments spent poring over book pages or in seminar, when I can literally and figuratively

close the book as soon as I decide I've had enough, aren't those that stand out to me in my evolving understandings of our most pressing concerns like the climate crisis. Instead, they are those I felt so deeply that I couldn't turn away.

One that sticks with me happened nearly three years ago, when listening to the news on my way to work. I heard reports of Exxon-Mobil's elaborate cover-up of documented climate change research, the scale of which was just beginning to be understood. The words rolled over me, and I felt a weight close in on my chest, the pain and anger of it welling up over my eyes. And again, when last November, 2016, I lay in the dark unable to sleep on the night of the election, the glow of county after county illuminated red in mind. As a young woman and first-time teacher that fall, my body ached with the worry of having to face my eighteen-year-old students in the morning and reassure them that things were going to be okay, even when I was deeply afraid that they would not be.

So often, I don't know how to think through the events unfolding in our increasingly frightening, uncertain world. But I know I feel them. It is both comforting and heartening to recognize that in fear and outrage, there is a place for hope, a place to begin building something new. Author and activist Terry Tempest Williams defines this feeling as a "sacred rage:"

> I think anger is a great motivator—anger that is conscious and directed toward justice. To me, that would be my definition of sacred rage. The difference for me is when I'm angry, I'm in my head. When I am holding sacred rage, I feel it in my solar plexus, in my belly, and I can proceed with a greater focus and with compassion for what I feel is not right. (qtd. in Paskus)

In the face of sheer exhaustion and terror about the world we've found ourselves in, we can begin to forge the foundation from which to build new narratives by deeply engaging with not only what we think but also what we feel. Klein alludes to this in the introduction to *This Changes Everything*, when she describes the palpable fear that strikes her when she realizes that her young son is heir to yet unknown environmental destruction. She explains, "when fear like that used to creep through my armor of climate change denial, I would do my utmost to stuff it away, change the channel, click past it. Now I try to *feel* it" (Klein, *Changes* 28, emphasis mine). Rather than participating in our own forms of denial, we can begin to make change by

dwelling in feelings of pain, fear, and anger. Indeed, as the authors in this final section suggest through their diverse approaches to the writing of new narratives, the beginning of activist intellectual work lies in recognizing our sacred rage and the hope it holds.

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