



Book Reviews

Climate of Denial: Darwin, Climate Change, and the Literature of the Long Nineteenth Century. Allen MacDuffie. Stanford University Press. August 2024. Pages – 296. ISBN: Hardcover ISBN: 9781503638938, Paperback ISBN: 9781503639546, Ebook ISBN: 9781503639553. Link: <https://www.sup.org/books/literary-studies-and-literature/climate-denial>.

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Allen MacDuffie's *Climate of Denial* offers a rigorous and wide-ranging examination of denialism across the long nineteenth century and its unsettling continuities in the present moment of climate crisis. While the book is grounded in Victorian engagements with evolutionary theory, its central concern lies with the persistence of climate change denial and what MacDuffie, drawing on Lauren Berlant, frames as a form of "cruel optimism," a wilful attachment to modes of thought that actively undermine human survival. The study thus moves between historical analysis and urgent contemporary relevance, seeking to demonstrate that denial is not an aberration but a deeply embedded cultural practice.

MacDuffie begins by tracing the emergence of denialist rhetoric in the wake of Charles Darwin's *On the Origin of Species*. Rather than focusing on overt and easily dismissible forms of "hard" denial such as those associated with Philip Gosse, he attends to more insidious and enduring modes of "soft" denial. These operate through ambiguity, partial acceptance, and strategic reframing, allowing individuals and cultures to accommodate unsettling scientific truths without fully internalising their implications. At the heart of this process lies the destabilisation of human exceptionalism: Darwin's decentring of the human subject and insistence on humanity's continuity with the animal world provoked a range of compensatory responses. These included renewed investments in religion, the reassertion of cultural hierarchies, racialized and imperial distinctions, and the intensified exploitation of a newly desacralized

nature—developments that MacDuffie links directly to the ecological crises of the present.

The opening chapter establishes the conceptual framework for the book by examining the coexistence of contradictory beliefs—a form of metacognitive dissonance that enables what MacDuffie terms “doublespeak.” Figures such as Darwin, George Eliot, and Charlotte Brontë are shown to participate in this dynamic, simultaneously acknowledging and disavowing evolutionary insight. While MacDuffie allows that such responses may have functioned as psychological coping mechanisms in a period when evolutionary knowledge remained largely inactionable, he draws a sharp distinction between then and now. In the contemporary context of accelerating climate catastrophe, denial no longer serves as a benign buffer but as a dangerous impediment to necessary action. Here, MacDuffie’s engagement with psychoanalytic frameworks like Freudian models of repression and disavowal proves especially productive, as it allows him to conceptualise denial not simply as ignorance, but as an active and structured mode of knowing.

The second chapter turns to the afterlives of Darwinian thought, demonstrating how evolutionary theory was reinterpreted to sustain rather than dismantle hierarchies. The notion of a vertical evolutionary scale facilitated both ontological distinctions between species and ideological distinctions between human populations. In this framework, Western societies positioned themselves as transcending nature, while colonised peoples were cast as closer to animality. Evolutionary discourse thus became entangled with imperial and racial logics, enabling the reassertion of human (and specifically European) superiority even as Darwin’s work had seemingly undermined it. MacDuffie’s reading underscores the extent to which scientific ideas can be appropriated to reinforce existing power structures, aligning his work with postcolonial critiques that expose the mutual imbrication of knowledge production and empire.

The subsequent chapters shift focus to literary form, exploring how denial operates within and through narrative techniques. In his

discussion of writers such as H. G. Wells, Robert Louis Stevenson, and Joseph Conrad, MacDuffie identifies first-person narration as a key site of disavowal. Confronted with unsettling truths about degeneration, hybridity, or the fragility of civilisation, these narrators ultimately retreat into forms of forgetting or rationalisation that allow them to resume ordinary life. Similarly, Alfred Tennyson's *In Memoriam* exemplifies a refusal to fully reckon with the implications of scientific knowledge, even when such knowledge is explicitly acknowledged. What emerges here is a compelling account of narrative as both a vehicle for and a defence against epistemic disruption.

A particularly compelling section of the book examines the role of free indirect discourse in nineteenth-century realism. Building on insights from critics such as Amitav Ghosh, MacDuffie argues that this narrative mode both exposes and perpetuates denial. In novels like *Middlemarch* and *Daniel Deronda*, George Eliot stages a complex interplay between narrative voice and character consciousness, revealing the fractures and self-deceptions that structure individual subjectivity. For instance, moments in *Middlemarch* where Dorothea's moral certainty is subtly undercut by narrative irony exemplify how free indirect discourse renders visible a gap between ethical aspiration and cognitive limitation. Free indirect discourse, in this reading, becomes a formal mechanism through which the simultaneity of knowing and not-knowing is rendered legible.

MacDuffie's analysis of Virginia Woolf further develops this argument by foregrounding modernism's engagement with denial. Woolf's fiction, he suggests, registers the persistence of Victorian modes of thought while also critically interrogating them. In *Mrs Dalloway*, for instance, moments of existential and ecological awareness are repeatedly deferred or displaced, embedded within the flow of everyday consciousness. Clarissa's fleeting recognition of a "doomed race" is grammatically subordinated, absorbed into the syntax of ordinary life—a stylistic gesture that encapsulates denial at the level of language itself. Woolf emerges as what MacDuffie calls a "diagnostician of denial," attentive to the subtle ways in which individuals acknowledge and evade uncomfortable truths.

The book's conclusion extends its temporal scope, drawing connections to contemporary writers such as Annie Dillard and Margaret Atwood. By situating climate change alongside evolution as a "hyperobject" (in Timothy Morton's sense), MacDuffie emphasises the difficulty of comprehending phenomena that exceed human scales of perception and agency. His reading of Atwood's *MaddAddam* trilogy is particularly incisive, highlighting the self-perpetuating nature of denial in late capitalism, where knowledge of ecological crisis coexists with its systematic disavowal. In this respect, MacDuffie's work resonates strongly with Amitav Ghosh's diagnosis in *The Great Derangement*, though it distinguishes itself through its sustained attention to literary form as a site of epistemic negotiation.

If there is a limitation to MacDuffie's otherwise impressive study, it lies in the relative absence of a clearly articulated pathway beyond denial. While the book excels in diagnosing the historical and cultural mechanisms that sustain disavowal, it remains less certain about how such patterns might be disrupted. One might ask whether the emphasis on diagnosis risks reproducing the very structure it critiques: a mode of knowing that stops short of action. What would it mean, the review invites us to consider, to develop reading practices that not only expose denial but actively resist it? This question becomes particularly urgent in the context of climate crisis, where the gap between knowledge and action is itself a defining feature of contemporary life.

Nevertheless, *Climate of Denial* stands as a significant contribution to ecocriticism, Victorian studies, and the environmental humanities more broadly. By tracing the *longue durée* of denialist thinking and demonstrating its entanglement with literary form, MacDuffie provides a powerful framework for understanding the intellectual and affective barriers that continue to hinder meaningful responses to climate change. The book ultimately leaves us with an unsettling recognition: that to confront ecological crisis requires not only new knowledge, but a fundamental reconfiguration of how we process and respond to what we already know.