Briefing Document: Resisting AI from a Climate Justice Perspective

Executive Summary

This document synthesizes a critical discourse on the uncritical promotion of Artificial Intelligence (AI), particularly within higher education, framed through the lens of climate justice. The central argument posits that AI is not a neutral or inevitable technology but a symptom of the same extractive and exploitative systems driving the climate crisis. Big Tech, employing a deception playbook mirroring that of the fossil fuel industry, is aggressively pushing AI into universities, thereby normalizing its narratives and exacerbating social and ecological harms. These harms include massive increases in energy and water consumption by data centers, direct collaboration with the fossil fuel industry to enhance extraction, the erosion of academic integrity, and the replacement of critical thinking with computationally generated "slop." The analysis concludes that robust, collective resistance is essential. This resistance must include refusal to adopt harmful AI, divestment from complicit tech companies, scholar activism, the pursuit of alternative technological paradigms like "decomputing," and organized efforts through collectives such as the Climate Justice Universities Union.

1. The Core Thesis: AI as a Symptom of Systemic Crisis

The foundational argument presented is that AI, like climate change, should be understood not as a standalone problem but as a symptom of deeper, systemic issues. This perspective reframes the debate from a narrow technological critique to a broader analysis of the political and economic structures AI serves.

- **Shared Roots with Climate Crisis:** Both AI and climate change are identified as products of "structural and systemic exploitative and extractive systems." The climate justice paradigm seeks to shift focus from individual behavior to collective action aimed at distributing wealth and power, whereas AI is argued to do the opposite by concentrating it.
- **The "Symptom" Analogy:** A recurring theme, articulated by speakers Jenny and Dan McQuillin, is that "AI is not actually the problem. It's also a symptom." This suggests that addressing AI requires tackling the underlying issues of extraction, exploitation, and the concentration of power.
- **Foreclosing Futures:** Dan McQuillin argues that AI's function is not to build the future but to limit it through "preemptive predictions and its nihilistic dependencies." This positions AI as a tool of austerity and control, extending economic precarity while creating a "new financial black hole."
- **An Abusive Relationship:** Psychologist Chenade Shien characterizes the societal relationship with AI as abusive. While it may meet short-term needs for productivity under pressure, it ultimately removes agency and control, pushing society in a direction that is not a conscious choice.

Key Quote: "If we really want to build a more hopeful and safe and stable and healthy future for everyone, we would be shifting from talking about climate in kind of this individual behavior change to more of collective action. Social change, distributing wealth and power rather than concentrating it, which is what AI does."

2. Deconstructing the AI Hype Machine

A significant portion of the discourse is dedicated to dismantling the marketing and language used to promote AI, revealing it as a system of persuasion and deception rather than a reflection of technological prowess.

- **AI as a Marketing Term:** Kristoff Becker asserts that AI has been a marketing term since the 1950s, referring to a changing set of technologies. Today, it is primarily used by Big Tech to push generative AI products that consumers "probably didn't ask for."
- **The "Bulls*** Engine":** Dan McQuillin describes AI as a "b******* engine," stating its computations are based on correlation, not causation, making its outputs "plausible rather than factual." He contends, "AI is basically crap, which is why investment in it is a bubble."
- **Debunking Anthropomorphism:** The use of human-like terms for AI functions is identified as a deliberate strategy to obscure the technology's nature.
    - **"Hallucinations":** Becker argues this term is a "convenient distraction" from the fact that for a language model, there is no fundamental difference between a correct and incorrect response. The models simply predict the next most likely token without any concept of truth, intention, or a world to reference.
    - **False Cognition:** Language models do not "think," "lie," "discuss," or "imagine." They are algorithmic calculators, and attributing human cognition to them is misleading.
- **The Narrative of Inevitability:** The idea that AI's adoption is inevitable is presented as a powerful argument that serves "very particular constellations of power." Resistance movements aim to remind society that "nothing is inevitable" and that citizens can and must choose how technology is used.

3. The Unholy Alliance: Big Tech and Fossil Fuels

The analysis draws a direct and damning line connecting the AI industry with the fossil fuel sector, arguing they are not only similar in their tactics but deeply intertwined in their operations.

- **Shared Playbook:** Big Tech is accused of adopting the fossil fuel industry's strategies of "denying, delay, and distracting." This includes investing heavily in higher education institutions to "normalize and legitimize their narratives" and promote friendly research, just as the fossil fuel industry has done for decades.
- **Massive Energy Demand:** The proliferation of data centers to power AI is causing "extravagant increases in energy demand," which necessitates more fossil fuel use and re-legitimizes "burning as much energy as possible in the name of progress." Cloud companies are seen as abandoning their pretense of sustainability.

- **Direct Collaboration:** Beyond energy consumption, Big Tech is actively collaborating with "big oil" to make fossil fuel extraction cheaper, quicker, and easier. AI is used as a tool to increase the fossil fuel industry's profits.
- **Ecological Harm of Data Centers:** Data centers are identified as a major source of ecological harm and social injustice.
    - **Resource Consumption:** The scale of resource use is immense. A conservative estimate suggests generating a one-minute video of a cat drinking water with Sora would require enough water to leave a real cat thirsty for eight weeks.
    - **Data Center Capitals:** Locations like Ireland and Virginia are described as "data center capitals of the world," where the proliferation of these facilities, driven by close ties between industry and government, has been "quite undemocratic."
    - **Environmental Racism:** The buildout of infrastructure to support data centers, such as gas plants and pipelines, disproportionately burdens communities already facing environmental injustices.

4. Big Tech's Deception and Anti-Regulatory Playbook

Mary Finley-Brooke details a systematic campaign of deception and regulatory evasion employed by the tech industry to facilitate its expansion, particularly in the construction of data centers.

- **Pervasive Greenwashing:** Big Tech companies make bold climate pledges ("water positive," "carbon neutral," "net zero") that are described as hypocrisy. They promote false solutions like carbon offsets while "supercharging" extractivism.
- **Anti-Regulatory Tactics:** The industry uses an aggressive playbook to circumvent oversight and local opposition.
    - **Aggressive Lobbying:** This includes using front groups, trade associations, and funding climate deniers.
    - **Legal Obstruction:** Companies deploy a "wall of legal challenges," claiming laws don't apply to them and using federal preemption to avoid state and local regulations they simultaneously pressure for incentives.
    - **Information Warfare:** A core tactic is to impede evidence and transparency.
- **Non-Disclosure and Secrecy:**
    - **NDAs:** Local officials are pressured to sign non-disclosure agreements, which prevents power mapping and public opposition by hiding project details.
    - **Code Names and SPVs:** Companies use code names and Special Purpose Vehicles (SPVs) so communities do not know a data center is being planned, preventing them from preparing or fighting back.
    - **Fake Math:** Companies are accused of "boundary moving" in their environmental accounting, for example, by only measuring a "teeny teeny piece" of the actual water used in their "water positive" claims.

5. AI's Incursion into Higher Education

Higher education is identified as a key battleground where the normalization of AI is being actively pursued, threatening the core mission of universities.

- **Threat to Academic Integrity:** The uncritical adoption of AI is seen as eroding the legitimacy of university degrees, as it becomes possible to generate entire theses with AI, undermining the learning process.
- **Erosion of Critical Thinking:** Large language models are described as "substituting slop for critical thinking." Research suggests that relying on generative AI causes cognition to atrophy.
- **Deepening Mistrust:** The prevalence of AI creates an atmosphere of mistrust between students and faculty. Students cannot be sure instructors are not using AI to generate course materials, and instructors cannot be sure of the authenticity of student work. A lawsuit at Northeastern University was cited where students objected to professors using AI.
- **Institutional Complicity:** Universities are criticized for being complicit by investing heavily in AI and rolling out institutional accounts (e.g., for ChatGPT) as if its use is inevitable, making it difficult for individual academics to push back.
- **"Displacement AI":** The Climate Justice Universities Union (CJUU) has defined the target of its resistance as "Displacement AI"—AI that displaces humanity and human ways of thinking. The union advocates for institutional divestment and disassociation from these technologies.

6. Frameworks for Resistance and Transformation

The speakers outlined a multi-pronged strategy for resisting the imposition of harmful AI and working toward alternative futures. This involves both oppositional tactics and the prefigurative building of new systems.

A. Principles and Tactics of Resistance

- **Refusal as a Core Principle:** Drawing from the "Feminist Data Manifest-No," it is argued that refusal must be a real option. "If there's no way to say no, it's never responsible tech."
- **Collective Action and Organizing:** The primary message is that resistance must be collective. This includes organizing within university unions, joining cross-institutional groups like the CJUU, and building coalitions with community groups fighting data centers.
- **Ridicule and Satire:** Kristoff Becker suggests that "collective ridicule can help to put [refusal] back on the table." Poking holes in the "madness" of AI hype is presented as a valid form of resistance.
- **Scholar Activism and "Exnovation":** Academics are encouraged to embrace scholar activism and reject institutional neutrality. A proposed research focus is "exnovation"—the study of how to phase out harmful systems, such as fossil fuels or exploitative AI.

- **Local Action:** On a community level, tactics include pressuring local officials to reject NDAs and to pass ordinances related to zoning, noise, and water use to block or regulate data center construction before it starts.

B. Alternative Paradigms

- **Decomputing:** Proposed by Dan McQuillin, this framework aims to create systems that are not dependent on continuous expansion. It is based on three principles:
    1. **Degrowth:** Rejecting scale to reduce carbon emissions and reassert human agency.
    2. **Care:** Countering algorithmic detachment and eugenicist abstractions.
    3. **Conviviality:** Collectively assessing technology's effects on relatedness and bio-interaction.
- **The Great Turning:** Chenade Shien uses Joanna Macy's framework to situate the resistance movement within a larger narrative of societal transformation.
    - **Business as Usual:** The story of the industrial growth society, competition, and profit.
    - **The Great Unraveling:** The visible consequences—war, poverty, ecological collapse, and inequality, all amplified by AI.
    - **The Great Turning:** The global transition to a life-sustaining society, characterized by cooperation, regeneration, and collective action. The resistance to AI is framed as a vital part of this story.

7. The Emerging Policy and Governance Landscape

While much of the focus is on grassroots action, an emerging landscape of policy and regulation was also discussed.

- **Academic Governance:** A survey by the American Association of University Professors (AAUP) highlighted five key concerns regarding AI, with a strong emphasis on the need for **shared governance** and **transparency** in university policymaking. The report noted that few institutions have created transparent and equitable policies.
- **European Union AI Act:** This regulation, which came into effect in spring 2024, establishes a legal framework for AI in the EU. It uses a risk-based approach to classify AI systems and includes specific language on the impact of AI on education.
- **International Declarations:** At a recent COP meeting, 12 nations signed a declaration pledging to address false content and protect information integrity, with specific reference to academia, scientists, and researchers.
- **University Policies:** A review of university-level policies indicates a general trend of encouraging or tolerating the use of generative AI. This points to a need for a meta-analysis of these policies and greater critical engagement from faculty and staff.