Bureaucratic Form and the Future We in Kim Stanley Robinson's *The Ministry for the Future*

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Two protest movements have emerged in Germany in the last few years that raise a central problem when it comes to the politics of climate change: *Fridays for Future* (which originally started in Sweden as *Skolstrejk för klimatet*) and *Die Letzte Generation* (The Last Generation) have taken to the streets because climate change will affect them (the humans currently below the age of 26) and future generations significantly more than those humans currently in power. This conundrum—that those whose future is most immediately concerned by present decisions are excluded from the decision- and policy-making process—is not new, of course, and it begs the question, at least in democratic societies, at what age citizens are mature enough to vote, if maturity is even the right variable. It also draws attention to the fact that political decisions are often geared towards more immediate concerns and goals, rarely going beyond the duration of legislative terms.

In 2005, in an interview with David Brancaccio from PBS, Kurt Vonnegut showed himself desperate about climate change and the U.S. public's apparent state of denial. "The game is over," he vehemently declared and pointed out that the catastrophe had been long in the making. He said, "Look, I'll tell you [...] [o]ne thing that no cabinet has ever had, is a Secretary Of The Future. And there are no plans at all for my grandchildren and my great grandchildren." What Vonnegut was suggesting, in other words, was an institution (a secretary or department) that would propose ideas for issues that required long-term attention and planning, such as climate change. It is precisely this idea that animates Kim Stanley Robinson's novel *The Ministry for the Future* (2020). The novel presents a near-future world in which an international body has been created that is to organize the struggle against climate change more effectively and to represent the interests of future generations. One of its goals is to achieve "legal standing" (35) for unborn citizens so as to afford lawyers the opportunity to represent their interests in courts. From there, the novel quickly opens a wide vista of additional possibilities and tools that governments have at their disposal to combat climate change: from technological and ecological to fiscal and financial. In the course of the novel, the ministry and the head of the ministry, Mary Murphy, pur-

sue many of those possibilities and nudge (indeed, occasionally push) governments to do the same.

But the novel is far from a straight-forward tale of ministerial agendas, let alone a political thriller à la Michael Crichton. Instead, Robinson's novel seems to attempt to tell the stories of as many of the agents involved in climate change as possible, including the elites making decisions as well as the wildlife impacted by them. Indeed, as critics and scholars have noted, the novel is particularly interested in the representation of the many and for this purpose draws on narrative modes that are uncharacteristic of the (realist) novel: "The novel is […] largely dominated by collective and/or anonymous voices […], and by non-narrative discourses of knowledge […], leaving comparatively little room for the everyday life or heroic actions of individuals, for their emotions, ruminations and discussions, that have occupied a large part of the modern novel" (Patoine 147). Building on those observations, I argue that it is precisely through such "non-narrative discourses of knowledge" that the novel represents collectives and seeks to build collective agency. It does so by drawing on a type of discourse that is representative of the organizational form which is at the center of the novel's plot: a bureaucracy. Indeed, I want to suggest that the novel seeks to perform the ministry of which it tells: to provide literary standing for the many, including future generations, and pathways for solutions to the challenges posed by climate change. What I analyze is the way in which the novel achieves this goal: I discuss the specific aesthetic and narrative strategies through which it represents collectives and collective agency, and I argue that a primary and most significant strategy is its use of a bureaucratic register. In the first part of this article, I therefore discuss the various bureaucratic forms employed in the novel and how they afford narrating collectivity as well as how they may build collective agency. In the second part, I briefly consider the effects of drawing on bureaucratic forms to narrate collectivity in the Anthropocene and I come to the conclusion that these forms afford the communication of knowledge about climate change and allow Robinson to create a "transtextual" network that seeks to build extratextual collectives (Johns-Putra 283).

Representing Collectives in the "Anthropocene": Genre, Form, and Bureaucracy

The Ministry for the Future covers about thirty years, from the ministry's creation at the annual Conference of the Parties to the Paris Agreement in 2025 (from COP 29 to COP 58), at which point the novel documents the successes of the vast shift not only in international environmental policies and practices, but truly of what can only be called a series of political and environmental revolutions around the globe. The novel's 106 chapters present different stories, places, groups and individual entities,

with only a few recurrent characters and plot lines. Among the recurrent characters are Mary Murphy, the head of the ministry, and Frank, a U.S. citizen who survives a catastrophic heat wave in India in the novel's first chapter. Their stories soon intertwine and provide the novel with a more traditional narrative and plot, the story of an unlikely friendship. The majority of the novel, however, strives to represent a planetary multitude—humans as well as non-human entities that register and indeed contribute to the political, economic and environmental changes that follow the initial cataclysmic events in India and the creation of the ministry.

The types of collectives that the novel represents range broadly. There are familiar forms of organized collectives, such as the ministry itself as well as states (Sikkim, 231–233), cities (L.A., 275–279, and Hongkong, 513–517), and international bodies such as the COP or the World Economic Forum at Davos, for example. The smaller collectives include refugee camps, teams of scientists, environmental activists, and terrorist groups such as the Children of Kali (see 230). In addition, there are collective and *non-human* entities such as the market (191–192). The novel clearly tries to represent all the spatial scales of planetary existence, from atoms to the sun, and to impress upon its readers the need to abandon the distinction between humans and non-humans in an effort to narrate the full scope of agents involved in the planet's climate system. In a chapter that diagnoses the decrease of the human population around the globe, for example, the reader also learns that birds and other animals are now legally considered subject of rights and possess citizenship status (world citizenship was introduced earlier). In addition to the spatial scales that the novel pays attention to, it also seeks to represent temporal scales as it acknowledges time and again the needs of unborn generations. This is mainly done through the ministry's agenda, of course (i.e., the efforts to achieve legal standing in court), as well as through the comparatively long time span that the novel covers. To put it differently, the novel provides literary standing to a number of entities –individual and collective—some of whom (including refugees and unborn children) presently still lack legal and political standing.

Collectivity is a key issue in the discourse on climate change. Climate change is often framed as a phenomenon that concerns all of humanity because there is only one planet on which humans can thrive, only one planet that they can call home. Hence, the discourse frequently employs the first-person plural pronoun, such as in this passage from the introduction to *The Climate Book* by Greta Thunberg:

> The climate and ecological crisis is the greatest threat that humanity has ever faced. It will no doubt be the issue that will define and shape *our* future everyday life like no other. This is painfully clear. In the last few years, the way *we* see and talk about the crisis has started to shift. But since *we* have wasted so many decades ignoring and downplaying this escalating emergency, *our* societies are still in a state of denial. (my emphasis)

Such claims to collective identity and specifically collective agency have been challenged, however, specifically in the course of the debates over the concept of the "Anthropocene." In particular when it comes to questions of accountability and reparation, critics point out that not all of humankind has contributed nor is contributing equally to carbon emissions and the loss of biodiversity. Much depends on income, as Thunberg notes: "The richest 1 per cent of the world's population are responsible for more than twice as much carbon pollution as the people who make up the poorest half of humanity." While historically, it is industrial Western countries whose carbon emissions have begun to impact the planetary climate long before countries such as India and China started on an accelerated path to catch up. Finally, and perhaps even more crucially, there is the term "human" itself which is problematic. Not only because for much of the twentieth century and in some cases until today, "human" was a category that excluded persons of color or Indigenous ancestry. Similarly, the category has come under some attack from scholars who point out that climate change concerns not only the human species and that non-human actors need to be taken into account. Yet even scholars and critics who acknowledge that there is no unified, homogenous human *we* argue that there is a need for such a collective entity in order for meaningful action to occur. As Dipesh Chakrabarty concludes, "climate change poses for us a question of a human collectivity, an us, pointing to a figure of the universal that escapes our capacity to experience the world. It is more like a universal that arises from a shared sense of a catastrophe. It calls for a global approach to politics without the myth of a global identity, for, unlike a Hegelian universal, it cannot subsume particularities" (222).

Scholars of climate change have often turned to literature as a means to convey knowledge about as well as to move and motivate readers to act against it. The significance of the former becomes apparent when one considers, as does Rob Nixon in the following passage, the example of Michael Crichton's novel *State of Fear*:

> How can environmental activists and storytellers work to counter the potent political, corporate, and even scientific forces invested in immediate self-interest, procrastination, and dissembling? We see such dissembling at work, for instance, in the afterword to Michael Crichton's 2004 environmental conspiracy novel, State of Fear, wherein he argued that we needed twenty more years of data gathering on climate change before any policy decisions could be ventured. Although the National Academy of Sciences had assured former president George W. Bush that humans were indeed causing the earth to warm, Bush shopped around for views that accorded with his own skepticism and found them in a private meeting with Crichton, whom he described as "an expert scientist." (9)

While spreading knowledge and information are still crucial, more recently, scholars and activists have also turned to literature to understand why knowledge and in-

formation, which are readily available today, may not be enough. They have looked to the narratives and other aesthetic forms that afford the representation of climate change's scales, in particular its planetary scope, its long durée and incremental pace, as well as its distributed multitude of agents. Some scholars have made the argument that the contemporary novel, and in particular the contemporary realist novel, is ill-equipped for the representation of climate change's scales. With respect to the representation of the collectives involved in and impacted by climate change, Amitav Ghosh makes the most thought-provoking argument. Acknowledging the writers in the Euro-American realist tradition that have represented collectives, or "'men in the aggregate,'" Ghosh nonetheless maintains that "[i]t is a fact that the contemporary novel has become ever more radically centered on the individual psyche while the collective […] has receded, both in the cultural and the fictional imagination" (78). For Ghosh, this moment in which novelists abandon narratives and forms of collectivity and collective agency coincides with the Great Acceleration: It is the moment in which modernist writers—animated by ideas of "progress" abandon the writing style of novelists such as John Steinbeck and the moment in which liberalism and post-war politics rigorously focus on the individual in U.S. culture (79).

To some extent, therefore, the representation of collectives and collective agency in a novel such as Kim Stanley Robinson's *The Ministry for the Future* is a question of generic conventions and aesthetic forms. While Robinson has long figured as a writer of science fiction, his recent work, such as *New York 2140* (2017), has been received as realist, and similar claims can be made for *Ministry*. Adeline Johns-Putra, for example, has argued that,

> Robinson's novels, as examples of what Jameson calls the "Science-Fictional" phase of the historical novel, make their political and ethical points through the interplay between *récit* and roman: the morally worthwhile, vividly described actions of empathetic and believable actors are shown to achieve morally desirable and politically effective consequences. (290)

Other critics, such as Patoine, have pointed out the novel's strong reliance on "non-narrative discourses of knowledge" and what may therefore be called its generic hybridity (147). As examples Patoine lists "chapters, that give voice to non-human entities (riddles formulated by the sun, the Earth, a photon, CO_2, history, the market, herd animals, code), or that explain (directly, or through debates in the form of anonymous dialogues) different theories from the humanities and social sciences" (146). Moreover, as the essays in this volume, indeed, the volume in its entirety, try to demonstrate, aesthetic forms do not exist in a realm that is separate from social and cultural issues, but intersect and carry over into the social. This is a position that is most prominently taken by New Formalists such as Caroline Levine and Anna Kornbluh. As Levine explains, "t]he idea of affordances is valuable for understanding the

aesthetic object as imposing its order among a vast array of designed things, from prison cells to doorknobs. Literary form does not operate outside of the social but works among many organizing principles, all circulating in a world jam-packed with other arrangements" (7).[1] In this sense, I would argue that Robinson's novel demonstrates the potential of narrative forms to afford collectivity and collective agency in an effort to explore and add to our understanding of the potential of social forms to afford them.

If collective agency is understood as a form of concerted action by a group of agents, then the novel actually begins at a moment at which the established procedures and protocols for concerted action on a global level have demonstrably failed. Readers learn that the recent global stocktaking of carbon emissions "didn't go well" (15) and that the subsequent creation of the ministry is a direct response to this failure to reduce carbon emissions. It is a creative interpretation of the Article in the Paris Agreement that allows the creation of new "'Subsidiary Bodies for Implementation of the Agreement.' These subsidiary bodies had previously been understood to mean committees that met only during the annual COP gatherings, but now some delegates argued that given the general failure of the Agreement so far, a new subsidiary body with permanent duties, and the resources to pursue them, was clearly needed to help push the process forward" (15). The lethal heat waves in India, with which the novel begins, add urgency to this sober diagnosis.

On the level of narrative (story), collectives take shape and take action mostly through networks and hierarchies. When the city of Los Angeles is flooded, for ex-

1 For a more detailed discussion of the criticism that the New Formalists and in particular Caroline Levine have received, such as by Eugenie Brinkema, see Alexander Starre's discussion of "Affordance" in this volume. While I agree with Brinkema's view that there is a certain risk in reading form with an eye to its social and political relevance (the handmaid's fate, if not worse), I am ultimately convinced that form is always political. More than Brinkema's critique, it is Dorothy Wang's approach to New Formalism that I find pertinent and indeed political. In "The Future of Poetry Studies," Wang criticizes Levine for her exclusion of writers that have long theorized the relationship between the formal and the social: "[T]here has been a long and substantial tradition of black intellectuals and cultural critics and practitioners who have thought hard and at great length about the inseparability of the formal and the social in the 'real world': Stuart Hall, C. L. R. James, Aimé Césaire, Amiri Baraka, Édouard Glissant, and, more recently, Fred Moten and the Afropessimists, among others. Many of these thinkers did not or do not work inside English departments. By occluding an entire tradition of black thought that has engaged with the problem of form and larger sociopolitical structures, such as those of colonialism and white supremacist racial hierarchies, the 'New Formalism' betrays the telling and endemic provinciality of Anglo-American literary studies" (223). Considering not only Levine but also Brinkema in the light of this observation, the entire debate over the social significance of aesthetics appears as a field struggle (in the sense in which Pierre Bourdieu has coined this term in his work on the literary field) and hence as one that is representative of a white avant-garde position.

ample, a network of citizens with boats emerges that help one another: "Lots of little boats but nothing big and nothing organized" (278). The narrative repeatedly emphasizes the small scale of the impromptu collective: "People shared knowledge," but without working phones, this sharing of knowledge occurs on an individual basis and in part based on people's "local knowledge" (278, 279). It is a crowd, occurring spontaneously, existing for a limited time, and animated by the desire to help and to survive. This network is therefore clearly distinct from the social networks characteristic of pre-flood L.A., and as such they are also characterized as more real. For example, the chapter's homodiegetic narrator exclaims, "I kept thinking This is real, this feels good, why again are you trying to be a fucking actress?" (278). Indeed, at the end, the narrator (a former actress) rejoices at the sight of the destruction of Hollywood's dream factory. The entire episode suggests that local and unmediated connections are more valuable and more beneficial for everyone, and that L.A. would be rebuilt at a much smaller scale.

But the novel does not only value such spontaneous figurations of the multitude, it is also quite invested in more permanent collective structures. The ministry itself is a textbook example of hierarchical organization, with Mary Murphy as its head and primary representative. In the chapters beginning with "Notes for Badim," the reader gets to witness the organization's bureaucratic structures in action. Although some of them record her diplomatic efforts, the notes mostly cover meetings between Mary and experts, department heads and teams, in which Mary seeks information, deliberates with her team, ultimately makes or postpones decisions. The meetings are characteristic of public but also of private organizations, and they are overall characterized by ideal-typical features of bureaucracy, such as neutrality, transparency, and regularity. Which is to say Mary listens to everyone at the table equally, whether she agrees with them or not. Those at the table are frequently experts in their fields, they have no personal stakes in the business at hand, and deliberation processes in the ministry have clear rules which everyone follows. Or do they? Badim is also the person associated with the ministry's black wing, a network of agents (or "friends," as Badim calls them, 110) pursuing the organization's agenda by illegitimate means. Badim explains to Mary that black wings are a common feature of large organization and that she must remain unaware of the details of their doings: "'[P]eople might resign if they knew that their actions were known to higher-ups. Anyway, you might not even know these people, I'm not sure how acquainted you are with your whole staff'" (112). In the case of the ministry for the future, hierarchy and network ultimately support one another as they strive for the same goals albeit by different means and vastly different forms of legitimation. Importantly, however, even though they support one another, their actions are ul-

timately not concerted: Mary remains largely unaware of the black agency's activities.[2]

Given the narrative's staging of the heat waves and the stocktaking as cesurae and its emphasis on the need to find new forms of acting cooperatively and more effectively, readers may be expecting *novel* forms of collective agents. Surprisingly, the two dominant forms in the novel are rather old-school: the ministry and the nation state. In the case of the ministry, the novel demonstrates the efficiency of (albeit ideal-typical) classic bureaucratic and managerial forms working in tandem with a black wing. The ministry is therefore a combination of the most rational and efficient structure for the evaluation and management of information on climate change, enabling its agents to work to the best of their abilities. While the black wing increases the ministry's power through its use of physical violence and thus expands its reach beyond legality.[3]

A similar pattern characterizes the novel's presentation of nation states, in particular in the case of India, which occupies a central role in the novel. Following the heat wave, India's government actually decides that cooperative action on an international policy level is not to their benefit. They decide to break the Paris Agreement and to pursue "solar radiation management action" (18), i.e., the distribution of sulfur dioxide in the atmosphere above India to cloud the sky and thus to lower temperatures. While it is a classic case of unilateralism that is initially presented as potentially endangering global weather patterns, it ultimately proves part of the solution. Even more importantly, India soon witnesses a social and cultural revolution that appears to be initiated by the horror of the heat waves: "Elections were held and the nationalist nativist BJP party was thrown out of office as insufficient to the task, and partly responsible for the disaster, having sold the country to outside interests and

2 While she is therefore not portrayed as the head of the black agency, she does eventually change her mind about violence. Compare her response to Tatiana's assassination.

3 In their conversation, Badim tells Mary that black wings are a frequent element of organizations in general. In fact, indeed, where it pertains to bureaucracy, the element of secrecy is noted by Max Weber: "Every bureaucracy seeks to increase the superiority of the professionally informed by keeping their knowledge and intentions secret. Bureaucratic administration always tends to be an administration of 'secret sessions': in so far as it can, it hides its knowledge and action from criticism [...]" (qtd. in Graeber 195). Largely, however, the operations of the black wing in *Ministry* are not so much due to the bureaucratic subject as they are due to what has been described as a grim turn in Robinson's oeuvre. In *The LA Review of Books*, Gerry Canavan points out that both U.S. pop culture and Robinson's prior works prioritize non-violent solutions to political problems and that Robinson's latest work suggests that those solutions might not suffice this time. "*The Ministry for the Future* takes us to the other side of that surety, asking a question that has typically been forbidden to ask in anything but deeply coded, allegorical, and sublimated terms: What if political violence has a role to play in saving the future? What if you actually can't beat the bastards playing by their rules in the institutions they buy and sell?"

burned coal and trashed the landscape in the pursuit of ever-growing inequality" (25). The novel presents the successes of "[t]he world's biggest democracy, taking a new way," including the abolition of the caste system (25). But as with the ministry, there is a black wing to the nation state, a political faction that calls itself the Children of Kali, that is quite open in its use of physical force to guarantee the well-being of the Indian nation. They "sent a message out to the world: change with us, change now, or suffer the wrath of Kali" (25–26). In both cases, the narrative demonstrates how network and hierarchy support one another, even as the network ultimately dislodges the hierarchy's centralizing effects. That is to say, while Mary is the head of the ministry and thus stands for hierarchical organization, the actions of the network are not controlled by her. The same appears to be true for the relationship between the Indian government and the Children of Kali. As ministry and nation state thus formally become more decentralized, they also appear to become more democratic.

While nation state and ministry may therefore appear as rather old-school than novel forms of collective entities, what is significant is the novel's prioritization of structural over individual agency. As Simone Knewitz points out in her discussion of collective agency in this volume, "Both [Wendy] Brown and Jodi Dean relate the emphasis on individual responsibility to 'neoliberalism's dismantling of social institutions' (Dean, 'Critique or Collectivity?' 173) and see in it not an enhancement, but a squashing of political forms of agency" (25). The novel's emphasis on political and social institutions, whether the ministry, the nation state, or farming cooperatives, is therefore not just a necessity for representation but a nod towards the need for such institutions for the formal affordance of collective agency in the first place.

With institutions and crowds, and multitudinous others in place, how does the novel narrate collective agency itself? I argue that the narration of collective agency in *Ministry for the Future* is achieved by indirection.[4] To put it more bluntly: Readers know that collective agency occurs because the novel reports that stuff happens and there is significant change towards a healthier planet over time. This change includes not only change in terms of increased biodiversity or other environmental factors, but also social change. However, this collective agency is not necessarily *concerted* action. Indeed, as the example of India and Los Angeles show, occasionally the novel suggests that collective agency cannot be scaled up indefinitely. Instead of the concerted action afforded by international protocols and agreements, the novel's broad panorama and polyphonic scope suggest that there are various collectives, some organized and some not, simply acting to the best of their abilities towards remediating the effects of climate change. In this regard, *Ministry*'s organizational landscape is similar to what Rodrigo Nunez has described as a principle of distributed action, which calls for a greater diversity of organizational forms, whether horizontally or

4 See my chapter on James Fenimore Cooper's novel *The Bravo* for a discussion of corporate agency as collective agency that is narrated as indirect agency (Mueller 2023).

vertically.[5] Indeed, the novel's point seems to be that there needs to be action in the first place.

In addition to the formal affordances on the level of story (narrative), there are formal affordances on the level of discourse (narration). As I mentioned at the beginning of this article, *The Ministry of the Future* is noteworthy for its generic hybridity: the fact that it draws on narrative registers that are more dominant in factual than fictional narration.[6] In this respect, one of the central, if not the central strategy defining the novel is to represent a broad scope of agents involved in and/or impacted by climate change. On the one hand, the novel attempts to realize this goal through personification and polyphony. In addition to the basic narrative that follows Mary and Frank, the novel therefore presents a great variety of different voices, from refugees to actresses, from millionaires to farmers.[7] In some cases, it uses personification to give voice to non-human (the sun) as well as non-individual agents (the market). In addition to the multiplicity of perspectives, the homodiegetic narrative vignettes often fluctuate between I and We narration, which is to say that an unidentified speaker refers to themselves collectively as well as individually. The Hong Kong chapter, for example, begins, "What did we teach Beijing, you ask? We

5 "Nunes proposes that we move beyond stifling oppositions and recognize that we need different, concurrent forms of organization that mediate between qualities of horizontality and verticality, diversity and unity, centralization and decentralization" (Knewitz 33).

6 I find the distinction between fictional and factual narratives analytically useful, even if these are the poles at each end of a spectrum. The distinction was introduced by Christian Klein and Matías Martinez in *Wirklichkeitserzählungen*, a collection of articles that (as the subtitle explains) focus on areas, forms, and functions of non-literary narratives and narrations. The distinction serves to highlight the fact that non-literary texts, too, draw on aesthetic forms and narrative modes as they represent the extra-textual world.

7 While this variety is impressive, it is also not quite as diverse as critics writing about the novel's "planetary polyphony" are perhaps implying (Patoine 141). The novel focuses on characters and areas in North America and Europe, with people of color mostly in the roles of refugees and climate-change victims. There is a notable absence of Indigenous characters, an absence that seems to be rather typical for cli-fi, as the research of Nicole Seymour and Briggetta Pierrot suggests. In their discussion of Kim Stanley Robinson's *New York 2140*, as well as three other prominent works of cli-fi, Seymour and Pierrot write that "[a]ll but one text explicitly invoke Indigenous peoples only to absent and sometimes even appropriate their experiences and traditions. We argue that these tendencies are neither coincidental nor benign. First, they contribute to a larger status quo wherein 'concepts and narratives of crises, dystopia, and apocalypse obscure and erase [past and] ongoing oppression against Indigenous peoples and other groups.' Further, these erasures suggest that contemporary Indigenous peoples have little to contribute to the processes of confronting or adapting to climate change—which is demonstrably false. Finally, such erasures prevent these cli-fi texts from fully capturing 'the massive temporal and spatial scales on which climatic changes play out,' […] even as they purport to do exactly that" (95).

taught them a police state doesn't work!" (513).[8] Eventually, the speaker refers to their own perspective and position: "You have to be part of a wave in history. […] It's a feeling—how can I say it? It's as if everyone in your city becomes a family member […]" (515). Through such first-hand accounts, as they could be called, the novel seeks to acknowledge and represent the complexity and large scale of the phenomenon of as well as the remedies for climate change. To give an example, chapters 71 to 73 sequentially present notes for Badim that record a meeting about the creation of a new earth-centered religion, an account of the creation of a new habitat corridor in eastern North America, and a summary of modern monetary theory. The chapters are not directly connected, except for the fact that they speak to the costs of climate change as well as to successful remedies. This places a significant burden on readers, who must make these connections themselves and have to become, in a sense, climate-change literate.

This is no coincidence, of course, and indeed is in many ways in tune with the fact that a significant portion of the narrative forms that the novel employs can be considered bureaucratic forms. This includes the meeting notes as well as theoretical introductions and overviews (such as the chapter on monetary theory and a chapter on "Jevons Paradox," for example (165–166) and chapters consisting of testimonies and histories, such as the one providing an account of the state of the Arctic Ocean's ice cover in 2032 (147–149). While Patoine calls those "non-narrative discourses of knowledge," it is more accurate to stress that they are discursive forms that are more characteristic of factual than fictional literatures and that, in addition, they are characteristic of bureaucratic management (Patoine 147). In addition, there are the bureaucratic-managerial practices that dominate the novel: Characters are frequently in meetings and conferences or engaged in (diplomatic) phone calls or correspondences. All of those forms share an emphasis on the ordered communication of knowledge and information, of course; they are frequently used in organizations to make sure that all levels and dimensions of a phenomenon at hand is represented before deliberation begins, whether it is testimonies, historical accounts, or reviews. But bureaucratic forms also tend towards impersonality. After all, the point of a bureaucratic regime is to apply its rules and regulations equally to everyone. This "formalistic impersonality" is one of the central aspects distinguishing bureaucracies from aristocracies (Fry and Raadschelders 40). This tendency towards the impersonal encoded in bureaucratic forms also translates into the novel's frequent use of summary (rather than scene): Many of the chapters present events in summary and hence highly mediated, and even chapters such as the ministry meetings which would lend themselves to scenic presentation and thus to more immedi-

8 Some chapters also employ an unidentified addressee which creates a dialogic form that is very much in keeping with Adeline Johns-Putra's argument that the novel affords a "discursive collective" that includes readers (293).

ate narration are presented in the form of meeting minutes, which is inarguably a rather mediated and diegetic genre.

Ultimately, the argument has been made that the novel's form connects the text to a larger textual universe, specifically, to Kim Stanley Robinson's non-novelistic oeuvre. Johns-Putra even makes the case that the novel's transtextual realism includes the readers as another collective impacted by but also in a position to act against climate change:

> While some of these non-fictional communications provide publicity for the novels, they are not strictly promotional pieces or events, for they are also instalments in an extended Robinsonian philosophy. All Robinson's work in the twenty-first century, when taken as a transtextual whole, resembles a coherent ideological infrastructure. Moreover, readers are incorporated into this structure, to form part of the collective, utopian enterprise that Robinson depicts in his fiction and elaborates on in his media and public appearances. (290)

In a sense, therefore, the novel can be understood to perform the ministry of which it tells: It acknowledges the claims of diverse actors that are often not taken into account in debates over climate change—from slave laborers to refugees, from unborn children to non-human agents—and presents their perspectives to the readers. In this way, it can be said to give literary standing where legal standing is still lacking. Moreover, this polyphony also adds to the novels effort to provide a broad array of paths for action, from the controversial (such as solar radiation management and carbon capture) to the mundane (replacing fossil fuels with renewable energy sources). That it draws in large parts on a bureaucratic register and its impersonal tone makes sense precisely because the collectivities that are represented as well as their strategies are occasionally at odds with one another, and yet the novel seeks to represents them all equally. To do so it requires the bureaucratic register's commitment to neutrality and impersonality. Yet, the side effect of such impersonality is a great degree of narrative distance that not even the novel's sentimental ending can remedy. As ecocritic Nicole Seymour has argued, sentimentality is one of the stereotypical affects on which mainstream environmentalism draws, alongside earnestness, reverence and wonder, for example (see 4–5). Yet, such affects, as research by sociologists and anthropologists such as Kari Norgaard have shown, do not motivate people to act against climate change.[9]

9 Nicole Seymour's *Strange Natures: Futurity, Empathy, and the Queer Ecological Imagination* (2013) also demonstrates to what degree such mainstream environmentalist affective registers are rooted in heteronormative ideas. This is also true for *The Ministry for the Future*, which consistently celebrates heteronormative family values, and concludes with an odd interpretation of the Ganymede myth.

Knowing the Facts, Feeling Collectively

Bureaucracy is not a phenomenon solely of state and state administration, but one also of market capitalism. As Frye and Raadschelders explain, "capitalism and bureaucracy share an emphasis on formalistic impersonality in their relationships. In the market, acts of exchange are oriented toward the commodity, and those acts, Weber asserts, constitute the most impersonal relationship into which humans can enter" (41). The ubiquity of bureaucratic-managerial structures, settings, and indeed practices (accounting, for example) may partly explain the fact that the bureaucratic register has long found its way into Western pop culture. Take film and television, for example: TV series such as *The Office* (2005–2013), *Parks and Recreation* (2009–2015) or *The Good Place* (2016–2020) do not simply employ the workplace-as-family topos but engage explicitly with their bureaucratic-administrative settings; while animated movies such as *Inside Out* (2015) and *Storks* (2016) draw on the bureaucratic register to imagine decidedly non-bureaucratic phenomena, such as a child's emotional life. As scholars have pointed out, such stories offer viewers the pleasure of recognition and inside jokes as they bring their own workplace and consumer experiences to the viewing. In addition, there's actual pleasure to bureaucracies—at least as ideal types. In *The Utopia of Rules*, David Graeber observes that "the experience of operating within a system of formalized rules and regulations, under hierarchies of impersonal officials, actually does hold—for many of us much of the time, for all of us at least some of the time—a kind of covert appeal" (149). To understand this appeal better, but also to better understand the ramifications of Kim Stanley Robinson's use of the bureaucratic register to narrate collective agency in the Anthropocene, let us briefly revisit Max Weber's basic characterization of bureaucratic organizations.

Weber's discussion of bureaucracies in *Economy and Society* is part of his larger work on the question of authority: what types of authority exist and ultimately, why people accept authority in the first place. According to Weber, bureaucracy accompanies mass democracy and is an attempt at levelling the playing field. It is rule by office, rather than by blood, and hence, to some extent, shares with the law the idea of blind-folded neutrality—albeit, in both cases, ideal-typically. According to Weber, the characteristic principles of bureaucracies are that they are rule-bound (whether these rules are administrative rules or laws) and this rule-boundedness defines everything from administrative procedures to the selection of new agents; that they are hierarchical; that those who hold offices separate their professional from their private persona, that they are selected on merit, and that they have received a professional education that qualifies them for their office.

Impersonality is therefore the combined effect of the structural effort to separate position from person that we call bureaucracy. As David Graeber notes, it is this impersonality that has gained bureaucracies the reputation of being "soulless," but as he also points out, soullessness, too, has its appeal.

> In fact, if one really ponders the matter, it's hard to imagine how, even if we do achieve some utopian communal society, some impersonal (dare I say, bureaucratic?) institutions would not still be necessary, and for just this reason. To take one obvious example: languishing on some impersonal lottery system or waiting list for a desperately needed organ transplant might be alienating and distressing, but it's difficult to envision any less impersonal way of allocating a limited pool of hearts or kidneys that would not be immeasurably worse. (152)

Impersonality can therefore be said to be the price we pay for a system that is at least structurally geared towards treating everyone and everything equally. As I noted earlier, however, in the case of *The Ministry for the Future*, this impersonality that is an effect of the bureaucratic forms that dominate the novel's discourse and the effort to represent collectives and collective agency may have disadvantages. Because recent research suggests that acting against climate change is not so much a problem of knowledge as of motivation.

Writing in 2011, Kari Norgaard sums up the widespread assessment at the time that the public needed more information about climate change and that—once informed—they would do something about it:

> Environmental and social scientific communities alike have identified the failure of public response to global warming as a significant quandary. Most existing explanations emphasize lack of information (people don't know enough information; climate science is too complex to follow; or corporate media and climate skeptic campaigns have misled them) or lack of concern (people are just greedy and self-interested or focused on more immediate problems). […] There is the sense that "if people only knew," they would act differently: that is, drive less, "rise up," and put pressure on the government. (1)

But as Norgaard and other researchers have pointed out, neither is information about climate change hard to come by nor is it—at its base—too complex to understand. Yet, there is a clear failure to "integrate this knowledge into everyday life" (4). Based on her extensive field work in Norway and to some extent in the U.S., Norgaard comes to the conclusion that information about climate change evokes three key emotions in the people she studied in these countries. These emotions are fear, helplessness, and guilt, and evidently none of these are likely to motivate people to act, quite the contrary. Talking to her U.S. students, Norgaard sums up their predicament: "We are overwhelmed because we recognize the enormity of the problem but have no clear sense of what can be done and do not know whether other people also really care, whether the political system is up for the task, and whether their attempt to respond will generate even further problems!" (193) Today, more

than ten years after Norgaard presented her research, *climate anxiety* has become a widely recognized phenomenon.[10]

Whether one feels capable and empowered to do something against the effects of climate change is also a question of whether one feels alone or in solidarity with others. It is, as I pointed out at the beginning of this article, to some extent a question of collective agency. The literary critic Min Song observes that "[w]henever I think about climate change, which is often, I struggle to make sense of its enormity. So much seems to be at stake. Maybe everything" (1). Song describes the feeling of being overwhelmed, of preferring to deal with the mundane everyday instead, and he suggests that it is a problem of collective agency:

> Maybe you feel this way too. […] If so, why do you and I feel this way? So much of it comes down to the fact that you and I lack strong models of a *shared agency*. Your ability to act in ways that have the intended effects is in doubt. You don't know how to connect with others and find ways to expand what you can do alone, so that you can act in a way that makes a difference. (1–2)

For Song, it is clear that literature can help remedy this problem: It can provide models of "shared agency" and help its readers to develop the skills necessary to enter and contribute to forms of collectivity and collective agency, in particular attention,[11] which is necessary to counter the forms of culturally supported denial that both Song and Norgaard have identified as part of the problem when it comes to effectively addressing climate change. In addition, scholars such as Seymour have argued that the positive emotions elicited by humor, for example, may be much more effective in motivating people. Analyzing works that pursue ironic and irreverent aesthetic strategies to represent climate change, she maintains that

> the works in my archive undercut public negativity toward activism while also questioning basic environmentalist assumptions: that reverence is required for ethical relations to the nonhuman, that knowledge is key to fighting problems like climate change. They suggest that it is possible to 'do' environmentalism

10 Climate anxiety and eco-anxiety are scientifically recognized medical phenomena that are primarily associated with children and young adults. "Although painful and distressing, climate anxiety is rational and does not imply mental illness" (Hickman et al.). Ecocritic Sarah Jaquette Ray describes her experience with her students: "The generation growing up in this age of global warming is not lazy or feigning powerlessness. Instead, they are asking why they should work hard, and to what end. [They are] so frozen by their fears that they are unable to desire—or, yes, even imagine—the future" (2).

11 Norgaard makes this point as well when she defines her use of "denial," and she stresses the cultural patterns of attention to which we are trained.

> without the aforementioned affects [i.e. guilt, shame, didactism, prescriptiveness, sentimentality, reverence, etc.], and perhaps even without knowledge. (4)

Kim Stanley Robinson's novel *The Ministry for the Future* contains many models of collectives and many examples of successful collective action. But while it is certainly a hopeful novel in that it provides clear avenues for action, it is not necessarily a novel that can address readers affectively, nor address them in ways that makes them *feel* solidarity as well as a sense of collective agency. The bureaucratic register's tendency towards impersonality forecloses this important aspect of climate change fiction. Instead, the novel's strength lies in its suggestion that social institutions such as bureaucratic organizations, have an important part to play in the struggle against climate change. By drawing on the bureaucratic register, it prioritizes knowledge and information about climate change and its attendant effects, such as loss of biodiversity, in an effort not only to inform its readers about the complexity of the problem and possible remedies, but also to portray the heterogenous multitudes that are impacted by it. As I hope to have shown, the novel thereby provides literary standing to agents that frequently still lack legal standing and thus to expand its readers understanding of the persons involved in climate change, of the different pathways for action that are available to them, as well as the diversity of challenges faced by different groups.

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