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Petro-Melancholia: Loss, Climate Anxiety, and Fossil Futures in Kim Stanley Robinson's *The Ministry for the Future*

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Abstract

*Published in 2020, *The Ministry for the Future* by Kim Stanley Robinson is a celebrated climate fiction work, acclaimed as policy realistic, institutionally optimistic, and its belief that catastrophe is yet avoidable. This essay takes the novel in another perspective. It posits that, below the horizon of techno-institutional optimism, the novel implants a system of petro-melancholia: an intense affective sense of fossil fuel culture that cannot be easily legislated out of existence. The paper is based on the ideas of Stephanie LeMenager about petro-melancholia, the framework of solastalgia by Glenn Albrecht, and the theory of slow violence by Rob Nixon, which leads to the discussion of ways in which the novel embodies loss, grief, and climate anxiety as the key circumstances of the fossil fuel age. It also contends that even the optimism of the novel itself, its dependence on carbon markets, geoengineering, and institutional reform, recreates a techno-centric and human-centric logic which ecocritical scholarship has recognized as a problem. *The Ministry of the Future* laments fossil futures when it suggests an end to them.*

Keywords: petro-melancholia, climate fiction, *The Ministry for the Future*, solastalgia, slow violence, ecocriticism, Anthropocene, techno-optimism

Introduction: Mourning the World We Built On Oil

The Ministry for the Future (2020) by Kim Stanley Robinson begins with an act of mass death. A wet-bulb heat wave hits the state of Uttar Pradesh in India. The electricity system goes down. The cooling systems are terminated. About twenty million individuals are killed in a week. Frank May, a US aid worker, manages to survive because he spends the night in a lake under water, as the rest of the people in the vicinity drown or overheat. He comes out into a world that is different and the same. The geopolitical clockwork goes on. The fossil fuel business lives on. The release of the carbon is persisting. This is not an introduction to naive hopefulness. It is an assertion regarding the main argument of the novel: that the world has already suffered irreversible losses, and that the sadness of those losses determines all the further.

The novel traces the life of the head of a newly established international agency tasked to advocate the interest of future generations in the politics of carbon markets, geoengineering, and eco-terrorism during a 30-year period. It is designed as a polyphonic collage: brief chapters of dozens of points of view, mixed up with economic statistics,

policy briefs, and snippets of lyric prose. It has been hailed as an imaginative policy think tank and by some readers the most significant climate novel of the twenty-first century. However, a critical interpretation of the novel shows that there is a more troubled framework underlying the institutional optimism. As the scholars who write in the *Studies in the Fantastic* put it (Shaviro 108), the novel works in the key of hope against disaster, which, in turn, is a variant of emotional control: the transformation of sorrow into creative force. This conversion is incomplete according to this paper. The grief persists. The sadness is formal.

Petro-Melancholia: the Affective Economy of Fossil Culture

Stephanie LeMenager (“Petro-Melancholia”) introduced the idea of petro-melancholia in an essay about the BP Deepwater Horizon blowout of 2010. LeMenager has claimed that the affective aspects of our relationship with fossil fuels are not merely negative. The culture of petroleum has produced a sense of comfort, mobility, domesticity, and identity that are very deep rooted in the collective life. When the culture is endangered, something is literally lost, and the reaction is not simply political but emotional. The concept, as LeMenager warns, makes us aware of the genres, practices, and mechanisms we apply to critique this relation, which includes the fact that even critical thinking is full of and is characterized by the energies of petromodernity. The mourned loss is not exclusive to the environment. It is the lost mode of life that petromodernity created, and that great parts of the world population have been shaped by.

As LeMenager warns, petro-melancholia “makes us aware of the genres, practices, and mechanisms we apply to critique this relation” (“Petro-Melancholia”), reminding us that even critical thinking is saturated by the energies of petromodernity.

This principle is relevant to *The Ministry for the Future* with a lot of accuracy. The characters in the novel do not just desire to stop using fossil fuel. A good number of them reside within its beats, its structures, and its conveniences. The aeroplanes that the Children of Kali shoot down are not perceived as Robinson to be innocent objects. They form a part of the circulation system of the modern world. The carbon to be moved is not an abstraction: it is in the physical form of the built environment of each city, each airport, each motorway that the characters in the novel travel along. When Robinson describes the progressive decline of fossil fuel consumption over the thirty-year time span of the novel, he does not show this as emancipation but as controlled loss. Economies contract. Habits change. Part of that change is not bad; most of it is lamented. Petro-melancholia is coded in the novel not as pathology but as the correct register of the transition of the emotions.

This idea is supported by the framework of solastalgia offered by Albrecht who characterizes it as the distress caused by environmental change that reaches people directly but at the same time they are related to the home environment directly (Albrecht et al. S95). Solastalgia is differentiated to nostalgia since it does not entail displacement. The defeat occurs at home, live. According to a scoping review of the solastalgia literature (Galway et al. 2662), this place-based lived experience of environmental loss is turning out to be a call card of the Anthropocene period. Solastalgia is decentralized in all the chapters in *The Ministry for the Future*. It is passed on by the heat wave survivor. There is a variation of carbon currency that is carried by the Swiss central banker elaborating on carbon currency proposals. Even the institutional optimist Mary Murphy makes her way through the novel bearing the burden of a world which she cannot completely redeem.

Slow Violence and the Geography of Climate Loss

The second critical framework that can be used to read *The Ministry for the Future* is the concept of slow violence formulated by Rob Nixon. According to Nixon, slow violence is violence that takes place over time and unnoticed, a violence of delayed destruction and is scattered across time and space. The paradigmatic example of slow violence is climate change: the most devastating consequences of it are temporal and cumulative and unevenly distributed across space and social classes. According to Nixon, slow violence can easily be overlooked by a hard-charging capitalism, and it increases the susceptibility of ecosystems and of poor, disempowered, and often involuntarily displaced people.

Nixon defines slow violence as “a violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space” (Nixon 2), a framework that maps with uncanny precision onto the climate catastrophes unfolding across the novel.

This geography of loss is an oddly precise register by Robinson in this novel. It is India, not Switzerland, that is hit by the wet-bulb crisis that opens the novel. The ecological catastrophes that slowly build up throughout the middle of the novel are unevenly distributed in the Global South. Mary Murphy has its headquarters in Zurich. The Swiss central bank is the institution managing the carbon market mechanisms that constitute the institutional heart of the optimistic narrative of the novel. *The Ministry for the Future*, as the Cleveland Review of Books (Starks) points out critically, is more of a decentring of American politics rather than a full-fledged explanation of the political paralysis of the largest historical emitter on the planet. The institutional imagination of the novel is based on the Global North institutional apparatuses although the tragedy lies at the Global South. This spatial allocation of mourning and reproduction of solutions replicates, at the narrative scale, the asymmetry that Nixon conceptualizes at the political scale in the concept of slow violence.

The novel knows this imbalance and does not fully address it. The expression of the rage caused by slow violence in the novel is the Children of Kali, the eco-terrorist group to which Frank May, albeit briefly, belongs. They are shooting down aeroplanes. They execute oil executives. They are the type of reaction that Nixon refers to as a result of desperation as the conditions of life-sustenance are undermined. Robinson neither supports their ways, nor does he merely criticize them. They fill the moral space of the novel as the logical consequence of a political system that has not reacted fast enough to the recorded disasters. The sadness that motivates them is the sadness that motivates Mary Murphy. It is not an effect as a strategy.

This is one of the most truthful aspects of the novel. It recognizes that both institutional reform and political violence can be the products of the grief of climate loss, and that neither can be entirely effective in addressing the underlying condition. The slow violence persists irrespective of whether the reaction is legal or illegal, institutional or terrorist. The ice melts. The permafrost thaws. The occurrence of the wet-bulbs has increased. This is what Robinson captures as the actual emotional texture of life in the Anthropocene where there is continuity of loss.

The Techno-Optimist Problem: Geoengineering as Mourning Avoidance

The most pressing and critical issue that *The Ministry for the Future* poses is whether its institutional and technological resolutions are sufficient to the losses it describes. The hopeful narrative of the novel is based on a number of large-scale technological interventions: carbon currency supported by the Swiss central bank, solar geoengineering via stratospheric aerosol injection launched unilaterally by India, half-earth rewilding programmes and a global switch to renewable energy. These are given in some policy particulars and debated with a serious intellectual tone. Robinson is not that naive when it comes to their hardships. However, an ecocritical analysis of this program of solutions finds a structural issue with it: it is human-centric, techno-centric in its vision of what the answer to climate loss ought to resemble.

This is explicitly stated in the interview by Rob Nixon about slow violence and the Anthropocene (Nixon). The eco-modernists with their merciless technophilia should not steal the Anthropocene as Nixon claims. The technology will be included in the strategies required, yet there is an extremely strong tension in eco-modernist thinking of techno-hubris. Techno-hubris has been linked to a re-centralisation of power, which contributes to the shift towards not being participatory democracy and a more equitable world. The geoengineering project of *The Ministry of the Future*, though well intended, is a typical example of techno-hubris. India acts unilaterally. The rest of the world complains, then adjusts. This is being enforced on a planet that lacks a scientific and a political process of making such decisions.

This is not the critique that Robinson is unwise to propose geoengineering as a crisis response. The fact is that geoengineering is a mourning-avoidance mechanism of the emotional logic of the novel. In case the technology succeeds, the grief may be controlled. The loss can be reduced in case the carbon currency is adopted. The institutional optimism of the second half of the novel serves to hold back the affective excess of the initial disaster. The PTSD that Frank May develops turns out to be productive action. The weariness of Mary Murphy is at length changed into wary hope. The sorrow is transformed into politics. However, as the ecocritical literature on eco-anxiety and ecological grief is always fond of observing, this metabolisation is not identical to resolution. The main point that Pihkala makes is that eco-anxiety and grief are inherently good responses to threats and loss, and the necessary response is not to turn it into optimism at once but to process them with the realization that certain losses cannot be reversed.

These are the most honest passages of the novel. The lyric interludes that are sprinkled in *The Ministry for the Future*, in the voice of carbon dioxide, photons, the sun and other non-human subjects, oppose the institutional optimism that envelops them. They are talking out of time, out of human time, and out of human solutions. They are a petro-melancholic residue of the novel: the sorrow that the policy narrative cannot take. Patra identifies in his ecosophical reading of the novel that Robinson is not satisfied with the use of pure statistics to describe one of the most challenging situations. He is grasping at something that cannot be measured by the statistics.

Climate Anxiety as Narrative Form:

Even the form of *The Ministry for the Future* is a manifestation of climate anxiety. The polyphonic form of the novel, its insistence on telling the crisis in dozens of simultaneous points of view, recreates the state of cognition that climate change imposes on people who

actually pay attention to it. There is too much to hold at once. The size of the scale is excessive. The time scale was excessive. The novel simulates this rush by spreading its story over chapters, which range in length, one page, three words, one statistical table. Such a form represents the initial stages of the process of experiencing the state of eco-anxiety, described by Pihkala as the state of unawareness and semi-awareness that comes before full realization of the extent of the crisis.

Simultaneously, the form of the novel shares a kind of psychological strength. The abundance of opinions does not allow one of the characters to shoulder the entire burden of the sorrow. Mary Murphy digs her part. Frank May processes his. The characters that happen to appear in individual chapters and never rejoin have their losses into the vacuum of the story and subsequently move out. This shared mourning is a reflection of what climate psychologists refer to as the community aspect of ecological mourning. The sense of powerlessness adds to the distress caused by the environmental change as the understanding of solastalgia by Albrecht acknowledges. The institutional narrative presented in the novel serves as a restraint to helplessness and provides the reader along with the grief, with a plausible explanation of human agency.

Albrecht et al. define solastalgia as “the distress that is produced by environmental change impacting on people while they are directly connected to their home environment” (Albrecht et al. S95), a condition that the novel distributes across nearly every point-of-view character.

The main critical question is whether this credibility is gained. The novel claims that it is. The ecocritical reading claims that it is a partially earned privilege, as the agency it provides is more institutional and technological, and the losses it recognizes are more human. The non-human world, the true object of the Anthropocene, is kept in the background of the novel. The interludes of lyric put it in voice, the principal story puts it in no agency. It is the boundary of the novel imagining climate justice, and it is where petro-melancholia is most evident: between the mourning one feels at what fossil culture has ruined, and the inability to think of a politics that would not make human institutions the main solution.

Conclusion: The Ministry for The Past

The name of the novel by Robinson is forward looking. *The Ministry for the Future* is an organization that is tasked to safeguard future generations that are yet to be born. But the emotional texture of the novel is retrogressive. It is overrun with mournings of what has already been lost: the humans lost in the heat wave, the species that have already been wiped out before the start of the novel, the glaciers that have already crossed the point of no return. In this interpretation, too, the Ministry of the Future is a ministry of the past, of all the futures that the fossil fuel age ate up before they could be experienced.

This does not criticize the institutional ambition of the novel. Its policy imagination is very serious and worth contemplating. It is insistence that the grief not be too soon translated into optimism, that the petro-melancholia not be techno-institutionalised into a kind of institutional confidence which leaves the underlying emotional reality untouched. The breeds are extinct. The individuals are killed. The ice has melted. They are not the issues that can be reversed by carbon currencies or solar geoengineering. They represent the lasting monument of what the fossil fuel age cost, and the emotional reaction befitting that monument is not hope, but grief.

Through the lenses of petro-melancholia, solastalgia, and slow violence, reading *The Ministry for the Future* is a more complicated novel, despite the impression that it is a policy handbook. It is the novel, which at the affective level, enrolls the entire burden of the so-called Earth emotions, the emotions caused by existing in a world that humanity is methodically destroying. The hope of the Ministry is genuine, and so is its sorrow. They both should receive a critical examination. And the sorrow, the sorrow because it is aimed at what is beyond redemption, can be the truer agent of what the Anthropocene truly needs in its literature.

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