



# Feeling through Empathy, Judging through Sympathy: Environmental Ethics and Eco-terrorism in Fiction

Sintiendo con empatía, juzgando con simpatía: ética medioambiental y ecoterrorismo en la ficción

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## Abstract

This research paper explores the environmental ethics depicted in Kim Stanley Robinson's latest eco-fictional novel *The Ministry for the Future* (2020) through an analysis of empathy, sympathy, and environmental justice. It also seeks to challenge the common division of empathy and sympathy reactions from characters as different from those of people in real life situations to theorize a case for how people might better react and understand their role in the face of climatic crisis as a consequence of reading fiction. In so doing, it accentuates the importance of reading environmental literature to awaken readers' sensitivities and trace paths outside the "planetary crisis" (Ghosh, 2021). Methodologically, it borrows concepts from reading-response criticism (character, empathy, and sympathy) to navigate the fabric of eco-criticism: the ethics of climate change through the injustices portrayed in Robinson's novel. In addition to this two-dimensional approach, this paper is clearly divided in three main sections. In the first section, I approach empathy and sympathy in various ways including the former being the precursor of the later for rhetorical purposes; that is, it is unique in the making of resonances for readers. Also, I argue that readers are lured to feel empathy through the novel's imagery and through readers' predilection to "read minds" (Zunshine, 2006) or take "imaginative leaps" (Sutrop, 2000). The

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second section inspects unity through climate outrage and nation-wide agency in the aftermath of the Indian heatwave. Such unity scaffolds the last section. The third part searches an ethical dimension to eco-terrorism in the novel given a shift of national intersubjective Indian unity that entitles climate justice to their own hands. This investigation concludes by suggesting directions to an analysis of empathy and sympathy within the realm of realistic, climate fiction.

**Keywords:** environmental ethics, sympathy, empathy, eco-terrorism, climate justice



### Resumen

Esta investigación explora las éticas ambientales representadas en la última novela de ecoficción de Kim Stanley Robinson *The Ministry for the Future* (2020) a través del análisis de empatía, simpatía y justicia ambiental. Asimismo, pretende retar la división común entre la empatía y simpatía sentidas por personajes y aquella sentida por personas para formular una hipótesis de cómo las personas pueden reaccionar mejor y entender su rol al enfrentar las crisis de cambio climático como un resultado de leer ficción. De esta forma, este artículo acentúa la importancia la literatura de cambio climático para despertar la sensibilidad de los lectores y trazar caminos fuera de “la crisis planetaria (Ghosh, 2021). Metodológicamente, este ensayo toma prestados conceptos de la estética de recepción (personaje, empatía y simpatía) para navegar de una forma ecocrítica las éticas del cambio climático por medio de las injusticias descritas en la novela de Robinson. Conjunto a este abordaje bidimensional, esta investigación está dividida en tres claras partes. En la primera, abordo la empatía y la simpatía en varias formas, incluyendo como la primera es la precursora de la segunda por motivos retóricos; es decir, es particular en crear resonancias con los lectores. También, debato cómo los lectores son invitados a sentir empatía a través del imaginario de la novela y su predilección para “leer mentes” (Zunshine, 2006) o arriesgarse a dar “saltos imaginativos” (Sutrop, 2000). La segunda parte inspecciona la unidad creada por medio de indignación climática y agencia a nivel de una nación como una repercusión de la ola de calor que sufre India. Esta unidad es la plataforma para la última sección. Esta busca una dimensión ética para el eco-terrorismo en la novela dado el cambio en la intersubjetividad que une a los indios a nivel nacional y que les autoriza a tomar la justicia climática por sus cuentas. Esta investigación concluye con sugerencias para futuras investigaciones de empatía y simpatía dentro del ámbito de ficción de cambio climático realista.

**Palabras claves:** éticas ambientales, simpatía, empatía, eco-terrorismo, justicia climática

## Introduction

Emotions and emotion-driven actions are linked in Greta Thunberg's statement during the climate change summit of 2019 as she states, "this is all wrong. I shouldn't be up here. I should be back in school on the other side of the ocean. Yet, you've all come to us, young people, for hope (?): How dare you?" ([Guarding News, 00:12-00:28](#)). Certainly, this is not the only instance in which feelings of anxiety, imperativeness, and ownership are elicited to an audience. Despite this, most people remain feeling somewhat helpless to contribute to the mitigation of climate change. In fact, a rising number of headlines indicate that "climate anxiety" is becoming a pressing phenomenon.<sup>1</sup> To better grasp what moves us from nonchalantly ignoring a call to arms to becoming part of the solution through collective social, political, and civically informed actions, this investigation arises. Thus, it analyzes Kim Stanley Robinson's latest eco-fiction novel *The Ministry for the Future* (2020), which portrays technological, economic, political, physical, and social struggles to avert the direst consequences of climate change in a near, almost-immediate future that is quite parallel to our reality as it references the Paris Agreement and is set to occur within the current and succeeding decades.

Similar to *New York 2140*, his 2017 novel that envisions a "reformation of capitalism" focused on a futurist version of

New York alone<sup>2</sup>, *The Ministry for the Future* portrays a world-wide, economic transition toward a post-capitalist economy through the cultural appreciation and usage of carbon coins, which are "monetized credits awarded for keeping fossil fuels in the ground and for sequestering atmospheric carbon" ([Abbott, 2020, paras. 5](#)). As Robinson himself comments elsewhere, "[these are] outlines of a political economy that is more horizontalized" and inclusive ([Figueres, Carnac & Dickinson, 2021, 51:36-51:43](#)). Nonetheless, the change is not uniquely achieved by the insertion of credit, for that is not the nature of climate change. Rather, climate change is intersectional as the novel compellingly shows how "decarbonization" "global economy," "violence," "climate justice," and "geoengineering" intersect to interact with one another in its fictional fabric ([Frame and Flamm, 2021, paras. 7](#)). One of these key factors is the fictional existence of the agency called "The Ministry for the Future."

Created to defend and guarantee the rights of future generations and to correct the failure of promises thus far unmet by the Paris Agreement in the "first global stocktake" ([Robinson, 2020, p.15](#)), a pro-climate agency called "The Ministry for the Future" emerges in Zurich, Switzerland, in 2025, and it is run by Mary Murphy, "ex-minister of foreign affairs in the government of the Irish Republic" ([p. 17](#)). This agency's purview is the defense of "all living creatures present and future who cannot speak for themselves" ([p. 16](#)). Nonetheless,

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1 See titles such as CNBC's "Climate change hopelessness is a real condition—these experts have advice on how to cope," Iberdrola's "Eco-anxiety: the psychological aftermath of the climate crisis," and Sally Weintrobe's chapter on "The difficult problem of anxiety in thinking about climate change" to name just a few.

2 For more, consult, [Chinchilla-Mora, L. \(2021\). Reformed Capitalism through Radical Ecology in Kim Stanley Robinson's New York 2140.](#)

shortly after the inauguration of this institution, India suffers from a traumatizing and decimating heatwave of which Frank May, an American aid worker who labors in Uttar Pradesh, is one of the few survivors. After a tough recovery and overcoming some symptoms of PTSD, he stalks and kidnaps Mary Murphy to violently confront her about the inefficiency, inaction, and apparent lack of empathy toward the affected Indians that the *The Ministry for the Future* and *the rest of the world* show. It is within this indifference that I conduct this analysis themed in an intersection of the political, the social and the physical: I seek to explore the relationship between environmental justice and violence through an evaluation of empathy and sympathy as agents of narrative change.

### **The Reception for the Ministry for the Future**

*The Ministry for the Future* by Kim Stanley Robinson is a novel addition to the climate change literature, which is why it has not been widely explored beyond the work of a few scholars and columnists. To be more precise, Başak Almaz analyzes it in his master's thesis in 2022 along with Robinson's *Forty Signs of Rain* and *New York 2140* "within the framework of [them being examples of] ecological economics<sup>3</sup> as an alternative to neoliberal capitalist economic models" (p. 1). In the case of *The Ministry for the Future*, Almaz examines the role of the carbon coin in a

transition toward ecological economics since it is a resource used to rescue the world from dooming into climate "ecological meltdown" (Patterson as cited in Almaz, 2022, p. 70). By being a contribution to saving the world, it becomes both a form of quantitative easing (p. 70) and, in light of his argument, a lynchpin for the ecological economics, which is supposed to value other ecosystems (p. 72). In such analysis, he also uses Herman Daly's "steady-state economy" to make the case for an even distribution of resources that may ensure the collective future (pp. 67-69) through an ethic of "enoughness" (Daly as cited in Almaz, 2022, p. 69). In the words of the Robinson himself, this is a "horizontalization of economic power and of adequacy for all" (Figueres, Carnac & Dickinson, 2021, 51:26-51:31). Nonetheless, economics is just one side of this multi-sided issue.

Stepping away from the economic focus, Bump analyzes post-traumatic-stress-symptoms<sup>4</sup> in his book review to indicate that by addressing climate anxiety and mental burdens, Robinson is depicting "the structure of feeling of the time"<sup>5</sup> (2020, p. 141). Such "structure of feeling," Rothman (2022) defines as "an invisible scaffold, unique to its period, on which our emotions hang" (paras. 38). These two remarks recognize the emotional aspect of the issue, yet they keep it shallow and overgeneralized without really engaging

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3 According to Almaz, ecological economics is a "holistic" approach to the economy that recognizes that "human economic activities are merely one component of an entire ecosystem;" thus, the main objective of ecological economics is to "improve the quality of life of societies, not to grow monetized consumption" (16).

4 Termed as such by Jerome as Frank, the main character, fails to exhibit the full spectrum of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder and, rather, suffers certain "symptoms."

5 As Jerome explains, and as Robinson himself mentions in the novel, this is a concept borrowed from Raymond Williams.

in how the narrative does one thing or the other. In other words, Robinson is indeed pressing on real existing worries of our time, something any climate change novelist is does, but how does it happen? Can it lead to any change?

Finally, there are some mentions of social change and political action as Kalm (2021) argues that India's decision to spray the sky—despite other nations' opposition to the matter—is an example of “self-differentiation” (Murry Bowen as cited in paras. 7), which is a “disruptive change” that usually motivates others to change. In so doing, he refers to nations as “sick family systems” making the case for how India can lead the way to change by being a role model (paras. 7). For Kalm, “rage can provide energy to take corrective action to repair and restore homeostasis” (paras. 7). Indeed, this is something that Almaz (2022) agrees on as he argues that the eco-terrorist attacks act “indirect[ly]” to eventually contribute to the ongoing economic changes since companies adapt to the threats of eco-terrorist changing their *modus operandi*. (p. 65). It is very clear that the novel, as Rothman (2022) comments, serves as a platform to show “what the news can't;” that is, allowing people to understand the full spectrum of future possibilities before those consequences take place: it maps our “routes” (paras. 59) out of this planetary crisis, and even the plausible collective responses that it can prompt.

Despite the angles given, the only in-depth analysis conducted at a scholarly level has been Almaz,' yet it regards economic restructuring. It may be worth recognizing that Bump, Kalm and even Rothman do

strike good points about emotional, social, and political struggles and achievements, but do little to understand the relationship between emotion and action. With this in mind, this investigation explores the relationship(s) between environmental justice and emotion, which I argue are inextricably bound to the creation of a sense of solidarity that, (I) helps justify the eco-terrorism in the novel and (II) helps generate fictional understanding of probable scenarios for readers to inspire social mobility.

To this end, this paper lays theoretical foundations for the concepts of character, narrative empathy, and narrative sympathy (concepts from reading-response criticism), yet it uses them to explore eco-critical concerns within the novel. It is in this essence that this research is part of the new “ecologies of affect” or the “ecocritical appropriations of affect theory” (Weik, 2017, p. 10). Accordingly, it first proceeds to explore the lethal heatwave suffered in India through Frank's testimony to trace how his experience is narrated sympathetically (and at points empathetically) as to evoke similar feelings in readers. This mechanism, I argue with caution, may possibly motivate *real* civic involvement since how similar characters are to real people is one of the factors that accounts for our emotional engagement with a text (Sklar, 2013, p. 15)<sup>6</sup>. Second, it analyzes the sense of community and solidarity built through climate outrage, to then make the case for ethical eco-terrorism. All throughout, this research, I purposefully

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6 Dr. Sklar is actually summarizing findings from multiple authors when he writes this statement. See *Art of Sympathy* for more.

conflate the concepts of readers and characters to theorize how the divide between literature and real-life climate actions can be bridged.

While the primary source of this investigation is a fictional work, this investigation theorizes on reader's empathy and sympathy to extract the value of interacting with literature to motivate climate action. It is, thus, worth mentioning the capacity of literature to change perspectives. Drawing from Felski, Fialho concurs that the role of literature is transformative one that grants meaning and purpose to life (2019 as cited in, p. 5). Fialho's "transformative reading" research in 2018 highlights "insights into oneself and others;" thus, in her empirical research, she identifies six constituents of transformative reading: imagery, readers' "identification," "experience-taking," "sympathy," "negative or positive character evaluation," and "aesthetic awareness" (as cited in Fialho, p. 8). The latter translates to evocative phrasing. The extent to which these factors influence sympathy, solidarity and community is axiomatic in this investigation as she states that "the result of this complex engagement with texts (self-other insights) is where modifications of personal meanings are observed," (p. 8) for they lead to *self-reflection*. Similarly, "we build perceptual and memory representations" when interacting with narratives, argues Zacks (as cited in Weik, 2017, p. 6), and that makes literature have a real impact in people's lives. Notably, Mar's, Oatley's and Peterson's research findings in 2009 visualize that fiction goes hand in hand with "social support" (as cited in Weik, 2017, p. 81).

For these reasons, I claim that *The Ministry for the Future* invites these reflections by equating characters to real life people, thus, inviting introspection. In so doing, I side with Sklar to claim that "the presumed distance between the real and the fictional is closed [...] by the connections that we draw, through our imaginations, between the literary work and our lives" (*Art of Sympathy*, 2013, p. 12). Under this light, I shall begin arguing that not only by analyzing our emotional relationships within the characters of the novels, but also by empathizing and sympathizing (as readers) with the characters, a profound impact in our role within the climate change crisis can spur.

### **Hybridity: Characters as Characters and as People**

While characters have mostly been kept within the confines of fiction as allusive of real people, recent research suggests defining them as "dynamic constructions that constantly negotiate mimetic humanity and unavoidable artificiality as well as elusive, inferred lives and multimodal, repeatable bodies (Varis, 2019, p. 83).<sup>7</sup> By being hybrid in their nature—that is, by being more than just imaginary people in a work of fiction, but intrinsically connected to humans—characters can operate "in unique ways as flexible, potentially trans-medial and immortal beings" (p. 84). It is through this definition that the novel's potential to mimic real life scenarios and thus enact possible solutions surfaces. Indeed, such is also Varela's view when asserting that readers can "vicariously liv[e] with

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<sup>7</sup> See Sklar and Polvinen (2019) for an empirical study that uses this definition and compares it with mimetic and structuralist theories to understand "how readers process "people" in fiction."



the actions of the characters within the fictional world (imagining emotions, sensations and bodily movement)” (Varela, Thompson and Rosch as cited in Polvinen and Sklar, 2019, p. 11). Weik von Mossner (2017) has also claimed that “our bodies act as sounding boards for our mental simulations of storyworlds and of character’s perceptions, emotions, and actions within those virtual words” (p. 10), which means we are wired to believe characters to be very similar to people: understanding them as such may be more productive than harmful for the purposes of environmental storytelling and actions.

Hybrid characters, then, do not belong necessarily to fiction that provides an *unauthentic stimulus* of emotions — or “quasi-emotions” (Walton as cited in Sklar, 2013, p. 15), but rather, embraces viewing fiction as a “full spectrum of real emotions” (Sklar and Polvinen, 2019, p. 11). The opportunity to experience vicariously through the actions of others gives readers the chance to self-reflect and feel sympathy. However, to what extent do they feel empathy?

### Sympathy and Empathy: Ethical Dimensions

Although discussed vastly, most scholars’ definition of empathy intersects with the “absorption of the individual in the feelings or experiences of another” (Sklar, 2013, p. 24). Further, it is also thought of as an “emotional chameleon” that “takes on the emotional experience as our own (p. 24), a “vicarious feeling” (p. 25). Similarly, Keen (2007) determines it to be the experience of “feel[ing] what we believe to be the emotions of others”

(p. 5), different from sympathy: a “more complex differentiated feeling for another” (p. 4). However, a direct link between empathy and action is rather difficult to draw because the intimate level to which it connects us with the other’s experience. I shall argue on this further below.

In fact, Keen widely researches altruism and empathy yet states that “many people feel others’ distress but do nothing to alleviate it” (p. 19). In her deep analysis, she mentions that the fallacies or overgeneralizations of “familiarity<sup>8</sup>” and “here-and-now<sup>9</sup>” obscure the usefulness of empathy in servicing others (p. 20), and this is a position that is widely held by multiple psychologists according to Keen. She concludes by stating that “the literature on empathy and altruism [...] does little to encourage reliance on empathy as inexorably leading to altruism” (p. 26)<sup>10</sup>. While not all action needs to be altruistic to be effective, focusing exclusively on “empathy” to direct this analysis could flaw the comprehension of how emotions play a role in climate justice. For more comprehensive ethical concerns, I shall dissect sympathy as well.

Widely researched, Sklar’s definition of sympathy differs in its interdisciplinarity as it covers the following aspects:

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- 8 An argument by Martin Hoffman (as cited in Keen, 2007, p. 20) that downplays the role of media in over-exposing masses to empathetic responses, resulting in a kind of “empathic burnout.”
  - 9 The inability to act or response given distance from the situation witnessed, read or experience. This is very common in literature as one cannot do much for the characters one reads other than feeling for them.
  - 10 See further commentary on narrative empathy and altruism as defined by various authors in Keen’s *Empathy and the Novel* pp. 90-92.

(1) “Awareness of suffering as “something to be alleviated,” (2) “Frequently, the judgment that the suffering of another is undeserved or unfair,” (3) “Negative, unpleasant or uncomfortable feelings on behalf of the sufferer” and (4) “Desire to help” (*Art of Sympathy*, 2013, p. 35). Consequently, I believe it is safe to draw a direct correlation with what is commonly known as “solidarity” and understand it as a kind of “sympathy-in-action.” Using this definition of sympathy within the context of climate despair is paramount since it visualizes (I); sympathy as a “social phenomenon,” (II); it “involve[s] ‘common-sense’ notions of fairness and suffering, (III); it “results from or produces the motivation (‘desire’) to eliminate its cause” and (iv); it “possesses an inherently ethical dimension” (p. 35). A last compelling argument to use sympathy and not only empathy is the difference between reader’s empathy and reader’s sympathy. The former closes the gap between readers and characters, whereas the latter enlarges it (p. 49). This distance created by narrative sympathy, Sklar contends, is what allows “judgement of the unfairness of the character’s situation (p. 54), and what, I claim, ultimately allows us to judge the characters’ lived unfairness in *The Ministry for the Future*.

### **Emotional & Traumatic: The Indian Heatwave**

“When does a heatwave go from uncomfortable to deadly?” (Sommer, G. Barber, Ramirez, 2022, 3:16-3:19). It is not only a question often asked by real people in the pressing heatwaves of this century, but also it is likely that this was

a question present in the minds of readers as they pick up the *Ministry for the Future* and read how multiple Indians, among them the protagonist Frank May, run out of ideas to cool themselves down: first, using the AC’s, then resting under shadows, finally, submerging themselves in water. Unknowingly, the characters are suffering from an episode of wet-bulb temperature, which Larry Keeney defines as the “the critical environmental limit;” i.e., “the combination of temperature and humidity beyond which either they can’t sweat enough, or they can’t evaporate enough sweat to maintain their body temperature” (Sommer, G. Barber & Ramirez, 2022, 1:10-1:21). The novel drastically demonstrates how this “theoretical limit for humans to survive” (Almaz, 2022, p. 62)<sup>11</sup> becomes deadly irrespective of citizens’ age. In this first section I inspect how the novel lures readers to feel empathy: (1) the role of the novel’s imagery to set the atmosphere for sympathetic responses, (2) the readers’ cognitive predispositions to feel for the Indians’ adversity, and (3) the novel’s “aesthetic distance” as it compels readers to move from feelings of empathy to sympathy.

In terms of imagery, the *Ministry for the Future* introduces the readers to a rather pessimist and unbearable environment using evocative phrasing —Fialho’s “aesthetic awareness” (2019, p. 8)—from a homocentric perspective since the heat suppresses the very human quality of existing: “too hot to think” and “too hot to cough” (Robinson, 2020, p. 3), mere cognitive and

<sup>11</sup> Almaz is referencing Columbia’s Climate School article “Potentially Fatal Combinations of Humidity and Heat are Emerging across the Globe” by Kevin Krajick.



physiological actions. Further, not only does it thwart these, but also it hinders the ability to grieve others, affecting humanity at an emotional level: “the day passed. Wails of grief were now muffled to groans. People were too hot and thirsty to make any fuss, even when their children died” (p. 9). This may be startling for readers considering that after the first night, “every town was a morgue, and it was as hot as ever, maybe hotter” (p. 8). As the depiction heightens, the only alternative left is to submerge themselves in the lake hoping for the day to end, but the death toll accrues, again with radical imagery:

People were dying faster than ever. There was no coolness to be had. All the children were dead, all the old people were dead. People murmured what should have been screams of grief; those who could still move shoved bodies out of the lake, or out toward the middle where they floated like logs, or sank. (p.12)

In the same way, the metaphors used to describe Frank emerging off the water with “his limbs [...] cooked spaghetti draping his bones” and “balancing his head carefully on his spine” (p. 12) are meant to be shocking, potentially leaving a lasting impression in the minds of readers. Readers are also informed that, in total, “twenty million people died” (p. 23) by the end of heatwave. These descriptions of the the heatwave bring readers closer to the characters by bestowing “intimate access to the mind and experience of a character [. . .] [since] we are said to gain access to the reality of a character, to collapse the distance between ourselves and another” (Sklar, 2013, p. 52). A similar way

to understand the role of this vocabulary is by thinking about it as an “invitation,” to use Weik’s term, to experience an “embodied simulation,” in which our “actions, emotions and corporeal sensations” are activated (Freedberg & Gallese as cited in Weik, 2017, p. 21). In this instance, however, the text persuades us through narrative *empathy*, a “rhetorical attempt to persuade readers to feel *with [emphasis added] them*” (Keen, p. 140 as cited in Sklar, 2013, p. 52). Thus, it must be clear that readers’ first cognitive-emotional response is likely to be empathy given the imagery of the novel. This is natural as empathy may be a “precursor” to sympathy (Keen, 2007, p. 4).

Another way in which readers gain access to the character’s state of mind is through mind reading. Zunshine (2006) refers to mind-reading, or Theory of Mind (ToM), as “our ability to explain people’s behavior in terms of their thoughts, feelings, beliefs, and desires” (p. 9).<sup>12</sup> What we are doing is imaginatively approximating<sup>13</sup> the experience depicted in the text. The text, then moves from Frank actively trying to help others to attempting to survive, and his direct discourse slowly diminishes turning the whole description into what seems like an impressively quiet scene, full of pain and oppressive inutterability forced by the heat. Cohen explains, then, that humans have a “tendency to interpret and predict” (as cited in Zunshine, p. 9), especially in context-dependent situations

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12 You can find a direct correlation between ToM and Caracciolo’s term “consciousness attribution” in Weik’s *Affective Ecologies* page 27.

13 This imaginative leap to imagine we are others is Margit Sutrop’s. For more, see “Fiction and Imagination: The Anthropological Function of Literature” (2000).

(Zunshine p. 9). As it unfolds, Frank's account is less personal, and it mutates to mere self-preservation. Though it must be clear that the narration does not occur in first P.O.V. at any point in this chapter, it is an increasingly more context-dependent scenario that is depicted, so readers must engage in these imaginary "leaps".

While Zunshine's premises sprout off real-people-based research, she also clarifies the following: "On some level, then, works of fiction manage to 'cheat' these mechanisms into 'believing' that they are in the presence of material that they were 'designed' to process, that is, that they are in the presence of agents endowed with a potential for a rich array of intentional stances" (Sperber, p. 49 as cited in Zunshine, p. 12). In so doing, readers are "effortless[ly]" or "intuitively" assuming Frank's "mental state" (Zunshine, p. 16) through a combination of imagery and imaginative leaps which approximate the experience of helping and then, surviving the heat. Readers can visualize "the intake of steamy air and the effort of coughing" making "hotter than ever" (Robinson, 2020, p. 2) by attuning their senses to "trigger" the appropriate feelings that allow a sympathetic connection with him (Hogan, p. 187 as cited in Sklar, 2013, p. 53). These are two mechanisms that get us close to the characters or, as Sklar would put it, "collapse the distance between ourselves and another" (p. 53). Referencing Husserl, Zahavi (2017) puts it very concretely: "the mind of the other, his thinking, feeling, desiring, is intuitively present in the gestures, the intonation, and in the facial expressions" (as cited in p. 40). Robinson gives

all these sensorial details which heighten the empathic resonances for readers. More importantly, the *Ministry for the Future* does not merely achieve this character identification by compellingly using hybrid characters and tricking readers to feel for them as real people. Rather, there is an ethical purpose to bringing readers so close as to feel empathy.

Hamington (2017) underscores the importance of "care ethics" in empathy by highlighting various aspects, three of which appertain this investigation. First, empathy "reinforces an alternative moral ontology" (p. 267). By this, he means that empathy allows people to navigate human differences and similarities<sup>14</sup>. This is highly useful to explore India's unfair catastrophe as the heatwave on its own exemplifies privilege of others over them. In so doing, "empathy and care give us the means to create common cause across intersectional identity differences" (Hamington, p.268). This, as I will suggest later, plays a crucial role in decision making to bring environmental justice, and it is also related to the Hamington's second proposition. Second, empathy has a "foundation for moral action [. . .] [that is,] caring action is motivated by empathy because the empathetic feelings help create a visceral connection between people" (p. 268). In the analysis of *The Ministry for the Future*, this contributes to the creation of positive solidarity, as I will illustrate in the second portion. Third, empathy "spurs moral progress" (268). He asseverates that "because empathizing with the other is central to care,

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<sup>14</sup> Hamington's arguments are about "people." I am arguing for such being the case with readers and through literature given the line of my argumentation.

one begins with an epistemic process, namely understanding the other, before determining which caring action to undertake” (p. 268). In this way, it is clear to see that while empathy shortens the distance between people, it may also do so between readers and characters; nonetheless action is less immediate because the time spent to judge may “temporarily” obscure our ability to judge (Sklar, 2013, p. 48).

Thus, it seems like empathy thwarts our ability to evaluate something ethically and, potentially, act on it. For this reason, I claim here that the text does not benefit uniquely from luring readers to feel empathy; instead, it initially engages readers empathically through such imagery to, then, move them toward a narrative *sympathy*<sup>15</sup>. One major distinction between reader empathy and sympathy, Sklar makes clear, is precisely the possibility to judge the situation as akin to an outsider or witness (p. 48). Thus, “how are regaining enough distance to be able to judge the unfairness lived by the characters?” is the next question to tackle.

In analyzing the transition from narrative empathy toward narrative sympathy is paramount to factor “aesthetic distance” in. Readers are at a good distance, which allows them to feel sympathy for Frank. Indeed, the expositional progression of the introductory chapter

moves toward witnessing of injustice, which manages to generate a sympathetic response as reader’s role is “within the scene to observe” (Sklar, 2013, p. 55). Simply put, the imagery is calling them to feel empathy while the aesthetic distance is placing them in a convenient witnessing position to see Frank as an active character who persistently tries to help others during the crisis. For example, “go to my clinic at two [. . .] get the old ones and the little ones out of this” and “go to the lake [. . .] the water will keep you more cool” (Robinson, 2020, p. 3). For this reason, imagery and narration may be working together luring readers into the mind of the characters to move them into an invisible semi-character role who is able to see others’ suffering while remaining only emotionally affected —yet physically speaking — unharmed. It is in this way that readers move from empathy to sympathy.

To discuss narrative persuasion, it is also true that readers witness how Frank is violently dispossessed (at gunpoint) of his AC unit, which was helping a good amount of people to withstand the heat. Narratively speaking, it is possible too that, when such unit gets stolen with a “we need this” —rather than a “I need this” —the text is luring readers into a feeling of sympathy as Sklar (2013) comments that “[stories] can ‘persuade’ readers to reevaluate and even to feel sympathy for those clearly, even radically, outside the boundaries of their [our] ‘we groups’”<sup>16</sup> (p.

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15 Another theoretical way of grasping this may be using Cacciariolo’s (from 2014 *The Experientiality of Narrative: An Enactivist Approach*) concepts of “consciousness-enactment”, the reader’s access to the character’s consciousness and slowly experience how the narrative shifts its focus to “consciousness attribution” a more distanced way of feeling for the other by means of a third person access. These definitions can be found in Weik’s *Affective Ecologies* page 27.

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16 Horstein’s concept is used by Wispé’s in arguing that, as Sklar puts it, “people tend to respond sympathetically to those they consider part of their we group” (as cited in *Art of Sympathy*, p. 40)

40). This “scene” might lead to a feeling of helplessness and even pity for Frank and his guests, but ultimately, the suffering is collective; as a result, I contend that narrative sympathy leads to no judgment against the act of violence, but rather against the climatic injustice. In this way, “by placing readers in the role of observers, narratives thus create the preconditions for judgement,”<sup>17</sup> (Sklar, 2013, p.55) which would likely be the response of this happening. Elsewhere, Sklar also comments that “the progression of judgments that narratives naturally prompt in readers develops cumulative attitudes and judgments, and this applies even to relatively intuitive or implicit judgements that nevertheless operate on our sensibilities and activate our ethical awareness” (2017, p. 455 *Empathy’s Neglected Cousin*). I simultaneously concur with Nussbaum in that there is an ethical dimension to sympathy since “it includes a judgement that the other person’s distress is bad” (p. 303 as cited in Sklar, 2013, p. 54), which is the feeling that “witnessing” (narratively speaking) Frank’s situation and being aware of others experiencing the same leave no space for outrage but rather post-crisis collective outrage. Accordingly, persecution of culprits takes another form. As will be seen in the next sections, this search for culprits is what gives dimension to eco-terrorist attacks somewhat of an ethical aura, and what ultimately leads to change, a change that sprouts out of sympathetic responses which emulate communitarian unity.

## Formation of In-Groups: Community and Solidarity

The heatwave has a galvanizing and unifying effect in all of India. In this section, I examine how climate injustice edifices solidarity and how apathy and inaction nurture violence in a kind of justified, righteous, and ethical eco-terrorism.

In the *Ministry for the Future*, Mary Murphy is informed that India is ready to start a “solar radiation management program,” which entails spraying the sky with sulfur dioxide to cool down the temperature and avoid any future traumatic heatwaves (Robinson, 2020, p. 18). Naturally, she reminds her colleague Chandra Mukajee, representative for the Paris Agreement in India, that “no atmospheric interventions [are allowed] without consultation and agreement” (p. 19). To which Chandra instantly replies, “we are breaking the agreement” (p. 19), and concludes with a truth that expresses her consternation and fury:

What you need to know is that we are scared and angry too. It was Europe and America and China who caused this heat wave, not us. I know we have burned a lot of coal in the last few decades, but it’s nothing compared to the West. And yet we signed the Agreement to do our part. Which we have done. *But no one else is fulfilling commitments, no one is paying the developing nations, and now we have this heat wave.* [emphasis added] And another one could happen next week! Conditions are much the same! (Robinson, 2020, pp. 19-20)

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17 Sklar draws from Phelan in this argumentation. See Sklar’s *The Art of Sympathy* p. 55 for more.

First, to bring focus to the italicized information, Ghosh (2021) is right to assert that the accumulation of wealth has been giving shape to the intensification of the “planetary crisis” during the last decade<sup>18</sup> (p. 142). Chandra, thus, is righteously calling others’ wrongdoing a charade of commitment to the Paris Agreement. Second, such an iconoclastic decision is just the beginning of a series of dissident actions that aim to awaken consciousness in others. A foundational aspect of this action is the consolidation of “we” in the statement. As a source of climatically induced unity, a feeling of community is developed within India in what Horstein would call a “we group,” (Wispé p. 322 as cited in Sklar), a common situation in which “people respond sympathetically to those they consider part of their ‘we group’” (Sklar, 2013, p. 40). As the Indian heat wave becomes an engraved episode in their collective memory, they now decide to demand change as a united force. For this reason, Kalm (2021) is right to point out that it is the “racial, social and economic” injustices that allow “most people to feel part of their community, [resulting in] a sense of togetherness [that] emerges [that is,] that allows for feelings of empowerment and community action and a growing belief in the positivity of small and large steps to deal with meaninglessness, pessimism, and cynicism” (p. 14). In the words of

Gosh, India was forced into “a strategy of conflict that pits people with high per capita greenhouse gas emissions against those whose emissions are much lower” (2021, p. 167). Nonetheless, rather than inactively waiting for their turn to become a semi-hegemony with privilege inaccessibility to climatic consequences, they decide to act. It is sufficiently evident that little accountability will be held by those hegemonies, even Ghosh remarks that “the idea that the laws of nature operate outside the domain of human agency makes it possible to justify inaction (p. 167). Inaction, as Robinson exemplifies, has not made enough progress, so action might. In essence, their shared identity as nation and as victims of climate injustice “mobilizes” what Van Vugt (2017) calls “proenvironmental action” (p. 245) in his essay titled “Averting the Tragedy of Commons.” Within this picture of shared suffering, Keen’s authorial strategic empathy” seems apposite in reasoning why Robinson zooms in such pivotal agreement: “[it] “occurs when an author employs empathy in the crafting of fictional texts, in the service of ‘a scrupulously visible political interest’” (Keen, 2010, p. 83). A sense of unity and a sense of responsibility is formed and a closer understanding of it draws readers closer to feel for the characters, potentially tracing the path act. Finally, readers also learn of the Children of Kali, a radical group whose message and actions are eco-terroristic. Naturally, this group is the device through which it is possible to navigate the ethics of eco-terrorism.

18 Ghosh further comments that “climate change, mass dislocations, pollution, environmental degradation, political breakdown, and the Covid-19 pandemic are all cognate effects of the ever-increasing acceleration of the last three decades. Not only are these crises interlinked—they are all deeply rooted in history, and they are all ultimately driven by the dynamics of global power” (158).



## Ethical Eco-Terrorism

It is already a dilemma to ponder whether there is something even ethical in eco-terrorism itself, but ethics is a concept that can mutate with the given circumstances as I will hint in this section. While Svoboda (2020) considers the *Ministry for the Future*, “morally difficult for the role it envisions for violence” (paras. 16) since, he claims, Robinson attempts not to “valorize” violence in the making of policy (paras. 12), Almaz (2022) brings up the dimension of it contributing to Herman Daly’s “ecological economics” to facilitate the transition to carbon coins in the novel (p. 77). Personally, I focus on it being a cultural backlash to the climate injustice suffered thus partially navigating a distance between the two perspectives.

As a cultural reference to the work being done by India, Gandhi’s word “satyagraha” is referred to as “peace force” and is later explained that, when written “Grahasthya,” it can mean “force peace,” which makes it more active as it turns it into a verb (Robinson, 2020, p. 388). Taking this into account, perhaps, terrorism can achieve good outcomes: “the work that you do here helps save the world, it forces peace on the world. Keep at it” (p. 388). Grahasthya’s significance lies underneath as it reveals a hidden ethic of achieving bigger ends despite confrontations. In this manner, India is not only politically, but also culturally, demanding changes as climate injustice has altered what is believed to be ethical. To illustrate how, I will refer to what Harari (2015) calls “intersubjective” reality or “fiction.” This is, he explains, an imagined and cooperative order that helps human

collaborate with one another (pp. 116-117). While money, human rights, and legislations are part of such “imagined orders,” it is evident that grounding Indians’ actions in this intersubjective, foundational principle brings ethical dimensions to their doing. Harari further elucidates that “these imagined orders are inter-subjective” and that, while it may not be so easy to achieve because it involves massive mobilization and mass conviction, “in order to change an existing imagined order we must first believe in an alternative imagined order (p. 118). Simply put, since many culturally believe in the wellbeing of acting together to demand the betterment of the climate, the decrease of Co2 emissions, and the commitment to a more equal world, Indians’ actions are rather justifiable. Their imagined intersubjectivity is at odds with the lucrative interests of others, and that seems to justify their doing. Ghosh (2021) comments “it is these inequities, rather than GDP or per capita income, that will determine how countries are impacted by the planetary crisis” (p. 138), and the Indians in *The Ministry For the Future* are not only a reified global image of that impact but are also not willing to repeat a decimating catastrophe at the expense of others’ selfishness. Despite these attacks, it is still possible to argue that *The Ministry for The Future* does align with the vision of Indian actions partaking in an ecological approach for the future since, referencing Pope Francis, Ghosh states “a true ecological approach always becomes a social approach; it must integrate questions of justice in debates on the environment, so as to hear both the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor” (as cited in p. 233). Under this light, ecological terrorism seems to approximate a valid ecological approach.



Finally, it must be mentioned that Robinson himself confesses that he is depicting a clear a common “cognitive error in the human brain”: people’s underestimation that they can suffer from such devastation until they do (Goodell, 2020 paras. 8). In reality, the novel also has the intention to awaken a sense of urgency in readers; to tell readers about the likelihood of such behavior and how “radicalized” violence can become as something “smart” (that helps change policy) or “stupid” (that can merely be targeted to humans) (Goodwell, 2020, paras. 12-13) for the sake of hatred. Thus, the role of violence is ancillary and directed to attaining better ends; that is, it is a “social epidemic” capable of “wide-scale political, economic and ecological even in the face of ambivalence and hostility” (Taylor as cited in Ghosh, 2021, p. 244). By looking at its intersubjective righteousness and entitled sense of changing-agency, India’s eco-terrorism becomes ethical. A “deep flip in the global unconscious” (Robinson, 2020, p. 286) is the result of solidary forces that do shape an intersubjective reality in the hopes of making it more equal.

### Final remarks

This investigation has purposefully blurred the lines between characters’ reactions and readers’ actions with the aim to make the case for how stories might shape our collective impact in bringing climate justice to the “global planetary crisis,” as Ghosh has called it. In so doing, I have claimed that *The Ministry for the Future* invites readers to evaluate their own political, legal, socio-cultural, and ethical standing in the global picture for

“it is empathy that makes it possible for humans to understand each other’s stories: this is why storytelling needs to be at the core of a global politics of vitality (Ghosh, 2021, p. 240). Through this analysis, it is possible to conclude the following.

In closing the space between the way readers might react and the way characters react in the fictional work, it must be borne in mind that “the intensity of readers’ emotional responses to narratives depends greatly on the proximity of the events and the situations of the characters to their lives” (Sklar, 2013, p. 20). Thus, this analysis serves to theorize readers’ responses through those portrayed in the novel as Robinson very vividly depicts “the structure of feeling,” our current collective and pressing urges. Bump (2022), equally, affirms that if solidarity became the collective ‘structure of feeling of the time’, the chances against the ostensibly inevitable ‘end of the civilization’ would increase (p.145).

To the analysis of ethics of environmental justice, it is worth mentioning the likelihood of acting purely off fictional input: “despite our inability to act upon sympathetic feelings that we experience while reading fiction, therefore, such feelings can be transferred from the fictional world into the fabric of our lives – can in fact possess ethical implications beyond the experience of reading” (*The Art of Sympathy*, 2013, pp. 45-46). These ethical implications are aligned with the cultural and political changes in the global intersubjectivity to fix the way things are done. It justifies, ethically speaking, what actions might be taken for a better, more sustainable collective.

Finally, it is my speculation that analyzing the traumatic heatwave episode, and even reading about it, can bring resonances into “the fabric of our lives.” It is not hard to see, for example, the NPR’s headline, “Heat Can Take a Deadly Toll on Humans” as an indicator that such a future may not be too far-fetched. Indeed, this gives more prominence to the problems they discuss in the episode such as the fact that the measures and statistics available to the public in case a similar heatwave are rather flawed. Namely, The National Weather Service’s heat index has been revised as it turned out to be uncalibrated by 28 degrees upon revision. Not only is that a big margin to fail, but also, the measures lack nuance as they leave out considerations for non-average people, i.e., children, people with a special, health conditions, pregnant women, and the simple fact that most measurements are based on people being under a shadow which, as the novel shows rather clearly, is not the case. To this, one last dimension must be added: information rarely reaches the vulnerable public. As a result, such news has opened a space where communication of data to the affected people is an actual concern of the experts.

Returning to the factual data on the likelihood of these reactions as reactions that real-life readers might have, Dobson argues that “ecological citizens will make democracies more responsive to sustainability demands” (as cited in [Weik, 2017, p. 170](#)), which I would say is essentially the principle and objective of affective ecology. Furthermore, future research may have to be conducted in experimental case studies aligned with the principles of Fialho’s transformative reading to determine

the extent to which readers are affected by the climate-change-driven eco-injustices portrayed in *The Ministry for the Future*. In such studies, in fact, Polvinen’s and Sklar’s methodology in *Mimetic and Synthetic Views of Characters: How Readers Process “People” in Fiction* and Sklar’s in *The Art of Sympathy: Forms of Ethical and Emotional Persuasion* may be considerably appropriate to emulate and test the reactions of participants to the heatwave chapter. Further methodologies and instruments would have to be designed to measure the impressions upon the ethical dimension of eco-attacks as portrayed in the novel, and even perhaps, then, contrasted to the arguments stated in this investigation about the perceived righteousness of such attacks. One thing is clear, more work that strives to understand the links between our reactions and those portrayed in climate fictional works is needed since tapping on our emotional (pre)dispositions might be needed for future climatic crises and the way we outline smart, ethical solutions towards the problems thereof.

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