

“It’s a plan or chaos:” Climate Migration Testimony and *The Ministry for the Future**

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[Abstract]

Kim Stanley Robinson’s epic science fiction novel *The Ministry for the Future* (2020) triggered a wide-ranging discussion and debate in multiple public spheres focused on its analysis of and solutions to the climate crisis. Yet some voices and stories included in the novel, specifically those of refugees, have been mostly absent from discourse about the novel. In *The Ministry for the Future*, climate migration testimony is a narrative form through which migrants, including refugees, describe their experience of departure, migration, arrival, encampment, release, and integration. The reader is confronted with a staging of voice through a protean narrative form that blurs the boundaries between oral history, social media post, memoir, diary, and auto-ethnography, and can be compared to the Latin American form of “testimonio,” which makes “subaltern experience and voice into something that matters” (Beverly

* I dedicate this paper to Richard Doug Davis, my close friend in graduate school, who passed away on January 6, 2025. Doug inspired me to start reading science fiction, and introduced me to Kim Stanley Robinson’s work, thirty years ago. He is deeply missed by many. Rest in Peace Doug.

xvi). *The Ministry for the Future* includes climate migration testimony to bring the voices and experiences of displaced people from the margins to the center of discussions of the climate crisis. In doing so, the novel critiques “refugee crisis” discourse and a global apartheid system that dehumanizes refugees and other migrants by subjecting them to a condition of protracted liminality in which temporary encampment becomes a permanent condition. By weaving climate migration testimony throughout the text, *The Ministry for the Future* creates a sense of urgency around the injustice of imprisoning refugees for indefinite periods of time, and proposes one possible solution, a Nansen-style passport, that could help facilitate the mobility and integration of displaced people. Given the rise of far-right, anti-immigrant and anti-refugee movements in the U.S. and UK, the representation of climate migration testimony in *The Ministry for the Future* makes a critical intervention in this historical moment.

Key Words: American literature, science fiction, critical refugee studies, environmental humanities, testimonial writing, decoloniality

I. Critical Migration and Refugee Studies

Kim Stanley Robinson’s epic science fiction novel, *The Ministry for the Future* (2020), opens in the year 2025 with an apocalyptic climate disaster, a heat wave that kills twenty million people in India, then moves through the “trembling twenties” and “zombie years” of the 2030s as unending fossil fuel extraction, transportation, and combustion unleash social, political, and biospheric chaos. “Always historicize!” urged Fredric Jameson, Robinson’s doctoral advisor at the University of California at

San Diego, and *The Ministry for the Future* can be read as an effort to historicize our present age of overshoot and climate breakdown (Jameson 9). Despite its grotesquely dystopian first chapter, one that borders on "disaster porn," this is ultimately a hopeful, utopian novel. As it traverses the 2040s, the novel assembles many of the forces needed to decarbonize the atmosphere and cool the planet, ranging from the United Nations to direct action, from degrowth to rewilding, from debt strikes to cooperatives, from geoengineering to the environmental humanities.

When it was published in 2020, *The Ministry for the Future* was discussed and debated by activists, economists, the United Nations, climate scientists, Bill Gates, Barack Obama, literature professors and students. Ordinary readers formed discussion groups on social media and sci-fi fans added the novel to book clubs such as "Ultimate Cli-Fi Book Club," the "SciFri Book Club," and the "Futurist Book Club," just to name a few. Yet despite the torrent of discourse about *The Ministry for the Future* in multiple public spheres, there are voices and stories in the novel, specifically those of migrants, including refugees, that have been mostly silenced by this discourse. This silence matters because struggles by and for displaced people are one of the most urgent issues facing humanity, and the humanities, in the twenty-first century.

According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), there are 117.3 million forcibly displaced people worldwide as of mid-2025 "as a result of persecution, conflict, violence, human rights violations or events seriously disturbing public order." Of these, 36.4 million are refugees who sought safety in another country, 73.5 million are Internally Displaced People (IDP), and 6.1 million are people in need of international protection. In addition, there are 4.4 million stateless people "who have been denied a nationality and lack access to basic rights such as education, health care, employment and freedom of movement" (UNHCR

“Refugee Data Finder”). These numbers, staggering as they are, do not include people who have been forced to leave their homes due to climate breakdown and environmental degradation. Summarizing UN data, Nina Lakhani writes, “Climate-related disasters forcibly displaced 250 million people globally over the past decade, the equivalent of 70,000 displacements every day.” As fossil fuels continue to heat the oceans and atmosphere, many places and regions, especially along the expanding tropical belt, may become uninhabitable due to heat waves, desertification, drought, crop failure, rising sea levels, and floods.

In *Nomad Century: How Climate Migration Will Reshape Our World*, Gaia Vince writes, “[t]he number of migrants has doubled globally over the past decade, and the issue of what to do about rapidly increasing populations of displaced people will only become greater and more urgent as the planet heats” (Vince xi). According to the United Nations International Organization for Migration (IOM), there could be up to 1.5 billion climate migrants by 2050 (Vince xv). The Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre calculates that, “[o]f the 83.4 million IDPs at the end of 2024 globally, 73.5 million were displaced by conflict and violence and 9.8 million by disasters” (IDMC “2025 Report”). In the twenty-first century, the separation of “conflict and violence” from “disaster” is problematic because climate breakdown is a “threat multiplier,” to use U.S. militaryspeak. For example, drought in Syria did not cause the civil war in 2011 which led to the “Syrian refugee crisis,” but it was a contributing factor, which means this crisis was in part a crisis of what Jason Hickel terms “atmospheric colonialism,” which I discuss in the following section.

Nasia Anam argues that since the 2010s, “we entered a new era of global migration” (405). In contrast to the “borderless world” and “end of the nation-state” hype of the neoliberal 1990s, the twenty-first century has witnessed the emergence of authoritarian forms of neoliberalism and far-right anti-immigrant movements that

support militarized borders and carceral systems that place "refugee populations into temporary, ad-hoc spaces of habitation which nonetheless begin to take on qualities of permanent settlements" (Anam 406). For Anam, the "warehousing" of refugees means that, "[i]n these spaces, liminality and transition are essentially rendered into conditions of permanence for refugee populations" (406). Jenna Lloyd contends that a "global apartheid" system is being solidified, a "condition in which the wealthiest regions of the world erect physical and bureaucratic barriers against the movement of people from the poorer regions of the world" (1). In their effort to "decolonize refugee integration paradigms," Fiona Murphy and Ulrike M. Vieten are representative of an emergent field of praxis, critical migration and refugee studies, which works to make sense of, and intervene in, this new era of global migration. Murphy and Vieten critique the legacy of colonialism that underpins the practice of holding displaced people from the Global South in a state of "protracted liminality," rather than understanding them "as sovereign lives seeking a place to belong" (Murphy and Vieten 2105).

For the editors of *Departures: An Introduction to Critical Refugee Studies*, "Refugees and the issue of displacement must be front and center in the ways we talk about the deleterious effects of climate change, global epidemics, and perpetual war" (Espiritu et al. 4). By weaving fictional, first-person narratives of departure, migration, protracted liminality, release, and integration throughout the novel, what I refer to here as climate migration testimony, *The Ministry for the Future* makes refugees and climate migration integral and intimate parts of the climate crisis. In the novel, climate migration testimony is a narrative form in which the speaker, a migrant or refugee, addresses the reader and describes their experience of dehumanization and oppression, but also their practices of mutualism and world-building in the camps. The reader is confronted with a staging of the voices of

displaced people through a protean narrative form that blurs the boundaries between oral history, social media post, memoir, diary, and auto-ethnography, and can be compared to the Latin American form of “testimonio,” which makes “subaltern experience and voice into something that matters” (Beverley xvi). *The Ministry for the Future* includes climate migration testimony to bring refugee voices from the margins to the center of discussions of the climate crisis while critiquing “refugee crisis” discourse and a global apartheid system that dehumanizes refugees by subjecting them to a condition of protracted liminality. The novel creates a sense of urgency around the injustice of imprisoning refugees for indefinite periods of time, and proposes one possible solution, a Nansen-style passport, that could help facilitate the mobility and integration of displaced people. Given the rise of far-right, anti-immigrant and anti-refugee movements in the U.S. and UK, the representation of climate migration testimony in *The Ministry for the Future* makes a critical intervention in this historical moment.

This paper is divided into three sections. The first section is a close reading of the opening chapter of the novel that outlines the material conditions, overshoot and climate breakdown, that contribute to the flow of displaced people from the Global South to the Global North. This section uses Jason Hickel’s concept of atmospheric colonialism, and the anti-colonial Children of Kali in the novel, to reflect on the attribution of responsibility for the climate crisis. The second section reads climate migration testimony in the novel from the perspective of critical migration and refugee studies. The third section examines the novel’s solution to the protracted encampment of refugees, a Nansen-style passport, and explains the origins of this document in the aftermath of World War I. The conclusion reflects on the meaning of hope in the novel as a form of decolonial praxis.

II. Atmospheric Colonialism and Overshoot

The opening chapter of *The Ministry for the Future* is set in Uttar Pradesh, a state in northern India, in the year 2025. An aid worker from the U.S., Frank May, wakes up to another dangerously hot morning amidst a long heat wave. The narrative brings the material agency of the sun to the foreground: "It blazed like an atomic bomb, which of course it was ... the heat coming from it was a palpable slap to the face" (Robinson 1). In the second chapter, this agency is underscored when the sun speaks in riddles in the first person: "I am a god and I am not a god. Either way, you are my creatures. I keep you alive" (13). As the sun rises, so does the heat, and people who slept on rooftops are waking up next to loved ones who are not waking up. Their wails of grief fill the air.

Frank checks the temperature: "He looked at his phone: 38 degrees. In Fahrenheit that was – he tapped – 103 degrees. Humidity about 35 percent. The combination was the thing. A few years ago it would have been among the hottest wet-bulb temperatures ever recorded. Now just a Wednesday morning" (2). Weather reports and forecasts typically refer to "dry-bulb temperature," which measures ambient outdoor temperature; "wet-bulb" is a heat index that combines air temperature, humidity, wind speed, and solar radiation. As the novel explains in chapter eight: "And a wet-bulb temperature of 35 will kill humans even if unclothed and sitting in the shade; the combination of heat and humidity prevents sweating from dissipating heat, and death by hyperthermia soon results" (29). During the 2003 European heatwave, more than 70,000 people died as wet-bulb temperatures reached twenty-eight degrees Celsius (Vince 16).

In the novel, as on our planet, high wet-bulb temperatures used to be extraordinary, but have gradually become ordinary – "Now just a Wednesday

morning.” The adjective “just” signifies slow violence, which Rob Nixon defines as an incremental violence, “[a] violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space” (2). Scientific consensus regarding the causes of and solutions to global warming began to emerge in the 1970s, and in 1992, the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) was adopted at the Earth Summit in Rio to support the stabilization of greenhouse gas concentrations in the atmosphere. On June 16, 1992, there were 359.44 parts per million (ppm) of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere. On June 25, 2025, there were 430 ppm (NASA “Carbon Dioxide”). To help stabilize the atmosphere of this planet, that number needs to go back down to around 350 ppm.

Apart from a brief dip at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, carbon emissions are still increasing. As the World Meteorological Organization (WMO) reports, “[c]arbon dioxide (CO₂) levels in the atmosphere soared by a record amount to new highs in 2024, committing the planet to more long-term temperature increase” (WMO “Carbon dioxide levels”). In *Overshoot*, Andreas Malm and Wim Carton put the situation bluntly, “And when the third decade of the millennium dawned, the relationship remained firmly in place: the warmer the globe became, the more fossil fuels were put on the fire. The higher the temperatures, the larger the emissions” (12). We are living, Malm and Carton argue, in the “age of overshoot,” an age in which the 1.5 degrees Celsius threshold of warming established by the Paris Agreement has been crossed, thus accelerating and intensifying climate breakdown. Slow violence is coming much faster and hitting much harder now. Lethal wet-bulb temperatures and other climate emergencies, from drought to flood, can no longer be viewed as unintended consequences, but as forms of violence caused by fossil fuels. As Andreas Malm writes, “[f]ossil fuels kill people, randomly, blindly, indiscriminately, with a heavy concentration on poor people in the Global South; and

they kill in greater numbers the longer business as usual continues" (11).

In the novel's Utter Pradesh, the accelerating violence of overshoot and climate breakdown, of business as usual, spectacularly arrives when power grids fail across India, and the high wet-bulb temperature triggers a mass casualty incident. Frank desperately struggles to keep people alive amidst the blackout and inescapable heat. While moving a generator to the clinic where people are sheltering, he is robbed. One of the thieves points a gun at Frank and says, "[y]ou did this" (9). The thief blames Frank for the deaths caused by the heat wave, and by extension, wasteful Americans, and more broadly, the overdeveloped countries of the Global North that are most responsible for the climate crisis. People seek refuge from the heat in a lake, but the water is too hot, and it becomes a mass grave filled with human waste and dead bodies – a gory and gothic Anthropocene. Above the horror of the lake, "[s]atellites passing overhead, east to west, west to east, even once north to south. People were watching, they knew what was happening. They knew but they didn't act. Couldn't act. Didn't act. Nothing to do, nothing to say" (12). Across India, twenty million people are killed by the high wet-bulb temperature over the course of five days.

The attribution of responsibility, "you did this," is echoed later in the novel when a violent direct action group is formed by survivors of the "great Indian heat wave." The Children of Kali, named after the Hindu goddess of creation and destruction, issue an ultimatum: stop business as usual, stick to the Paris Agreement, or there will be economic war. After a brief period of mourning, the twenty million deaths in India are forgotten, and by the 2030s, fossil fuel extraction, transportation, and combustion continue uninterrupted. Armed with drones, the Children of Kali shoot down private and business jets and torpedo container ships. 7,000 people, mostly the global capitalist elite, are killed on "Crash Day," although innocent people were

killed too. The Children of Kali engage in a “War for the Earth” that also involves the destruction of power plants and ending beef consumption. The violence is effective, as carbon emissions drop rapidly. The Children of Kali’s actions can be read as an anti-colonial movement that resists occupation, an occupation in which violence, both fast and slow, spectacular and incremental, is killing and displacing people everywhere, but most intensely in the Global South. The Children of Kali justify their actions according to the principle of reciprocal justice – “eye for an eye” – found in the Code of Hammurabi and Hebrew Bible. The Children of Kali coldly explain, “They killed us so we killed them” (135). The novel does not necessarily endorse this code but rather provides a geopolitical and biospheric context in which their actions can be understood and averted in the real world by adhering to the Paris Agreement, stopping overshoot, and slowing climate breakdown.

The Children of Kali blame the countries of the Global North for mass murder in India, and their actions can be read as an anti-colonial uprising. But what has been colonized? What is being occupied? Like the ocean, rivers, lakes, forests, swampland, deserts, mangroves and more, the atmosphere is a commons on which we all depend for our existence, both human and non-human, and which we all have a right to enjoy. The atmosphere provides the oxygen that we breathe, protects us from solar radiation, and generates pressure that allows water to exist on this planet. The idea of “reclaiming the atmospheric commons,” of making polluters pay for their greenhouse gas emissions, and using the revenue for the public good, has been circulating for about twenty-five years and is an important front in the climate justice movement. Jason Hickel writes, “[t]he atmosphere is a shared and finite resource” and “all people are entitled to an equal share of it” (Hickel 400). For Hickel, the concept of atmospheric colonialism works to understand which nations are most responsible for climate breakdown, and concludes:

A small number of high-income countries have appropriated substantially more than their fair share of the atmospheric commons. Just as many of these countries have relied on the appropriation of labour and resources from the Global South for their own economic growth, they have also relied on the appropriation of the global atmospheric commons, with consequences that harm the Global South disproportionately. (Hickel 403)

Fossil fuel emissions by high-income countries are colonizing the atmosphere and heating the planet, causing the most damage in the Global South and thus contributing to the “refugee crisis.” Atmospheric colonialism is continuous with the barbaric acts through which Western countries industrialized and expanded into global, fossil-fueled empires: colonialism, land enclosures, the slave trade, deforestation, plantations, extractivism, genocide. By setting the climate disaster of the first chapter in India, the novel establishes a theme that runs through the entire novel: colonialism is not over, it has just taken new forms, named later as “neoliberal neocolonialism” (376).

Atmospheric colonialism and the anti-colonial Children of Kali provide one context for interpreting the meaning of “you did this.” In chapter eight of the novel, a more direct attribution of responsibility appears. This chapter begins by explaining that, “Humans are burning about 40 gigatons (a gigaton is a billion tons) of fossil carbon per year” (29). Excess burning puts the Earth’s bioregions in danger, impacts food production, and makes high wet-bulb temperatures and other disasters features of everyday life for many people. The novel then lists the “nineteen largest organizations” responsible for putting excess carbon into the atmosphere: “Saudi Aramco, Chevron, Gazprom, ExxonMobil, National Iranian oil...” (Robinson 30). This list of agents responsible for atmospheric colonialism, overshoot, and climate breakdown complicates Global North/Global South, West/East,

overdeveloped/underdeveloped, rich/poor, them/us binaries, as they are headquartered all over the world: the United States, England, Russia, Mexico, Brazil, Venezuela, and in the petrostates of the Middle East: Saudi Arabia, Iran, Iraq, Abu Dhabi, Kuwait. These petrostates are both hubs of fossil capital and places suffering the most from climate breakdown, especially in the form of drought. From early twentieth century through the Global War on Terror, Western imperialist desire to control the flow of oil in the Middle East has instigated wars, coups, invasions, massacres, and genocide, all of which have increased the flows of displaced people, migrants, and refugees.

In her 2016 Edward W. Said London Lecture, “Let Them Drown,” Naomi Klein connects the dots between Western imperialism, fossil fuels, and the production of displaced people in North Africa and the Middle East: “Western fighter jets followed that abundance of oil; now, Western drones are closely shadowing the lack of water, as drought exacerbates conflict” (Klein). Klein writes:

Just as bombs follow oil, and drones follow drought, so boats follow both: boats filled with refugees fleeing homes on the aridity line ravaged by war and drought. And the same capacity for dehumanizing the other that justified the bombs and drones is now being trained on these migrants, cast their need for security as a threat to ours, their desperate flight as some sort of invading army. (Klein)

The Ministry for the Future introduces readers to people who arrived on boats, are dehumanized, and find themselves existing in protracted states of liminality in refugee camps in Switzerland. Climate migration testimony is a narrative form through which the novel promotes empathy and radical care for displaced people. Given the rise of far right, anti-immigrant and anti-refugee movements in the U.S.

and UK, testimonial narrative is an urgent form of resistance to fascist national imaginaries that promote ethnic cleansing, one that is emerging on embattled streets from Gaza to Minneapolis and flourishing on social media. We should all be reading and studying and teaching testimonial narrative right now.

In the novel, climate migration testimony is not spoken by pitiful or passive victims, but by people making history in refugee camps: "We had formed study groups, classes, sports clubs, activity groups. We had made friends. We taught the children" (469). The novel wants displaced people to be released from oppressive conditions and enlists readers in that desire. Climate migration testimony can be read as a narrative form that, like Latin American "testimonio" theorized by John Beverley, involves readers in a relation of solidarity with the other, a "staging of voice" that aims not only to interpret the world, but to change it (Beverley 7).

III. Climate Migration Testimony

Refugees typically appear through either/or logics: they are either invisible or hypervisible, ignored or aggressively remembered. As Viet Thanh Nguyen writes, "Refugees, like all others, are unseen until they are seen everywhere, a threat to overwhelm our borders, invade our cultures, rape our women, threaten our children, destroy our economies" (15). The current U.S. president ran on this exact platform. To counter dehumanizing representations of refugees and other migrants, humanitarian narratives often extend, rather than dismantle the either/or operation. Instead of violent menace, they are victims in need of rescue; instead of fear, they are soaked in pity and expected to display gratitude toward their white Western saviors. The physical mobility of refugees is restrained, limited to the space of the

camp; they can also be emotionally restrained, placed in affective internment in which ugly feelings, like resentment or anger, are prohibited.

Critical migration and refugee studies disrupt either/or logics, subjecting both sides to critique so migrant voices can be heard and political, economic, and cultural agency can be expressed. *The Ministry for the Future* aligns with this academic and activist movement through a fictional staging of voice in climate migration testimony, a narrative form that intervenes in, and works to reframe, “refugee crisis” discourse. Claire Gallien argues that the “refugee crisis” is a “term coined by politicians and the media with little or no connection to the reality of the migrants who are confronted with the violence of war, the inhuman conditions of the journeys toward ‘Fortress Europe’, governments’ unwillingness to provide for an effective new start, and the xenophobic or Islamophobic attitudes and discourses” (736). The novel situates migration testimony in the overlapping contexts that displace people: war, colonialism, neoliberal empire, climate breakdown. This narrative intervention can be read as a “testimonio-like text.” John Beverley explains: “Testimonio-like texts have existed for a long time at the margin of literature, representing in particular those subjects—the child, the ‘native,’ the woman, the insane, the criminal, the proletarian—excluded from authorized representation when it was a question of speaking and writing for themselves rather than being spoken for” (31). Climate migration testimony in the novel brings the marginal figure of the refugee to the center of the climate crisis. Through this narrative form, the novel foregrounds the urgency of a situation in which refugees and migrants are being imprisoned in camps for protracted periods of time with no hope of release or integration.

The first climate migration testimony in the novel, chapter fourteen, reflects on the moment of departure and begins with a simple explanation, “[w]e had to leave. It was too dangerous to stay” (51). The speaker, a doctor, explains that his family left

their home and community because "rebels from our area began fighting the government and troops moved into town, and people were killed right on the street ... I knew we had to leave. Somehow, we were on the wrong side" (51). The doctor recounts paying a smuggler to take his family some place safe, whereas other people in the community couldn't afford to escape the violence. The doctor does not say where his home was, or the name of his country, or his own name, but does reveal the smuggler said he could get the family to Turkey and Bulgaria, and then on to Switzerland or Germany. These are the only proper nouns in his story, a vague south to north migration route that appears later in the novel through testimony that tracks movement from Libya and Syria to Switzerland. The doctor does not provide any details about where he is speaking from, where, or if, he arrived, and whether he is still with his family or not. The doctor does not appear to have a present tense.

The moment of departure is recounted with emotional flatness: "As we drove off I looked out the car window at our apartment and realized I would never see it again. All that was over" (51). The doctor reflects on his comfortable life in the town, "I had my routines, I liked to go down to the café after work or late at night when it had cooled, drink coffee and play backgammon and talk to friends" (52). The chapter concludes, "I remember what it was like. But just barely" (52). The emotional flatness, brevity, and anonymity of this migration testimony can be read as a symptom of the doctor's spatial and temporal distance from home. The trauma of being forced to leave home and community, "had to leave," was also a decision, a choice: they could have stayed in the community, they could have moved somewhere else the country, they could have joined a side and fought. At this point, the doctor and his family become migrants, which, as Jørgen Carling argues, is an inclusive term that can cover "the diverse combinations of force and choice that shape migration both within and outside the refugee category" (400).

The doctor assembles basic emotions and generic events because the memories are fading, and the fading of memory, or lack of desire to remember, hence the absence of detail and emotionally engaged expression, could itself be a secondary form of trauma. The trauma of not wanting or needing to remember, of letting go, results in blankness, a protective film that blurs rather than sharpens the details of a past that “just barely” exists, like the speaker. This departure testimony is geographically, culturally, and politically indefinite, which means it could be set any place where rebels are fighting governments. The novel situates climate migration testimony in the context of generalized war, violence, and political instability, which since the start of the Global War on Terrorism in 2001, has been a fact of everyday life for large numbers of people across the Global South. In “Forcing Displacement: The postcolonial interventions of refugee literature and arts,” published two years before *The Ministry for the Future*, Claire Gallien provides a wide geopolitical context in which this brief testimony should be set:

Since 9/11, the US “War on Terror” and the invasions and occupations of Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, and Yemen by the US and its allies, the Middle East been a theatre of devastating military conflict and civil war. This, and the Arab revolutions of 2011, led to the internal displacement of millions of people, the multiplication of refugee camps along borders or just outside Syrian and Yemini combat zones, and the migration of millions of others escaping further to Lebanon, Turkey, and Egypt, with only a miniscule proportion making it to Western Europe. (736)

Later, the novel moves from ground level testimony amidst political violence to a bird’s eye view of climate violence and migration in and around the Global South. When drought and heat waves hit the Middle East, displaced people start moving wherever they can, even to countries that themselves are facing drought and heat

waves:

Refugees from the area were pouring across Turkey into the Balkans, also north into Armenia and Georgia and Ukraine and Russia, also east into India. India was a refuge from heat waves! But the Punjab was also caught in a drought, so India had sealed its border with Pakistan, already militarized and easy to close. Disaster all around. (285)

According to the UNHCR, seventy-one percent of refugees are hosted in low- and middle-income countries (UNHCR “Refugee Data Finder”). This perspective on displacement and mass migration within the Global South is brought down to ground level again through climate migration testimony that depicts the arrival in Switzerland of refugees from North Africa. Several of these migration testimonials are connected to Frank May.

Frank is found unconscious in the boiling lake amidst the human waste and dead bodies and then wanders in and out of the novel struggling with severe trauma. He undergoes various forms of therapy, both conventional and unconventional, to deal with his rage and desire for revenge, none of which work. Frank tries to join the Children of Kali, but they do not let him join, suggesting instead that he can help spread their message to the world. Frank travels to Switzerland and takes Mary Murphy, the head of the Ministry for the Future, hostage and impresses upon her the urgency of the situation. Frank then goes into hiding and adopts a pseudonym, Jake, and begins teaching English in refugee camps. In the camp he meets a woman from Libya, Syrine, and her two daughters, Emna and Hiba. They get married and live together for four years, but the traumatic experience of the heat wave and mass death continue to haunt him. As one of the daughters says, he “was spinning inside ... There was something dark inside him” (153). Frank’s emotional volatility, warm and

loving one moment, cold and verbally abusive the next, puts the family on edge. Frank abandons them, so Syrine and her daughters are forced to move back to the camp. Looking back on the marriage, Frank regrets that he “couldn’t hold it together,” that there was something “broken in his head” (194).

In chapter thirty-seven, the younger daughter provides an arrival testimony: “This is hard to write. I was born in Libya, I’m told, and after my father disappeared, no one knows how or why, my mother took my sister and me to Europe, on a boat that carried mostly Tunisians.” Despite the hardship, the Swiss took better care of them than the sailors on the boat. “It felt good to be clean and dry and not hungry,” she writes, and her mother finally stopped crying (151). Because she was young when they first arrived at a refugee camp in Winterthur, in northern Switzerland, her memories are unstable, fragmented. She does not know how or why they left Libya, but one unspoken context of the mother’s decision to leave could be the 2011 NATO intervention in the Libyan Civil War that overthrew Muammar Gaddafi and turned Libya into a failed state. Gaddafi and his regime were supported by European governments so long as he blocked the migration routes from sub-Saharan Africa to Europe via Libya. But when he was removed from power, the routes reopened and more migrants tried to cross the Libyan desert and the Mediterranean Sea to Europe. As Gallien writes, “By engaging in wars abroad, participating in the destruction of entire regions and societies, exploiting cheap labour and natural resources, and supporting autocratic and authoritarian regimes, these democracies create the very refugees that they then reject” (736).

Critical migration and refugee studies highlight and work to end forms of oppression in which border militarization targets non-white, non-Western refugees who are, as Murphy and Vieten write, “[o]ften held in protracted states of liminality, a ‘holding pattern’ that transforms bodies into commodities of global equity rather

than recognizing them as sovereign lives seeking a place to belong” (2105). Several chapters of *The Ministry for the Future* reference a condition of protracted liminality. For example, chapter forty-eight is a testimony spoken by an unnamed woman who describes the camp as a prison in which she has been incarcerated: “This is the 1,859th day I have spent in this camp” (208). Her story reads like a diary entry as it describes everyday life in a refugee camp:

Babies crying at dawn. Already hot. People hungry. Sun over the hills like a bomb. Hot on the skin ... Better to sweat than not ... Showers not till Saturday. It’s my time of the month. Need that shower. It is hot, boring, routine, and people treat each other with basic kindness. At the dining tent, there is a long line and people let moms with kids go first. Unless you’re starved, it’s easier to hang back. Not to mention the right thing to do. (205)

She gazes at the aid workers who serve food. Her gaze dwells on their faces as they dish food onto plates, sensing that they don’t really see the refugees. From her perspective, they “aren’t really real” (205). This refugee camp testimony is angry, resentful, frustrated, bored, resigned, understanding, and appreciative all at the same time. But there is one overwhelming feeling that dominates the monologue: “But I still hate them for not seeing me. For looking me in the eye while they put food on my outstretched plate, and yet never seeing. I try not to but I hate them. Just as I hate everything else in this life” (206). In contrast to the image of a violent menace that needs to be prevented from entering, or deported, humanitarian narratives typically articulate the series “crisis-rescue-gratitude:” refugees are expected to display humility and gratitude toward their saviors, preparing them for acceptance by making them acceptable. The editors of *Departures* argue that this form of soft power humanitarianism “weaponizes gratitude” (Espiritu et al. 15).

Although we are not told directly, this speaker reappears in chapter one-hundred and five, the second to last chapter of the novel. The speaker and her family have been released from the refugee camp and acquire legal permanent residence in Switzerland. Unlike chapter forty-eight, this chapter contains some proper nouns, biographical details, and exposition, although the speaker does not reveal her name, she is anonymous. She informs the reader that she is a grandmother from Syria who was incarcerated in the camp in Switzerland with her daughter, her daughter's husband, and their two daughters. She reflects on her experience of twenty-eight years of protracted liminality: "Here, after twelve years in a Turkish camp, two years on the move trying to get to Germany, very crazy years, very hard; then fourteen more years in the Swiss camp north of Bern. Now we are finally somewhere" (549-50). At the age of seventy-one, after being released from the camp, she is "finally somewhere." In the camp testimony of chapter forty-eight, the speaker expresses her desires, anger, frustration, boredom. In the liberation testimony of chapter one-hundred and five, she reflects on her life: "And yet now I find I am seventy-one years old. My life has passed. I will not say it was wasted, that's not right" (550). She explains that mutualism in the camps helped them survive and flourish: "[w]e took care of each other, and we taught the children. They got a good education in that camp. We did what we could with what we had. It was the life we could make" (550). As readers, we can learn what it means to be human from these testimonial narratives. The editors of *Departures* write: "With the stories they tell and retell, refugees instruct us on what it means to be human and humane in the best and worst of times" (Espiritu et al. 6). Or to paraphrase Karl Marx, refugees make history, but not in the conditions of their choosing, and they do so in part through mutual aid and the act of telling and retelling their stories.

The speakers of climate migration testimony in *The Ministry for the Future* are,

for the most part, anonymous and generic, which goes against the grain of humanitarian efforts to humanize refugees by crafting them as "individual people, emphasizing the particularity of the individual and their life: a person with unique experiences, stories, history, and identities" (Suzuki 8). The speakers of testimony in the novel are not meticulously individualized, and their stories are short, like diary entries, social media posts, or flash refugee fiction, with little exposition. These speakers often do not use first-person singular, but first-person plural, "[w]e took care of each other, and we taught the children" (550). Climate migration testimony in the novel, like *testimonio*, constructs an "anonymous collective popular-democratic subject" (Beverly 36). But in rendering this subject anonymous, this narrative form, again like *testimonio*, risks reproducing a generic, depthless, "facelessness" that often governs representations of migrants and refugees in hegemonic culture (Beverly 34).

When she is released from the camp, the grandmother says that she acquired something she did not have while imprisoned: dignity. She reflects: "And this is what I think everyone needs. After the basics of food and shelter that we need just as animals, first thing after that: dignity. Everyone needs and deserves this, just as part of being human" (551). For displaced people to secure the basics of food and shelter, and just as importantly, dignity and hope, Vince argues, "There must be a pathway to dignified and safe migration for all who need it" (308). At the end of the novel, one possible pathway appears through a reference to Fridtjof Nansen, the first international High Commissioner for Refugees. *The Ministry for the Future* is fundamentally a pedagogical novel, one that concludes by introducing readers to Nansen and his role in helping create a brief, utopian moment in the past that can help readers imagine a better, safer, and more dignified future for climate migrants, refugees, and all people who have been forced to decide to leave their homes for whatever reason.

IV. Nansen Passports

After surviving the “great Indian heat wave,” traveling to Switzerland, taking Mary Murphy hostage, killing a man, working in the refugee camps, marrying Syrine and then abandoning her and her daughters, Frank is finally arrested. Both Syrine and Mary visit him in prison, the former empathetic, the latter captivated, aware that the hostage-taking was an act of desperation and desperate times generate desperate measures. While in prison, Frank asks Mary about the refugee division of the Ministry for the Future. Frank points out that there are one hundred and forty million refugees:

You have to work up a plan all the governments will agree to, he told her. Have you looked at what happened at the end of the world wars? There were millions of refugees wandering around starving. They put Fridtjof Nansen in charge of the problem after World War One, and he came up with a system they called the Nansen passports, which gave refugees the right to go wherever they wanted to, free passage anywhere. (396)

Frank advises:

Do like you did with the central banks. It's a plan or chaos. The camps, I know you've visited them, but what I see there is that it's like this jail here, but worse, because they don't have any sense of how long they'll be held, and they never did anything in the first place. Europe is just punishing the victims. Sudan takes care of more refugees than all of Europe, and Sudan is a wreck. People come to Europe and they get called economic migrants, as if that wasn't just what their own citizens are supposed to do, try to make a better life, show some initiative. But if you come to Europe, you get criminalized. You've got

to change that. (398)

After World War I, Fridtjof Nansen was the first international High Commissioner for Refugees. He issued stateless persons passports, also known as “Nansen passports,” which provided half a million internationally recognized travel documents from 1922 to 1938, the majority to Armenian and Russian refugees. The passports were valid up to one year and could be renewed. They enabled holders to travel to another country to look for work, helping relieve pressure on overcrowded places while “distributing” refugees among member countries of what was then the Leagues of Nations. This enabled the state to keep track of displaced people crossing their borders. For refugees, it provided a new form of international protection, beyond the authority of the asylum state, before they acquired a new citizenship. Gaia Vince argues that a Nansen passport could be reinvented in the twenty-first century to help manage climate migration: “A Nansen-style emphasis on enabling mobility, so migrants are free to move to where they can find work, is vital to safe and positively managed migration – additionally helping states with the data they need to manage changing demographic needs – and it’s something the UN-citizen scheme could address” (86).

Frank’s words have an impact on Mary Murphy, and the Ministry for the Future begins producing Nansen-style passports which enable refugees to be released. The speaker of chapter ninety-two relates the experience of being released from the camps, “[w]ord got round one morning that we were to be released ... They’re letting us go” (467). But this solution does not emerge from refugees, from their desires, experiences, and epistemologies; rather, it is something done to them from above, just like everything else. They are alienated from the decision, even if the effects are positive: “Of course it would happen this way. No warning; ad hoc, an improvisation, just as it had been all along. They toy with us, cage us, release us,

it's all made up moment to moment, that's history" (467). The speaker of this chapter expresses frustration and resentment at being excluded from discussions that impact their lives and futures, but there is also joy. The speaker describes this moment through first-person plural voice, "They were releasing us. We were to be given world citizenship, meaning we had the right to live anywhere. We were warned there would be immigration quotas for many countries, and possibly we would have to get in a waiting list for some of them" (467). The speaker explains the policy to the reader:

This arrangement was not quite the same as open borders, they said. Countries would still have passports and immigration quotas. The hope was that many people would want to return home. Polling showed that many refugees felt that way, and would go back home if it could be done safely. The destabilized countries that had generated the most refugees would be helped to restabilize as much and as quickly as possible. (468)

This hopeful release testimony suggests that the overdeveloped countries of the Global North most responsible for atmospheric colonialism, overshoot, and climate breakdown, should help countries in the Global South restabilize through climate reparations. Such reparations could be directed toward building climate-resilient "Anthropocene cities" that are "safe and healthy with decent infrastructure" (Vince 130). Imperialist countries would have to stop criminalizing and punishing their victims and start repairing the damage their wars and carbon emissions and endless demands for growth have caused.

With the rise of authoritarian neoliberalism in the U.S., and far-right, anti-immigrant, anti-refugee movements across the Global North, the possibility of a Nansen-style passport gaining world-wide acceptance right now is dim. At this

moment in history, one in which the UN has been incapable of stopping the ongoing genocide in Gaza, Frank's fantasy of "a plan all the governments will agree to," a plan that would then be implemented by the UN, appears absurd. This does not mean the plan is absurd, but that plans need to come from the bottom up, not the top down, from people power movements, not government ministries. Plans need to emerge from migrants, refugees, and displaced people in dialogue and movement with scholars, activists, artists and ordinary citizens, which is happening right now in cities like Minneapolis, where mutual aid groups are coming together to support immigrants and refugees, while opposing the racist violence being unleashed by the Trump administration. Communities around the U.S. are supporting and fighting for their immigrant and refugee neighbors, and we could be witnessing the birth of a movement through which something like a Nansen-style passport, or something like open borders, could become reality.

Open borders is a radical idea that could move toward the center, just as student debt cancelation did after it was put on the table by the 2011 Occupy Wall Street movement and became reality, albeit limited, during the Biden administration. While open borders are clearly not within the realm of possibility in the Global North right now, they are possible through South-South, bilateral or regional agreements. As Vince point out:

Given the difficulties with establishing any sort of globally binding agreement, we shouldn't wait: bilateral or regional arrangements should be rolled out, especially where cultural or historic links already exist. Pacific nations already have agreements with Australia and New Zealand, for instance, and other regional groups have agreements over reciprocal labour rights, recognition of skills and qualifications, and freedom of movement. (87)

The African continent is working toward a system of free movement across all nations as part of its “Agenda 2063: The Africa We Want” development initiative, which, includes an African Union passport and free-trade agreement (Vince 87). *The Ministry for the Future* alludes to this initiative through the “Africa for Africans movement.”

The editors of *Departures* argue that Critical Refugee Studies (CRS) “is a way to seize control of image and narrative, by and for refugees, centered in refugee epistemologies and experiences, in ways that enable transformative interventions into legal and political arenas to engage with state structures but not be bound by them” (Espiritu et al. 415). *The Ministry for the Future* contributes to transformative interventions into legal and political arenas through its vast cognitive mapping of climate breakdown and could inspire readers to learn more and educate themselves about refugee and migrant epistemologies and experiences, to move from fiction to nonfiction and toward a more critical perspective on “refugee crisis” discourse. When it was published in 2020, many readers fixated on the novel’s proposed solutions to the climate crisis, such as a carbon coin. But there was very little critical attention to the representation of climate migration in the novel. Given the anti-immigrant, anti-refugee violence the Trump administration has unleashed on many U.S. cities, which has resulted in internment, torture, forced labor, family separations, deportations, sexual violence, and murder, the representation of migration through testimonial narrative in *The Ministry for the Future* makes a critical intervention in this historical moment, one rooted in its historically grounded construction of hope.

V. Hope in the Dark

To reframe my argument with a critical term provided by Kim Stanley Robinson’s mentor Fredric Jameson, *The Ministry for the Future* creates a “cognitive mapping” of climate breakdown in the twenty-first century, and through climate migration testimony, makes decolonial cracks in Global North discourse about the “refugee crisis.” This discourse masks the material conditions that displace people in the Global South – atmospheric colonialism, climate disasters, war, extractivism, deforestation, pollution – and then criminalizes and punishes displaced people by imprisoning them for protracted periods of time, blaming them for the problem. Stopping the gaslighting of migrants, including refugees, is one of the fundamental goals of critical migration and refugee studies, of the novel, and of this paper. Climate migration testimony, both fiction and nonfiction, can help in this effort, the former hopefully inspiring readers to pursue the latter. As scholars working in British and American studies and the environmental humanities, we need to listen to and learn from climate migration testimony and bring the stories of refugees and other migrants into our classrooms and onto our universities so others can hear and learn from them. Expanded circulation of climate migration testimony can help chip away at the racist walls and militarized borders of the global apartheid system, and when aligned with social movements, might help save lives that would otherwise be lost at sea. We can’t just let them drown.

The cognitive mapping produced by the novel is vast and includes references to: refugees, refugee camps, the sun, heat waves, drought, flooding, melting glaciers, sea level rise, the sixth mass extinction, contemporary slavery, debt, colonialism, Bretton Woods/IMF/GATT/WTO, Washington Consensus, Global North/Global South, Africa for Africans, India, Switzerland, Davos, neoliberalism, Keynesianism, socialism, the

Navy, finance, monetary theory, carbon coin, fossil fuels, Big Oil, petrostates, nationalism, nationalization, fascism, the UN, the Paris Agreement, meetings, conferences, direct action, terrorism, drones, renewable energy, adaptation, mitigation, Antarctica, geoengineering, degrowth, Earth First, rewilding, renewable energy, Aldo Leopold, the biosphere, regenerative agriculture, retrofitting, conservation, habitat corridors, the commons, the Paris Commune, Mondragon, occupy movements, social media, the internet, affect, climate anxiety, trauma/PTSD, people power, economic inequality, ideology, epistemology, actor networks, periodization, language, and words. The novel does not attempt to represent the totality of climate breakdown in the twenty-first century, but it does move in that direction to help readers make sense of this critical historical conjuncture, and just as important, to help them figure out what they can do. The novel is not a blueprint for the future, nor an instruction manual; rather, it works to show readers that Margaret Thatcher was wrong, there are alternatives.

But there is one term that is surprisingly not on the map: climate refugee. The word refugee is a legal term whose definition was formulated at the 1951 Refugee Convention by Europeans at the onset of the Cold War and revised in the 1967 Protocol. Scholars working in critical migration and refugee studies, specifically decolonial environmental justice, argue that the legal definition of refugee is too restricted and does not address changed historical and biospheric conditions. As Francesca Rosignoli summarizes, “international law does not protect people who find themselves in vulnerable situations after disaster” (747). A decolonial environmental justice movement argues that “we are at a colonial impasse and need a broader definition of refugee today” (Rosignoli 753). While *The Ministry for the Future* does not explicitly argue for an expanded understanding of refugee, one that includes climate factors, nor does it push for a new refugee convention through which the

legal definition of refugee could be revised, the novel does implicitly align with such efforts. The novel promotes empathy and radical care for displaced people who are forced to decide to leave their homes and communities because of disaster, regardless of whether the reasons are political or ecological or a mix of the two. The novel understands that "migration is a multicausal phenomenon," as Rosignoli puts it (755). Ending imperialist war, stopping fossil fuel combustion, moving toward degrowth, and building climate-resilient cities and communities can help preempt displacement. These are interconnected fronts in the struggle for the future of life on this planet, in the "War for the Earth" as the Children of Kali name it.

As it moves from dystopia to utopia, or from gutter punk to hopepunk, the novel instills a rigorous sense of hope in readers. To borrow an image from China Miéville, this is "hope with teeth" (24). Rebecca Solnit argues that hope emerges between optimism and pessimism and involves reclaiming the future: "To hope is to give yourself to the future, and that commitment to the future makes the present habitable" (4). The novel commits to future generations, both human and nonhuman, by joining the fight against biological annihilation and global heating, which is a fight for the biosphere of this planet, and it does so by drawing attention to ideas and practices that are already in place, right now, in the third decade of the twenty-first century, and which move through social and political movements at all geopolitical scales: local, national, regional, global. Hope is driven by the fact that, as Solnit writes, "What we dream of is already present in the world" (157). Dreaming and fighting for what is present in the world is one way of thinking about decoloniality. As Catherine Walsh writes, "However, as coloniality-capitalism plot their advance, so too spread resurgences, shifts, and movements toward a decolonial otherwise, resurgences, shifts, and movements of decoloniality in/as praxis. And it lays the ground for understanding the potential and prospect of the decolonial *for*"

(16).

The clearest of example of hope as praxis, of the decolonial *for*, of ways of living on this planet that are both other and wise, is chapter eighty-five of *The Ministry for the Future*. This chapter is structured as a role call for a meeting of environmental activist groups from around the world that are engaged in agro-forestry, permaculture, biodiversity corridors, reforestation, restoration, wildlife conservation, regeneration, regreening, rewilding: “Hi, I am here to tell you about Argentina’s Shamballa Permaculture Project. We are representatives of Armenia’s ARK Armenia, happy to be here. Down in Australia we’ve connected up our Aboriginal Wetland Burning, Shoalwater Culture, Gawula, Greening Australia …” (425). These are not fictional organizations, but ones that exist in the world right now. Readers can search them on the internet, which is a fun exercise for the classroom. The chapter is four pages long and includes hundreds of organizations engaged in the decolonial *for* — for the restoration and health of mangroves, for wetlands, for forests, for deserts, for coral reefs, for rivers, for oceans, for prairies, for the biosphere:

We are all here together to share what we are doing, to see each other, and to tell you our stories. We are already out there working hard, everywhere around this Earth. Healing the Earth is our sacred work, our duty to the seven generations ... You will find us out there already, now, and then you must realize we are only about one percent of all the projects out there doing good things. And more still are waiting to be born. (428)

The praxis of hope enumerated in this chapter is composed of decolonial cracks, and when cracks connect, they can break down the walls erected by “the coloniality of power,” as the Peruvian sociologist Anibal Quijano names it. I mention Quijano and decoloniality at the close of this paper to open the novel, and my analysis, to Latin

America. As I write this conclusion, the United States has invaded Venezuela and abducted President Nicolas Maduro and his wife to tap into the veins of Latin America once again, not to stop the flow of drugs, but to increase the flow of that other drug – oil. As one U.S. lawmaker put it, regime change in Venezuela will be a “field day” for American oil companies, one that will increase the flow of carbon into the atmosphere and people from their homes. To stop these flows, perhaps the Children of Kali need to be joined in the War for the Earth by their Gen Z comrades in Latin America, Africa, Oceania, and other parts of Asia. Their actions could be coordinated by a new ministry, the Ministry for Delinking.

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국문초록

“계획 아니면 혼돈이다:”
기후 이주 증언과 『미래부』

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김 스탠리 로빈슨의 장편 SF 소설 『미래부』(2020)는 기후 위기에 대한 분석과 해결책을 제시하며 다양한 공공 영역에서 광범위한 논의와 논쟁을 촉발했다. 그러나 소설에 포함된 일부 목소리와 이야기, 특히 난민들의 이야기는 소설에 대한 담론에서 거의 배제되어 왔다. 『미래부』에서 기후 이주 증언은 난민을 포함한 이주자들이 출발, 이주, 도착, 수용소 생활, 석방, 통합의 경험을 서술하는 이야기 형식이다. 독자는 인터뷰, 구술 역사, 회고록, 일기, 자전적 민족지학 사이의 경계를 흐리는 다변적인 서사 형식을 통해 연출된 목소리에 직면하게 되며, 이는 “하위 계층의 경험과 목소리를 중요한 것으로 만드는”(Beverley xvi) 라틴아메리카의 “증언(testimonio)” 형식과 비교될 수 있다. 『미래부』는 기후 이주 증언을 포함시켜 기후 위기 논의의 주변부로 밀려난 이주민들의 목소리와 경험을 중심부로 끌어올린다. 이 소설은 ‘난민 위기’ 담론과 난민 및 기타 이주민들을 비인간화하는 글로벌 아파트헤이트 체제를 비판한다. 임시 수용을 영구적 상태로 만드는 장기적 경계 상태에 그들을 내몰기 때문이다. 전반에 걸쳐 기후 이주 증언을 엮어낸 『미래부』는 난민을 무기한 구금하는 부당함에 대한 긴박감을 조성하며, 난민들의 이동성과 통합을 촉진할 수 있는 한 가지 해결책으로 난센식 여권(Nansen-style passport)을 제안한다. 미국과 영국에서 극우, 반이민 및 반난민 운동이 부상함에 따라, 『미래부』에 등장하는 기후 이주 증언의 묘사는 이 역사적 시점에 매우 시의적절하다.

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