TALKING ABOUT YOUR GENERATION
"Our Children" as a Trope in Climate Change Discourse

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This article examines the rhetorical figuration of "our children" in climate change discourse. Based on an analysis of James Hansen's book, *Storms of my Grandchildren* (2009), Barack Obama's speech at the COP21 meeting in Paris in 2015, and a newspaper article about the Norwegian environmental organization, The Grandparents' Climate Campaign, it argues that the uses of "our children" reflect a notion of a family-timed future. The trope implies a "we" working as the active subject in the texts, while "our children" simply represents a future to be saved. This structure also authorizes "the parent" as a position of enunciation in climate change discourse. The article argues that the authority of this position is based on a heteronormative reproductive futurism.[1]

Keywords: climate change temporality, family time, heteronormative reproductive futurism, climate change narratives

In April 2018, the French president Emmanuel Macron visited the USA and spoke in front of Congress on Capitol Hill. His speech concerned the bilateral relationship between the USA and France, in the past, present and future. He argued for the importance of international climate agreements, with an implicit critique of the USA's withdrawal from the Paris Agreement. He further emphasized the importance of finding "a smooth transition to a low-carbon economy," and proclaimed: "What is the meaning of our lives, really, if we work and live, destroying the planet while sacrificing the future of our children?" And he added: "I believe in building a better future for our children, which requires offering them a planet still habitable in twenty-five years."[2] A year later, 16-year-old Greta Thunberg spoke in the British Houses of Parliament. Speaking from the position of a child and "on behalf of future generations," she declared: "Now we probably don't even have a future anymore" (Thunberg 2019: 57–58). Her statement resonates well with Macron's worry for "the future for our children." They are both using "the child" trope, which is well-established in environmental and climate change discourse (Johns-Putra 2016; Sheldon 2016). In this article, I will examine how this trope was well-used even before Macron and Thunberg performed their speeches. I will ask why a climate-changed future so often is articulated in terms of the future of "our children", and what the uses of this trope tell us about notions of time and temporality. By doing so, I will establish a foundation for understanding the rhetorical power of this trope, and thus also a foundation for understanding how this rhetoric has facilitated for Thunberg and the Fridays for Future movement to use "the child" as a privileged position of enunciation.

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The temporal aspects of the Anthropocene have been widely discussed during the last decade. The Anthropocene in general, and the climate crisis more specifically, is often described as a collapse of the distinction between the ontological zones of nature and culture, including an intertwining of geological and historical time as two main timescales (e.g. Chakrabarty 2009, 2018; Ekström & Svensen 2014; Latour 2017; Robin & Steffen 2007; Robin 2013). It has become obvious that historical processes and events like the Industrial Revolution of the late eighteenth century and the nuclear weapon testing in the 1940s and 1950s have had geophysical consequences, while deep time geological events have been given contemporary societal relevance by being used to inform climate change modelling. Yet the temporality of climate change is not dual, but multiple. There is not one natural time scale and one human one, but several (cf. Hastrup & Rubow 2014: 222–285). "Our children" represents a way of organizing social time, often neglected in discussions of climate change temporaries.

In this article, I will explore the notion of temporality implied in the trope "our children". As the anthropologist Cecilie Rubow has pointed out, notions of time are embedded in certain practices, experiences and value systems (Rubow 2014: 227). This article will explore the intertwining of values, experiences and temporal structures of the trope "our children", by examining how "our children" configures the relationship between the present and the future, and how the uses of "our children" authorize a certain position of enunciation in climate change discourse. The approach will be narratological, and I will examine how "our children" is incorporated in certain narrative scripts for organizing the relationship between the future and the present. In the book *Climate Change and Storytelling*, sociologist Annika Arnold claims: "To understand the nature of the political and public debate about climate change, we need to understand the narrative structures that produce this discourse" (Arnold 2018: 1). This article aims to contribute to such an understanding by drawing on theories of narrative scripts and literary scholar Algirdas Greimas' concept of *actants*, as a class of actors defined by their narrative function (Bal 1997: 197; cf. Greimas [1966]1983). Through a textual analysis, it will argue that narrative approaches must also be taken into consideration in the study of climate change temporality.

The trope "our children" appears in a variety of texts and rhetorical situations. In this article, I will examine popular uses of the trope across the societal fields of politics, popular science and activism. This will be done through close readings of three texts: the climate scientist James Hansen's book, *Storms of my Grandchildren* (2009), Barack Obama's address at the opening session of the climate conference in Paris in 2015, and a newspaper article presenting the Norwegian environmental organization, the Grandparents' Climate Campaign.[3] Hansen and the Grandparents' Climate Campaign are chosen because they are operating between different fields of action. Hansen is not only a scientist; he is also an activist, and has been a governmental advisor, while several high-profile members of the Grandparents' Climate Campaign are former politicians.

The three selected texts represent three quite different genres; the political speech, the newspaper interview and the popular science book. This choice is based on an assumption that different genres imply different rhetorical strategies. The political speech is oral, held in front of an audience. It is brief in length, which implies that the argumentation must be kept short and not too complex, and it is often summed up in one-liners. In line with the political speech, the conversational form of a newspaper interview does not allow elaborated arguments. As a written representation of an oral conversation, it often holds a quite informal style. However, the popular science genre is far more elaborative; it aims to transform science into a well-told story, balancing scientific knowledge with personal narratives and claims in its effort to appeal to a general audience. Thus, by analyzing different genres I will identify some rhetorical patterns and narrative structures across genre conventions and spheres of communication (cf. Bakhtin 1986: 60). Further, the three selected texts are all intertextually embedded in a transnational climate change discourse. Both Hansen's book and

Obama's speech have had a wide, international outreach, while the Grandparents' Climate Campaign is part of a transnational movement. By analyzing these three texts, the objective is to identify some trans-local patterns in the uses of "our children" as a trope.

The Heteronormative Future

My argument is built upon literary scholar Rebekah Sheldon's book, *The Child to Come: Life after the Human Catastrophe* (2016). In a broadly performed study, she has analyzed the figuration of "the child" in catastrophic future imaginations in American culture after 1960. She polemically asks: "[W]hy, when we reach out to grasp the future of our planet, do we find ourselves instead clutching the child?" (Sheldon 2016: vii), and examines a number of films, novels and popular environmental publications to answer the question. Informed by Lee Edelman (2004) and queer theory, she shows how "the child" represents a reproductive futurism in American environmentalism. She uses Al Gore's bestselling book, *An Inconvenient Truth* (2006), to illustrate this point. The opening illustration of Gore's book is a photo from the early 1970s, picturing a young heterosexual couple sitting in a canoe. Both are smiling happily, and the woman is folding her hands on her pregnant belly. The caption reads: "Al and Tipper Gore, one month before the birth of their first child, Karenna, on the Caney Fork River, Carthage, TN, 1973" (Gore 2006). Sheldon remarks that this picture "encapsulates the equation between nature, heteronormative family structure, reproductive futurism, and the landscapification of the future," which is the subject of her work (Sheldon 2016: 38). By using examples like this, she convincingly points out how the future is naturalized through heteronormative reproductivism. This kind of futurism reproduces social norms by projecting them onto the future.

Sheldon also refers to James Hansen's popular scientific book, *Storms of my Grandchildren* (2009). Hansen is a high-profile NASA and Colombia University scholar, known for his contributions to establishing a public awareness on climate change. At a Senate hearing as early as in 1988, he proclaimed that it was time to "stop waffling, and say that the evidence is pretty strong that the greenhouse effect is here" (Hansen in Weart 2003: 155). *Storms of my Grandchildren* was published 21 years later, at the end of his career. It is a highly personal account of his career as a climate scientist and an activist.

Public events, such as the Senate hearing in 1988, are thoroughly described in the book. However, such events are not as important for his argument as his family seems to be. His family's history works as a narrative framework for the book, and his three grandchildren, Jake, Sophie and Connor, constitute a leitmotif, representing hopes and dreams, but also the uncertainty of the future. For instance, the concluding chapter, which is also entitled "Storms of my Grandchildren," opens with a picture of his grandson Jake (Hansen [2009]2011: 237). Sheldon claims that this image works as a metonym for the "concept of responsibility for future generations" (Sheldon 2016: 369).

Even though Sheldon understands "the child" as a temporal term, expressing notions of the future, the trope itself does not necessarily imply a temporal dimension. It may also refer to innocence, nostalgic imaginaries of a childhood, perhaps placed in an ideal past, but just as easily in a timeless state. However, when Sheldon understands the picture of Hansen's grandson Jake as a metonym for the "concept of responsibility for future generations," she not only emphasizes that she understands "the child" trope as future-oriented, she also moves from discussing the term in the singular to discussing it in the plural. This plural form is less abstract than the singular form, as it refers to the future in terms of a group of people rather than an ideal human state.

Sheldon does not discuss the rhetorical implications of the fact that Hansen uses his own grandchildren as examples. Yet this has significance for the kind of future they represent. They do not represent the future as such, but rather a future related to the present. To put it simply, the term "grandchild" implies a "grandparent". The trope they represent expresses such a relationship between people in both the present and in the future. Hence, I will argue that Jake, Sophie and Connor work as exemplifications

of "our children", implying a contemporary "we", rather than metonyms of "the child".

It is quite obvious that Hansen's rhetorical use of his grandchildren exposes a heteronormative reproductive notion of the future. But the way he refers to his grandchildren unveils more than just reproductivism and heteronormativity. It also unveils a certain temporal structure; a specific way of organizing the relationship between the present and the future. In the first part of this article I will use Hansen's book to explore this temporal structure.

Family Time

The timescales are constantly shifting in Hansen's book, between geological deep time and modern, historical time. He uses graphs extensively to illustrate his argument, and the time intervals in them vary, from millions of years to a few decades during the twentieth century. Hansen depicts the so-called Zachos curve, which is a well-known graph in paleoclimatic research. It shows the variety of deep-water temperatures during the last 65 million years, with a peak 55.9 million years ago. This peak is the so-called Paleocene–Eocene Thermal Maximum (PETM), a period of 200,000 years, when the global temperature rapidly increased due to enlarged concentrations of CO_2 in the atmosphere (Hansen [2009]2011: 153). This event is regarded as a geohistorical recourse for understanding possible future climate scenarios (Svensen, Bjærke & Kverndokk 2019). Hansen also relates the PETM to the near future:

> [F]or the sake of your children and grandchildren, let's look a little closely at another story in figure 18 [the Zachos curve], one that is vitally important. I refer to the PETM, the Paleocene–Eocene thermal maximum, the rapid warming of at least 5 degrees Celsius that occurred about 55 million years ago and caused a minor rash of extinctions, mainly of marine species. (Hansen [2009]2011: 161)

A period of time, 55 million years ago, that lasted for 200,000 years, is put in relation to two future generations. Two very different timescales entangle; the PETM represents geological deep time, while, following the debate on the temporality of Anthropocene, it is tempting to regard "your children and grandchildren" as a metaphor for the future within the framework of a historical timescale (cf. Chakrabarty 2009, 2018). Yet, I will claim that the lifespans of these generations represent yet another kind of timescale.

This timescale appears clearly when Hansen, in another part of his book, refers to a lunch conversation he had with the talk-show host Larry King. King had claimed that: "Nobody cares about fifty years from now" (Hansen [2009]2011: 131). Hansen disagreed:

> Over the past few years I thought about our grandchildren and the intergenerational inequity of human-made climate change. Larry King's comment that "nobody cares about fifty years from now" didn't seem right – people do care about their children and grandchildren. In fact, the concept of responsibility to future generations is as familiar to Americans as their Constitution, with its phrase "to ourselves and our Posterity" embedded in the preamble. I believed then, and believe now, that if the public had a better understanding of the climate crisis, they would do what needed to be done. (Hansen [2009]2011: 238)

Hansen's disagreement with King has to do with different notions of time. While King seems to be referring to fifty years as a linear calendric time, Hansen is thinking in terms of family cycles. The terms "their children and grandchildren" unveil a specific notion of experienceable time, which is often neglected in discussions on temporality in the climate change discourse. This experience-near aspect is underscored by the reference to the American constitution. The term "Posterity" used in the constitution literally means "what comes after". It is an older term for the future, reflecting an early modern notion of temporality, where the future was regarded as coming *after* or *behind*, rather than being *in front* of the present. It reflects a notion of the future drawing on experiences, rather than being open, endless and unpredictable (e.g. Hartog 2015; Koselleck 1985).

Hansen further relates this notion of the future to the principle of intergenerational equality, used in philosophy, economics and environmentalism since the 1970s. The general term "future generations" is widely used to describe such an equality. It is, however, worth noticing that Hansen is not describing the future in terms of future generations, as an endless chain of generations. He refers specifically to the next two generations. By stating the obvious fact that "people do care about their children and grandchildren," and giving it a temporal horizon of fifty years, he claims that a vernacular experience-near notion of time is organized in terms of family cycles.

Social historian Tamara Hareven has made a distinction between family time and historical time. She defines historical time as "a linear chronological movement of changes in a society over decades or centuries" (Hareven 1977: 59; cf. Koselleck 1985). Family time, on the other hand, is culturally situated and far less chronological. It is a notion of time that is based on how individual life experiences and lifespans are embedded into family cycles through formative life stages and events, such as childhoods, marriages, childbirths, parenthood, parents gradually getting old and dying, and so on. In this way, the individual lifespan is also given a cyclic temporality, which she terms "family time" (Hareven 1977: 59–61). Such family time has the capability of transcending the individual life experience, as the time of ancestors, grandparents, parents, children and grandchildren. Family time is, in this sense, a notion of experienceable time between the individual lifespan and historical time.[4]

Today's families are not particularly stable units. This is not an entirely new trend. Hareven remarks that family structures and family timing are historically quite complex, and often unstable (Hareven 1977: 61). People have nevertheless experienced time through family experiences and family cycles, and people are still experiencing the past and have expectations of the future within a family-timed framework. The family time of the past must deal with family fluctuations, while the family time of the future is an ideal time. It is drawing on the expectations, hopes, dreams and fears for the lives of today's children and children not yet born.

Hansen's claim that "the concept of responsibility to future generations is as familiar to Americans as their Constitution," is not merely a claim about American family values. It also demonstrates how he organizes the relationship between the present and the future through a notion of family time. Throughout the book, Hansen constantly refers to the future in family-timed terms, by addressing the reader with the term "your children and grandchildren", and alternately using his own grandchildren as examples.

Life-scripted Future

Hansen also uses family cycles rhetorically to establish a sense of continuity from the past to the present. He draws a line from his parents' lives to his expectations of the lives of his grandchildren: "My parents lived to be almost ninety years old, so Jake [his two-year old grandson] may be around for the rest of this century. Jake has no idea what he is in for – that's just as well. He had better first grow up strong and smart" (Hansen [2009]2011: 238). Hansen not only expects Jake to live a long life, just like the boy's great-grandparents. He also expects him to "grow up strong and smart." This expression is not just an empty saying. A saying is never empty; it expresses a cultural value that is conventional and naturalized. In this case, the saying expresses a naturalized and scripted expectation of a safe and happy childhood and a successful adolescence.

These expectations draw on what ethnologist Jonas Frykman has termed a *life script*, a narrative model for how a life is expected to be (Frykman 1992: 261). The term *life script* has been used in autobiographical studies to analyze how people use cultural models to negotiate their life stories. Such scripts tend to draw on cultural norms concerning formative life events and life timing – when one is supposed to get an education, a job and a family, and when that life is supposed to end. Ethnologist Helena Kåks has shown that life scripts are not only used in retrospect, to evaluate life experiences. By interviewing a group of Swedish youngsters over a

ten-year period, she has shown how culturally distributed life scripts also structure expectations of the future. She found that the life scripts her informants used for imagining the future were highly heteronormative. The expectation of a future family life was a key motif in these scripts, and they were taking the nuclear family for granted. Kåks found that such scripts dominated, even among those who had experienced other kinds of family constellations (Kåks 2007: 285).

Following Kåks' findings, it is likely that conventional, heteronormative life scripts also structure how parents and grandparents imagine the future of their children and grandchildren. This seems to be the case with Hansen's prediction of Jake's future. When he writes that Jake "better first grow up to be strong and smart," he draws on a conventional, gendered script of a successful life, making his future seemingly predictable. This life-scripted future is however threatened by a narrative dissonance, introduced in the sentence: "Jake has no idea what he is in for." "[W]hat he is in for" is what Hansen calls "[the] storms of my grandchildren." The term "storms" is literarily referring to an expected increase of extreme weather events in the future. But these "storms" are also used by Hansen as a metonym for the climate-changed future as such. He describes this metonymic meaning in rather concrete terms: "Storms. That is the one word that will best characterize the twenty-first-century climate […]. Our grandchildren are in for a rough ride" (Hansen [2009]2011: 250). And continues:

> In the first decade of this century, while the large ice sheets are just beginning to be softened up, we have seen significant increased warming in the high latitudes of the northern hemisphere, especially in central Asia and the Arctic. But once ice sheet disintegration begins in earnest, our grandchildren will live the rest of their lives in a chaotic transition period. (Hansen [2009]2011: 250)

When Hansen writes that Jake "better *first* grow up," he seems to refer to this expected "chaotic transition period" in just a couple of decades. The subtitle of the book even terms it "the Coming Climate Catastrophe." This climate catastrophe will collide with the hopes and dreams he has for Jake. Narratologically speaking, climate change will turn the life-scripted predictability of his grandson's future into unpredictable chaos.

In other terms, life-scripted family time makes the future seemingly tellable and imaginable, and to some extent fairly predictable. But this predictability is threatened by climate chaos. Since this kind of imaginary future is based on family norms, it is not surprising that it is heteronormative. In the next section, I will examine how such a family-timed and narratively scripted notion of the future configures the relationship between the present-day and a climate-changed future. To do this, I will turn to Barack Obama's speech at the opening session of the COP21-conference in Paris, on November 30, 2015.

"Our Children" as an Actant

According to Obama, the objective for the Paris-conference was to build "the future we want for our children."[5] He uses two examples from his own experience to underscore this point. "Our children" is used rhetorically in both of them. In the following close reading, I will concentrate on the first and most elaborate one:

> This summer, I saw the effects of climate change firsthand in our northernmost state, Alaska, where the sea is already swallowing villages and eroding shorelines; where permafrost thaws and the tundra burns; where glaciers are melting at a pace unprecedented in modern times. And it was a preview of one possible future – a glimpse of our children's fate if the climate keeps changing faster than our efforts to address it. Submerged countries. Abandoned cities. Fields that no longer grow. Political disruptions that trigger new conflict, and even more floods of desperate peoples seeking the sanctuary of nations not their own.[6]

In this passage, he is positioning himself as an eyewitness to "the effects of climate change," but unlike most testimonies, this one does not contain any details about what he has experienced. He starts by stating that he has visited Alaska, before he switches,

almost unnoticeably, to talk about Alaska in general terms. He does not name any people he has met, or places he has visited. Even the nature is described generally, as the extraordinary natural phenomena of dramatic pace and scale; eroding shorelines, thawing permafrost, burning tundra and melting glaciers. By listing them, Obama demonstrates the power of an uncontrollable, imbalanced nature. The villages he is referring to appear as small enclaves of culture surrounded by this uncontrollable nature – that even swallows them. The devastation is total. Even though the description is dramatic, the villages remain unnamed. They are not referred to as specific cases, but as general examples of what might happen to any small village located along a shoreline. It is a depiction of an apocalypse in miniature, pointing toward the future.

Furthermore, the list of natural phenomena is not just a list of consequences of climate change. Obama describes them as "a preview of one possible future." As such a preview, they work as signs signifying a catastrophic future, or what Obama terms "a glimpse of our children's fate." This fate is also literarily presented as glimpses through incomplete sentences, some of them just containing adjectives and nouns: "Submerged countries. Abandoned cities. Fields that no longer grow." These glimpses describe a general disastrous state of a climate-changed future. They are not geographically located and contain no human subjects. Humans are included in the last glimpse, but through a natural metaphor, as "floods of desperate peoples." This metaphor underscores how "our children's fate" is destined by the uncontrollable force of not only nature, but also of humanity as nature, that is unleashed by the force of nature.

These glimpses of a disastrous future might be regarded as what literary scholar Isak Winkel Holm has termed a prophetic experiential mode. This mode is characterized by a mental projection into the moment after a future disaster, brought back to the present and told as an intensely affective experience to invoke engagement and avoid the coming disaster. The prophetic mode is a temporal and narrative structure used in both canonized literature, such as Henrik Ibsen's *Brand* and in popular culture, such as the TV-series *True Detective* (Holm 2016, 2018; cf. Dupuy 2013). This temporally looped narrative structure is connecting the disastrous future to the present. Holm shows how this mode draws on the temporal structure of the prophetic books of the Old Testament. It might be regarded as a disaster imaginary that not only frames the understanding of a future disaster. Drawing on disaster studies, Holm claims that it "frames our perception of the entire world" (Holm 2016: 105). He argues that this structure is relevant to understanding the contemporary political discourse where a potential disastrous future is present (Holm 2018: 193–195). Used in a climate change discourse, where the future is described in all-encompassing catastrophic terms, and given the biblical undertones, this prophetic structure brings apocalyptic associations.

A number of scholars have pointed out the apocalyptic character of popular climate change discourse (e.g. Anshelm & Hultman 2015; Cochet 2015; Hörnfeldt 2018; Hulme 2008: 10–13; Johns-Putra 2016; Lilly 2016; Northcott 2015). The term apocalypse is, however, often used as simply a metaphor for a severe societal collapse (cf. Skrimshire 2014: 237–239). The apocalyptic notion of a climate-changed future is undoubtedly metaphorical, as it is a secular imaginary. However, it is more than just a metaphor, it is a narrative plot organizing the relationship between the end and present-day actions. Both a religious apocalypse and a metaphysical, secular one imply a complex temporal structure. Literary scholar Frank Kermode has remarked that there is a double temporal relationship between the present and the ending in apocalyptic narratives. With reference to theological literature, he uses the Greek terms *chronos*, meaning passing time until the end, and *kairos*, defined as "a point of time filled with significance, charged with a meaning derived from its relation to the end" (1967: 47; cf. Johns-Putra 2016: 525). The kairos structure underscores how the apocalypse is as much about the significance of the present as it is about the future.

Moreover, regarded as a metaphoric, secular plot, the apocalyptically configurated climate-changed

future is not the end of the earthy world. It is rather a global disastrous state or, in worst case, the end of contemporary civilization. In Obama's case, "our children's fate" is depicted as a totally devastated and chaotic world. This metaphoric, apocalyptic plot is double-ended, it also includes an alternative to the all-encompassing cataclysmic transformation of the world. The alternative is most often formulated as either sustainability or as a progress narrative about technological development that will solve the climate crisis and facilitate further economic growth (Kverndokk 2017: 39–41).

Following Kermode's distinction between *chronos* and *kairos* and the double-ended structure of the apocalyptic climate narrative, there are three identifiable layers of futurity implied in the plotting of Obama's speech. All three of them are about the future of "our children". The first one is what will happen: The children will grow up. The second is what we fear will happen, or what Obama terms "one possible future." In other words, an uncontrollable climatic catastrophe. The third is what hopefully will happen, "the future we want for our children." This is apparently a happy ending, and as such, not really an ending. Like all happy endings, it is a reestablishment of narrative balance, enabling life to continue as planned. The second and third are structured as *kairos*, or how the "now" is significantly related to the possible endings. The plot of the climate-changed future is, in other words, unfolding in the tension between these two futurities, while the first one represents passing time indicating the chronology of the narrative. The narrative function of "our children" is in this case to mediate between the present and the future both by representing the end of the story, and by indicating the passing of life-scripted family time by simply growing up. In both regards, "our children" might be regarded as the *actant*, in folklorist Vladimir Propp's and literary scholar Algirdas Greimas' sense of the term.

Propp's classic study of the morphology of the folktale emphasizes the narrative function of the actors, and how they work as vehicles for bringing the action forward, to the end. He argued that just a few such function-defined classes of actors were necessary for a folktale to develop, enabling "the hero" to fulfill his or her task. Propp suggested seven such "spheres of actions" (Propp 1968: 79–80). Greimas later reduced them to six and termed them *actants* (Greimas [1966]1983).[7] He argued that they not only operate in folktales, but rather characterize narrative structures in general.[8]

My analysis is only concerned with the two key actants in Greimas' model: *the subject* – the one reaching for a goal[9] – and *the object* – which is defined as what the subject is aiming for (Bal 1997: 197; cf. Greimas [1966]1983). In the quote from Obama, "our children" seems at first glance to be the main characters, since it is about their future. However, regarded from a Greimasian point of view, it is not the case. "Our children" are not ascribed any agency – they just happen to grow up. They are not reaching for a goal – they simply have a "fate". The goal, according to Obama's speech, is to save them from this fate. In this regard, they work as the object-actant.

The possessive pronoun "our" has a significant narrative function in the speech, by constituting a relationship between the object "our children" and a "we". It is "we" that are given agency, working as the active subject-actant. This subject-actant/object-actant relationship between "we" and "our children" is a symbolic parent–child one. While Hansen is specifically referring to his grandchildren, Obama is speaking in a general plural form, referring to "our children", as the children of the earth. Equally, "we" refers generally to a generation of global adults. Or, more specifically, "we" seems to refer to the political leaders representing the world's population. In other terms, Obama and the other politicians and policy makers attending the COP21 conference in Paris fill the subject-actant of "the parent". By structuring his speech around the temporal logic of *kairos*, he highlights the delegates at the conference as the possible heroes or villains of the story of climate change, inhabiting at the same time a cumulative guilt and the potential for a solution. In this way he emphasizes the COP21 conference as the moment that determines the ending of the dual plot of a climate-changed future. It is a moment of almost cosmological dimensions, or in Kermode's terms, "a

point of time filled with significance, changing with a meaning derived from its relation to the end" (Kermode 1967: 47).

In this way, Obama elegantly demonstrates the rhetorical force of the symbolic "parent–child" relationship and underscores the importance of the Paris conference. By using the symbolic "parent–child" relationship for authorizing his message, he also demonstrates how "the parent" has been used as a privileged position of enunciation in climate politics (cf. Foucault [1969]2002: 55–61). The authority of this position is based on what Sheldon has termed a heteronormative reproductive futurism.

The Grandparent as a Position of Enunciation

In *Storms of my Grandchildren*, Hansen describes how the experience of becoming and being a grandparent motivated him to engage in climate politics and activism:

> I myself changed over the last eight years, especially after my wife, Anniek, and I had our first grandchildren. […] I did not want my grandchildren, someday in the future, to look back and say, "Opa understood what was happening, but he did not make it clear." […] If it hadn't been for my grandchildren and my knowledge of what they would face, I would have stayed focused on the pure science, and not persisted in pointing out its relevance to policy. (Hansen [2009]2011: XII)

By emphasizing that his motivation for his engagement was his grandchildren, and his "knowledge of what they would face," he also transforms the family status of being a grandparent into a position of enunciation. This is underscored by the words he puts in his grandchildren's mouths at some point in the future: "Opa understood what was happening, but he did not make it clear." He not only engages because of his grandchildren. He engages as a grandfather, with his grandchildren as addressees.

It is tempting to relate Obama's and Hansen's rhetorical use of "our children"/"my grandchildren" to American family values, but the practice of structuring the future as life-scripted family cycles is not just American. I will now turn to the Norwegian environmental organization the Grandparents' Climate Campaign to examine how the subject-actant/object-actant relationship between "the (grand) parent" and "our (grand)children" authorizes the parent/grandparent as a privileged position of enunciation in climate change discourse. Following the actant-model both parents and grandparents work as subjects, yet, they fill the actant-position in slightly different ways. The grandparents hold a double educational and caretaker position. To get grandchildren gives them a second chance to raise children. This time ideally without economic responsibility, but with accumulated life-experiences and the experience of having raised their own children. At the same time, they are still parents, and as such they may advise their children in how to raise the grandchildren. Hence, grandparents may at the same time work as co-educators/caretakers and as supra-educators/caretakers.

The Grandparents' Climate Campaign was founded in 2006.[10] It was originally established as a loose cross-political network, but reorganized as a formal environmental organization in 2012. In March 2018 it had about 1,900 members.[11] Despite a modest number of members, it has been a significant contributor to Norwegian public debate for more than a decade, partly due to its many prominent members.

Its founders were a group of elderly people, several of whom had possessed influential positions in Norwegian political and public life. In late 2006, a founding statement was published in several Norwegian newspapers, proclaiming the need for what was termed a "responsible climate politics" (Willoch et al. 2006). Among the people that signed it were a former central bank governor, two former bishops, two retired professors, two acclaimed authors and five previously high-profile politicians.

Three of those signing the founding statement were interviewed by the newspaper *Aftenposten* on December 4, 2006 (Hegtun 2006). These three were the former prime minister and former leader of the Conservative Party[12], Kåre Willoch (aged 78), the former leader of the Labor Party[13], Reiulf Steen (aged 73), and the founder of the influential environmental

organization The Future in Our Hands[14], Erik Dammann (aged 75). The interview elaborated on the recently published statement of the Grandparents' Climate Campaign, using a quote from the statement as a starting point: "As grandparents we have remained too silent for too long."[15] Hence, *Aftenposten* not merely presented these elderly men as former public figures. The objective of the article was rather to position them as grandparents involved in the environmental debate.

The article demonstrates how a family experience of being a grandparent is transformed into a privileged position of enunciation in environmental and political debate. The headline reads: "Look, grandfather is warning."[16] It is wordplay based on the line: "Look, grandfather is dancing,"[17] from the Norwegian song "The Grandfather's Waltz,"[18] made popular by the artist Einar Rose in 1932. The reference to this song indicates that these grandfathers are actively engaging in politics again – they are, so to speak, back on the political dancefloor, as grandparents concerned for the future. To demonstrate that they were not only symbolically speaking from the grandparent position, Dammann and Steen brought their grandchildren, Mathias (aged 11) and Mia (aged 16), with them. The grandchildren do not play a significant part in this article, other than exemplifying a future needing to be saved. Mathias and Mia's presence not only worked as an exemplification of future generations. It also displayed the three men's personal concern for their own grandchildren. In a concrete way, they turned family concerns into a subject for environmental politics. In that sense, Mathias and Mia worked efficiently as mediators between a family sphere and a political one. It is also worth noticing how they mediated across former political disagreements. Two former politicians and one activist, with radically different political backgrounds, were seemingly able to reconcile through their joint position as grandparents. The responsibility as grandfathers seems to raise fundamental moral concerns for the future. They reprehend today's politicians by not only drawing on their professional experience, but also explicitly by drawing on their experiences as grandfathers. Thus, when they engage in politics again, they do it as supra-caretakers, as grandparents both in and of politics.

When these three men claim public authority by referring to their family positions, they draw on well-established political symbolism. The family and the home have been widely used as analogies for the nation and the society in Western history, for instance expressed through metaphors such as "the fatherland", "homeland" or the much-used Swedish term "folkhemmet" (the people's home). Such metaphors and analogies have a long history. In Protestant countries they are historically related to a patriarchic notion of society. Luther understood the king as paterfamilias of the state, the clergyman as paterfamilias of his parish and the father as paterfamilias of the home, responsible for both basic religious and societal upbringing (Markussen 2018: 41–44). The Protestant doctrine of these three disciplining estates (the state, the church and the family) in the early modern Lutheran state has its continuation in the educational ideology of the modern nation-state, as a relationship between two "homes", the family home and the fatherland (cf. Thorkildsen 1995: 55–61, 87–88). Thus, there is a historical patriarchic bias in the rhetorical uses of the grandparent–child relationship, which is striking in the way the three elderly public figures, Willoch, Steen and Dammann, position themselves as grandfathers in climate politics.

Linguists Mateusz-Milan Stanojević and Ljiljana Šarić have pointed out that family analogies and metaphors for the nation and the society "make it possible to conceptualize human communities as extended families" (Stanojević & Šarić 2019: 14). This is what happens in the uses of "our children and grandchildren" in popular climate change discourse. In this article, I have argued that the child-trope is not merely a metonym for the "concept of responsibility for future generations"; it is also used to describe the relationship between the climate-changed future and the present in family-timed terms. In that regard, the trope relates societal development to the family in quite direct terms. The interview with Willoch, Steen and Dammann, and Hansen's *Storms of my Grandchildren* demonstrate

that the trope is more than just a metonym. The way these four elderly men talk about the future in family-timed terms implies a constant blurring of the distinction between the actual grandfathers, caring for their own grandchildren, and the position of the symbolic grandparent talking generally about the future in terms of children and grandchildren. This is at the same time a blurring of the distinction between family status and the political sphere, that turns the relationship between what the philosopher Jürgen Habermas has termed *the lifeworld* and *the system* on its head. Habermas argues that the *system* tends to colonialize the *lifeworld* in a modern society (Habermas [1981]1988). However, by transforming family status into a privileged position of enunciation in politics, the lifeworld, with all its social norms and taken-for-granted-ness, seemingly invades the system, at least on the level of discourse.

Conclusion

The parent–child relationship is a way to organize time, founded on family-timed life cycles. While both climate modeling and climate agreements use more or less arbitrary dates for anticipating and calculating the future, such as 2030, 2050 and 2100, family time does not date the future. The future appears instead as the expectations of continuing lifespans and upcoming life experiences. In that way, family time makes the future seemingly tellable and imaginable.

In this article, I have argued that a family-timed future implies a specific kind of plotting of the relationship between the present and the future. The life-scripted future of children and grandchildren constitutes one part of a plot of a climate-changed future, as an alternative to a climate catastrophe. This plot ascribes both "our children" and "the parent" specific narrative functions as subject-actant and object-actant. The dual narrative structure, and the subject-actant/object-actant relationship embedded in it, is used to authorize a privileged position of enunciation of "the parent" in climate politics and activism. "Our children" is not just a metonym for the "concept of responsibility for future generations," referring to what environmental philosophy and economy terms *intergenerational equality*. The terms "my/our children" and "my/our grandchildren" refer to something more specific than the general and temporally endless term "future generations". The position of enunciation of "the parent" or "grandparent" is more than a symbolic position, it also draws heavily on the specific experiences and family obligations of being a parent or a grandparent. In that way, it blurs the distinction between a private family sphere and a public, political one.

Consequently, the family-timed figuration of "our children" in climate change discourse tends to work as a vehicle for downscaling climate change, in both temporal and spatial senses. The most striking example of such downscaling mentioned in this article is Hansen's argument about the contemporary relevance of PETM, where he appeals to the readers to pay attention to the scientific knowledge about the event "for the sake of your children and grandchildren" (Hansen [2009]2011: 161). The intention is presumably pedagogic, yet the result is that the distinction between very different timescales and spatial scales is collapsing. A change in the global climate almost 56 million years ago, that lasted for 200,000 years, is made relevant for the readers as here-and-now family concerns.

The downscaling through "our children" delimits the time span of the climate-changed future to one or two generations ahead. This kind of downscaling implies a dramatization of the future. It moves a possible climatic all-encompassing catastrophe closer, making room for such statements, as Emmanuel Macron's wish to offer our children "a planet still habitable in twenty-five years." Such downscaling does not only work as a way of authorizing a certain position of enunciation of "the parent". It also enables young people such as Greta Thunberg to step forward, positioning themselves as children speaking "on behalf of future generations" (Thunberg 2019: 57), demanding political action. Thunberg and the Fridays for Future movement draw heavily on the established "child" trope and the future-dimension embedded in it, and have rhetorically succeeded in turning the object into a subject. By appealing to the embedded, yet unfulfilled, caretaking aspect of the

"parent" position, they have succeeded in turning "our children" into a privileged position of enunciation in climate change discourse (Kverndokk 2019). In this article, I have shown how a rhetorical foundation for doing this was established long before Thunberg entered the stage.

Notes

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2 Quoted from YouTube: CNN: Macron warns US Congress: There's no Planet B, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XYTx4DrBhzM (accessed March 3, 2019).

3 Besteforeldrenes klimaaksjon.

4 There is a parallel of this way of thinking in memory theory. Alaida and Jan Assmann argues that communicative memory, that is orally and/or informally communicated, are transmitted across generations. It is a kind of memory in between personal memory and scholarly, archival-based history. Jan Assmann links communicative memory to generational time, and claims that this kind of memory has a temporal horizon that "does not extend more than eighty to (at the very most) one hundred years into the past, which equals three or four generation" (Assmann 1995: 127).

5 The White House: President Barack Obama: Remarks by President Obama at the First Session of COP21, https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2015/11/30/remarks-president-obama-first-session-cop21 (accessed March 26, 2018).

6 The White House: President Barack Obama: Remarks by President Obama at the First Session of COP21, https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2015/11/30/remarks-president-obama-first-session-cop21 (accessed March 26, 2018).

7 The actants in Greimas' model are: 1) "The subject" reaching for 2) "the object" (the goal of the story). 3) "The sender" is the one initiating the action by sending the hero or "the subject" off to reach for "the object", while 4) "the receiver" benefits from the action. 5) "The helper" simply helps "the subject" to reach "the object", while 6) "the opponent" tries to prevent it from happening (Greimas [1966]1983).

8 The Propp-Greimasian model does not distinguish between human or non-human actants; the actant could just as well be an animal or object as a person. Philosopher Bruno Latour has applied Greimas' term *actant* to actor-network theory. In this article, I will however use the term strictly in a Propp-Greimasian sense.

9 It equals both "the hero" and "the villain" in Propp's scheme, depending on which of them is successfully reaching his or her goal.

10 The Grandparents' Climate Campaign has its equal in several countries: Canada (For Our Grandchildren and The Suzuki Elders), Great Britain (Grandparents' Climate Action), Switzerland (Grands-parents pour le climat/Klima-Grosseltern Schweiz) and France (Grands-parents pour le climat). In June 2014, these organizations signed the "Statement of Concerned Grandparents International" calling for "a new moral leadership, giving priority to the safety of all our grandchildren and their right to a sustainable planet." This statement is also signed by the former bishop and Nobel Peace Prize holder Desmond Tutu, the Canadian activist and former leader of the Inuit Circumpolar Council Sheila Watt-Cloutier, and James Hansen.

11 See Besteforeldrenes klimaaksjon: About the Grandparents Campaign, http://www.besteforeldreaksjonen.no/?page_id=1467; Besteforeldrenes klimaaksjon: Bakgrunn og historie, http://www.besteforeldreaksjonen.no/?page_id=28; Besteforeldrenes klimaaksjon: Formål og vedtekter, http://www.besteforeldreaksjonen.no/?page_id=6 (all three webpages accessed April 26, 2018).

12 Høyre.

13 Arbeiderpartiet.

14 Framtiden i våre hender.

15 "Som besteforeldre har vi vært altfor tause altfor lenge."

16 "Se, der advarer bestefar."

17 "Se, der danser bestefar."

18 "Bestefarsvalsen," by Arne Svendsen.

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