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Ishiguro's Inhuman Aesthetics

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ISHIGURO'S INHUMAN AESTHETICS

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The question of what it means to be human pervades Kazuo Ishiguro's novel *Never Let Me Go*, which gradually reveals a counterfactual twentieth-century England where clone colonies provide ready supplies of organs for donation. In the tradition of Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932) and George Orwell's *1984* (1949), the novel envisions a dystopian civil society where clones struggle to comprehend the significance of their own circumscribed personhood. Perhaps unsurprisingly, this interrogation of what it means to be human emerges through a critique of Romantic-inspired assumptions about aesthetics and empathy. While the novel attracts attention for its theme of genetic engineering, its deepest anxieties arguably concern the ethics of artistic production and consumption in an age of multiculturalism and globalization. Through its veneer of science fiction, *Never Let Me Go* offers an allegory both for national concerns about the state of England and for transnational fears about rising global inequality. In its portrait of the systematic exploitation of the clones and its implicit exploration of vulnerable actors in our modern economic order, the novel indicts humanist conceptions of art as a form of extraction that resembles forced organ donation. If Romantic-inspired views of empathy rely on the claim that art reveals the human soul, Ishiguro's novel implies that the concept of the soul invokes a fundamentally exploitative discourse of use value. In this respect, *Never Let Me Go* shares in a pervasive late-twentieth-century cultural skepticism about the viability of empathetic art.

Yet Ishiguro's critique does not—as might be expected—abandon the ethical potential of works of art. Instead, it makes a case for an ethics offering a very different approach to art and empathy that relies on the recognition of the inhuman. As an alternative to humanist modes of representation, Ishiguro's inhuman style suggests that only by recognizing what in ourselves is mechanical, manufactured, and replicated—in a traditional sense, not fully human—will we escape the barbarities committed in the name of preserving purely human life. *Never Let Me Go* implies that if there is to be any empathetic connection with Ishiguro's protagonists, it will not occur through the consoling liberal realization that clones are humans, just like us. It will evolve through the darker realization that art, along with the empathy it provokes, needs to escape the traditional concept of the human. The novel thus calls for what seems like a contradiction in terms: an empathetic inhuman aesthetics that embraces the mechanical, commodified, and replicated elements of personhood. While inhuman is often used as a synonym for cruel or unethical, Ishiguro's novel suggests exactly the reverse. As its aesthetics of replication allows us to sympathize with others without recourse to such constraining ideals, *Never Let Me Go* reinvents empathy for a posthumanist age.

Empathy, Art, and the Human

The act of identifying with someone else's experience is deeply tied to our everyday understanding of what it means to be human. While older traditions of philosophy have presumed that persons are fundamentally autonomous and exclusively self-interested, this model fails to capture important dimensions of ordinary human behavior. Richard Rorty makes this point when he argues that a vast amount of Western moral philosophy directs our attention toward what he calls "the rather rare figure of the psychopath, the person who has no concern for any human being other than himself" (123). Indeed, modern psychological accounts afford empathy a significant place within social and biological narratives of human development. Brought into English as a translation of the German aesthetic term *Einfühlung*, the term empathy entered English in 1909 through the work of the American psychologist E. B. Tichener (Wispé 78).[1] Tichener used the word to describe a physical process in which infants between birth and ten months began to mimic the nonverbal expressions of those around them (Omdahl 25). Known as motor mimicry, this nonverbal bodily process was understood to exemplify the instinctive and physiological basis of shared feelings.[2] In the 1980s, the American developmental psychologist Martin Hoffman showed how the motor

mimicry of infants could lead to more sophisticated cognitive forms of empathy once children recognized their separation from other people. Hoffman ultimately argued that the development of empathy enabled individuals to form moral judgments and to take moral actions (Goleman 105).

Well before modern developmental psychology, empathy (or its synonym in an earlier era, sympathy) assumed a privileged role in theories of literature and ethics. (While some philosophers stress technical differences between sympathy and empathy, I use them both to denote the process of identifying with the experience of others.) While these theories emerged in eighteenth-century philosophy, as in Adam Smith's *Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759), they reached new intensity in the work of the British Romantics. Most radically, William Hazlitt argued that a robust sense of self actually requires the same imaginative leaps that we associate with empathy for others. For Hazlitt, our link to our own future selves is more tenuous than our common sense tells us. Instead, his 1805 *An Essay on the Principles of Human Action* argues that our grasp of our own future relies on the same type of imaginative projection that helps us infer the interior selves of others. Hazlitt concluded his thread of thought by linking this cognitive capacity to ethical action: "I could not love myself, if I were not capable of loving others" (3). The aesthetic manifestos of William Wordsworth and Percy Bysshe Shelley embedded such ethics of empathetic imaginative projection into their defenses of aesthetic pursuits. "In spite of difference of soil or climate, of language and manners, of laws and customs, in spite of things silently gone out of mind and things violently destroyed," Wordsworth proclaimed in his Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, "the Poet binds together by passion and knowledge the vast empire of human society, as it is spread over the whole earth, and over all time" (259). Shelley, in similar terms, declared that a "man, to be greatly good, must imagine intensely and comprehensively; he must put himself in the place of another and of many others; the pains and pleasures of his species must become his own. The great instrument of moral good is the imagination; and poetry administers to the effect by acting upon the cause" (759). These Romantic conceptions found even greater scope in Victorian fiction, where the idea of sympathy, in Hina Nazar's words, became "a privileged ethical term in many nineteenth-century novels" (293). For George Eliot, the novelist perhaps most associated with philosophies of compassionate identification, this concept came to represent the possibility of the redemptive transfiguration of pain and suffering. *Adam Bede*, referring to such redemption, famously describes sympathy as "the one poor word which includes all our best insight and our best love" (488). Such powerful Romantic and Victorian ideas about

the positive ethical value of literary empathy continue to define the way many writers conceptualize their role in modern society.

Yet these celebrations of the ethical, civic, and even political potential of empathetic art have not gone unchallenged. Henry James's *The Portrait of a Lady* (1881), for instance, reveals how the deceptively simple connection between "portrait" and "lady" constitutes an increasingly sinister bond between aesthetics and personhood. As Isabel Archer's vitality withers under her husband's connoisseuristic gaze, the novel suggests that looking at a work of art can inhibit rather than encourage generous identification with the lives of others. The novel even goes so far as to question its own complicity with such objectification, inviting us to ask if James's exquisite prose does not also contribute to Isabel's demise. Similarly, E. M. Forster's *A Room with a View* parodies the aesthete's ethical obtuseness when Lucy Honeychurch tells her fiancé Cecil, "You were all right as long as you kept to things, but when you came to people—" (199). The unsaid, and perhaps unsayable, conclusion to Lucy's indictment mimics the ethical blankness at the heart of Cecil's aestheticizing gaze.

Even more radically than James and Forster, whose works in different ways sought to reclaim the human from the aesthetic, a competing strain of modernist writing strove to reject the claims of psychological fiction and its lavish empathetic celebration of the details of everyday consciousness. As Ella Zohar Ophir shows in her study of modernist antihumanism, writers such as Wyndham Lewis and Laura Riding created "pitiless fiction" that reflects "stark estimations of the significance of ordinary human lives" (111). For such writers, the great bulk of humanity is not fully human at all. Since such modernists were eager to divide "the autonomous few from the automatic many" (100), they distrusted the power of empathy because it threatened to blur the lines between the strength of autonomous selfhood and the force of the automatic crowd. Their works often seized on the anesthetic properties of comedy and abstraction to ensure a detached and pitiless gaze on the hapless characters of their fiction. Writers like James, Forster, Lewis, and Riding all sought in different ways to question the utopian alignment among art, empathy, and human ethical development they inherited from the Romantics.

In many respects, the alternative late-twentieth-century reality of *Never Let Me Go* reflects a world that the antihumanist modernists would have recognized. The lives of the genetically-engineered students seem fundamentally automatic and mechanized: they move through the stages of their lives with the regularity of students promoted from grade to grade, seemingly blind to the horrors that shadow their march toward suffering and death. Any protest against this system of values, conscious or unconscious, is met with ridicule

by their peers, who do as much as the barely registered system of teachers and doctors to maintain their status as machines without the capacity to resist their own exploitation. This vision provides one logical extreme of the twentieth century obsession with challenges to the definition of the human. As Jonathan Greenberg reminds us, "It is now something of a commonplace to note that in the twentieth century, the mechanization of the human seemed to be accelerating as a consequence of changes in technology and capitalist production" (590).

Indeed, the world of *Never Let Me Go* deeply resonates with twentieth-century legacies of modern totalitarian repression. The regulated and automated sense of personhood in the novel evokes Giorgio Agamben's theory of *homo sacer*, or the identity of one whose "entire existence is reduced to a bare life stripped of every right by virtue of the fact that anyone can kill him without committing homicide" (183). Like *homo sacer*, Ishiguro's students can be killed but not sacrificed; their deaths by organ removal create no source of transcendent meaning for them or for their community. Agamben identifies a central locus of such "bare life" in the modern concentration camp, a paradoxical space included in political life only by means of its radical exclusion. Like *A Pale View of Hills* (1982), *An Artist of the Floating World* (1986), *The Remains of the Day* (1989), and *When We Were Orphans* (2000), which all respond in different ways to the Second World War, *Never Let Me Go* can be read as a meditation on a world shaped by the eugenic fantasies of Nazi-era incarceration. Hailsham, the English boarding school-like institution where Ishiguro's characters grow up, provides precisely such a shadowy territory beyond the admissible political life of the realm it inhabits and enables. Such a space strips its inhabitants of their claims to any forms of political identity; denuded of citizenship and culture, they represent a form of life that challenges traditional definitions of what it means to be human.

The novel's evocation of this concentrationary universe does much to remind us that late-twentieth-century art in the aftermath of the Holocaust has generated powerful anxieties about the possibility and desirability of empathy. If victims of the Holocaust underwent unspeakable agonies and erasures, representations of their suffering—particularly by those without firsthand experience—are frequently seen as exemplars of dehumanizing pornography. Aesthetic pleasure and empathetic identification appear antithetical to one another, mocking the very idea of human solidarity in light of such atrocity.[3] In the post-Holocaust era, not only the ethics but also the efficacy of empathy has undergone skepticism and scrutiny. The late twentieth century saw the rise of phrases like "compassion fatigue" that

bespeak the failure of representation to encourage action on others' behalf. As Carolyn J. Dean suggests, such discourses of numbness have generated "a new, highly self-conscious narrative about the collective constriction of moral availability, if not empathy" (5). This skepticism about empathy's humanizing capacity sets the stage for the central drama of *Never Let Me Go*.

Building on such critiques, *Never Let Me Go* indicts humanist art because such art works to keep the students unaware of their own inhumanity—it masks their own mechanical condition and serves to prepare them for lives of exploitation. As Romantic theories of self-expression become horrifyingly literal in the act of organ donation, they reveal the dystopian potential of such an aesthetic. However, while Ishiguro's novel rejects the promise of traditional humanism, it does not ultimately subscribe to the disdain for automata that characterizes strands of earlier modernist writing; nor does it wholly replicate the later critiques of pornography or numbness that have emerged after the Holocaust. To create an alternative, the novel offers a thematic and stylistic vision of inhuman art to enable a very different kind of identification with the bare lives of others. This vision suggests how it might be possible to empathize with a mechanized version of *homo sacer*, a form of life that eludes traditional sympathy.

Betrayals of Empathy

At first glance, *Never Let Me Go* seems a surprising candidate for such a claim. In many clear and subtle ways, the novel does appear to bolster the ideals of liberal humanist art and liberal humanist empathy.[4] A habitual user of second-person address, the narrator Kathy immediately constructs her readers as listeners who know more than they really do about the workings of her world. "My name is Kathy H.," she begins the novel. "I'm thirty-one years old, and I've been a carer now for over eleven years. That sounds long enough, I know, but actually they want me to go on for another eight months" (3). The deprecating restraint of her tone enables her to identify with the audience of her story ("that sounds long enough, I know"), while she assumes a readership who understands what it means to be a "carer" and how long carers normally stay in their position. Even though we do not know these details at this point in the novel, we are cast as characters with whom Kathy shares a frame of reference, and this reassuring gesture invites us to return the favor. Her narration is peppered with rhetorical devices that implicate us in the world of the novel: "I don't know how it was where you were," she says, "but at Hailsham we had to have some form of medical almost every week" (13). This performance of liberal empathy pulls us into

Kathy's world, asserting fundamental likeness between teller and listener at every turn.

However, this positive vision of Kathy's generous impulse is undercut by many elements of her own story, which suggest the darker narrative that shadows the surface tale of her life as a caretaker. What is Kathy really doing as a "carer"? She is helping clones like her, created for organ donation, accept a life of painful and debilitating operations that rob them of their vital organs. All in their twenties and thirties, the donors will "complete"—the word die is never used—after their fourth organ donation. Some "complete" much earlier, after only one or two donations. As she tells us, Kathy is prized for keeping her patients calm: "hardly any of them have been classified as 'agitated,' even before fourth donation" (3). All this empathy, it seems, has one purpose only: to reconcile patients to their brief lives of terrible suffering and imminent death.

The complacency of the cloned students has provoked intense outrage among Ishiguro's readers, who cannot understand why Kathy and virtually all other characters in the novel express so little explicit anger at their condition and take so few steps to contest their fate. Ishiguro makes it clear that while the students grow up in isolated institutions across England, they are not permanently separated from what they think of as regular society: they live in a simulation of college at "The Cottages" in their late teens, acquire driver's licenses and travel around England, meet regular people in shops and offices, and entertain the possibility of sexual relationships with them. But though the students witness first-hand how others live, their resistance against their proscribed fate is horrifyingly modest. As Harper Barnes, reviewing the novel for the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, pointedly imagines: "if you were scheduled to have your organs plucked out any day now, but in the meantime were permitted to wander around the British countryside pretty much as you chose, wouldn't you decide at some point, 'This is a really bad deal, and I'm moving to France'?" Except for the student Tommy, whose uncontrollable rages hint at a repressed apprehension of his fate, none of the characters seem overly troubled by their impending suffering and death.

Readers of the novel have frequently explained this signature discrepancy through the lens of liberal empathy. As we identify with the students, the argument goes, we realize that they are actually much like us. Some readers stress that the clones, despite the biological characteristics that set them apart from their models, assert their fundamental humanity throughout the course of the narrative. Reviewers who interpret the novel in this light, as "a *1984* for the bioengineering age" (Browning) and "essential reading for everyone associated with the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Authority"

(Taylor), defend Kathy as a being with feelings and sufferings to re-spect. Other readers reverse this logic to recognize our own society in the world of the characters. Rather than pitying the clones for their plight, we should appreciate how our own approach to death, suffer-ing, and constraint may not be entirely different. M. John Harrison adopts this approach in his review for the *Guardian*: "This extraor-dinary and, in the end, rather frighteningly clever novel isn't about cloning, or being a clone, at all. It's about why we don't explode, why we don't just wake up one day and go sobbing and crying down the street, kicking everything to pieces out of the raw, infuriating, completely personal sense of our lives never having been what they could have been." Like Kathy and her classmates, regular humans can go to extreme lengths to repress the knowledge of their deaths and to reconcile themselves to their diminished lives. As the major-ity of reviewers comment, Ishiguro's previous novels—especially *The Remains of the Day*—all offer us such portraits of repression in action. Indeed, this commitment to consoling and compensatory narratives constitutes what many readers, in Brian Shaffer's terms, see as Ishiguro's "master theme" (122).

At one level, the novel does enact these identifications: it does invite us to recognize Kathy as human, and it does invite us to ac-knowledge the ways in which we too accede to the limitations of our own lives. But it also complicates these identifications in disturbing ways. Our condition as readers exactly mirrors the education of the students themselves: "'you've been told and not told,'" a subversive teacher tells her students in a failed attempt to shake them out of complacency. "'You've been told, but none of you really understand'" (*Never* 81). The same could be said of the readers of the novel, who return to the first few pages and wonder how they could have missed the sinister significance of such words as "donor" and "carer." Our own comfortable sense of empathetic solidarity with Kathy ultimately constitutes the horror of the novel's rhetorical technique. It is this deeper and more dangerous identification, figured in the predicament of being "told and not told," that challenges the performance of a safe liberal empathy.

As the novel proceeds to betray its own invitation to empathetic humanist identification, it resonates with Rebecca Walkowitz's descrip-tion of Ishiguro as an artist of treason. "Committed to change but also to conflict," Walkowitz argues, "Ishiguro commits to treason: his floating worlds betray their narrators, and they everywhere betray 'us'" (130). Similarly, Claire Pégon-Davison claims that Ishiguro's work tends to "invite, but also thwart, representational and emotional identification" (251). As we will see, the novel plays with the sinis-ter possibilities of such identification in its millennial tale of British

anxieties about globalization and of the role of art in perpetuating its inequalities. As *Never Let Me Go* accentuates the dystopic potential latent within Ishiguro's earlier narratives, its parable invites us to rethink the terms of our empathy.

Humanist Art, Human Repression

Why is it that the characters in the novel fail to stage a rebellion, protest their fate, or move to France? In keeping with his past novels that center on repression, Ishiguro never suggests explicitly how the students accept their lives as carers and donors, even when they realize the inequality of their situation. Hailsham offers no heroic or theological ideology to comfort the students; no elevating talk of sacrifice infiltrates Ishiguro's prose. "'I was pretty much ready when I became a donor,'" a student named Ruth says. "'It felt right. After all, it's what we're *supposed* to be doing, isn't it?'" (227). Such ordinary and even banal language suffices to convince students to acquiesce to their own extraordinary demise.

In keeping with the spirit of Ishiguro's previous novels, the social norms that lead to these radical consequences seem innocuous, for they are the social norms of good professionals. As scholars such as Bruce Robbins and Ryan Trimm have argued, Ishiguro specializes in showing how moral crimes or ethical lapses often stem from the desire of ordinary individuals to adhere to the everyday codes that give their lives structure and meaning.[5] These professional codes enable political abuses (such as Japanese fascism or Nazi sympathy) and personal failures (such as the neglect of one's family). It is not surprising, then, that Ishiguro again indicts a modern profession in *Never Let Me Go*.

What is particularly painful, however, is that this profession is in some sense Ishiguro's own: the profession of the artist. As in *The Unconsoled*, which dramatizes the predicament of a bewildered musician, *Never Let Me Go* illuminates the problems that arise when art becomes a governing ideological force.[6] To professionalize its students, Hailsham builds a virtual electric fence through an emphasis on artistic production. From an early age, the guardians encourage their students to develop their "creativity" through poetry, painting, and sculpture (22). Student work circulates within Hailsham at the "Exchanges," where students buy the work of their classmates to decorate their beds and fill out their "collections" (16). Exceptionally good work is appropriated by a woman known only as Madame, who is said to run a Gallery filled with outstanding student art. Although the students do not know why creative art is so highly valued, they hear rumors that their art reveals their souls, and eventually they

come to believe that this evidence of their inner lives may allow them deferrals before beginning their donations.

Threaded throughout the novel, these elusive references to the importance of art become explicit only at the end of the story. When Kathy and her boyfriend Tommy eventually track down Madame and Miss Emily, the former headmistress of Hailsham, they demand to know why the art was considered so crucial to their upbringing. In the rather improbable denouement of the novel, Miss Emily confesses that "'we took away your art because we thought it would reveal your souls. Or to put it more finely, we did it to *prove you had souls at all*'" (260). As advocates for compassionate treatment of clones (whom they always call "students"), Madame and Miss Emily use art shows to convince others of their students' right to humane consideration. Art, they believe, will inspire regular people to identify with the students and thus recognize their ethical obligations toward them—a theory that resonates with the Romantic relationship between art and moral action.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, this advocacy movement ultimately fails. To be sure, it does so because the audience, far from being touched by the accomplishments of the clones, begins to feel threatened by their impressive talents. But the demise of this movement also resonates with modern psychological accounts that temper earlier exuberance about the relationship between art and ethics. In *Empathy and the Novel*, Suzanne Keen argues that psychological studies and reader-response experiments offer scant proof that audience reactions to art actually lead to measurable behavior on the behalf of others: "The evidence for a relationship between narrative empathy and the prosocial motivation of actual readers does not support the grand claims often made on behalf of empathy," she contends (145). The logic of *Never Let Me Go* speaks to this finding; looking at art, at least for the bulk of the novel's regular citizens, appears to cultivate narrow self-interest rather than altruistic obligation.

Even more crucially, what Madame and Miss Emily do not confess to Kathy and Tommy is that the underlying role of clone-produced art is far more sinister. Concealed within their Romantic logic lies a far more dystopian goal that colludes with the exploitation of the students they claim to protect.[7] When Miss Emily says that "'your art will reveal your inner selves'" (*Never* 254), her choice of phrase suggests that making such art actually prefigures the process of organ donation. From a young age, children grow accustomed to the idea of handing over their "inner selves" to figures of authority. For such donations they are literally paid in "Tokens"—one of Ishiguro's most frightening wordplays. Furthermore, through their seasonal Exchanges, students barter their own work to buy the sculptures,

paintings, and poems of their classmates. Held four times a year, the rhythm of the Exchanges mirrors the four organ donations that each student expects, or hopes, to make.

As the practice of circulating artwork reflects the circulation of vital body parts, it furthers three central assumptions that work to repress the students' possible resistance. First, the students become dependent on their community for a robust sense of selfhood. "I can see now, too, how the Exchanges had a more subtle effect on us all," Kathy muses. "If you think about it, being dependent on each other to produce the stuff that might become your private treasures—that's bound to do things to your relationships" (16). As the students become more and more emotionally bound to each other through the exchange of art, they gradually lose their ability to imagine themselves outside the system that governs their collective lives. As a result, they find it difficult to consider independent action. When Kathy and Tommy ask a dying Ruth why she never pursued her dream to work in an office, Ruth can only offer a lackluster response: "'You say I should have looked into it. How? Where would I have gone? There wasn't a way to look into it'" (231). Ruth offers this defeatist account even though she has an address for Madame, the figure all the students believe can shape their destiny. Although Ruth is cast as a strong and even manipulative figure who likes to brag about her intimacy with figures of authority, her passivity as an individual testifies to the network of relationships that prevents her from actually pursuing any such individual resistance. The circulation of student art helps to shape community bonds that keep the students, as peers, moving in lockstep toward their deaths.

Second, this emphasis on artwork encourages an instrumental philosophy of individual worth. While Madame and Miss Emily believe that showing regular people student art will assert intrinsic over instrumental personhood, the novel reveals exactly the opposite process at Hailsham. "A lot of the time, how you were regarded at Hailsham, how much you were liked and respected, had to do with how good you were at 'creating,'" Kathy tells us (16). In keeping with this assumption, students feel justified in humiliating Tommy because of his artistic failures. "'The reason they go for Tommy's because he's a layabout,'" one student says. "Then everyone was talking at once, about how Tommy never even tried to be creative" (10). If artistic capability reveals humanity, then lack of artistic capability provides a license for exploitation. The Exchanges encourage students to think instrumentally about the worth of their peers, thus preparing them for an acceptance of their own instrumental lives.

Third, and most cruel, the Exchanges encourage students to believe that they actually partake in a real exchange. They give up

their own art and receive other works in return, but, of course, they will receive no one else's organs to replace the ones they eventually donate. While we might expect the ideology of Hailsham to focus on the heroic elevation of donation and self-sacrifice without the sullying hope of payment, the reality is just the opposite. Through the Exchanges students come to believe that they participate in an economy of circulation rather than of extraction. This myth is perpetrated even more fully through the Sales, which enable students to "buy" things from the outside world. While the students purchase clothing, music, and other items from the Sales, Ishiguro's description of the goods suggests, with excruciating irony, that these objects are actually donations from regular society. "The boxes were open at the top, so you'd catch glimpses of all kinds of things," Kathy remembers. "All sorts of rumours would be going around, maybe about a particular track suit or a music cassette" (42). This jumbled collection of cardboard boxes that contain only singular items seems like the discarded goods of regular citizens, and since the students pay for their choices with tokens, any actual monetary exchange is only a formality. As with the Exchanges, the Sales mask a donation economy within the guise of egalitarian circulation. What seems reciprocal is always only one way.

In critiquing an apparent circulation that masks simple extraction and exploitation, *Never Let Me Go* can be said to offer a metaphor for the inequalities and predations of national and global economic systems. While Kathy and her classmates prefigure a futuristic world of genetic technology, they also reflect an existing late-twentieth- and early-twenty-first-century reality of growing economic imbalances. On the national level, the creation of a service class for organ donation extends the principles of the British class system to its most horrifying extreme. Indeed, the clones believe themselves to have been modeled on lower class citizens, such as prostitutes. As a global metaphor, the condition of the students also speaks to the fate of postcolonial and migrant laborers who sustain the privileges of First World economies, the fortune of soldiers called on to serve in Afghanistan or Iraq, or the collateral damage of civilians killed in war so that other nations might maintain their power. While Ishiguro rarely refers explicitly in the novel to such phenomena, he makes this parallel between the clones and service classes easy to draw. If First World economies desire labor without the inconvenient presence of human laborers (whose needs and wants complicate the seamless functioning of modern industrial life), the instrumental bodies of Kathy and her classmates offer the logical and terrifying realization of such a view. These similarities may help to explain why the novel resembles not a fantastical future, but instead the period in time

noted for accelerating economic imbalances worldwide: its epigraph reads "England, late 1990s."

This critique seems most unnerving because the novel, in Ishiguro's characteristic style, renders these resemblances to the current globalizing world conspicuous through their near-invisibility. The ethnic diversity that typifies divisions of labor in multicultural nations and global capitalism, for example, is virtually erased in *Never Let Me Go*. Kathy H., for instance, never describes her fellow students in readily identifiable ethnic terms. The students' first names (their last names are given only as initials) are traditionally associated with white, middle-class England: Kathy, Ruth, Tommy, Chrissie, Rodney, and Steve offer a representative sampling of names that suggest a mainstream cultural provenance. But these names tell us nothing, because these students have no parents to name them. They could be modeled on people from any race, but since they are the products of institutions, they lose any possible connection to groups outside the boarding schools that shape their youth. Whatever their skin color may be, and Ishiguro is silent on this point, these students have no meaningful ethnicity in the terms of the novel. Their truncated identities suggest the triumph of a white, fascistic racial ideal that effectively obliterates the markers of multicultural Britain so common in the late 1990s. Kathy H., thirty-one at the time of her narration, would have been cloned around the time of Enoch Powell's notorious 1968 outcry against the changing racial composition of Britain.[8] The deracinated world of *Never Let Me Go* seems to figure what England might have become, had Powell had his way. Homogenized, deprived of cultural specificity, and raised to serve the needs of others, the condition of the students also offers a frightening parable for the assimilative energies of First World metropoles that absorb the embodied labor and cultural identity of people from diverse parts of the world. Non-clones retain the possibility of cultural identity—Miss Emily refers to her medical assistant as "George, the big Nigerian man" (256–57),[9] and Madame is described as French—but the world of Hailsham is a world of cultural sameness, a normative ideal of white, middle class culture. While Ishiguro has sometimes been accused of embracing postethnicity in the guise of whiteness, *Never Let Me Go* affiliates postethnicity not with promise but with peril.[10]

This cultural erasure is part of the strategic genocide that gradually unfolds in the novel. Like the Jews deprived of their citizenship when sent to concentration camps, the students' loss of cultural specificity signals one tactic by which they lose their purchase on human identity. As Agamben argues in his reading of denationalization in the camps,

> The correct question to pose concerning the horrors com-
> mitted in the camps is, therefore, not the hypocritical one
> of how crimes of such atrocity could be committed against
> human beings. It would be more honest and, above all,
> more useful to investigate carefully the juridical procedures
> and deployments of power by which human beings could be
> so completely deprived of their rights and prerogatives that
> no act committed against them could appear any longer
> as a crime. (171)

Never Let Me Go points to precisely such absences that render its
characters less than fully human in their world. In doing so, it sug-
gests how the terrifyingly familiar tactics of totalitarianism reemerge
within late-twentieth-century globalization. Transnational economies
of circulation and exchange, evoked through the transmission of
art, reveal themselves to be closed systems that actually resemble
concentration camps.

As the circulation of artwork paradoxically both mirrors and
masks the most insidious effects of globalization and totalitarian-
ism, the novel quietly indicts the very idea of humanist art that it
seems at first to support. Revealing one's insides, a commonplace
way of praising the emotional authenticity and value of expression,
emerges as a form of extraction that makes art-making as exploit-
ative as organ donation.[11] As the opiate of the students, "creativity"
comes to seem as loaded a euphemism as "carer," "donation," and
"completion." Dehumanizing rather than humanizing for the artist and
the audience, the kind of art fostered at Hailsham—art that claims
to reveal the soul but that actually prefigures the dismemberment
of the students' bodies—represents a form of sinister ethical failure
in *Never Let Me Go*.

Textual Cloning, Inhuman Art

What, then, do we make of Ishiguro's own work as an artist?
Does the prose style of *Never Let Me Go* participate in the patterns
of extraction and repression it exposes? To construct an alternative,
Ishiguro's novel offers an aesthetic based on cloning that works in
opposition to the predatory "creativity" suffered by its characters.
While discourses skeptical of humanist empathy have often encoded
gestures of refusal into the structure of their narrative, *Never Let
Me Go* declines to abandon the possibility of empathy through art.[12]
Using stylistic characteristics of repetition and replication, Ishiguro
expresses a solidarity with the students more forceful than any act
of liberal empathy in the novel. His own inhuman style offers what
Hailsham's humanist art cannot.

Writing about clones suits Ishiguro, who has been powerfully described by Louis Menand as a novelist of simulacra. When *Never Let Me Go* was published, Menand argued that Ishiguro is best understood not as a psychological realist, but instead as a writer impersonating a psychological realist. Menand claims in a review of *Never Let Me Go*: "There is something animatronic about [Ishiguro's characters]. They are simulators of humanness, figures engineered to pass as 'real.' Genetic engineering—the idea of human beings as products programmed to pick up 'personhood skills'—is a perfect vehicle for a writer like Ishiguro." The design for the Vintage International paperback cover of the novel reinforces this vision of identity, featuring a close-up photograph of a young and attractive white woman whose face seems extraordinarily realistic but also glassily artificial. If Ishiguro is not exactly a realist, what then does his work seek to accomplish? Katherine Stanton, building on Menand's insight, argues that Ishiguro's work "is far more interested in ethical experimentation than in psychological realism" (15).[13] Like Ishiguro's earlier fiction, *Never Let Me Go* invites us to focus on an ethical experiment in the aesthetics of simulacra.

Through its mimicry of psychological life, the style of the novel thematizes the problems of repetition and replication that characterize genetic engineering. In short, it models its style on the process of cloning. This aesthetic appears through dominant rhetorical gestures that dramatize, again and again, the troubling importance of repetition and mimicry. On the most basic level, Kathy repeatedly uses the same device to introduce new episodes in the narrative: "That was when I first understood, really understood, just how lucky we'd been," she says at the beginning of the novel (6). Variants on this theme, in which Kathy introduces a new idea by stating that she only now realizes its significance, occur regularly throughout the narrative. In a novel thematizing genetic replication, this mode of stylistic patterning gives new significance to what Adam Zachary Newton calls Ishiguro's "interruptive structure" (279). Repeated several times, even to the point of narrative tedium, this gesture comes to resemble the act of cloning.

Told in flashback mode, Kathy's narrative positions the creation of new material as another kind of repetition: a memory. In *Never Let Me Go*, one of Ishiguro's trademark narrative strategies acquires a new and unsettling significance.[14] Since the novel reflects Kathy's rereading of her past, memory serves as the symbolic clone of experience. For her readers, these memories become more substantial than the original experiences they document (to which we have no direct access). As the beginning of the novel reveals, students come to desire memories that can erase the dystopias of their own lives. Speaking about her idyllic childhood in Hailsham to a donor, Kathy

comes to realize that the donor—who grew up in much less progressive surroundings—wants to embrace her memories as his own. "What he wanted was not just to hear about Hailsham, but to *remember* Hailsham, just like it had been his own childhood" (5). Kathy thus creates memories as a repetition, or clone, of experience, and then copies them for others who have even less than she to fall back on during the agonies of donation. The clone comes to supplant the original through the gesture of memory.

Counterpointing these repetitions at the level of the sentence are the broader forms of mimicry that seem to bear out Jean Baudrillard's predictions for science fiction in an age of simulacra. In its portraits of the social lives of its characters, the texture of the counterfactual world of *Never Let Me Go* resonates with familiar (perhaps even overfamiliar) banalities of modern coterie school culture. While the world of the novel erases many salient historical realities (such as ethnic diversity), it nonetheless refuses the elaborate and exotic fantasizing of social difference that usually characterizes science fiction. As Baudrillard theorizes,

> It is no longer possible to fabricate the unreal from the real, the imaginary from the givens of the real. The process will, rather, be the opposite: it will be to put decentered situations, models of simulation in place and to contrive to give them the feeling of the real, of the banal, of lived experience, to reinvent the real as fiction, precisely because it has disappeared from our lives. (124)

Like Julian Barnes's *England, England* (1998), which most vividly reflects the rise of a culture of simulacra, Ishiguro's prose provides such a "model of simulation" and gives it "the feeling of the real." In a different kind of novel, such micro and macro repetitions might be read as aesthetic failings. But, given its narrative investment in genetic engineering, the novel invites us to subvert the ordinary hierarchy that favors the original over the repetition. As Baudrillard would claim, the simulation is now the ultimate reality (126).[15]

To combat the predations of liberal creativity, the novel offers us a representation of art that replicates the actual condition of the clones, rather than the humanist delusions that Hailsham foists on them. Tommy, the only character in the novel who subconsciously intuits the agony of his fate, significantly refuses to collaborate in the process of art-making at Hailsham. When he finally does decide to put pen to paper of his own accord, he produces a striking set of small and intricately detailed animals that offer a metaphor for Ishiguro's own work: "The first impression was like one you'd get if you took the back off a radio set: tiny canals, weaving tendons,

miniature screws and wheels were all drawn with obsessive preci-
sion, and only when you held the page away could you see it was
some kind of armadillo, say, or a bird" (*Never* 187). Although Tommy
makes these images in the hopes that they will reveal his soul and
thus allow him to defer his donations, his art (like his anger) knows
more than his conscious mind can express. Tommy's drawings of
imaginary animals reveal "the soul" to be an illusion; if we open up
the animal, we find only the workings of an intricate form of machin-
ery. In Eluned Summers-Bremner's formulation, the novel's turn to
nonhuman imagery "represents the failure of the inhuman to mask
humanity's fear of death" (145); it exposes the fundamental secret
that the characters so carefully repress. As Kathy reveals, Tommy's
new aesthetic runs counter to the values of their education: "what
I was looking at was so different from anything the guardians had
taught us to do at Hailsham" (*Never* 187). This inhuman art, which
marries the animal with the automatic, provides an alternative to the
destructive visions of soul-based humanity that the novel critiques.
Art that exposes soullessness, not soulfulness, offers the truer vision
of Tommy's simulated life. Ishiguro's vision of late-twentieth-century
mechanical culture thus resonates with Donna Haraway's famous
declaration that "we are all chimeras, theorized and fabricated hy-
brids of machine and organism; in short, we are cyborgs" (150). To
be most human, in the world of the novel, is to recognize oneself
as inhuman.

And yet these small mechanical creatures still invite a prosocial
ethics of care that revitalizes the possibility of empathy through art.
"'You have to think about how they'd protect themselves, how they'd
reach things,'" Tommy confesses to Kathy (178). Kathy herself comes
to feel that "for all their busy, metallic features, there was something
sweet, even vulnerable about each of them" (188). This description
offers a perfect emblem of Ishiguro's own characters, who often
appear eerily and purposefully artificial. One reviewer of Ishiguro's
novel aptly describes Kathy as "a speaking clock" (Taylor); and yet
it is difficult not to be moved by her childhood innocence and her
terrifying predicament. Precisely because Ishiguro's characters call
attention to their own artificiality and their own role as simulacra,
they make a claim on our empathy. Such identification, generated
through an inhuman art of insistent repetition and stilted precision,
provides an alternative to the destructive powers of Hailsham's per-
versely paradoxical ideas about artistic empathy and moral action.
Ishiguro's cloned style thus makes an ethical demand: the absence
of the soul does not signal the absence of prosocial imperatives.

This empathy enables the possibility not only for an ethics of
care, but also for an ethics of self-knowledge. Emily Apter's model of

textual cloning, based on her reworking of Walter Benjamin's theory of art in the age of its reproducibility, helps to explain the aesthetic innovation of *Never Let Me Go*. While Apter specifically uses the idea of the clone to develop a theory of translations with no originals, her description of language as a metaphoric clone resembles the principles that Ishiguro's work seems to support. For Apter, when we can no longer distinguish between originals and clones, "the whole category of originality—as an essentialist life form—becomes subject to dispute" (213). Abandoning the need for fidelity to the original, in Ishiguro's world, would mean two paradoxical things: it would free the students from their imperative to serve the biomedical needs of their own originals, thus liberating them from subservience to the category of "human," while it would also allow them to celebrate openly their own identity as copy, as inhuman.

The realism and value of the copy, prefigured in Tommy's drawings, best enables the characters to intuit the tragedy of their condition. Kathy, unaware of the significance of her findings, reveals an important change in Tommy's anti-Hailsham approach to art. As Tommy prepares for his fourth donation (or in other words, his death), he returns to the style of drawing that he inaugurated as a young man. "It came to me that Tommy's drawings weren't as fresh now," Kathy says. "Okay, in many ways these frogs were a lot like what I'd seen back at the Cottages. But something was definitely gone, and they looked laboured, almost like they'd been copied" (241). While Kathy, her sensibilities still governed so strongly by her nostalgia for Hailsham, views these pieces as diminished versions of Tommy's ear-lier attempts, the novel suggests otherwise. Tommy, like Ishiguro, is literally making cloned art. The fabulist aesthetic of the frogs vividly mimics Tommy's own condition: the "something" that is "definitely gone" resonates with Tommy's missing three organs, and the "la-boured" quality of the drawings mirrors the condition of his own body that labors in the aftermath of his surgeries. The novel encourages us to embrace such simulacra as the greatest form of realism: we are asked to change our allegiance from the humanist art fostered by Hailsham to the inhuman art of Ishiguro and Tommy.

The title of the novel, *Never Let Me Go*, gestures toward the most pressing replica of the story. As a child at Hailsham, Kathy treasures a cassette tape that contains a song called "Never Let Me Go." When she listens to the song, she pretends that the singer is celebrating the arrival of a baby whom she never thought she would bear. Long after Kathy's tape mysteriously disappears, she rediscovers a copy on a trip when she and Tommy rummage through second-hand stores. "Then suddenly I felt a huge pleasure—and something else, something more complicated that threatened to make me burst into

tears," Kathy reveals (172). As *Never Let Me Go* becomes a copy within itself, and even (with the found cassette) a copy of a copy, it offers Kathy a way to mourn the unspeakable tragedy of her own condition. In Kathy's childhood, the replica of the novel's title allows her to grieve for her losses without realizing it; for like the imagined singer, Kathy never expects to become a mother. Her inner life is best expressed not through the extraction of her soul, but through the power of a replica.

The phrase "never let me go" is the only sentence in the novel that explicitly rages against the condition of the students: it articulates the symbolic, unheard cry of the subject on the operating table who faces the unknown after a fourth donation. It is the only real statement of resistance in the novel, all the more powerful for being misunderstood by the characters whose fate it registers. The novel thus implies that only the replica, the simulacrum, or the symbolic clone has the power to illuminate the contradictions of Kathy's own life. Only, perhaps, the inhuman has the power to offer her a non-exploitative sense of her life as a person.

As with all of Ishiguro's novels, what does not appear—what lurks on the fringes of the narrative—is often the most important specter in the story. When the novel invites us to extend sympathies beyond the category of human, it recognizes this category as exclusionary and troubling in itself. The implicit analogies between deracinated, genetically-engineered students and exploited workers in a multicultural Britain and a globalizing economy ask us to recognize how many people in our own world are not considered fully human. Like the clones, they are consigned to the barely visible worlds of service to others that, in extreme situations, give rise to Agamben's *homo sacer*. Yet despite the repudiation of humanist empathy, we are not allowed to give up on the empathetic potential of art. As Andrew Joron writes in his call for a poetics of the inhuman, "If we have arrived too late to rescue the natural body, we must learn to awaken the Inhuman object found in its place" (210). Novels like Ishiguro's do not promote an aesthetic of detachment, like those we find in antihumanist writings that celebrate an unforgiving distance between fellow beings. We come to value Kathy's voice not in spite of her affiliation with automata—her role as a "speaking clock"—but because of such seemingly inhuman characteristics that bespeak her life as simulacrum. As she illuminates the aspects of our own lives that are less than fully human, identifying with Kathy generates a new aesthetics of empathy for a posthumanist age.

Notes

I would like to thank Tanya Agathocleous and the anonymous readers of *Modern Fiction Studies* for their helpful comments on an earlier version of this essay.

1. The Oxford English Dictionary actually cites an earlier appearance of empathy in 1904, but most scholars credit Tichener with its popularization.

2. The theory of motor mimicry has provided a starting point for later work in developmental psychology. For example, Omdahl understands motor mimicry to be central to Martin Hoffman's work, and thematizing this aspect of Hoffman enables Ohmdahl to create the basis for her own model (Omdahl 25). Lauren Wispé also argues in her own theory that "muscle mimicry and visual imagery, working together, provide the means for the release of sympathy" (154). See also Goleman (98–99).

3. On such critiques of empathy, see Dean (16–42).

4. Ishiguro's earlier novels are often read as invitations to liberal empathy, as seen in the work of Wall and Wong. Wall argues that one of the effects of unreliable narration in *The Remains of the Day* is to question the very idea of reliable narration, and this instability opens up a space for the reader to experience heightened empathy for the character. "We do not feel the same degree of arrogant superiority to Stevens that we do to those narrators whose accounts indicate fissures and inconsistencies of Grand Canyon proportions," she argues (37). Similarly, Wong generalizes from Ishiguro's first four novels that "though a reader may suspect the narrator's deception, their open admission of real human flaws gains a reader's empathy. . . . Because each of the main characters also suffers tremendous losses of both personal and professional kinds, readers may gain additional empathy for them" (24). The narrative strategies of *Never Let Me Go* do dramatize the possibility of such affinities between reader and character, but, as we will see, they also suggest an evolving critique of such humanist empathy in Ishiguro's work.

5. See, especially, Robbins (426) and Trimm (135–61).

6. The specific role of art has not gained much currency in studies of *The Unconsoled*, as seen in the readings of Lewis, Wong, and Shaffer, which tend to read the novel in terms of its stylistic and psychological dreamworlds of displacement.

7. In this sense, Deborah Britzman's reading of the name "Hailsham" is germane: "The name means what it says: the children, with no parents, are greeted by a sham that they can't quite figure out but that manages to hail them" (313).

8. In 1968, the British politician Enoch Powell delivered a famous speech that railed against the growing racial diversity of England and predicted "the River Tiber foaming with much blood" (Powell). Powell's speech became an iconic image of British xenophobia and racism.

9. Here, in the world outside the clones, Ishiguro does represent a racialized division of labor.

10. For more on Ishiguro's relationship to whiteness, see Ma (71–88).

11. Britzman's psychoanalytic reading offers a different perspective on the novel's dystopian critique of aesthetics, arguing that "while reading, we really do rob someone's insides" (317). However, Britzman's interpretation does not differentiate between the distinct forms of empathetic aesthetic engagement that I find depicted in the novel.

12. For accounts of such refusals, see Sommer (on literature) and Shuman (on personal stories).

13. To read in this vein is to read Ishiguro's work against the grain, as well as against the psychological realist emphasis favored by Shaffer, Wong, and Burton. Wong, for instance, argues for the realism of Ishiguro's duplicitous narrators by presenting them as "like actual writers" and "like actual people" (19). While many of the psychological patterns these critics identify in earlier novels are also at work in *Never Let Me Go*, I suggest that too strong an emphasis on psychological realism can conceal the ways in which Ishiguro's mannered and retrospective narratives constitute challenges to the very literary conventions of the human that they invoke.

14. Kathy's often nostalgic mode of narration aligns her with past narrators of Ishiguro's novels. Exploring the impact of such backward longing, John Su argues that Ishiguro's use of nostalgia in *The Remains of the Day* is both critical and productive, enabling the novel to constitute an ethos of national character through its expression of disappointment and decline (555). I suggest that with *Never Let Me Go*, it is now the form of the retrospective, rather than its content, that best exemplifies the significance of Ishiguro's flashback narration.

15. Despite its surface similarity to Ishiguro's first novels, *Never Let Me Go* can be understood, like *The Unconsoled*, as a postmodern challenge to the narrative conventions of Ishiguro's earlier works. We might also understand this preoccupation with simulacra as a transformation of what Lewis identifies as the central role of displacement and homelessness in Ishiguro's oeuvre (1–17).

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