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Precarity as Personhood
in Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go*

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Abstract

Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go* lures readers into a dystopic world that has the artifice of a country boarding school. When the characters to which readers have become attached are revealed to be clones raised for organ harvesting, the novel forces the readers to confront questions about what it means to be human, and at what cost humanity is willing to preserve itself. In this science fiction narrative about cloning, Ishiguro invokes multiple representations of the disabled body: the clones have been created, to ameliorate disability from the rest of society. Their organs are harvested to forestall the inevitable disabilities that the ailing or aging body will experience. The novel also replicates the social apparatuses that have traditionally been used to contain and eliminate disability. Reading Ishiguro's narrative of cloning from a disability studies perspective reveals the novel's use of defamiliarization as a literary technique to examine both the ideological constructions of disability and the physical structures that have contained disabled bodies during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Finally, approaching *Never Let Me Go* from this critical perspective reveals the novel's answer to the central question it poses: What does it mean to be human?

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Describing his understanding of the children of Hailsham during *Never Let Me Go*'s fifteen-year period of genesis, Kazuo Ishiguro has said that he "was never sure who these people were" though he sensed "some strange fate hung over" them; when he heard a radio broadcast about "advances in biotechnology" the "framework around these students fell into place" ("Interview"). This description of his writing process is useful in contextualizing the world Ishiguro creates in the novel, for while the

story reveals itself to be about cloning, the novel's beginning places readers in the aftermath of an unknown loss or dislocation. Driving through the English countryside, searching for the lost Hailsham, Kathy H. reveals herself as the victim of a sort of private apocalypse (6). Readers will not understand precisely what has been lost or how it has been lost until the novel's end, but it is within this context of palpable, unnamed loss that the narrative about cloning is rooted.

In fictional texts, individuals left in the aftermath of a society's dissolution grapple anew with how to define themselves. They are forced to ask, absent the social structures that have defined them, what it means to be a person, what it means to be a human. In a very different way, the debate about cloning poses the same question: To what extent is one's personhood, one's humanness, bound to one's body? And if that body is not truly one's own, how is personhood possible? In its meditation on these questions, Ishiguro's novel invokes multiple representations of the disabled body. Most obviously, the clones have been created to ameliorate disability; their organs are harvested to forestall, even if not permanently, the inevitable disabilities that the ailing or aging body will experience. However, the novel also replicates the social apparatuses that have traditionally been used to contain and eliminate disability. I argue that reading Ishiguro's narrative of cloning from a disability studies perspective reveals the novel's use of defamiliarization as a literary technique to examine both the ideological constructions of disability and the physical structures that have contained disabled bodies during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Finally, approaching *Never Let Me Go* from this critical perspective reveals the novel's answer to the central question it poses: What does it mean to be human?

Perhaps it is natural that the answer to this question evokes representations of the disabled body, for the disabled body has been and continues to be at the nexus of political, ethical, and spiritual debates about what it means to hold personhood. On the one hand, Western culture has long dedicated itself to the elimination of disability through a variety of means, some of which have come to be regarded as ethically abhorrent, and others which have become standardized as best practices in medicine, therapy, or education. While ethicist Peter Singer has drawn

criticism for his defense of eugenics, his underlying assumptions of preference to avoid disability are undoubtedly held in common by most people; that is, if asked, it would be regarded as reasonable that “most people. . . would prefer to be without disabilities, and would prefer to have children without disabilities” (316). Disability is a bodily confirmation of precarity. Precarity, or the innate and inescapable fact of our vulnerability, drives much of human behavior: Environmental manipulation, the amassing of capital and, yes, medical research are all driven in part by the dread of precarity.¹ However, one must argue against Singer’s distinction that the preference to avoid disability is a *reasonable* preference; acquiring disability or producing a disabled child is rarely the product of a logical process. Disability is a status or experience conferred upon one’s body or the body of one’s child without the input of contemplation. Disability is a universally possible experience or identity, or as Rosemarie Garland-Thomson advances, “the human variations we think of as disabilities . . . are essential, inevitable aspects of human being” (141). Thus, a preference to avoid disability is fundamentally unreasonable, in that one cannot avoid what is universal and inevitable. Nevertheless, history is littered with the attempt to do precisely this, and the remnants of these efforts – cure and correction, containment, and elimination – structure the world Ishiguro creates in *Never Let Me Go*.

Cure and correction

Though the experience of disability may be universal, its definition and social context are culturally specific. Lennard Davis argues that contemporary western conceptions of disability have their foundation in the definition of normality, which “arrived with industrialization and with the set of practices and discourses that are linked to late eighteenth- and nineteenth-century notions of nationality, race, gender, criminality, sexual orientation, and so on” (3). The concurrent evolutions of industrialization, the field of statistics, eugenics, and normality coalesced in the body of the “universal worker whose physical characteristics would be uniform, as would the result of their labors – a uniform product” (10). The disabled body constituted, then as now, a disruption to uniformity. Robert

McRuer's analysis of the etymology of able-bodiedness as linked to the nineteenth-century history of industrialization enables us "to understand the compulsory nature of able-bodiedness" (385); the standardization of production effectively standardizes the body of the worker. In a culture that increasingly came to equate economic independence – if not success – with moral fitness, the disabled body posed a threat to "national fitness" (Davis 10). In the years of industrialization and after, advances in medical science have made available various procedures aimed at restoring able-bodiedness. In this medical model of disability, "[c]ure or correction has been viewed as the only possible means by which people with disabilities could achieve social acceptance and social assimilation" (Longmore). That is, rather than advances in medicine empowering the disabled, more often they have reinforced the expectations of compulsive able-bodiedness. This is carried to a sort of logical conclusion in *Never Let Me Go*.

To explain, Ishiguro builds a world in which medicine promises, at least for some part of society, an extended – if not indefinite – delay of disability. Miss Emily explains to Tommy and Kathy H. that the fate that hangs over them is the product of this pursuit:

There was no way to reverse the process. How can you ask a world that has come to regard cancer as curable, how can you ask such a world to put away that cure, to go back to the dark days? There was no going back. However uncomfortable people were about your existence, their overwhelming concern was that their own children, their spouses, their parents, their friends, did not die from cancer, motor neurone disease, heart disease. (263)

Miss Emily's explanation illuminates not only the irresistibility of the abled body, but the concomitant discomfort of disability embodied in the clones. However, the boundaries between abled and disabled are not so neatly drawn in the world of the novel. For while the clones' bodies are systematically disabled to replenish the bodies of the recipients, the clones are also systematically created to be able-bodied. In Garland-Thomson's analysis of the novel's complication of the boundaries of disability, she observes that "the *uber*-fit and healthy young Hailsham donor clones Kathy, Ruth, and Tommy ... are biologically fiercely able-bodied but

socioculturally disabled in the disordered world of the story” so that they “paradoxically possess normate embodiment and disabled status” (138). The clones possess “disabled status” in the sense that they experience the same kinds of social barriers traditionally imposed upon disabled bodies.

While the status of able-bodiedness is correlated with normative participation in the labor market, the clones are excluded from any kind of labor in the competitive workforce: Until their maturation, the clones are suspended in institutional ennui; they can then become donors or carers (and then donors). The Hailsham clones are initially informed of the limits of their future in an unsanctioned disclosure by Miss Lucy:

“If no one else will talk to you,” she continued, “then I will. The problem, as I see it, is that you’ve been told and not told. You’ve been told, but none of you really understand, and I dare say, some are quite happy to leave it that way. But I’m not. If you’re going to have decent lives, then you’ve got to know and know properly. None of you will go to America, none of you will be film stars. And none of you will be working in supermarkets as I heard some of you planning the other day. Your lives are set out for you. You’ll become adults, then before you’re old, before you’re even middle-aged, you’ll start to donate your vital organs. That’s what each of you was created to do. You’re not like the actors you watch on your videos, you’re not even like me. You were brought into this world for a purpose, and your futures, all of them, have been decided. (81)

Notably, the clones are excluded from nearly any kind of participation in the workforce. It is not simply that they are excluded from open competition in the labor market, but even participation in blue-collar or unskilled labor positions are off limits. Years later, when the Hailsham students are at the Cottages, Kathy H. remembers “Miss Lucy’s outburst” as rooted in the past, and notes that while “[i]t couldn’t last” the Cottages free the students to “live in this cozy state of suspension in which [they] could ponder [their] lives without the usual boundaries,” though “none of [them] pushed it *too* far” (142-143), imagining lives as postmen, farmworkers, or drivers. Yet the clones all seem to acknowledge that this kind of imagining of their future is both temporary and fruitless. Instead of occupying body of the worker – the abled-body that can produce labor, – the clones’ bodies function as products of labor.

Of course, the individual parts of the clones are goods that we presume are consumed within a kind of marketplace; however, prior to the harvesting of the organs, an industry has been built around the production and maintenance of the clones themselves. What is made visible to the reader are the institutions – Hailsham, the Cottages, the Kingsfield – but one can also intuit that there are other parts to this industry related to their creation, gestation, and nurturing in early childhood. This industry further exemplifies their disabled status. Paul K. Longmore explains that “people with disabilities are highly profitable” and have historically been “kept segregated in what is virtually a separate economy of disability” that “is dominated by nondisabled interests.” The clones in *Never Let Me Go* are excluded from the rest of the society, first at Hailsham, and later on at the Cottages. The only contact with the outside world that readers witness – apart from the brief scene in the art gallery – is with their guardians and keepers. The world of Hailsham even operates on its own economy.

The students are given tokens that they use to buy their clothes and toys, and to build their “collections.” The details of the Hailsham economy reveal that while the school itself has the illusion of economic or social eliteness, the students are made totally dependent on the institution for everything they have, and their lives are marked by financial and emotional impecuniness. The students’ private possessions are kept in “a wooden chest with [their] name on it,” containing what they “acquired from the Sales or the Exchanges” (39). Of their collections, Kathy H. recalls that the students “took enormous care, bringing things out to display, putting other things away carefully” (39). The items from the Sales appear to carry value only because they come “from outside,” as in themselves, the items are “nothing remotely special” just replacements for “stuff that was wearing out or broken” (41). In contrast, the Exchanges consist of the purchases of goods produced by the students in their art classes. The works the students produce directly correlate to their social positions; as Kathy H. explains, “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’ (16)”. While the Exchanges offer students the chance to set their own prices and benefit from their work, Madame chooses/confiscates their best work, so that the students forfeit

their “most marketable stuff” (39). Thus, the clones experience disability status within the broader economic system in that they are both excluded from participating in the competitive labor market because of their bodies, and forced to purchase substandard goods as a captive consumer market. Simultaneously, the clones experience disability status within the Hailsham economy, as they are denied the economic benefit of their own products of labor; here one may consider the ongoing practice of compensating disabled workers for their labor at subminimum wages. In the United States, most disabled workers earning subminimum wages labor in “sheltered workshops run by non-profit organisations [sic]” (O’Hara), not unlike the clones whose labor is contained first in the sheltered environ of Hailsham and later as carers in the centers.

Even when efforts have been made to reintegrate disabled people into social and economic institutions, as Colin Barnes observes, these efforts “rest upon basically traditional perceptions of impairment and disability” (31). Indeed, these are the same perceptions that guide the education the clones receive – or do not receive. The Hailsham students are frequently told that they are experiencing “privilege” and “opportunity” by being residents of the school, and once they transfer to the Cottages, it is revealed that this has been to some degree true. The students are regarded by the veterans as enjoying a special status because of having come from Hailsham. By the novel’s end, though, it is clear that Hailsham has not changed their status, but has simply delayed the inhumane. As Miss Emily laments Hailsham’s closing at the novel’s end, she explains that “All around the country, at this very moment, there are students being reared in deplorable conditions. . . And now that we’re no more, things will only get worse” (261). While on the one hand Hailsham was an attempt to make the practice of cloning more humane, it was founded on the premise that the clones are something less than human, and that their humanity can only be replicated (not necessarily achieved) through education. In his history of Victorian Britain’s Earlswood Asylum, David Wright explains that

[p]hilanthropic schools, such as Earlswood, held special significance within the class-torn environment of Victorian England. Within the laboratory of the asylum, idiot children were being recreated into a

bourgeois, middle-class image. If even idiots could be incorporated and educated into civilized society, there were no barriers to the education of the working classes and the civilization of “underdeveloped” cultures of the merging British Empire. (137)

The education the students receive at Hailsham in many respects mirrors that of an affluent preparatory school, most particularly in its emphasis on the humanities. The students appear to be receiving an education to render them “into a bourgeois, middle-class image.” But learning that her education will do nothing to forestall her fate as a donor, Kathy H. asks, “Why did we do all of that work in the first place? Why train us, encourage us, make us produce all of that? If we’re just going to give donations anyway, why all those lessons? Why all those books and discussions?” (259). The answer to her question is that, like the disabled children of Victorian England, the Hailsham students are the “beneficiaries” of a philanthropic effort to produce their humanity through education, to show “the world that if students were reared in humane, cultivated environments, it was possible for them to grow to be as sensitive and intelligent as any ordinary human being” (261). The prejudice underlying philanthropy is evident in the “as”; Miss Emily concedes “there would always be a barrier against seeing [the clones] as properly human” (263). Despite her philanthropic commitment to their education, Madame is never fully able to mask the fear and disruption the clones’ bodies awaken in her, as she “looked at [them], like she was seeing something that gave her the creeps” (72) and “tucked her shoulders in tightly as she passed between” them (251). Miss Emily similarly confesses: “We’re all afraid of you. I had to fight back my dread of you all almost every day I was at Hailsham. There were times I’d look down at you all from my study window and I’d feel such revulsion” (269). These responses signal a disgust for the disabled body that has historically been used to justify its social exclusion (Schweik 94-97).

Long before the movement that sustains Hailsham is jettisoned, the philanthropic support of the individual students is abandoned once they age out of Hailsham. Though Miss Emily reassures Kathy H. and Tommy that they have “had good lives” and are “educated and cultured” it is clear that the education has been in service to the cause instead of to the clones,

as once they are sent to the Cottages, the development of the clones ends and they become products which must sign in and out of “Keffer’s ledgerbook” (118). The guardians send them away from Hailsham tasked with writing essays on “a topic that would absorb [them] properly for anything up to two years” (115). But the essays are never finished, nor are they ever read. Musing on her essay years later, Kathy H. thinks about her essay on Victorian novels in complexity, imagining new critical approaches and half-heartedly contemplating returning to her writing. However, there is never any question that further is possible. While, like the asylum, Hailsham sought to recreate the clones in “a bourgeois, middle-class image,” the clones are cut off from the possibilities of economic independence and upward social mobility promised by middle-class education. Rather, their futures are known and closed because of their bodily identities, another marker of their disabled status.

The tension created by the contrast between the clones’ exemplary able-bodiedness and their social impairment (Garland-Thomson 138) exists alongside another tension within the novel: It is simultaneously, if paradoxically, true that the clones’ *bodies* are *disabled* bodies. In the final chapters of the novel, both Ruth and Tommy experience iatrogenic disability and then death as a result of their donations, but even prior to this, the novel reveals the clones’ bodies as disabled in other ways.

In the early sections of the novel, Tommy poses a disruption to the hyper-normative world of Hailsham, for while he exhibits physical excellence, he exhibits neurologically and/or psychologically aberrant behavior that sets him apart from the other students. Readers are introduced to Tommy in one of Kathy H.’s memories of Hailsham when the students are twelve years old. Along with the other girls, she watches from a distance as the boys contrive to humiliate Tommy by excluding him from their football teams. As he warms up “to play the game at which he so excelled,” the other students notice – and mock – his atypical facial expressions, which convey his lack of social awareness (8). As the plot to exclude him from the teams unfolds, Kathy H. recalls: “There was something comical about Tommy at that moment, something that made you think, well, yes, if he’s going to be that daft, he deserves what’s coming” (9), identifying his inability to read social cues. When Tommy

finally realizes what has happened, he dissolves into a fit of “thunderous bellowing” and “a nonsensical jumble of swear words and insults” (9). His tantrum progresses, his limbs flail uncontrollably, until he accidentally strikes Kathy when she tries to speak to him (11). In another incident that occurs a few months later, students convince Tommy that his skin can “unzip” and his elbow can fall out (85-86), which further suggests his social immaturity and lack of bodily awareness. In the eyes of the Hailsham students, Tommy is a target for teasing because he “never even tried to be creative” and does not produce art for the Exchanges (10).

It is Tommy’s inability to “be creative” that poses the greatest problem for him at Hailsham, because this represents a direct threat to his personhood. The inability to produce art is a source of anxiety for Tommy, which is temporarily alleviated when Miss Lucy tells him that art does not matter; she later tells Tommy that she has “done [him] a big disservice telling [him] not to worry about being creative” because his art is important for “evidence” (108). As he and Kathy H. eventually learn, art is intended to serve as evidence of the existence of their souls (260), or more simply, of their personhood. Tommy’s inability to create art jeopardizes the campaign to humanize the clones; perhaps subconsciously, or perhaps because of their conditioning, the other Hailsham students regard Tommy’s deficiency as a threat to their community.

While Tommy’s difference is not explored as pathology within the novel, the confluence of differences that Ishiguro develops suggests a kind of neurodiversity: Tommy’s inability to read social cues, his outbursts in response to teasing and anxiety, his developmentally delayed behavior, and his inability to be creative all might be read as an autism spectrum disorder. This is further underscored when he later begins making the animal drawings to mount evidence of his personhood. Fittingly, he renders these in Keffer’s discarded ledger books, and Kathy H. observes that they are “densely detailed”: “The first impression was like 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 prevision, and only when you held the page away could you see that it was some kind of armadillo, say, or a bird” (187). The acute attention to detail in Tommy’s drawings evokes what Joseph N. Straus has identified in autistic art as

local coherence, “an unusual and distinctive ability to attend to details on their own terms” which is “sometimes at the expense of the big picture” (542). The detail in Tommy’s animals is both at the expense of the big picture of the animal itself, and of the larger context for his art: He has entirely, and tragically, not seen the details of the drawings in relation to the rest of the world.

It is in this respect that Tommy’s lack of social awareness is shared by the rest of the clones, who focus their attention on the minutiae of living, unaware of how they fit into the bigger picture. It may be said that all the clones possess what Simon Baron-Cohen terms *mindblindness*, or a lack of awareness of the collective consciousness of others. Kathy H. and Tommy attribute to Madame, both correctly and incorrectly, the power to read minds, for while she does not know what Kathy H. is thinking when she spies her singing along with the Judy Bridgewater cassette, she possesses a knowledge of society’s intentions that the Hailsham students do not. Of course, save Tommy, Ishiguro does not develop the students as exhibiting signs of a mental or neurological disability, and yet assumptions of such a disability – and its related negation of their personhood – have been extended to the clones. In her discussion of neurodiversity, Micki McGee explains:

As a category that includes those individuals previously understood as insane, mad, or deranged (for example, schizophrenics) or cognitively-impaired (formerly “mentally-retarded” and before that, “feeble-minded”), the idea of neurodiversity necessarily strains the very notion of the rational, choosing subject that is at the heart of the liberal ideal. Our ideals of personhood (and the associated status of citizenship) are located in the notion that we are reasonable creatures. Predicating personhood on rationality has always been a dubious proposition. . . (13)

While Tommy poses a threat to the humanizing project of Hailsham, it is the rest of the clones that pose a threat to society if they are allowed to develop typical social awareness and cognition. Thus, while their bodies are the focus of efforts to optimize health and development, the society insists on their innate, unremediable mental difference in order to deny their personhood.

The denial of their personhood is also explored in relation to the clones' sexuality; readers learn that all of the clones have been made sterile. Whether this is the result of an accident or design of their creation, or a procedure inflicted on them after birth, is unknown. There is a long history of forced and routine sterilization of the disabled (Richards, Miodrag, and Watson 137-138). The children learn that "Out there people were fighting and even killing each other over who had sex with whom. And the reason it meant so much . . . was because the people out there were different from us students: they could have babies from sex" (84). Though it is not explored in any depth, the suggestion is that "out there" breeding is a source of some anxiety. This aligns the world of *Never Let Me Go* with the history of eugenics; in different times and places, various concerns over genetic purity or preservation have preceded eugenic practices. Bound up in the case for eugenics have been associations of aberrance – especially sexual aberrance – and criminality with the disabled body, especially related to intellectual or psychological impairment (Richards, Miodrag, and Watson 138).

For example, in its 1927 decision in *Buck v. Bell*, the United States Supreme Court found that a Virginia statute allowing for forced sterilization of people with mental disabilities not only did not constitute a violation of Fourteenth Amendment protections, but that the practice served a necessary social good. In the majority opinion, Oliver Wendell Holmes declared it "better for all the world if, instead of waiting to execute degenerate offspring for crime or to let them starve for their imbecility, society can prevent those who are manifestly unfit from continuing their kind." Evident in Holmes's decision is the fear that the mentally disabled will replicate criminality and dependency in addition to reproducing other disabled bodies. While Holmes might have limited his decision to the specific disabled body considered in the case, an eighteen-year-old woman named Carrie Buck, his decision broadly declares the elimination of disability as a social responsibility. "We have seen more than once that the public welfare may call upon the best citizens for their lives. It would be strange if it could not call upon those who already sap the strength of the State for these lesser sacrifices, often not felt to be such by those concerned, in order to prevent our being swamped with

incompetence.” His words at once deny the sentience of the disabled body, and cast disability as an affliction on the national body (“sap the strength”). So thoroughly did Holmes regard disability as a contagion that he concluded his decision by citing the Court’s finding in *Jacobsen v. Massachusetts* which supported compulsory vaccination, claiming “The principle that sustains compulsory vaccination is broad enough to cover cutting the Fallopian tubes.”

These same fears of aberrance and contagion are associated with – and internalized by – the clones in *Never Let Me Go*. Fearing her own sexual desire as unnatural, Kathy H. searches for her possible – the woman she replicates – in the pages of pornographic magazines. After she is unable to find her own possible, Ruth claims: “We’re modelled from trash. Junkies, prostitutes, winos, tramps . . . If you want to look for possibles, if you want to do it properly, then you look in the gutter. You look in rubbish bins. Look down the toilet, that’s where you’ll find where we all came from” (166). Ruth’s suspicions are never validated, and from an economic standpoint, it is unlikely that her belief on this point would be true. Very likely, medical innovations like cloning would first benefit the wealthy, and so it is probable that Ruth’s possible is affluent and connected rather than socially marginal or suspect. However, her claim here speaks to the historical associations between disability and criminality, poverty, and immorality that fueled the expansion of England’s asylum system.

Containment

Ruth’s declaration that she is “modelled from trash” is part of a trash aesthetic that is developed in the novel. The aesthetic correlation between disability and trash dates back to the nineteenth-century when “the discourse of literary realism began . . . to privilege representations of trash, fragments, and imperfect bodies, while modern art turned to the representation of human difference and defect, changing the sense of aesthetic beauty to a rawer conception” (Siebers 749). A version of this same kind of transformative relationship is developed in Ishiguro’s novel. However, before exploring this, it is important to first acknowledge that

the genesis of this aesthetic is the shared experience of discard. Like trash, the disabled body has historically been what is unwanted because it is viewed as broken or not useful; like trash, when its repair through cure or correction has not been possible, the disabled body has been contained.

In *Never Let Me Go*, the clones are held in a network of institutions which serve as containers for the disabled body. Hailsham is the exceptional therapeutic school. In contrast, most clones spend their childhood in “vast government ‘homes’” which are the stuff of nightmares (265). The difference between Hailsham and the large government institutions can be likened to the products of the two waves of asylum reform in nineteenth-century England. In contrast to the philanthropic impulse that creates Hailsham, the government homes are a way to relegate the clones “to the shadows” (265). As the clones are not visibly or behaviorally identifiable as different, their complete removal can be read as rooted in the fear that they will somehow become lost or integrated into the broader culture; in other words, that they may contaminate the normative national body. A similar fear of contagion drove the “demand for institutional accommodation for idiot and imbecile children” made by the 1898 Parliamentary Committee on Defective and Epileptic Children, which was convened in response to “fear and anxiety” of an increasing number of the insane poor (Wright 188-189). This alarm coincided with a cultural preoccupation with eugenics, and the “desire to segregate the feeble-minded” was directly related to controlling their reproduction (Wright 190). English society also held that insanity that was attributed to an etiology of heredity was regarded as both “impairment” and “incurable,” in contrast to insanity from “moral and physical causes” which held the possibility for rehabilitation (Taylor 35). In asserting that the clones are “modelled from trash,” Ruth articulates an assumption of their incurable, essential difference, which fuels the justification for their permanent containment, echoing historical attitudes toward heredity and mental ability.

Like their containment in the institutional system, their movement through the system of “care” also mirrors the historical treatment of children with mental disabilities. The clones arrive at Hailsham without a known history: their first six or seven years are unseen and unknown by

the reader, as perhaps to themselves. Similarly, upon leaving Hailsham, the clones are dispersed among various cottages and then rehabilitation centers, so that all that is known of them is through rumor or chance encounter. While within the novel this reinforces their denied personhood, the erased pasts and futures mirror the incomplete personal histories of England's disabled children. Steven J. Taylor's examination of the "economy of care" in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century England reveals that a child's stay in an asylum made up only one placement in their movement through a care network; tracking a child's movement through the entire system is difficult if not impossible because of irregular (or absent) recordkeeping practices (105-108).

At the age of majority, the clones are sent to the Cottages or their like until they begin to work as carers or start their donations. Here, too, readers can discern the ruins of efforts to contain the mentally disabled. In England, as well as on the European continent and in the United States, a cottage system of caring for the mentally disabled functioned as an alternative to the centralized care of the large institution. Proponents of "the cottage plan" held that departing from "monolithic hospitals into smaller units . . . created a freer and more sociable atmosphere" (Yanni 79). While there was little in the way of empirical evidence to support this claim, it was undeniable that a cottage system appeared as a far more economical alternative to the asylum, as

. . . Doctors could reuse old houses, use structures with a variety of plans, and cluster small buildings around preexisting linear hospitals. The shapes of cottages varied widely and were not prescribed. Wooden houses could be built less expensively than fireproof masonry hospitals, and small buildings did not require the complicated heating and water technologies of a linear asylum. (Yanni 79)

In his advocacy for a cottage system for asylums in the United States, Dr. John M. Galt praised the village of Gheel, Belgium, in which people diagnosed with various mental disabilities were spread throughout the village as boarders in family homes (Yanni 84); in theory, this model provided greater integration into community life as well as a supportive and nurturing family structure, both favorable components of a rehabilitative setting for the mentally disabled. In practice, however, "the

farmhouses were dirty and cold” and “the simple apparatuses in a Belgian house were technologically backward” compared to modern asylums (Yanni 88). The low rate of compensation for the care and board of the disabled meant that boarders might be “placed in garrets, lofts, outhouses, and other out-of-the-way nooks and corners” (Earle qtd. in Yanni 88). The inadequacies of the cottage system were enumerated at length in a January 1870 article in the *Journal of Mental Science* written by J.B. Tuke, Medical Superintendent of the Kinross District Asylum. Observing a cottage asylum system in Kennoway, Scotland, Tuke identifies the patients as “with one exception, either demented whose disease was of long standing or congenital idiots” who “as a whole . . . were identically of the class which forms the mass of Asylum population” (526). He notes that many of the patients were unbathed or unclean, lacked proper nutrition, lived in “dingy” and dilapidated dwellings, missed the “amusements and variety of asylum life,” and enjoyed far less personal liberty in the community than they might have had in the confines of an asylum (527-528).

The conditions observed in the cottage system for asylums are replicated in the Cottages of *Never Let Me Go*. Kathy H. describes the Cottages as “the remains of a farm that had gone out of business years before” the center of which is the old farmhouse surrounded by “barns, outhouses, stables all converted” for the clones’ living quarters (116). The buildings are poorly heated, Keffers rarely brings fuel for the heaters, and the clones lack access to proper bedding, for “the blankets often weren’t even blankets, but a really odd assortment – old curtains, even bits of carpet” (127). The food is simply described as “different” (129). The clones are left adrift without the guidance of their guardians, or a focus for their attention so that they “spend large parts of the day awkwardly standing outside the farmhouse, not knowing what else to do” (119).

As they begin their donations, the clones transition into medicalized “recovery centers” that are also repurposed buildings. In the Kingsfield, where Tommy is housed, “A lot of the donors’ rooms you can’t get to with a wheelchair, or else they’re too stuffy or too draughty. There aren’t nearly enough bathrooms and the ones there are are hard to keep clean, get freezing in winter and are generally too far from the donors’ rooms”

(218). On one hand, it is surprising that the conditions in the recovery centers are so rudimentary, for it is during this period that the clones are at their most valuable as a commodity. If donations go well, the clones can complete four cycles of donation before completing. Achieving a fourth donation is treated as a marker of worth. “A donor ‘on a fourth,’ even one who’s been pretty unpopular up till then, is treated with respect. Even doctors and nurses play up to this; a donor on a fourth will go in for a check and be greeted by whitecoats smiling and shaking their hand” (278). An early completion could damage potentially viable organs. Thus, if there is any point at which the clones might expect to be treated well, it is during this period, when the period of investment is nearly at an end and the return has not yet been realized. However, the clones remain relegated to the margins at this moment too. The reason for this is the problem their disruptive bodies present that the society cannot fully resolve.

Referring to the turning away from asylums as sites that held promise for restoring function to the mentally disabled, Carla Yanni explains that “The institutions themselves began to be neglected by both the doctors and the state, because they carried negative associations. They were filled with incurable people who reminded both doctors and the public of past failures” (146). In *Never Let Me Go*, medical technology has advanced to the point that cloning and organ replacement are routine, and illness and disability have been all but eliminated from the society. However, in this pursuit, the clones’ bodies have complicated the pursuit of cure and remind “both doctors and the public of past failures,” for in eliminating disability, the society creates new disabled bodies; in affirming the value of human life through attempting to extend it, it has failed to settle what it means to be human.

Eliminating disability

Cure, correction, and containment are all manifestations of society’s impulse to eliminate disability. The children of Hailsham have been created to eventually save some unknown group living in the outside world from the experience of disability. The cloned body is never intended to be a self; it is imagined as a sum of parts that are intended to

be extricable and subtracted, and whatever remains will be disposed of. The associations between the cloned body and trash are many. The children buy society's trash in the Sales and trade it in the Exchanges; they are housed in facilities that have outlived their intended purpose; Ruth is certain they are modelled on trash; Ruth's collection is thrown in the rubbish bin; Ruth dreams that Hailsham is flooded and she "could see rubbish floating by" (225). Indeed, when Tommy and Ruth have both completed, it is trash that Kathy H. finds when she journeys to Norfolk, the "lost corner" of England:

All along the fence, especially the lower line of wire, all sorts of rubbish had caught and tangled. It was like the debris you get on a sea-shore: the wind must have carried some of it for miles and miles before finally coming up against these trees and these two lines of wire. Up in the branches of the trees, too, I could see, flapping about, torn plastic sheeting and bits of old carrier bags . . . I was thinking about the rubbish, the flapping plastic in the branches, the shore-line of odd stuff caught along the fencing, and I half-closed my eyes and imagined this was the spot where everything I'd ever lost since my childhood had washed up, and I was now standing here in front of it . . . (287)

Ishiguro purposefully chooses plastic sheeting and grocery bags as the rubbish in the novel's final landscape for plastic's extraordinary stubbornness to discard: plastic does not easily decompose. Plastic travels in wind and is buoyant in water. Plastic trash is the unwanted remainder of efforts to improve the human condition. In simplest terms, plastic is the thing we cannot seem to get rid of. Plastic has still another resonance: when referring to life, plastic means "capable of adapting to varying conditions"; when referring to the mind, plastic means "relating to, characterized by, or exhibiting neural plasticity" (Merriam-Webster). It is in respect to all of these meanings that plastic proves an appropriate symbol for disability, for while disability is often unwanted, it is ubiquitous, resilient, and resistant; it is also a way of being that invites – or demands – adaptability and new ways of seeing the world. Disability transforms the landscape.

Tobin Siebers cautions that both trash aesthetics and discourses about disability have created a "perception . . . that broken bodies and things are more real than anything else. . . Somehow, today, a photograph

of a daisy in a garden seems less real than a photograph of garbage blowing down a dirty alley” and yet “[t]he disabled body is no more real than the able body – and no less real” (749). In the end, however, it is not disability itself, or even the disabled body, that constitutes what is real. Rather, it is its possibility that is real: The shared and inevitable experience of precarity. The central aesthetic success of Ishiguro’s novel is that he has made “recognizable, readable, and grievable” (Butler xiii) the lives of the clones, or, as he hoped, written “story in which every reader might find an echo of his or her own life” (“Interview”). It is in this way that Kathy H., Tommy, and Ruth achieve personhood within the novel; they become real to the reader through the empathic connection made possible through acknowledged vulnerability.² In the end, the Hailsham students who bare their failures, frustrations and pain become far more human to us than the world that creates and destroys them for the sake of denying its own pain.

Ishiguro’s novel begins in the aftermath of unnamed loss, and the world he creates replicates the remains of the apparatuses contrived to cure and contain the vulnerable body. Yet in its final scene, facing all that she has lost and all that she will lose, Kathy H. imagines that she might yet see Tommy emerge from the horizon (287-288). Kathy H.’s ability to still reach out for Tommy is the resolution of novel’s central question: What does it mean to be human? Avoiding the precarity of living has made the world less human, but it is not merely the acceptance of her own precarity that humanizes Kathy H. Rather, Kathy H.’s humanity is in her connection to others, that she stubbornly clings to even though so much else has been stolen from her, that “no one can take away” (287).

Notes:

¹ In developing my discussion of precarity, I draw on Judith Butler’s use of the term. Contemplating the relationship between embodiedness and normativity in relation to sexuality and the performance of gender, Judith Butler observes that all are subject to precarity, for “none of us has the choice of creating ourselves *ex nihilo*. We are transformed and acted upon prior to any action we might take” (xii). The same might be said for disability, in that the body creates for everyone, or holds the potential to create for everyone, a shared experience of precarity that Butler imagines as a uniting “rubric” of those whose “lives do not qualify as

recognizable, readable, or grievable" (xiii). In this analysis, precarity encompasses not only the potential for physical illness or frailty, but the related experiences of social dislocation, financial insecurity, and political disenfranchisement.

² Aline Strebler and Claude Valentin observe that

Vulnerabilis in late Latin means "who can be wounded" both literally and figuratively. The term "precariety" comes from the legal Latin *precarius*, which means "that can be reached through prayer", hence its uncertain transient aspect. "Woundedness" and "uncertainty" both belong to the social and medical realms, in which pathos, compassion and care come to the fore. (49)

In *Never Let Me Go*, Ruth, Tommy, and Kathy H. are most humanized in their woundedness: Ruth is driven to right her past wrongs when facing her own death (233); Tommy's meltdown on the return from seeing Miss Emily comes at the moment he realizes his death is inevitable (273-4); Kathy H. breaks from her emotionlessness at the loss of Tommy (288).

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