

## **‘Why would you play a game like that?’:**

### **Community and the pandemic in Kazuo Ishiguro’s *Klara and the Sun***

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#### **Abstract**

In this essay, I read Kazuo Ishiguro’s *Klara and the Sun* (2021) as an exploration of lost community within the Covid-19 pandemic, concerned especially with the relationship between illness, new technologies, and increased social loneliness and atomisation. In a context in which death rates in the thousands have become a regular feature within the news, and in which both individuals and governments must weigh up life’s value against the disadvantages of isolation and unemployment, the novel can be read to consider just what a life is worth (how it’s value should be determined), as well as flagging the enormous decisions involved in saving or ‘continuing’ lives. It introduces a debate between humanist and posthumanist thinking specifically relevant to our current era, not simply as this is shaped by new ethically-slippery technological developments, but more centrally as it generates an incessant recalibration of human worth, denying the status of ‘human’ to certain populations. Read through the lens of Zygmunt Bauman’s ideas on ‘liquid modernity’ and the modern economy of obsolescence, as well as Judith Butler’s on contemporary vulnerability and precarity, *Klara and the Sun* suggests that while it may *seem* most humane to see each life as unique and irreplaceable, in this way favouring a humanist perspective on pandemic policies, ironically this calculation itself can also involve cruelty, given that the stipulations regarding to whom it is applied are already restrictive. In this sense, a posthumanist perspective on identity and community is urgently needed.

## Introduction

Over one year on from the first arrival of the Covid-19 virus, and with a ‘third wave’ now spreading across the globe, it may seem soon to announce the beginnings of a new ‘pandemic literature’. To be sure, popular cultural interest in pandemic-related fictions and films is readily visible across the internet (Doherty and Giodano 2020), and one recent publication even suggests that those individuals reading and watching such outputs may actually experience more psychological preparedness to face pandemic-related difficulties (Scrivner et al. 2021). Nevertheless, when it comes to literary fiction, authors and critics have been more reticent to position their work in this way, instead asserting the importance of time and retrospection as necessary conditions for critical and creative assessment. As Lily Meyer writes, ‘No one has had time to truly refine their ideas about personal life in a state of widespread isolation and existential dread, [...] and because no inner experience of the coronavirus pandemic could plausibly be described as complete, prose that renders it static and comprehensible rings false’ (Meyer 2020). Likewise, Laura Spinney reflects that ‘it’s too early to know if we’ll reap a crop of pandemic-themed novels in years to come,’ but for the moment, ‘literary fiction that explores contagion is thin on the ground’ (Spinney 2020).

Kazuo Ishiguro’s eighth novel, *Klara and the Sun*, which I want to position within this category in order to explore its critical representation of Covid-19-era loss, is not necessarily intended in response to the experience of the pandemic – indeed, considering its publication date in early March of 2021, it seems unlikely Ishiguro would have had sufficient time to properly incorporate meaningful references to this event. His own pronouncements on the novel likewise reflect this. ‘I had no premonition or anything of a pandemic,’ Ishiguro insists. ‘I just saw a society that was going to be more isolating and isolated’ (James 2021). More properly, from interviews Ishiguro has given on the novel, it is intended as a comment on

developments in genetic engineering and AI technology, suggesting worries over the emergence a new, 'quite savage' meritocracy based in genetic enhancement and the impact this might have on existing social communities (Knight 2021, n.p.). Ishiguro states,

Our assumption about what a human individual is and what's inside each unique human individual—what makes them unique—these things are a little bit different because we live in a world where we see all these possibilities of being able to excavate and map out people's personalities. Is that going to change our feelings toward each other, particularly when we're under pressure? When you actually face the prospect of losing somebody you love, I think then you really, really start to ask that question, not just intellectually but emotionally. (Knight 2021)

Here, the author emphasises the affective and ethical questions raised by genetic engineering, underlining the potentially disastrous ramifications these technologies might have on human relations, especially where the threat of personal loss informs decision-making. As Clara Nguyen writes, the novel offers 'a heartfelt exploration of technology's potential to affect the way we love,' one which 'shines direct light on the tenuous connections that sustain an increasingly isolated world' (Nguyen 2021). In other words, it probes technology's impact on an escalating contemporary solitude, especially where these developments claim to offer hope through revolutionary innovation.

Nevertheless, in the context of Covid-19's relentless toll on human lives, which has also impacted on how we interact publicly, how we educate and socialise children, and on how we assess the very value of different human lives, similar questions are also clearly at stake: who gets to live? Who gets to thrive? And on what grounds? Indeed, the radically world-changing dilemmas raised by the availability of new genetic and AI technologies in the novel

might be seen as continuing an already prominent and Covid-pertinent debate around the category of the ‘human’, especially as this concept defines access to basic rights, including education, a living wage, and health care. As Brenda Carr Vellino writes, ‘the category of the “human” functions to ‘designate which human rights subjectivities are visible, legible, intelligible, and audible in aesthetic, legal, political and ethical contexts’ (Vellino 2016, p. 149). Likewise, as Simon Cohn and Rebecca Lynch reflect, this prioritisation has also tended to define global public health debate, where those qualifying as humans are automatically accorded ‘an exceptional status’ (Cohn and Lynch 2017, p. 286), often with tragic consequences for those more disadvantaged. What I am concerned to examine in this chapter is how this debate connects to the novel’s central depiction of a pandemic-era lost community, seeing Covid-19 as that which operates at the tension between state investment in personal health (the individual) and the meaning of this for local and national communities. In effect, I read the novel as suggesting that a humanist account of the subject, prizing rationality and uniqueness, obstructs a healthy understanding of community solidarity, standing in the way of a larger appreciation of social obligation.

To elaborate, if the novel is concerned about individuals and how individuals are affected within the pandemic context, and if it suggests (as I believe) that this representation is bound up with a certain idea of the human, nevertheless, this depiction clearly positions these individuals within a larger social collective, which in different ways come under threat by humanist philosophy. Indeed, we see this already in Ishiguro’s earlier novel *Never Let Me Go* (2005), where a similar focus on posthuman commonality overtly disrupts taken-for-granted assumptions regarding the priority of the individual, instead making clear what Shameem Black explains as humanism’s violence: the ‘fundamentally exploitative discourse of use value’ implicit within the concept of the human ‘soul’ (Black 2009, p. 785). Similarly, in *Klara and the Sun*, as I read it here, Ishiguro likewise brings to bear a larger cultural and theoretical

debate around the meaning of the human, which underpins the text's representation of community as fragile and under threat. I hope to better explain this here as I look more closely at the novel's pandemic-era panorama, considering how representations of the relationships between humans, robots and nature come to stand in for changing social understanding, though one too eager to exalt the rational individual over the iterated and vulnerable body.

### **The Human and the Posthuman**

It is difficult to understate the centrality of humanism to contemporary life, a situation clearly reflected in the society of *Klara and the Sun*. Underlining the importance of the figure of the 'human' within modern history and culture, Peter Boxall reflects, 'one becomes a subject of a sovereign state, with the privileges and sanctions that such subjection entails, to the extent that one can prove oneself to be fully human' (Boxall 2013, p. 85). Within this context, a subject's ability to situate oneself as part of a larger national community emerge as decidedly contingent: 'the plight of those who have been denied certain rights under sovereign law [...] has thus been determined by the question of who "counts" as human' (Boxall 2013, p. 85): those populations oppressed within modern society experience this oppression precisely on the basis of their supposed non-humanity. In the context of Covid-19, this might include unemployed individuals without access to privatised health-care; those denied necessary information about the importance of shielding; those with unequal access to vaccines; or those left otherwise unprotected in order to assist a logic of 'herd immunity'. As Judith Butler writes, 'Because "the vulnerable" are not deemed productive in the new quasi-Aryan community, they are not valued lives, and if they die, that is apparently acceptable, since they are not imagined as productive workers, but "drains" on the economy. Although the herd immunity argument may not make this claim explicitly, it is there' (Butler 2020).

Despite the importance of the human to modern social and political relations, however, as Boxall also notes, the category has increasingly come into question over the last half century, thrown into ‘crisis’ as it is opened to ‘those elements which it has sought to exclude’ (Boxall 2013, p. 86). More broadly, while the suffering of those whose rights have been refused them under sovereign law has thus-far been determined by their failure to qualify as fully human (Boxall 2013, p. 85), in this way limiting political sovereignty to the domain of the white, able-bodied?, Western male subject, more recent challenges to this category across the late twentieth and early twenty-first century have seen it extended to encompass more identities and communities, or alternately, dismantled to reveal its elitist and discriminatory foundations. As Rosi Braidotti puts this, those left out by humanism include ‘the sexualized, racialized and naturalised others, who are reduced to the less than human status of disposable bodies’ (Braidotti 2015, p. 11). Postcolonial, feminist, and Marxist theory has worked to articulate these subjects’ experience of oppression and disenfranchisement, making it clear how ‘these “others” raise issues of power and exclusion’ (Braidotti 2015, p. 11).

Critical theory emerges, then, as one important challenge to humanist thinking, laying bare its tendency to exclude and omit those positioned on the margins. More recent technological developments have also contributed significantly to this debate, promoting in particular notions of the ‘posthuman’ or ‘transhuman’ as salient alternatives, re-defining the human in technologically informed, digitally cognisant ways. To be sure, these categories are subject to diverse interpretations, in some cases denoting an effort to ascend *beyond* humanity’s physical limitations, into the realm of digital abstraction or cybernetic purity. Invoking gene-editing technologies such as CRISPR, which allows scientists to change human genes in ways that are inheritable across generations, and the ‘body-hacking movement,’ in which participants implant ‘RFID microchips and magnets into their bodies to better take advantage of potentially life-enhancing technology,’ Christine Emba explains that transhumanism is, in

this sense, ‘dedicated to promoting the use of technological advancements to enhance our physical, intellectual and psychological capabilities, ultimately transcending the limitations of the human condition’ (Emba 2016).<sup>i</sup>

Nevertheless, in its most celebrated versions, posthumanism endeavours not to transcend the human, but rather, precisely, to *ground* this, *retaining* a concern with the subject’s inescapable materiality, and therefore also her interconnection with non-human matter. As N Katherine Hayles explains, ‘the posthuman view [...] thinks of the body as the original prosthesis we all learn to manipulate, so that extending or replacing the body with other prostheses becomes a continuation of a process that began before we were born’ (Hayles 1999, p. 2). Embodiment in this way emerges as theoretically crucial, offering, in Hayles words, ‘an opportunity to put back into the picture the flesh that continues to be erased in contemporary discussions about cybernetic subjects’ (Hayles 1999, p. 5). Similarly, Rosi Braidotti champions the posthuman precisely for its challenge to ‘the arrogance of anthropocentrism and the “exceptionalism” of the Human as a transcendental category’ (Braidotti 2013, p. 66). In other words, this critical position authorises a rebuttal of humanism’s transcendental presumptions, instead favouring a reassertion of materialist thinking as a means to situating the subject historically and corporeally. As Pieter Vermeulen remarks, rather than denoting ‘the successful transcendence of nonhuman constraints [...] it [instead] declares the end of humanism by insisting that the discrete, disembodied entity of the human never existed’ (Vermeulen 2014, pp. 122-23). This emphasis on the body functions to reinforce the ties between the subject and everything around it. In Brian Massumi’s words, ‘It is the limit-expression of *what the human shares with everything it is not*: a bringing out of its *inclusion* in matter’ (Massumi 2002, p. 128; qtd by Vermeulen 2014, p. 122).

Regarding the topic of community, then, it is significant how this critical position reinforces the importance of the collective, reaffirming an underlying connectivity with the

surrounding world. Importantly, this point is sometimes overlooked in posthumanism's emphasis on the subject *as body*, where this is perceived (by liberal humanism in particular) as a critical failure to take into account the individual's defining rationalism. As Elizabeth Anker explains,

this classically Cartesian animus treats the body as a problem to be disciplined, integrated, conquered, and overcome, lest its inherent captivity and suffering jeopardize the liberal freedom and autonomy conferred by rights. [...] To be reduced or beholden to the body is to be labelled subhuman, and that equation has and continues to support the subjugation of "people" according to gender, race, religion, sexual orientation, class, and species membership. (Anker 2016, p. 42)

In other words, the body continues to be perceived as a burden to be borne, just in the same way that Empire itself seeks 'to dominate and subdue nature' in the interest of power and profit (Anker 2016, p. 42). In its focus on the corporeal, by contrast, and on the lack of metaphysical surety available to non-transcendent subjects, posthumanism upends this liberal understanding, instead underlining physical embodiment as the subject's defining (and interlinking) condition. This makes it much more attentive to the body's own needs, and less focused on self-determination and control. Even so, posthumanism too relies on a notion of 'the subject' that in a sense mirrors the contemporary individual as normative base. As Braidotti herself admits, 'One needs at least some subject position,' however distanced from the 'unitary or exclusively anthropocentric' (p. 102). In this way, it becomes imperative to underline the need to reinterrogate the relationship between the posthuman and community, bringing these two discourses back into dialogue as mutually conversant.



One way of doing this is to emphasise the centrality of the relational within posthumanist thought, where this encompasses an understanding of mutual interdependency based on shared bodily vulnerability. As Amelia DeFalco explains, within posthumanism's care-centred affective economy, vulnerability emerges 'as the normative effect of posthuman vital embodiment, as opposed to an anomalous state that can be overcome or corrected via neoliberal practice' (DeFalco 2020, p. 31). Here, while 'jettison[ing] the implied anthropocentrism of [an] ethics of care philosophy,' this theory nevertheless 'retains care's foregrounding of entanglement, embodiment and obligation' (DeFalco 2020, p. 31). In this way it reinforces the importance of community to the conceptualization of the postmodern subject, as a larger body within which the subject remains inevitably entwined.

What's more, within posthumanism, the definition of community extends beyond an awareness of relationality between humans to encompass connections between people and their surroundings far more generally (i.e. with the non-human). As Braidotti puts it, this theory 'indicates and actualizes the relational powers of a subject that is no longer cast in a dualist frame, but bears a privileged bond with multiple others and merges with one's technologically mediated planetary environment' (Braidotti 2013, p. 92).<sup>ii</sup> Furthermore, as Cohn and Lynch explain, the potential of this approach with respect to questions of personal health and wellbeing is that here, these categories themselves are 'broadened and re-conceived as generalised and shared. Rather than a property of a body or entity, the meaning shifts to being a quality of relationships between humans, other living things, the environment and even material objects' (Cohn and Lynch 2017, p. 287). In this way, 'the focus of health research shift[s] from the human to being a more distributed quality across heterogeneous relationships' (Cohn and Lynch 2017, p. 287), extending out to encompass a larger community shared between both humans and non-humans.

Looking to Ishiguro's novel, this reading of the posthuman speaks to the technological innovations the text addresses, but also and more centrally to the challenge to humanism these bring with them. To quote Haynes again, 'the posthuman view configures the human being so that it can be seamlessly articulated with intelligent machines. In the posthuman, there are no essential differences [...] between bodily existence and computer simulation' (Hayles 1999, p. 3). In effect, the posthuman *is* Klara as Josie's mother understands her, especially as she promises a seemingly impossible 'continuation' of Josie. The novel's engagement with this technological miracle brings to the fore new existential questions raised by computer engineering, but perhaps even more pertinently the (above mentioned) Covid-related questions regarding the meaning and value of the human within a pandemic context.<sup>iii</sup> With this in mind, it seems worth reinforcing the centrality of this categorical challenge within the novel, in particular, with a view to what I see as its post-Covid outlook on twenty-first century living.

### **Interior Landscapes and Digitised Vistas**

In fact, the novel's interest in Covid's affective and material impact on contemporary life is arguably apparent from the start of the text, in the confined interior setting and limited physical viewpoint that the protagonist, Klara, has on the world around her. The text begins, 'When we were new, Rosa and I were mid-store, on the magazines table side, and could see through more than half of the window' (Ishiguro 2021, p. 1). Awaiting her purchase from this store, Klara treasures such scant viewing opportunities, her connection to the outside world restricted by her access to one of the shop's two windows. Within this context, the store-front position is prized as a 'special honor' (Ishiguro 2021, p. 5), with each Artificial Friend (or AF) granted a week in the display, in a surprisingly democratic economy. When Klara's turn finally comes, she makes a point of expressing her contentment about this opportunity, noting how the

attraction of the window for her exists beyond its advertising value, more centrally encompassing its access to sunlight and its panoramic view on the street outside. She stresses how ‘I was free to see, close up and whole, so many things I’d seen before only as corners and edges’ (Ishiguro 2021, p. 6). This opportunity makes her ‘so excited that for a moment,’ she says, ‘I nearly forgot about the Sun and his kindness’ (Ishiguro 2021, p. 6), the joy of an unblocked view trumping even her more pious sensibilities, as it promises unselfconscious immersion in the world around her.

When Klara is later moved from the store to Josie’s home, in this way seeing her surroundings altered and extended considerably, this textual interest in interiority, and in the limitations of an indoor perspective, persists nonetheless. Indeed, Klara’s viewpoint itself is framed throughout the novel via a medium of (sometimes pixilating) screens, which remind the reader of the considerable restrictions of her non-sentient outlook. As Alex Preston describes, her access to her surroundings is occasionally subject to glitches, ‘so that perspectives are skewed, everything given a migraine-ish slant’ (Preston 2021). Likewise, with minimal exceptions, the events of this novel take place indoors, within the confines of four walls – and where they do not, they are flagged explicitly as anomalies. Klara and Josie both ask permission even to venture as far as the neighbour’s house, while any longer excursions (for example, to the waterfall or the city) merit special precaution. The reasons the reader is given for this interiority relate not only to Klara’s status as an AF, but to the fact that *all* children in the novel are confined to their houses, attending classes on their ‘oblongs’ or (in Rick’s case) devising inventions to pass the time. The introduction of AFs into this society emerges as a strategy to make this loneliness more bearable, providing companionship in the only form available to this generation. Likewise, the few social reunions or ‘interaction meetings’ (Ishiguro 2021, p. 64) the children attend are freighted with anxiety and tension. As Josie’s

mother puts it, they are part of the ‘work’ the children must do to succeed in college (Ishiguro 2021, p. 63).

The vision of solitude this scenario invokes, all the more amplified by online learning, overtly references the pandemic experience as we currently live this, where ‘isolation’ and screens have become an everyday element of contemporary global experience, forcing us to weigh up the value of physical health against quarantine’s mental toll. Indeed, while on the one hand this solitude has in some ways reawakened our modern investment in community, forcing us to reconsider our connections, obligations, and debts to one another, and perhaps to reach out to individuals otherwise forgotten (for example with the many local volunteer groups and communication campaigns that have emerged across the globe during the lockdown),<sup>iv</sup> on the other hand, there is also sense in which this community sentiment has ultimately not taken us as far as we might expect, leaving in place divisions of race and gender referenced above. As Ramgobin et al. make clear, for example, however active charity organizations in the United States may have been during the pandemic, and however nominally community-minded some state governments in managing the lockdown, those individuals and communities from lower socioeconomic status remain ‘less likely to have health insurance and follow up with medical care due to out-of-pocket costs, which in turn leads to a higher case fatality rate due to Covid-19’ (Ramgobin et al. 2021, p. 107).

Moreover, where a need to isolate has in some ways also offered opportunities for the development of a variety of new online communities and technologically-mediated connections, for example in virtual schooling programmes, support groups, social media fandom societies and political campaigns, on the other hand, it remains unclear to what extent such resources can provide a replacement for face-to-face encounters, and indeed to what extent involvement in such communities might actually increase a sense of loneliness and

isolation.<sup>v</sup> A recent article examining new Harvard research precisely around Covid-19's mental health impact explains this as especially relevant to teenagers and young adults:

[This community] may be particularly susceptible [to feelings of social isolation] because they are often transitioning from their “inherited families to their chosen families,” [...] Students in college may be struggling to fit in and feel homesick, while those not in school can feel disconnected from important social groups or communities. (Walsh 2021, n.p.)

Both of these scenarios are directly referenced by Josie and Rick's perspectives in the novel, as the former struggles to find a grounding within her new college-bound community, while the latter is left apart from this coterie due specifically to his unaltered genetic make-up. As Josie comments, ‘a lot of things come in the way of friendships’ within this society (Ishiguro 2021, p. 61), here in particular, new technologies: Rick expresses fury at Klara's arrival as a symbol of Josie's new artificial friend group (Ishiguro 2021, p. 60), whereas Josie herself fails or refuses to appreciate Rick's reasons for social distrust. There is ‘no reason Rick can't come,’ she protests, when her mother suggests he might not enjoy her ‘interaction meeting’, and moreover, she nags him about his supposed promise to come until he agrees (Ishiguro 2021, p. 64). Likewise, Klara's *own* experience of ‘choosing a family’ in the text can also be connected to this social anxiety, as her memories of the store and the other AFs invest her life in Josie's house with a tangible sense of homesickness. She reflects, ‘I realized how much I'd grown used to making observations and estimates in relation to those of other AFs around me, and here too was another adjustment I had to make’ (Ishiguro 2021, p. 48).

On one level, such sentiments are, perhaps, reflective of an aging process relevant to modern society more generally, and in this respect, implicit within the larger *Bildungsroman*

dimensions of the novel. As Joseph Slaughter writes, ‘The *Bildungsroman* [...] is equipped to normalise the conditions of inclusion in and exclusion from the public sphere’ (Slaughter 2007, p. 157), and in this respect, all *Bildungsroman* contemplate loneliness at least to some extent as a condition of seeking inclusion: the protagonist leaves behind her early existence in order to enter into the ‘collective will’ (Slaughter 2007, p. 159). It is notable here, however, that social *in*clusion itself, in this novel, might be read as inherently lonely and atomising, where the massive shift in normative lifestyles brought on by new technology and illness is pictured as deeply isolating, separating each individual and household from the surrounding society. In effect, what Josie signs up for in being ‘lifted’ is a childhood defined by persisting solitude: she gives up sociability in order to be normatively social.

In the context of the Covid-19 pandemic, this act of risk assessment carries considerable resonance, particularly in debate regarding a post-pandemic shift to digitised education. Here, corporate celebrations of new classroom and home-schooling technologies tend to mask both their potentially negative impact on children’s mental health and their socially divisive implications, instead championing (in the words of a position paper published by Microsoft) the ‘unprecedented opportunity to transform education across whole systems’ (Fullan et al., 2000). Nevertheless, as Stuart Rimmer notes, for certain student populations, especially those ‘left behind by digital poverty,’ online learning has ‘pushed them further into social isolation’ (Rimmer 2020):

Being out of direct physical contact [for those students] means support needs might be slower and disengagement increased. Some students report lacking structure and momentum being lost as routines, previously used as social and mental health anchors to guide the week and help regulation, are eroded with flexibility and choice becoming a tyranny. (Rimmer 2020)

Furthermore, such changes can also be connected to an increasing privatisation of public schools, in this way undermining the current system of state provision. As Jen Persson explains, ‘Once schools become dependent on the tech giants’ systems for teaching in class, homework, management and communications, and once a certain threshold is reached in the number of schools they operate in, then the state delivery of education becomes entirely dependent on private companies’ (qtd. in Fleming 2021). With respect to *Klara and the Sun*, such concerns are registered overtly within the novel’s dystopian vision of corporate hierarchy, where access to education and later ‘high ranking’ professional success (Ishiguro 2021, p. 22) is limited to those who have been ‘lifted’.

### **Pandemic-era Exclusions**

The competitive and exclusive mindset laid out in this narrative scenario again returns the novel to that central question of what makes us human. For the text’s imagined society, the answer to this question involves an explicitly humanist thinking, wherein the supposedly successful subject transcends physical barriers in the pursuit of personal and social progress. Rights to a good life, including an education and well-paid profession, are seen to demand an ascension *beyond* corporeal obstacles; where this is not possible or where one opts out, this merits exclusion. As one mother puts it to Mrs Arthur, implicitly criticising Rick’s parents’ choices, ‘Did his folks just . . . decide not to go ahead? Lose their nerve? [...] You’ve been so courageous.’ (Ishiguro 2021, p. 68). The judgement here that Rick’s parents were insufficiently brave in their decision *not* to genetically alter their son, and that, by contrast, Josie herself ‘will be grateful to [her mother] one day’ (Ishiguro 2021, p. 68), reinforces the cruelly competitive dimension of this supposedly progressive outlook, where extra-bodily transcendence, in a

perverse extension of humanist ideals, becomes an agreed parental aim and a condition for social and professional success.

Indeed, the problem for Rick as explained within the novel is not simply that he fails to access the genetic potential that Josie now possesses – he is described as having ‘genuine ability’ (Ishiguro 2021, p. 230) and in his work with drones is clearly very clever. The problem is that, without genetic alteration, he cannot practically access the online tutoring that would allow him to enter college: as his mother explains, ‘The long and short of it is that we can’t find screen tutors for him. They’re either members of the TWE, which forbids its members to take unlifted students, or else they’re bandits demanding ridiculous fees, which of course we are in no position to offer’ (Ishiguro 2021, p.147). It is notable here that while again Ishiguro probably was not thinking of the pandemic while writing the novel, this exclusive tutoring conglomerate open only to ‘lifted’ students might itself be easily read in relation to this context as an implicit reference to an increasingly inaccessible (because privatised) body of online learning technologies.

The text includes various historical markers that might also be tied overtly not only to the context of the virus more broadly, but to Donald Trump’s administration and to policies set in place at the time of the virus’s arrival to the United States. Klara’s frequent mentions of the RPO building, for example, from the very first paragraph of the novel, might be read as an ironic allusion to Trump’s endeavours to slow-down postal services in the build-up to the (Covid-affected) 2020 election, the acronym referencing the US’s historical ‘Railway Post Office’, a nineteenth century innovation meant to increase the speed of postal delivery. Equally centrally, the link between the character ‘Housekeeper Melania’ and the Slovene-American First Lady is hard to miss, the former applauded amongst the mothers in the novel as proof that ‘the best housekeepers still come from Europe’ (Ishiguro 2021, p. 66), while the latter is known



for being the first First Lady with naturalised citizenship, having been born in Slovenia, and whose native language is not English (Gunter 2018, np).

Indeed, given Melania Trump's general support for her husband's anti-immigrant politics throughout his presidency, perhaps best reflected by her decision to wear a jacket emblazoned with 'I don't really care, do u?' during her visit to a child migrant detention centre in October 2018 (BBC 2018, np), the novel's positioning of the character Melania as an immigrant white European housekeeper, tasked in part with Josie's care, might itself be seen to comment on this right-wing outlook and on the racist double-standard it involves. Here the novel suggests an awareness that the former President's decision to invoke a state of emergency based on the supposed threat to US security posed by migrants at the Mexican-American border, overlooks his own wife's status as a recent immigrant. It also overlooks, of course, the real threat posed by Trump's 'zero tolerance' policy to children detained and separated from their parents at the border – a threat only further amplified by the arrival of the virus to these border detention centres (Kneedler 2020). The novel's repeated emphasis on fences and drones (Ishiguro 2021, p. 151, 248), as well as on the precarious fate of those left outside its 'lifted' demographic, including a building filled with 'four hundred and twenty-three post-employed people [...] eighty-six of them children' (Ishiguro 2021, p. 240), reinforces this anxiety directly, where such individuals are forced to find a protective community who will assist and defend them, or risk the threat of violence from increasingly fascist and racist social factions (Ishiguro 2021, p. 232).

Commenting on this contemporary experience of precarity and vulnerability, both in relation to undocumented migrant populations and Covid itself, Butler's writing offers an important insight on changing socio-political discourses, especially as these ignore an underlying (and increasingly visible) bodily interdependence specific to the posthuman. Reflecting, alongside Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, on the plight of those denied human rights

on the basis of their non-citizenship, Butler notes how ‘these spectral humans, deprived of ontological weight and failing the test of social intelligibility required for minimal recognition include those whose age, gender, race, nationality, and labor status not only disqualify them for citizenship but actively “qualify” them for statelessness’ (Butler and Spivak 2007, p. 15-16). In the context of Covid-19, this experience of disqualification from state protection is again extended to other minority communities, who lack the means to isolate and protect themselves and still retain their employment. As Butler puts it,

On the one hand, the pandemic exposes a global vulnerability. Everyone is vulnerable to the virus because everyone is vulnerable to viral infection from surfaces or other human beings without establishing immunity. [...] On the other hand, [...] the pandemic exposes the heightened vulnerability to the illness of all those for whom health care is neither accessible nor affordable. Perhaps there are at least two lessons about vulnerability that follow: it describes a shared condition of social life, of interdependency, exposure and porosity; it names the greater likelihood of dying, understood as the fatal consequence of a pervasive social inequality. (Butler 2020, np).

Klara’s own particular relationship to this historical reality is notably ambiguous in the novel, as she stands in for a number of contrasting social discourses emergent within this pandemic experience. From one perspective, Klara’s sensibilities, while in some ways notably empathetic to those around her (much more so, for example, than the B3 model which soon replaces her robot prototype (Ishiguro 2021, p. 35, 40)), are also distinctly racist: she repeatedly makes note of black skin, but never white (Ishiguro 2021, pp. 68, 245). Furthermore, while wanting to help Josie and Rick, she does little to question or challenge the societal hierarchy within which they operate. Indeed, when asked if she can ‘continue’ Josie, rather than trying to ‘save’ her, she

agrees that ‘perhaps this is the better way’ (Ishiguro 2021, p. 214), in this way effectively agreeing to allow Josie to die, so that she can take her place.

On the other hand, as becomes repeatedly clear throughout the novel, Klara is also herself an unmistakable figure of minority exclusion and disenfranchisement, at points compared to a vacuum cleaner and made to ride in the trunk of Josie’s car (Ishiguro 2021, pp. 145, 174). In the scene in which Klara, Rick, and his mother meet up with Mr Vance in front of the theatre, this prejudice becomes explicit, tied to a discourse of parasitic invasion commonly used in the popular right-wing media against migrant communities (see Musolff 2016; Arcimaviciene and Baglama, 2018). As the woman outside the theatre puts this, ‘These are sought-after seats [...] They shouldn’t be taken by machines. [...] First they take the jobs. Then they take the seats at the theatre’ (Ishiguro 2021, p. 242). Here, Klara’s status as a machine within this space is figured as an unlawful incursion on citizens’ rights, these calculated precisely in relation to an agreed social prioritisation of biological humanity.

The questions that Mrs. Arthur poses to Klara regarding the meaning of the ‘human heart’ and whether it exists as something more than ‘an organ’, which ‘makes each of us special and individual’ (Ishiguro 2021, p. 218), should in this context be read not simply in relation to Klara’s position as robotic substitute for Josie, but more centrally as a critical comment on poetic humanist understandings of the subject as fundamentally immaterial, their meaning located outside or beyond the body, in the realm of transcendental reason or spirit. Rather than endorsing such understandings, the novel instead affirms humanity’s fundamental condition as embodied matter. It does this in three ways: firstly, by approaching subjectivity itself (and the narrative voice with it) through the position of a posthuman robot; secondly, by drawing links between the robotic and the human (for example, Josie is said to have a ‘complex’ but ultimately ‘limited’ human heart (Ishiguro 2021, p. 219)); and thirdly, by recognising with the ending the inevitable erasure of this posthuman voice through a process of material

decomposition. In the novel's terms, Klara will experience a 'slow fade' (Ishiguro 2021, p. 298) as she sits abandoned in the rubbish dump; her rusting hardware eventually obstructing her processing capacities. Recalling the emphasis within posthumanist theory on materiality precisely as a clue to the subject's fundamental interconnectedness, as the body (again) brings to bear '*what the human shares with everything it is not: a bringing out of its inclusion in matter*' (Massumi 2002, p. 128), there is a sense here whereby this ending reinforces Klara's place within a larger post-Anthropocene ecosystem, binding the human, the robotic, and nature as a complex community.

### **Wasted Lives and Redundant Communities**

Zygmunt Bauman's writing on 'liquid modernity' helps to explain this representation's materialist conception, even as it also positions the novel in relation to a larger political economy of instantaneity and obsolescence. Thus, Klara's status as a posthuman robot and the fact that she is left to run out of power in a forgotten scrapyards in both cases reinforces what Bauman sees as a 'great transformation' in the experience of contemporary life (Bauman 2000, p. 121), one in which the meaning becomes at once increasingly affective or sensational – measured in relation to momentary intensities and immediate sensations (Bauman 2000, p. 124) – and at the same time transient and dispensable – indifferent to long-term durability or communal solidarity. As Bauman puts it, 'It is Bill Gates-style capacity to shorten the timespan of durability, [...] to dispose of things lightly in order to clear the site for other things similarly transient and similarly meant to be instantly used up, that is nowadays the privilege of the top people and which makes them the top people they are' (Bauman 2000, p. 126). In other words, for Bauman, modernity's 'liquidity' or 'instantaneity' sees it pursuing a politics of obsolescence, which involves readily dispensing with the old in favour of the new (Bauman

2000, p. 125-129). In Bauman's 2003 publication, *Wasted Lives*, he further expands on this understanding to consider its socio-economic implications for disenfranchised minority communities, noting how such populations themselves becomes the disposable objects of this society, 'used-up' as expendable labour in a 'disembodied' capitalist system (Bauman 2003, pp. 5-6, and 2000, p. 121). As he puts it,

The production of "human waste", or more correctly wasted humans (the "excessive" and "redundant", that is the population of those who either could not or were not wished to be recognized or allowed to stay), is an inevitable outcome of modernization, and an inseparable accompaniment of modernity. It is an inescapable side-effect of *order-building* [...] and of *economic progress*. (Bauman 2003, p. 5, italics in the original)

In other words, within this liquid modern political-economic system, excess labour itself becomes the material 'waste' disqualified from recognised humanity, dispensed with precisely in the name of biopolitical efficiency.

Klara's final abandonment in the novel reaffirms this analysis in no uncertain terms, likewise positioning her ironically, as a defunct model easily replaced and forgotten. What is especially interesting about this positioning in light of the pandemic, is how this reflects not only on Klara, but also Josie, herself a figure of pandemic-like near-death illness, but one for whom the nominal status of human allows her a gesture of pity and compassion denied to Klara by their larger society. Indeed, Josie is allowed to be seen differently both from Klara *and* Rick in so far as she is granted the status of being 'lifted,' and it is this notional uniqueness which facilitates her special treatment as a focus of care and community support. Yet in situating her separately here – as socially superior and therefore more deserving of attention – the novel makes clear this society's negligence of its other minority populations, particularly in a time

wherein sickness and unemployment have become ubiquitous social problems. Within this context, the novel suggests, to prize uniqueness is effectively to forget community and solidarity: in other words, to ignore larger caring responsibilities for society's most vulnerable.

Towards the start of the novel, Josie plays a game wherein 'the characters continually died in car accidents' (Ishiguro 2021, p. 91), which provokes an appalled reaction from her mother: 'Why would you play a game like that, Josie?' (Ishiguro 2021, p. 91). Defending herself in response, Josie reflects, 'It's just the way the game is set up, Mom. You get more and more of your people in the superbuss, but if you haven't figured out the routes, you can lose all your best people in a crash' (Ishiguro 2021, p. 91). While this reflection is positioned merely as an aside in the novel, the game otherwise irrelevant to the plot and storyline, nevertheless the scenario described arguably articulates the text's final assessment of right-wing Covid-19 policies, wherein these too involve a game of risk without any determined safe route, a politics of chance which ignores any clear sense of social obligation. With Klara ultimately left aside to rust in the scrapyards, and Rick fending for himself in an increasingly fractured country, Josie's own elite flourishing appears here not as success but merely social disregard, an implicit condemnation of humanist thinking within a now posthuman world.

The implications of this ending for novel's larger post-pandemic vision suggest a nod to a still more precarious future soon to come, wherein, as the world gradually begins to exit lockdown and to loosen existing safeguarding regulations, ideas of community continue to shift towards disregard and individualism. Indeed, rather than applauding the various social safety-nets set in place during the pandemic period, which might include government investments in vaccine trials, furlough programmes, stimulus packages, volunteering incentives, and educational programmes, what lies at the heart of this novel is an attention to the failures within contemporary social and political thinking to take into account the wellbeing of disadvantaged populations at a more systemic level and the larger effect this has had on community

experiences. While perhaps there is still hope present in the novel's vision of Josie's miraculous recovery, and indeed perhaps even in the fact that she no longer needs Klara to provide her company, when considered as a larger whole, the novel is despairing about the future that awaits us, where voices like that of Klara and Rick remain distinctly passed over. If things are to improve, the text suggests, the posthuman will need more properly to come into our vision.

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<sup>i</sup> These technologies’ costliness, and their consequent inaccessibility to all but the most elite, speaks the novel’s anxieties regarding socio-economic division. As Emba reflects, ‘If the benefits of human enhancement accrue only to the upper classes, it seems likely that inequality will be entrenched in ways deeper than just wealth, fundamentally challenging our egalitarian ideals’ (Emba 2016, np). Certainly, such fears are apparent in the wealth distinctions the novel draws between Josie and Rick, where the former’s ‘lifted’ status emerges as aligned to her relative socio-economic privilege.

<sup>ii</sup> It bears noting how Jean-Luc Nancy’s critical reinterpretation of Heidegger’s existentialism to focus on the concept of *mitsein* (being-with) can also be placed in dialogue with the posthuman here as foregrounding the constitutive role of relationality. As Marie-Eve Morin (2009) explains, ‘For Nancy, [...] Being is always already the plurality of articulated beings, which already themselves make sense, and which can, only because of this original and intrinsic articulation, come to be signified’ (p. 44). Indeed, ‘for Nancy, singular being is always a corporeal being, a place of existence. [...] A body is impenetrable, but it is not isolated or absolved’ (p. 45). In this way, Nancy’s *mitsein* shares with posthumanism a similar focus on embodiment and interdependency, likewise seemingly underpinning Klara’s distinctly relational approach to community. A special thanks to Peter Ely for drawing my attention to this.

<sup>iii</sup> It is worth recognising how the questions the novel raises both about AI technologies and pandemic era community are brought together through recent innovations around robot-technology similar to those imagined in the novel, designed precisely as a way of mitigating loneliness during Covid-19. See Odekerken-Schröder *et al.* (2020) and DeFalco (2020).

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<sup>iv</sup> For some analyses of these types of campaigns, see Buckland, R. (2020); Carlsen, et al. (2020); Lachance, E. (2020); Mudera, et al. (2021); Trautwein, S. (2020).

<sup>v</sup> Some interesting studies on this include Flannery, H. et al. (2021); Crawley, E. (2020); Wind T. R. (2020).