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敘述「不重要」的人類世：石黑一雄《別讓我走》中的時  
間與人類滅絕

Narrating a “Negligible” Anthropocene: Time and Human  
Extinction in Kazuo Ishiguro’s *Never Let Me Go*

李寧

Ning Lee

指導教授：廖咸浩 博士

Advisor: Hsien-hao Liao, Ph.D.

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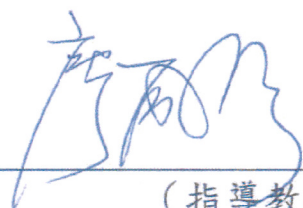
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*Never Let Me Go*

本論文係李寧君（R07122025）在國立臺灣大學外國語文學系完成之碩士學位論文，於民國 111 年 8 月 30 日承下列考試委員審查通過及口試及格，特此證明

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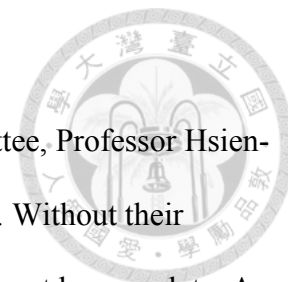


（指導教授）

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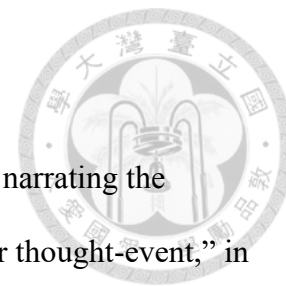


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## Abstract



This thesis explores the contemporary fictional engagements in narrating the impending human extinction as what Claire Colebrook calls, a “broader thought-event,” in the Anthropocene. The engagements can be particularly perceived in how contemporary fiction has begun to display a self-reflexive, epochal awareness, one that resists the “grand” notion of the human while taking on a “thick” and “deep” imaginary of humanity’s enmeshed status in the new epoch. Yet as the thesis would like to argue, the Anthropocene now also requires an “indifferent” mode of narrating that prompts us to rethink the significance of human existence on Earth. Building upon Colebrook’s notion of “indifference,” which reconceptualizes “difference” as destructive of intrinsic distinctions, the indifferent turn calls for the need to story human extinction as an opening to non-anthropocentric differences. It also suggests that the way to carry out such a storying is to first embrace other other-than-human times. Once we reconstrue time not in a human-centric sense, we can narrate our death no longer in terms of human fragility but in terms of a universal communion with the nonhuman. This thesis ultimately shows how Kazuo Ishiguro’s *Never Let Me Go* (2005) serves as an unexpected yet powerful example of engaging in such an indifferent turn by weaving together the notion of stratigraphic time, death-as-counter-actualization, and rubbish ecology. Through the narration of a human clone named Kathy H., the novel demonstrates the need of becoming counter-anthropocentric, or in Ishiguro’s word, “negligible,” in the Anthropocene. In doing so, it challenges our all-too-significant narrative preoccupation with human extinction today.

Keyword: Kazuo Ishiguro, *Never Let Me Go*, the Anthropocene, human extinction, indifference, stratigraphic time, death, counter-actualization, Deleuze, rubbish theory

## 摘要



本篇論文探討當代小說如何敘述人類滅絕在人類世下作為克萊兒·寇布克所稱的「更廣大的思維事件」。這樣的敘述尤可見於當代小說開始展現一種自我反射性的時代意識，不僅抗拒「宏偉」的人類概念，更承擔起人類於新世紀糾纏存在的「粗」及「深」的想像。然而，本論文主張即將迎來的人類世同時傳喚我們採取一種「存於差異」的敘述模式。基於寇布克「存於差異」的理論，本論文闡述這種敘述模式如何重新詮釋「差異」中的內建差別性，並視人類滅絕為一種去人類中心差異性的開放，進一步迫使我們重新思考人類存在在地球上的意義。而這樣的敘述轉向首先必須要接受其他非人類的時間。一旦能以非人類中心主義重新理解時間性，死亡的敘述將從基於人類的脆弱性，轉而基於一種與非人類普世的共有性。本論文呈現石黑一雄的《別讓我走》如何作為這種「存於差異」敘述轉向的一個意外但強而有力的例子。結合地層時間、死亡為反實現化作用以及垃圾生態學，《別讓我走》展示了人類世下成為「不重要」——意即反人類中心——的需求。藉由克隆人旁白的揭示，小說重新檢視當今人類面對人類世下的自身存在，更挑戰對於人類滅絕過度重要的敘述關注。

關鍵字：石黑一雄、《別讓我走》、人類世、人類滅絕、存於差異、地層時間、死亡、反實現化作用、德勒茲、垃圾理論

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## Introduction

### The Human Question



In the fourth chapter of *On the Origin of Species* (1859) titled “Natural Selection,” Charles Darwin makes a passionate plea for the intrinsic role extinction plays in his theory of evolution. As he writes,

The extinction of species and of whole groups of species, which has played so conspicuous a part in the history of the organic world, almost inevitably follows on the principle of natural selection; for old forms will be supplanted by new and improved forms. (475)

Extinction, for Darwin, has been an inevitable and contingent occurrence in natural history. It contributes to the thriving of the ecosystem in fostering species selection and improvement, during which “old and less-improved forms” will gradually be replaced with “new and improved forms.” Rather than impede, this process opens “the [species’] capacity to extract for what it needs for its ongoing existence” (Grosz 76), and thus marks not the end but the progressive continuation of life. Yet there is only one catch: extinction in Darwin’s account seems to be a matter of *other* species that takes place out there in nature. As if championing human exceptionalism, it “preclude[s] any questioning of humanity’s right to life” (Colebrook, *Death of the PostHuman* 140). The humans are instead attributed with a certain sense of survival in the world as the unquestionably “new and improved form,” where its own extinction appears to be out of view.

The Darwinian extinction bequeaths us a potent idea of evolution based on natural selection dominant in the fields of both science and culture—leading to Herbert Spencer’s “survival of the fittest” and social Darwinism typical of modernity. However, it seems that Darwin was not always assured of the corollary of extinction as well as the humans’

exceptional status in relation to extinction (Beer 327). In fact, his late autobiography reveals an entirely dissimilar view from the *Origin*, in which not only is extinction catastrophic but humanity is also “doomed” to it:

Believing as I do that man in the distant future will be a far more perfect creature than he now is, it is an intolerable thought that he and all other sentient beings are doomed to complete annihilation after such long-continued slow progress. (*Autobiographies* 111)

What Darwin alludes to as the progress of “complete annihilation” is a mid-nineteenth-century apocalyptic vision derived from Sir William Thomson’s theory of thermal diffusion.<sup>1</sup> Thomson’s theory argues that the Earth in the distant future would eventually become too frigid for any species to live. Adhering to Thomson’s view, Darwin in his autobiography ruminates on a disastrously end-of-the-world prospect brought about by the dying sun, in which the meaning of extinction is changed into total extermination. The “intolerable thought” for him is that the humans will also share the fate of such an extinction with “all other sentient beings.” On this account, the “improved” mankind turns out to be no different from “the less-improved forms” to be eliminated. In an unexpected turn from the *Origin*’s cheery optimism flattering the humans’ exceptional status, Darwin here compels us to recognize the possibility of human extinction, though unbearably, that we humans might not always be here and live forever.

Almost two centuries have passed since Darwin wrote his autobiography. Human extinction, far from being a distant thought in Darwin’s time, has now become an imminent reality. “The twenty-first century,” as Claire Colebrook clearly claims, “is at one and the

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<sup>1</sup> Before the discovery of radioactivity, the age of the Earth as infinite or not has become a geological paradox in the nineteenth century (Stacey 13155). Following Hermann von Helmholtz’ energy theory, Thomson argues against the popular geological assumption of the Earth’s infinite age and proposes that the Earth would have reached its end after twenty million years due to the gravitational collapse of sun. On a more detailed review of Thomson’s theory of the cooling sun, see Frank D. Stacey’s “Kelvin’s age of the Earth paradox revisited” (2000).



same time marked by a sense of impending human extinction” (“Extinction” 150). A glance at the recently the-end-of-the-human trend can attest to Colebrook’s claim. Apocalyptic films, such as *The Day After Tomorrow* (2004), *2012* (2009), and *Don’t Look up* (2021), became invariably blockbusters. Speculative fiction like Margaret Atwood’s *MaddAddam* trilogy (2003, 2009, 2013), Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road* (2006), and Colson Whitehead’s *Zone One* (2011)—all meditating on the collapse of human civilization—turn out to be critics’ favorites. Mass media also tends to refer to human extinction with provocative headlines like “Would Human Extinction Be a Tragedy?”, “Humans Are Doomed to Go Extinct”, “Will Humans Survive the Sixth Great Extinction?”.<sup>2</sup> Not to mention the outbreak of Covid-19 toward the end of 2020 having now wiped out millions of human beings on Earth.<sup>3</sup>

The question of why human extinction becomes more than ever imminent in the contemporary world then arises. There is a critical consensus that one of the key reasons lies in the growing recognition of the more-than-ever-expansive, anthropogenic impacts on Earth that have pronounced a new geological epoch called “the Anthropocene.” Referring to as the epoch where humanity comes to constitute “a major geological force,” the Anthropocene is introduced by atmospheric chemist Paul Crutzen and biologist Eugene Stoermer in the early 2000s as a successor to the Holocene, the warm period of the past ten to twelve thousand years (17-18).<sup>4</sup> It marks the unprecedented pervasiveness of human activity, which has altered the planet irrevocably, resulting in severe consequences such as climate change,

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<sup>2</sup> See Todd May’s “Would Human Extinction Be a Tragedy?” (2018) in *The New York Times*, Henry Gee’s “Humans Are Doomed to Go Extinct” (2021) in *Scientific American*, and Nadia Drake’s “Will Humans Survive the Sixth Great Extinction?” (2015) in *National Geographic*.

<sup>3</sup> According to the Coronavirus Research Center in John Hopkins University, the number of worldwide death due to Covid-19 has reached over six million by 2022. For the exact and up-to-date number, see <https://coronavirus.jhu.edu>.

<sup>4</sup> As Crutzen calls forth in the famous *Nature* article titled “The Geology of Mankind,” “For the past three centuries, the effects of the humans on the global environment have escalated. Because of these anthropogenic emissions of carbon dioxide, global climate may depart significantly from natural behaviour for many millennia to come. It seems appropriate to assign the term “Anthropocene” to the present, . . . human-dominated, geological epoch, supplementing the Holocene—the warm period of the past 10 –12 millennia” (23).

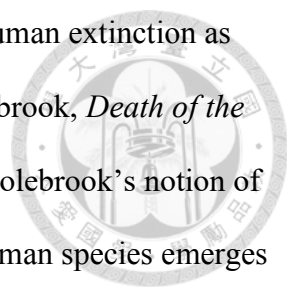
global warming, sea-level rising, nuclear pollution, bio-diversity crisis, to name but a few.<sup>5</sup> What comes into view is, as Dipesh Chakrabarty has famously argued, “the collapse of the age-old humanist distinction between human history and natural history” (“The Climate” 201). Yet while this collapse signals the becoming geological of human force, it also simultaneously implicates humanity in what he has done to the planet. The Anthropocene spells out not only the epoch of the humans but, more terrifyingly, the humans’ self-invoked end in the increasingly inhospitable world.

In a significant departure from Darwin’s nature-induced apocalyptic prospect, human extinction appearing on the horizon today becomes inherently human-induced. The idea that the humans need to act differently upon its impending extinction has thus received much attention in recent years. While it is the humans’ collective activity that is hastening the demise of the human species, the imperative seems to become the duty of individuals by changing our lifestyles. Nonetheless, such an imperative turns out to be increasingly more escapist than actually engaging. Timothy Clark has criticized how advocacies for alternative human actions at best offer only “romantic” comforts for “targeting *personal* attitudes” (*The Cambridge Introduction* 24). Chakrabarty also warns that the moment human responsibility is evoked, it rehearses a “homocentric[ism]” that can easily reinvoke human exceptionalism (“The Human Condition” 160).<sup>6</sup> Calling upon the humans to act in response to our extinction more often than not ends up either catering to a cozy present or affirming human power, and in both cases, evades the actual end of the humans.

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<sup>5</sup> The bio-diversity crisis acknowledged in the Anthropocene is now famously referred to as “the sixth extinction”. Popularized by Elizabeth Kolbert’s Pulitzer Prize–winning book, *The Sixth Extinction: An Unnatural History* (2014), the sixth extinction marks the soaring rates of species extinction on Earth as a consequence of anthropogenic activity in recent decades, such as habitat destruction, deforestation, pollution, and so on.

<sup>6</sup> Here, Chakrabarty is particularly referring to climate change and its impact on human condition. As he explicates, “the moment we say ‘we’ should do something to prevent dangerous climate change, we raise questions about damages, costs, and responsibility, and we read what I have called *homo* back into the word *anthropos* as used in the expressions ‘anthropogenic’ or ‘the Anthropocene’ (“The Human Condition” 160). The following offers a more elaborated discussion on the distinction between the *homo* and the *anthropos*.



A concurrent shift of critical attention to think of the looming human extinction as what Colebrook calls, “a broader thought-event,” timely emerges (Colebrook, *Death of the PostHuman* 10). Departing from the calling for human counteraction, Colebrook’s notion of “thought-event” demands that we imagine “a deep time in which the human species emerges and withers away and a finite space in which ‘we’ are now all joined in a tragedy of the commons” (Colebrook, *Death of the PostHuman* 10). Such an imaginary by no means designates a futile fantasy of the humans’ annihilation in the new, hostile world. Rather, it urges us to rethink the significance of human existences on Earth in the Anthropocene. In other words, the imminent human extinction, rather than ushering the humans in non-being, introduces a new sense of being: that the humans are now required to *be* different within the large, spatio-temporal cataclysm called forth by the new epoch.

Indeed, looking into contemporary criticism of human extinction, critics have been avidly arguing how extinction as a “broader thought-event” comes to reconfigure the humans’ ontological condition. On the one hand, there is a new universalist view that calls attention to the dismantled “boundary conditions” of human existence as a collective species (Heise 221). Particularly promoted by Chakrabarty, this view calls for the need to dwell on humans beyond the rigid, *homo-anthropos* binary. According to Chakrabarty, the Anthropocene now reveals that we humans are caught in a tension between two kinds of conceptualization: the Latin *homo* and the Greek *anthropos* (“The Human Condition” 159). *Homo*, or in Chakrabarty’s words, “the human-human,” describes the traditional, humanist notion of mankind as an individual of reason who observes, acts, and interprets; *anthropos*, or “the nonhuman-human,” depicts the ontic existence of the humans as a posthuman, geohistorical force (“Postcolonial Studies” 11-12). While the humans now come to identify ourselves as the *anthropos* for our aggregate, geological force in the new epoch, it is also

undeniable that the Anthropocene is the result of global capitalism enacted by only a small group of *homos*.<sup>7</sup>

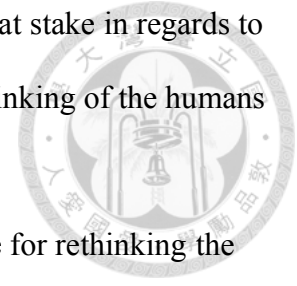
Yet for Chakrabarty, instead of resolving the *homo-anthropos* tension, the coming of human extinction demands a new universalist understanding that contemplates humanity as both *homos* and *anthropos*. Such an understanding urges us to acknowledge that “[h]umans, humans as a species, and humans as the makers of the Anthropocene are three distinct categories,” each with their own mode of narratives and experiences (Chakrabarty, “The Human Condition” 180). The new universalism neither reasserts humanism nor equates the *anthropo* with the *homo*, but works toward “an awareness that [...] speaking about the human species, humanity, humanness, or the Anthropocene requires a patient and meticulous process of assembly” (Heise 220). It implores us to recognize the complex implications underlying the humans as a universal “we” in the Anthropocene.

Following the new universalist view, extinction scholar Thom van Dooren attends to how human extinction, far from closing down, “holds open space in the world for other living beings” (5). In *Learning to Die in the Anthropocene* (2015), Roy Scranton likewise asserts that to die in the Anthropocene is “to learn to see not just with Western eyes but with Islamic eyes and Inuit eyes, not just with human eyes but with golden-cheeked warbler eyes, coho salmon eyes, and polar bear eyes” (8). In a similar vein, Ursula K. Heise claims that extinction urges us to think of “forms of multispecies justice and multispecies cosmopolitanism” (6), which “construct versions of the human in a careful and pains-taking,

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<sup>7</sup> Noting the role capitalism playing in the Anthropocene, Chakrabarty warns against a “negative universalism” that highlights the difficulty of reading the humans as a collective we. As he puts forward, “Why should one include the poor of the world—whose carbon footprint is small anyway—by use of such all-inclusive terms as species or mankind when the blame for the current crisis should be squarely laid at the door of the rich nations in the first place and of the richer classes in the poorer ones” (“The Climate” 216)? There is thus an advocacy for terms like “Capitolocene” and “Plantationocene” as the more appropriate terms than the Anthropocene. Rob Nixon makes a similar point in relating the Anthropocene to what he calls “slow violence”—the gradual, insidious damage to the environments in particularly the global South as a result of globalization and colonialism exerted by a small group of the humans, often the white, civilized male in the global North. On slow violence, see Nixon’s *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (2011).

cross-cultural process of assembly” (18). For the above critics, what is at stake in regards to human extinction is not human life, but the all-too-inclusive species-thinking of the humans and our failure to account for alterities and diversities.



However, while the new universalist view offers a crucial move for rethinking the human condition beyond species-centered perspective, it stops short of re-imposing the human subject in the Anthropocene. Despite denouncing human exceptionalism, it still centers on a humanist outlook of human extinction. Here, in contrast to the new universalist view, what also emerges is a more posthuman thinking that turns to consider how human extinction not just dismantles the boundary condition of the human species, but also brings forth the possibility of the humans thriving toward a new *anthropos*. Whereas the new universalist view propels us to recognize the humans as both *homos* and *anthropos* upon extinction, the posthuman thinking more compellingly calls attention to the humans' entanglement within a myriad of other other-than-human forces in the larger nonhuman world as the new *anthropos*.

One of the key thinkers conducive to such a posthuman thinking of the human condition is Bruno Latour. Drawing on his actor-network theory (ANT), Latour has implicitly denounced the position of the *homo*, claiming that the long-held subjectivity having secured the *homo*'s self-possessed position no longer holds water in the Anthropocene. The Anthropocene instead has brought forth a reversed distribution of the subject and the object that unsettles the *homo*'s agency.<sup>10</sup> As Latour states in the phenomenal essay “Agency at the

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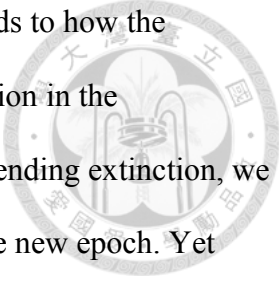
<sup>10</sup> Timothy Morton has also noted such distribution but argues for the dark power of objects derived from the philosophy of object-oriented ontology (OOO). He asserts that the Anthropocene we are living in consists of “hyperobjects” that “defies overview and resists understanding” (1). For Morton, “hyperobject” are “objects massively distributed in time and space that make us redefine what an object is,” such as global warming and Styrofoam (167). This object-oriented thought typifies the larger speculative realist thinking arisen in the last decades. Advocated by Graham Harman, Quentin Meillassoux, Iain Hamilton Grant, and Ray Brassier in 2007, speculative realism is a movement of continental philosophy that aims to argue against the traditional European thinking based on correlationism between mind and body. This speculative turn critiques the dangerous anthropocentrism in contemporary thinking while proposing alternative thinking, most famously Meillassoux's mathematical philosophy in his *After Finitude: An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency* (2008). On speculative realism, see Graham Harman's *Speculative Realism: An Introduction* (2018), Steven Shaviro's *The*

Time of the Anthropocene,” “humans are no longer submitted to the diktats of objective nature, since what comes to them is also an intensively subjective form of action” (5). Confronted with nature’s counterpunch, we humans instead must begin to learn “to shift away from dreams of mastery as well as from the threat of being fully naturalized” and “to share agency with other subjects that have also lost their autonomy” (Latour, “Agency” 5). Latour here is advocating for an ontological revision that prompts us to accept the enmeshed status of the humans as the new *anthropos* in the immeasurable world we share with the nonhuman in the Anthropocene.

Human-extinction critics following Latour have thus probed into what condition of the humans as the new *anthropos* might entail. Earth scientist Jan Zalasiewicz, for instance, suggests us to reconsider how human extinction can induce a meditation of “becoming fossils” of the humans for future excavation in geological strata (3). Anthropocene expert Bronislaw Szerszynski likewise takes up the idea of human extinction as the “becoming mineral” of the humans, in which the humans will be “contemplated by the geologist-to-come” (Szerszynski 179–81). Ray Brassier further proposes a nonhuman understanding of absolute extinction which exterminates both the humans and human thought. In *Nihil Unbound: Enlightenment and Extinction* (2007), he asserts that “Extinction is not to be understood here as the termination of a biological species, but rather as that which *levels* the transcendence ascribed to the human” (224). Turning away from the transcendental, Brassier urges that the world is in fact “indifferent to our existence and oblivious to the ‘values’ and ‘meanings’ which we would drape over it in order to make it more hospitable” (xi). The above posthuman view attends to the negligence of not only the humans but also the thought of human extinction in the large nonhuman world.

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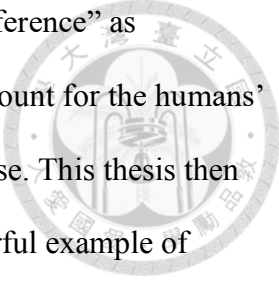
*Universe of Things: On Speculative Realism* (2014), Peter Gratton's *Speculative Realism: Problems and Prospects* (2014), and Leon Niemoczynski's *Speculative Realism: An Epitome* (2017).



My thesis aligns with the latter posthuman perspective that attends to how the impending human extinction comes to reconstrue our ontological condition in the Anthropocene as the new *anthropos*. It concurs that to confront our impending extinction, we humans need to first recognize our more posthuman ways of being in the new epoch. Yet instead of simply advocating for human's alternative being, the thesis further prompt to interrogate how such a thinking of the human condition upon extinction might be brought into literary studies. Particularly, how might the notion of human extinction as a “broader thought-event” also alter the way of narrating the humans in contemporary fiction? How can fictional narratives further offer mediation to humans' reconfigured, ontological condition in the Anthropocene? To what extent can any response to human extinction be storied without once again reaffirming human-centric significance?

Evoking these questions, the thesis does not dismiss how the posthuman thinking of the humans as new *anthropos* can also generate problems such as flat ontologies, where hierarchal differences become absent and are substituted by endless relationalities, and uncritical human insignificance. In fact, it aims to highlight how the above problems underlying the posthuman thinking of human extinction often risk recreating another “grand narrative” of the Anthropocene. Indeed, as the thesis contends, while contemporary fiction has begun to take on a “thick” and “deep” imaginary of the humans' enmeshed status as a new *anthropos* in the new epoch, there also emerges a danger of generating a grander narrative that reaffirms the hierarchal difference between the human and the nonhuman. Acknowledging such a danger, the thesis argues for the prompt need to seek another way of narrating human extinction that is not just thick and deep but “indifferent.”

This indifferent narrative turn calls for the need to story human extinction as not merely an occasion that reveals the humans' entangled relations with the nonhuman, but more importantly, an opening of our existence to non-anthropocentric differences. Building

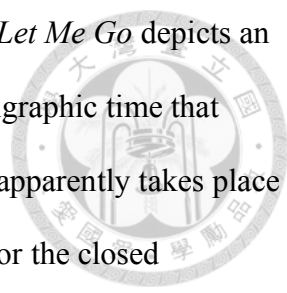


upon Colebrook's notion of "indifference," which reconceptualizes "difference" as destructive of intrinsic distinctions, the indifferent turn propels us to account for the humans' ontological relationship with time and death in a non-human-centric sense. This thesis then shows how Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go* (2005) serves as a powerful example of engaging in such turn by weaving the clones' untimely finitude with the notion of stratigraphic time, death-as-counter-actualization, and rubbish ecology. In fact, the novel serves as an allegory of the human condition in the Anthropocene that demonstrates the timely need of our becoming counter-anthropocentric, or in Ishiguro's word, "negligible." In doing so, it challenges our all-too-significant narrative preoccupation with human extinction today.

## Chapter Design

The thesis continues with Chapter One, "The 'Indifferent' Turn," which outlines Colebrook's theory of "indifference" and its connection with the Anthropocene and contemporary fiction. According to Colebrook, indifference is not lack of interest or sympathy, but should be understood as "in-difference," both different and not in a non-anthropocentric sense. While Colebrook makes a case that the Anthropocene demands a rethinking of the humans' epistemological value with such an indifference, the chapter argues how indifference needs to also serve as the humans' ontological condition upon extinction. It particularly asserts how our ontological relationship with time and death must follow such an indifference in the new epoch. By claiming so, the chapter shows Deleuze and Guattari's philosophy of stratigraphic time and death-as-counteractualization is intrinsic to understanding such an indifferent turn. It moreover asserts that contemporary fiction must also start to enact an indifferent narrative practice with the example of Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go*.





Chapter Two, “Kathy’s Stratigraphic Time,” argues how *Never Let Me Go* depicts an intensified imagination of the Anthropocene and experiments on a stratigraphic time that allows Kathy to question her untimely finitude. Such a revelation most apparently takes place in Kathy’s constant contemplation of ecological ruins while searching for the closed Hailsham, including ploughed earth, flood, and wasteland. Significantly, these meditations do not dwell on any single, human timescale of geology, but adopts a “prospective archaeology” (Mertens and Craps) that open to other minor, virtual, not-yet-realized times. Through these meditations, the chapter argues that Kathy’s narrative not only displays her imaginative capacity of re-stratifying her remaining time, but also registers a temporal tranquility. Such a tranquility in fact reveals Ishiguro’s criticism of anthropocentric “agitation” upon human finitude and his advocacy of the need to embrace different times indifferently.

Chapter Three, “Death and Becoming Rubbish,” argues how the stratigraphic time offers a way for not just Kathy but also other clones to reconsider death in an indifferent way as a “counter-actualizing” process. Looking into the philosophical trajectory of the relationship between time, death and rubbish theory in Anthropocene studies, this chapter claims that the clones affirm, but without subjecting to, death by recognizing it as *becoming rubbish*. At first glance, the clones as being disposed of after donating their organ seem to cast them in an unequal position to the human like rubbish. Yet with the clones developing an affinity with rubbish, such implicated relationship not only suggests the implausibility of managing the loss of life, but also the impossibility of maintaining a self-contained existence through fixing differences between what is intrinsic and extrinsic. Death, for the clones, is no longer identified as completion but “in-completion,” both complete and not in an indifferent way. And it is for this indifferent relationship with death the chapter finally argues how Ishiguro provides a glimpse of a liberating potentiality for the clones to imagine beyond their limited condition.

The thesis ends with the concluding chapter, “Toward a ‘Negligible’ Anthropocene.” It highlights how the indifferent narrative turn Ishiguro engages in not only raises our awareness of becoming “negligible,” but further helps enact the need to act as if human existence is negligible in the contemporary world. Briefly mentioned in *Never Let Me Go* to denote Tommy’s failure to create humanistic art, the notion of the negligible, however, also comes to underlie Kathy’s narrative practice that challenges the anthropocentrism constituted her limited condition. The thesis then suggests how, once we humans come to terms with our indifferent relationship with time and death, we might also begin to act in response to the impending human extinction in a negligible way, that is, as if we were one among other other-than-human modes of existence in different times. In our contemporary world haunted by the Anthropocene, we need to start “letting go” of our self-concerned existence, rather than clinging onto it.

## Chapter One

### The “Indifferent” Turn



It was perhaps ironic but nevertheless unsurprising that the Anthropocene has been framed as less a geoscientific concept than a grand narrative.<sup>11</sup> In fact, already from the very beginning when Crutzen and Stoermer first popularized the term in the *Global Change Newsletter* in 2000, the Anthropocene has been taken up for its grand notion inseparable from the humans and the single story we create. As Crutzen and Stoermer define in the seminal article, the Anthropocene is a new geological epoch where “[m]ankind’s activities gradually grew into a significant geological, morphological force” (17-8). Despite the epoch’s simultaneous implication of new human-nature relations, this short definition enlarges a more arresting storyline we humans have long told ourselves—about progress and modernity, about domination over nature. Since then, it has seemed impossible to account for the Anthropocene without once again weaving “[d]iscourses of science, religion, politics and philosophy which are supposed to explain the world in its totality, and to produce histories of the world as narratives of progress” (Wolfreys et al. 47). The Anthropocene becomes, after all, the tale of how we humans evolve “from hunter-gatherers to global geologic force” (Steffen et al. 741), of how we alter the Earth history by inscribing an Age of Human, and ultimately, of “how we got here” (Bonneuil 18).

Looking into literary studies, critics have lamented how the novel form has served as a complicit site that perpetuates the Anthropocene’s grand narrative. In fact, ever since its birth, the novel has been giving form to the nascence of anthropogenic impacts on the planet.

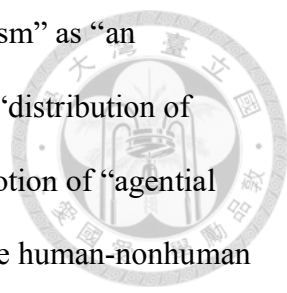
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<sup>11</sup> Christophe Bonneuil identifies four grand narratives of the Anthropocene: the naturalist narrative, which is the mainstream story of the humans becoming geological force and the grand narrative this chapter refers to; the post-nature narrative, which shares with ecomodernist values like the world without nature; the eco-catastrophist narrative, in which the world is depicted to be collapsed or at tipping points; and the eco-Marxist narrative, whose more familiar term is the Capitalocene. On the four grand narratives, see Bonneuil’s “The Geological Turn: Narratives of the Anthropocene” (2015).

As Amitav Ghosh has famously called out, “it was in exactly the period in which human activity was changing the earth’s atmosphere that the literary imagination became radically centered on the human” (66). The inherent human-centered scale of the novel, as shown in the human-focused characters and linear plotlines, moreover fails to address how “scientific knowledge of the spatiotemporal vastness and numerousness of the nonhuman world” begins to come into the fore “as a formal, representational, and finally existential problem” (McGurl, “The Posthuman Comedy” 537). As the narrating form of/for the humans, the novel has made itself incapable of representing, let alone grappling with, what is beyond the grandeur of human experience.

However, with the growing awareness of the imminent human extinction, a significant body of contemporary fiction has begun to challenge its formal limit. More and more novels seek to story the Anthropocene no longer via the long-held, self-complacent way of telling the grand story of the human, but through other deeper and thicker ways that account for the humans’ reconfigured, ontological condition. Instead of focusing on human-centered experiences, they tend to explore “the *deeply* entangled relations of humans and all other living beings and ecosystems” (Pooley 262, my emphasis) and the possibility of “mak[ing] kin in lines of inventive connection as a practice of learning to live and die well with each other in a *thick* present” (Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble* 1, my emphasis). For such novels, the Anthropocene, despite being an anthropogenic era, is by no means anthropocentric. It also entails the complex entanglements between the human and the nonhuman, which cannot be narrated as a unified framework but must be unfolded through “myriad unfinished configurations of places, times, matters, meanings” (Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble* 1).

This fictional turn to thicker and deeper modes of narrating is largely advocated by the vigorous new-materialist and posthuman(-feminist) thinking on how to tell the story of



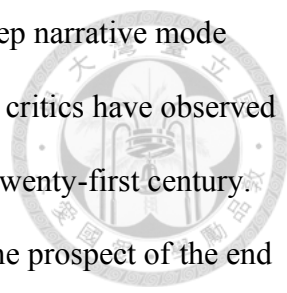
the Anthropocene. Karen Barad, for example, introduces “agential realism” as “an epistemological-ontological-ethical framework” that can encapsulate a “distribution of agency over human, nonhuman, and cyborgian forms” (26, 218). Her notion of “agential realism” contests the human-centered concept of agency constituting the human-nonhuman distinction while suggesting a “performative understanding of discursive practices” that challenges “the representationalist belief in the power of words to represent preexisting things” (133).<sup>12</sup> Bruno Latour’s “Gaiastory” or “geostory,” on the other hand, urges us to capture “all the former props and passive agents hav[ing] become active without, for that, being part of a giant plot written by some overseeing entity” (“Facing Gaia” 73-4).<sup>13</sup> For Latour, gaiastory calls for a recognition of the humans as “a matter of concern” in the Anthropocene, that is, as “Earth-bound” creatures, rather than remaining as Humans in the Holocene (*Facing Gaia* 248). Proposing the notion of Chthulucene, Donna Haraway also argues for the narrative need to “stay with the trouble,” to attend to how “[w]e are at stake to each other” within “ongoing multispecies stories and practices of becoming-with in times” and (*Staying with the Trouble* 55).<sup>14</sup> These responses highlight the multiple, heterogeneous relations at work in the Anthropocene that need to be told through a deeper and thicker narrative mode beyond human-centered perspective.

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<sup>12</sup> As Barad explicates in *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (2007), agential realism is “an epistemological-ontological-ethical framework that provides an understanding of the role of human *and* nonhuman, material *and* discursive, and natural *and* cultural factors in scientific and other social-material practices, thereby moving such considerations beyond the well-worn debates that pit constructivism against realism, agency against structure, and idealism against materialism” (26).

<sup>13</sup> Formulated by James Lovelock in the early 1970s, Gaia is first referred to as a hypothesis of “a biological cybernetic system able to homeostat the planet for an optimum physical and chemical state appropriate to its current biosphere” (579). Latour takes up Lovelock’s Gaia hypothesis and develops it into his own Gaia theory. Significantly resonated with Isabelle Stengers’ discourse of Gaia, Latour’s Gaia theory evokes a new contemplation of Earth system science and thinks of Earth as neither holistic nor stable especially with regards to the Anthropocene. On Latour’s Gaia theory, see Latour’s *Facing Gaia: Eight Lectures on the New Climatic Regime* (2017), “Why Gaia is not a God of Totality” (2017), “Agency at the Time of the Anthropocene” (2014), and also *Facing Gaia: Six Lectures on the Political Theology of Nature* (2013).

<sup>14</sup> Brought up by Haraway, the Chthulucene with its central imperative of “making kin” names the upcoming epoch as entangled with “myriad temporalities and spatialities and myriad intra-active entities-in-assemblages—including the more-than-human, other-than-human, inhuman, and human-as-humus” (Haraway, “Anthropocene, Capitalocene, Plantationocene, Chthulucene” 160).



Looking into contemporary fiction, nowhere is this thick and deep narrative mode more evident in the treatment of human extinction today. While literary critics have observed a rising fictional obsession with human extinction since the turn of the twenty-first century, they also find out what preoccupies contemporary novels is no longer the prospect of the end of the humans but the possibility of opening our self-contained existence to a thicker and deeper order of the world. Yet such a preoccupation does not illustrate other posthuman ways of living, but seeks to challenge the limits of the human imagination. It in fact resonates with what Mark McGurl promotes, “a new cultural geology,” which “position[s] culture in a time-frame large enough to crack open the carapace of human self-concern, exposing it to the idea, and maybe even the fact, of its external ontological preconditions, its ground” (380). In other words, if novels today have the means to account for human extinction in deeper and thicker ways, they do not do so by celebrating the humans’ more posthuman modes of being. Instead, they compel us to confront the boundary we humans have set for our own existence with other nonhuman modes of existence.

For its thick and deep narrative engagements in human extinction, contemporary fiction seems to display what Kate Marshall characterizes “an epochal shift” (524). According to Marshall, this shift illustrates the self-reflexivity of novels today as “new novels of a newly self-aware geological epoch” (524). Rather than simply representing the Anthropocene, novels today come to be a self-descriptive form that can mediate the new epoch. Nevertheless, as more and more novels seek to tell deep and thick stories of the humans in the upcoming epoch, we can also perceive the tendency of less confronting human extinction than courting a different and even better version of the Anthropocene. Warning against the “better-Anthropocene,” Colebrook argues that such a fictional tendency can easily reclaim the problematic, dualistic difference between the human and the nonhuman (“We

Have Always Been Post-Anthropocene”).<sup>15</sup> It would mean recreating another grand Anthropocene story, one consisting of “a non-negotiable difference” where “we’ [humans] recognize that human history is geologically significant after all, and that ‘we’ have made a definitive difference” (Colebrook, “We Have Always Been Post-Anthropocene”).

Considering the problematic potentiality of reaffirming dualities between the human and the nonhuman, this thesis argues that maybe it’s not enough to simply attend to the Anthropocene in a thick and deep narrative mode. Rather, we might begin to narrate both the humans and the Anthropocene in an “indifferent” way.

### Theorizing “Indifference” in the Anthropocene

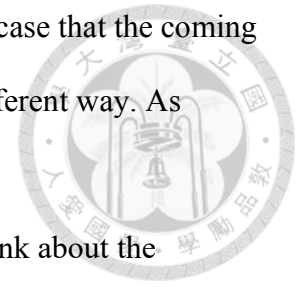
In her article, “We have never been Anthropocene,” Colebrook argues that the Anthropocene now demands the humans to “confront a *new form of indifference*.”<sup>16</sup> Reconceptualizing difference, Colebrook’s notion of “indifference” is not the opposite of difference or without difference. It should be understood more as “in-difference,” where the prefix “in” suggests both within and toward, and thus means both different and not different in a non-anthropocentric sense. As Colebrook elaborates, indifference “is destructive of inscribed difference,” “but *not* because there is something like a pure undifferentiated matter” (“We”). It does not simply erase distinctions but propels us to reconsider difference as what “comes into being and is always haunted by its dissolution” (Colebrook, “We”). And to adopt such an indifference is to refuse intrinsic boundaries or hierarchies built upon binary distinctions.

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<sup>15</sup> The “better Anthropocene” Colebrook criticized resonates with the notion of “the good Anthropocene.” First brought up by American environmental scientist Erle Ellis in the first decade of the 2000s and further set out in *An Ecomodernist Manifesto*, “the good Anthropocene” entails a techno-idealism that posits human agency as not destructive but benevolent to the planet in the Anthropocene. Yet the term has also stirred much debates in both environmental humanities and beyond for championing human species while downplaying nonhuman agency (Nixon 14). On a detailed critique of the good Anthropocene, see *Future Remains: A Cabinet of Curiosities for the Anthropocene* (2018) edited by Gregg Mitman, Marco Armiero, and Robert Emmett.

<sup>16</sup> The title of the article is hereafter referred to as “We.”

Theorizing her notion of indifference, Colebrook then makes a case that the coming of the Anthropocene demands us to comprehend ourselves in this indifferent way. As Colebrook elaborates:

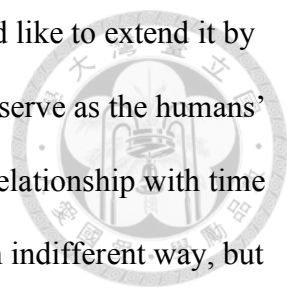


Certainly ‘man’ is too broad an agent if one wants to think about the difference the Anthropocene marks, but rather than more nuanced differences it might be better to note that any such difference [...] is achieved by way of indifference [...]. (“We”)

The passage here indicates that if thinking about indifference can warn us about the problematic dualism of human-nonhuman distinction, it becomes necessary for us to also prompt the question whether the Anthropocene is really the epoch that marks the differences we humans made on Earth. In fact, by thinking about indifference, we might then try not to reflect more on how humanity’s inscriptive impact on the planet can create a different geological order, rather, we should let go of the difference-making that can set us humans apart from the nonhuman.

Here, it is apparent that Colebrook’s notion of indifference allows us to rethink the humans’ epistemological value in the Anthropocene: to “think about an ‘essentially’ rogue or anarchic conception of life that is destructive of boundaries, distinctions and identifications” (Colebrook, “We”). In fact, we should even take indifference as “the milieu in which we live, always destroying and confusing inscribed differences,” one that also consists of “a complexity that will always exceed any of the differences we read into the world” (Colebrook, “We”). And once we stop thinking of the difference we humans can make on Earth, we might further understand human extinction not as equivalent of the end of the world, but “the continuation of ‘man,’ as the being who believes that he can finally be different, and transform himself to the point where in his relation to the planet he no longer makes a difference” (Colebrook, “We”).



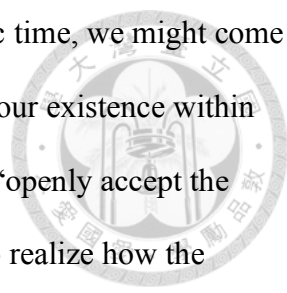


Yet while siding with Colebrook's indifference, the thesis would like to extend it by calling attention to how the notion of indifference need to also come to serve as the humans' ontological condition upon extinction, particularly with regards to our relationship with time and death. It argues not just how we might think of time and death in an indifferent way, but that our ontological relationship with time and death must also open to such an indifference in the Anthropocene. This is to suggest that the way to arrive at such an ontological indifference is to first accept an impersonal, non-anthropocentric notion of time. Once we reconstrue time not in a human-centric sense, we can grasp death no longer in terms of human fragility but in terms of a universal communion with the nonhuman. By arguing so, the thesis also shows Deleuze and Guattari's philosophy of stratigraphic time and death-as-counteractualization is intrinsic to understanding the indifferent turn that can help narrate our existence without reasserting anthropocentrism.

Originally as a geoscientific practice of reading earth layers, stratigraphy has been a vital way for mankind to discern and tell the broader, nonhuman history in our own sense of time. Yet for Deleuze and Guattari, such a notion of stratigraphy fails to notice the non-anthropocentric spatio-temporal scale it entails. Instead of illustrating the before-after logic of geological layering, stratigraphy should be more considered in its philosophical implication. The strata in fact encompass a layering in an above-below sense, where no stratum is "higher" or more perfect than another. They are "rhizomatic," pointing to a vertical movement of time always diverging and converging. As Deleuze and Guattari puts, "Philosophical time is thus a grandiose time of coexistence that does not exclude the before and after but superimposes them in a stratigraphic order" (*A Thousand Plateaus* 58-9).<sup>17</sup> On this account, we might begin to re-comprehend stratigraphic time as not an actualized, geological chronology, but a grand coexistence that always unfolds new pasts.

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<sup>17</sup> Deleuze and Guattari's *A Thousand Plateaus* (1987) is hereafter referred to as *ATP*.

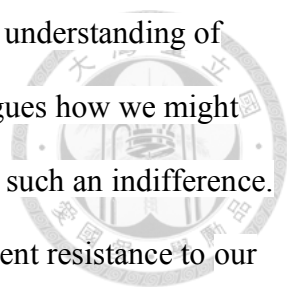


Following Deleuze's non-anthropocentric notion of stratigraphic time, we might come to think of how the Anthropocene more compellingly asks us to accept our existence within other nonhuman stratigraphy. Or as Elizabeth Grosz states, we need to "openly accept the rich virtualities and divergent resonances of the present" (38). This is to realize how the humans have been existing in close proximity with all other different times. And if we can grasp our existence within such a stratigraphic time, we might also reconstrue our death as no longer an actualized end but a "counter-actualizing" process that opens to new possibilities. According to Deleuze, counter-actualization not only describes the movement from the actual to the virtual, but also entails the intensifying of potentials by throwing oneself to other possibilities. In the case of death, it entails, on the one hand, actualizations where body parts fall part, and on the other hand, an impersonal sense of ongoing transformation reserved for further actualizations. It is always something unknown and to come, as Deleuze explicates, "neither present nor past, but always coming, the source of an incessant multiple adventure in persistent question" (*Difference and Repetition* 112).<sup>18</sup>

Rather than physical self-destruction, the Deleuzian understanding of death points to the liberating opening of the "I" to different possibilities in reenacting events. It consists of a process of eternal return, "not a cycle of death and rebirths," but "the passing away of sameness and the eternal return of multiple forms of difference" (Williams 123). In this view, death is always something unknown and to come: "neither present nor past, but always coming, the source of an incessant multiple adventure in persistent question" (Deleuze, *DR* 112). It "extend[s] a tendency's becoming beyond any of its constituted forms into a not yet realized future" (Colebrook, *Deleuze and the Meaning of Life* 122). In this view, the Deleuzian notion of death as counter-actualization renders a synthesis of time in the openness of future. It is not a negation of life or nonbeing but reveals an indifference of life.

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<sup>18</sup> Deleuze's *Difference and Repetition* (1994) is hereafter referred to as *DR*.



Connecting Colebrook's notion of indifference to the Deleuzian understanding of stratigraphic time and death-as-counter-actualization, the thesis then argues how we might also begin to narrate our ontological relationship with time and death in such an indifference. This "indifferent" narrative approach, I argue, can act as an always present resistance to our all-too-human-centric narrative preoccupation of human extinction. Instead of recounting the Anthropocene as the story of intrinsic differences we humans have made and will make, it calls attention to the need of narrating human extinction as an opening of our existence to a non-anthropocentric relationship with time and death. Challenging as it is, such an indifferent narrative mode can help us reconstrue human life as having been existing among other nonhuman, minor stratification. And if contemporary fiction can carry out such an indifferent way of narrating the Anthropocene, it might then truly arrive at what Marshall characterizes, "an epochal shift."

### **The Case of *Never Let Me Go***

Ever since *Never Let Me Go* was published in 2005, the novel has gained worldwide reputation. Not only has it been shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize, but it has also been translated into over thirty languages and adapted to a Hollywood film in 2010. *Never Let Me Go* has indisputably become one of the must-read novels in the canon of contemporary literature. Beginning with an explicit mentioning of its setting, "late 1990s, England," the novel depicts an alternative, late-twentieth-century world having undergone biogenetic breakthroughs, where clone-rearing for human organ donation becomes possible and ethically acceptable. Narrated by a dispassionate female clone Kathy H., who is around thirty and is about to enter the last stage of her life, the novel tells the story of a group of clones, referred to as "students," growing up in a humanist institution called Hailsham and being looked over by human guardians. After reaching adolescence, the "students" leave the school and follow

their destined path, where they first work as a “carer” and then as a “donor.” And after two to three donations, they would face their imminent “completion,” that is, death.

For the novel’s apparent adoption of in-vitro creation of human beings and its mild, melancholy tone, many critics have found *Never Let Me Go* highly resonant with Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World* (1931), which also illustrates a nightmarishly pain-free human society of genetic engineering and educational brainwashing. However, *Never Let Me Go* is more than a motivated pastiche. Whereas Huxley’s novel is full of scientific practices and ideologies, Ishiguro’s is “dearth of science” (Shaddox 449). As John Harrison puts, “Inevitably, it being set in an alternate Britain, in an alternate 1990s, this novel will be described as science fiction. But there’s no science here.” Rather, the scientific is substituted by the euphemistic, in which clones becomes “students,” organ transplantation becomes “donation,” and death becomes “completion.” And unlike Huxley’s physically-maintained characters, Ishiguro’s clones are imposed with a pre-shortened life while functioning as mere organ banks. They eventually have to face their bodily decrepitude and are doomed to premature death. Perhaps the biggest difference between *Brave New World* and *Never Let Me Go* lies in the fact that Ishiguro’s clones never rebel. Whereas Huxley offers a glimpse of revolution for the enslaved clones in his novel, Ishiguro forecloses any possibility of the clones’ rebellion in his alternate world, not even in any slightest thought (Christou 375).

Looking into Ishiguro’s lack of interest in science and insistence on the clones’ finitude, what can be perceived is in fact a surprising response to the Anthropocene preoccupation of human extinction that haunts our contemporary world. At first glance, *Never Let Me Go* seems to defamiliarize us from the notion of the Anthropocene. While the epigraph—“late 1990s, England”—indicates that the novel takes place in the end of the twentieth century, the novel resists any identification to the near past the reader would thought to have experienced. Not only is it “removed from any historical reality that we can

recognize” (Mullan 104), but it also characteristically displays “the scarcity of historical locators and specific temporal references” (Currie 93). Moreover, the reader would soon realize that the novel is set in an alternate world where “the post-war scientific breakthroughs were in biotechnology rather than nuclear physics” (Butcher 1300). The alternative setting seems to suggest a rather counterfactual imagination of the Anthropocene, as some geoscientists believe that the nuclear detonation since the Second World War generated crucial, stratigraphic marks indicative of the beginning of the Anthropocene.<sup>23</sup>

Yet as the thesis would like to suggest, *Never Let Me Go* depicts an intensified imagination of the Anthropocene. Though exploring the biotechnological promise of humanity’s continual existence in an alternate world, it simultaneously implies the humans’ ontological insecurity in response to the Anthropocene, which would mean facing our imminent extinction. As Kathy’s narrative unfolds, such an implication can be observed in Kathy’s constant contemplation of ecological ruins, ranging from ploughed earth to flooded wasteland. These ruins attest to how the biotechnological premise in the alternate world more compellingly bring about devastating impacts on the planet, where ecological pressures of overpopulation begin to accrue at the limit of Earth’s capacity. This Anthropocene reading of *Never Let Me Go* is further pronounced by Ishiguro himself. Although Ishiguro has never referred *Never Let Me Go* to the crisis of human extinction in the looming epoch, he has indirectly implied the connection between the two in multiple interviews. As he proclaims in one of the interviews, he is in fact exploring “a metaphor for the human condition, and for coming to terms with the fact that we’re not immortal, that we’re here for a limited time. There is a countdown” (“A Conversation” 215). While the novel portrays an alternate world

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<sup>23</sup> This defamiliarization can be understood from one of the designations of the Anthropocene’s starting date to the post-war era, where the drastic accumulation of nuclear waste is believed to be a decisive, stratigraphic evidence of the Anthropocene: “Superposed on GHG radiative forcing growth are time-series of anthropogenic radionuclide activities (14C and 239+240Pu) derived primarily from nuclear weapons testing, and providing robust independent stratigraphic markers for a mid-20th century onset for the Anthropocene” (Zalasiewicz et al. 211).

where the humans seem to be able to prolong their life and sustain their existence through endless organ transplantation, Ishiguro in his interviews made it clear that the portrayal aims to expose the other side of the coin, that is, the limitation of human condition. At the center of the novel is the fundamental question of human capacity in coming to terms with our own limit.

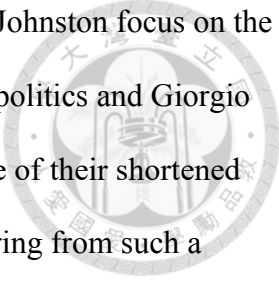
However, looking into the present criticism of *Never Let Me Go*—fruitful as it is—most of the readings only indirectly interrogate the novel with regards to the Anthropocene and human extinction. They either touch on the converging, anthropocentric logics underlying the Anthropocene, such as neoliberal-capitalist mode of production and imperial domination, or at most interpret the novel as an advocacy for more posthuman way of living. On the one hand, Maria Cristou, Chris Holmes, and Mark Seltzer have asserted how the clones' incapacity of contemplating beyond their death signifies the failure of neoliberal forms in our contemporary world.<sup>24</sup> Reading the novel in the context of world literature and global theory, Rebecca Walkowitz and Cynthia appeal to the novel's continued hold on the representation of the clones as being caught in the contradiction between mobility and immobility.<sup>25</sup> Robin B. H. Goh, Wen Goh, and Josie Gill moreover critiques on how the clone's limited condition depicts the global inequality confronted by the racial Other in Third World countries today.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> This reading includes Christou's meditation on the clones as non-actor working against the neoliberal individual, Seltzer on the pernicious effect of official institutionalization, and Holmes on limit thinking. See Christou's "Kazuo Ishiguro's Nonactors" (2020), Seltzer's *The Official World* (2016), Holmes' "Ishiguro at the Limit: The Corporation and the Novel" (2019). On neoliberalism and *Never Let Me Go*, see also Bruce Robbins' "Cruelty Is Bad: Banality and Proximity in 'Never Let Me Go'" (2007) and Whitehead's "Writing with Care: Kazuo Ishiguro's 'Never Let Me Go'" (2011).

<sup>25</sup> See Walkowitz's "Unimaginable Largeness: Kazuo Ishiguro, Translation, and the New World Literature" (2007) and Wong's *Kazuo Ishiguro* (2005).

<sup>26</sup> This is elaborated by Goh, who argues the novel serves as a type of "postclone-nial" narratives, playing out those concerns of the Third World body as the site of the discriminatory markings and power play of capitalism and technology" (50). On the topic of race and postcolonialism, see Wen Goh's "The Postclone-nial in Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go* and Amitav Ghosh's *The Calcutta Chromosome*: Science and the Body in the Asian Diaspora," Guo's "Human Cloning as the Other in Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go*" (2015), and Gill's "Written on the Face: Race and Expression in Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go*" (2021).



On the other hand, critics like Arne De Boever and Justin Omar Johnston focus on the novel's relation to Michel Foucault's notion of governmentality and biopolitics and Giorgio Agamben's notion of "bare life." They argue how the clones' acceptance of their shortened life urges us to achieve a more posthuman care and belonging.<sup>27</sup> Demurring from such a biopolitical reading, which can reconfirm a stable body politics based on a self-contained subject, Nancy Armstrong contends that we need to turn to "affect" to read the clones' condition.<sup>28</sup> She claims that the clones' bodily capacity of feeling and being felt, compared to the unfeeling humans, demonstrates the clones' potentiality of becoming more-than-human.<sup>29</sup> In a similar posthuman approach, Shameem Black calls attention to how the clones confront their imminent death through "an inhuman aesthetic" that highlights the inhumanness of the human and the untenable species-exceptionalism (786).

For the first reading, which interprets the clones as a human-equivalent bearer of the impact caused by dominant countries in the contemporary world, it at most alerts us of our dangerous self-complacency of living as humans in the Holocene. In the case of the second reading, while it offers us a glimpse of the novel's attempt to imagine beyond the limited human condition, it only concludes how the human clones, far from being "less than fully human," can be more-than-human (Ishiguro, *Never Let Me Go* 239). And in doing so, they inevitably draw another distinction between the human and the nonhuman. Drawing on while extending the second reading of *Never Let Me Go*, this thesis attempts to show how the novel

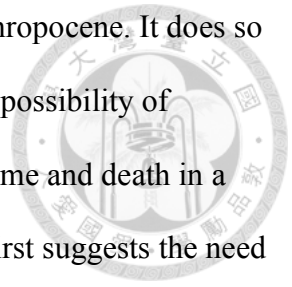
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<sup>27</sup> See Arne De Boever's *Narrative Care: Biopolitics and the Novel* (2014) and Justin Omar Johnston's *Posthuman Capital and Biotechnology in Contemporary Novels* (2019).

<sup>28</sup> As Nancy Armstrong claims, "Ishiguro does not leave us with only a sense of how the mission of biopower—that is, to maximize human life—goes terribly wrong, displaces disciplinary institutions, and produces death in the name of life. He also demonstrates that such instrumental reason observes the same limits as sympathetic identification, as his novel pushes beyond the usual critique of biopower to provide a glimpse of what it might be like to live without the misbegotten notion that being a self-contained subject is not the best or certainly the only way of being fully human" (458).

<sup>29</sup> See Armstrong's "The Affective Turn in Contemporary Fiction" (2014). On affect and *Never Let Me Go*, also see Lisa Fluet's "Immaterial Labors: Ishiguro, Class, and Affect" (2007), Matthew Eatough's "The Time that Remains: Organ Donation, Temporal Duration, and Bildung in Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go*," and Emily Horton's *Contemporary Crisis Fictions: Affect and Ethics in the Modern British Novel* (2014).

does not only reflect but challenge the human logics at work in the Anthropocene. It does so by arguing that the novel calls into question the all-too-anthropocentric possibility of achieving posthuman ways of “living” while demanding us to take on time and death in a non-anthropocentric sense. As the following chapter shows, the novel first suggests the need to accept a non-human-centric relationship with time through portraying Kathy’s “indifferent” stratification of her not-much-remaining time.





## Chapter Two

### Kathy's Stratigraphic Time



In August 2021, *Future Library*, an artwork created by the Scottish artist Katie Paterson, welcomed its eighth author, the Zimbabwean, Booker Prize-shortlisted writer Tsitsi Dangarembga. Joining previous acclaimed authors like Margaret Atwood and David Mitchell, Dangarembga contributed the manuscript of her newest work to the secured library room in Oslo. Yet like all other past contributions in the room, her work will not be disclosed or read for another hundred years. Beginning in 2014, Paterson's *Future Library* is a century-long project that aims to testify to the preservation of a thousand newly-planted forest trees around Oslo. Every year, it acquires a new manuscript and locks it up until 2114, at which point the planted trees will provide paper for manuscripts to be printed and leafed through by future readers. At the core of *Future Library*, as Paterson states, is “the environment” and “the interconnectedness of things, those living now and still to come,” which challenge “the present tendency to think in short bursts of time, making decisions only for us living now” (“The Artwork”). Inviting witnesses for environmental conservation while urging accommodations for long-term thinking, the artwork is as much an ecological intervention as it is a temporal one.

Paterson's *Future Library* underlies a sonorous ring with the recent turn to thinking of time in relation to the environment, which has significantly entered academic views upon the dawning recognition of a new geological epoch called the Anthropocene. Proposed by Eugene Stoermer and Paul Crutzen as the Holocene's successor, the Anthropocene not only once again draws human attention to the ethical concerns regarding our wreaking havoc on Earth, but also unprecedentedly demands us to think of human life at broader timescales (Clark 13). As Dipesh Chakrabarty has argued, “The time of human history—the pace at

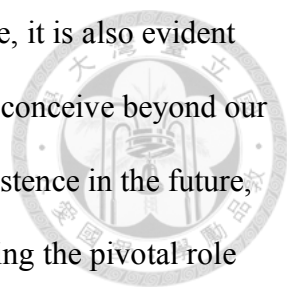
which we tell stories of individuals and institutions—has now collided with the timescales of two other histories, both deep time, the time of evolution of life on the planet, and geological time” (180). Less complacent than alerting, this chronological collapse implies that whereas humanity comes to undertake geological impacts, our humanly experienced time must now also be upscaled toward those deep, heterogeneous, and nonlinear forms of nonhuman time.

What appears to be enthralling about Paterson’s *Future Library*, nevertheless, lies not simply in its invocation of a larger temporal thinking in response to the new epoch. In fact, it takes on a much more critical challenge of “a kind of ‘prospective archaeology’” that propels us to further contemplate the upcoming epoch “as if” our existence would be readable after our extinction (Mertens and Craps 135). Think of what the Anthropocene entails: it names an anticipated timescale where the humans no longer exist but become barely discernible inscriptions in geological strata. It already posits a time beyond our existence that confronts us with our own capacity of imagining a proleptic throwback from a future without us. To undertake the “prospective archaeology” is then to imagine “a future in which our future has already become the past” (Mertens and Craps 135). Or as Richard Klein succinctly puts, “we need the future present tense” (83). Targeting readers a century later, in which not only we living in the present but even humanity as a whole might no longer exist, *Future Library* indeed displays the awareness of engaging with such an imaginative task.<sup>30</sup>

The question becomes why we need to take on the imagination of our future as past, given that it seems only to envision our end in the Anthropocene. According to Claire Colebrook, the underlying reason is that such an imagination, far from simply compelling a nonhuman vision of the humans’ end, invokes our impersonal grasping of temporality that calls our all-too-complacent and anthropocentric present into question. While the new

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<sup>30</sup> This is particularly pronounced by the project’s first contributor Margaret Atwood. As she frames, “[w]e really don’t know who’ll be reading it. [...] We don’t know what footnotes we will need” (“Into the woods”).



geological epoch indeed already posits a time absent of human existence, it is also evident how the living present has been structured by a consistent reluctance to conceive beyond our very same existence. The irony is that the more we imagine our non-existence in the future, the more we enlarge the significance of our being in the present as playing the pivotal role that can alter the planet’s future—albeit one without us. Yet, as Colebrook argues, thinking about the future without us as already taken place can in turn urge us to recognize how our present is not necessarily always linked to a certain anthropogenic future, but how “a thousand other temporalities existed alongside every now” (Colebrook, “A Grandiose Time of Coexistence” 453).

Indeed, the imagining of our future-as-past suggests how the progressive way of understanding our Anthropocene-anticipated present must also open to other stratigraphic time. In a similar invocation of “prospective archaeology,” Colebrook asserts that the new epoch now requires us to deploy a mode of “impersonal imaging” (*Death of the Posthuman* 27): we no longer simply “look at the earth” now but do so by imagining “as if, in our future absence, we will be readable as having been” (“We Have Always Been Post-Anthropocene”). This deployment of nonhuman imaging not only “abstract[s] [the Anthropocene] from the human eye” but more crucially compels a vision of our present as a past without the human sense (*Death of the Posthuman* 24). Instead of designating the present as an anthropocentric now, it “open[s] the thought of all the other ways in which inhuman timelines might stratify the present” (“A Grandiose Time of Coexistence” 449). As a geoscientific practice of reading earth layers, stratigraphy has been a vital way for mankind to discern the broader, nonhuman history in our own sense of time. With the arriving Anthropocene which urges us to imagine ourselves being read, we nevertheless should also learn to “intensify the geological stratification” for stratigraphy would be interpreted by nonhuman readers to come (Colebrook, “A Grandiose Time of Coexistence” 442).

Proposing the notion of the “stratigraphic Anthropocene” (11), Earth scientist Jan Zalasiewicz thus puts forward how we might attend to our stratigraphic evidences in the future not as part of human history but “a peculiarity of geological time, which is that, at heart, it is *simply* time—albeit in very large amounts” (124). As for the strata, which the humans use to demarcate the periodical shift, they are “just an interface in time, of no duration whatsoever—it is less than an instant—between one interval of time (which maybe millions of years long) and another” (124). This is to think of stratigraphic time as a large, “extraordinary” time not “synchronous” to human history but to Earth history itself. In this view, the Anthropocene should be reconceptualized as a “change to the Earth system rather than a change to the extent to which [we] are recognizing human influence” (Zalasiewicz 11).

Inviting as Zalasiewicz’s notion of “stratigraphic Anthropocene” is, it still hinges on a naturalized conceptualization of strata, which could inevitably reaffirm a distinction between the human and the nonhuman. It moreover *simply* subsumes human time under nonhuman one. What is apparent is that we need a more intensified thinking of stratigraphic time. And according to Colebrook, such a thinking is to think of the time of the strata as always “diverg[ing] into multiple and impossible [time]lines” (Colebrook, “A Grandiose Time of Coexistence” 443). On the contrary to the chronological, causal time lived by the individual, it delineates a continuous return of different times and urges us to think of one’s time as not one’s own (Colebrook, “A Grandiose Time of Coexistence” 453). Time, on this account, no longer unfolds toward an end and delineates an actualization of the past that we can grasp in the present. Rather, “each moment of time bears the potential for a sense of the whole of time; and this is a sense and a whole that is not our own” (Colebrook, “Stratigraphic Time, Women’s Time 14”).

For this anti-anthropocentric understanding of stratigraphic time, the past in turn should be reconsidered as an opening to multiple temporalities. The Anthropocene, in this

case, turns out to be not a radical actualization of our human past, as *our* past is never simply ours but unfolded with other other-than-human times. While the Anthropocene indeed inscribes a stratigraphic difference that we humans make, it more compellingly asks us “to be proximate with forces tending towards the collapse and proliferation of differences” (Colebrook, “A Grandiose Time of Coexistence” 443). In other words, we need to accept the nonhuman stratigraphy of the Anthropocene and “openly accept the rich virtualities and divergent resonances of the present” (Grosz 38).

This imagining of our future-as-past through nonhuman readers is significantly played out in Ishiguro’s *Never Let Me Go*. Narrated by a human clone Kathy H., who is aware that she will not exist at the time her narrative is read, the novel at first seems to be constitutive of a nostalgic recollection of Kathy’s past spent with her friends. Yet as the narrative unfolds, it turns out to be a continuous meditation on ecological ruins, ranging from over-ploughed earth to flooded wasteland. And for this posthumous imagination of anthropogenic traces, an impersonal time emerges and challenges the linear, human-centered time that confines Kathy and the clones. What is unleashed is a peculiar, stratigraphic temporality where different times converge and diverge. Such a stratigraphic time allows Kathy to re-stratify her limited present and further generates a significant “temporal tranquility” that calls for an “indifferent” thinking and narrating of the limited time of our existence.

### **In Search of Hailsham: Stratigraphic Anthropocene in *Never Let Me Go***

Time is probably one of the most distinctive yet disconcerting aspects of *Never Let Me Go*. At first glance, Kathy’s narrative seems to follow a carefully-contrived chronology. As the narrative unfolds though, this chronology would soon be continuously disrupted by occasions of temporal confusion. Such disruptions often make Kathy’s story difficult to follow, for the reader is never quite sure of the time accounted for but feel like always

meandering through the past (Lewis 205). In “Controlling Time: *Never Let Me Go*,” Mark Currie observes how the temporal disruption dominating Kathy’s narrative is constitutive of two particular paradoxes: “remembered forgetting” and “recollected anticipation” (95, 97). On the one hand, Kathy often refers to past acts of forgetting but those instances of forgetting would later to be always reminded. On the other hand, Kathy also tends to recollect how a certain future—now the past—was imagined before. In both cases, Kathy’s time of narration is constantly betrayed by the time of her narrated events, as if she resisted to continue progressing her story.<sup>31</sup>

Indeed, for Currie, the double temporal paradox, instead of enabling linear progression, “casts [the reader] into an uncertain middle, or a location in time that is uncertain about what did happen and what will happen” (103). In fact, it constitutes a significant “proleptic past perfect” tense structuring Kathy’s narrative. This “proleptic past perfect” tense involves neither the time of the narrated event nor the time of narration, but the time in the middle: the time “constituted by events that are posterior to the events being narrated, including acts of recollection that are posterior to the events being narrated and yet anterior to the time locus of our narrator” (Currie 94). On this account, as Currie continues to argue, the “proleptic past perfect” serves as a mechanism of “control of distance,” where Kathy can trap both herself and the reader in a state of forever “oscillation between a half-forgotten past and a falsely-anticipated future” (Currie 103). It functions as a kind of “coping strategies” for Kathy to escape from her destined fate but in a deluded way, as it merely stops her from coming to terms with the unjust reality of being a clone (Güngör 118).

In this view, Kathy’s narrative seems to be less an artful autobiography than a series of “inadequate attempts to make a story of herself” (Mullan 103). However, if this is the case,

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<sup>31</sup> The “remember forgetting” can be indicated from Kathy’s usage like “Or maybe I’m remembering it wrong (Ishiguro, *NLMG* 8), “Maybe I’m exaggerating it, but my memory is that [...]” (Ishiguro, *NLMG* 56). Examples of “recollected anticipation” include Kathy saying “Looking back, I can see how she must have realized” (Ishiguro, *NLMG* 75).

such a reading fails to recognize the non-anthropocentric time consciousness at work in Kathy's deployment of the proleptic past perfect. The back-and-forth temporality in fact displays a stratigraphic time which, far from suggesting her incapacity of thinking beyond her finitude, allows her to imagine other possibilities that opens her confined time to nonhuman modes of stratification. Despite appearing to be a nostalgic recollection, Kathy's narrative should also be read as a posthumous imagination of an Anthropocene archive of ecological ruins. Working as a carer and driving around the English countryside in the beginning of narrating the story, Kathy tells her reader how she constantly finds herself pursuing sights of closed Hailsham on the way:

Driving around the country now, I still see things that will remind me of Hailsham. I might pass the corner of a misty field, or see part of a large house in the distance as I come down the side of a valley, even a particular arrangement of poplar trees up on a hillside, and I'll think: "Maybe that's it! I've found it! This actually is Hailsham!" Then I see it's impossible and I go on driving, my thoughts drifting on elsewhere. (Ishiguro, *NLMG* 6)

Though Kathy never manages to find Hailsham itself, her narrative would soon reveal how, instead of looking for the beautiful environment Hailsham stands for in her memory, she often feels particularly drawn to bleak scenes of anthropogenic ruins. Once a clone-rearing institution that allows the humans to prolong their life and even epitomizes human exceptionalism, Hailsham now becomes reimagined as anthropogenic traces but without any human sense in other nonhuman future. Moreover, significantly, Kathy is not narrating to any human but to human clones in a future without her. As the repeated second-person address in her narrative suggests—"I don't know how it was where you were, but at Hailsham we had to have some form of medical almost every week" (Ishiguro, *NLMG* 13)—Kathy's targeted

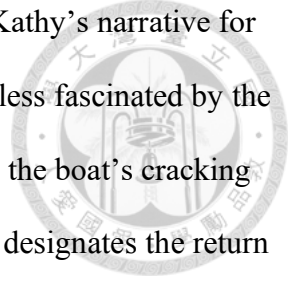
readers, the “you,” are assumed to be some other clones having stayed in similar rearing institutions like Hailsham.

Through the nonhuman imagination of Hailsham with anthropogenic traces, we can perceive an underlying stratigraphic time in Kathy’s narrative. The most striking episode of such an imagination surfaces when Kathy, Ruth, and Tommy travel out to the boat that is “stranded in the marshes” (Ishiguro, *NLMG* 197). The beached boat has been a popular topic circulating around the donors in recovery hospitals, and Ruth has been particularly keen to pay it a visit, despite her ailed body after having gone through her first donation. At Ruth’s request, Kathy agrees to take her and Tommy, who is also a donor at that time, to the boat. Arriving at the place, they come to see a desolate marshland:

The pale sky looked vast and you could see it reflected every so often in the patches of water breaking up the land. Not so long ago, the woods must have extended further, because you could see here and there ghostly dead trunks poking out of the soil, most of them broken off only a few feet up. And beyond the dead trunks, maybe sixty yards away, was the boat, sitting beached in the marshes under the weak sun. (Ishiguro, *NLMG* 224)

The open marshland is full of dead trunks and broken wood. Far from anything glamorous, the boat, like the marshland, is also bleached. As Kathy continues to observe, “its paint was cracking” and “the timber frames of the little cabin are crumbling away” (Ishiguro, *NLMG* 204). Yet rather than feeling appalled by the scene, the three of them are drawn to it. The reason turns out to be the affinity between the desolated boat and the closed Hailsham. As Tommy would then bring up, “I always see Hailsham being like this now. No logic to it. In fact, this is pretty close to the picture in my head.” (Ishiguro, *NLMG* 225). Like Kathy and Ruth, Tommy never gets to see what the closed Hailsham looks like but feels compelled to reimagine it as some ecological ruins.

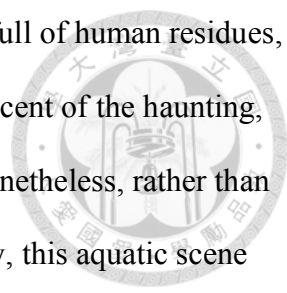




Here, the boast scene unfolds the stratigraphic time underlying Kathy's narrative for the first time. Indeed, absorbed by the boat scene, the clones are in fact less fascinated by the human time the boat inscribes than the entangled times also unfolded in the boat's cracking paints and crumbling timber. Far from suggesting a geological scar that designates the return of human time, the cracked and the crumbled indicate other possible stratification while marking the passing of time without any human sense. What we can also perceive is the literal convergence of times through the entanglement of rubbish. Such a temporal convergence is even suggested by Kathy, who also observes that before seeing the boat, the three of them pass "a barbed wire fence, which was tilted and rusted, the wire itself *yanked all over the place*" (Ishiguro, *NLMG* 222–223; my emphasis). These waste materials together do not point to an accumulation of the linear time but signify the return of different passing of time that further returns to haunts the human conception of time. "The temporalities of waste," as Fiona Allon et al. has pointed out, "are decidedly non-linear" (5). This temporal non-linearity delineates how "discarded matter returns with the passing of time" and "'haunt[s] [the present],' both symbolically and materially" (Allon et al. 5; qtd. Gregson, Metcalfe and Crewe 198).

The boat scene is further followed by Ruth's dream, which also features the imagining of Hailsham in an anthropogenic waste-scape that enables other possible, stratigraphic times. Like the decayed marshland the boat is situated in, Ruth's dream of Hailsham is no longer impeccable: it is flooded with rubbish. As she describes,

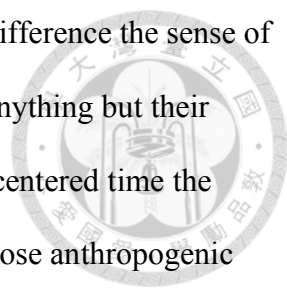
I was dreaming I was up in Room 14. I knew the whole place had been shut down, but there I was, in Room 14, and I was looking out of the window and everything outside was flooded. Just like a giant lake. And I could see rubbish floating by under my window, empty drinks cartons, everything. (*NLMG* 205)



The dream here once again reimagines Hailsham as an ecological ruin full of human residues, albeit this time in an aquatic space. One may find Ruth's dream reminiscent of the haunting, anthropogenic reality of rising sea-level in our contemporary world. Nonetheless, rather than affirming the anthropocentric ideology of time Hailsham used to signify, this aquatic scene intensifies the stratigraphic time on a more metaphorical level. It depicts a temporality that is literally non-linear and difficult to chart along a clear timeline. Indeed, with the rubbish floating around, what comes into view is "a specifically watery movement of difference and repetition" (Neimanis 4). In this view, the human residues, as well as Hailsham in the scene, does not display a linear actualization of the humans' exceptional past, but are linked to other possibly coexisting times that are converging and diverging, in which the clones' present condition is unsettled.

#### **"It was nice and tranquil": Toward a Temporal Tranquility in a Future Without Us**

At first glance, it would seem plausible to read these imaginations as somewhat a closure for the clones in the face of their upcoming "completion." Tommy and Ruth in particular seem to experience a sense of calmness from those scenes. As Tommy states while staring at the boat, "It wouldn't be so bad, if it's like this now" (Ishiguro, *NLMG* 225). Ruth also feels the same about her dream: "But there wasn't any sense of panic or anything like that. It was nice and tranquil, just like it is here. I knew I wasn't in any danger, that it was only like that because it was closed down" (Ishiguro, *NLMG* 205). As they are both expecting their upcoming "completion" any time soon, the envisioning of Hailsham now as a wasteland seems to provide "a compensatory aesthetic vision of their own ruinous status, a compellingly peaceful end for an object created, used, and eventually discarded" (Rich 642). It evokes a tranquility that appears to suggest their reconciliation with their premature death.

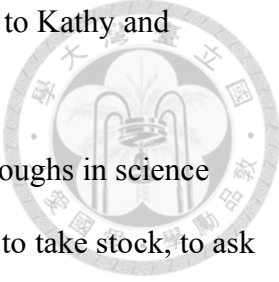


Yet such a reading would be overlooking the significance of indifference the sense of tranquility entails. The tranquility shared by both Tommy and Ruth is anything but their submission to death, which would mean reaffirming the linear, human-centered time the clones follow and failing to notice other temporalities also at work in those anthropogenic marks. The tranquility, in fact, works “not as expressions of a single, intending expressive individual whose thoughts can be conveyed through time, but as having emerged from events that have a complexity beyond individual persons” (Colebrook, “The Anthropocene and the Archive”). It thus should be considered a “temporal tranquility” that underlies a non-anthropocentric grasping of time, where Tommy and Ruth indeed come to recognize the time that confines them is not the only time their being is unfolded within.

Significantly, Kathy at this moment of narrating would not yet be aware of the temporal tranquility the stratigraphic time evokes in those scenes—though its effect is already at work in her back-and-forth narrative. For unlike Tommy and Ruth, she still works as a carer and hence does not face the risk of immediate “completion.” Instead of coming to terms with a temporal tranquility, she seems to be still conforming to the ideology of “agitation” the humans in Ishiguro’s alternate world perpetuates. Referred to as a “classified” state of the clones during their recovery period as a donor, agitation delineates the disturbance the clones could feel upon facing “completion” (Ishiguro, *NLMG* 3). It is thus the carer’s job to help the donors to “stay calm,” as Kathy boasts what she does (Ishiguro, *NLMG* 3).

Yet this agitation in fact more compellingly underlies the heightened response not of the clones but of the humans while facing the end of their life. Indeed, as the cloning system shows, it is rather the humans that are and have been in an “agitated” state as they attempt to cling on their existence and live in a complacent present, a “cosy state of suspension,” through receiving organ donation from their cloned counterparts (Ishiguro, *NLMG* 130). As

Miss Emily, one of the human guardians in Hailsham would later reveal to Kathy and Tommy,



After the war, in the early fifties, when the great breakthroughs in science followed one after the other so rapidly, there wasn't time to take stock, to ask the sensible questions. Suddenly there were all these new possibilities laid before us, all these ways to cure so many previously incurable conditions. [...] 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. (Ishiguro, *NLMG* 240).

Despite the biotechnological premise, the humans are still “agitated” by “the dark days” of facing their own finitude. Not much different from the clones, the humans in Ishiguro’s alternate world appear to be also confined to the human-centered time. In this view, Ishiguro’s alternate world turns out to be less a utopian-like world of flourishing, immortal humans than a haunting story of human survival. It depicts an intensified version of our Anthropocene-anticipated present pervaded by socioecological pressures that accumulate at the limit of a planet’s carrying capacity.

Working as a carer at the moment of narrating, Kathy seems to be still haunted by such a temporal agitation every now and then. It is not until the end of Kathy’s narrative that she would finally become aware of the tranquility the stratigraphic time can evoke, which eventually provides us a glimpse of Kathy’s capacity of imagining beyond her condition. In the end after the completion of Ruth and Tommy, Kathy drives to Norfolk and is drawn to a ruined, earthly landscape. Brought up by Miss Emily, Norfolk has been less a literal place on the east coast of England than a “joke” as “England’s “lost corner” circulating in the

Hailsham community (Ishiguro, *NLMG* 60). Arriving at a “flat, featureless field” (*NLMG* 262), Kathy utters the following epiphany:

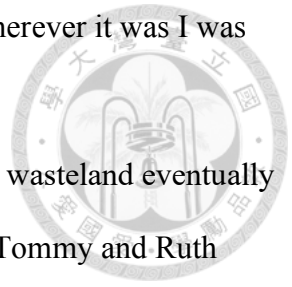
I was thinking about the rubbish, the flapping plastic in the branches, the shore-line of odd stuff caught along the fencing, and I half-closed my eyes and imagined this was the spot where everything I’d ever lost since my childhood had washed up, and I was now standing here in front of it, and if I waited long enough, a tiny figure would appear on the horizon across the field, and gradually get larger until I’d see it was Tommy, and he’d wave, maybe even call. (Ishiguro, *NLMG* 263)

Once again, there is the imagination of sedimentary rubbish that attests to the entangled times the clones’ existence are implicated with. And different from the drifting images in the previous boat scene and Ruth’s dream, we now even encounter a literal converging and diverging of different times, where the times of the plastic, the odd stuff and the rubbish are all bound up on the shore. In contrast to the vertical, linear, and hierarchical notion of human-centric time, the scene displays a horizontal assemblage of different times caught up, accumulated, unfolded, and meshed in the washed-up field of Norfolk (Caracciolo 15).

Yet fragile as the Norfolk landscape seems to be, this final scene of Norfolk simultaneously evokes a tranquil interdependence of different times, in which Kathy begins to realize how her temporal being is also implicated within other times. Indeed, for another eight months, she will also undergo her job as a donor and that would mean to confront her own end. But instead of bursting out in agitation over her upcoming death as well as Tommy’s premature death, she does nothing more than “imaging[ing] just a little fantasy thing” (Ishiguro, *NLMG* 263). Moreover, as Kathy states, “The fantasy never got beyond that—I didn’t let it—and though the tears rolled down my face, I wasn’t sobbing or out of

control. I just waited a bit, then turned back to the car, to drive off to wherever it was I was supposed to be” (Ishiguro, *NLMG* 263).

Indeed, as Kathy’s epiphany shows, the final scene of Norfolk’s wasteland eventually allows Kathy to recognize and experience the temporal tranquility that Tommy and Ruth have experienced earlier respectively. This tranquility enables Kathy to imagine different kinds of future not yet actualized and also beyond her finitude. Such a temporal tranquility by no means entails how Kathy has developed a “calculated callousness” in response to her limited condition (Garrard 41). Instead, it indicates Kathy’s understanding of a non-anthropocentric sense of stratigraphic time that can further re-stratify her remaining time. In this view, Ishiguro’s *Never Let Me Go* not only challenges our agitated response to human extinction in the Anthropocene but also prompts us to think of and narrate our time on Earth in an indifferent way.



## Chapter Three

### Death and Becoming Rubbish



If the stratigraphic time underlying Kathy’s posthumous imagination can help Kathy rethink the time that confines her in a non-anthropocentric way, we might then take a deeper look into how such a time alters Kathy’s relationship with her premature death. Is Kathy’s understanding of death different from other clones’? Does Kathy in the end really accept her premature death? For Kathy and other students raised in Hailsham, death is “told and not told” as a euphemistic term, “completion,” which refers to the end result of the clones’ undergoing a series of organ-transplantation operations to save human lives until they die (Ishiguro, *NLMG* 74). Though never provided with specific details, the clones always know “at some level” about their premature death (Ishiguro, *NLMG* 74). As Ruth states, “After all, it’s what we’re supposed to be doing, isn’t it?” (Ishiguro, *NLMG* 207). Death seems to be presented as an ambiguously big picture of the clones’ life goal that they readily accept and anticipate without any second thought.

Indeed, looking into Kathy’s narrative, we can perceive how the seemingly readiness for death pervades the detached language and the plain tone and style that Kathy adopts throughout telling her story. At the time of narrating, Kathy has been working as a “carer” for over twelve years. Yet instead of revealing any sympathy, she seems to be detached from her donors’ condition. She mainly focuses on talking about her job performance, “boasting” how good she is in taking care of her donors by making them “stay calm”: “My donors have always tended to do much better than expected [...] hardly any of them have been classified as ‘agitated,’ even before fourth donation.” (Ishiguro, *NLMG* 3). As Kathy’s narrative unfolds, we can also perceive her slow and mild style in narrating like “a speaking clock” (Taylor), which seems to be devoid of any anxiety or fear with regards to the limited

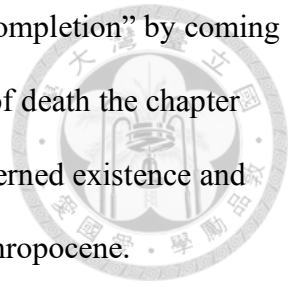
condition of her own kind. Kathy's tone is also characterized as "meek" (Wood) and "flat" (Rose), and she is thus often accused of displaying an "apolitical, complacent tendency" by critics (Nakamura 66). On the formal level, Kathy appears to not only submit to her death but also even serves as a complicit role in facilitating other clones toward their death.

Perhaps the most poignant evidence of Kathy's readiness toward death is Kathy's constant references to "rubbish," where she would often treat any possibility beyond the clones' limited condition as something insignificant. Already from the very beginning of her narrative, the reference to rubbish emerges when Kathy refers to other unskilled carers as "a complete waste of space" (Ishiguro, *NLMG* 3). And when Ruth bursts out with the remark of how the clones are "modelled from trash" (Ishiguro, *NLMG* 152), Kathy considers her merely "speak[ing] garbage" (Ishiguro, *NLMG* 153). This is also the case when Tommy expresses the clones' collective concern about the possibility of failing to complete ("How maybe, after the fourth donation, even if you've technically completed, you're still conscious in some sort of way; how then you find there are more donations, plenty of them, on the other side of that line"), she disregards Tommy's concern as "rubbish" talk (Ishiguro, *NLMG* 255). Kathy's repetitive allusions to rubbish seem to once again register her compliance with the limited condition she and other clones are destined to follow.

This chapter, however, argues how the nonhuman sense of stratigraphic time offers a way for Kathy as well as other clones to not simply accept death but reconsider it not as an end but an opening to other potentialities. Despite their seemingly acceptance of their limited condition, Kathy, Tommy, and Ruth display a gradual grasping of death as a Deleuzian "counter-actualizing" process that rethinks their existence within other virtual mode of time. Such a grasping can be most apparently perceived in the intricate relationship of time, death, and rubbish ecology played out in the novel. Looking into the philosophical trajectory of the relationship between time and death with rubbish theory in Anthropocene studies, this



chapter claims that the clones affirm, yet without subjecting to, their “completion” by coming to terms with death as *becoming rubbish*. And it is for this affirmation of death the chapter ultimately concludes how Ishiguro compels us to “let go” our self-concerned existence and accept a “negligible” understanding of our becoming extinct in the Anthropocene.



### **Death and Time: From Heidegger to Deleuze**

The inextricability of time and death cannot be interrogated without tracing back to Martin Heidegger’s philosophy of time, at the center of which lies its primary concern of death and its ontological relation with human existence. In *Being and Time* (1927), Heidegger characterizes Dasein as “*being toward possibilities [Sein zu Möglichkeiten]*,” “its being as possibility” (182). The idea is that something always remains “*outstanding [aussteht]*” for Dasein in a never-present future and for which, Dasein constantly lives ahead of itself (Heidegger 227). This being-ahead-of-itself into possibilities, defined as “care,” constitutes the structure of Dasein’s existence (Heidegger 227). It indicates a “*constant unfinished quality [Unabgeschlossenheit]*” constitutive of Dasein (Heidegger 227), a lack that is the impossibility for Dasein to grasp itself as a whole and come to an end, and thus the continuousness of Dasein being what it is not yet (Heidegger 234-5).

Among all the possibilities, death, Heidegger argues, is “the most extreme possibility” of Dasein (244): “the possibility of the absolute impossibility” (241). As long as Dasein exists, regardless of other possibilities, Dasein is always grounded by the pursuit of its own death. Dasein, then, is also necessarily and ineluctably “being-toward-death.” This “being-toward-death” by no means gestures to Dasein’s relation to a specific end time in a suicidal way, where Dasein wishes for death. Instead, Dasein as “being-toward-death” entails Dasein’s “imminence” in death itself (Heidegger 241), “Dasein’s relation to its own finitude that continually stretches it ahead of itself to the impossibility of its possibilities” (Adkins

19). On this account, death is not an end that can be actualized nor as a possible thing present at hand—understanding death as such would mean to deprive Dasein’s existence—but what remains at all times in relation with Dasein as its “ownmost” possibility (Heidegger 240, 250). Far from designating the end of Dasein’s existence, it throws Dasein into the not-yet of the end, for which Dasein exists.

Looking into the everyday context, Heidegger notes the construal of Dasein as being toward death is, however, seldomly authentically achieved. This is most apparent in the everyday evasion of death, which Heidegger considers “an *inauthentic* being toward [death]” (249). Such an evasion not only misunderstands death as something that can be actualized and thus bypassed, but also exerts a futile diversion of Dasein from what it is inevitably delivered to already. Heidegger then claims that to achieve “the authentic being toward death” is to embrace the ineluctable character of death: to face and “anticipate” the certainty of death (Heidegger 251) while living with “anxiety,” which is “the fundamental attunement of Dasein” in being “thrown” into and disclosed to death (Heidegger 241). This authentic being toward death conceives death as something even less real and limited, rather, a possibility “‘greater and greater’ [...] which knows no measure at all” (Heidegger 251). It ultimately points to a “*freedom toward death*” of Dasein (Heidegger 255), for insofar that Dasein accepts its relation to death, Dasein is able to grasp and choose from all possibilities and in doing so, is liberated from its finitude.

Heidegger’s philosophy of Dasein fundamentally establishes an intellectual framework for thinking of time, death and human existence. It shows the impossibility of any attempt to seek beyond death for death is what constitutes the humans’ being. Yet it is also apparent that Heidegger’s philosophy turns out to be not without problem. In fact, it has often been criticized for upholding a problematic anthropocentrism that emphasizes the hierarchal difference between the human and the nonhuman, particularly the animal. Unlike

the human, the animal and other objects for Heidegger cannot achieve authentic being-toward-death, but only exist poorly in relation to Dasein. As Philip Tonner puts, “Heidegger’s anthropocentric pre- supposition is that animals are understood by him to be impoverished precisely in terms of their inability to transcend the environment of their immediate and pragmatic concerns” (220). While the Heideggerian death contemplates the possibility of Dasein pursuing its utmost possibility, Dasein is simultaneously human-centered. It is ontological yet in a way that the animal and the object can never be (Tonner 221).

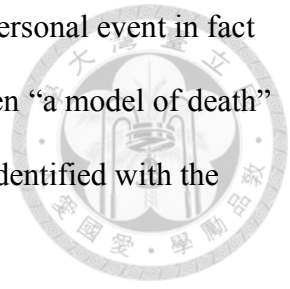
In contrast to Heidegger’s concept of death, Deleuze and Guattari’s philosophy of death provides a more capacious understanding of the interconnection between time, death, and being. It invites a more accommodating approach considering the ontological relation of the humans in the new epoch without reaffirming human exceptionalism. One of the most important departures of Deleuze’s philosophy from the Heideggerian death is that death does not constitute one’s existence nor reveal an individual’s significance in the world. Rather, it is no more than an accident that is “always external” and “of little significance” (Deleuze, *Spinoza* 41). The central idea of such a death is that it is “impersonal”: “*an impersonal event* provided with an always open problematic structure (where and when?)” (Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense* 145).<sup>32</sup> Though it “has an extreme and definite relation to me and my body ..., it also has no relation to me at all – it is incorporeal and infinitive, impersonal, grounded only in itself” (Deleuze, *LS* 151). There is no subject at stake in death, but “that subject as an adjacent part is always a ‘one’ who conducts the experience, not an I who receives the model” (Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus* 331).<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Deleuze’s *The Logic of Sense* (1990) is hereafter referred to as *LS*.

<sup>33</sup> Deleuze and Guattari’s *Anti-Oedipus* (1983) is hereafter referred to as *AO*.

As Deleuze and Guattari continues to explicate, death as an impersonal event in fact entails a two-folded process that points to a continual oscillation between “a model of death” and “an experience of death.” The model of death, on the one hand, is identified with the body without organs (BwO),



The body without organs is the model of death. [...] Zero intensity. The death model appears when the body without organs repels the organs and lays them aside: no mouth, no tongue, no teeth – to the point of self-mutilation, to the point of suicide. (Deleuze and Guattari, *AO* 329)

As a significant concept in *Anti-Oedipus* as well as in *A Thousand Plateaus*, BwO for Deleuze and Guattari is not the opposite of organs but “a practice” of the body of energies and flows (*AO* 151, 158). It is “a destratified body” (Protevi 169), the site for the circulation, coagulation, and folding of intensity (Deleuze and Guattari, *AO* 159). However, in the case of the model of death, the BwO is referred to as the “empty” BwO, in which the body has reached the limit of its affects—a Spinozian notion of bodily capacity of affecting and being affected—and thus what Deleuze and Guattari mean by the state of zero intensity.<sup>34</sup> It indicates a more “personal death,” yet in a misconstrued way, in which “I” can wrongly think that death is an objective state that can be actualized and experienced.

The experience of death, on the other hand, is the passage from one state of intensity to another. While the model of death is the empty body without organs insofar as it marks the zero degree of intensity, the experience of death entails the passing through the zero degree of intensity to another intensive state. It is “the most common of occurrences in the unconscious, precisely because it occurs in life and for life, in every passage or becoming, in

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<sup>34</sup> John Protevi provides a clear differentiation among the three types of BwO mentioned in *A Thousand Plateaus*: full (“reached by careful experimental destratification, which causes waves of intense matter-energy to flow in immanence”), empty (“reached by too sudden destratification, which empties bodies of its organs”), and cancerous (“belongs to the organism that resides on a stratum, rather than being the limit of a stratum”) (170).

every intensity as passage or becoming” (Deleuze and Guattari, *AO* 330). Through passing, the experience of death also becomes “*what is felt in every feeling, what never ceases and never finishes happening in every becoming...* forming zones of intensity on the body without organs” (Deleuze and Guattari, *AO* 330). It is the extreme form of my power to become other or something else, which will never end and get accomplished. The experience of death then speaks to a more impersonal death, in which the “I” never cease to die but unceasingly return in drawing back to multiple forms of differences.

It is for the above double implications of death as an impersonal event the temporality of death enters in Deleuze’s philosophy. What can be perceived is a Nietzschean eternal return from the model of death to the experience of death and back to the model of death, so on and so forth. For Deleuze, eternal return is not a repetition of the same but the return of differences (*DR* 381). In the case of death then, eternal return is “not a cycle of death and rebirths,” but “the passing away of that which is inanimate in sameness and identity and the eternal return of multiple forms of difference” (Williams 123). In this view, death is always something unknown and to come: “neither present nor past, but always coming, the source of an incessant multiple adventure in persistent question” (Deleuze, *DR* 112). It becomes “a problem regarding the future” (Williams 123), yet not in the Heideggerian sense that it points to a “not” in the never-present future but that it indicates an openness of the future, something “virtual” that coexists with the present. Rather than existing finitely in a Heideggerian manner, Deleuze’s death points to a way of existing infinitely.

With these parameters, the Deleuzian notion of death as an impersonal event provides two significant points of reconsideration concerning the preoccupied notion of human extinction in the Anthropocene. First, death always implies a “counter-actualizing” process

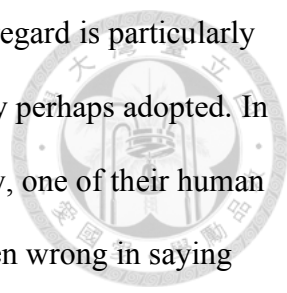
where the “I” becomes dissolute.<sup>35</sup> It involves actualizations where body parts fall part, but it also entails a virtual sense of ongoing transformation reserved for further actualizations. Rather than a “mystical escape” (Shults 135), death “extend[s] a tendency’s becoming beyond any of its constituted forms into a not yet realized future” (Colebrook, *Deleuze and the Meaning of Life* 122). Such a dismantling of the self by no means indicates physical self-destruction. Instead, it points to the liberating opening of the “I” to different possibilities in reenacting events. Second, Deleuze’s understanding of death, instead of pointing to a linear end, renders a synthesis of time in the openness of future that death entails: “the deployment and explication of the multiple, of the different, of the fortuitous, for themselves and ‘for all times’” (Deleuze, *DR* 152). Death, for Deleuze, is never a negation of life in finitude or nonbeing, as himself has contended, “neither the limitation of mortal life by matter, nor an opposition of an immortal life with matter” (*DR* 148), but affirmation of life, that is, being in multiple times.

### **“Look in the Gutter”: Death as Becoming Rubbish**

In *Never Let Me Go*, the grasping of death as a counter-actualizing process that opens the clones, especially Kathy, to other possibilities is connected to the rubbish ecology Kathy’s narrative also explores. In the first half of the novel, it is apparent that Kathy regards

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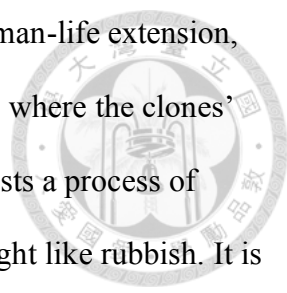
<sup>35</sup> In *The Logic of Sense* (1990), Deleuze elucidates his concept of counter-actualization with the example of the actor acting: “The actor thus actualizes the event, but in a way which is entirely different from the actualization of the event in the depth of things. Or rather, the actor redoubles this cosmic, or physical actualization, in his own way which is singular and superficial [...]. Thus, the actor delimits the original, disengages it from the abstract line, and keeps from the event only its contour and its splendour, becoming thereby the actor of one’s own events—a *counter-actualization*” (150). As the above passage indicates, what Deleuze means by counter-actualization is not only the movement from the actual to the virtual but also intensifying potentials within the event by affirming and throwing oneself to other possibilities like the enactment of the actor. Moreover, the actor becoming his/her own events also signifies the dismantling of the self in counter-actualization. As Jane Sholtz has stated, “counteractualisation, if it is to be an engagement with the virtuality of the intensive Idea/event, needs the dissolution of the subject; *the ‘I’ must counteractualise itself*” (62). Deleuze refers to this dissolution of the self as the notion of “the free man”: “It is true only of the free man, who grasps the event, and does not allow it to be actualized as such without enacting, the actor, its counter-actualization. Only the free man, therefore, can comprehend all violence in a single act of violence, and every mortal event in *a single Event* which no longer makes room for the accident, and which denounces and removes the power of *ressentiment* within the individual as well as the power of oppression within society” (Deleuze, *LS* 152).



rubbish as something insignificant with a negative implication. Such a regard is particularly expressed in her heightened sensitivity to the word “rubbish” Miss Lucy perhaps adopted. In a peculiar memory of Tommy retelling his conversation with Miss Lucy, one of their human guardians, Kathy recollected Miss Lucy telling Tommy that she has been wrong in saying that it’s okay if Tommy’s art is being “uncreative,” but that there was no excuse for “being so rubbish” because his art is in fact “important,” “not just because it’s evidence [...] but for [his] own sake” (Ishiguro, *NLMG* 99). At that time, Kathy tells her readers “she never got to assess what kind of impact” that talk had had (Ishiguro, *NLMG* 101). Her only response is being appalled by Miss Lucy’s possible word choice of “rubbish.”

Here, what Miss Lucy implies is that their arts, as well as the humanist education Hailsham stands for, would be an evidence for the humans to “claim” that they are not “anything less-than-human” (Ishiguro, *NLMG* 237, 239), to “prove [they] had souls at all” (Ishiguro, *NLMG* 237), to tell something exceptional about them like the humans to differentiate them from being simply human residues. The word “rubbish” delineates what is nonhuman in a negative sense, or simply less-than-human. While at that time, Kathy as well as Tommy would not know what Miss Lucy is referred to, Kathy’s sensitiveness already underlies her resistance to being associated with rubbish, being “less-than-human.” Yet it also simultaneously affirms the “less-than-human” analogy drawn between the clones and the rubbish, which in fact would be clearly pronounced by Madame many years later. In the episode where Kathy and Tommy finally confront Madame to ask for “deferral,” Madame reveals to them the social mechanism at work behind the cloning system,

The world didn’t want to be reminded how the donation programme really worked. They didn’t want to think about you students, or about the conditions you were brought up in. In other words, my dears, they wanted you back in the shadows. (Ishiguro, *NLMG* 242)



Less than a neat, scientific procedure that suggests a utopian way of human-life extension, the cloning system is an endless, horrific production of human residues, where the clones' body would be rid of after providing vital organ to the humans. It suggests a process of resource depletion based on an illusion that can cast the clones out of sight like rubbish. It is then no surprise when Ruth once bursts out and alludes to the clones' affinity with rubbish, "You look in rubbish bins. Look down the toilet, that's where you'll find where we all came from" (Ishiguro, *NLMG* 152). The biotechnological premise registered in cloning more compellingly testifies to how the clones are not different from rubbish, where their remaining will be left stranded with other human residues like plastic bags and cans.

Here, the human attempt of casting the clones out of sight like rubbish in Ishiguro's alternate world in fact illustrates what Brian Thill has diagnosed an "Away-fantasy", a fantasy our Anthropocene-anticipated contemporary world also clings onto (109). Thill's notion of "Away-fantasy" is derived from Timothy Morton, who claims that "we may have thought that the U-bend in the toilet was a convenient curvature of ontological space that took whatever we flush down it into a totally different dimension called *Away*" (50). We delude ourselves into thinking that when we throw our trash in the bins that will be manage elsewhere. And in doing so, we are also inclined to dwell on trash "as simply a natural outcome of human existence; life inevitably begets rubbish" (Rogers 27). In this view, we do not feel responsible to contemplate trash, just as we don't think about the many other aspects of human existence we have long taken for granted while consuming and producing.

For Gay Hawkins, nevertheless, our "Away-fantasy" in treating trash is not just a displaying of our biological necessity but more importantly an implication of our long-held practice of subjectivity intrinsically associated with our ontological relation with death. In "Plastic Bags: Living with Rubbish," Hawkins argues that at the center of our waste



management lies our need of “*ordering* the self,” of “maintaining a boundary between what is connected to the self and what isn’t” (8):

If waste is our most immediate other and establishing our difference and separation from it is the condition of possibility for a self, then its persistence, its refusal to go, its visibility, is a primordial threat to the drive for wholeness (Hawkins 17).

For Hawkins, the relationship between our human existence and rubbish practices is necessarily based on disposal in order to maintain the fantasy of our self-contained self. Yet the upcoming reality of the Anthropocene now also confronts us with the more-than-ever-apparent problem of how our long disregard for what happens to our trash is endangering our existence (Buchanan). Our capacity of managing waste are exceeding its limits, where waste comes to overwhelm landscapes in many third world countries as well as ocean and returns to threaten our own existence. It is clear that the boundary that maintains the difference between the humans and the rubbish are collapsing. Hawkins thus also demands us to recognize our interconnected relationship with waste: “We cannot avoid relating to rubbish: connected, separate, either way we’re implicated” (Hawkins 7). Instead of perpetuating the delusion of “away,” we might then come to render waste not as something to be disposed, managed, and eliminated, but as a part of our human existence that entails “currents of movement and difference within the self” (Hawkins 17).

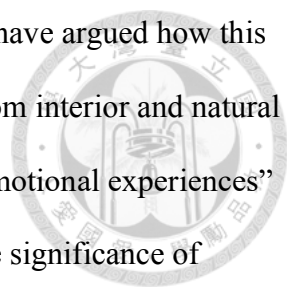
Through our interaction with rubbish, we may then come to challenge our ways of being and finally thrive toward *becoming rubbish*. As Hawkins continues to argue, “To be moved by waste, to be disturbed by it, is to be open to our own becoming” (21). Rubbish provides a reconsideration of the notion of the humans’ end, which suggests the implausibility of managing the loss of our life. It calls for the acknowledge of “those intensities that signal not our difference from waste but our profound implications with it”

(Hawkins 21). Yet to argue for becoming rubbish by no means indicates that we should accept humans' implicated being with rubbish here and there in the Anthropocene. Instead, becoming rubbish means to develop an awareness of the impossibility of maintaining a limited condition of being through fixing differences. It is becoming aware of our limitation, the human finitude, and simultaneously our opening to further actualizations beyond our self-contained body. It prompts us to think of how death always unfolds virtual relations with what is extrinsic to us like rubbish and thus constitutes our unfixed ontological status in the world. And it is through this sense of becoming rubbish that its connection with the Deleuzian understanding of death as a "counter-actualizing" process reveals.

This interconnected relationship between death and becoming rubbish in *Never Let Me Go* can be first perceived in Kathy's peculiar attachment to her Judy Bridgewater cassette tape found in the Sale. The Sale is a monthly event held in Hailsham for students to exchange their tokens with "stuff that was wearing out or broken with more of the same" (Ishiguro, *NLMG* 21). At the Sale, Kathy once finds an old cassette tape of Judy Bridgewater and despite its used status, she treats it as something significant for being particularly drawn to one of the songs in the tape, "Never Let Me Go." As she explains to her readers,

What was so special about this song? Well, the thing was, I didn't used to listen properly to the words; I just waited for that bit that went: "Baby, baby, never let me go..." And what I'd imagine was a woman who'd been told she couldn't have babies, who'd really, really wanted them all her life. Then there's a sort of miracle and she has a baby, and she holds this baby very close to her and walks around singing: "Baby, never let me go..." [...]. (Ishiguro, *NLMG* 64)

For Kathy, the specialty about the song is not the lyrics but the imagination it invokes. While the clones are deprived of reproductive ability, Kathy is aware of how this imagination could



not have happened but still enjoy fantasizing such a possibility. Critics have argued how this scene portrays “a notion of individuality which does not issue solely from interior and natural competencies adequate unto itself but from the accumulation of life's emotional experiences” (Shaddox 456). Yet with a closer look, we can also perceive not just the significance of affective experience but also a crucial interrelation between rubbish and existence underlying Kathy’s attachment to the tape. Indeed, before talking about the song, Kathy displays a heightened attentiveness to the rubbish-ness of the tape. With details, she describes “the cover picture [which] was what must have been a scaled-down version of the record sleeve,” the burning cigarette in Judy’s hand, and the plastic case that contains the tape (Ishiguro, *NLMG* 61). In contrast to her resistance to Miss Lucy’s notion of rubbish, Kathy here shares an intimacy with the tape’s rubbish quality. And it is for such intimacy Kathy is able to imagine what’s beyond her own condition, a woman with a baby.

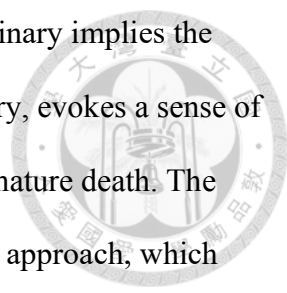
Crucially though, Kathy at this moment of narrating would not yet realize the liberating potentiality of the rubbishness of the tape in regards to her limited condition. In fact, the tape still underlies a maintaining of “Away-fantasy” that once again casts the clones out of sight. Besides the song “Never Let Me Go,” Kathy also expresses a particular attention to the burning cigarette in Judy’s hand in the tape’s cover picture. Kathy then tells her readers how the used cigarette invokes the horror image of disposed body parts of the clones. This trope of the whole body as a container of spare parts is referred to as “unzipping” for the clones. It starts as a joke on Tommy when the students pretend that his elbow’s wood could “unzip” like a bag, in which “skin flopping about next to him ‘like one of those long gloves in *My Fair Lady*’” (Ishiguro, *NLMG* 78). The idea of unzipping further comes to conceptualize the clone’s envisioning of donations: “The idea was that when the time came, you'd be able just to unzip a bit of yourself, a kidney or something would slide out, and you'd

hand it over” (Ishiguro, *NLMG* 79). Both cases, however, shows the failure of grasping death as becoming rubbish for their misrecognition of what opening the self entails.

If the cassette tape provides a glimpse of the relationship between death and becoming rubbish in Kathy’s narrative, Kathy’s growing fondness to Tommy’s paintings of imaginary animals further testifies to the liberating possibility such a relationship can invoke. After becoming Tommy’s carer, Kathy for the first time gets to see Tommy’s paintings, which reminds her of the “scaled-down versions of the sort of pictures we’d done when we were small” (Ishiguro, *NLMG* 171). As she describes,

So I was taken aback at how densely detailed each one was. In fact, it took a moment to see they were animals at all. The first impression was like one you’d get if you took the back off a radio set: tiny canals, weaving tendons, miniature screws and wheels were all drawn with obsessive precision, and only when you held the page away could you see it was some kind of armadillo, say, or a bird. (Ishiguro, *NLMG* 171)

At first, Kathy confesses she cannot praise Tommy for those animals, insisting that “for some reason I couldn’t fathom, something continued to stop me coming out with praise” (Ishiguro, *NLMG* 172). She also mentions how “the more excited he got telling me about his animals, the more uneasy I was growing” (Ishiguro, *NLMG* 163). The paintings unsettle Kathy as they remind her time is not still but clicking fast. In the second time seeing the paintings, Kathy moreover describes how the paintings evoke the sense that “[Tommy] wasn’t complacent, and that he was busy getting on with his part of the preparations” (Ishiguro, *NLMG* 220). The past of their time at Hailsham and the future of Tommy’s upcoming completion are both invoked. What follows up is “strong mix of emotions that engulfed [Kathy],” and one of which is a feeling that she has “tried to keep it out,” a feeling “that we were doing all of this too late” (Ishiguro, *NLMG* 220).



Yet one should not hasten to the conclusion that Tommy's imaginary implies the clones' powerless resistance to their limited condition but on the contrary, evokes a sense of becoming rubbish that liberates both Kathy and Tommy from their premature death. The rubbishness of Tommy's paintings lies in its nonhuman sense of artistic approach, which Miss Lucy once defines as "rubbish" art. Indeed, Tommy's animals runs counter to the humanistic values of Hailsham's education, as he himself admits, "what I was looking at was so different from anything the guardians had taught us to do at Hailsham" (Ishiguro, *NLMG* 187). They become "strange rubbish" as they expose "strategies of abstraction allows us to see some bodies as mechanisms and others as individuals" (Ishiguro, *NLMG* 263; Walkowitz 224). Instead of reaffirming, they open question to the human-nonhuman difference the humans in Ishiguro's alternate world clings on.

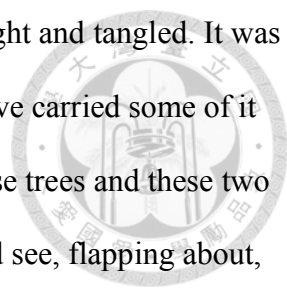
In this view, Tommy's painting shows not his complacency toward his death but a recognition of death as becoming rubbish. Portrayed in a black notebook, the paintings act like a "time-shifting" "black box" that forces opening of other temporalities (Seltzer 120). The significance here is that the paintings not only entail "the flexibility of the time allocated for the clones' disposal" (Güngör 117), but also exposes the myth of the self-contained self whose "inside" can be "proved" (Ishiguro, *NLMG* 237). Tommy's arts in fact shows "what they are inside is not reducible to the parts inside them" (Seltzer 120), and calls for the opening of the self to other further actualizations unfolded in multiple relations with the world. Thus, despite its "rubbish" quality, Tommy's animals, far from being lifeless, even seem to grow on themselves: "it's like they come to life by themselves" (Ishiguro, *NLMG* 178). And it is here Kathy comes to recognize the complexity of ontological relation the becoming rubbish Tommy's paintings suggest: despite her initial resistance, she grows affection to Tommy's animals. As she states, "I was becoming genuinely drawn to these fantastical creatures in front of me. For all their busy, metallic features, there was something

sweet, even vulnerable about each of them” (Ishiguro, *NLMG* 220). She even claims how “often” she has “wondered about Tommy’s animals over the years (Ishiguro, *NLMG* 219).

Here, Kathy’s affection to Tommy’s strange animals serves as a stark contrast to Madame’s repulsion to the clones that Kathy once observed back in Hailsham. Every year, Madame comes to visit Hailsham as the host of the Gallery, an annual event held to showcase the clones’ artworks. While the real identity of Madame remains mysterious for Kathy, she cannot forget how Madame “shudder[s]” while walking pass her and other students: “she just froze and waited for us to pass by. She didn’t shriek, or even let out a gasp. [...] I can still see it now, the shudder she seemed to be suppressing (Ishiguro, *NLMG* 32). And as Kathy comes to tell, this shudder of Madame indicates not just her being afraid of the clones, but that “she was afraid of us in the same way someone might be afraid of spiders” (Ishiguro, *NLMG* 32). Unlike Kathy’s coming to terms with her implicated being with strange animals, Madame’s shudder demonstrates the human failure to open existence to what is beyond the intrinsic-extrinsic difference, and to accept other modes of being that is “something troubling and strange,” something rubbish (Ishiguro, *NLMG* 33).

Indeed, as *Never Let Me Go* finally shows, it is never the clones but the humans that are incapable of imagining beyond their limited condition. Unlike the humans in the novel, the clones come to accept death as counter-actualization, becoming rubbish, and in-completion. Particularly for Kathy, her narrative unfolds the impossibility of maintaining a self-contained existence through fixing differences. Take another look at Kathy’s epiphany in the end:

I found I was standing before acres of ploughed earth. There was a fence keeping me from stepping into the field, with two lines of barbed wire, and I could see how this fence and the cluster of three or four trees above me were the only things breaking the wind for miles. All along the fence, especially



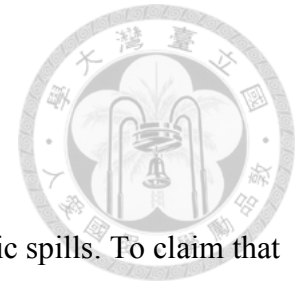
along the lower line of wire, all sorts of rubbish had caught and tangled. It was like the debris you get on a sea-shore: the wind must have carried some of it for miles and miles before finally coming up against these trees and these two lines of wire. Up in the branches of the trees, too, I could see, flapping about, torn plastic sheeting and bits of old carrier bags. That was the only time, as I stood there, looking at that strange rubbish, feeling the wind coming across those empty fields, that I started to imagine just a little fantasy thing, because this was Norfolk after all, and it was only a couple of weeks since I'd lost him.

(Ishiguro, *NLMG* 263)

The plastic sheeting, the old carrier bags, and all the “strange rubbish” here gather and spread in the flat field of Norfolk. Standing within the rubbish, Kathy now becomes part of it. Yet instead of feeling appalled, she accepts the rubbish presence as well as her implication with it. And it is this acceptance we can perceive Kathy's ultimate response to death as not an end or a “completion” but an opening to other potentialities, as her little fantasy of Tommy's reappearance shows. This does not mean she submits to her limited condition, but she comes to reach a significant “indifference” toward the anthropocentric ideology of death as “completion.”

## Conclusion

### Toward a “Negligible” Anthropocene



Droughts, floods, storms, hurricanes, wildfires, heat waves, toxic spills. To claim that the concept of the Anthropocene has become inseparable from the notion of anthropogenic disasters today is less than exaggerating. Particularly looking into how these disasters are harming and even taking away human lives ever more so in the Global South, it has become clear that the upcoming Anthropocene now forces our reconsideration of what human existence on Earth means. Despite the humans’ long-held belief that “extinction will not befall on us,” the compelling reality calls for our need to raise awareness and take actions in response to the possibility of humans’ collective demise. The general consensus is that we humans can still alter the catastrophic course. If it is not a dramatic reversal, it can at least be a change in our everyday behaviors that could abate the damage we inflicted on Earth.

Nevertheless, as Colebrook’s notion of human extinction as a “broader thought-event” suggests, any attempt to make a change cannot be done so without first revisiting the conceptual frameworks of “the human” that underlie our actions. While human beings indeed still have to “do something” about our self-induced extinction, we can only begin so by re-comprehending ourselves. And as the thesis has suggested, one way of re-comprehending the humans is through thinking of indifference. The notion of indifference as an opening to non-anthropocentric differences helps us reconstrue our reconfigured, ontological condition as implicated with other other-than-human modes of existence. The question here becomes what kind of action can indifference further help enact without reaffirming human-centric difference. In Ishiguro’s *Never Let Me Go*, it is the need to act as if our existence were “negligible” in the Anthropocene—albeit it has in fact always been so.



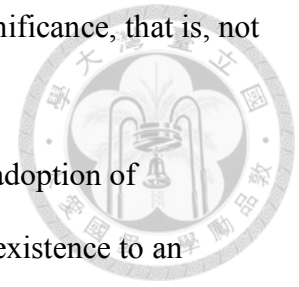
Briefly mentioned in *Never Let Me Go*, the word “negligible” originally denotes Tommy’s failure to create humanistic art back in his childhood. Long before Tommy coming up with his strange animals, there is one incident where he deliberately paints childishly in one of Hailsham’s art classes. He draws an elephant painting yet “exactly the sort of picture a kid three years younger might have done,” one “that said he couldn’t care less” (Ishiguro, *NLMG* 18, 19). And for his childish paintings, Tommy receives hostility from both his guardians and classmates. Only Miss Lucy, one of the guardians, assures him that there is nothing wrong to be uncreative. Nonetheless, it is also Miss Lucy who takes back her words and informs him the need to be creative. As Tommy recalls their conversation to Kathy:

‘Tommy, I made a mistake, when I said what I did to you. And I should have put you right about it long before now.’ Then she’s saying I should forget everything she told me before. That she’d done me a big disservice telling me not to worry about being creative. That the other guardians had been right all along, and there was no excuse for my art being so rubbish....” (Ishiguro, *NLMG* 99)

While Tommy and Kathy would not have understood at that time, Miss Lucy here is implying that the clones’ arts would be an evidence for the humans, one that can “claim” they are not “anything less-than-human” (Ishiguro, *NLMG* 237). Yet while they serve to mark how the clones can in fact be not so different from the humans—to “prove [they] had souls at all”—they simultaneously suggest an unsurpassable, intrinsic, hierarchical difference between the humans and the clones (Ishiguro, *NLMG* 237). Such a connection becomes even more ironic when Tommy also recollects how Miss Lucy perhaps uses another word to describe his art: “If it wasn’t ‘rubbish’ it was something like it. *Negligible*. That might have been it” (Ishiguro, *NLMG* 99, my emphasis). For the clones, they are advised not to act

“negligibly.” Instead, they must act as if their existence can mark a significance, that is, not so different from the humans.

However, as Kathy’s narrative unfolds, it also reveals Kathy’s adoption of negligibility in her narrative practice as she comes to open the clones’ existence to an indifferent relationship with time and death. The negligible in fact becomes full of liberating potentiality that helps Kathy challenge the anthropocentric ideology constituted her limited condition. Surprisingly, this is also the case of Paterson’s *Future Library*. Instead of safeguarding evidence of human existence, its indifferent thinking of human extinction enacts a negligible, archival practice that urges an alternative way of collecting literary works, as if they were just one among the tree rings in a thousand, newly-planted trees. From Paterson’s *Future Library* to Ishiguro’s *Never Let Me Go*, what can be perceived is that as we follow a nonhuman stratigraphic sense of time and grow to grasp death as a counter-actualizing event, we can come to act as if our long-held existence is not distinct or solely significant. We might start by asking ourselves why we cling on to our present, why we fear about our death, and why we seem to “never let go” of our existence. For in doing so, we might begin to act as if human existence is “negligible,” as if we were simply one among other other-than-human modes of existence in multiple, different times.



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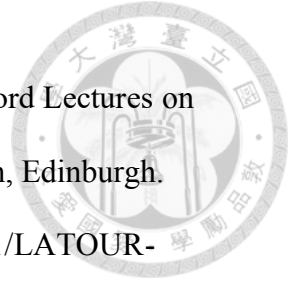
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