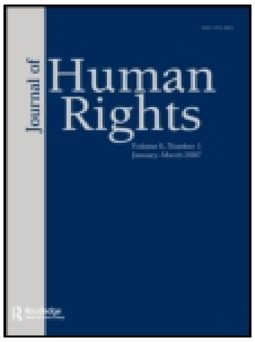

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Human Rights Storytelling and Trauma Narrative in Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go*

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This article examines Kazuo Ishiguro's novel Never Let Me Go *as a type of Bildungsroman that presents coded models of contemporary human rights issues. It shows how autobiographical storytelling functions within the novel as a form of rights claim that gives voice to the suffering of an oppressed social group. The article demonstrates how the text grapples with the effects of storytelling on individual psychologies, both as a constructive response to atrocity and as a potentially dubious method of overcoming traumatic experience. It also underscores Ishiguro's sensitivity to the ways that aestheticized forms of traumatic experience are consumed by the general public with a mixture of empathy, indifference, and perversion.*

Introduction

In a story complete with clones, sinister organ donation centers, and doomed romance, Kazuo Ishiguro's novel *Never Let Me Go* offers a complex depiction of contemporary human rights issues. Ishiguro's novel imagines a dystopian society where human copies are brought into the world and raised in seclusion. When fully grown, they begin to give up their organs for the benefit of the "normal" human population, until they "complete," the novel's euphemism for death. Ishiguro explores the nature of brutal, systemic atrocity through the voice of Kathy H., a young woman raised in an exclusive boarding school for clone children called Hailsham. Kathy's narrative is part memoir and part rights claim, demonstrating the ability of autobiographical narrative to communicate stories of exploitation and injustice by giving a voice to marginalized social groups struggling on the fringes of supposedly democratic societies.

Ishiguro's novel falls under a subgenre that Joseph Slaughter calls the "dissensual Bildungsroman" (Slaughter 2007: 181), a variation of the classic coming of age story that narrates the individual's assimilation into the social order, while simultaneously protesting the oppressive social conditions that the state forces on its subjects. As Slaughter shows, Bildungsroman is a genre closely tied to human rights narrative; one that explores the complex paradoxes that have come with the emergence of the modern human rights regime. Ishiguro utilizes this multifaceted narrative form to model such paradoxes, showing the ways in which incorporation into the body of the state gives access to the benefits of human rights, while also limiting personal freedoms through the process of inclusion into an inflexible social order.

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The novel also reckons with issues of trauma narrative, interrogating the ways that people express themselves in the wake of atrocity, and how others respond to those aestheticizations of human suffering with varying degrees of empathy, indifference, and perversion. *Never Let Me Go* examines the ways in which atrocity can become normalized, hidden in the routines of daily life. The novel weighs the power of human rights narratives against the countervailing forces of denial and apathy that make atrocity an unpleasant but accepted aspect of everyday existence. By questioning the effectiveness of human rights and trauma narratives Ishiguro confronts contemporary social issues in all their frustrating complexity, while always returning to the potential of human rights ideals as a way to enliven and enrich human lives—even those cut short by the brutality of repressive regimes.

Bildungsroman, Human Rights Narrative, and Science Fiction

Ishiguro's novel addresses modern social issues by utilizing genre to communicate and interrogate contemporary human rights concerns. Margaret Cohen argues for an understanding of genre as a "social relation"; a position that puts the text in dialogue with a pressing social issue (M. Cohen 1999: 17). Cohen claims that authors employ specific generic strategies to take a position in the context of a contemporary debate. She argues that "Once genre is viewed as a position, differences among individual examples of the genre become important when a text transgresses its dominant (in the structuralist sense) generic horizon" (M. Cohen 1999: 18). In other words, texts don't just utilize certain genres; they undermine, subvert and rebel against generic expectations as a way of tackling complex social dilemmas. In this model of analysis, "a subgenre becomes a set of poetic strategies that offer a persuasive fictional solution to urgent contemporary social contradiction" (M. Cohen 1999: 19). Although *Never Let Me Go* both employs and subverts genre to engage with human rights issues, it does not offer the "persuasive fictional solution" imagined by Cohen. Rather, Ishiguro's novel presents coded models of contemporary human rights paradoxes; models that recognize both the positive impacts and harmful unintended consequences that are products of the human rights regime.

Never Let Me Go fits into a number of generic molds, but Kathy's narrative is essentially a Bildungsroman, tracking the protagonist's personal growth from early childhood to maturity and adulthood. Much of Kathy's story focuses on her experience growing up in Hailsham where she forms the personal connections that define her life. Through a number of interweaving anecdotes regarding friendships, romances, and various adventures, the narrative tracks Kathy's individual development as she struggles with loss, uncertainty, and her responsibilities as a "carer"—a nurse who helps clones recover from their organ transplants.

The Bildungsroman dramatizes a complex process of adaptation, in which the needs and desires of the individual reconcile with their perceived responsibilities to society. In this way, the Bildungsroman provides a potential answer to the perennial Enlightenment question that asks to what degree the aspirations of the individual should supersede or become subordinate to the duties demanded by the state or society as a whole. The genre generally provides a blueprint for a type of synchronization of individual and societal needs that culminates in an eventual reconciliation between two inherently opposed sets of interests.

The narrative conventions and content of the Bildungsroman tell a particular story of the individual's shifting, give-and-take relationship with the society that they inhabit—a story with striking similarities to the human rights narrative crystallized by contemporary documents such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. In his book *Human Rights,* *Inc.*, Slaughter draws connections between the language of Bildungsroman and human rights law, showing how the two seemingly distinct genres frequently overlap in terms of their narrative expectations and in their conceptions of the individual's relationship with the state:

> Both human rights and the idealist *Bildungsroman* posit the individual personality as an instance of a universal human personality, as the social expression of an abstract humanity that theoretically achieves its manifest destiny when the egocentric drives of the individual harmonize with the demands of social organization. (Slaughter 2007: 20)

For Slaughter, the protagonist at the center of the plot of human rights and Bildungsroman stands as a representation of the universal individual struggling to find her place within a larger social structure.

Bildungsroman and human rights law both champion conditions that allow for the free and full development of human personality. Each genre posits the benign state as the ideal structure that allows the individual to reach their full potential. Paradoxically, the very structure (the state) that creates the optimal conditions for the development of human personality also constrains the individual by compelling them to sacrifice their personal desires to meet the demands of society.

Kathy's narrative exhibits many of the structural features found in the Bildungsroman and human rights narrative genres. Her individual voice does, in some ways, stand in for the clone community as a whole. Like all the other clones, she must eventually sacrifice the personal freedoms she has enjoyed to the demands of society. Just as they come into maturity, the period of reconciliation between the individual and society championed by human rights and Bildungsroman, Kathy and the other clones forfeit their personal freedoms to an extreme degree through the process of organ donations in a disturbing fulfillment of generic expectations.

Reading *Never Let Me Go* as a Bildungsroman, and by extension, as a type of human rights narrative, helps to explain one of the novel's most glaring questions: Why don't the clones rebel against their status in society? Even with a clear picture of the horrors awaiting them in the donation centers, the clones remain passive. They accept their fate almost without question, and some are even eager to carry out out what they perceive to be their responsibility to society, a sentiment clearly expressed by Kathy's friend Ruth when she says: "'I was pretty much ready when I became a donor. It felt right. After all, it's what we're *supposed* to be doing, isn't it?'" (Ishiguro 2005: 227, emphasis in original). Many critics and reviewers of the book have commented on the lack of resistance exhibited by the clones with responses ranging from puzzlement and frustration to elaborate justification. But the seemingly irrational behavior of the oppressed minority has a kind of twisted logic to it when reading the novel with certain generic expectations in mind. Slaughter points out that the Bildungsroman and human rights narrative employ narrative strategies that blunt rebellious impulses for the perceived betterment of society:

> [H]uman rights and the modern *Bildungsroman* share this basic plot structure that manages the pressures of both human rebellion and state legitimation … human rights law [like Bildungsroman] aspires to domesticate the impulse of the revolutionary plot of rebellion into the less-spectacular, reformatory plot of human personality development as the progressive harmonization of the individual and the state. (Slaughter 2007: 90–91)

The rebellious free-spirited individual is at once a product of the freedoms offered by society, and a threat to the order and stability of that community. Human rights law and Bildungsroman narrate a process that blunts the dangerous spontaneity of the individual, compelling them to integrate peacefully into the fabric of the social order. Instead of a revolutionary fervor born of dissatisfaction and discontent, the individual engages in the "plot of human personality development" that fulfills the protagonist's desires up until the point of maturity, the "harmonization of the individual and the state." From this perspective, Kathy and the other clones are simply following a common plot line that anticipates the submission of radical autonomy to the social responsibilities required by the state.

But Ishiguro's novel does not envision the reconciliation between the individual and society as a benign process of harmonization. Kathy's admission that she will soon give up her personal freedoms by way of organ donation does not represent a mutually beneficial tradeoff between state and citizen but, rather, an unjust capitulation to the demands of an oppressive social order. Slaughter describes this type of story as a realist version of the Bildungsroman, a cynical offshoot of the idyllic, affirmative narrative that complicates the dynamic between the individual and society by imagining the state as a rigid, tyrannical force:

> [R]ealist variants of the genre tend to depict the social order as intractable, and in such cases the plot of personality development appears as a process of assimilation, or "accommodation to the existing society"; these versions of the genre . . . image the social texture as aprioristic—as the "immobile background of the [ready-made] world" against which the protagonist becomes heroic by adapting (to a greater or lesser extent) to its exigencies. (Slaughter 2007: 180)

In this approximation of the genre, the individual and the society do not realize a mutually beneficial reconciliation of interests. Instead, the protagonist must submit to the social forces applying pressure from every direction, demanding compliance and conformity. Kathy's lack of rebellious impulse is still frustrating but understandable when considering the monolithic social forces pressuring her to relinquish her personal freedoms. And despite Kathy's passive acceptance of the social order, Keith McDonald suggests that "Some readers . . . will undoubtedly find heroism in her ability to recount her experiences in a world that goes so far as to disenfranchise her from the human mass, where she is reduced to a cog in the bioconsumerist culture" (McDonald 2007: 81). In some ways, Kathy's narrative constitutes a courageous act of protest by giving a marginalized minority a form of humanistic expression. This assertion corresponds with Slaughter's conception of Bildungsroman as "a human rights claim . . . a narrative instrument for historically marginalized people to assert their right to be included in the franchise of the public sphere" (Slaughter 2007: 157).

As a coming of age narrative that promotes a process of assimilation while simultaneously protesting the protagonist's disenfranchisement from society, *Never Let Me Go* falls into a subgenre of Bildungsroman that Slaughter calls the "dissensual *Bildungsroman.*" Slaughter describes this variation of the genre as a means of protest against disenfranchisement that uses the dominant narrative forms exemplified by Bildungsroman and human rights to make its case:

> This dissident subgenre depicts the imperatives of modernization, socialization, and human personality development not as an idealist process of consensual harmonization, but neither does it discount such concordance as an absolute, abstract impossibility . . . it neither accepts the grossly compromised terms of

> enfranchisement (the story of adaptation, for example) nor rejects them outright; instead, it holds onto the ideal of harmonious integration even as it narrates the unfulfillment of the promises of human rights and the idealist *Bildung*. (Slaughter 2007: 181)

The dissensual Bildungsroman offers a cautious narrative approach that both accepts and interrogates the basic tenets of the human rights plot of incorporation. This subversive subgenre recognizes the need for some basic form of human rights regime while protesting the coercive processes of socialization that obviate individual freedom and tarnished the fundamental ideals underlying the human rights enterprise. In this sense, the dissensual Bildungsroman correlates with Cohen's conception of genre as a social relation, in which the author subverts generic traditions (in this case the expectations associated with the idyllic Bildungsroman) in an effort to engage a contemporary social issue.

Never Let Me Go is an exemplary model of the dissensual Bildungsroman, a genre that promotes the benefits of free and full personality development while calling attention to the oppressive structural institutions that constrain individual autonomy. The dynamic between the individual and the forces of social domestication manifests itself in the novel's depiction of the relationship between the student clones and Hailsham. Kathy looks back on her time at Hailsham as an idyllic period in her life. She remembers her childhood with an intense nostalgia that elevates Hailsham to the status of a mythical, almost Edenic paradise. During long cross-country drives between caring centers, she often finds herself searching for Hailsham in the landscape, and lingering on old memories of friend, teachers, and various experiences both joyful and bittersweet. Kathy's description of the traditions at Hailsham—the student art exchanges, the secondhand sales, the classes on art, literature, and health—paint the school as a place where the students were able to develop individual personalities in a comfortable, supportive environment. And long after the students have left Hailsham, it still remains an important element of the clones' life as a place that binds them together over space and time. When Kathy hears that Hailsham is closing down, she laments the loss of her childhood home and wonders what will happen to her fellow students "spread across the country, carers and donors, all separated now but still somehow linked by the place we'd come from" (Ishiguro 2005: 212).

But even while Hailsham acts as a psychological link between its students, the school also constricts individual autonomy, stunting rebellious impulses by strategically acclimating students to their predetermined role in society. Despite her relentless idealization of Hailsham, Kathy also recognizes some of the ways that the school deceived it students: "Hailsham, timed very carefully and deliberately everything they told us, so that we were always just too young to understand properly the latest piece of information. But of course we'd take in at some level, so that before long all this stuff was there in our heads without us ever having examined it properly" (Ishiguro 2005: 82). Even though it provides its students with a space for free and full development, Hailsham's complicity with the existing social order compromises the integrity of that space by engineering a process of adaptation that precludes the possibility of resistance or dissent.

The revelation of Hailsham's role in conditioning its students for exploitative purposes is disturbing, but perhaps even more unsettling is the way Ishiguro's novel refuses to reduce the school to an institution of oppression, devoid of any positive influence on the lives if its students. When Kathy and her boyfriend Tommy encounter Hailsham's former headmistress, Miss Emily, the aged activist makes a compelling claim for the school's intrinsic worth as a shelter against the horrors perpetrated against clone children growing up in less idealistic institutions: "Whatever else, we at least saw to it that all of you in our care, you grew up in wonderful surroundings. And we saw to it too, after you left us, you were kept away from the worst of those horrors. We were able to do that much for you at least" (Ishiguro 2005: 261). Miss Emily strongly believes that Hailsham acted as a positive force that gave its students good lives and protected them from the deplorable conditions experienced by other clone children. At the same time though, she does admit that in order to carry out its ideal, Hailsham intentionally obscured truths, something she sees as a necessary deception:

> You see, we were able to give you something, something which even now no one will ever take from you, and we were able to do that principally by *sheltering* you. Hailsham would not have been Hailsham if we hadn't. Very well, sometimes that meant we kept things from you, lied to you. In many ways we *fooled* you. But we sheltered you during those years and gave you your childhoods. . . . You built your lives on what we gave you. You wouldn't be who you are today if we'd not protected you. (Ishiguro 2005: 268, emphasis in original)

Miss Emily admits to the project's inherent deceitfulness but claims that given the circumstances Hailsham did the best thing it could do for the well-being of its students. The "something" she claims Hailsham offered, the irrevocable gift to its students, was the opportunity for free and full development of individual personalities, the chance to grow up enjoying the freedoms envisioned by human rights law and literature. What Miss Emily also unintentionally expresses is Hailsham's great flaw, and the difficulty faced by any governing body that seeks to implement human rights through incorporation into a larger community. The freedoms that they wished to offer their students would always be tainted, compromised, incomplete in some way because they were freedoms tendered within the constricting boundaries of an institution demanding the eventual conformity and submission of the individual to the perverse responsibilities demanded by a corrupt social order.

In depicting Hailsham as a place of both personal growth and shadowy restrictions, Ishiguro's novel models a particular human rights paradox—the conflict between personality development and submission to a society that both offers and constricts individual freedoms—with unflinching complexity. But as much as the book's characters idealize Hailsham or defend its methods and motivations, in the end, Kathy's narrative functions as a form of protest against a system that curtails personal freedoms in favor of the exploitative demands of society. McDonald makes a compelling case for the novel working as a kind of testimonial literature that implicates the reader as a witness to atrocity. He argues that by incorporating elements of autobiography into Kathy's narrative, "Ishiguro invites us to abandon the veil of authenticity and bear witness to a memoir from another reality, an imagined past that could represent a real feature, where Science Fiction again calls our imaginations to act as a lens by which to scrutinize contemporary social dilemmas" (McDonald 2007: 82). McDonald sees science fiction as the primary genre at work in *Never Let Me Go* and argues that like most pieces of speculative fiction, the novel constructs an alternate but familiar reality, an allegorical world with subtle and disturbing connections to our own.

But while the novel does use aspects of speculative storytelling to engage with human rights issues, Ishiguro's brand of science fiction undermines generic expectations by muting all things fantastical and downplaying anything out of the ordinary. James Wood describes the novel as "a fantasy so mundanely told, so excruciatingly ordinary in transit, its fantastic elements so smothered in the loam of the banal and so deliberately grounded, that the effect is not just of fantasy made credible or lifelike, but of the real invading fantasy, bursting into its eccentricity and claiming it as normal" (Wood 2005: 36). Ishiguro constructs a sci-fi reality that insists on normalcy, refusing to embrace the gaudy trappings that are a major part of the genre's traditional appeal. The significance of this stylistic aberration lies in its connection to the novel's representation of atrocity (a subject that I will examine in more depth in a later section). Atrocities are conspicuous. They stand out, spill blood and demand attention. The way Ishiguro twists generic expectations, transforming the fantastic into something verging on mundane, mirrors the disturbing attitude taken towards atrocity throughout the text, as something ordinary, systemic and utterly unremarkable. Ishiguro's novel is both an expression and a study of this disconcerting process of normalization, in which the extraordinary and the horrific become indistinguishable from the everyday facets of reality.

Human Rights Narratives and Social Protest

In the face of a system that goes so far to normalize atrocity, *Never Let Me Go* posits the individual's life narrative as a subversive means of self-expression. Ishiguro constructs Kathy's narrative as a model of autobiographical social protest that draws attention to the plight of a marginalized social group suffering at the hands of an oppressive state system. In human rights work, there is a growing body of literature that supports this notion of autobiographical construction as an important act of protest that can undermine the legitimacy of an exploitative regime. In their examination of the role of life narratives in relation to human rights issues, Kay Schaffer and Sidonie Smith argue that the individual's autobiographical account functions as an important tool for resistance:

> Through acts of remembering, individuals and communities narrate alternative or counter-histories coming from the margins, voiced by other kinds of subjects—the tortured, the displaced and overlooked, the silenced and unacknowledged—among them. These counter-histories emerge in part out of the formerly untold tales of those who have not benefited from the wealth, health, and future delivered to many others by the capital technologies of modernity and postmodernity. (Schaffer and Smith 2004: 4)

The very act of telling one's own story gives a voice to the social groups living on the margins of society. Subversive stories of remembrance contest the accepted narratives of progress that turn a blind eye towards the suffering and the oppressed. These narratives run up against the conventional notions of growth and development, creating a friction that opens up space for criticism and dissent. Schaffer and Smith note the various ways in which this type of storytelling can upset the foundations of an already imbalanced social order:

> [P]ersonal and collective storytelling can become one way in which people claim new identities and assert their participation in the public sphere. It can also become a way of maintaining communal identification in the face of loss and cultural degradation. Or it can be enlisted in witnessing to the failures of democratic nations to realize and live up to their democratic principle of inclusive citizenship, making visible rents in the social fabric that undermine unified narratives of national belonging. (Schaffer and Smith 2004: 6)

In this sense, autobiographical construction functions as both a form of protest and a coping mechanism in the wake of loss or violation. Storytelling allows for participation in the public sphere, an arena where voices can be heard and change initiated. It also helps the victims persevere through the injustices that have robbed them of friends, family, and stability. And crucially, storytelling can expose hypocritical practices of democratic societies that spout off the rhetoric of inclusive citizenship, while engaging in shadowy practices of repression and exploitation.

From this perspective, Kathy's autobiographical narrative takes on new significance as a subversive act of protest, establishing her humanity and the injustices perpetrated against the clone population in a way that Hailsham's humanitarian project was never fully able to. The school encourages students to construct art and then shepherds their production away to mysterious galleries. Eventually, we learn that these galleries of student art were displayed for important public figures in order to prove the inherent humanity of the students. As Miss Emily explains, "We took away your art because we thought it would reveal your souls. Or to put it more finely, we did it to *prove you had souls at all*" (Ishiguro 2005: 260, emphasis in original). But while the galleries are never able to truly convince, Kathy's narrative—her artistic magnum opus derived from inner feeling and emotional experience—both fulfills Hailsham's mission to prove that the clones have souls and surpasses the school's narrow idealism by underscoring the oppressive conditions imposed by an exploitative regime.

The importance of autobiography in establishing the individual's human rights claim has a long history that goes back to the use of slave narratives as a tool for abolitionist aspirations. In the pre-Civil War period, the question of whether or not Africans were equal or inferior to Europeans permeated discussions of slavery. As Dwight McBride notes, "The primary site of contestation for slavery debates in the nineteenth century was African humanity." Proponents of slavery argued that "Africans were fundamentally inferior to Europeans and were, therefore, especially fitted for slavery. Such ideas also served as a moral justification for much of the treatment of Africans under slavery" (McBride 2001: 1–2). This denial of the fundamental humanity of thinking, feeling human beings is analogous to the situation presented in *Never Let Me Go*. Miss Emily elucidates the prevailing sentiment society hold towards clones that justifies their continuous exploitation: "So for a long time you were kept in the shadows, and people did their best not to think about you. And if they did, they tried to convince themselves you weren't really like us. That you were less than human, so it didn't matter" (Ishiguro 2005: 263).

The argument that Africans were somehow inferior to Europeans was an effective tool for proslavery advocates. With this type of racial thinking circulating through intellectual circles, abolitionists seized on slave narratives—with their stories of horrific violence and brutal degradation—as primary evidence that served as undeniable proof of a slave's inherent humanity and of the sadistic conditions he or she was forced to endure. The slave narrative works on multiple levels as a rights claim. It works to emancipate the individual by introducing their voice into the public sphere while also advancing the interests of the oppressed minority group. In this way, the slave's story serves as a form of witness that draws attention to the brutal atrocities perpetrated against a marginalized community.

By recording the horrific moments of violence and subjugation that they have borne witness to, the authors of slave narratives create another type of witness: the reader who engages with the testimonial text. McBride claims that the authors construct their autobiographical narratives of testimony with a specific audience in mind, a kind of discursive reader made of various ideologies that the text can challenge or placate at a given moment. He argues that the slave narrative does not address "a particular person or even . . . a particular community of persons. Rather, this discursive reader, which the slave implies in his or her testimony, is in fact a confluence of political, moral, and social discursive concerns that animate, necessitate, and indeed make possible slave testimony itself" (McBride 2001: 151). In this argument, the slave's autobiographical construction is, to some degree, determined by an imagined reader. The text consciously anticipates a specific audience and works to engage "this discursive reader who serves as principal witness to the slave witness" (McBride 2001: 151). In establishing this relationship between the text and the reader, McBride draws on Mikhail Bakhtin's theory to enhance his discussion of testimonial texts:

> Therefore [the speaker's] orientation towards the listener is an orientation towards the particular horizon, the particular world of the listener, it introduces completely new moments into his discourse: what takes place here is an interaction of different contexts, different points of view, different horizons, different expressively accented systems, different social "languages." The speaker seeks to orient his discourse with its own determining horizon within the alien horizon of the understander and enters into dialogic relations with moments of that horizon. The speaker penetrates the alien horizon of the listener, constructs his utterance on alien territory, against his, the listener's, appreciative background. (Quoted in McBride 2001: 152)

Bakhtin imagines a sort of dynamic call and response relationship between speaker and listener that both constitutes the nature of the text itself and influences the reader's experience of the narrative. The importance of this idea in relation to testimonial narratives lies in its emphasis on the dialogue running between witness and reader. The speaker does not just relate their experience haphazardly but constructs that experience with a particular audience in mind. And the nature of that audience goes a long way in determining the narrative's final form, in terms of both content and structure.

In *Never Let Me Go,* Kathy's story mimes the slave narrative's engagement with an imagined audience by explicitly addressing a constructed reader. Throughout the narrative, but especially in the first third of the book, Kathy employs the second person address, engaging the imagined reader with questions like "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 2005: 13). This frequent habit of addressing the reader does, as McDonald suggests, strengthen the illusion of the novel's status as autobiography, with the aim of engaging the reader in an act of witness: "the autobiographical trope of meta-reference seeks to draw the reader into the account of events, to ask us to bear witness to the dystopian world and the treatment of its victim" (McDonald 2007: 80). Kathy has clearly oriented her narrative towards a specific reader, presumably someone who lives under the same societal conditions as she does. This reader is not necessarily synonymous with McBride's multifaceted discursive reader, but there is a similar sense of a speaker shaping her narrative according to the expectations and inherent knowledge of a nameless listener, one who bears witness to the atrocities related by the narrator.

The Double-edged Sword of Trauma Narrative

It is clear that autobiographical narrative can give marginalized social groups a medium of protest and expression. At the same time, it also offers individuals the opportunity to work through their respective traumas through a structured expression of traumatic experience. Connecting autobiographical narratives of witness with trauma theory has become a common practice in human rights work; one that has recently drawn criticism from both academic and activist quarters. Translating traumatic experience into coherent narrative is a problematic process and an especially complex issue in the context of human rights work. On the one hand, putting painful experiences into language can be a therapeutic process that has the potential to help the sufferer cope with trauma. James Dawes summarizes this point of view, saying, "to bring physical or psychic damage into language is to lift it out of the body or mind into the world, where it can be repaired or, at the very least, distanced. To transform pain into language is to exert control over it, to undo pain's original theft of our autonomy" (Dawes 2009: 408). In this view, the act of organizing trauma into language allows the individual to reassert their agency and to reclaim a degree of control over their life. But the counterargument is that this very act of organizing constitutes its own malignant problem. Cathy Caruth argues that "the transformation of trauma into a narrative memory . . . may lose both the precision and force that characterizes trauma recall. . . . Yet beyond the loss of precision there is another, more profound, disappearance: the loss, precisely, of the event's essential incomprehensibility" (Caruth 1995: 151, 153–154). For Caruth, turning suffering into narrative dilutes the powerful nature of traumatic remembrance. Even worse, it ignores the possibility of the traumatic event as something so devastating and illogical that no narrative form or content can accurately portray its true horror.

For the first part of the novel, Kathy's story doesn't seem to contain very much in the way of trauma. Her school-day anecdotes and other seemingly harmless reminiscences about teachers and friends don't correspond with our conceptions of the prototypical trauma narrative, which usually deals in jarring memories of abuse, predation, and scarring violence. But as Judith Herman reminds us, trauma is not only the product of singular, cataclysmic events: "Traumatic events are extraordinary," she says, "not because they occur rarely, but rather because they overwhelm the ordinary human adaptations to life" (Herman 1992: 33). Herman encourages an understanding of trauma as a disturbing specter that haunts daily life. Trauma can be located not just in extreme contexts, but in aspects of the quotidian, the commonplace, the seemingly ordinary experiences that mask the dark horrors lying just below the surface of normalcy, knitted into the very fabric of everyday life. As Kathy's story unfolds, the traumatic experiences layered within her narrative become frighteningly clear: All her friends and schoolmates are dead or near death, their organs extracted in painful increments.

Ishiguro's novel examines trauma as a psychological state of being situated in everyday life and in what Caruth calls "the complex relation between knowing and not knowing" (Caruth 1996: 3). Caruth argues that both literature and psychoanalysis fixate on this particular aspect of trauma, as an experience that the victim is aware of, but that he or she can never fully understand. "And it is at the specific point at which knowing and not knowing intersect that the language of literature and the psychoanalytic theory of traumatic experience precisely meet" (Caruth 1996: 3).

The students in *Never Let Me Go* rarely discuss their individual and collective fates, but that knowledge is something they must reckon with, consciously or unconsciously, every day. Their trauma stems from an inability to confront the macabre reality they have been born into. The students are caught in a psychological limbo in which they simultaneously acknowledge and ignore their place in society. As mentioned before, the guardians at Hailsham do much to obscure the truth from their students. Miss Lucy, an idealistic young guardian who disagrees with the way Hailsham rears its clones, recognizes how this deception can end up having a damaging effect on her students' psyches. In one of the novel's most explicitly dramatic moments, Miss Lucy confronts her students with the stark reality of their existence:

> The problem, as I see it, is that you've been told and not told. You've been told but none of you really understand, and I dare say, some people are quite happy to leave it that way. But I'm not. If you're going to have decent lives, then you've got to know and know properly. . . . You've been brought into this world for a purpose, and your futures, all of them, have been decided. . . . If you're to have decent lives you have to know who you are and what lies ahead of you, every one of you. (Ishiguro 2005: 81)

Miss Lucy believes that Hailsham does it students a crippling injustice by denying them a full and explicit disclosure of their intended fates. In one sense the clones have been "told," initiated into the reality of atrocity and exploitation that constitute the basis of their respective traumas. At the same time they are "not told" and remain unable to fully grasp the inevitable horrors that will pervade their day-to-day lives throughout adulthood. Hailsham's system traps their students in a constant state of psychological uncertainty; a gray area between knowing and not knowing that keeps them wrapped up in self-delusional fantasies while damaging their perceptions of everyday life.

Never Let Me Go is a novel relentlessly self-conscious of the paradoxes that arise in the process of aestheticizing human suffering. Kathy's first person account of her childhood at Hailsham and her life beyond the school's protective boundaries takes shape as a traumatic narrative that offers both relief and anxiety. In one sense, Kathy's ability to put her life into language has a positive effect. She often relates the details of her past as something that she *needs* to do, suggesting that there is a therapeutic value in recounting her story. At several points, Kathy begins long anecdotes or explanations by saying "I want to talk about" or "I should explain," directly soliciting the reader's attention and signaling a desire to express some burdensome memory or tragic moment. Recounting the past through narrative organization also allows Kathy to make sense of certain moments of her life, to contextualize individual instances of confusion into the stabilizing body of a coherent storyline. On a number of occasions, Kathy comments that she did not understand the significance of a particular event until looking back on it much later. In this way, Kathy's desire to organize her life into a narrative allows her to make sense of the traumatic past and to assert some form of autonomy in the face of a brutal regime.

Although the novel displays a cautious optimism in the ability of narrative to bring some form of psychological relief, it also explores the limitations of storytelling as a way of confronting traumatic experience. Despite the fact that Kathy puts her memories into language, she can't seem to acknowledge the full extent of the horrors that pervade her day-to-day existence. While the reader may recognize the nature of the injustices that the clones must endure under the donation system, Kathy seems disconnected from her trauma. She avoids painful details and refuses to describe the donations or the loss of friends and loved ones in great detail. Her unwillingness to fully engage the traumatic past reflects the novel's deeper anxiety about the indescribable nature of trauma and atrocity.

The paradox of structured traumatic expression as a process that is both personally meaningful and, as Caruth suggests, potentially confusing, even damaging for the victim's comprehensions of his or her experience, also manifests itself in the artwork created by the students at Hailsham. The teachers at Hailsham encourage students to create works of art with the best creations taken away to the mysterious Gallery. When Kathy and her boyfriend Tommy confront Miss Emily she explains the rationale behind the displays of clone art: "'There were speeches, large funds pledged. 'There, look!' we could say. 'Look at this art! How dare you claim these children anything less than fully human?'" (Ishiguro 2005: 262). Shameem Black argues that the students' creation of art, far from achieving the desired empathy, actually serves a far more sinister purpose. "When Miss Emily says that 'your art will reveal your inner selves' (Ishiguro 2005: 254) her choice of phrase suggests that making such art actually prefigures the process of organ donation. From a young age, children grow accustomed to handing over their 'inner selves' to figures of authority" (Black 2009: 794). In Black's analysis, aesthetic expression that reveals the inner self is something to be exploited by the repressive regime. The creation of art is simply another form of control that stunts resistance and imprisons the students in a blissful ignorance until their time runs out.

But the novel is not so one sided in its depiction of art. Early in the novel, Miss Lucy tells Tommy not to worry about producing good art even though the other students make fun of him for his lack of creativity. Later though, she changes her advice and tells Tommy to focus on creating good art. "Listen Tommy, your art, it *is* important. And not just because it's evidence. But for your own sake. You'll get a lot from it, just for yourself" (Ishiguro 2005: 108, emphasis in original). Miss Lucy implores Tommy to work on his art, not just as evidence for the school's humanitarian project, but as an end in itself, an avenue of expression in which the individual can reckon with the past and find some form of solace or temporary relief that can help cope with the horrifying uncertainty of the future.

Responding to Atrocity

If *Never Let Me Go* obsesses over the ways that representing atrocity can affect the victim, or teller of the tale, it spends just as much, if not more, time contemplating the ways people experience and respond to representations of moral catastrophe. In particular, the novel deals with two very different but equally disturbing types of empathetic response: a feeling of numbness towards atrocity that preempts substantive action and the perverse, voyeuristic pleasure offered by aesthetic distillations of human suffering. Carolyn Dean sums up these modern suspicions of empathy saying: "The notion that we are currently 'numb' and inured to suffering is by now commonplace. Similarly, that the tears we shed in response to narratives and images of suffering are no longer necessarily pure surely goes without saying" (Dean 2004: 41). Both these responses speak to the problem of empathetic response in a modern society saturated with images and narratives of extreme violence with one taking the form of a deficiency and the other manifesting as a sadistic distortion of an idealistic sentiment.

This sense of numbness, an inability to properly feel for victims of violence and atrocity is a disturbing development that carries with it potentially devastating consequences. It signals an exhaustion of empathy that weakens the already fragile lifeline of humanitarian support that so many vulnerable populations rely upon for aid and assistance. For Dean, the emergence of numbness as a standard response to atrocity is a frightening development with potentially devastating consequences for humanist ideals:

> Numbness . . . manifests an important challenge to the liberal ideal that we can empathetically project ourselves into others with whom we share a common humanity, whether strangers or neighbors. For numbness is not only a psychological form of self-protective dissociation; it is arguably a new, highly self-conscious narrative about the collective constriction of moral availability, if not empathy and may thus constrain humanist aspirations in ways we do not yet recognize. (Dean 2004: 5)

Defenders of humanist ideals have challenged these pronouncements of the so-called death of empathy by pointing to the myriad ways in which people and organizations have stepped up to the challenge of providing humanitarian aid to those who need it the most. Lynn Hunt counters Dean's alarmist narrative saying, "Empathy has not been exhausted, as some have claimed. It has become a more powerful force for good than ever before. But the countervailing effect of violence, pain, and domination is also greater than ever before" (Hunt 2008: 212). For Hunt, empathy is alive and well, but the impulses and conditions that fuel mass atrocity are also thriving at an unprecedented scale. Still, recognition of an empathetic exhaustion is not an anomaly that should be discounted. For every humanitarian crisis that shows up on the front page of the morning paper, there are dozens more atrocities that go unnoticed and uncared for, whether because of distance or willful disengagement. Dean's concern is that a feeling of numbness toward atrocity has the potential to spread given the right circumstances.

Ishiguro's speculative novel imagines the realization of just such a scenario—of individuals and societies numbed to atrocity and unwilling or unable to shake themselves out of the empathetic stupor that masks the daily horrors that occur barely out of sight, and willfully out of mind. The ordinary citizens of this world do seem to have an inking of moral sensibility. The humanitarian project engineered by Miss Emily and her "small but very vocal movement" (Ishiguro 2005: 261) galvanizes support for the oppressed populations of clones, at least for a time. But ultimately, the novel depicts a disturbing failure of empathy. Near the end of the novel, Miss Emily explains to Kathy and Tommy the reasons for society's callous dismissal of clone rights, even after people have become aware of the horrors that underlie the donation system:

> However uncomfortable people were about your existence, their overwhelming concern was that their own children, their spouses, their parents, their friends, did not die from cancer, motor neurone disease, heart disease. So for a long time you were kept in the shadows, and people did their best not to think about you. And if they did, they tried to convince themselves you weren't really like us. That you were less than human, so it didn't matter. (Ishiguro 2005: 263)

According to Miss Emily, the people turning a blind eye to the plight of the clones are not necessarily evil; they simply put their personal relationships ahead of the needs of a distant, vaguely menacing population. In Ishiguro's novel, this sense of numbness develops as a kind of coping mechanism, a way for people to go about their daily lives even with the knowledge that others are suffering in a system of mass repression. The citizens of Ishiguro's fictional universe preempt feelings of empathy by imagining the clones as "less than human" and therefore outside the moral considerations that would normally be extended to the sick and the suffering.

The behavior of the normal human population in Ishiguro's world reflects a disturbing social phenomenon in our own society known as the "bystander effect," a term that refers to ways in which ordinary people ignore or remain indifferent to blatant human suffering. According to social psychologists, bystander passivity results from a number of interweaving psychological attitudes. Diffusion of personal responsibility, an inability to identify with the victim, a feeling of powerlessness, and a failure to conceive of an effective intervention all contribute to the apparent indifference of bystanders standing adjacent to atrocity (S. Cohen 2001: 16). Stanley Cohen points out that bystanders try to ignore horrific events by convincing themselves that those atrocities are simply incontrovertible facts of life:

"Bystanders, like perpetrators, are gradually drawn into accepting as normal actions which are initially repugnant. They deny the significance of what they see by avoiding or minimizing information about victims' suffering" (S. Cohen 2001: 16). Cohen explicitly relates the behavior of bystanders to the perpetrators of atrocity. It is a condemning connection, suggesting that bystanders are not simply passive voyeurs but active enablers of atrocity.

The subversion of empathetic response occurs not only because normal citizens can't stomach knowledge of atrocity but also because they recognize how the entitlements they enjoy have a direct connection to the suffering of others. Susan Sontag notes the limits of sympathy as a viable emotional response to suffering when the sympathizer is in some way complicit in the social order that perpetuates pain and inequality. She challenges those who pity the miserable and the oppressed to reflect "on how our privileges are located on the same map as their suffering, and may—in ways we might prefer not to imagine—be linked to their suffering, as the wealth of some may imply the destitution of others" (Sontag 2003: 102–103). In Ishiguro's novel, the refusal to engage with atrocity constitutes a denial of moral responsibility. Like many of the people who are vaguely aware of the mass suffering that occurs in distant, unfamiliar regions of the world, the citizens of Ishiguro's novel have more than a passing connection to the exploitative processes that subject others to pain and degradation.

Perhaps even more disturbing than this deficiency of empathy is the idea that people can actually derive pleasure from the suffering of others, particularly from representations of suffering meant to engender some sort of constructive, empathetic response. Dawes frames the issue as a complex question that human rights workers and storytellers must contemplate when relating narratives of atrocity: "How do you resolve the paradox that your audiences hunger for images and stories of human calamity," he asks, "both because they want to understand their world and their moral responsibilities in it and because they are voyeuristic?" (Dawes 2009: 401–402). In a similar vein of thought, Feldman critiques the proliferation of trauma narratives as an unwelcome development for human rights work. He argues that "the trauma-aesthetic installs and smuggles into discourse a visual genealogy of witnessing and testimony-giving that sorts victim and witness into positions of hierarchical observation, compulsory visibility, and non-reciprocal appropriation of the body in pain" (Feldman 2004: 186). Trauma narratives may have good intentions, but they also reflect and reinforce an exploitative relationship that places suffering body prostrate in front of the voyeuristic gaze of a distant witness.

Ever sensitive to these issues of representation, Ishiguro's novel addresses this paradox by omitting the gory details. There are no grisly descriptions of mutilated bodies, no explicit descriptions of organ removal—only vague hints of suffering, implied and insinuated, but never rendered in plain view. The novel rarely lingers on violated bodies even when they start to appear more frequently in the last section of the novel, most of which takes place at the caring facilities where clones go through the painful cycle of extraction and convalescence. Instead, Ishiguro slips suggestive hints into seemingly innocuous sentences. For instance, when Tommy explains why he didn't leave his caring facility to go on a trip, he says, "I couldn't be bothered really. I was going to go once, with a couple of others and their carers, but then I got a bit of bleeding and couldn't go anymore" (Ishiguro 2005: 221). Similarly, when Kathy describes the first time she and Tommy have sex she says, "That first time we still had stitches to worry about, and anyway, after all the years of knowing each other and not having sex, it like we needed some intermediary stage before we could get into it in a full-blown way" (Ishiguro 2005: 238). Ishiguro's prose shrouds the damaged and disfigured body with rhetorical diversions that simultaneously hint at suffering and resist the invasive impulse to fetishize the pain of the oppressed.

Conclusion

Never Let Me Go covers a multitude of human rights issues. Ishiguro constructs his novel as a type of human rights narrative that invokes the power of autobiographical storytelling to affirm the humanity of individuals and the democratic rights of oppressed communities. Telling stories can open up a space for dissent, as well as provide a medium of expression that can help victims of atrocity cope with their respective traumas. But Kathy's Bildungsroman also casts doubt on the infallibility of human rights ideals and practices, a feeling of apprehension reflected in the deceitful nature of Hailsham's educational project, and the disturbing failure of empathetic response exhibited by the citizens of Ishiguro's dystopian society.

I've shown throughout the course of this article that Ishiguro models the paradoxes of human rights narratives in careful detail. But is there any useful purpose to be found in representing these paradoxes, or is Ishiguro's work simply an exercise in futility that demonstrates the painful backlash of idealism run amuck? Slaughter provides a useful way of looking at paradox that invests Ishiguro's project with positive meaning: "If we recognize paradox's figurative role in human rights instead of treating it is a shameful limitation of human rights discourse and practice, then we can attend to its productive possibilities" (Slaughter 2007: 13). Ishiguro's exploration of human rights paradoxes is ultimately optimistic. Life and trauma narratives may have limitations, but, by examining the extent and character of those limitations, the novel makes a constructive contribution to human rights discourse. Ishiguro compiles the different facets of rights work, storytelling, and trauma narrative together into a disturbing and readable document that complicates and enriches an ongoing discussion of the processes that allow human beings to respond to and cope with the worst atrocities.

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