Confronting the Anthropocene with an Artificial Friend: The Pedagogical Affordances of Kazuo Ishiguro's *Klara and the Sun*

Maxim Shadurski (University of Siedlce, Poland)

Abstract
Kazuo Ishiguro's *Klara and the Sun* (2021) is a useful pedagogical resource in the study of Anthropocene fiction. Its clear, engaging prose can suit the needs of university modules in contemporary anglophone literature, particularly those aimed at enhancing readers' critical literacy. This article proposes a reading model of Ishiguro's novel which seeks to perform a triple task: 1) to raise discourse awareness about artificiality as a symptom of the Anthropocene; 2) to stimulate a critical response to progress-oriented anthropogenesis; and 3) to encourage a rethinking of the crisis of the Anthropocene in terms of the novel's narrative.

Keywords: critical literacy; artificiality; environmental crisis; anthropogenesis; progressivist discourse; narrative

This article proposes that Kazuo Ishiguro's eighth and latest novel, *Klara and the Sun* (2021), holds significant pedagogical affordances as an Anthropocene fiction. The novel problematizes the Anthropocene as an environmental crisis brought about by the increased artificiality of life. The novel's protagonist embodies, inhabits, and reframes artificiality. Klara is an android machine endowed with the characteristics of a female artificial friend (AF). She—or, more appropriately, it—operates in a world dominated by human activity. Such reality marks the parameters of what Klara observes, knows, and retrospectively translates into her first-person account. Despite its seemingly naïve tone, this self-reflexive narrative highlights how certain kinds of artificiality can be more life-threatening than others. Klara perceives these artificialities in the forms of pollution and a portrait. Conversely, the novel also posits the artificiality of Klara's own narrative as a more redemptive asset in confronting the

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Anthropocene. Written in lucid, almost conversational prose, *Klara and the Sun* provides valuable reading material for university students and teachers. The novel may be read on specialized modules in contemporary anglophone literature, especially those dealing with fiction in the Anthropocene.

A reading model of Klara and the Sun

This article devises a reading model of Ishiguro's novel by which to address artificiality as a facet of the Anthropocene. My model owes itself to a critical literacy approach and the ideas of transformative pedagogy emerging within it. It also upholds climate change literacy, which has recently gained prominence in the humanities. Grounded in the work of Norman Fairclough (1992), Terry A. Osborn (2000), and Jim Cummins (2000), critical literacy brings readers' attention to how certain varieties of text serve as discourse. For Fairclough and Osborn, discourse uses language in ways that make class, gender, and identity, as well as ethnic, ethical, and other social norms seem natural. It does so through repetition, which renders the status quo of socio-political power structures unchallenged and unchanged (Fairclough 1992: 9; Osborn 2000: 48). For Cummins (2000), the reader's task becomes to learn how to question the 'discourse of disempowerment' (232). For that purpose, he espouses transformative pedagogy, which promotes collaborative interactions between students and teachers. Such interactions, in turn, help to overcome the 'reality of coercive relations of power' and to relearn the world from a critical perspective (252).

The proponents of climate change literacy take a critical stance on the discourse that normalizes how humans ensure their progress by affecting Earth's climate. In *Climate Change Literacy* (2023), Julia Hoydis, Roman Bartosch and Jens Martin Gurr (2023) turn to literary narrative as a site where discourse is at once reaffirmed and challenged. For them, narrative 'situates climate change within a larger cultural context and re-situates questions of reflexion and agency accordingly' (8). By this logic, fictional texts acquire renewed pedagogical value. Not only can they reinforce the reader's distrust of progressivist discourse, but they can also inspire empathy and fresh insight into the socio-ecological factors behind environmental crisis (26). In this manner, fiction serves as a transformative component in both 'climate education and action' (2).

The reading model I elaborate for Ishiguro's *Klara and the Sun* is equally guided by an understanding that literary narrative provides a space in which students learn to confront the crisis of the Anthropocene. In *Klara and the Sun*, students find themselves amidst characters and events that bear out the effects of progress-oriented anthropogenic activity. The novel's focal point is the destiny of an AF in a world where the privileged few can have their children genetically upgraded or, if the operation fails, substituted by a true-to-life technological product. Put differently, an artificial entity, Klara, plays naïve witness to an artificial intervention into the teenage body of her human user, Josie. Should the latter die in the process, Klara may serve as Josie's artificial 'portrait' (Ishiguro 2021: 266). Ishiguro's novel enacts the workings of discourse that engenders crisis. It also serves as an invitation to ponder on its possible resolution.

To tap into the pedagogical affordances of Ishiguro's novel, I propose a reading which combines elements of critical literacy, cultural theory, art history, and literary analysis. My reading model develops in three stages. First, it contextualizes the novel alongside critical studies which treat artificiality as the outcome of progress-driven anthropogenesis. This contextualization should enable students to distinguish between different kinds of artificiality, including those that can be less detrimental and more life-saving in the Anthropocene than the pressures of progressivism. Second, my model asks students to explore Klara's conflicted relationship with progress. As she moves from newness to obsolescence, her trajectory as an android, narrator, and character signals a wider underlying critique of progressivist discourse. The third and final step consists of a discussion that attends to the alternate ways in which Klara's narrative engages with the world which operates on anthropogenic principles. Such a three-step discussion, it is to be hoped, amounts to transformative insights about the roles of artificiality in confronting the Anthropocene.

My reading model sets out to perform the following pedagogical tasks: 1) to raise students' discourse awareness about the Anthropocene as a crisis of artificiality; 2) to stimulate students' critical response to progress-guided anthropogenesis; and 3) to encourage students to rethink the crisis of the Anthropocene through Klara's narrative. Developing from discourse awareness to critique to transformative reflection, my reading model follows Sofia Ahlberg's (2021) recommendation. For her, times of crisis require readings that 'interweave the theoretical and the practical with a method of reading [that would be applicable] to classroom

practices' (9). To that end, I also offer accompanying reading exercises in the sections below. Each exercise seeks to foster a reading that would motivate students to confront the Anthropocene collaboratively.

Conceptualizing Klara's situation in the Anthropocene

This section begins with a thought-provoking question: Can the incremental artificiality of life on Earth be harnessed to reverse the effects of the Anthropocene? In the module, students are asked to offer reflections on this question. Their responses will then be explored alongside conceptualizations of artificiality. They will also be discussed in relation to the artificiality of Ishiguro's narrator in *Klara and the Sun*.

In a recent study, the Anthropocene has been defined as 'an ongoing geological event' characterized by 'anthropogenic global changes' (Gibbard 2022: 395). Said changes permeate nearly every aspect of life on Earth, from the atmosphere and soil to microbial cycles, genetic structures, and even virtual reality. Affecting environments on all scales, anthropogenic activity poses a profound existential threat to life as it has been understood for millennia (Dominey-Howes 2018; Folke 2021). In the words of Sue Zemka (2018), the Anthropocene heralds a sense of an ending, 'if we agree that by "ending" we mean changes unprecedented in recorded history in the biostability of the Holocene, in the climates and species of life that have remained relatively the same for the last 12,000 years' (72). The resulting impacts are not only life-changing, but they also reshape human actions into a matter of geology. As Dipesh Chakrabarty (2009) aptly states, 'the geologic now of the Anthropocene has become entangled with the now of human history' (212). Indeed, humans leave an indelible mark on the planet's geology, one whose artificiality will persist long after humanity itself.

To conceptualize artificiality for the purpose of students' further reading, the Anthropocene is approached as the product of Western modernity, particularly its grand narrative of progress. Such examination traces itself back to *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1947). Famously, its authors, Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno (2002), construed progress with its opposite: 'The curse of irresistible progress is irresistible regression' (28). Writing in the aftermath of the Holocaust, they rejected progress as the guiding vector of human history. They also pointed to the 'disenchantment' (1) that progress brings to the world through applications of knowledge and technology: 'Knowledge, which is power,

[enslaves] creation' while 'Technology ... aims to produce neither concepts nor images, nor the joy of understanding, but method, exploitation of the labor of others, capital' (2). Disenchanted, the world becomes not only an instrument of progress, but also its playground. To ensure this, modern science reduces the complexities of Earth to a manageable set of coordinates. As David Chandler (2024) notes, such knowledge systems establish an 'ontology of universal laws, Newtonian fixities, and Cartesian divides of the "human" as subject and "world" as passive object' (2). Indeed, progress may only happen in an artificial world made by humans, and Western modernity legitimizes it as a continuous overhaul of Earth's environments, bodies, and matters.

In 'All Life is Artificial Life' (2019), Claire Colebrook takes a more provocative view of progress. She identifies it with anthropogenesis, or the process by which humans make both themselves and the world around them. According to her, anthropogenesis is artificial in its entirety: 'It is artifice that defines rather than supplements life' (1). In an evolutionary sense, anthropogenesis starts with the acquisition of tools and language. Further human development becomes unthinkable without these artificial extensions, yet Colebrook notes that Western modernity renders anthropogenesis into an almost exclusive prerogative of the more privileged fractions of humanity (9). Those select few have the means to expand and maintain purchase over life by pushing its limits. Not only do they instrumentalize nearly everything on Earth, but they also co-opt language to valorize what they do. However, Colebrook refuses to accept the discriminatory terms of such anthropogenesis. Instead, she opens it up to other possibilities by asking questions that students can be encouraged to consider:

> What might life be like if all life were thought of as artificial life, and if that same artifice were not moralised as having its only proper form in the art object? Should we really see the end of life as we know it—the life of the technologically accomplished purveyor of a world of one single, self-forming humanity—as the end of the world? (10).

Colebrook's (2019) rhetorical questions invite students to rethink both progress and the Anthropocene. 'Life as we know it' does not have to end with the actions and fantasies of the privileged few, whose version of anthropogenesis demands a constant transcendence of life. Earth's destiny does not need to lie at the mercy of progress that proves to be suicidal. If

artificiality is fundamental to anthropogenesis at large, the Anthropocene can play itself out along different lines. Students should be encouraged to explore other kinds of artificiality, which would be less prone to self-expansion and maintenance. Ishiguro's novel grants one such example in the character and narrative of his protagonist.

To anticipate the ensuing discussion of Klara's artificial alterity further, students are invited to reflect upon the following questions: How do art and artificiality become conflated in the Anthropocene? And how does this conflation change artistic representation? If one accepts that whatever humans make with the help of their tools and language contributes to the Anthropocene, art is no exception. Art is also artificiality. From creation to distribution to archiving, its existence equally produces impacts on the environment, yet unlike polluting machineries and extracting infrastructures, works of art are more highly valued for how they at once reflect and enable anthropogenesis. To guide students towards such insights, they can be asked to consider the most famous portrait painting in the world, Leonardo Da Vinci's *Mona Lisa* (ca. 1503). Executed in a realist, nearly photographic manner, its sitter may wish to reaffirm the conviction that art imitates humanity. But does it? What kind of being, with that uncanny shadow of a smile, is staring at the viewer? What relationship does its strange beauty bear to that of the human? These questions problematize art's aptitude to reflect the human-like essence that allegedly constitutes it. In the context of the Anthropocene, art acquires a different functional mode. Similarly to any other human-induced environment-changing activity, it creates a reality of its own, where the human is but a trace.

In his study of anglophone fiction, *The Prosthetic Imagination: A History of the Novel as Artificial Life* (2020), Peter Boxall recruits a poststructuralist, Derridean principle to explain a new order of artistic representation. Under the Anthropocene, reality is inseparable from anthropogenesis. Since humans constantly make themselves and the world around them by artificial means, there can be no 'prior reality' that predates an artificial one (11). As a consequence, art must grapple not with some missing or lost essence of the human, but with a proliferation of its evasive reflections. For Boxall, art equals anthropogenic activity. It does not imitate 'an absent reality' but rather produces it like a prosthesis (9). By this logic, a work of art is also artwork. It is as artificial as a prosthetic hand, which looks like a human hand, yet operates and feels differently

from that organ. An interplay between likeness and difference characterizes Boxall's notion of the prosthetic. Extracts from his study can therefore be explored by students to prepare them for a reading of Ishiguro's novel.

The following two sections of this article will investigate how Klara's narrative fulfils its prosthetic function. Students are asked to explore the narrator's artificiality not only as a matter of her anthropogenic ontology, but also as a self-generating phenomenon with its own logic and vision. Klara will be treated as narrative, a form of artificiality which produces, rather than imitates reality. This reality can be seen to subvert both the self-transcending stresses of anthropogenesis and the imitative aspirations behind it. The reading module will present anthropogenesis as a clash of competing artificialities: between narratives that enable some select humanity to surpass the limits of life, on the one hand, and narratives that attune themselves to those limits, on the other. The aim is to sensitize students to persisting socioeconomic divisions at the heart of the Anthropocene and thereby to increase their critical literacy.

Klara's movement in time and space: Progress in the Anthropocene

This section presents the main developments of Klara's narrative, discerning how Ishiguro lays bare the anthropogenic forces behind the present-day environmental crisis. The novel's narrator moves in time and space along two incongruent trajectories. The first one frames her narrative. Klara begins in a store and ends in a scrap yard. The second one sends her on a quest. Klara travels towards the Sun, the source of her 'nourishment' (Ishiguro 2021: 3). To analyse each trajectory, students are asked to mine the text for answers to two sets of questions. This exercise aims to facilitate a broader critique of progress. The first set of questions is: What does Klara's career from newness to obsolescence reveal about progress? What stimulates progress in the society she serves? Do these incentives apply to machines only?

In approaching the first set of questions, students are asked to observe Klara's fixation about being new, with which the novel starts. Its opening pages contain repeating variations: 'When we were new' (Ishiguro 2021: 3), 'I was new then' (4), and 'I was still quite new then' (8). Klara attributes newness to her status as commodity in Manager's store, where she awaits her consumer alongside other products. Newness also refers to her model. Being a B2 (49), Klara worries that the more recent arrivals of

B3s, equipped with 'all sorts of improvements' (41), may diminish her chances of being bought. Klara's concern suggests the high rate at which complex technologies not only become released but also exceed demand. Progress leads to a numerical upgrade of models, stoking up capitalist anxieties even among the AFs.

The novel's final pages unveil the flipside of progress in the enormous amounts of waste it leaves behind. Symbolically, Klara comes to inhabit a large scrap yard, which she shares with other obsolete machineries. It stretches as far as she can see and features objects with 'an untidy identity—with the remains of severed cables protruding or with dented grille panels' (Ishiguro 2021: 334). This setting evokes a nineteenth-century trope, that of a formidable rubbish tip. In E. H. Dixon's watercolour of the *Great Dust-Heap* (1837), a tell-tale scene presents itself. It shows a garbage dump in the form of an alpine peak, encircled by slum residences, allotments, and a smallpox hospital in the vicinity of London's King's Cross. In addition to birds hovering above the heap, there are human scavengers who live by its contents. The painting depicts waste as an indelible part of progress. It accentuates endless opportunities to be gained from everything under capitalism. By contrast, Klara's scrap yard attracts no vermin: 'Sometimes birds will come down from the sky, but they soon discover there is little in the Yard to interest them' (Ishiguro 2021: 334). The few human visitors Klara notices might be hoarders. Like her former store Manager, they come 'to collect little souvenirs' (337). Pointing to the 'orderly rows' of waste under a 'wide sky' (334), Klara's narrative probes an Anthropocene aesthetic. Nonreusable plastics and metals cut short the delusions of infinite progress.

Stretching between store and scrap yard, Klara's trajectory involves her service for the Arthur family. The pressures of progress hold sway over its members in peculiar ways. Josie's parents, Paul and Chrissie, live separated in California, close enough perhaps to the Silicon Valley. They might have fallen out over their ability to embrace progress and whatever it takes to go along with it. Paul describes himself as 'an expert engineer' (Ishiguro 2021: 249), who was extremely successful until 'the changes' came (257). The loss of his job has landed him on the margins of society. Divorced from his former family, Paul takes up with a community of similar socioeconomic outcasts. While looking to others like a 'fascistic' gang with guns, they claim 'to lead a decent and full life' (257), which they defend against the growing social inequities resulting from progress.

Paul opposes Josie's pending genetic editing. Rather, he prefers to address her as 'my favorite wild animal' or simply 'animal' (207, 208, 254, 256, 259, 260), stressing thus his daughter's residual biology. In the Anthropocene, Klara shares with Paul a congruent destiny. They both move along a downward arc, which blurs the boundaries between human and machine. As Paul's case illustrates, humans, too, may end up in a position of being identified as uncommodifiable waste if they fail to meet the upgrading demands of their society. Unlike humans, however, machines have not staged an armed revolt yet.

In *Klara and the Sun*, Chrissie acts as Paul's foil regarding progress. Even though her occupation remains unspecified, she belongs to a financially secure elite, who can provide for a separate house in the country, a housekeeper, and a genetic intervention for her child. Chrissie's loss of her elder daughter, Sal, does not stop her from having Josie become like one of the 'lifted kids' (Ishiguro 2021: 93). The stakes of the operation are steep: either Josie survives it and gets to college or she dies. Tormented by the uncertainty of either eventuality, Chrissie blocks out a third option. Her decision works against Josie's future without college. It erases the possibility of a life in which Josie would be socially and economically marginalized like her father. This prospect looks more unpalatable to Chrissie than her child's possible death. Such a progress-oriented ethics of care brings Chrissie together with a group of like-minded parents, 'all of them female' (75). At first glance, the camaraderie between them seems to reflect a wider empowerment of women outside the two-parent model of the bourgeois family. At a deeper level, though, these mothers refashion and exacerbate the patriarchal order of Western modernity. In the Anthropocene, a privileged matriarch subjects her own child's body to the risky inroads of progress.

Klara and the Sun undercuts the linearity of progress by how Klara narrates time. The temporal structure of her narrative refuses to move like a mechanical clock, which parcels out time into segments of equal duration. Rather, Klara presents her story in six chapters whose timeframes are strikingly uneven and their timings imprecise. Part One and Two cover the events of approximately a month (Ishiguro 2021: 45, 64, 96), Part Three and Five last several days (149, 295, 307), Part Four takes less than twenty-four hours (289), and Part Six sees 'the seasons—and the years—[go] by' (319). Narrative duration intensifies in Part Three and Five, when Klara revisits the circumstances of Josie's frail health. In

Part Four, her narrative almost grinds to a pause, when Klara broods about what would have happened to her if Josie had died, whether she would have been able 'to continue her' (233) and 'learn her heart' (242). However, Josie's recovery accelerates temporal movement. Years flick on fast-forward until the moment when Josie leaves for college and Klara for the scrap yard. When students are asked to consider the timeframes in the novel, the manipulations of narrative duration may disclose to them that Klara, a mechanism which stands for progress, is strikingly unmechanical in her perceptions of time. Her narrative complicates the pace and rhythm of progress, which would otherwise be expected to be smooth.

The second set of questions serves to trace the trajectory of Klara's quest and brings students' attention to the self-sustaining logic of her narrative: Where does Klara's pursuit of the Sun lead her? What new knowledge and experience does she acquire herself? What further insights about Klara's being in time does her narrative offer? These questions highlight that her movement in time and space occurs on its own terms, which challenges the human-centred thrust of progress. They also help students to appreciate the importance that the novel's title, *Klara and the Sun*, attaches to its narrator's relationship with the Sun, and whether that relationship has a redemptive potential in the Anthropocene. What follows is a retracing of Klara's changing interactions with the Sun from chapter to chapter, recording how she sees the Sun and moves towards it.

Being solar-powered, Klara feels strongly attracted to the Sun to a point of personifying it as a universal energy giver, with 'his' nourishment and kindness. She finds fascination in the Sun's reflections across sunlit rooms, buildings, and fields, while admiring sunsets especially. From Part One to Part Three, Klara's quest keeps her wondering about where the Sun goes to rest. In Part One, she first appears inside her Manager's store, observing 'the Sun on his journey' (Ishiguro 2021: 3). Her wish to be nourished by the Sun complements her preference to stay by the window, 'to see more of the outside—and see it in all its detail' (9). Because a tall building in front prevents Klara from watching sunsets, she can only guess where the Sun disappears. Her first meeting with Josie spells a promise. Once purchased as her AF, Klara will get nothing in the Sun's way. As Josie pledges, 'From up in my room you can see exactly where the Sun goes down' (15).

In Part Two, Klara has this promise realized. She spends her evenings in Josie's bedroom. Its rear-view window allows her 'to watch the Sun go

to his resting place' (Ishiguro 2021: 60), as she enjoys 'the last part of the Sun's journey' (61). Such regular observations make Klara notice 'a dark box-like shape at the end of the furthest field' (62). Josie refers to it as Mr. McBain's barn and describes it as being 'open on two sides' to keep 'stuff in there' (62). For Klara, the Sun's downward movement aligns with the barn's position on the horizon. This alignment makes her 'wonder why the Sun would go for his rest to a place like that' (62).

In Part Three, Klara's curiosity about the Sun grows because of Josie's ill health. Based on her own solar nourishment, she develops a belief that Josie lacks the 'special help' that the Sun has yet to send her (Ishiguro 2021: 129). Yet the Sun struggles to do so as a result of what Klara deems to be 'Pollution' (131). She connects it with the overhaul machine she saw in Part One. Also known as the Cootings Machine, it becomes responsible for 'obliging even the Sun to retreat for a time', in Klara's judgement (131). To ensure Josie's recovery, she embarks on her first trip to Mr. McBain's barn, where the Sun allegedly spends the night.

Klara's adventure has several important discoveries in store for her. One of them concerns movement. Klara wrestles with coordination and orientation outdoors. She miscalculates the time needed to reach the barn, because she takes the space around her to be smooth. Yet, in Klara's own words, 'I thought there'd be sufficient time, but the fields were more complex than I'd imagined' (Ishiguro 2021: 177). Indeed, the ground turns out to be uneven and the grass coarse for her small body to navigate, so much that she has to be carried by Rick, Josie's neighbour and friend. Klara's other discovery involves the Sun itself. On reaching the barn, she looks further afield and realizes that the Sun continues its descent elsewhere. This realization makes Klara readjust her thinking. If the barn cannot be 'the Sun's actual resting place' (180), it may be an intermediary stop on its way. Together with her first-hand experience of time and space, Klara obtains a sense of a receding horizon. Her narrative recasts some of her absolute beliefs into their more relational and elusive counterparts, where the Sun, like Earth, are at once known and unknowable.

From Part Four to Part Six, Klara's pursuit of the Sun brings out further revelations for her. Having pleaded with the Sun against the Cootings Machine, the ostensible origin of all pollution, Klara delivers her promises. In Part Four, she forms a strange Luddite pact with Paul, who helps her to damage the overhaul machine they spot during their stay in the city. However, Klara's initial triumph gives way to disappointment.

She sees a 'New Cootings Machine', greater and more powerful, and understands 'why the Sun hadn't acted' (Ishiguro 2021: 292). This understanding tallies with her dawning insight that phenomena, including pollution, are not singular. They take on multiple forms, and those forms conceive different meanings.

In Part Five, Klara's second trip to the Sun consolidates that insight. She becomes aware of a new source of light, as the Sun's rays fade: 'I realized the Sun wasn't really in the barn at all, but that something reflective had been left there by chance and was now catching his reflection during the last moments of his descent' (Ishiguro 2021: 306). Klara's attention shifts to the stack of seven sheets of glass leaning against the wall behind her. Turning to inspect them, she remarks: 'I began to appreciate that I wasn't looking at a single picture; that in fact there existed a different version of the Sun's face on each of the glass surfaces' (307). Klara discerns a whole range of the Sun's characteristics, which she perceives to vary from aloof and unfriendly to soft and kind.

Once students have traced Klara's shifting interpretation of the Sun so far, they are asked to consider it in relation to Plato's allegory. Notably, Ishiguro situates his narrator in an inverted version of the Platonic cave. Unlike the ancient cave prisoner, Klara must first come there. Only after she gets used to the reflecting light inside the cave, can she see both the reality of the Sun and her relationship with it properly. Such a move is crucial. It speaks directly to Klara's artificiality. Similarly to that stack of glass left in the barn, Klara's narrative not only reflects, but also generates its own light. The multiple reflections it produces give 'the effect ... of a single face, but with a variety of outlines and emotions' (Ishiguro 2021: 307). Through them, Klara heightens the prosthetic function of representation, including her own. Artificiality may look like what it represents, but it always does more than that.

In Part Six, Klara's journey to the Sun ends. On being relegated to the scrap yard, she sits on top of a dump heap: 'The wide sky means I'm able to watch the Sun's journeys unimpeded, and even on cloudy days, I'm always aware of where he is above me' (Ishiguro 2021: 334). If one remembers Klara's ambition to follow the Sun and get the best view, her final situation may seem rewarding in a cynical sense. Along these lines, some commentators have picked up on the vexed tonality of Klara's narrative and approach it from a humanistic perspective. For them, Klara is the victim of exploitation, objectification, and deindividualization.

Being subaltern makes her redemptive (see Banerjee 2022; Xiao 2023). Indeed, Klara shares with Ishiguro's earlier narrators a search for solace in the retrospective narrative of her own (Sloane 2021: 26). Like them, she moves back in time to undo the progress that has reduced her to an unwanted, disused piece of rubbish.

Astute as they are, such interpretations miss two very important points: Klara's artificiality and her relationship with the Sun, inscribed in the novel's title. Elsewhere, I have argued that Klara 'remains oblivious to her own artificiality and status as nonbiodegradable pollution' (Shadurski 2023: 72). Here, I would like to add that precisely her artificiality defines her continuing movement beyond the waste ground of the Anthropocene. The Sun enables Klara to reflect. The retrospective narrative she constructs resembles reflected sunlight, which lingers on after the Sun has set. At the same time, though, Klara's reflections are transient, as they appear 'drifting and overlapping as if in the evening wind' (Ishiguro 2021: 304–305). Klara, too, may become like her own reflections, but in a more material sense. In addition to being solar-powered, she is also photodegradable. The Sun will eventually break her body into plastic particles. These will float and coast around Earth after she disintegrates. Klara never envisages such an ending herself. Yet her narrative prompts it. Moreover, Ishiguro rehearses a drift of plastic at the close of an earlier novel, *Never Let Me Go* (2005). Its protagonist narrator, Kathy H., makes out her future in the flotsam of windborne rubbish (Ishiguro 2005: 281–282; Shadurski 2024: 22). Powered by the Sun, this process is Earth-bound. Unlike the progressivist incentives behind the Anthropocene, it does not push the planet to or beyond its limits.

Concluding this part of the discussion, students are reminded of the two sets of questions posed at the start. If the first set of questions asks students to reflect critically on progress in human terms, the second set encourages them to reconsider a human-centred direction of progress in favour of a more cyclical and Earth-bound notion of change through Klara's relationship to the Sun.

Reframing the Anthropocene

This section delves into Klara's capacity to reframe the Anthropocene with the help of her artificiality. Before doing a close reading of several short selections, students receive two preliminary exercises. The first one asks them to imagine the Anthropocene as a portrait. What type of human will

they place at its centre? Against what background? Could it be a human who has surpassed itself by affecting its own body and everything on the planet? The second task invites students to speculate about how Klara might imagine such a portrait. Would it be a realist, photographic representation? Of what? The purpose of these exercises is to guide their attention to Klara's peculiar perceptions, which at once foreground and overlook, reassert and renegotiate the Anthropocene.

In *Klara and the Sun*, the narrator faces two distinct categories of anthropogenic activity; one of them relates to industry, the other to art. To explore these categories and establish how they converge in the Anthropocene through Klara, students are asked to examine the following selections from the novel: 1) Klara's trip with Chrissie in Part Two (Ishiguro 2021: 111–113, 120–121); 2) her initial sighting of the Cootings Machine in Part One (31–35); 3) her description of a photo in Part Five (303); and 4) her encounter with Josie's portrait in Part Four (226–234).

Before engaging with these reading selections, students are asked to consider how Klara's perceptions work. Her sensorium transpires not only in what she sees, but also in how she does so. The novel indicates various mediating surfaces that frame her vision. At the novel's onset, Klara starts learning about the world through the window glass in the store. She also turns to window reflections to comprehend the nature of Josie and Rick's friendship. Equally, Klara witnesses various artworks. The reality they frame makes her ponder on the scope of representation, yet Klara also admits to having internal sight. Its mechanisms manifest themselves in two complementary ways. The first one partitions her view into boxes. During their trip to Morgan's Falls, Klara remarks about Chrissie's face: 'for a moment it felt to me her expression varied between one box and the next. In one, for instance, her eyes were laughing cruelly, but in the next they were filled with sadness' (Ishiguro 2021: 118). Klara's vision approximates the multiple perspectives granted by Cubist portraiture, where the human face loses its singular reality. The second mechanism extends Klara's perceptions further into geometric abstraction. Following her plot against the Cootings Machine in the city, Klara records how the human world suddenly changes shape: 'their figures became more simplified, as if constructed out of cones and cylinders made from smooth card' (261). Unknowingly, Klara moves into a Suprematist painting. Her reality splits into pure forms, and she takes delight in what she perceives as 'the illusion of roundness and depth' (264). Since Klara internalizes the

principles of avant-garde art in her vision, this circumstance bears on her response to the Anthropocene.

On perusing the first two selections, students are asked to observe not only how Klara perceives human bodies, but also how her perceptions inform her notion of pollution. It begins with the Cootings Machine, which makes a high-pitched whine and emits smoke through its three funnels. Seen through the window, the machine overwhelms Klara. It looks as 'something out of the ordinary' (Ishiguro 2021: 32) to her and causes her vision to fragment into boxes: 'The amount of dark smoke appeared to vary from panel to panel, so that it was almost as if contrasting shades of gray were being displayed for selection' (33). A recent study of the novel notes that the Cootings Machine serves for Klara as the prototype of all machinery, leading back to 'the steam engine invented by James Watt in the late eighteenth century' (Yuan 2024: 3). In addition, though, Klara's apprehensions of it evoke several Romantic and post-Romantic reactions to the Industrial Revolution. To make this clear to students, they can be asked to compare the machine's funnels to William Blake's 'dark Satanic mills' or John Ruskin's ominous storm cloud of the nineteenth century. The machine's sublime appearance may recall William Turner's steaming transport to those students who are familiar with it.

Klara's response to pollution extends to two further occasions. When Chrissie drives her to Morgan's Falls, Klara spots 'a town created entirely out of metal boxes' (Ishiguro 2021: 111). It turns out to be a chemical plant, with 'tubes pointing up at the sky' (112). Despite Chrissie's assurances that the site is a beacon of clean energy, Klara continues to worry: 'Something about it reminded me of the awful Cootings Machine, and a concern came to my mind about Pollution' (112). She associates the factory's form with the funnels of the overhaul machine she knows from the city. Klara's narrative amplifies such an association by referencing Paul's dismissal from his leading job at that plant. Unbeknownst to Klara, Paul's former workplace symbolizes not so much pollution, but anthropogenesis, with its stress on progress at any cost.

When Klara and Chrissie drive further, they come across another embodiment of pollution to which Klara reacts negatively. It is a bull in a field. The sight elicits her sublime charge, comparable in intensity to what she originally experienced about the Cootings Machine: 'Its face, its horns, its cold eyes watching me all brought fear into my mind ... At that moment it felt to me some great error had been made that the creature should be

allowed to stand in the Sun's pattern at all' (Ishiguro 2021: 113). Most likely, Klara associates the bull's horns with the industrial funnels that exude smoke. Such an association colours her perceptions of that animal as essentially antagonistic to the Sun, like pollution itself. Klara remains ignorant of the bull's role in the beef industry. Yet her narrative gives away a hint elsewhere. During her visit to the city in Part Four, she notices a building whose sign reads: 'We Grind Our Own Beef' (235, 236). As with the chemical plant, Klara's wider understanding of the Anthropocene may be limited, yet her gut feeling about anthropogenesis is generally sound.

One more episode in the novel serves to illustrate, quite eloquently, Klara's internalization of the principles of art in her vision of industry. On their way back home, her attention is drawn to fields dotted with sheep. Despite moving fast in the car, Klara does not hesitate to assert that each one of those animals is 'filled with kindness—the exact opposite of the terrible bull from earlier' (Ishiguro 2021: 121). She zooms in on four sheep and concludes that they stand in 'a neat row,' 'as though proceeding on a journey' (121). Yet Klara curtails her momentary excitement about pure form by admitting: 'they were in fact standing quite still, aside from the small movements of their mouths as they ate the grass' (121). Klara's fondness for sheep has a largely aesthetic character. Unlike the bull, they do not overpower her vision. Since she views them from a distance, their little horns do not protrude enough to feel menacing.

Sheep appear kind to Klara because they form a pattern in the land in which they graze. Such perceptions refer back to a robust cultural trope, which Raymond Williams dissected famously in *The Country and the City* (1973). For him, pastoral landscapes were sites of land enclosure, where displacement and exploitation had occurred in the interests of the wool industry. Without such enclosures, the Industrial Revolution would never have taken off. Yet literature and art abound in celebrations of the pastoral, positing it as a redemptive riposte to 'a lost way of life' (Williams 1975: 120). For Ishiguro's Klara, the meek sheep play precisely that compensatory role. She exempts them from the charges of pollution she bestows on the Cootings Machine, the chemical plant, and the bull. To students who are asked to engage critically with the novel, Klara's vision contains a culturally determined, algorithmic blind spot that distorts her vision of the Anthropocene.

The remaining two selections from the novel trace how Klara engages with art and how her engagement brings forth a split between reality and

representation, which ends up reframing the Anthropocene. In the novel, she inspects three varieties of artwork: sketches, photos, and Josie's portrait. Each one of them expresses the human in a particular way, just as their reliance on technology also varies. At one point, Klara regards Josie's sketches and photo album. In one of the sketches, she identifies the work of Josie's hand with multicoloured pencils. It creates 'an impenetrable mesh' which overshadows two small human figures walking 'away hand in hand' (Ishiguro 2021: 157). The image leads Klara to construe it as Josie's wish to be with Rick, despite their inevitable separation. Photos strike Klara particularly strongly. In Josie's photo album, Klara looks at processed images, framed by the camera's viewfinder. One of them brings her attention to change. It shows a younger Josie, a less slender Chrissie, a living Sal, the 'Sun's patterns', and 'a blurred black-and-white pattern', which happens to be a waterfall (99). Together with Josie's sketch, the photograph supplies Klara with a glimpse into the contingent and mutable manifestations of life occurring over time.

Students are asked to consider how Klara, herself a form of artificiality, finds more fascination in reality than in its representation. Life's changeability creates a stark contrast to what Klara perceives in represented reality. She finds that her first-hand experiences of Morgan's Falls and the bull exceed their photographic copies. About the waterfall, she attests that it is 'larger and fiercer than the one I'd seen in the magazine' (Ishiguro 2021: 114) and 'much more impressive' (120). The bull, in turn, seems equally more frightening than 'in magazines', so much that, in Klara's words, 'I was so alarmed by its appearance I gave an exclamation and came to a halt' (113). This unambiguous preference for unphotographed reality comes to the fore in the episode from Part Five selected for the close reading. In it, Klara mistakes 'a large oval-shaped photograph' for an AF (303). On closer look, she distinguishes a different, albeit familiar scene. It shows a field patterned with sheep, where four especially recognizable ones graze in the foreground, in the allegedly kind pastoral observed on an earlier trip. Yet Klara immediately dispels the visual likeness the photo creates. Even though the sheep form the same pattern, they look suspended to her: 'they no longer appeared to stand on the surface of the ground. As a result, when they stretched down to eat, their mouths couldn't reach the grass, giving these creatures, so happy on the day, a mood of sadness' (303).

Klara's emerging sense of a 'cold pastoral' prompts a parallel with John Keats. In 'Ode on a Grecian Urn' (1819), the poet meditates on art's paradoxical ability to surpass life by rendering it timeless and therefore unlived. Similarly, the photographed sheep will remain perpetually fixed in a state of unfulfilled desire, forever grazing, yet never satisfying their hunger. In this context, it is quite telling that Klara initially misrecognizes the photo as an AF. Her misrecognition permits her narrative to suggest Klara's vicarious recognition of herself. Like the representation of sheep and the vase, she is also an artwork. Her relationship to life is dubious. She is at once superior and inferior to it. However, such recognition misrecognizes the fact that artificiality abides by its own terms. As was demonstrated in the exploration of Klara's destiny under the Sun, she is Earth-bound. She seeks no transcendence of life, unlike humans who co-opt art to these purposes.

The last selection brings together the novel's concerns about the Anthropocene as a crisis of artificiality. It explores how Klara comes to terms with a situation where anthropogenesis has driven Josie's life to the edge of survival. Josie's socioeconomically privileged mother attempts to appropriate artworks, including Klara, to compensate for the upgrade made to her daughter's body. Without denying art's general compensatory function, Klara's narrative subverts certain valuations of it. Her insistence on the split between reality and representation casts doubt on Chrissie's expectations that art can transcend itself and become more real than reality.

Symptomatically, when visiting Mr. Capaldi's studio, Klara witnesses a portrait. The choice of word is no accident, as it implies an artistic representation of the human form. Yet Klara discerns more. With its arms outstretched, a copy of Josie's body hangs suspended in the air: 'Her face was very like that of the real Josie, but ... the upward curve of her lips gave her an expression I'd never seen before. The face looked disappointed and afraid' (Ishiguro 2021: 226). The crucifix-like figure of Josie appears singular to Klara. It resembles Josie in one way only, while failing to register the innumerable nuances of her life, as perceived by everyone else around her.

As with the oval photo, Klara suffers a moment of recognition in front of Josie's portrait. It comes across to her as neither 'a picture [n]or a sculpture, but an AF' (Ishiguro 2021: 230). This admission places her in the same group of imitative artificiality which humans mobilize to their

own self-serving needs. Capaldi, the artist engineer behind Josie's portrait, advises that Klara would have to step into this emptiness if Josie died. As he puts it, 'we're not asking you to train the new Josie. We're asking you to *become* her' (232). Klara's prospect begs comparison with Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890). Its main character aspires to live his life like a picture, without allowing the picture to live a life of its own. In Ishiguro's novel, Klara is pushed to be that picture, as if her own artificiality has no other potentialities, but 'to continue' the hollow human form (Ishiguro 2021: 233).

Such a limited notion of Klara's potential, it is hoped, will prompt students to reconsider artificiality in the Anthropocene. How would Klara reframe the Anthropocene if she had to imagine it as a portrait? Students can debate about the tonality of such a picture, whether it would be critical, neutral, or generous to the human. However, based on the avant-garde framing of Klara's vision, it would probably not conform to a lookalike realism. Fascinated with the Sun's multiple reflections, Klara might envisage a kaleidoscopic play of Cubist shapes and Suprematist lines. Some of them might merge to evoke a myriad elusive perceptions in which the human exists, while others would lay out a background landscape partitioned into dots and tubes, all reflecting back to the human. If so, this portrait would belong together with an artificiality that does not expand or maintain the illusions of the self-surpassing human. It would not appeal to the privilege of those who deplete life on Earth to make themselves look like a picture.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I recommend a post-reading activity by which students are asked to consider why Klara does not become a human portrait. The question that would steer this activity is: Why does Klara's artificiality refuse to embrace a further degree of artificial likeness, even though her narrative is made to imitate that of the human? Further considerations may feed into an essay-long exercise which invites students to reflect both about the compensatory and life-saving potential of artificiality, as exemplified by Klara as an AF, and about her narrative as a form of artwork. These concluding assignments seek to consolidate the pedagogical affordances of Ishiguro's *Klara and the Sun*, especially those that develop critical literacy through narrative. Klara's narrative prises open the crisis of the Anthropocene as the outcome of progress-fixated

anthropogenesis. Like all artificiality, Klara bears no imitative resemblance to the world made by humans but creates her own photodegradable reality instead. She never becomes a portrait, not only because the human survives its upgrade, but also because her self-reflexive narrative overtakes her. The artificial means of that narrative disclose the antihuman logic behind anthropogenesis. In having proposed such a reading model, I hope to empower students to confront the Anthropocene with changed views and life practices.

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