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Futurity, the Life Course and Aging in Kazuo Ishiguro's *Klara and the Sun*

Abstract

Reading Kazuo Ishiguro's *Klara and the Sun* (2021) in this article, we bring the perspectives of aging and posthumanist studies together to explore how the novel helps us to rethink our being and relationality in time beyond the boundaries of the human. In particular, we are interested in the novel's critique of the anthropocentric privileging of youth and progress in the ways in which we imagine the future. Central to this form of imagination are generational continuity and the symbolism of the child: a new generation as a promise of the future, or rather, a better human future. Nevertheless, this novel does not simply employ the trope of generational futurity; instead, it interrogates and draws attention to the exclusionary way this type of thinking functions. Through its blurring of AI and human child, ultimately, *Klara and the Sun* suggests the dangers and the limits of a generational imagination that seeks to reproduce the same, progressive narrative of the future through the image of the child not "growing up and growing old" (Woodward 2020: 55; italics in original). Our analysis then suggests how fictional speculative modes might both engage with and yet also force us to reflect critically upon that form of future-orientated thinking.

Keywords: aging, speculative fiction, posthumanism, childhood, generation

1 Introduction

Often explicitly engaging with imagined future worlds, science and speculative genres are fundamentally concerned with humans' relation to time at the level of the planet, the species,

the community and the individual. This is evinced by the genres' interest in tropes such as longevity, immortality, large-scale demographic change, and generational conflict. As Maricel Oró-Piqueras and Sarah Falcus (2023) have argued, they may, therefore, be said to be genres that are about aging itself, our being in and experience of time. More centrally, these are genres interested in exploring what it means to imagine the future, often through threats to a societal or species future. One of the ways in which these texts articulate those threats is through what Falcus has called "generational anachronism", or disorder, "where the life course, progress and the promise of the future are all disrupted by threats to generational continuity" (2020: 65). Whether in the form of mass infertility, extreme longevity or technologically altered humans, speculative genres employ aging and generation as ways to articulate anxieties about the future, for the individual, species and planet. Aging itself is, therefore, central to the ways in which these genres express concerns about time.

Reading Kazuo Ishiguro's *Klara and the Sun* (2021) in this article, we bring the perspectives of aging and posthumanist studies together to explore how the novel helps us to rethink our being and relationality in time beyond the boundaries of the human. The novel is set in a future where human society is faced with the threats that technological advancement and capitalist forces pose. There is a pervasive sense of anxiety about the future in this world, an anxiety that centres around childhood, a stage of life that is, in the novel, in the process of transhuman and posthuman changes. Children are genetically engineered, or in the novel's terminology, 'lifted', to improve their intelligence, and 'Artificial Friends' (AFs), including the Klara of the title, provide companionship and care to an isolated generation. The novel shares many premises with Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go* (2005), a text that imagines an alternative world where clones are bred to provide organs for donation. Just like *Never Let Me Go*, *Klara and the Sun* invites ethical and posthumanist questions about the relationship between humans and non-humans, and much critical work has approached the novel from these perspectives.

Kate Montague, for example, sees the logic of the contemporary service economy in the text, where service and care workers engaged in affective labour are treated as less-than-human. For Emily Horton, the novel's depiction of the unequal power relationship between human and AI alludes to the collapse of inclusive and equal community at local, national and global levels, something that became evident in the Covid pandemic. Others have considered Klara's moral status (Stenseke 2022), her agency (Eaglestone 2022) and the fantasy of "post/human perfectibility" in their treatment of Klara as human technological other (Sun 2022). Like these readings, our analysis concerns relationality in the novel but approaches it from the perspective of time and generation.

In particular, we are interested in the novel's critique of the anthropocentric privileging of youth and progress in the ways in which we imagine the future. Central to this form of imagination are generational continuity and the symbolism of the child: a new generation as a promise of the future, or rather, a better human future. As in so many SF and speculative narratives, generational continuity is precarious in *Klara and the Sun*, and the young are burdened with a legacy they have inherited from their parents, as human child Josie's father, Paul, makes clear in his comment about Rick, her friend: "I hope he's able to find a path through this mess we've bequeathed to his generation" (236). Chrissie, Josie's mother, later tells her daughter: "for you and your generation, it's going to be pretty tough unless you put in some work now" (63). In this way, the novel vaguely, but fairly persistently, suggests that the challenging future of this world is something to be borne by this generation's children. Nevertheless, this novel does not simply employ the trope of generational futurity; instead, it interrogates and draws attention to the way this type of thinking functions. Through its blurring of AI and human child, ultimately, *Klara and the Sun* suggests the dangers and the limits of a generational imagination that seeks to reproduce the same, progressive narrative of the future through the static image of the child. Our analysis then suggests how fictional speculative

modes might both engage with and yet also force us to reflect critically upon that form of future-orientated thinking. We begin by introducing key critiques, in queer, ecological and aging studies discourses, of generationally inspired imaginaries of the future – exemplified by the symbolism of the child.

2 Generation, futurity and care

Generation is central to the human imagining of time. It metaphorically and literally helps humans to overcome the ephemerality of individual lives, connecting past, present and future. In particular, generational continuity underpins a vision of the future through the image of the child. In her study of the figure of the child in catastrophe discourses of recent decades, Rebekah Sheldon argues that during the long nineteenth century, the connection made between child and species turned the individual story into a “broader story of generational succession and lineage” (2016: 3). The child, then, “became legible not only as a record of the past but as the recipient of a specific biological inheritance freighted with consequence for the future” (Sheldon 2016: 3). As Sheldon outlines, the employment of the figure of the child as representing the future of species then continues into the twentieth century and finds particular expression in speculative and environmental discourses of recent decades. One example is P. D. James’ *The Children of Men* (1993 [1992]). Described as a “sterility apocalypse” (2016, 151) by Sheldon, this dystopian narrative depicts a world in which infertility causes a profound demographic threat and the only hope for the future lies in the unborn child.

Powerful as this form of child-based futurism may be, critics suggest that its political potential is limited as it envisages a future based on identification and sameness, excluding those marked by difference. For example, Lee Edelman criticises the heteronormativity in what he terms “reproductive futurism” (2004). For Edelman, this type of child-centred thinking prevents the possibility of alternative, specifically queer, futures. Alexandra Lakind and Chessa Adsit-Morris similarly note the limitations of reproductive futurity in environmental discourses

in which this type of thinking has been instrumental, arguing that “imagined environmental futures are fused with reproductive futures, intricately connected to heterofutures, based on underexamined assumptions that instrumentalize children toward the perpetuation of a selfsame future” (2018: 31–32). Lakind and Adsit-Morris also point out that the vision of the future articulated through this figuration of the child is a dominantly white one (2018: 34). As suggested by these critics, heteronormative futurity underpinned by the figure of the child has limited potential for change, as it promises a future that is simply an extension of, or return to, the same.

Another aspect of generationally based futurity that contributes to its exclusionary tendency is the underlying expectation of a future that is better than the past and the present. As critics have suggested, progressivism has been integral to Western modernity. Lisa Baraitser, for example, describes the politics of time that was central to European modernity and colonisation, a politics that privileged progressive linear time and marginalised other temporalities. She states:

Modern time renders the past old and obsolete in order for the new to emerge, precisely through its radical separation from the past disparaged *as* past. Progress is the replacement of the old with the new, leaving modern European time as a kind of suspension between what is rendered as a dead past, and a progressive future that holds all the promise of betterment in a generation always beyond our own. In the time of European modernity what is new is produced at the cost of what was once new and now made old. (2017: 6; italics in original)

As aging studies critics such as Cynthia Port (2012) and Mary Russo (1999) have suggested, this progressive futurity configures the child as the bearer of the promise of the future and excludes those for whom the future seems foreclosed, including people with disabilities and those who are older. Russo states: “progressivism still dominates the commonsensical notions

of a life course, generational difference, and social change. Hope, desire, understanding, and optimism seem ineluctably joined against the forces of the past, the backward, the unenlightened, the old” (1999: 21). Such exclusionary futurity premised upon obsolescence of certain populations is increasingly prevalent in neoliberal societies. As Sara Ahmed (2010) suggests, tying a “promise of happiness” to the future, this type of futurity functions to divert our attention from problems in the present and pre-empt political change. Therefore, if the symbolism of the child promises a future that is a continuation of the same social and cultural order, and even, a future that is better, then it tends to depend upon a model of generational succession that privileges youth and represses aging itself.

Imagining a future differently, then, must involve recognising a human’s being and change across time. Age studies pioneer Kathleen Woodward, while making a case for the value of generational and child-centred thinking in environmental debates, draws attention to the danger of thinking that relies upon replication and sameness. Arguing for the power of what she calls “generational time”, she states “I am convinced in fact that the most influential way to frame the dangers of climate change is precisely in terms of the future of generations who are our intimates or whom we *feel* to be our intimates – our children and our grandchildren, and by extension, children and grandchildren around the globe” (2020: 54–5; italics in original). Environmental futures are intertwined here with generational and reproductive futures. A crucial part of Woodward’s argument, however, is thinking about a child as a being in time, rather than invoking it as a static subject that does not change in its association with the (threatened) future; as she states: “We need to imagine not just children as young children but as adults living into old age – that is, *growing up and growing old* in a world defined by climate change to come” (2020: 55; italics in original). As Falco has also argued elsewhere, the static image of the child only promises the future as “a continuation of the same”, a future that is nevertheless “premiered on leaving behind those who represent the past: the old” (2020: 67). As

Woodward and Falck suggest, recognising a child as a being in time offers a way of rethinking the generational imagination of the future to encompass the complexity of aging across the human lifecourse.

Imagining a child that may change through time promotes an awareness that future selves and others may be different from us in the present. This awareness that otherness may be a condition of future beings brings the sense of the unknowability of the future. Imagining a different future, therefore, is an ethical act that involves the recognition of relationality between those who inhabit different temporalities. This ethical aspect of generationally based futurity is a primary concern in our reading of *Klara and the Sun*, and environmental approaches have much to offer for thinking about relationality between different beings and times. For example, relationality between generations is a concern in Adaline Johns-Putra's exploration of what she calls "posterity-as-parenthood" and the role of a parental ethics of care in responses to climate change. Johns-Putra traces the development of posterity thinking (i.e. thinking about legacy and the position of future humans) in environmental discourses of the mid-twentieth century, aligning this with the development during the same period of intergenerational justice or ethics (2019: 10–13). Parental ethics of care is based on the idea that "future humans resemble our children, and we should be motivated by something like a parental duty of care to them" (Johns-Putra 2019: 15). Using Christopher Groves' 2014 exploration of ethics, generations and climate change as a case study, Johns-Putra notes that "[H]is ethics aims to provide a rationale for our obligations to the future while accepting that we cannot know it – that, indeed, our actions cause its unknowability" (2019: 17). Groves' "intergenerational ethics of care" addresses the problem of previous intergenerational ways of thinking that do not accept the future's radical unknowability. He instead suggests a more mobile way of thinking about the relationship between present self and future others, arguing that "we should care [not] despite the future's unknowability; it is that we care because of it –

or, more precisely – as a way of making sense of it” (Johns-Putra 2019: 18). Though, as Johns-Putra points out, Groves does not focus on childhood itself as the symbol of that future, his study “model[s] these attachments [to future generations] on parental ones”, “expanding the private and direct mode of care into a rationale for political and indirect care for the future” (2019: 19). Nevertheless, as Johns-Putra points out, even this more flexible way of articulating a model of parental care is subject to limitations. As she notes, parental models of care must contend with the idea that not all care is “a positive disposition and act”; rather, power and inequality are frequently aspects of care relationships (2019: 19).

As our reading demonstrates, *Klara and the Sun* explores such complexity of parental care as it interrogates generationally based futurity. Furthermore, the novel takes a posthumanist approach to relationality, interrogating the anthropocentrism that underpins generational futurity. As Johns-Putra suggests, care ethics is fundamentally anthropocentric, based as it is on the conception of identity as fixed and focussed on “human wants and concerns” (2019: 23). As a result, parental care ethics finds it hard to imagine care that extends to the non-human. Johns-Putra states: “parental care ethics, along with most models of intergenerational ethics, possesses deeply anthropocentric tendencies, constructing the future of the biosphere as relevant primarily in relation to human survival and well-being” (2019: 27). In her analysis of cultural representations of care robots, Amelia DeFalco similarly identifies this human-centred preoccupation in care scholarship, but is also optimistic about “the rich posthuman potential of care as a capacious concept flexible enough to theorize the incredible range of human/non-human interdependencies and ontologies that produce and sustain life” (2020: 35). She concludes that “The figure central to ethics of care – the embodied, embedded and encumbered subject – is ripe for posthumanist expansion” (2020: 50). *Klara and the Sun* then responds to this “posthumanist expansion” in our thinking about and practices of care. It is an example of the kind of speculative writing about robot/human care that DeFalco argues

draws attention to and invites interrogation of (in this case, generational) care relationships, texts that “encourag[e] us to consider how these technologies will influence the meaning and function of care and relationality, as well as how such relationships might transform the meaning and function of the human as an onto-political category” (2020: 44).

These are the perspectives and concerns that are relevant to our reading of *Klara and the Sun*. We recognise, as do many scholars, the power as well as the limitations of our generational imaginary and figures of aging as we try to engage with and apprehend our human futures in a posthuman and increasingly precarious world. Speculative narratives help us to reflect on our generational imaginary, as Johns-Putra optimistically notes about ‘clifi’: “Indeed, some climate change novels deploy the geography and psychology of parenthood in order to destabilise these anthropocentric worlds and identities as a basis for environmental concern for the future. Some, I suggest, go further, and manage to destabilise the very idea of coherence in world and identity” (Johns-Putra 2019: 39–40).

Klara and the Sun is one example of a speculative narrative that does just this. With the AI narrator Klara at its centre, the novel explores the precarity of the human and its relationship to the non-human. Juxtaposing the stories of Josie and Rick – the human children in the novel – and of Klara as a kind of posthumanist child, the novel interrogates generational futurity based on the figure of the child, futurity tied to a linear temporality that privileges youth and progress, excludes difference and forecloses change. Part of this interrogation is an inquiry, through Klara and her relationship to humans, into how far relational care may or may not extend beyond the human in envisioning the future.

3 *Klara and the Sun*

Klara and the Sun depicts a world of change and uncertainty. The novel never clarifies the history and nature of the threats in this fictional world (in typical Ishiguro style), but implicitly links them to the consequences of technological advancement and capitalism. There are

suggestions that violence and crime pervade this world, but we see little of this. Foregrounded in the novel instead is a seemingly orderly, meritocratic, individualistic society, one with little sense of any public or communal identity. Those who oppose the current state of society, such as Paul, live in an alternative space called the “community” and yet, even there, there is division, with white and former professional elites like Paul defending themselves against “other *types*” (232; italives in original). There are signs of social divisions in public spaces too, as Emily Horton suggests (2022: 188–9) in reference to the examples of fenced fields (151), Rick’s drones for surveillance (248) and the forced evaluation, mentioned by Rick’s mother, of “four hundred and twenty-three post-employed people [...], eighty-six of them children” (240), in a building in the city. The phrase “post-employment” seems to suggest that working and being productive are considered defining features of the human subject and life course. In this world, some children are more vulnerable than others, including those genetically engineered, or ‘lifted’, and over protected like Josie. The novel therefore presents a seemingly meritocratic society, in which, nevertheless, human lives have become precarious and certain lives are more so than others.

In this society, children are the source of both hope and anxiety and because of this, childhood is precarious: children need to be protected and yet also carefully prepared for their future success within a narrow model that ensures the reproduction of the social order. The novel explicitly ties parental care to a future-based thinking that sees the child primarily in terms of its future progress and success within a capitalist, neoliberal paradigm. The starkest example of this emphasis upon future success rather than present wellbeing is the adoption of technological solutions that promise individualistic transhuman futures: better and brighter children. Parents must decide whether or not to have their children ‘lifted’, something that comes with significant risks for the children, but will help to ensure their future success. Read through the lens of contemporary, neoliberal manifestations of biopower, the treatment of

children in the novel therefore echoes the contemporary emphasis on “life-making”, which “has become increasingly focused on optimization and maximization (rather than simply control and maintenance)”, with “life-making operations now foster[ing] health and life in relation to market logics and global capital” (Ehlers 2020: 128). Care for children in the novel is focussed on “optimization”, alienated from any wider social benefit.

Furthermore, the repercussions of ‘lifting’ highlight the inequity that underlies this system of biopower. In the novel, Rick has not been ‘lifted’ and is now struggling to get a place at a good school, finding himself isolated and marked as different from ‘lifted’ children like Josie. ‘Lifting’ therefore exacerbates inequalities, echoing Ehler’s point that “Life-making strategies” reinscribe rather than reduce existing inequalities and raise the ethical question of “Whose lives are suspended and whose extended?” (2020: 128). The different future prospects that await Josie and Rick in the novel bring this question into focus. Parental care in the novel is then marked by both paternalism/maternalism (thinking you know best about the person for whom you care) and parochialism (a focus on specific private caring relationships as the most important). Drawing on Joan Toronto, Johns-Putra considers the ethical dangers of the generational care model in these particular forms, stating of both cases: “a private position that depends on authority and familiarity is potentially undemocratic and even unethical when it becomes a model for public, moral action” (2019: 20). The novel, therefore, highlights the dangers of a parental ethics of care focussed upon a capitalist vision of future human success.

The consequence of parochial and paternalistic parental care in the novel is a childhood that is marked by isolation and individualism. Children are given AI companions; they attend ‘interaction meetings’ (63) – heavily coordinated opportunities to socialise with peers – and receive one-to-one tutorials online rather than attending school in person. The isolation and individualism of this childhood also manifests in the novel’s depiction of the countryside where Josie and Rick live, a setting that defamiliarizes the romantic association between child and

nature. With green fields and undulating hills, the countryside appears removed from the violence-infected world out there; yet, this apparently idyllic space is marked by isolation and stasis rather than the rustic charm that is often evoked in the romanticization of natural environment, especially in its association with childhood. This is particularly the case for Josie, a lifted child whose development is considered to require or deserve more protection than unlifted children, including Rick. Klara frequently notes the lack of passing traffic (vehicle and human) and when she does see the homes from the outside, she observes the spatial segregation of the houses. Josie spends most of her time indoors and going outside is a supervised activity. Her conversation with Klara about the structure of the house reveals how limited her spatial experience is, even within her own home. When she takes Klara outside for the first time, she has to be accompanied by Melania, the housekeeper, who cuts their time outside short, worried about the wind. The emphasis in the narrative upon looking out from inside promotes that sense of constriction and physical separation from the outside world, both human and material.

In the novel, however, even those who benefit from ‘lifting’ do not live lives free of risk, and Josie’s ‘lifting’ clearly reveals the dangers of parental care that is predicated upon a very narrow vision of progress. Chrissie has Josie lifted despite losing her older daughter, Sal, after the same procedure. The shadow of her death heightens the sense of Josie’s vulnerability, as she struggles to overcome unpredictable bouts of ill health caused by the procedure, something that undoubtedly contributes to the spatial restrictions she endures. An even more disturbing aspect of parental care in its extreme form is Chrissie’s plan to use experimental science to have Klara simulate and ‘continue Josie’ in the case of her death. This plan (which never comes to fruition in the novel) blurs the lines between Klara and Josie and exposes the logic of a transhuman future in which children as singular entities are replaceable. It is also a plan that is quite literally premised upon the child as a static being that never changes, because Klara, as AI, would never grow older in the embodied way that Josie will age. This plan

therefore is an almost-parodic representation of the logic of parochialism that can underlie the discourse of generational care and futurity. The child's present wellbeing is sacrificed for the future in this biopolitical system of parenting. What children represent and how they may achieve success (within a very narrow model of human progress) is more important than their specific existence as embodied and situated beings who will change across time to become unknowable adults and older adults. The pervasive impact of this paradoxical logic of parental care is signalled in the novel by the sort of resigned passivity that Josie demonstrates in the face of her mother's choice, something that echoes the lack of rebellion that we find in the clones in *Never Let Me Go*. Robert Eaglestone reads this as Josie's exercise of agency in choosing to be forgiving rather than angry towards her mother, and considers this as something that distinguishes this novel from Ishiguro's previous works where protagonists cannot escape but suffer the consequences of wrong choices made in the past (2022). Nevertheless, Josie's forgiveness also signifies her acceptance of the legacy of her parents' generation, implying that the future will be one of repetition rather than change. Paradoxically, then, human children are made disposable by a parental logic that aims to secure their futures and the novel does little to suggest that the next generation will disturb this future of the selfsame.

Added to the novel's exploration of the trope of child as future is Klara, a childlike AI figure that is created to contribute to the progressive future, a 'child' that is nonetheless out of time herself in many ways. Although described as a 'friend', Klara's primary role is to care for Josie. As critics have suggested, seen as a non-human care worker, Klara is in a precarious and marginalised position in the human world, and this is made very clear throughout the novel. For example, when Josie and her mother eat together in the kitchen, Klara stands facing a fridge, to give them privacy, recognising her own position as inferior to that of the biological family. Klara's relationships with others make explicit her subordinate, if liminal, position. Melania, whose ungrammatical use of English indicates her immigrant status, shows solidarity

with Klara in the shared duty of care for Josie at one point in the novel, but is generally antagonistic towards her. Her attitude suggests Klara's status as a servant, just like Melania, as Montague points out (2022: 8), but also the human discomfort with an AI whose position is somewhere between (unpaid) carer and 'friend'. Even Josie – who might be expected to treat Klara more equitably, given their ostensible 'friendship' – situates her as a being of lesser status. So Josie does not intervene when boys threaten to physically harm Klara in an interaction meeting, despite her initial eagerness to introduce Klara at the meeting. And when Josie cries out in the middle of night fearing she may die, she refuses Klara's care in favour of her mother's. These examples suggest that Klara is part of what Sherryl Vint identifies as a more recent trend in the fictional representation of robot servants, where instead of being a threat to the human, they are the ones "at risk" (2021: 48). Inevitably, these representations force us to reflect on the position of under- and de-valued labour (particularly care work), such as that provided by immigrants and minority groups in the west (see Montague 2022; Horton 2022). Ultimately, as the final scene of the novel where Klara stands alone in a scrap yard confirms, she is excluded from the human cycles of care for the future; she is used to sustain those cycles. Relational care does not, then, extend beyond the human in this world.

Klara's representation as a child further complicates the novel's critique of anthropocentric generational futurity. The novel is in many ways AI Klara's *Bildung*, making her a technological or posthumanist child. Considering the posthuman in children's literature, Lindsay Burton sees the posthumanist child as a figure that interrogates "the field's central binary, in large part comprising its ontology, [...] aetnormativity" (2019: 202), the assumption of "adulthood as norm" (Nikolajeva 2013: 313). Though not children's literature, through its use of Klara as a posthumanist child, *Klara and the Sun* is a novel that similarly interrogates generational dynamics and the function of the image of the child in the ways in which we imagine the future. Klara's story is one of growth and development as she learns about the

world around her and how to interact with it, encouraging us to read her as childlike. Her first-person narrative offers her minute observations of her surroundings and her reactions to and reflections on them. Her learning ranges from practical things such as how to sit on a chair by mimicking human child Josie to the more complex matter of human emotions. Activating associations with childhood, the novel also suggests Klara's physical smallness: she struggles to sit on the high chair in the kitchen; she becomes disoriented in overgrown grass in fields and ends up being carried by Rick on his back. Her intense interest in the physical environment, especially, the organic material world, is another example in the novel that promotes an association with childhood. While Josie's relationship with the physical environment is human-managed (as indicated by her enjoyment of Morgan's falls, a picnic spot popular with families), Klara is often depicted in outdoor space. In particular, the novel closely represents her journeys to Mr McBain's barn, where she believes the Sun rests every day, wading through tall grasses that block her view and "resist my [her] pushes" and hearing "strange noises around me [her]" (157). These journeys invoke the familiar adventure narrative focussed on childhood and nature, making Klara a seemingly more 'human' child than those organic children around her.

Yet, despite these intimations of the child and childishness, Klara's growth and learning seem very performative, something made increasingly clear as we become aware of the plan to 'continue' Josie, where Klara will become a replacement for the human child. We see her self-consciously learning to be like (and therefore be a suitable companion for) a human child. It is symbolic that her first notable task as an AF in the shop is to respond to a request by Josie's mother who wants to confirm Klara's observational ability by asking her to "reproduce" Josie's unstable walk (43). Klara's enactment of her walk, including "a weakness in her left hip" and "her right shoulder [that] has potential to give pain" (43), parodies the development of a toddler's mechanical skills, but is also uncanny and unsettling both because of its mimicking of disability and in its verisimilitude, as the AI becomes an almost-perfect copy of a human

child. Her awareness of her own learning and her reflections upon it – detailed in her narrative – and her overly formal language that recounts these reinforce the sense that she performs and defamiliarizes childhood itself. Reading Klara in this way, then, she comes close to a parody of the romantic child: connected to nature and the outdoors, innocent and eager to please. Ultimately, Klara as a parodic, posthumanist child poses the question of what is ‘natural’ for a ‘human’ child, drawing attention to the power of the image of the child and its function in our cultural imaginaries.

Klara’s investment in the Sun is one example in the novel that signifies both innocence and ignorance and interrogates the cultural conception of the child. In the novel, Klara is concerned about construction machines – coating machines – which she believes pollute the air. For her, the Sun is angry about the ecological damage caused by humans and she believes that if she can appease the Sun’s anger and appeal to his “kindness” (165), the Sun may help to cure Josie. At one level, Klara’s anthropomorphism of the non-human material world rejects the binarism between the human and nature, making her an example of what Naomi Morgenstern calls “the posthumanist wild child”, a figure that unsettles the boundary between the adult and the child, and between civilization and nature, boundaries that conform to and are sustained by the humanist fantasy of the developmental subject (2018). Joanna Haynes and Karin Murriss also criticise the adult tendency to dismiss children’s animalistic philosophy, arguing for its posthumanist potential as it “disrupts the pervasive (adult) conception of temporality that takes development and progress as inevitable” (2019: 291). Klara’s belief system around the Sun then may be a sign of her childlike innocence that can transform the adult-centred worldview and the adult image of childhood itself.

At another level, however, Klara’s belief system reveals the limitations of her knowledge as AI, and, ultimately, her vulnerability as a posthumanist child and carer. This is because her myopic, hopeful care for Josie contributes to the age-based generational imaginary

of the future that recreates the status quo. Eaglestone (2022) compares Klara's epistemological state to Plato's allegory of the Cave, suggesting what Klara can see is limited and so is her understanding of the world. For her, her investment in the Sun, although it may be accounted for by the fact that she operates on solar power, exemplifies an algorithmic thinking that "if it enters the right information in the right way, and undertakes the right actions, it will get the right result" (2022: 5). This suggests that her hope system, despite seeming "wild", is embedded in a (adult/humanist) linear temporality that operates to produce sameness. As a result, her hope system does not accommodate the unknowability of the future, something that Johns-Putra argues is fundamental to an ethical, inclusive future. Klara's hopefulness is then similar to the calculated way in which Josie's mother seeks to ensure a future for Josie through technological intervention: in both cases, time is envisioned as linear continuity into the future, and unknowability is not part of this progress.

It is also poignant that despite her hopeful care for Josie, there is no place for Klara in the future that she seeks to ensure. Her story is always shadowed by what Adam Parkes calls "planned obsolescence" (2022). From the beginning of the narrative there are frequent reminders of the limits of the lives of the AI and this takes a specifically generational form: models of AI are superseded by other models, with older generations containing within their design key flaws that weaken them and make them less valuable. This is subtly implied by the phrase that Klara uses to begin her narrative: "When we were new" (1). As Parkes argues, the sense of planned obsolescence in the narrative is also stylistic as Klara's speech contains clichés and redundant words. In this respect, Klara's narrative echoes that of Kathy in the earlier *Never Let Me Go*: "Echoing the well-known flatness of Kathy H.'s language in *Never Let Me Go*, Klara's narration gives that flatness new prominence by converting it into a mechanism for producing stylistic obsolescence" (Parkes 2022: 18). The final section of the

novel sees this foreclosure of the future come to fruition: Josie's full recovery makes Klara redundant.

Just like Josie, who is put at the risk of redundancy by her mother's plan to have Klara continue her in the case of her death, Klara faces the threat of succession and redundancy. In Klara's case, however, it is her use value for the human that dictates when she becomes redundant. The final section of the novel opens with Klara succinctly announcing the end of Josie's childhood: "The Sun's special nourishment proved as effective for Josie [...] and after the dark sky morning, she grew not only stronger, but from a child into an adult" (289). Klara then continues to recount how Josie's social life has expanded as she prepares to leave home for college. But Klara's story cannot continue beyond Josie's childhood – she must be left behind once Josie reaches adulthood because she represents a time that Josie herself has left behind in her linear trajectory of progress (a narrative we see in much children's literature about a child's favourite toy, from *The Velveteen Rabbit* to *Toy Story*). Her being outside the human life course is signalled by the language that describes this part of Klara's life where she no longer has utility value: when leaving home for college, Josie anticipates her "possible departure" from the house (300); what awaits her is a "slow fade", as Josie's mother puts it (298). In the final scene of the novel, we find Klara standing alone in a scrap yard, designated as being of no use by the humans she once served. A construction crane seen far away in the background of the scrap yard symbolises the human obsession with building for the future, at the same time making certain things and lives redundant. Zsuzsa Gille and Josh Lepawsky suggest that nothing is inherently waste but that "[w]aste is always situated" (2021: 4). Klara is not simply "material discarded" but "material we failed to use (for whatever reason)" (Gille and Lepawsky, 2021: 5). Klara's position in the yard at the end of the novel confirms her status as waste destined to be scrapped. As Montague suggests, quoting Saidiya Hartman on slavery

and racialized service work, for Klara, “‘labor-time’ coincides with ‘her lifetime’ (233)” (2022: 8).

What adds to the poignancy of Klara’s redundancy is that she does not seem to be fully aware that despite her care for Josie and her future, the future is foreclosed for Klara herself. And this makes the readerly experience of the novel an ethically charged one. As we have explained above, Klara’s performative childness evokes a nostalgic vision of childhood in many ways, and this is likely to encourage us, the adult reader, to feel close to the child Klara. She is limited and unreliable because she is AI in a human world – we see things she cannot or does not. For instance, she, at points, lacks self-awareness, as when she feels superior to other AIs because of her strong curiosity about the world and her sense that she is very perceptive. But this is also intertwined with the sense that she is childlike – learning about the social and natural world as a child would and misreading things; again, we approach that perspective as an adult and see beyond it. In these ways, generational dynamics are inherent in the reading of Klara’s first-person narrative. Exhibiting both innocence and ignorance and invoking identification and distance at once, Klara’s narrative perspective draws attention to the ethical complexity of generational relationality that the novel explores. As we become increasingly aware of her precarity and future disposal, we also recognise that she does not fully see this. For the adult reader, then, her ignorance adds to the sense of her precarity. Reading her narrative of *Bildung*, and yet with the anticipation of her obsolescence in the future, the adult reader is reminded of their relationality to temporal and non-human others. This echoes in many ways the readerly experience of *Never Let Me Go*. Just as the reader of that novel is implicated in a system that treats the clones as body parts, so here the reader must consider whether their care extends to Klara the AI. *Never Let Me Go* slowly makes clear the position of the clones, but *Klara and the Sun* delays the revelation of the AIs’ fate until the very end of the novel. The narrative subtly implies that Klara will become obsolescent, but her position in the scrap yard

is not clear until the final part of the novel and, even then, her final destination remains uncertain. She may, like the clones, become a series of body parts, in this case for other AI. Reading itself then presents us with questions about who cares and who is considered worthy of care.

4 Conclusion

Klara is not the only AF in the scrap yard; newer models of AFs are there too to reinforce the planned obsolescence of these care providers. Moreover, it is not only non-human beings that are destined to become waste in the novel. By the time Josie leaves home for college, Melania is replaced by the “New Housekeeper” (300) and, like Paul, now lives in a community. The shop manager visits scrap yards to see the AFs previously on sale in her store, a shop that is no longer open, and to collect “little souvenirs” (305). Her presence in the yard implies that humans are at the risk of becoming obsolescent once they lose productivity and utility value.

This feeling of obsolescence that pervades the novel can be read as suggestive of a broader sense that the shadow side of reproductive futurity, or the power of the child in the generational imaginary, is older age. Not simply eschewing the power of the generational imaginary, the novel employs its posthumanist narrator to draw attention to the limitations and dangers of our generational thinking, which is predicated upon replication of the same, imagined as a narrow, anthropocentric model of progress and success. Like other speculative fiction, *Klara and the Sun* engages with the trope of generational disorder or anxiety, where the image of the child comes to bear the weight of and hope for the future of individual, society and species. However, the novel offers a sharp critique of the dangers of a parental care model that sacrifices present wellbeing for future success, a model based upon a form of futurity that prioritises youth and replication over more radical unknowability and change. And through its juxtaposition of human and posthumanist children, it highlights the shared precarity of human

and non-human, even as it points to the anthropocentric perspective that limits our conceptions of relationality and care.

Employing an aging studies perspective, we identify this novel as one example of speculative fiction's powerful explorations of what it is to be a human being in time and to be with human and non-human others. Aligning obsolescence and waste with a model of generational imagination that prioritises the young and the new, the novel might invite us to reflect on how generational thinking and our intimations of childhood may more fully embrace the whole of the lifecourse, imagining a human, and posthuman, subject "*growing up and growing old*" (Woodward 2020: 55; italics in original).

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