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Race, Genetic Ancestry Tracing and Facial Expression: 'Focusing on the Faces' in Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go*

In 1998 a group of scientists led by retired pathologist Eugene Foster published an intervention into what they termed the 'long-standing historical controversy over the question of US President Thomas Jefferson's paternity of the children of Sally Hemings, one of his slaves.'¹ They had compared the Y-chromosomal DNA of the male descendants of Jefferson's uncle and the male descendants of Hemings's sons, and concluded Hemings's youngest son, Eston Hemings Jefferson, was the son of Thomas Jefferson. Supporting their finding with historical claims that Eston 'is said to have borne a striking resemblance to Thomas Jefferson' while noting some historians' belief that Eston was in fact the son of one of Thomas Jefferson's nephews, the scientists claimed that the presence of a rare haplotype which had never been observed outside of the Jefferson family meant that the 'simplest and most probable explanations for our molecular findings are that Thomas Jefferson, rather than one of the Carr brothers, was the father.'² The study unsettled what many historians had previously believed and while its findings were dismissed by some, they were taken as a starting point by others for a re-evaluation of Jefferson and his attitudes towards slavery. The findings contradicted the oral history known to the descendants of Hemings – that it was her first son whom Jefferson fathered – thus also unsettling long-standing family stories of the kind upon which Alex Haley had relied.³ Making genes act as a 'new kind of historical evidence',⁴ the Jefferson study was one of the first instances that brought to wider public attention the use of DNA analysis to trace ancestral history.

It is no coincidence that questions of race and racial mixing were central to what would become one of the catalysts for a public boom in genetic ancestry testing at the turn of the new millennium. The techniques that the Jefferson study

employed – namely Y-chromosome analysis – had been developed alongside and as part of a much larger initiative premised on making distinctions between human population groups, the Human Genome Diversity Project (HGDP).⁵ Proposed in 1991 by the population geneticist Luca Cavalli-Sforza and Allan Wilson (the lead scientist behind African Eve) as a response to the larger Human Genome Project (HGP), the HGDP set out to ‘study the genetic richness of the entire human species’ in order to ‘show both humanity’s diversity and its deep and underlying unity.’⁶ The project’s method was to take blood samples, saliva and hair from populations around the world from which DNA could be extracted and made available to scientists globally.⁷ Populations were defined as ‘ethnic groups defined by a self-imposed name’ and prioritized according to anthropological interest, cultural and linguistic uniqueness, and those in danger of ‘losing their identity as genetic, cultural, or linguistic units.’⁸ The Y chromosome was ‘the star of the project’⁹ providing ‘the male perspective’¹⁰ on human evolution, the genetic study of which had been dominated by (female) MtDNA and African Eve. It was argued that in addition to enabling scientists to understand the evolutionary history of humanity, the information gathered could help in the fight against disease worldwide, including in the indigenous populations to be sampled where, for example, the incidence of recessive diseases could be estimated.¹¹

The HGDP was, much like African Eve, presented as an anti-racist endeavour: for Cavalli-Sforza the project represented an ‘attack on racism’, an example of population genetics demonstrating that the genetic differences between populations were much smaller than superficial physical differences might imply, and he suggested that thinking about humans in terms of ‘groups’ and ‘populations’ based on geography was more productive than using the hard-to-define term ‘race’.¹² As Jenny Reardon has shown, Cavalli-Sforza believed that what genetics undermined was ‘popular’ constructions of race, which were based on superficial phenotypic (physical) differences and were separate from genotypic differences which were, in contrast, real.¹³ Thus, dismissing the significance of physical appearance, Cavalli-Sforza could join with anthropologists, social scientists and government officials in the late 1980s to argue that race, as phenotypical difference, was meaningless in science and society, replacing it with a genetic definition of difference which reconstructed the meaning of race to be molecular, and therefore distanced from ideological agendas.¹⁴ As such, Cavalli-Sforza argued that the HGDP should be funded precisely because it could be used to combat ‘social problems such as racism’ for which, he contended ‘there is no scientific basis’.¹⁵ Relegating race, as commonly

understood, to the realm of fiction, science was asserted as an authority on (the non-existence of) race and as separate from the sociocultural sphere from which race was deemed to have emerged.¹⁶

Such assertions on Cavalli-Sforza's part were necessary because despite his claims to the contrary, the HGDP was accused by many indigenous and ethnic groups as constituting a racist, colonial, exploitative attempt to extract and make money from the biological material of people whose fates and lives were otherwise of no interest to the scientists involved. Dubbed by critics as 'The Vampire Project', a problematic rhetoric of alarm about vanishing populations from which DNA needed to be urgently collected was central to the project's launch.¹⁷ The team claimed that 'isolated human populations contain much more informative genetic records than more recent, urban ones. Such isolated human populations are being rapidly merged with their neighbors, however, destroying irrevocably the information needed to reconstruct our evolutionary history'.¹⁸ Focusing on groups deemed to be 'uncontaminated' by European expansion, the HGDP appeared to act as a continuation of nineteenth-century anthropology, classifying non-Westerners as distinctive tribes stuck in the past.¹⁹ As a result, the project stalled as debates about its ethics continued into the late 1990s, the scientists involved forced to begin addressing in far greater depth issues of ownership, consent and consultation with participating populations.²⁰

Yet aside from significant concerns about whether scientists would profit from the collection of the biological material, and whether it would be used for racist ends, the project also participated in what Troy Duster has called 'the molecular reinscription of race'.²¹ For while the project emphasized 'the importance of human population genetics for a feeling of panhuman kinship', including, as part of its sampling, Y chromosomal DNA, which was considered not to correlate with any racial markers of old,²² it ultimately did constitute a search for population differences which could be mapped on to older divisions between races. As several critics have pointed out, in his 1994 co-authored book *The History and Geography of Human Genes*, Cavalli-Sforza published maps showing genetic differences which in some cases divided populations into geographical ethnic regions; Africans, Caucasoids, Mongoloids and Australian Aborigines.²³ A map presented in 2005 grouped the fifty-two populations included in the HGDP in less racialized terms, but still categorized them as Africans, Europeans, Asians, Oceanians and Native Americans.²⁴ What Cavalli-Sforza's search for population differences amounted to was the re-labelling of race as geographic ancestry, his insistence that science could be separated from society, ignoring the 'mutual constitution of natural, social, and moral orders'²⁵ which, rather than society

alone, had produced ideas of race based upon phenotype. Although Cavalli-Sforza was acutely aware of the history of racial science and vehemently denied that his project was in any way associated with it (accusing those who made such connections as lacking understanding of human population genetics),²⁶ he was unable to comprehend the role that science played, and would continue to play, in the formation of the sociocultural understandings of race upon which it also drew.

The result is that as the term 'race' was being erased from human population genetics, scientific discussion of population differences continued to evoke races in all but name. This is perhaps no more evident than in genetic ancestry testing technologies, the commercial arm of population genetics, which has seen geneticists set up businesses which draw upon genetic data from indigenous communities to offer their customers individual maps and analyses of ancestral origins.²⁷ Analysing MtDNA, Y chromosome and autosomal DNA, companies such as 23 and Me, Oxford Ancestors, Roots for Real and African Ancestry promise to give their customers information about their 'family history',²⁸ 'a clear view of your ancestry, your people and your heritage'²⁹ and to 'estimate the location of your ancestral origins'.³⁰ While all are careful not to use the term race, it nevertheless remains a central way in which the services are to be understood and sold: Roots for Real, for example, recognizes that African Americans and British African Caribbean clients have 'special requirements' due to the history of slavery, and warns them that 'to trace your paternal line, you can select the Y-DNA test, but beware that 25% of American blacks and Caribbean blacks have a European Y chromosome due to historical admixture with plantation owners'.³¹ Racial terminology ('black') is conflated with the geographical 'European' as a particular group of people defined by race is directed to think about their test results in those terms. Similarly, another company, African Ancestry, asserts that it is 'committed to providing a unique service to the black community' by determining individuals' 'specific ethnic groups of origin with an unrivaled level of detail, accuracy and confidence'.³² The differences between race, ethnicity, clan, tribe, group or population – to name only some of the terminology employed in this industry – are unclear and unexplained.³³ Instead, consumers of this technology are largely left to create their own interpretations of what 'a single population or ethnicity'³⁴ means. That it is black people who are, as sociologists have shown, most interested and influenced by DNA ancestry tests,³⁵ and at whom many of the services are marketed, suggests that the technology has done little to change public understanding of race. It has rather served to underscore what Alondra Nelson terms 'a classificatory logic of human types

that compounds, rather than challenges, social inequality',³⁶ because, as Anders Nordgren and Eric Juengst argue, 'the identity categories that customers tend to seek to confirm, discover, or reject through DNA testing are usually social categories' which 'genomic testing can powerfully reinforce'.³⁷ As in the Hemings case, DNA testing operates to confirm or deny particular 'racial' lineages, rather than to raise questions about the validity of the concept of race itself.

This chapter examines how the simultaneous denial and re-inscription of race in population genetics and genetic ancestry testing are addressed in one of the most popular and successful novels of the early twenty-first century, Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go*. A tale of the relationship between three human clones, Kathy, Tommy and Ruth, who have been brought up and educated in a kind of boarding school, Hailsham, the novel charts their lives as they grow from children into adults. As teenagers, the clones are sent to live in 'the Cottages', a complex which functions as a half-way house where they prepare for their future roles as both the carers of organ donors and donors themselves; each clone will donate three or four organs until they 'complete', being cared for between donations by other clones who have yet to begin their own donations. It is only once Kathy, Tommy and Ruth leave Hailsham that they realize that they have been brought up in exceptional circumstances compared to other clones and start to hope that there may be a way to escape their fate. *Never Let Me Go* is not a novel that engages with science, race or the relationship between the two in any overt way. Ishiguro provides little scientific detail about how human cloning has arisen and sets his novel in the recent past when human cloning did not exist in order to avoid interpretations of the novel as, in his words, 'a chilling warning about the way we're going with cloning and biotechnology'.³⁸ Instead the novel appears to reprise the themes and concerns of Ishiguro's previous fiction, only in a different guise: the idea of growing up without parents explored in *When We Were Orphans* (2000) and the narrative of an individual looking back over a career, who has acquiesced to a system that represses them, depicted in *The Remains of the Day* (1989). Reviewers and critics have, as a result, tended to conclude that *Never Let Me Go* is not about human cloning, instead interpreting the novel variously as referring to class,³⁹ the holocaust,⁴⁰ the relations between humans and animals,⁴¹ 'the neoliberal state',⁴² 'vulnerable actors in our modern economic order'⁴³ or more generally as a 'disquieting look at the effects of dehumanization on any group that's subject to it'.⁴⁴

The novel is clearly not a comment on the dangers of cloning (something which was being publicly debated in the years immediately preceding its publication⁴⁵), nor can it be classified as science fiction, yet the critical evasion

of its biotechnological premise has obscured the ways in which it does engage with another strand of genetics – ancestry testing – and the role of that science in shaping contemporary ideas about race and racial identity. I argue that *Never Let Me Go* draws a subtle analogy between the lives of the clones and people who are racially marginalized, as a means of exploring the ways in which race is erased from population genetics on the basis that it is a social rather than biological category, yet continues to be evoked in that science through the use of other, euphemistic terminology and forms of classification.⁴⁶ Identifying correspondences between the exploitation of the clones and the marginalization of Britain's non-white immigrants and migrant workers, as well as similarities between the clones' functional education and the education of the colonized, I demonstrate that despite appearing post-racial, the world of the novel is saturated in racialized forms of discrimination. The clones, apparently raceless yet segregated on the basis of their genetic difference, reflect the internalization of race that is enacted in Cavalli-Sforza's denial of race's phenotypic significance in favour of the genotype – an invisible marker of difference. The clones' condition reveals the ironic outcome of the claim that race has no biological (only social) meaning, which is that 'any exploitation of non-white workers is expiated symbolically through the scientific admission of their human equality'.⁴⁷ Rather than helping in the fight against racism, the claim that race is not biological can serve to shore up colourblind ideologies which remove race without removing racism, ideologies which result from the attempt to separate biology from culture, the separation of which the novel's clones are a product.

However the chapter contends that as *Never Let Me Go* explores the paradoxes of the post-racialism which population genetics served to support, it also presents an alternative vision of a form of kinship based on a non-genetic, non-racial affinity. I identify an emphasis in Kathy's narrative on describing and interpreting facial expressions in place of physical characteristics. Kathy's privileging of looks and faces not only enables her to achieve a level of emotional comprehension not possible through her education but it is also particularly significant in relation to her search for a 'possible'.⁴⁸ Searching for recognition in the face of a genetically similar other, Kathy instead finds the recognition she has been seeking in the facial expression of the novel's only racially differentiated character, Miss Emily's Nigerian carer George. Evoking the logic of an older biological science, Darwin's theory of the universality of expression, and thus the common descent of different races, I argue that *Never Let Me Go* explores the capacity of facial expressions to disrupt racial thinking and challenges the idea promoted by genetic ancestry tracing companies that the question of who you

are can be answered genetically, that tracing your (racial) genetic ancestry is a way of discovering an authentic, lost identity. Instead, the non-racial recognition between Kathy and George suggests a way of moving beyond the genetic assumptions that underpin much contemporary, racialized identity politics, towards a model of reciprocity that recalls the insights of an earlier Darwinian biology. It is ultimately through the novel's emphasis on facial expression that Ishiguro undermines the artificial division of biological fact and sociocultural fiction which Cavalli-Sforza upheld. Kathy and George's mutual recognition eschews genetic or racial similarity as it embraces their common experience of exclusion in a culture of racism which distinguishes their bodies along racial/genetic lines; yet it is a recognition grounded in biological similarity, a physiological unity brought to the fore by a socio-scientific fiction of difference. The world of the novel is one in which the idea of racial difference is reinforced through the combined effort of the scientific and sociocultural spheres, but it is also a world in which the entanglement of the biological body with its cultural environment provides the means for thinking beyond race.

The racial aura of *Never Let Me Go*

Writing about the paradox of contemporary genetic science, in which the idea of race is at once erased and reinvigorated, Alys Weinbaum suggests the implication of this paradox for art that takes biotechnology as its subject is that race is always inevitably present in such art.⁴⁹ Weinbaum applies Walter Benjamin's idea – that the aura of the singular artwork is lost in mechanically reproduced art, but that the aura of art is also 'that which is artificially produced to replace or fill-in where a loss of "authority" or "authenticity" is identified'⁵⁰ – to the use of race in biotechnology. She argues for 'an uncanny correspondence between aura, as Benjamin develops it, and the concept of race that circulates in our supposedly post-racial times: the present denial of the biological existence of race shapes all invocations of race, effectively making biological race auratic each and every time it appears'.⁵¹ Thus, in art that engages with biotechnology, 'in a supposedly post-racial age even genomic art without overt racial content is paradoxically haunted by racial aura ... the denial of the existence of the genetic reality of race is in fact accompanied by racial aura; or put differently, that in the context of post-racialism, race is always already present'.⁵²

Although *Never Let Me Go* is not quite 'genomic art' in that cloning is not its central concern, Weinbaum's analysis is instructive for understanding

the peripheral or indeed 'auratic' emergence of race in the novel and for comprehending the novel's capacity to perform a 'critical assessment of our supposedly post-racial moment'.⁵³ As a novel without 'overt racial content', the world of *Never Let Me Go* appears post-racial. There is no discussion of race or ethnic differences in England; the only kind of difference is that between the clones and normals, who are not represented as being physically different from each other. It is as though race has been effaced in the manner that Paul Gilroy imagines might be made possible by the new genetics, its signification moving from the visual level of skin colour to an internal 'cellular' level.⁵⁴ However, the result is a post-racialism premised on a kind of whiteness where, as Shameem Black has suggested, 'the world of Hailsham is a world of cultural sameness, a normative ideal of white, middle class culture', which suggests 'the triumph of a white, fascistic racial ideal that effectively obliterates the markers of multicultural Britain so common in the late 1990s'.⁵⁵

Yet despite the apparent absence of race, the idea of racial difference nevertheless emerges in the predetermined roles that the genetically differentiated clones fulfil. As bodies that have been created to serve the needs of the 'normal' population, the clones' experience appears little different from the contemporary exploitation of the black and minority ethnic workers who are often reduced simply to bodies that carry out various forms of undesirable and poorly paid labour. In addition to evoking the increasingly racialized trade in organs for transplantation, where human organs are illegally bought by people in the West from the impoverished in countries such as Turkey, Iraq and Brazil,⁵⁶ the lives of the clones echo those of the largely unseen populations of poorly paid migrant workers in Britain. Once the students leave Hailsham and live independently in 'the Cottages', which are 'the remains of a farm', they spend 'a lot of the time ... being chilly' and 'huddled around half-dead fires in the small hours'.⁵⁷ Their only contact with the outside world is Keffers, 'this grumpy old guy who turned up two or three times a week in his muddy van to look the place over',⁵⁸ who operates much like a gang-master, providing only the bare minimum the clones need to survive. Following their donations they are sent to 'recovery centres'⁵⁹ located in peripheral locations such as Dover, which are reminiscent of the detention centres in which asylum seekers are often detained for long periods (including the notorious Dover Immigration Removal Centre). At Hailsham they are given 'Culture Briefing' classes where 'we had to role play various people we'd find out there – waiters in cafes, policemen and so on',⁶⁰ preparing them, in the manner of contemporary citizenship tests that immigrants are required to take, for what is essentially the foreign culture that

they are about to enter following their isolation at Hailsham. As with the largely unseen, usually unreported populations of poorly paid migrant workers who often live and work in dire circumstances, the clones' existence in Ishiguro's imaginary Britain is shielded from the mainstream society of the normals, who 'didn't want to be reminded how the donation programme really worked'.⁶¹

The correspondence between Britain's non-white immigrant populations and the experiences of the clones is most explicitly drawn, however, at the end of the novel in its first and only portrayal of racial difference. Kathy and Tommy track down their former guardians, Madame and Miss Emily, in the mistaken belief that as Hailsham students they might be able to defer their donations for a year or so by proving that they are genuinely in love. The only time that the clones are given a clear, unambiguous understanding of their situation, this moment is the most dramatic of the novel. Yet Kathy's confrontation with her guardians is repeatedly interrupted by the presence of another character, whose existence is first indicated by Kathy's observation as she enters the guardians' house that 'it was like a servant of some sort had got the place ready for the night-time', then by 'a gruff male voice,' which 'called something from upstairs'.⁶² The character is George, a nurse and carer to the wheelchair-bound Miss Emily, and his presence might be unremarkable were it not for the fact that he is described as being Nigerian. Although we are only presented with a brief glimpse into George's life, there are clear parallels between his situation and that of Kathy. Like the clones, George is a carer and as the only character differentiated by race in the novel, his ethnicity seems linked to the social role that he inhabits. As Philomena Essed and David Theo Goldberg have argued in an essay on the cultural contexts which have made cloning conceivable:

One can also imagine the cloning of non-white, able-bodied, good-natured, caring, docile, moderately smart but not too intelligent bodies to do the service work that those more privileged seem to demand more and more. Whereas biological cloning is still for the most part a fiction waiting to be realized, the cultural cloning of preferred types to inhabit segregated spaces is everyday practice, especially among social elites.⁶³

George is the culturally cloned equivalent of the genetically cloned Kathy; he is not only a carer but a servant forced to respond to the barked orders of his mistresses: 'I've told you what to do. Just do as I explained' and 'George! George!'.⁶⁴ Where Kathy must care for her fellow clones as they slowly die through donating before sacrificing her own body, George, circumscribed by his racial difference, is destined to serve and care for Miss Emily. Ann Whitehead has noted how

the novel portrays a system of care analogous to Britain's care homes, which are often staffed by migrant workers without citizenship.⁶⁵ George represents this underclass of Britain's migrant workers. His shadowy, voiceless presence in Kathy's narrative – a 'faint thump', 'muffled', the 'footsteps',⁶⁶ answering the door – reflects not only his peripheral status in the world of the normals, but also the increasingly peripheral nature of race itself. George's condition exposes the pitfalls of the post-racialism that the biological disavowal of race enables: removing the concept of race, as Goldberg argues, does not remove the material conditions of race or racism.⁶⁷ The near absence of racial difference in the novel only serves to highlight the presence of racial discrimination as the model for the clones' subjugation and oppression.

The novel's critique of the erasure of race is extended in its allusion to the historical racisms and exclusionary modes of humanism that provide a precedent for the contemporary forms of dehumanization that the denial of race enables. If the inescapability of the clones' situation corresponds to the contemporary exploitation of migrant workers, the way in which their humanity is queried and judged during the course of their education recalls the experiences of the colonized. Albert Memmi writes of the schooling of the colonized child that the 'memory which is assigned him is certainly not that of his people. The history which is taught him is not his own ... Everything seems to have taken place out of his country',⁶⁸ and it is this sense of alienation and externally acquired habits of memory that characterize the educational system of the 'colony' of Hailsham. The clones are taught about the different counties of an England they have never seen through romanticized 'picture calendars', which consist of images of 'little villages with streams going through them, white monuments on hillsides, old churches beside fields' that Kathy holds on to once she has left Hailsham: 'it's amazing, even now, after all these miles I've covered as a carer, the extent to which my idea of the various counties is still set by these pictures Miss Emily put up on her easel'.⁶⁹ Given Kathy's familiarity with an alternative England in which she is more likely to be 'having coffee in a service station, staring at the motorway through the big windows',⁷⁰ her preservation of the former image reflects the gap between expectation and reality that has often characterized the immigrant experience of the mother country, the result of an education designed to serve the needs of the colonizer.

The functional role of the students' education is particularly apparent in the emphasis placed on their ability to be creative and to produce art, again recalling the experience of colonized or enslaved people. At the beginning of the novel Kathy explains the young students' preoccupation with the arts, 'paintings,

drawings, pottery; all sorts of “sculptures”;⁷¹ upon which they are encouraged by their guardians to focus their attention. Their creations are then sold at ‘Exchanges’ where the work of all the students is displayed and bought by other students, with the best pieces being taken away for the mysterious Madame’s ‘Gallery’.⁷² In her school days, Kathy reveals that ‘how much you were liked and respected, had to do with how good you were at “creating”’.⁷³ The clones come to attribute great significance to their art, convincing themselves that it might be a qualification for getting their organ donations deferred because, according to Miss Emily, ‘things like pictures, poetry, all that kind of stuff, she said they *revealed what you were like inside*. She said *they revealed your soul*’.⁷⁴ It is not until the end of the novel that the real purpose of the gallery is explained by Miss Emily: ‘We took away your art because we thought it would reveal your souls. Or to put it more finely, we did it to prove you had souls at all’.⁷⁵

The guardians’ reduction of the students’ art and creativity to functioning as evidence of their humanity echoes the artificial relationship between art and humanity that historically characterized Europeans’ judgement of the non-European subject. Discussing the way that the humanness of black Africans was assessed by Europeans during the Enlightenment, Henry Louis Gates, Jr. writes:

Since the beginning of the seventeenth century, Europeans had wondered aloud whether or not the African ‘Species of Men’, as they most commonly put it, could ever create formal literature, could ever master ‘the arts and sciences.’ If they could, the argument ran, then the African variety of humanity and the European variety were fundamentally related. If not, then it seemed clear that the African was destined by nature to be a slave.⁷⁶

Gates goes on to give the example of George Moses Horton, an African American slave poet in the 1820s whose master promised him his freedom in exchange for an adequate return on sales of his poetry.⁷⁷ As Gates explains, ‘Writing, for these slaves, was not an activity of mind; rather, it was a commodity which they were forced to trade for their humanity’.⁷⁸ Such limited criteria for what constitutes art, and therefore what constitutes the human, is little different to the function performed by the clones’ art.⁷⁹ Far from proving their humanity, the hope the students invest in art and education only reveals their subjection to a debased liberal ideology premised on a limited idea of what constitutes the human. Yet while the clones’ art is unable to liberate them, *Never Let Me Go* might itself be considered ‘art that paves the way for liberation’ in critically apprehending racial aura and making its spectral presence visible.⁸⁰ In recalling the historical ways in

which the colonized and enslaved have been excluded from the human and the contemporary figurative cloning of a racialized underclass, Ishiguro's portrayal of the clones exposes the ambivalent nature of race in genetics and in British society more generally. The seemingly post-racial world of the novel reveals itself to be a world saturated in forms of racial differentiation and discrimination, displaced onto the genetically differentiated clones whose condition reflects the 'paradoxical persistence of geneticized racial thinking in our supposedly post-racial moment'.⁸¹

Identifying with the other: Race versus face

As *Never Let Me Go* explores the paradoxes of a seemingly post-racial genetics, it also presents a vision of how human relations, and what it means to be human, might be understood without allusion to racial difference. This is achieved through Kathy's narrative style. For a number of critics, the banality and repetition of Kathy's narration challenges the (falsely) humanist education and artwork that the clones are brought up to revere.⁸² I suggest that the challenge of Kathy's narration does not reside solely in its apparent inhumanity but that her emphasis on descriptions of facial expressions (in place of physical characteristics) enables her to challenge the conventions of the art and education that have ultimately contributed to, rather than ameliorated, her oppression. Significantly, this style of narration places an emphasis on a universal human trait – facial expression – above physical attributes including racial differences. In so doing it recalls Darwin's emphasis on the unity of man over racial distinctions and difference outlined in *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals*, which, published in 1872, sought to show that the origins of human facial expressions could be found in the expressions of animals, an argument which formed part of his response to the continuing debates on evolution sparked by the *Origin of Species* (1859). In making this argument Darwin was able to conclude that 'all the chief expressions exhibited by man are the same throughout the world', and that 'the young and the old of widely different races, both with man and animals, express the same state of mind by the same movements'.⁸³ Darwin's theory thus had implications not only for man's relationship to animals, but also for the relationship between different human races; the universal facial expressions of man proved that all races had evolved from the same species and not, as the polygenists of the time argued, that races had evolved from different origins. Although there has since been much discussion of whether expressions and emotions are universally

human,⁸⁴ Darwin's thesis remains a powerful indictment of scientific racism and demonstrates that, as Sarah Winter contends, 'prior to modern genetics, the biological species unity of humanity can be clearly defined – and the biological status of race refuted.'⁸⁵ It is the logic of Darwin's thesis upon which Ishiguro draws in the alternative form of non-racial and non-genetic kinship that the novel proposes.

Kathy's narration represents her experience in a way that evades the codes, conventions and expectations of the traditional education she has been given and that has contributed to her oppression. The kind of writing that Kathy has been taught to do is at the forefront of her mind as she narrates her life story in the present:

Sometimes I'll be driving on a long, weaving road across marshland, or maybe past rows of furrowed fields, the sky big and grey and never changing mile after mile, and I find I'm thinking about my essay, the one I was supposed to be writing back then, when we were at the Cottages ... When I think about my essay today, what I do is go over it in some detail: I may think of a completely new approach I could have taken, or about different writers and books I could have focused on ... Just lately, I've even toyed with the idea of going back and working on it, once I'm not a carer any more and I've got the time.⁸⁶

Although Kathy is thinking about her former writing and reading as she composes her narrative, there is little evidence in her writing of the intellectual training she received at Hailsham. Despite revealing her familiarity with *The Odyssey*, *1001 Nights* and the novels of Thomas Hardy, George Eliot, Edna O'Brien, Margaret Drabble and James Joyce, Kathy does not adopt the techniques for storytelling or stylistic innovation represented in these wide-ranging literary texts. Instead, as John Mullan argues, 'for all her earnest reading, Kathy H.'s narrative voice feels deprived of resources'.⁸⁷ From the first line of the novel – 'My name is Kathy H. I'm thirty-one years old, and I've been a carer now for over eleven years'⁸⁸ – to the last – 'I just waited a bit, then turned back to the car, to drive off to wherever it was I was supposed to be'⁸⁹ – Kathy writes in a mundane style that would seem to suggest a limited capacity for creativity and critical thinking.

Yet it is creativity that has been functionalized in Kathy's experience. She recounts how the essays the students were told to write were designed to 'absorb us properly for anything up to two years', and that 'how well you were settling in at the Cottages – how well you were *coping* – was somehow reflected by how many books you'd read'.⁹⁰ Distracting the students from their impending

deaths, their essays and reading are merely an extension of an education that has prevented them from reaching a true understanding of their situation. Denied the possibility of freedom through art of the kind given to the slave poet George Moses Horton, Kathy produces an artwork that challenges the conventions of the canonical, European literature she has studied. Specifically, her description of faces challenges the emphasis in much Victorian literature (the topic of her essay) on physical features as representative of character, the product of the contemporaneous science of physiognomy.⁹¹

Kathy rarely describes the physical characteristics of the people she presents in her narrative and never refers to race or ethnicity. No information is given about what Kathy and her closest companions, Ruth and Tommy, look like. Only the physical features of the guardians and the veterans at the Cottages are described and then only in very basic terms. Kathy describes the same traits, height and hair, each time: Madame ‘was a tall, narrow woman with short hair’, Miss Emily ‘wasn’t especially tall ... she wore her silvery hair tied back’, ‘Chrissie was a tall girl who was quite beautiful when she stood up to her full height’ and Rodney ‘went around with his hair tied back in a ponytail’.⁹² These repetitive, unimaginative physical descriptions highlight the limited importance of the physical body in Kathy’s psyche. Awaiting the harvesting of their organs, Kathy and the other clones are emotionally detached from their own bodies, which are merely functional rather than individual, an attitude reflected in their emotionally disconnected approach to sex: ‘sex had got like “being creative” had been a few years earlier. It felt like if you hadn’t done it yet, you ought to, and quickly’.⁹³ Devoid of meaning, bodies do not provide or add to an understanding of character.

Rather than describing physical features, Kathy instead describes facial expressions. Her narrative abounds with descriptions of people’s countenances and her interpretation of the thoughts and feelings that these looks express. Typical of this is Kathy’s recollection of an encounter with Miss Emily: ‘I remember when I went to tell Miss Emily my chosen topic was Victorian novels, I hadn’t really thought about it much and I could see she knew it. But she just gave me one of her searching stares and said nothing more’.⁹⁴ Kathy ‘sees’ in order to understand the thoughts of others. Having been brought up being ‘told and not told’⁹⁵ about the true purpose of her life, she learns to interpret facial expressions, which reveal more than what is said. When the students joke among themselves about electric fences in Second World War prison camps, Kathy is initially alerted to the possibility that Hailsham’s fences could be electrified through Miss Lucy’s look: ‘I went on watching Miss Lucy through all this, and I could see, just for a

second, a ghostly expression come over her face as she watched the class in front of her.⁹⁶ Kathy's inability to articulate her own feelings (for example 'I wasn't keen on Ruth going with them to Norfolk, though I couldn't really say why'⁹⁷), which is evident everywhere in her narrative, is the product of an upbringing in which words mask, or cannot convey, the full picture of what someone is feeling. As a result, in place of dialogue Kathy meditates on facial expressions which, for Kathy, are a more reliable and honest marker of emotion. As she humiliates and mocks Ruth about her belief in the potential of her possible, the humans the clones are copied from, she monitors Ruth's face for a reaction: 'I glanced at Ruth beside me. There was no anger in her eyes, just a kind of wariness. There was even a sort of hope, I thought, that when the poster appeared, it would be perfectly innocuous – something that reminded us of Hailsham, something like that. I could see all of this in her face, the way it didn't quite settle on any one expression, but hovered tentatively.'⁹⁸

Although she is somehow conditioned to see what is not said, Kathy also privileges this form of non-verbal communication because it brings her closer to an understanding of the human soul than any of her art or writing. Ultimately it is her ability to interpret facial expressions (rather than words or texts) that gives her a reliable and honest understanding of human emotion. Darwin privileges the facial over the verbal in this way when he writes: 'We readily perceive sympathy in others by their expression; our sufferings are thus mitigated and our pleasures increased; and mutual good feeling is thus strengthened. The movements of expression give vividness and energy to our spoken words. They reveal the thoughts and intentions of others more truly than do words, which may be falsified.'⁹⁹ As Ruth lies dying after a donation, Kathy observes:

Just for a few seconds, no more, she looked straight at me and she knew exactly who I was. It was one of those little islands of lucidity donors sometimes get to in the midst of their ghastly battles, and she looked at me, just for that moment, and although she didn't speak, I knew what her look meant. So I said to her: 'It's okay, I'm going to do it, Ruth. I'm going to become Tommy's carer as soon as I can.' I said it under my breath, because I didn't think she'd hear the words anyway, even if I shouted them. But my hope was that with our gazes locked as they were for those few seconds, she'd read my expression exactly as I'd read hers.¹⁰⁰

It is through reading expressions and locking gazes that Kathy attempts to form a relationship with another based on a reciprocity of feeling, emotion and understanding in which words are insignificant. She draws on this capacity at the end of the novel when she encounters Madame and they discuss the moment at Hailsham when Madame catches Kathy singing 'Never Let Me Go' while

cradling a pillow. Attempting to break the barrier between clones and normals, Kathy tells Madame, 'I think I know what you're thinking about,' and notes that 'Madame's expression didn't change as she kept staring into my face.'¹⁰¹ Although Madame initially resists Kathy's attempt to establish a mutual interpretation of the moment by mocking Kathy's attempt to read through seeing, 'a mind-reader. You should be on the stage,' their meeting ends when Madame, overcoming her fear of the clones, empathizes and physically connects with Kathy by looking: 'She reached out her hand, all the while staring into my face, and placed it on my cheek. I could feel a trembling go all through her body, but she kept her hand where it was, and I could see again tears appearing in her eyes.'¹⁰²

Kathy's looking is tied to, and perhaps also derived from, another kind of looking that she performs in her search for a possible. Throughout the novel, Kathy's sense of alienation from the world of the normals is linked to her inability to find a reflection, a lack caused by the absence of a genetic parent or ancestor. From a young age Kathy senses this difference:

So you're waiting, even if you don't quite know it, waiting for the moment when you realise that you really are different to them; that there are people out there, like Madame, who don't hate you or wish you any harm, but who nevertheless shudder at the very thought of you – of how you were brought into this world and why – and who dread the idea of your hand brushing against theirs. The first time you glimpse yourself though the eyes of a person like that, it's a cold moment. It's like walking past a mirror you've walked past every day of your life, and suddenly it shows you something else, something troubling and strange.¹⁰³

It is a moment which has been compared to the experience of alienation brought about by racism; Martin Puchner describes this scene as 'a recognition scene, a standard feature in novels about racism and other forms of discrimination.'¹⁰⁴ Searching for recognition and familiarity in a world that deems them to be less than human, Kathy and the other clones look for their possibles, who they believe could be discovered at any moment. Kathy looks in pornographic magazines, explaining how 'I hardly saw the contorted bodies, because I was focusing on the faces. Even in the little adverts for videos or whatever tucked away to the side, I checked each model's face before moving on,'¹⁰⁵ and it is during this time at the Cottages that the students take a trip to Norfolk after a sighting of a possible for Ruth. Kathy explains that 'we all of us, to varying degrees, believed that when you saw the person you were copied from, you'd get *some* insight into who you were deep down, and maybe too, you'd see something of what your life held in store.'¹⁰⁶ Once again, seeing is understanding for Kathy, whose search for

reciprocity and recognition in the faces of others is caught up in her search for genetic recognition.

However, instead of discovering who she is by finding a possible, the only person in whom Kathy can find a likeness is George. It is through a comment made by Miss Emily that the reader learns of George's racial difference and Kathy's reaction to it. In describing her first post-Hailsham encounter with Kathy, Miss Emily says: 'I recognized you, but you may well not have recognized me. In fact, Kathy H., once not so long ago, I passed you sitting on that bench out there, and you certainly didn't recognize me then. You glanced at George, the big Nigerian man pushing me. Oh yes, you had quite a good look at him, and he at you.'¹⁰⁷ Instead of recognizing Miss Emily, the guardian for whom she has been searching, Kathy recognizes herself in George. Through their silent face-to-face looking Kathy gains access to a sense of kinship that goes beyond the confines of the genetic connection she has hitherto been seeking in a possible. The recognition between Kathy and George is based on their mutual exclusion on the basis of their genetic and racial alienation, yet it is also a recognition that negates the significance of these differences. Privileging facial expression over physical appearance enables Kathy to recognize that understanding who she is might be achieved in the recognition of shared human experience, in a non-biological and non-racial affinity.

In this way *Never Let Me Go* offers an alternative view of kinship that challenges the idea that understanding who you are can be achieved through the genes, in tracing a (racial) genetic ancestry.¹⁰⁸ This has been the claim of genetic ancestry tracing companies, a claim popularized in television programmes such as the 2003 BBC2 documentary *Motherland: A Genetic Journey*, in which the scientists behind the company Roots for Real were featured. Billed as a 'quest to recover lost identity', the documentary followed three Black Britons as they traced their ancestries, through DNA analysis, to specific parts of Africa, exploring their emotions as they confronted their African 'distant cousins' in order to discover 'who they are and where they came from'.¹⁰⁹ One participant, Mark Anderson, described how 'the question of who my ancestors were and what my past was like was one that always needed answering for me. I was never comfortable describing myself as a Black Briton. I always felt that something was missing from my story'.¹¹⁰ Not only have serious questions been raised about the accuracy of genetic ancestry tests which, while claiming to offer individualized results, present results which would likely apply to large populations (and in the absence of historical information could be explained by any number of scenarios),¹¹¹ but the focus on Y chromosome and MtDNA analysis as ways

of understanding ancestry is also misleading because these only represent two 'corridors of ancestry', excluding many others.¹¹² It is on this basis that Richard Dawkins criticized the *Motherland* documentary, of which he writes:

They used Y-chromosomal and mitochondrial DNA because, for the reasons we have seen, they are more traceable than genes in general. But unfortunately, the producers never really came clean about the limitations this imposed. In particular, no doubt for sound televisual reasons, they came close to actively deceiving these individuals, and also their long-lost African 'relatives', into becoming far more emotional about the reunions than they had any right to be.¹¹³

For Dawkins, the *Motherland* documentary was 'sentimental rubbish' because 'different genes tell different stories' and 'at any given time in the past we have a huge number of genealogical ancestors' meaning 'a single chunk of DNA, such as from a mitochondrion or Y chromosome, gives as impoverished a view of the past as a single sentence from a history book'.¹¹⁴

However beyond his methodological objections, Dawkins does not challenge the idea that, as he puts it, 'ancestors hold the key to understanding life itself',¹¹⁵ a claim which is central to the appeal of genetic ancestry testing. The tests make ancestry key to identity, to which race is also key; as biologist Fatimah Jackson contends, ancestry testing companies have exploited a vulnerable market in African Americans where 'identity is disproportionately linked to phenotype, and in ethnic minority groups is associated with levels of self-confidence, performance, and overall positive life outcomes'.¹¹⁶ Put differently by Stuart Murray, 'Because genomic vocabularies have so pervaded the public sphere, it is impossible not to understand the self as a problem in these terms'.¹¹⁷ The silent bond between Kathy and George resists the naturalization of genetic explanations of kinship, the prevailing conception that DNA is the key to the self. Instead, they embrace the kind of ethics of care that Murray argues is needed in an era in which genetic technologies have recast family relationships in genetic terms. They eschew 'a self that uncritically does the bidding of those ideologies we call family, nation, or race ... however "naturalized" or "biologized" these terms may become' in favour of an ethical care which 'will mobilize these as the tropes that they are, and seek new relations, new modes, and new terms by which we might once again ask the question of the good life'.¹¹⁸ The seemingly natural connection between race and identity is broken in the non-racial recognition between Kathy and George, creating a post-racial vision that, rather than being based on a denial of racial inequality, gestures towards the kind of affinities that Donna Haraway imagines might emerge from a unity between social relations, science and technology: 'a self-consciously constructed space that cannot affirm

the capacity to act on the basis of natural identification, but only on the basis of conscious coalition, of affinity, or political kinship'.¹¹⁹ While Black argues that 'the students' loss of cultural specificity signals one tactic by which they lose their purchase on human identity',¹²⁰ it is rather the belief that such cultural or ethnic forms of identification are self-evidently human that Ishiguro's portrayal of Kathy and George confronts. Who you are, the novel suggests, is determined not in the promise of a recovered genetic ancestry (in this case by the discovery or identification of a 'possible'), but by your interactions and affiliations in the present and the shared experiences on which such affiliations are built.

Reading faces, reading literature

Kathy's emphasis on a universal, biological means of expressing emotion has, however, implications beyond repudiating the primacy of racial and genetic forms of identification. Her emphasis on facial expression overrides the articulation of emotion in words, apparently calling into question the efficacy of the novel's own communicative means. This tension is explored at various points in the novel where the value of words, writing or literature is undermined. One such moment is when Kathy is at Hailsham and catches Miss Lucy

leaning over in concentration, forehead very low, arms up on the surface, scrawling furious lines over a page with a pencil. Underneath the heavy black lines I could see neat blue handwriting. As I watched, she went on scrubbing the pencil point over the paper, almost in the way we did shading in Art, except her movements were much more angry, as if she didn't mind gouging right through the sheet.¹²¹

Miss Lucy scrawls over the students' work in anger at the false ideals they have developed through their education; their writing is a sham that reduces, rather than proves, their humanity. Kathy, who assesses the situation in her usual way – 'I could see her face was flushed, but there were no traces of tears' – narrates how she was confused and upset by what she had seen but adds, 'if you'd asked me to define just what I was so upset about, I wouldn't have been able to explain'.¹²² It is precisely because their writing leaves the students unable to express their true feelings in words that Miss Lucy reacts against it; Kathy at some level understands this, which is why she responds emotionally to Miss Lucy's 'flushed' face.

Another such incident occurs when Kathy describes the experience of reading *Daniel Deronda* at the Cottages, around the time that she and the other students are struggling to make sense of their origins and look for their possibles. She

makes no explicit connection between this discussion of possibles, of genetic ancestors or parents, and her reading of *Daniel Deronda*, the tale of a young man adopted at birth who becomes involved with a Jewish family only to discover that he is Jewish himself, giving a sense of purpose to his hitherto directionless life. Instead, she simply remarks that she had 'not been enjoying it very much'.¹²³ For Kathy, reading *Daniel Deronda* is part of the competitive reading the students are forced to do in order to prove how well they are coping; its meaning, the way that it might relate to the human condition (in this case Kathy's) or how Kathy as a reader might empathize with its characters is erased, despite the fact that the resonances are clear: when Eliot describes how Deronda's 'own face in the glass had during many years been associated for him with thoughts of someone whom he must be like – one about whose character and lot he continually wondered, and never dared to ask',¹²⁴ we are immediately reminded of how Kathy's looking in a mirror provokes similar questions about who she is.

These moments draw attention to the assumptions embedded in the act of reading and the expectation that literature and writing will signify something to the person reading it. That Kathy's reading of faces is more significant than her reading of books is not an indication that the significance of literature is diminished; it is, rather, part of an alternative mode of interpretation that might act as a model for our own reading. Derek Attridge is instructive here: he writes of a 'parallel between creativity and responsiveness' in literature and argues that 'creatively responding to the other ... involves the shifting of ingrained modes of understanding in order to take account of that which was systematically excluded by them'.¹²⁵ Kathy's responsiveness to others, particularly George, is enabled by her creative method of describing facial expressions in place of physical characteristics, involving a 'shifting of ingrained modes of understanding'. In this, Ishiguro provides an example of how we, as readers, might creatively respond to and interpret the novel. It is in looking and seeing beyond ingrained assumptions about how literature should work, seeing beyond what appears as a banal and unremarkable narrative mode, that the reader, like Kathy, is able to read differently and see how Kathy reads differently in interpreting what is written on the face. Attridge argues that literature is effective even if it 'solves no problems and saves no souls',¹²⁶ a moot point in the case of Kathy and her fellow clones; although literature itself cannot save them or prove they have souls, it remains effective as a means through which Kathy can challenge and subvert the very idea that it can save them.

Yet the novel also moves beyond the more abstract responsiveness espoused by Attridge towards a biologically grounded conception of recognition and

human similarity that reveals literature's ability to apprehend the human experience of facial expression. In the concluding sections of *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals*, Darwin reflects on the difficulty of describing specific expressions, which, in the context of the novel, reminds us of Kathy's limited mode of description:

M. Lemoine argues that, if man possessed an innate knowledge of expression, authors and artists would not have found it so difficult, as is notoriously the case, to describe and depict the characteristic signs of each particular state of mind. But this does not seem to me a valid argument. We may actually behold the expression changing in an unmistakable manner in a man or animal, and yet be quite unable, as I know from experience, to analyse the nature of the change ... It has often struck me as a curious fact that so many shades of expression are instantly recognized without any conscious process of analysis on our part. No one, I believe, can clearly describe a sullen or sly expression; yet many observers are unanimous that these expressions can be recognized in the various races of man ... If, then, great ignorance of details does not prevent our recognizing with certainty and promptitude various expressions, I do not see how this ignorance can be advanced as an argument that our knowledge, though vague and general, is not innate.¹²⁷

The lack of specificity in Kathy's descriptions of faces reflects her lack of 'any conscious process of analysis'; hers is an innate, human reaction that would seem to prove Darwin's point that a 'great ignorance of details' (which arguably defines Kathy's experience) does not prevent the recognition of expression. Kathy's sparse language thus highlights her human ability to respond, feel and recognize, so that as readers we feel more than empathy towards Kathy, as she feels more than empathy towards George: we recognize ourselves in the life of a clone. Rather than providing a warning about the dystopic potential of new genetic technologies, or simply critiquing formations of race in genetic science, *Never Let Me Go* acknowledges our human biological commonality and develops a biofictional narrative form which harnesses the power of facial expressions to suggest a way of moving beyond both the dismissal of biology and its separation from cultural context in debates about the meaning of race. As it speaks to such contemporary debates about race and science while drawing on the logic of an older, Darwinian science of facial expression, the novel recalls an insight from Eliot's *Daniel Deronda*, which, in this case, does signify that 'often the grand meanings of faces as well as of written words may lie chiefly in the impressions of those who look on them'.¹²⁸