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Clones, and Blurring Subject and Object in the Anthropocene

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# Species Thinking Without Agency: The Afterlife of Slavery, Clones, and Blurring Subject and Object in the Anthropocene

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## **Abstract**

The overwhelming scale of climate change demands new ways of bridging national, cultural, and taxonomic differences. However, ecocritical frameworks that emphasise non-human agency in an attempt to make human individuals empathise with other people, other species, and the earth are haunted by the tenacious spectre of nineteenth-century classical liberalism's characterization of personhood through specious, fragile dichotomies that can largely fall under the general rubric of agency versus determinism. The putatively opposed terms of these binaries are malleable, and control of their designation is a key element of control societies. Contemporary scholarship has identified several ways subjects bleed into objects, but, even though the 'individual' should theoretically collapse under its own ontological pressure in our current biopolitical age, neoliberalism largely holds onto classical liberalism's central dogma of a person as an agential individual. I analyse the novel *Never Let Me Go* (2005) by Kazuo Ishiguro and its critical analyses to show how the plight to recognise agency is a prison of analysis that upholds an ideal of the individual as the bastion of personhood. As seen through the afterlife of slavery post-emancipation, those in power can discursively recognise the humanity in people formerly designated 'things' while still perpetuating systematic exploitation and dehumanisation. The metric of 'agency' as a unit of hope is an epistemic barrier to effective political rhetoric regarding climate change and species thinking.

The sheer scale of climate change is difficult to conceptualise and convey. As Timothy Morton (2013) puts it, climate change is a ‘hyperobject’: a system whose scale and magnitude escape both true comprehension and representation. The various effects on ecosystems, economies, and people cannot be synthesised into a uniform narrative, and long-term ecological processes, such as global warming, are challenging to present to the public due to the temporal longevity and relative invisibility in relation to everyday life (Nixon, 2011). In order to increase public awareness around the severity and long-term effects of human-accelerated greenhouse gas emissions and destructive environmental practices, geologist Paul Crutzen (2002) coined the term ‘Anthropocene’ to name a new geological epoch defined by the catastrophic impact human activity has had on the environment.

While naming a geology of ‘humankind’ could potentially make the incomprehensible scale of climate change more legible, the term ‘Anthropocene’ has been a controversial topic of debate in both STEM and the humanities (Grinevald, Crutzen and McNeill, 2011; Zalasiewicz et al, 2008). Andreas Malm and Alf Hornborg argue that attributing climate change to the human species through geological nomenclature ignores sociohistorical specificity and obscures the fact that “the historical origins of anthropogenic climate change were predicated on highly inequitable global processes from the start” (2014, p. 63). Etymologically, ‘Anthropocene’ comes from the Greek root *anthrōpos*, meaning human. Since the language of the Anthropocene assigns our current epoch of rapid climate change to all ‘humankind’, there is no distinction between countries that have historically led to nearly irreversible changes to our global ecosystems. Crutzen himself acknowledges that twenty-five percent of the human population disproportionately affect climate change, but the name ‘Anthropocene’ potentially exonerates countries associated with the Industrial Revolution and the Second Industrial Revolution that unevenly contributed to greenhouse gas emission over the last few centuries. Meanwhile, so-called ‘developing’ countries that rely on fossil-

fuel technology to grow their economy and standard of living face the hurdle of being labelled environmentally insensitive for the industrialisation practices that other countries have already historically benefited from.

Despite the dangers of erasing historical specificity, prominent postcolonial Indian historian Dipesh Chakrabarty (2009) still calls for the need to develop a ‘species thinking’. Even though Chakrabarty acknowledges that “we can only intellectually comprehend or infer the existence of the human species but never experience it as such” (p. 220), he still sees a use for a putative global identity since he does not find postcolonial and other fields of sociohistorical analysis “adequate in dealing with the crisis of global warming” (p. 221). Climate change is so spatially, temporally, and historically disorienting that it demands novel forms of analysis and a new global identity that unites us as a species. The lacklustre efforts to challenge destructive environmental practices corroborate Chakrabarty’s suspicion. Although the United Nations met in 1992 to sign an international environmental treaty addressing climate change, since then, trends have not changed; in fact, “more than half of the carbon exhaled into the atmosphere by the burning of fossil fuels has been emitted in just the past three decades” (Wallace-Wells, 2019, p. 4). Beyond the loose alliances of the United Nations and neoliberalism’s deregulated global markets, there is a desperate need for a type of thinking that can globally unite people from a non-economic standpoint.

Following Chakrabarty’s call for new conceptions of global consolidation, Bruno Latour (2018) argued for the concept of Gaia as the figure for a living Earth, Jane Bennett (2009) advocated for vital materialism and recognizing the agency of human-nonhuman assemblages, and Donna Haraway (2015) coined the term ‘Chthulucene’ as an alternative to the Anthropocene. While their individual arguments are certainly not homogenous, each scholar makes their attempt to blur distinctions between subject/object, human/animal, and person/network in order to make room for a concept of ‘species thinking’ compatible with global empathy and

transnational political efficacy. These examples are indicative of certain fields of thought circulating within ecocriticism, such as object-oriented ontology, vital materialism, and actor-network theory, that employ a ‘flat ontology’, which decenters the human by making all matter their own subjects in a network where each entity affects one another. There is no ontological hierarchy that dictates increasing agency in the movement from rock to plant to animal to human. The underlying belief is that recognizing the agency of ‘things’ will abate environmental exploitation – that if the targets of destructive ecological practices were considered subjects rather than objects, their right to existence would necessitate a more active approach to contesting climate change. If we cared about the environment as if it were a person and treated ecosystems as subjects with their own agency, then it would be more difficult to justify their complete abuse.

However, in this paper, I want to put pressure on the naturalisation of ‘agency’ as the ahistorical metric of sociopolitical recognition, respect, and rights. The valorisation of agency is a remnant of a specific conceptualisation of subjecthood that derives from nineteenth-century liberalism<sup>1</sup>, whose spectre lingers over the biosubjects of twenty-first-century neoliberalism. These variants of liberalism ask its willing subjects to consider their freedom in terms of several dichotomies: subject versus object, person versus property, human versus animal, etc. The former term of these dichotomies represents agency whereas the latter term represents determinism; control, or perhaps more accurately, *aufheben*<sup>2</sup>, over the term of determinism defines

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<sup>1</sup> By nineteenth-century liberalism, I am specifically referring to (i) classical liberalism and its focus on economic freedom as represented by the works of John Locke, Adam Smith, James Mill, and other British philosophers and (ii) utilitarianism as associated with Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill.

<sup>2</sup> Hegel uses the term *aufheben* to describe the process of a dialectic. The German word has multiple connotations and signifies both canceling as well as preserving. It can be translated as ‘sublation’ or ‘overcoming’. When a proposition, the thesis, meets its reaction, the antithesis, the antithesis is overcome while simultaneously being preserved through the process of synthesis. I view agency and determinism as a Hegelian dialectic since determinism is overcome yet preserved within conceptions of agency.

the autonomous individual. For example, the capacity to own property supposedly demarcates the agency and rights of a citizen within capitalism.

In short, nineteenth-century liberalism posits subjectivity and individuality as the result of the separation of mutually exclusive dichotomies such as person/property, yet these binaries are never mutually exclusive because power operates through the control of their movement. One can legally be *both* person and property as seen manipulated in chattel slavery. People, through slavery and its twisted logics, have been horrifically terrorised as subject *and* object – violently coded human *and* animal. While scholars of contemporary neoliberal biocapitalism acknowledge that the terms of liberalism’s rigid dichotomies are not mutually exclusive (in the past or in the present), they largely retain the framework of these fragile dichotomies of subjecthood even as they show the fluidity with which one can go between person and object. Thus, nineteenth-century liberalism’s conception of personhood lingers into the present – especially visible through the branches of ecocriticism that insist on locating the agency of objects, critters, and things as an antidote to their exploitation.

In the simplest terms possible, the main idea of my paper is that nineteenth-century liberalism posited personhood in terms of fragile dichotomies (agency vs determinism); twenty-first-century neoliberalism retains nineteenth-century liberalism’s construction of selfhood by framing subjectivity in terms of freedom, agency, and binaries, even if it is the binary’s disavowal. Ecocriticism will need to shift away from a (neo)liberal fascination with ‘agency’ if a true concept of species thinking is to ever be epistemically possible. In the remainder of the paper, I will explore how liberalism’s fragile dichotomies still carry over into our present moment of neoliberalism. I then turn to the novel *Never Let Me Go* by Kazuo Ishiguro (2005) as a paradigmatic representation of neoliberal subjecthood in the Anthropocene and criticism on *NLMG* as an example of how the focus on agency may inhibit new conceptions of subjecthood necessary to fostering species thinking.

While species thinking has the admirable goal of uniting people across disparate identities in order to collectively address climate change, my analysis of neoliberalism and *Never Let Me Go* aims to question certain assumptions regarding achieving species thinking – namely, that advocating for the agency of all people and things is the solution to preventing destructive environmental practices.

### Fragile Dichotomies: Racialised (Neo)liberal Subjecthood in the Anthropocene

No nation can now shut itself up from the surrounding world, and trot round in the same old path of its fathers without interference. The time was when such could be done... Oceans no longer divide, but link nations together. From Boston to London is now a holiday excursion. Space is comparatively annihilated. (Douglass, 1852)

The initial question is deceptively simple: what distinguishes neoliberal subjectivity in the Anthropocene? Before Thatcher, Reagan, Volcker, and deregulated global markets, Frederick Douglass prophetically described both twenty-first-century neoliberalism and the Anthropocene in his 1852 speech ‘What to the Slave is the Fourth of July?’ by boldly claiming “space is comparatively annihilated”. Neoliberalism’s deregulated global markets and the Anthropocene’s focus on the planetary both obscure geographical and national specificity. The shared properties of spatiotemporal diffuseness and propensity to erase historical specificity and individual identities make neoliberal subjecthood and subjecthood in the Anthropocene analogous processes. To be an individual consumer in an unregulated global market is to also be a nameless human data point in the larger species experiencing the slow violence of unregulated climate change. Thus, when I define the terms of contemporary neoliberal subjecthood, to a large extent, I am also characterizing the creation of the self in the time of the Anthropocene. My aim is to show (i) neoliberal subjecthood in the Anthropocene largely borrows from nineteenth-century liberalism’s central dichotomy of agency

versus determinism, (ii) these dichotomies of subject and object, human and animal, agency and determinism are false separations that are fluid and manipulated in order to subjugate certain populations, especially via race, and (iii) the recognition of agency is not a direct path toward an ethics of care and equity as seen via the abolition of chattel slavery.

Nineteenth-century liberalism established agency versus determinism as the central dichotomy that defines personhood. In J.S. Mill's account in *On Liberty* (1859), the struggle between opposites reflects a dichotomous logic that creates mutually exclusive dichotomies such as person/property, subject/object, truth/lies, order/chaos, Christian/heathen, man/woman, etc. For Mill, the individual is isolated as a discrete entity that is defined against other individuals, and he emphatically states that "the only freedom which deserves the name, is that of pursuing our own good in our own way, so long as we do not attempt to deprive others of theirs, or impede their efforts to obtain it" (p. 16). The 'individual' is the basis of human nature, human rights, and divine order according to nineteenth-century liberalism. The clean separation between self and other, which can be articulated differently as the proposition that an individual is a subject as long as that person is not property, provides a rich ontological foundation of selfhood's depiction as a function of agency. Mill's nexus of agency, individuality, and freedom relies on two mutually opposed categories; as an example, he argues for freedom of speech by claiming "there can be no fair discussion of the question of usefulness, when an argument so vital may be employed on one side, but not on the other" (p. 26). 'One side' and its corresponding 'other' come to dominate conceptions of subjecthood in the nineteenth century – I am a person because I am not property.

Neoliberalism derives its name from these principles of classical liberalism and its emphasis on *laissez-faire* principles. However, the unique elements of neoliberalism are supposedly its unprecedented, globalised capitalist circuit and the transition from the individual as *homo economicus*,

who makes rational decisions to maximise income, to the individual as human capital, who strives to increase their speculative value through a careful deliberation of all aspects of their life. For Michel Feher, a defining feature of neoliberalism that distinguishes it from liberalism is that the neoliberal subject-position as human capital goes beyond one's relation to their labour.

The things that I inherit, the things that happen to me, and the things I do all contribute to the maintenance or the deterioration of my human capital. More radically put, my human capital is me, as a set of skills and capabilities that is modified by all that affects me and all that I effect. (Feher, 2009, p. 26, emphasis added)

Essentially, work, leisure, interior life, work life, domestic life, spirituality, hobbies, sex life, etc. all collapse into speculative attributes that the neoliberal subject compiles into a portfolio of skills to be invested in. The liberal free labourer had a relatively clear division between work and other attributes of their life, but neoliberalism marks a new era of subjectivity where capitalism penetrates every corner of interior/exterior and past/present/future.

At least, that is how the story goes. However, through chattel slavery, capitalism has already paradoxically allowed for (and necessitates) the conflation of person and property as human capital. Control of marriage, reproduction, education, hobbies, sex life, and space-time itself were constitutive elements of a slave's subjection and dehumanisation. If the defining social characteristic of neoliberalism is its diffuse speculation in human potentiality, then its precursor/ontological condition of possibility could be located in the evaluation of a female slave's speculative value via future reproduction or an auction for Black children to reproduce slavery's labour force<sup>3</sup>. With regards to chattel

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<sup>3</sup> Alys Weinbaum argues that neoliberal biocapitalism operates within the 'slave episteme' that emerged through chattel slavery: the 'afterlife of a thought system that renders human reproduction's devaluation and extraction conceivable in both senses of that biologically laden term' (2019, p. 2, emphasis original). Weinbaum carefully clarifies that she does not wish to construct a causal history, but she does attempt to demonstrate slavery's lasting effects on neoliberal biocapitalism's ability to assign an exchange value to blood, organs, and reproduction. Ingrid Diran utilizes Weinbaum's

slavery, the commodification of life itself and the investment in future value via reproduction delineate a clear investment in ‘human capital’ that sinisterly portends neoliberalism during the time of liberalism.

According to Stephen Best, this disarticulation of liberalism’s nexus of person/inalienable property/*homo economicus* was no temporal disjuncture, but rather, Black people “as a subordinate class got a head start on modernity, floating free of constraints of tradition and property long ago codified in the common law” (2004, p. 110). Best deems the fugitive slave an epistemic representative of the burgeoning credit-based economy in the mid-nineteenth century. Fugitive slaves, who were both person *and* object according to the law, represented the speculative nature of the market through their legal description in the Fugitive Slave Law of 1850. According to the law, the slave is referred to as a “person held to in service or labor” and a “person whose service or labor is claimed to be due” (Best, 2004, p. 9). Rather than referring to ownership of property or ownership of the slave’s body, the Fugitive Slave Law defines slavery in terms of potentiality (for labour, for reproduction), obligation, and contract. In the emphasis on liability and duty, Best sees the fugitive slave as paradigmatic of the nineteenth-century American economic shift to consumption over production, services instead of material goods, and the rise of intellectual property rights stemming from technological advances such as voice capture. The slave’s ‘head start on modernity’ portends a temporal unfreedom of body and the disciplinary and regulatory control over its various capacities<sup>4</sup>.

Stephen Best’s description of the fugitive slave’s two bodies as simultaneously object and person resonates with other concepts that describe

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framework to argue that ‘the reproductive imperative attached to the female slave constitutes her as a security (a bonded asset, linked to a private debt), while her children are engendered derivatives thereof’ (Diran, 2019, p. 700).

<sup>4</sup> According to Alexander Weheliye (2014), scholars should not carelessly reduce the historical specificities of slavery and racialised capitalism as a future general condition of modernity. Doing so treats race and blackness not as primary sources of power structures but rather as subcategories of a generalized conception of biopower.

classical liberalism's construction of the self. Contemporary ecocriticism, informed by neoliberalism, is captivated by nineteenth-century liberalism's obsession with dichotomy, agency, and paradox when it comes to subject formation. Neoliberalism and the contemporary theoretical frameworks that describe its condition belie a schema of liberalism that, like Douglass's, derives affective power from articulating the injustice/paradox within transgressions against the sacred separation of person and object. However, as Best's framework articulates, chattel slavery operated through the manipulation of the discursive categories of person and property, and Douglass rightfully calls out the paradoxes of this fragile dichotomy of subjecthood.

Studies on neoliberalism and work in Black studies both acknowledge how easily one slips between person and property, and scholars in those fields articulate how the recognition of agency is not the bastion of utopian freedom that nineteenth-century liberalism and contemporary ecocriticism make it out to be. Saidiya Hartman (1997) calls the emancipation of slaves a 'nonevent' because the recognition of the slaves' humanity sinisterly "dissimulated the encroaching and invasive forms of social control exercised over black bodies through the veneration of custom; the regulation, production, and protection of racial and gendered inequality in the guise of social rights" (pp. 117-8). In other words, the promise of freedom vis-à-vis political recognition did not prevent the encumbrance of social and material subjugation for Black people in the United States; in fact, the political recognition of agency opened pathways for new forms of control<sup>5</sup>. While acknowledging that Black subjectivity in the United States is unique and not reducible to any ubiquitous model, in general, 'agency' is a concept that demands to be historicised and

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<sup>5</sup> Emancipation "instituted indebtedness. Blame and duty and blood and dollars marked the birth of the free(d) subject. The very bestowal of freedom established the indebtedness of the freed through a calculus of blame and responsibility" (Hartman, 1997, p. 131). Suddenly, as if there were no conception of history, freedmen could be blamed for their own abject material conditions since they were 'free' and had the potential to work up the socioeconomic ladder in the putative meritocracy of American capitalism. Despite having very few opportunities for such movement immediately post-emancipation, white America shifted the blame from slavery to the freedmen themselves as the cause of their own suffering.

challenged as an ‘objective’ metric of freedom. Many branches of ecocriticism strive to locate agency in objects, critters, and all living matter, but lessons from Black studies and the history of chattel slavery and its afterlife indicate how that recognition of subjecthood may not transfer to care and justice.

### The Prison of Agency in *Never Let Me Go*

Building off my characterisation of classical liberalism’s fragile dichotomies and their relationship to the concept of ‘agency’, I will now use the novel *Never Let Me Go* by Kazuo Ishiguro (2005) as a representative of neoliberal subjectivity in the time of the Anthropocene. Then, I will analyse criticism on *NLMG* to show how contemporary scholarship in the humanities is largely predicated on (neo)liberalism’s postulation of personhood as agency. While *NLMG* is not explicitly about ecological catastrophe, I find its biopolitical focus on the slow violence of inevitable ruin through a first-person perspective of a clone an apt metaphor for the subjective experience of the Anthropocene. The clone puts ontological pressure on an individual’s relation to species and individuality; the uncertain precarity regarding one’s status as a clone or potential clone template forefronts questions regarding species, humanity’s privileged status amongst animals, and the ethics of technological advancement. In this manner, the clones of *Never Let Me Go* are the perfect subjects of the Anthropocene: their slow deaths mirror the slow violence of climate change, and they blur the distinction between human and animal. They are the embodiment of the end-product of many flat ontologies within ecocriticism: an amalgamation of subject and object. However, *NLMG* shows the reader how the ‘elevation’ of an object to a subject with agency does not prevent its abuse. The most disturbing environmental degradation will be done under the pretence of caring for the environment and respecting its status as agential subject.

To help explain my choice in text, I will give a brief plot overview of *Never Let Me Go* that emphasises its salient features with regards to

subjecthood, neoliberalism, and the Anthropocene. Set in a fictional 1990s England, the tragic tale is told through the hazy memories of Kathy H., an experienced ‘carer’ who reminisces about her childhood at Hailsham, a boarding school in the English countryside. She fondly recalls her best friends Ruth and Tommy and her childhood at Hailsham, where the Guardians (‘teachers’ who also act as parental figures and mentors) guided their development. Hailsham has always been regarded as special, and the Guardians would emphasise how important it was that each student represented themselves through artistic endeavours such as painting or poetry. Smoking is strictly forbidden in Hailsham, and the Guardians had heavily stressed how important, even essential, it was for the students to take care of their bodies. In the central twist of the novel, one of the Guardians, Miss Lucy, reveals to the Hailsham students that they are clones who are forced to ‘donate’ their vital organs until they die: a process sinisterly called ‘completion’. The students react indifferently, claiming “nothing came as a complete surprise. It *was* like [they]’d heard everything somewhere before”, (Ishiguro, 2005, p. 83, emphasis original). Life went on. As it turns out, Hailsham was a unique experiment to verify if the clones had souls and their artwork was put on display in an attempt to prove their interiority and humanity to the general public.

As Kathy discovers in her years as a carer, for the other clones, Hailsham was an almost mythical place that sounded like a utopia, indicating that life for the other clones was much worse than the lives of Hailsham students. Hailsham, described through the lexicon of a boarding school, is depicted as a site of privilege. After their graduation, Kathy and her friends go to the Cottages, where they spend two years writing essays, biding time until their eventual donations and death. After their time at the Cottages, the Hailsham students become carers, who take care of donors recovering from the removal of their vital organs. After their service as a carer, they themselves become donors. As a young adult, Kathy eventually serves as both Ruth and Tommy’s carer, witnessing their frail bodies weaken through

multiple surgeries, leading to their eventual ‘completions’. The novel ends with Kathy driving around reflecting on her fractured relationships with Ruth and Tommy. She gets out of her car to look at scenery, and Kathy says to the reader, “I just waited a bit, then turned back to the car, to drive off to wherever it was I was supposed to be” (Ishiguro, 2005, p. 288).

This concluding sentence can be read as Kathy’s literal death sentence. Instead of anger, sadness, resolve, or resignation, Kathy’s focus is on her duty to fulfil her teleological destiny of ‘completion’. It should come as no surprise that critical analyses of *NLMG* view Kathy’s story as a representation of biopolitical, necropolitical, neoliberal, or capitalist subjugation. The clones’ organs are harvested to increase the general health of the English population, so they are ‘made to live’ (both in the sense of being created as well as the careful monitoring of their bodies’ health) and subsequently left to die through the gradual process of organ donation.

The clones in Ishiguro’s novel are subjected to the power over life at the point where the political regiment represents the purpose of their existence as organ donors who can be left to die once their organs have fully matured. Maturation of life here coincides with cessation of life (Mack, 2016, p. 201).

The English population is made to live through the death of the clones, so Ishiguro’s melancholy novel is both a hyperbolised depiction of biopower as well as the Anthropocene. In a biopolitical reading, the clones are made so the general health of the population can burgeon, and a “biological-type caesura” (Foucault, 2003, p. 255) bins populations into those made to live and those left to die<sup>6</sup>.

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<sup>6</sup> For Foucault, race is the divide that the State manipulates and utilises to decide either who should be part of the body politic made to flourish or who should be left to die. Although the clones are white, they are racialized through (i) their status as perpetual outsiders who must show their loyalty to a country that tries to erase the visibility of their existence and suffering, (ii) the commodification of their bodies, which operates through the slave episteme: the afterlife of chattel slavery and its wicked logics, and (iii) the exhausting demand to continually demonstrate that they too are human.

Keeping the biopolitical reading in mind, from an ecological point of view, *Never Let Me Go* depicts two modalities of environmental destruction that demonstrate the need for species thinking. As an ‘object’, Kathy (the vessel for vital organs) represents the environments, animals, and objects destroyed so that the ‘normal’ population can flourish: forests, fish, coastlines, the atmosphere, and other objects taken for granted by humans. As a ‘subject’, Kathy (the person) represents the populations who suffer for the discrete choices of a select few (business leadership, lobbyists, and lawmakers) who are responsible for the majority of carbon dioxide emission. The exploitation of vulnerable populations (‘let die’) is the condition of possibility for the economic success (‘make live’) of the fossil fuel industry and other industries that contribute to climate change. Ecological readings and biopolitical readings of *NLMG* both analyse the elements of the novel that articulate the clones’ cruel manipulation, and they do so by focusing on the ability of everyday social interactions to normalise any phenomenon, including the most egregious overwhelming catastrophe, whether that is the naturalised murder of the clones or the naturalised slow death of our planet.

As an example of a reading that fuses biopolitics with ecocriticism, Sean McQueen (2016) finds *NLMG* useful for its “double articulation of the biopolitical production of subjectivity/citizenship and the overwhelming biocommodification this entails” (p. 199). McQueen links biopolitics to biocapitalism and the individual’s relation to these systems, specifically how the clones themselves become invested in their own health/commodification and desire to fit in by taking pride in being good ‘students’, carers, and donors. Ishiguro brilliantly uses adolescent awkwardness and school social posturing to show how quotidian experiences dissimulate operations of power through power’s habituated dispersal in all aspects of life. As an example, when Tommy gets a gash on his elbow, an older student, Christopher H., plays a prank on Tommy by telling him, “if [the cut is] right

on the elbow like that, it can *unzip*. All you have to do is bend your arm quickly. Not just that actual bit, the whole elbow, it can all unzip like a bag opening up” (Ishiguro, 2005, p. 85). Tommy takes Christopher’s warning seriously, and other students join in on the inside joke, and they tell Tommy about “a student who’d gone to sleep with a cut on the elbow just like his and woken up to find his whole upper arm and hand skeletally exposed, the skin flopping about next to him” (p. 86). These pranks are framed as ordinary, innocuous school bullying, yet the centralization of body parts, health, and injury indicates that the State’s investment in the clones’ health have become their own concern, even if it is subconsciously enacted through mundane social interactions. For the State, the market, and the clones themselves, their bodies, specifically their ‘insides’, become the target of subjugation.

As demonstrated through these various readings, *NLMG* is an emblematic depiction of contemporary neoliberal selfhood in the Anthropocene; by confounding the mundane and the extraordinary (person and property, interior and exterior, human and animal), Ishiguro’s world conveys the construction of neoliberal subjectivity: the blurring of the subject and object. Just as chattel slavery put immense pressure on liberalism’s formulation of person vs. property, Ishiguro’s clones also move within the fragile axis of person/property. For Alys Weinbaum, *NLMG*

constellates slave racial capitalism and biocapitalism, effectively revealing to readers that the narrator’s and our own neoliberal, supposedly postracial society is predicated on the death function (necropolitics) and on the complex, albeit disavowed and invisible racialization of the population that has been (re)produced for disposability (2019, p. 151).

Put another way, the alienability, fungibility, marketability, and control of reproduction of the clone body resembles the slave body, indicating the afterlife of slavery that lurks within postracial neoliberalism, which operates through the slave episteme.

Ishiguro's clones are white, but they are racialised through operations of power that constellate with Best's (2004) characterisation of the fugitive slave's two bodies. While some may object to Weinbaum's portrayal of race as an ongoing process of racialisation, Ishiguro's clones undeniably occupy several mutually opposed terms of nineteenth-century liberalism's construction of selfhood: person and property, human and animal, commodity and labourer, etc. With remarkable resemblance to the abolitionist strategy of publishing slave narratives and poetry, Hailsham had showcased the clones' artwork and writing in an attempt to prove interiority/humanity. Weinbaum (2019) thus calls Kathy's narrative a 'whitewashed' eighteenth/nineteenth-century slave narrative for neoliberal times. Hailsham supports the clones' ontological position as subjects by promoting individuality and expression. However, the Guardians' recognition of the clones as agential subjects does not mean they escape their relegated status.

For example, when Kathy and Tommy visit Miss Emily, one of the Guardians, after their time at Hailsham, Kathy says to her, "Madame never liked us. She's always been afraid of us. In the way people are afraid of spiders and things" (Ishiguro, 2005, p. 268). Miss Emily slightly recoils and says in reply, "We're *all* afraid of you. I myself had to fight back my dread of you almost every day I was at Hailsham. There were times I'd look down at you all from my study window and I'd feel such revulsion" (p. 269). Even though Hailsham had been created to combat the injustice in the conflation between person and property, the main advocates for clone rights still dread the clones' uncanny existence. Hailsham (2009) can be seen as the fulfilment of Feher's call to "embrace the neoliberal condition" (2009, p. 25) via using art/hobbies to raise the clones' speculative value as human capital. Although the neoliberal condition of the individual as human capital whose exterior and interior existence are shot through with (micro)chips of capitalism should warrant an understanding of the spurious nature of the separation of person and property, the Guardians still fear the clones.

The Guardians still fear Hailsham students because a hidden reification of the mutually exclusive dichotomies of nineteenth-century liberalism personhood lurks within the ethos of neoliberal subjectivity. Logically, the blurring of subject and object should not surprise a neoliberal subject whose work/play/hobbies/sex life/religion have all collapsed into human capital; however, transgressions against the sacred order of liberalism's dichotomies (such as the clones' existence) viscerally affect, disgust, and enrage the neoliberal imagination. Miss Emily explains to Kathy the impact that the clones have on the general population:

How can you ask a world that has come to regard cancer as curable, how can you ask such a world to put away that cure, to go back to the dark days? There was no going back. However uncomfortable people were about your existence, their overwhelming concern was that their own children, their spouses, their parents, their friends, did not die from cancer, motor neuron disease, heart disease. So for a long time you were kept in the shadows, and people did their best not to think about you. And if they did, they tried to convince themselves you weren't really like us. That you were less than human, so it didn't matter (Ishiguro, 2005, p. 263).

Besides the obvious biopolitical reading of this passage, Miss Emily's explanation also emphasises discomfort and wilful ignorance as the main responses to the clones' teleological existence. The cause of the discomfort stems from an implicit recognition of the clones' humanity ("their *own* children" implies a latent recognition of the clones as humans) that clashes with their subaltern status as alienable property whose organs are systematically harvested until 'completion'. The clones are human and 'less than human'. The clones are "told and not told" (Ishiguro, 2005, p. 81) of their paradoxical status. Subjects and objects are never exclusive, but because neoliberalism builds off of liberalism's sacred dichotomy of agency and determinism, the uncanny blurring of subject and object confuses the neoliberal imagination.

An abundance of contemporary scholarship registers how control of the movement between the terms of liberalism's dichotomies is a key facet of biopower, neoliberalism, and capitalism, yet it still lingers on 'agency' as the metric of personhood, freedom, and hope. Jane Elliott views Ishiguro's clones as representatives of the general neoliberal subject. The intimate connection between the clones and the reader is corroborated by Kathy's first person-narrative that asks questions to the reader as if they are fellow clones: e.g. "I don't know if you had 'collections' where you were" (Ishiguro, 2005, p. 38). Kathy addresses the reader as another clone, and the slow reveal of the novel's plot fully indoctrinates the reader to the habituated, mundane existence of a dystopian life. Through Foucauldian rhetoric, Elliott (2013) wants to dissociate 'agency' from its positive connotation by showing how neoliberalism mandates the wilful participation of its subjects. Neoliberalism "operates through rather than against the agency of its subjects" (p. 87). Just as biopower necessitates individual agency in order to enforce norms and the regulation of the population, a neoliberal subject is often forced to choose between unfairly constructed choices like paying for either groceries or rent. Kathy ends up choosing to become Ruth and Tommy's carer, melancholically salvaging severed friendships at the cost of witnessing their severe suffering. Elliott thus coins the term 'suffering agency' to convey how agency and choice necessarily uphold neoliberal subjugation and do not necessarily convey joyous freedom. While these choices are still meaningful and evaluated by the individual, 'agency' does not mean exemption from societies of control.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Gilles Deleuze describes our dominant social structure in 'Postscript on the Societies of Control'. Building on Foucault's genealogy of the movement from sovereign societies to disciplinary societies, Deleuze proposes that our contemporary moment is dictated by societies of control. Whereas "in the disciplinary societies one was always starting again (from school to the barracks, from the barracks to the factory)... in the societies of control one is never finished with anything – the corporation, the educational system, modulation, like a universal system of deformation" (Deleuze, 1992, p. 5). Kathy thus trains all her life to be the best donor she can possibly be in the seamless movement between Hailsham, the Cottages, the hospital, and 'completion'. She feels an urgency to "go wherever it was [she] was supposed to go" (Ishiguro, 2005, p. 288), just like the 'motivated' youth that Deleuze feels pity for.

Even though Elliott aptly articulates the problems with a static, binary notion of agency, she retains ‘agency’ as *the* metric of neoliberal personhood; the desire to never let go of ‘agency’ even when the term becomes overloaded and insufficient correlates to a hidden reification of selfhood as classical liberalism’s dichotomy of agency versus determinism. Elliott (2013) calls attention to the limitations of subjecthood as agency, yet she also posits neoliberalism’s totalising logic in a similar manner to how determinism is constructed against agency:

Our enclosure within Kathy’s consciousness, and her failure to imagine an escape route, stage on the level of form the inability to think past the terms of neoliberal personhood. When we as readers assume that life-saving action on her own behalf is the necessary solution to her dilemma, we demonstrate that we, like Kathy, can’t see beyond the terms of the logic in which we are embedded—in our case, the logic that links self-preservation to action in one’s own best interest, to agency, to personhood (p. 97).

In Elliott’s framework, readers either acknowledge forms of agency that are dissociated from liberalism’s positive connotation of the term or they fall victim to an all-encompassing neoliberal schema. I share Elliott’s concern about deterministic readings that disavow Kathy’s agency due to the presence of subjugation, but I am hesitant to accept ‘suffering agency’ as a central variable of neoliberal personhood. The necessity of the adjective ‘suffering’ in the nomenclature suggests a deviation from a putative, normal meaning of agency; the power of its name comes from the betrayal of the utopian ideal of pleasurable agency: the same agency that is posited by nineteenth-century liberalism as the negation and dichotomous other of determinism.

Agency is rife with suffering (as demonstrated in *NLMG* and our own horrific quotidian experiences), but a new lexicon is necessary to escape from subjecthood’s transmutation into a rigid binary between agency and determinism. Otherwise, contemporary ecocriticism will continuously acknowledge that we “can’t see beyond the terms of the logic in which we are

embedded in” (Elliott, 2013, p. 97) while simultaneously using the language, frameworks, and rhetoric of the very logic it is trying to disavow. What readings of *Never Let Me Go* and the Anthropocene are possible when not read through a prison of agency?

#### Conclusion: Toward a Species Thinking Without Agency

Through my close readings of *Never Let Me Go*, I hope to have partially illuminated the persistence of nineteenth-century liberalism thought that provided the conditions of possibility for contemporary neoliberalism. Nineteenth-century liberalism, informed by slavery, abolition, feminism, the birth of biology, and other sociohistorical forces, positioned subjecthood as the function of several spurious dichotomies. Slavery and other forces rendered visible the movement within discursive axes of subjecthood, and, as Stephen Best (2004) argues, the fugitive slave had two ‘bodies’ as both person and property. Neoliberalism, due to its ideological roots, posits subjecthood through the same dichotomies as classical liberalism – just more open to a recognition of their diffuse, malleable nature. Although contemporary scholarship on neoliberalism acknowledges the discursive fluidity between the terms of subjecthood’s binaries (as well as the power within the control of the terms), the blurring of a binary does not necessarily correlate to a displacement of the binary’s force as a normalised, sacred axiom. Despite untangling liberalism’s web of associations between person, agency, subversion, and ownership, neoliberalism and its scholars have a propensity to hold onto a reified image of subjecthood as the battleground between agency and determinism.

The coronation of ‘agency’ and its associated terms as the indicator of self-possession limit our understanding of political efficacy and attempts to construct a ‘species thinking’ in the time of the Anthropocene. Ecocriticism faces an epistemic roadblock: the construction of subjecthood as a function of agency. In the vital materialism movement that seeks to acknowledge non-

human agency, I find the centralisation of individual agency insufficient to address the hyperobject of climate change. Considering Jane Elliott's (2013) framework of suffering agency and how individual agency is mandated by societies of control, the ontological recognition of the latent potentiality in objects/things/environment will not abate global warming. Following Kathryn Yusoff's (2018) lead<sup>8</sup>, it is important to incorporate critical race theory into conversations on the environment in order to grapple with the histories of how subjects and objects have always-already been violently blurred through the process of racialisation.

Ecocriticism will have more political efficacy if its scholars shift away from (neo)liberalism's nexus of personhood/subversion/agency. The recognition of land/animals' agency or their anthropomorphising does not subsequently equate to respecting their 'rights' or lead to political action to combat their subjugation. As seen through Black studies' research on the fugitive slave's two bodies as well as my analysis of *NLMG*, those with power can discursively recognise the humanity in people labelled as 'things' and 'property' while still perpetuating systematic domination, exploitation, and dehumanisation. Like the clones in Ishiguro's novel, ecosystems can be recognised as their own agential subjects while still being oppressed. Harkening back to Hailsham, neoliberalism is well-equipped to rhetorically transform murder into 'completion' – granting objects and environments agency may lead to new, sinister forms of domination that simultaneously treat the environment as an ontological equal while irreversibly harming the planet. We already see these strategies through the marketing tactic of 'greenwashing' when companies such as Shell use tree-planting initiatives

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<sup>8</sup> Kathryn Yusoff argues in *A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None* that the sociogeological displacement of contemporary climate change is preceded by the violent displacement of the Middle Passage and colonialism, which was the end of the world for millions of Black individuals. Thus, Yusoff's title argues that Anthropocene discourse does not acknowledge the billions of lives/worlds already lost through colonialism and slavery, and it discursively shifts the products of racialised capitalism and Western colonialism toward an ahistorical notion of deep time.

and social media campaigns highlighting their low carbon technology research to hide their massive involvement in the planet's destruction (telegraph.co.uk, 2020). As far as their rhetoric delineates, oil companies can respect the planet and its inhabitants as living, agential subjects even though they are killing them slowly. Thus, it is time to shift away from 'agency' as the main metric of hope, and I see the fragile dichotomies of nineteenth-century liberalism as an epistemic barrier to a species thinking capable of promoting true care for all people, creatures, and ecosystems.

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