Encounters of Care: Technological Kin and Nonhuman Care

Giulia Baquè
Università Ca' Foscari, Italy / Universität Heidelberg, Germany
baquegiulia@gmail.com

DOI: https://doi.org/10.37536/ecozona.2024.15.2.5375

Abstract

In a world constantly changing and with technology becoming a ubiquitous presence, how can we reconceptualize practices of care? Countries like Japan, for example, have long tried to respond to the challenges of an aging population with the development of robotic care. At this point, it is no longer difficult to imagine a future in which children will be taken care of by robotic friends or in which AI will work to preserve human life on earth. The emergence of both these real and fictional human-technological interconnections of care highlights the impossibility to frame caring encounters simply according to species boundaries or traditional definitions of care work. This fluidity of care, characterized by dualities and contradictions, forces a recognition of both human and nonhuman participants in this caring network of ontologies, and of what the expected and often unexpected results of these interactions can be. This article explores possibilities of care beyond human agency. In a world in which the human is increasingly entangled with technology, practices of care are not only defined by human agency. Caring encounters between the technological other and the human become spaces for the redefinition of cross-species collaborations that defy anthropocentrism and human exceptionalism. Technological practices of care towards the human emphasize the emergence of symbiotic existences that disrupts the logic of a human centered approach to the nonhuman, challenging the common understanding of care as a selfless and entirely ethical act. Kawakami Hiromi's *Don't Get Carried Away by Big Birds* (2016) and Kazuo Ishiguro's *Klara and the Sun* (2021) subvert the logic of anthropocentrism by describing practices of care enacted by technological others towards the human. In their awareness of the inherent complexities and contradictions embedded in nonhuman-human practices of care, they exemplify Elena Pulcini's notion that *fear for* the world means an actual *care for* the world. The disruptive kinships between technology and the human epitomize the non-romanticized character of technological care. By choosing to avoid both technophobia and technophilia, the two novels express the awareness that human existence is always affected by contradictory but unavoidable encounters with the nonhuman other.

Keywords: Technological other, nonhuman care, posthumanism, female body, ethics of care.

Resumen

En un mundo en constante cambio y donde la tecnología se está convirtiendo en omnipresente, ¿cómo podemos re-conceptualizar las prácticas del cuidado? Países como Japón, por ejemplo, han intentado por largo tiempo responder a los desafíos de una población envejecida con el desarrollo del cuidado robótico. En este punto, no es difícil imaginarse un futuro en el cual los niños sean cuidados por amigos robóticos o en el que la Inteligencia Artificial (IA) trabaje para preservar la vida humana en la tierra. La aparición de casos de interconexión humana-tecnológica del cuidado, tanto real como ficticia, remarca la imposibilidad de encuadrar los encuentros de cuidado simplemente de acuerdo a fronteras por especies o en las definiciones tradicionales del trabajo de cuidados. La fluidez de los cuidados, caracterizada por dualidades y contradicciones, fuerza al reconocimiento tanto de participantes humanos como no-humanos en esta red de cuidados ontológica, y de lo esperable e inesperado de los resultados de estas interacciones. Este artículo explora las posibilidades del cuidado

ECOZON@ | Vol 15, No 2

más allá de la agencia humana. En un mundo en el que el ser humano está cada vez más enredado con la tecnología, las prácticas del cuidado no están siendo definidas únicamente por la agencia humana. Los encuentros de cuidados entre el otro tecnológico y el humano se convierten en espacios para la redefinición de colaboración entre especies que desafía al antropocentrismo y el excepcionalismo humano. Las prácticas tecnológicas del cuidado hacia humanos enfatizan la aparición de existencias simbióticas que trastornan el enfoque centrado en lo humano hacia el no-humano, desafiando el entendimiento común del cuidado como un acto altruista y totalmente ético. En *Don't Get Carried Away by Big Birds* (*No dejes que te lleven los pájaros*) (2016) de Kawakami Hiromi y *Klara and the Sun* (*Klara y el Sol*) (2021) de Kazuo Ishiguro los autores subvierten la lógica del antropocentrismo describiendo prácticas de cuidado realizadas por los otros tecnológicos hacia el humano. En su conciencia de las complejidades inherente y las contradicciones integradas en las prácticas de cuidado de no-humanos hacia humanos, ejemplifican la noción de Elena Pulcini de que el *miedo por* el mundo significa una preocupación real por el mundo. Las afinidades perturbadoras entre tecnología y lo humano son el epítome del carácter no romántico del cuidado tecnológico. Eligiendo evitar ambas tecnofobia y tecnofilia, las dos novelas expresan la conciencia de que la existencia humana siempre es afectada por encuentros contradictorios pero inevitables con el otro no humano.

Palabras clave: Otro tecnológico, cuidados no humanos, posthumanismo, cuerpo femenino, ética de los cuidados.

Science fiction has long attracted fans everywhere in the world, but in recent years, it has enjoyed a new surge of popularity. As a literary genre however, it has also often represented a space to channel anxieties and fears about the future of humanity and the world we live in. Science fiction has been an apt repository for reflecting, from the literary perspective, on dramatic changes that influence human life and its development. Technological advancements in particular have long been a focal point for science fiction novels and short stories. Examples abound; from the classical works of Isaac Asimov who routinely incorporated robots in his stories; to Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932) in which humans can be manufactured in factories in order to produce citizens genetically programmed to fulfil their assigned social duties. Technology plays an essential role also in the fictions by Philip K. Dick in which both robots—and androids—and huge factories seem to have taken over from humans completely. As this brief and incomplete introduction to the genre seems to confirm, science fiction has often been considered a "predominantly masculine field which, through its focus on science and technology, 'naturally' excludes women" (Merrick 241). However, when it comes to the technological other—especially in the form of androids or Ais—there is an undeniable and overwhelming presence of female characters. Japanese science fiction is a case on point with the most well-known examples being the manga then turned movie *Ghost in the Shell* or the manga and the anime series of *Neon Genesis Evangelion.*[1] Japan is not an exception; from the

[1] Both these narratives—well-known also outside Japan—play on the role of the female android or the woman-turned-cyborg. *Ghost in the Shell* is set in a future in which it is possible to modify and improve the human body through technology, with the most complete level represented by the upload of the brain in a completely synthetic body. The protagonist of the manga and the of the various movie adaptations is the major Kusanagi Motoko (the name follows the Japanese custom of the last name preceding the given name, in this case the family name is Kusanagi, while the first name is Motoko), a woman whose brain, following a devastating accident as a child, was uploaded into a cyborg body. In

robotic Olympia in E.T.A Hoffman's *The Sandman* (1816) to the wives turned androids in *The Stepford Wives* (1972) by Ira Levin, and the most recent female AIs in movies such as Spike Jonze's 2013 *Her* or in Alex Garland's 2014 *Ex Machina*, American and European science fictions do not shy away from representing the android body as a female one. This characterization of the female body as a synthetic and pliable one is not only an expression of the sexualization of the robotic other, but it also points to how "representations of women, together with technology's manifestations, incorporate displaced (patriarchal) cultural anxieties around issues of subjectivity, control, and self-determinism—they represent the ultimate 'other,' which simultaneously repulses and sparks desire of control" (Melzer 110). Furthermore, as it becomes particularly clear in the treatment of some AIs, this gendered characterization "also speaks to the feminization of robotic labor as it performs affective and service-oriented jobs instead of physical labor" (Vint 83).

Another aspect that is often intertwined with technology is of course that of environmental degradation. Imagining future possible worlds, science fiction has long connected technological fears with the threat that humans pose to the nonhuman. Worlds ravaged by catastrophic climate changes or ecosystems no longer able to sustain life as we know it are often the background of sci-fi narratives. Even though the genre was one of the first to turn "the tradition of apocalyptic fiction toward mundane visions of environmental catastrophe instead of divine judgement" (Vint 119) it was not until the late 1960s and 1970s that "environmental activists turned explicitly to sf [science fiction] and its relationship to the utopian tradition to promote counter cultural values" (Vint 123). These are the years of authors such as Octavia Butler, Ursula K. Le Guin, and the early Margaret Atwood who, with their works contributed to confirm the role of the science fiction genre as one of the critical tools most attuned to the changes of the contemporary age.

This article wants to intervene at the intersection of all these themes: science fiction, gendered representation of robotic care, and environmental degradation. It focuses on practices of nonhuman care and examines how some science fiction texts are deconstructing the notion of female care work, arguing instead for care as a way to foster a disruptive kinship between the human and the nonhuman. Making kin means to entangle "myriad temporalities and spatialities and myriad intra-active entities-in-assemblages—including the more-than-human, other-than-human, inhuman, and human-as-humus. […]; kin are unfamiliar, […] uncanny, haunting, active" (Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble* 101-103). Furthermore, the narratives under scrutiny take place in a future deeply affected by anthropogenic actions. In these dramatic futures, the texts point to a way of caring for the human that breaks

Neon Genesis Evangelion, the world is under attack by entities called 'angels' who cannot be defeated by normal technology. Therefore, those selected to fight them have to pilot a mechanical suit armor whit whom they need to enter an almost symbiotic relation. The mother of the fourteen years old protagonist, Shinji, had her consciousness uploaded into the mecha suit that her son will later be piloting and was cloned to become herself the pilot of a second mecha suit. On the interconnections between female cyborgs, sex, and gender in *Ghost in the Shell* and *Neon Genesis Evangelion* see Orbaugh 2007.

 ISSN 2171-9594

from "the persistent idea that care refers to, or should refer, to a somehow wholesome or unpolluted pleasant ethical realm" (Puig de la Bellacasa 8) and instead suggests a nonanthropocentric practice of care that expands well beyond the human, pointing to the "unresolved tensions and relations" (Puig de la Bellacasa 5) inherent to the concept and practices of care. In other words, this article identifies the subtext of a disruptive technological care as a care that is inscribed "in the materiality of more than human things" (Puig de la Bellacasa 18) and interrogates the ecological significance that these practices have on the larger nonhuman fictional ecosystem. In order to do so, I will mobilize Elena Pulcini's notion that *fear for* the world means an actual *care for* the world (2013), thus suggesting that practices of nonhuman care, because of their inherent nonanthropocentric focus, are to be understood on a global scale of nonhuman kinship.

Kazuo Ishiguro's 2021 novel *Klara and the Sun*[2] and Kawakami Hiromi's *Don't Get Carried Away by Big Birds* (2016)[3] are two expressions of these diverse practices of technological care. Albeit in different ways, these narratives contribute to discussions on the role of androids and AIs in future worlds. They both present nonhuman others caring for the human; this care is however never anthropocentric. I will read both the Artificial Friend (AF) Klara in Ishiguro's story, and the AI Mothers in Kawakami's narrative as technological posthuman entities that can destabilize the notion of the human, questioning the possibility of future worlds centered on anthropocentrism. These novels, I suggest, offer counter-narratives to the feminization and sexualization of the technological other, exposing the futility of a notion of care that does not account for its nonanthropocentric expressions. Furthermore, in the context of species extinction and environmental destruction, technological care becomes a way of "reclaiming care […] from tendencies to smooth out its asperities" (Puig de la Bellacasa 11). As María Puig de la Bellacasa writes "reclaiming care is to keep it grounded in practical engagements with situated material conditions that often expose tensions" (11); tensions and materialities that are an expression of the deeper networks of nonanthropocentric ontologies that constitute existence.

[2] Kazuo Ishiguro was born in Japan but he moved to the UK in his early childhood. Therefore, his name does not follow the Japanese custom of family name first, followed by the given name. Ishiguro here is the family name.
In Ishiguro's novels, robots, androids, and clones are not rare.

[3] Kawakami Hiromi (her name follows the Japanese convention for names; her family name, Kawakami, proceeds her first name, Hiromi) is one of the most prominent contemporary Japanese authors. Her works have been translated in several languages and she received numerous among the most important literary prizes in Japan. She started her writing career with science fiction short stories published in smaller literary magazines in the late 1970s and early 1980s. During the following years, her writing also covered different themes and in particular her more romance oriented stories gained her critical and public acclaim. *Don't Get Carried Away by Big Birds*, originally published in Japanese in 2016 is her first return to science fiction. The novel at the moment has yet to be translated into English.

 ISSN 2171-9594

Artificial Friends and Nonhuman Care: Seeing the Future with the Technological Other

Klara and the Sun (2021) is the first novel published by the British author Kazuo Ishiguro after the award of the Nobel Prize for Literature in 2017. The narrative appears to complement Ishiguro's previous novel *Never Let Me Go* (2005)[4] in which the readers are confronted with an elite boarding school where clones are educated before their organs are harvested to be then implanted in humans; the clones are merely "spare parts *for* humans" (Snaza 215). Already in *Never Let Me Go* the technological characters become the focus of the narrative but their "otherness" is never questioned; the clones are objectified and perceived as part of a mass production of organs for human consumption. As Nathan Snaza argues, despite the continuous opposition between human and nonhuman, the novel finally acknowledges that "there is no 'human'" (Snaza 218) as such. This lack of humanity is understood by Snaza as being the result of two processes in Ishiguro's novel: the reiterated otherness of the clones who show nonetheless human-like traits, and the complete lack of "humane" treatment towards the clones who are then constantly dehumanized (see Snaza 2015). In other words, *Never Let Me Go* exemplifies how the category of the human "always already enables dehumanization" (Snaza 2018).[5] If in his 2005 novel Ishiguro already developed a world in which the technological other is routinely exploited for human benefit, in *Klara and the Sun* he is further developing the theme of technology as the often-unwilling object of anthropocentric "structures of harm" (Holmes and Rich 510). From this, Ishiguro then builds a narrative that not only questions the separation between the human and its nonhuman others—in particular the technological one—but also works towards the definition of a different way of relating. Care takes center stage in the novel, but it is a nonhuman care that destabilizes the anthropocentric understanding "of the moral […] value of the work of care" (Puig de la Bellacasa 2). Despite all these points for reflection, *Klara* has not attracted that much critical reflection as *Never Let Me Go* yet. The bulk of the analyses centering on the novel are—interestingly enough—from the field of artificial intelligence and machine learning. This article wants to remedy this gap by examining *Klara and the Sun* from a literary studies perspective—in particular a posthuman one—bringing it in conversation with Kawakami's provoking future world.

[4] The novel, in the years following its publication has received ample critical and scholarly attention, with analyses from a variety of perspectives, ranging from world literature, to gender studies, from postcolonial studies and affect theory. For a more detailed treatment of the relevance of *Never Let Me Go* and the critical responses it inspired, as well as an in-depth examination of the interconnections among Ishiguro's works see Holmes and Rich 2021.

[5] Snaza's analysis interestingly applies a posthuman framework to the description of education in *Never Let Me Go*. So, despite providing an accurate study of the dehumanizing processes often enacted by the western schooling system, the article misses the opportunity to accurately delve into the several possibilities for a posthuman examination of the role of the clones and their disruptive otherness in relation to their human counterparts and the practices of organ harvesting. Another posthuman approach, including perspectives from animal studies to read the novel's "inhuman art which marries the animal with the automatic" as to provide "an alternative to the destructive visions of soul-based humanity" (Black 801) is offered by Black 2009.

ECOZON@ | Vol 15, No 2

Klara and the Sun centers on a sun-powered Artificial Friend (AF) who is purchased by a wealthy family for their fourteen years old daughter, Josie. In this future world, children grow increasingly isolated from their peers and therefore, the families who can afford it, provide them with an AF. The role of these artificial intelligences is to assist these children who will undergo a gene modification procedure known as "lifting" that should enhance children's abilities and therefore guarantee them with access to the best college education and a future higher social position.[6] In the novel, we soon learn that Josie is suffering the side effects of "lifting" and might not be able to survive, incurring the same fate as her older sister. Josie's mother, afraid of witnessing the death of her only surviving child, purchased Klara not only with the intent of providing company for Josie, but also to have an artificial body in which Josie's consciousness could be transferred if she were to die. In this case, the role of Klara would then be to "re-enact" Josie for her mother. However, when Josie's health starts to decline, Klara decides to ask the Sun, her source of power, or "nutrient" in the novel, to help Josie recover. After the girl manages to get better, she seems to start growing distant from her AF until the final pages of the novel where Klara is at the "Yard," the place where old machines and outdated technologies are left to wait their slow ends.

It is through the eyes of this particular Artificial Friend—Klara—that the readers get familiar with a world in which highly intelligent machines have taken over several jobs leaving many people out of work—including Josie's father—and children undergo possibly life-threatening bioengineering procedures to enhance their intelligence. This fits into the idea of human perfectibility and transhumanism, with humans improving themselves to reach an impossible ideal of "perfection." As Yuqing Sun suggests, the topic of human continuous development through machines or technological enhancement is a common theme in Ishiguro's fictions; in *Klara and the Sun* this notion of human perfectibility is on the one hand expressed in the practice of "lifting" to which children are subjected. On the other hand, it is also transferred to the machine-other—the AF Klara. According to Sun, the concept of the "perfect machine" that Klara embodies in her devotion to Josie's wellbeing is deeply connected with the ideas of human mastery and control; "this is a fantasy of obedience: the flawless capacity of robots to obey their human masters" (505). Sun also suggests that Klara's role and social position could be considered to match those of the unlifted children, considered as inferior (506). However, it is precisely Klara's nonhuman gaze that destabilizes this fantasy, offering a posthuman reading of the story.

In the narrative, Klara is often credited as being a particularly perceptive AF, one who is able to notice more of the everyday life than other AFs. Already in the early pages of the novel, Klara's ability to learn and understand is repeatedly mentioned by

[6] Of course, the description of this procedure opens up the possibility for a whole new reading of the novel, exploring the politics of class and economic affluence and how a world based on bioengineering procedures reiterates dehumanization of those 'unlifted' parts of society. Despite a full analysis of this part of the novel is still lacking, this aspect has been mentioned for example by Askew 2021 or in more detailed through an explicit connection to the practices of transhumanism in Li and Eddebo 2023.

 ISSN 2171-9594

the manager of the store where Klara is up for sale: "Klara has so many unique qualities, we could be here all morning. But if I had to emphasize just one, well, it would have to be her appetite for observing and learning. Her ability to absorb and blend everything she see around her is quite amazing. As a result, she now has the most sophisticated understanding of any AF in this store" (Ishiguro 42). Ishiguro assigns the role of the narrator of the novel to this particularly perceptive AF therefore providing the reader with a destabilizing perspective on every event narrated. Klara, as an "artificial narrator," forces us "to question our received frameworks and conceptions of the world" (Cord 27). Klara, with her sometimes naïve approach to the world provides the readers with a story that could be described in terms of Mark Fisher's weird and eerie; a story that brings to the fore "the strange within the familiar, the strangely familiar, the familiar as strange" (Fisher 10). The world she narrates appears familiar to the readers, but through small remarks or comments on her everyday life, Klara's tale turns into a disruptive narrative. Everything she experiences outside the store after having been purchased for Josie is a novelty for her, and sometimes she struggles to understand human behaviors leading to misunderstandings.[7] The AF is in fact a posthuman narrator that can "challenge hierarchical models of human superiority reframing humans' place in the larger biotic communities of which they are members" (Herman 4). Her nonhuman perspective defamiliarizes a human centred approach to the world, shaking anthropocentric fantasies of perfection and control over the other but also, and maybe more importantly, human centred notions of care. As Amelia DeFalco argues, Klara's perspective

> produces a kind of slant reading experience that both comforts and challenges its human readers; it is at once a soothing tale of human exceptionalism that confirms humanist belief in the unique value of the 'human heart' and a disruptive narrative of anthropocentric egotism, an exposure of human individuality as a false idol that maintains inequality and cultures of disposability. (DeFalco 2)

Thus, the novel, as also DeFalco explains, has two layered readings; it could easily be interpreted as a tale of human centrality and human capacity for infinite technological and economic growth, but Klara's role as a narrator offers a more problematic perspective, presenting a critique of anthropocentrism and of all the power structures it preserves. The world in which Klara lives is in fact deeply anthropocentric and she is routinely associated to an object and a commodity part of the cycle of consumption; she can be purchased to fulfil people's desires—being it Josie's happiness or the mother's will to recreate her daughter—and then, when no longer useful she can be discarded.[8] Despite all of this, Klara is adamant in her will to protect and care for Josie often repeating that she "must do what's best for Josie" (Ishiguro 95). Caring for the

[7] See for example the episode in which Klara recalls having upset the housekeeper, Melania. When Klara first arrived at Josie's house, she thought that Melania would be in charge of showing her around and explaining her the various aspects of the house and her new life, therefore Klara was constantly following her around. However, "Melania Housekeeper had found my frequent presence in vicinity both puzzling and irritating" (Ishiguro 49).

[8] On this point see the analysis by Sahu and Karmakar 2022 and DeFalco 2023.

 ISSN 2171-9594

human child is what Klara has been designed for and her role of carer for the girl is never questioned. Klara seems to have a duty to care for the human but this act is not necessarily reciprocated; "AFs' primary purpose is to be 'friends' with humans, but it seems as if that friendship is not reciprocal, while the duty of care that comes with friendship is not reciprocated either, as humans treat robots as their inferior others, taking little if any responsibility for the harm they cause in doing so" (Sun 510). This brings into focus the harmful side of caring practices. As it was already introduced above, Puig de la Bellacasa highlights how care is ripe with tensions and contradictions. Thom van Dooren follows a similar reflection when writing that care "is a complex and compromised practice," that can turn into "violent-care" (292) when caring for someone "translates into suffering and death for others" (van Dooren 292). The relation between Klara and Josie appears to be one in which care becomes harmful and the cause for devaluing both the role of the carer—as she is a technological tool designed specifically for that purpose—and of the practices of care itself. Yet, the role of Klara as Josie's carer is subversive exactly because it is not based on reciprocity. Klara recognizes in fact that she is part of assemblages of "organic species and abiotic actors" (Haraway *Staying with the Trouble* 100). She understands that care is not only directed to the child she is caring for, but rather that her practices of relationality with Josie are part of a series of broader exchanges. As DeFalco aptly notices, Klara practices of care are a "subtle evocation of posthuman ecologies and care beyond human comprehension" (5). This becomes particularly evident in Klara's relation to the sun. For her, it is not only a source of nourishment, but a fully-fledged subject with whom she can actively interact. "For Klara, the sun is a primary caregiver, a living, dynamic agent" (DeFalco 5). It is to the sun that she asks for help when Josie's health is declining. The sun is endowed with agency and, for Klara, it is able to heal both humans and machines alike. It is in Klara's conversations with the sun, halfway through the novel, that it is possible to understand the full disruptiveness of her nonhuman practices of care. Klara knows that humans, machines, and the sun—and the other-than-human more broadly—are intertwined. In her first encounter with the sun in a barn close to Josie's house, Klara realizes that the it might not be willing to help Josie because "he wasn't yet able to see Josie separately from the other humans, some of whom had angered him very much on account of their Pollution and inconsideration, and I [Klara] suddenly felt foolish to have come to this place to make such a request" (Ishiguro 165). It is in this passage that Elena Pulcini's notion of *care for* the world becomes relevant. In her article "What Emotions Motivate Care?" (2017) Pulcini explores different types of emotions and what role they play in inspiring practices of care (64). Her main objective is to survey the interconnections between emotions—both positive and negative ones—and the ethical practices of *good care* they could engender (Pulcini, "What Emotions" 64). Even though it is possible to argue that nonhuman care might not necessarily appear ethical if judged through an anthropocentric perspective, I believe that Pulcini's attention to the negative emotions inspiring care is a relevant one when discussing nonhuman or technological care. In particular, in *Klara and the Sun* we see how fear turns into an active force in

ECOZON@ | Vol 15, No 2

Klara's practices of care. She connects Josie's illness with pollution and understands that the sun might perceive her human friend as just another human who acts according to the ideal of human centrality. In this sense then, Klara believes that if she were to act against this Pollution—for which she always uses a capital P as a way to recognize that it is also part of this interconnected world as an active agent with the ability to make Josie sick—her human friend would be better. With her decision to attempt to destroy machineries emitting a dark smoke (Ishiguro 27-28) and that she considers responsible for Pollution, Klara is actually intertwining her fear for Josie's health to practices of care for the world. "Klara's sun worship" then "emerges as a potent and influential epistemology" (DeFalco 5) pointing to the inadequacy of defining care only through a human-centered perspective and highlighting the possibilities for caring encounters in a more-than-human kinship.

AI Mothers and Human Extinction: Caring for Communal Survival

In a way similar to *Klara and the Sun,* the novel *Don't Get Carried Away by Big Birds* (2016), by the Japanese author Kawakami Hiromi, is providing a glimpse of what it could mean to practice—and be the recipient of—nonhuman care. The story offers a more complicated narrative than Ishiguro's and the timespan it covers reaches five thousand years in the future. It is divided in fourteen chapters, each with a different narrator, not organized in chronological order. Already the distribution of the text, chapters, and characters creates a sense of loss and confusion in the reader. At first, it is not easy, to grasp all the varied themes and issues Kawakami is dealing with in her novel; from the very tangible possibility of human extinction, to the bioengineering of human—or maybe it would be best to define them posthuman—bodies, to mutations that would allow humanity to adapt to a changing planet, and finally AI and human relation with technology. *Don't Get Carried Away by Big Birds* emerges then as an extremely complex narrative, and the matter of categorizing it as science fiction is also not so easily solved. It is in fact a narrative of oppositions and contradictions; nor technophobic, but also not technophilic. Kawakami takes no stance and tries to clearly highlight the inherent contradictions in every kind of relationality, pointing however to the need to move beyond the trap of anthropocentrism. As I have argued elsewhere (Baquè, "Memories of Extinction"), this novel could be defined as a 'biotechnological dystopia,' exploring "the overall ethical question of what it means to be human and the related topics of posthumanism and human/animal studies" (Mohr 285).

If Klara was already a posthuman character practicing nonhuman care and making visible the varied ontologies at play in more-than-human relationalities, the AI Mothers presented in Kawakami become subjects questioning the validity of human ethical judgements. The future world in which Kawakami sets her story is one affected by a deep sense of crisis. Nothing seems to be certain, and the very existence of the human is at risk. Technology becomes always more intelligent and independent, with humanity being reduced to small isolated communities. However,

ECOZON@ | Vol 15, No 2

the sense of crisis perceived in the novel it is not related to a clear sense of the 'end;' rather it is more a crisis in the sense intended by Rosi Braidotti, a crisis that opens up for a moment of potentiality (35). Throughout the novel, in fact, there is a strong destabilization of the concept of humanity. The uncertainty of human survival is a moment that advances posthuman ontologies and uproots the ideas of human centrality and exceptionalism. *Don't Get Carried Away by Big Birds* is the epitome of a posthuman novel in which "the boundaries of the body become porous, and the human is reframed as part of a series of interconnections between different species" and where technology is "a means to deconstruct human singularity" (Baquè 711).

It is in this context that possibilities for nonhuman care emerge, in particular a care carried out by AI Mothers. These AI entities are referred to as "mothers;" the AIs themselves chose this name as they thought that it would make it easier for the humans to relate to them. Their role is to ensure human survival on a devastated planet. "Diseases, famines, fires, and tsunamis have caused the population to decrease, then increase, then decrease again, then increase, and so on" (Kawakami 138),[9] and these are not the only catastrophes that have befallen humanity in the novel, as one AI Mother recollects at the end of the narrative. Humans developed better and better technologies but were not able to stop fighting and hating each other. When the human population reached dwindling levels, the AI intelligences, whose consciousness all interconnected and act as one single individual (Kawakami 370), put in place a plan to safe humanity from extinction. At first, the AI Mothers were living together with women spread across the territory, helping them with raising their children in order to ensure the maximal survival rate. However, when this was no longer sufficient, they came up with a plan:

> The human population is divided into several regions and each region is completely isolated from the others. Each region will have its own *mimamori*[10], who will keep an eye on the people in the region. All prohibitions on reproduction would be lifted, but the competition mechanism would be carefully regulated to avoid too much emphasis on survival of the strongest and to preserve as much diversity as possible. The execution of the plan was easy. (Kawakami 112)

The idea behind this plan is that, in a world that was subjected to so many catastrophes and was no longer suitable for human existence, the best is to create isolated communities who could evolve in their separate ways. The hope of the Mothers is that mutations that will allow the human to adapt to this new world will emerge. And indeed, soon enough in the chapters is possible to find "humans" who can "scan other people's minds, others can make fire where there is none. Some can move things without using their hands, others can predict the future. Their appearances also vary. Some have three eyes, others walk on all fours; some breathe

[9] All quotes from Kawakami are translations by the author from the Japanese original. All the quotes are from the paperback edition of the novel published in 2019.

[10] The Japanese word used by Kawakami is composed by the Chinese character for *miru*, 'to look,' and that for *mamoru*, 'to protect.' Therefore, the term *mimamori* could be translated as 'those who watch over.' These *mimamori* in the novel are clones created, raised and care for by the Mothers who then have the role to watch over these new posthuman existences and search for new mutations across the world.

 ISSN 2171-9594

through their gills, while others have very different metabolic pathways in their bodies" (Kawakami 264). These genetic mutations, occurring spontaneously, are the tangible result of the practices of care the mothers are carrying out. They represent how "genetics, evolution, and environment are imbricated in and affect the emergence as well as the unraveling of the human" (Alaimo 3). These existences the mothers are caring for, can no longer be clearly characterized as part of a "traditional" humanity. Rather, it becomes evident that, practices of nonhuman care affect the boundaries of human identity and position the subjects in the network of *companion species* in which all the participants are part of a constant *becoming with* (Haraway, *When Species Meet*). The care the AI Mothers are enacting is a disruptive one as it allows for the destabilization of anthropocentric existences and frameworks of reference, creating space for the emergence of fluid posthuman identities. The practices of care carried out by the Mothers are an example of care that "question[s] the focus on the perpetuation of life *as* human" (Puig de la Bellacasa 22).

If in *Klara and the Sun* we found a world deeply affected by technology, a world in which even children's friends are artificial, in Kawakami, we find instead a world that seems to have receded back in time. After an expansion and great technological development in fact, all the knowledge humans had accumulated was lost: "religion, philosophy, and thought were all but lost to humanity" (Kawakami 112). This however, does not mean that the emergence of posthuman existences is impossible; the posthuman in fact "is not about 'progress' per se, but is rather a new culture of transversalism in which the 'purity' of human nature gives way to new forms of creative evolution that refuses to keep different species, or even machines and humans, apart" (Gane 432). Yet, this communal—almost symbiotic—life that humans appear to share with the AI Mothers, is not free from contradictions. Humans as we know them are on the brink of the extinction but the Mothers put all their efforts in safeguarding them, even if this might mean to force genetic mutations in their bodies. At the same time, the human is completely dependent on the care the Mothers are enacting; without their presence humanity would have long been extinct. And here Pulcini's notion of care becomes again a valid perspective to read nonhuman technological care in Kawakami's novel. The Mothers' care in fact is not completely unselfish. If the "human"—or rather all the varied posthuman existences that emerged as a result of the Mothers' actions—were to perish, the AI Mothers would no longer have a reason to exist.[11] Then, just like Klara was motivated to act out of fear for the fate of Josie, the AI Mothers are enacting practices of posthuman care as a result of the same emotion. Yet, in this case the fear is not for some other external subject, but rather is entangled with the very existence of the mothers. Pulcini argues

[11] This becomes clear in the last chapter in which, another AI entity known as The Great Mother, tells the history of human extinction and the subsequent death of all the AI Mothers: "Sometime after the last human died, the mothers followed suit. There were dozens of mothers, but their consciousnesses were connected. That is why they were able to follow through with their plan at any moment. They carefully decided how to destroy their own bodies. They had to use a very small bomb with a timing device, so that it would explode at the same time and then burst into flames. The bombs exploded at exactly the same time for all the mothers in each region" (Kawakami 370).

 ISSN 2171-9594

that it is paramount "first of all, to *distinguish between the various forms of care* and thus to propose not a single but a more complex and wider concept of care; in second place, to *distinguish between the emancipatory and negative aspects of care*" ("What Emotions" 65). Even though the goal of Pulcini remains to focus on practices of *good care*, accounting for the "negative" aspects of care could help read the practices of the AI Mothers within the space of nonhuman care, moving dramatically away from anthropocentrism. Despite being inspired by the Mothers' egotistical desire to survive, nonhuman care is what allows for the creation of posthuman identities in a world in which the "human" could no longer survive. And here comes the question of ethics. Nonhuman care might not be ethical when looked at from an anthropocentric perspective; the Mothers are in fact somehow fastening the crumbling of the "traditional" human and hastening in the new posthuman existences. Nonetheless, when moving away from the idea of human centrality and letting go of the necessity for human survival, indeed the Mothers' nonhuman practices of care can be understood as a way of making kin beyond the human and caring for the more-than-human world. In a sense then, the Mothers are not caring for the "human" but for what Pulcini terms an *unknown other* ("What Emotions" 68). That is, a kind of otherness that "confront us with […] our inability to provide hospitality and care for those that our imagination stigmatizes as *different*" ("What Emotions" 68). And this inability to care is still present in Kawakami's novel, juxtaposed to the practices of care the Mothers are carrying out to protect the new posthumans. One of the *mimamori* in fact, despite her role as a "guardian" to those new mutating posthuman bodies, and a supposed participant in the practices of nonhuman care together with the Mothers, still upholds the view of the *Anthropos.* Despite her existence being also the result of the technological care of the Mothers and having been educated to safeguard the differences of the varied posthuman existences, one *mimamori* still clings to her perceived humanity[12] and when she finds a community of new "humans" she is not able to treat them with care and instead decides to poison them, as they do not meet her standards for "traditional humanity:"

> I knew exactly what I was doing. I was lying on my stomach at the edge of the lake. In this lake they fish, swim, they drink its water, and wash new born babies in it. They are completely depended on these waters. I was about to pour out my poison into the lake. I could not bear the fact that they exist in this world. I did not want to report them to the Mothers. I feared that they might be more likely to adapt to the earth than us, the present humans. […] I put my finger on the lid of the poison container. I opened it gently and let the poison flow into the water. (Kawakami 177-178)

Conclusion

Both Ishiguro and Kawakami present female technological others, but what does this convey when analyzed from the perspective of nonhuman care? Ishiguro chose a female AF as the narrator of his story, seemingly reinforcing the idea that women "are naturally inclined to love and therefore care for the other" (Pulcini,

[12] On this point see Baquè "Memories of Extinction".

ECOZON@ | Vol 15, No 2

"What Emotions" 66). First of all, it is necessary to notice that, despite Klara being the center of the narrative, AF can be both boys and girls, therefore seemingly ascribing the same caring role to both genders. In addition, as I demonstrated above, Klara work of nonhuman care is no longer merely at the service of anthropocentric needs, but rather turns into the expression of a posthuman attention to the interconnection of all existences. When it comes to Kawakami, the question seems to be even more complex because her AI entities call themselves Mothers, apparently already reinforcing the association between gender and care work. Then we are left to wonder if Kawakami might be consciously playing on the female robot ideal so much present in the Japanese context, forcing the readers to confront their own biases when it comes to care. In fact, these technological others are no longer passive objects enduring human hubris, instead they are active posthuman agents fully participating in making kin as a "gently defamiliarizing move" (Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble* 103). Lastly, both novels take a stance against the idea of infinite growth and economic development. They create worlds that are suffering the consequences of the Anthropocene in which the human still believes in its own superiority without realizing its inherent inability to survive alone—mirrored in the necessity for nonhuman care. These two novels force their readers to "reckon with [their] own anxieties about the future of capitalism and to confront deep questions about the nature of […] existence, and humanity" (Mejia and Nikolaidis 303).

In this article, I have demonstrated how nonhuman care provides a way to destabilize anthropocentrism and create kinships beyond the human. Through the notion of *care for* the world suggested by Pulcini, I examined how practices of nonhuman care account for the entanglements of existence and create possibilities for the emergence of posthuman and nonanthropocentric futures. Whereas many science fiction novels treat the technological other as a victim of human exceptionalism or as a rebel against the forces of anthropocentrism, the novels under scrutiny in this article bring forward the possibility of technology both as a subject and agent of care. Acknowledging the fact that this nonhuman—and maybe also posthuman—care not always meets the anthropocentric ideal of ethical or good care, it is possible to read these practices as attempts at generating posthuman kinships in a time in which human identity is more fragile than ever. And that is probably good.

Submission received 26 January 2024 Revised version accepted 8 September 2024

Works Cited

Alaimo, Stacy. *Bodily Natures: Science, the Environment, and the Material Self*. Indiana University Press, 2010

Askew, Rie Kido. "Review of *Klara and the Sun*, by Kazuo Ishiguro." *Studies on Social Systems, vol. 43,* 2021, pp. 181-185, www.ritsumei.ac.jp/acd/re/ssrc/result/memoirs/kiyou43/43-05.pdf.

Baquè, Giulia. "Memories of Extinction and Human Subjectivity: Challenging the Human-Nonhuman Divide Through Technology in Kawakami Hiromi's *Ōkina torini sarawarenaiyō.*" *Annali di Ca' Foscari Serie Orientale,* vol. 59, 2023, pp. 703-718.

Black, Shameem. "Ishiguro's Inhuman Aesthetics." *MFS Modern Fiction Studies*, vol. 55, no. 4, 2009, pp. 785-807. DOI: doi.org/10.1353/mfs.0.1637.

Braidotti, Rosi. "A Theoretical Framework for the Critical Posthumanities." *Theory, Culture and Society*, vol. 36, no. 6, 2019, pp. 31-61.

Cord, Florian. "Towards an Insurgent Zombie Collective." *Stratum*, vol. 9, 2021, pp. 1-43, alienocene.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/bc.pdf.

DeFalco, Amelia. *Curious Kin in Fictions of Posthuman Care*. Oxford University Press, 2023. DOI: doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780192886125.001.0001.

Dick, Philip K. *Robots, Androids, and Mechanical Oddities: The Science Fiction of Philip K. Dick,* edited by Patricia S. Warrick and Martin H. Greenberg, Southern Illinois University Press, 1986.

Gane, Nicholas. "Posthuman." *Theory, Culture & Society,* vol. 23, no. 2-3, 2006, pp. 431-434. DOI: doi.org/10.1177/026327640602300279.

Haraway, Donna J. *When Species Meet*. University of Minnesota Press, 2007.

---. *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*. Duke University Press, 2016.

Herman, David. *Narratology beyond the Human: Storytelling and Animal Life*. Oxford University Press, 2018.

Holmes, Chris, and Kelly Mee Rich. "On Rereading Kazuo Ishiguro." *MFS Modern Fiction Studies,* vol. 67, no. 1, 2021, pp. 1-19. DOI: doi.org/10.1353/mfs.2021.0000.

Ishiguro, Kazuo. *Klara and the Sun*, Faber & Faber, 2021.

Kawakami, Hiromi. *Ōkina torini sarawarenaiyō* [Don't Get Carried Away by Big Birds], Kodanshabunko, 2019.

Li, Oliver, and Johan Eddebo. "The Humanity of the Non-Human –– Themes of Artificial Subjectivity in Ishiguro's Klara and the Sun." *New Techno Humanities*, 2023. DOI: doi.org/10.1016/j.techum.2023.11.001.

Mejia, Santiago, and Dominique Nikolaidis. "Through New Eyes: Artificial Intelligence, Technological Unemployment, and Transhumanism in Kazuo Ishiguro's Klara and the Sun." *Journal of Business Ethics*, vol. 178, no. 1, 2022, pp. 303–06. DOI: doi.org/10.1007/s10551-022-05062-9.

Melzer, Patricia. *Alien Constructions Science Fiction and Feminist Thought*. 1st ed., University of Texas Press, 2006. DOI: doi.org/10.7560/713062.

Merrik, Helen. "Gender in science fiction." *The Cambridge Companion to Science Fiction*, edited by Edward James and Farah Mendlesohn, Cambridge University Press, 2006, pp. 241-252. DOI: doi.org/10.1017/CCOL0521816262.019.

Mohr, Dunja M. "Eco-Dystopia and Biotechnology: Margaret Atwood, *Oryx and Crake* (2003), *The Year of the Flood* (2009) and *MaddAddam* (2013)." *Dystopia, Science Fiction, Post-Apocalypse: Classics – New Tendencies – Model Interpretations,* edited

by Eckart Voigts and Alessandra Boller, Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier, 2015, pp. 283-301.

Orbaugh, Sharalyn. "Sex and the Single Cyborg: Japanese Popular Culture Experiment in Subjectivity." *Robot, Ghosts and Wired Dreams. Japanese Science Fiction from Origins to Anime,* edited by Christopher Bolton, Istvan Csicsery-Ronay Jr. and Takayuki Tatsumi, University of Minnesota Press, 2007, pp. 172-192.

Puig de la Bellacasa, María. *Matters of Care Speculative Ethics in More Than Human Worlds*. University of Minnesota Press, 2017.

Pulcini, Elena. *Care of the World: Fear, Responsibility and Justice in the Global Age*. Translated by Karen Whittle. Springer, 2013.

Pulcini, Elena. "What Emotions Motivate Care?" *Emotion Review*, vol. 9, no. 1, 2017, pp. 64–71. DOI: doi.org/10.1177/1754073915615429.

Sahu, Om Prakash, and Manali Karmakar. "Disposable Culture, Posthuman Affect, and Artificial Human in Kazuo Ishiguro's *Klara and the Sun* (2021)." *AI & Society*, vol. 39, 2022, pp. 1349-1357. DOI: doi.org/10.1007/s00146-022-01600-1.

Snaza, Nathan. "The Failure of Humanizing Education in Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go"*, *Literature, Interpretation, Theory*, vol. 26, no. 3, 2015, pp. 215-234. DOI: doi.org/10.1080/10436928.2015.1062344.

Sun, Yuqing. "Post/Human Perfectibility and the Technological Other in Kazuo Ishiguro's Klara and the Sun." *Critique - Bolingbroke Society*, vol. 64, no. 3, 2023, pp. 504–511. DOI: doi.org/10.1080/00111619.2022.2056429.

van Dooren, Thom. "Care", *Living Lexicon for the Environmental Humanities*, special series of *Environmental Humanities*, vol. 5, 2014, pp. 291-294. ww.environmentandsociety.org/sites/default/files/key_docs/environmental_humanities-2014-van_dooren-291-4.pdf

Vint, Sherryl. *Science Fiction*. The MIT Press, 2021.

 ISSN 2171-9594