Modern Language Studies

"A MULTITUDE OF DROPS": RECURSION AND GLOBALIZATION IN DAVID MITCHELL'S CLOUD ATLAS

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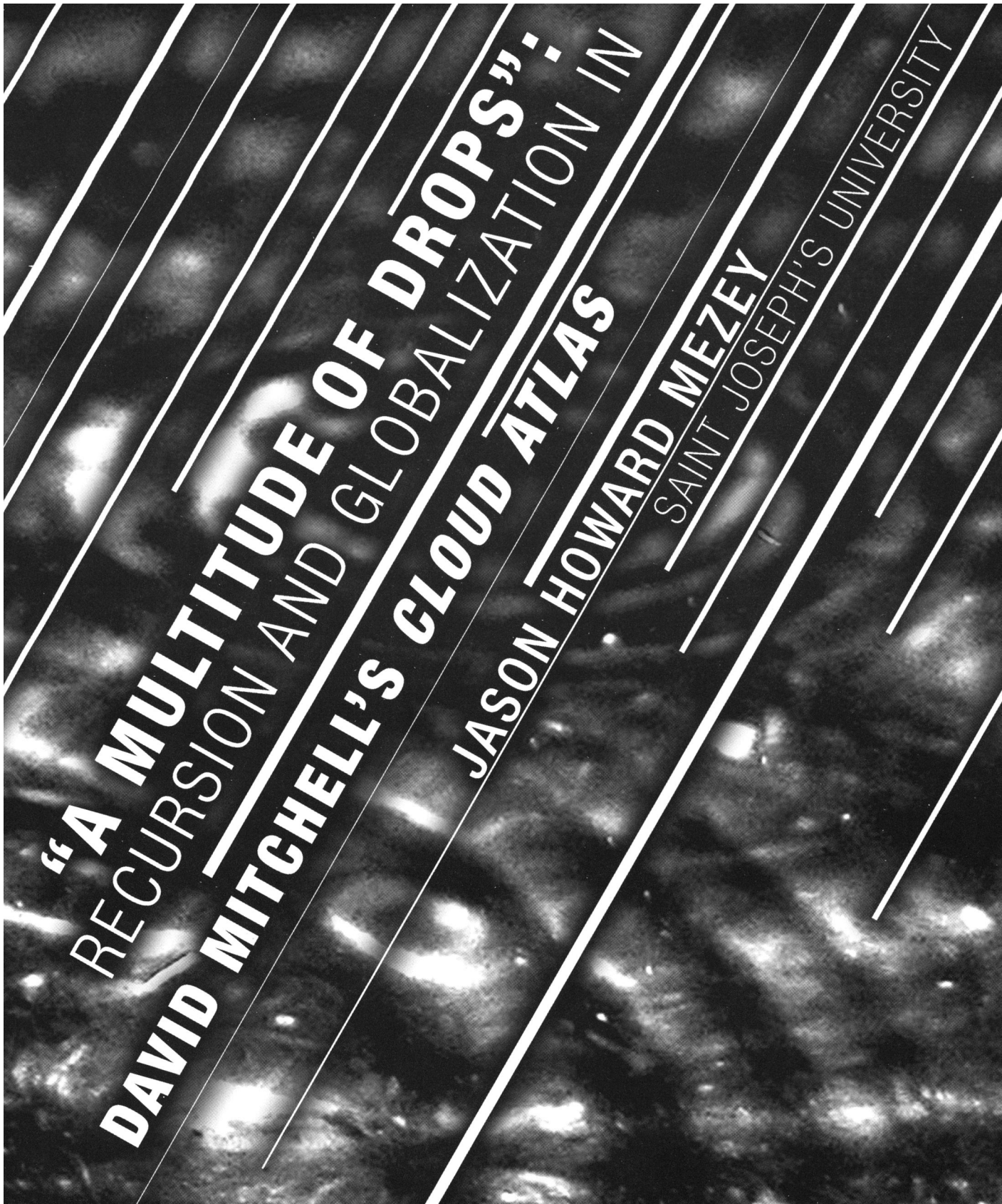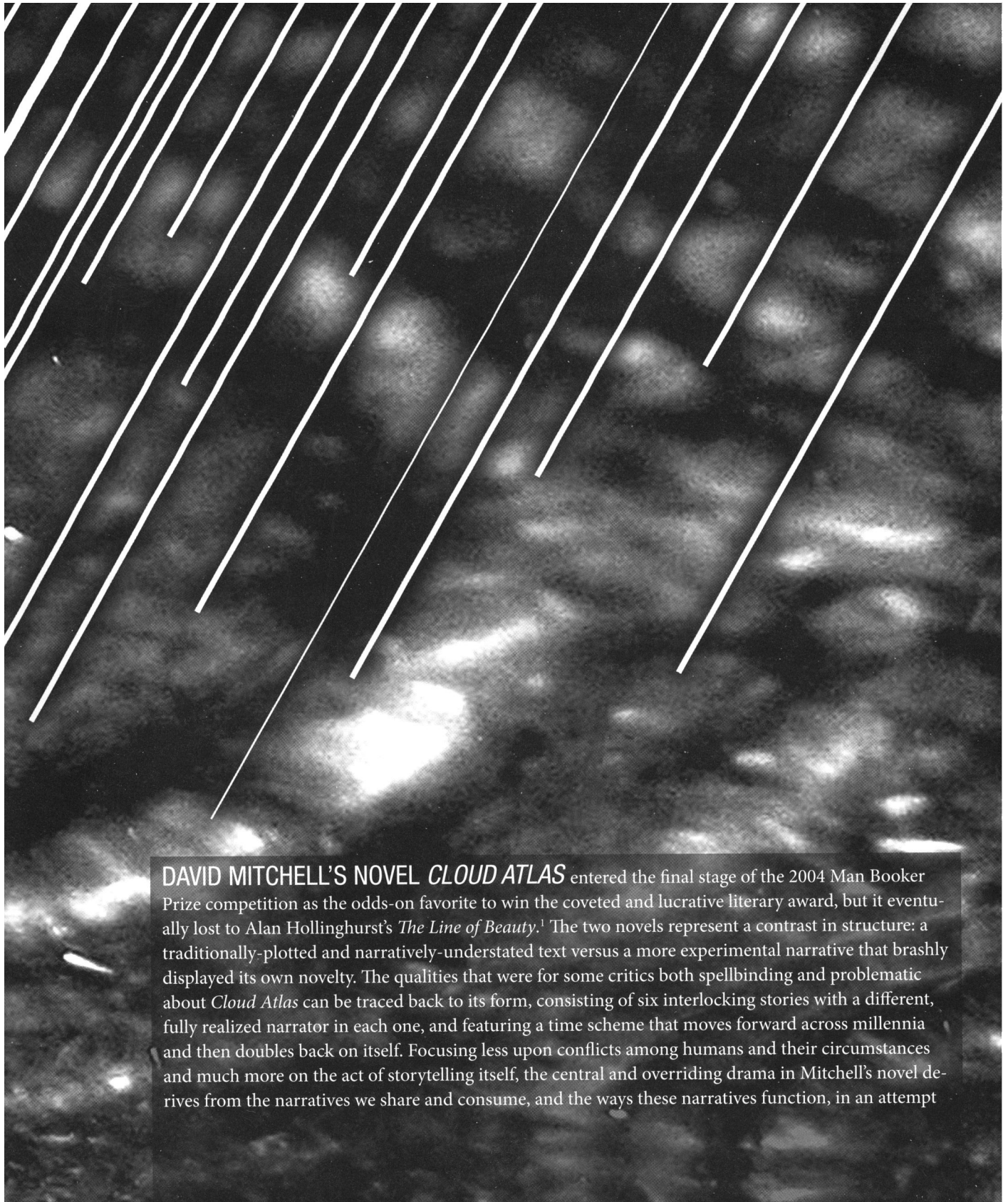
DAVID MITCHELL'S NOVEL *CLOUD ATLAS* entered the final stage of the 2004 Man Booker Prize competition as the odds-on favorite to win the coveted and lucrative literary award, but it eventually lost to Alan Hollinghurst's *The Line of Beauty*.[1] The two novels represent a contrast in structure: a traditionally-plotted and narratively-understated text versus a more experimental narrative that brashly displayed its own novelty. The qualities that were for some critics both spellbinding and problematic about *Cloud Atlas* can be traced back to its form, consisting of six interlocking stories with a different, fully realized narrator in each one, and featuring a time scheme that moves forward across millennia and then doubles back on itself. Focusing less upon conflicts among humans and their circumstances and much more on the act of storytelling itself, the central and overriding drama in Mitchell's novel derives from the narratives we share and consume, and the ways these narratives function, in an attempt

to represent the experience of the large, abstract economic, social, and political phenomenon known as globalization. In doing so, Mitchell argues for individual agency and collective identity even within what he sees as the impersonal and recursive unfolding of history itself.

The structure of *Cloud Atlas* illustrates and magnifies the driving need to see such a narrative through to completion. Narrative completion, however, implies neither straightforward chronology nor consistent perspective. The novel consists of six chapters: Chapter One ends midsentence, interrupted by Chapter Two, which in turn is interrupted by Chapter Three, and so on, up to Chapter Six, which appears in its entirety all at once. It is then followed by the second half of Chapter Five, which is in turn followed by the second half of Chapter Four, and so on, back to Chapter One. These chapters are also interlinked, as Chapters Two through Six incorporate as a crucial event the discovery of the preceding story; in the second half of the novel, each chapter save the last depicts its protagonist completing the story he or she discovers. As Robert Frobisher, the protagonist of Chapter Two, states, "A half-read book is a half-finished love affair" (64);[2] the discovery and completion of each unfinished text is an act of personal consummation, through which characters can reinforce family traditions, move on to the next phase of their lives, or even to die in peace.

Concluding this vast and performative (in a more theatrical than theoretical sense) narrative, however, is a simple and powerfully rendered ethical stance taken by the first narrator, Adam Ewing, who also speaks the final words of the novel. After narrowly avoiding death through the assistance of an escaped slave whom he aided, Ewing decides to dedicate his life to abolitionism as his limited means of reversing what he sees as a global trend in human behavior: "[O]ne fine day, a purely predatory world shall consume itself. Yes, the Devil shall take the hindmost until the foremost is the hindmost. In an individual, selfishness uglifies the soul; for the human species, selfishness is extinction" (*CA* 508). Despite his good intentions, however, Ewing knows that his resolution will be greeted with skepticism and even outright violence, as he imagines the response from his father-in-law:

> "You'll be spat on, shot at, lynched, pacified with medals, spurned by backwoodsmen! Crucified! Naïve, dreaming Adam. He who would do battle with the many-headed hydra of human nature must pay a world a pain & his family must pay it along with him! & only as you gasp your dying breath shall you understand, your life amounted to no more than one drop in a limitless ocean!"
>
> Yet what is any ocean but a multitude of drops? (*CA* 509)

For a novel invested in exploring the dynamics of the purely predatory world Ewing seeks to improve, its final words are quite hopeful, creating a sharp sense of ethical clarity about the individual's obligations to a global totality. To self-identify as a part of a multitude is not to resign oneself to anonymous inaction. Rather, the novel's point is to do something in spite of being such a small part of the whole. In Mitchell's invocation of the now-common phrase "think globally, act locally," Adam Ewing's words speak to how daily choices aggregate as a single life and how individual lives constitute the larger collectives of culture and history.

The intricate narrative journey that ends with Adam Ewing's ethical rebirth depicts human predatory behavior on a transcontinental and transhistorical scale, including tribal warfare, imperial conquest, corporate corruption, capital-

ist dystopia, and personal avarice and maliciousness occurring within a larger recursive cycle — a cycle in that there is a narrative return to the beginning, recursive in that this return is effected through new, nested iterations of prior circumstances. Set against this bleak landscape, however, is an ethical vision that allows for the experience of the individual, and in particular a personal sense of relationality that enables the individual to view oneself as part of a larger, non-subsuming collectivity. This twin emphasis — focusing on predatory cycles of history and the consciousness of individuals able to recognize themselves and others as trapped within those cycles — gives *Cloud Atlas* the scope of an epic, a genre from which Mitchell draws in crucial ways both to establish a broad and encompassing narrative sweep and to evoke a particularly heartfelt investment in readership and community. For Mitchell, the epic provides a means of yoking a vast array of human existences throughout time and space into an integrated process of human evolution and devolution. *Cloud Atlas* depicts this process by advancing its own uniquely combined sense of temporality, textual transmission, and transgenerational human connections, all of which are bound together by the multi-faceted concept of recursion. Viewing Mitchell's novel as recursive provides a way of understanding how the different subnarratives fit together structurally to create a coherent narrative for the novel as a whole; this practice further enables readers to consider how *Cloud Atlas* has gathered different human experiences spread out globally and temporally into one common, grander epic experience; and finally, examining the idea of recursion in *Cloud Atlas* conveys a sense of the novel's own take on globalization as a phenomenon marked by reiterative transitions rather than a straight-line development of human progress. My goal is not to argue that the epic is by extension a necessar-

ily recursive genre, but rather that *Cloud Atlas*'s recursiveness makes it epic.

Cloud Atlas builds on Mitchell's already prominent stature in contemporary literature as well as the themes he has successfully and evocatively presented in his previous work. Shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize in 2001 for his second novel *number9dream*, David Mitchell was named one of *Granta*'s "Best of Young British Novelists" in 2003 and once again became a Man Booker Prize finalist in 2004 for *Cloud Atlas*.[3] (His fourth novel, the semi-autobiographical *Black Swan Green*, appeared in 2006, and his fifth, *The Thousand Autumns of Jacob de Zoet*, a complex, multi-strand narrative alternating between Dutch and Japanese characters set in the 1700s, was released in June 2010.) As Pico Iyer sums up his literary career:

> In his first novel, *Ghostwritten*, in 1999, David Mitchell, now 37, invented the planetary novel, in a way, by setting nine stories in eight countries and describing a single spirit that ran through them all like a fuse. In his third novel, 2004's *Cloud Atlas*, he turned the postmodern book inside out by setting pieces in six different ages and voices, then doubling back (a little too fancily perhaps) to explore the idea of "eternal recurrence." In his new, most deeply personal work [*Black Swan Green*], Mitchell does something even more remarkable: he makes the well-worn coming-of-age novel feel vivid and uncomfortable and new. The revolution here is not of form, but of content and sensibility. (70)

Iyer's parenthetical qualification of *Cloud Atlas* in the midst of listing Mitchell's otherwise impressive achievements — his use of the term "planetary novel" accurately captures the global scope of Mitchell's work — reflects a significant

refrain in the attention the novel has received: while even the most negative reviews acknowledge Mitchell's literary talent, they frequently go on to characterize *Cloud Atlas* as too clever for its own good.[5] However, while perhaps accurately characterizing a popular dig against Mitchell's apparent substitution of structural intrigue and stylistic fireworks for humanistic depth, Iyer's use of the term "eternal recurrence" is less warranted. Despite its mention in both Robert Frobisher chapters, as a whole, this Nietzschean trope of endless repetition does not fully describe how *Cloud Atlas* dramatizes the passage of time and progress of history.[6] The structure of the novel is more accurately described as recursive, a word with definitions in multiple fields, but which is defined at its most elemental by Douglas Hofstadter as "nesting, and variations on nesting" (127). By way of example, he uses a scenario of an executive talking on a telephone to client A, whom he puts on hold to take a call from client B, whom he puts on hold to take a call from client C, etc. As the executive deals with these interruptions, he works his way back to client A, who is "sitting at the other end of the line, drumming his fingers against some table, and listening to some horrible Muzak piped through the phone lines to placate him" (127). Describing this scenario in terms borrowed from computer science, Hofstadter refers to this series of phone calls on hold as a "stack," the process of putting one call on hold to answer another call as "pushing," and the process of ending one call to return to somebody previously on hold as "popping" (128). Adapting this vocabulary, we can say that *Cloud Atlas* is a recursive narrative that relies on stacked subnarratives. This idea is best articulated in the novel during a metafictional moment as "an infinite matryoshka doll of painted moments, each 'shell' (the present) encased inside a nest of 'shells' (previous presents).... The doll of 'now' likewise encases a

nest of presents yet to be..." (*CA* 393). *Cloud Atlas* indeed consists of six nested shells, each dominated by a different narrator or focalizer:

1. "The Pacific Journal of Adam Ewing"
   Narration: 1st person, diary, by Adam Ewing.
   Time and Place: South Pacific, 1850-51.

   2. "Letters from Zedelghem"
      Narration: 1st person, epistolary,
      by Robert Frobisher.
      Time and Place: Belgium, early 1930s.

      3. "Half-Lives: The First Luisa Rey Mystery"
         Narration: 3rd person, focused on Luisa Rey.
         Time and Place: Southern California,
         early-mid 1970s.

         4. "The Ghastly Ordeal of Timothy Cavendish"
            Narration: 1st person, autobiographical tell-all,
            by Timothy Cavendish.
            Time and Place: England, early 2000s.

            5. "An Orison of Sonmi-451"
               Narration: 1st person, dialogue,
               by Sonmi-451 and a state archivist.
               Time and Place: Korea, at least 2100 C.E.[7]

               6. "Sloosha's Crossin' An' Ev'rythin' After"
                  Narration: 1st person, fireside story,
                  by Zachry Bailey.
                  Time and Place: Hawaii, 3000 C.E.

As I have stated above, chapters one through five are cut off halfway, followed by chapter six in its entirety, followed by the remaining halves of the previous five chapters in reverse order. This format, which in fact doubles back upon itself rather than repeating cyclically, might be more schematically represented using Hofstadter's terminology as follows:

Push | 1
Push | 2
Push | 3
Push | 4
Push | 5
Push | 6 | Pop
5 | Pop
4 | Pop
3 | Pop
2 | Pop
1
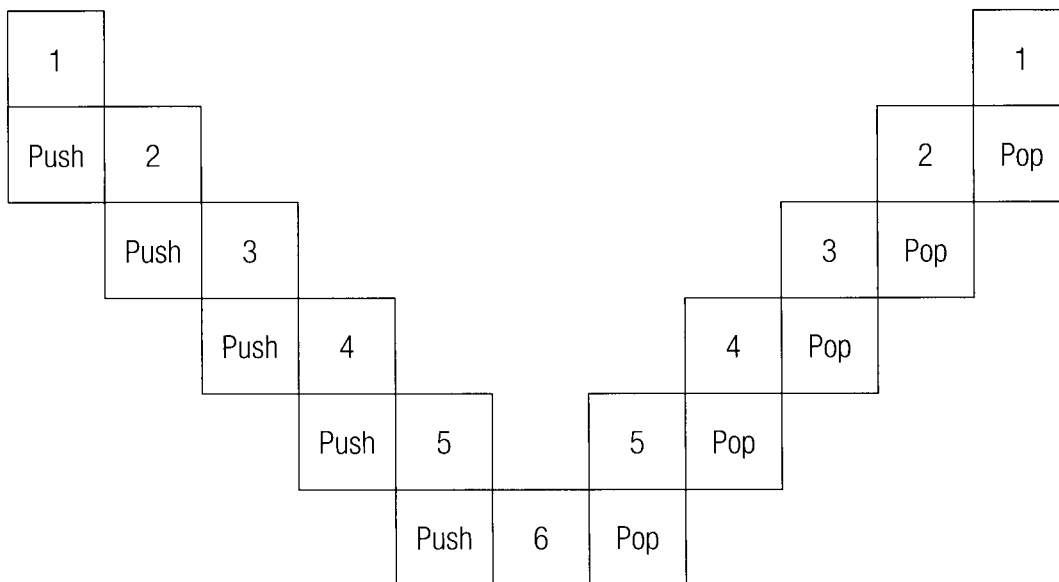
As illustrated, Chapter One — Adam Ewing's narrative — is displaced by Frobisher's narrative in Chapter Two, which is pushed onto the narrative stack until it is put on hold for the Luisa Rey story of Chapter Three, and so on until Chapter Six concludes, followed by each previously interrupted narrative popping off the stack in reverse order until we re-arrive at the last half of Chapter One. While Mitchell's novel may from this perspective be considered recursive, there are still more interpretive possibilities associated with this concept when examining its use in two other fields: linguistics and mathematics.

In linguistics, recursion evokes the idea of the infinite contained within the finite; according to Morten Christiansen and Maryellen MacDonald: "Recursion has … become a fundamental *property* of grammar, permitting a finite set of rules and principles to process and produce an infinite number of expressions" (127). The examples of recursion they cite extend from the simple use of relative clauses — "John saw the dog that chased the cat" becomes "John saw the dog that chased the cat that bit the mouse" (128) — to more complicated phrases inserted into the middle of sentences — "The dog that John saw chased the cat" becomes "The cat that the dog that John saw chased bit the mouse" (128). Such sentences extend to the point of unfeasibility the grammatical flexibility of language, as they become difficult to read with proper intonation, to memorize, to paraphrase, and to comprehend (Christiansen and MacDonald 128).[8] However, recursion provides descriptive depth and nuance by adding additional details, complicating agency, qualifying actions, and embedding meaning, despite the linearity of our language. "Cat bites mouse" is a simple act of predation; the predator chased by a larger predator and witnessed by a yet more fearsome predator is more complex. Similarly, "Adam Ewing rescues a slave, is then rescued by him, and becomes an abolitionist" is an understandable and linear chain of events. These same actions witnessed and added to over the course of centuries become

much more complex and meaningful. Mitchell enacts in *Cloud Atlas* on a grander scale what these sentences do in miniature.

In mathematics, the famous Fibonacci sequence, defined as "1, 1, 2, 3, 5, 8, 13, 21, 34, 55, 89, 144, 233, …" (Hofstadter 135), does not represent recursion in the same manner as the stacking or embedding described above. Instead, recursion consists of a function "designating a repeated procedure such that the required result at each step is defined in terms of the results of previous steps according to a particular rule (the result of an initial step being specified)" ("recursion, n."). Essentially, to derive the next number in a Fibonacci sequence, one must derive the values of the previous two numbers (in a formula Hofstadter describes as "FIBO(n) = FIBO(n − 1) + FIBO(n − 2) for n > 2" [136]). Recursion here pertains to the process of returning to the past "instructions" of a mathematical function to figure out its present value.[9] Again, this function resists simple repetition, for while the steps of the process are repetitive — the same equation provided by Hofstadter can determine the value of any *n* in the Fibonacci sequence — the results are not. The image of the Fibonacci sequence here, if we use the movement through an ascending series as an analogy for movement through time, evokes a timeline in which the past is integral in defining the present, which expands recursively to a potentially infinite future.

Cloud Atlas establishes this sense of temporality as its succession of narrative presents unfold; each is explicitly prefigured by its narrative past (through the discovery of the previous chapter's text) and each will similarly prefigure the subsequent narrative future (when it in turn is discovered in the following chapter).[10] Despite these experiments with temporality, the narrative pasts, presents, and futures of *Cloud Atlas* are bound together by a simple, basic need, which

I have described above as the overwhelming desire to see a story to its completion. The state of suspense Mitchell provokes in his readers with each narrative break mirrors the desire felt by the characters in the novel to arrive at the end of their found texts. For Mitchell's characters, the textual artifacts they encounter help them to answer central questions as they attempt to make meaning of their lives and histories. Zachry's son shows the rest of Sonmi-451's testimony to his family to verify his father's story; Sonmi-451 requests the right to see the last hour of the Timothy Cavendish movie before her execution; Cavendish requests and receives the second installment of the Luisa Rey novel from its author, which in turn inspires him to write his own life story; Luisa Rey acquires Robert Frobisher's final letters to Rufus Sixsmith and reads them to think more about her connections to the past; and Frobisher reads the last half of Adam Ewing's diary, finding solace in Ewing's ignorance of what is befalling him. These temporal breaks are another hallmark of recursion, in this sense a recursive mode that alters the way we conceive of narrative time. According to Ursula K. Heise,

> Recursion, in other words, is a means of articulating a temporal interval through a narrative that is not its own, but that of another moment in time: that is, of giving it a structure of meaning while 'at the same time' leaving it semantically empty as an interval of pure chronology, since nothing can happen in the frame narrative while the framed story is being told. Recursion figures the moment as what it is not, replacing it by the story of another moment; somewhat paradoxically, it becomes narrative by not being narrated. (Heise 61)

The recursive grand narrative of *Cloud Atlas*

leaves a number of chronological gaps in each successive narrative shell. Breaking off chapters at moments of revelation (Sonmi-451's), lost consciousness (Rey's and Cavendish's), seasonal change (Frobisher's), and grammatical linkage (Ewing's ends after an auxiliary verb but before the main verb), Mitchell structures *Cloud Atlas* around an intensified sense of readership. As I will go on to argue, Mitchell's use of the epic genre is more focused on evoking this sense of readership involved in a joint, interconnected, intergenerational process of making meaning than it is with conforming to a certain style, form, or content. As *Cloud Atlas* unfolds through its process of narrative recursion through embedding and reiteration, it achieves an epic scope.

While *Cloud Atlas* shares with the classical epic what Hegel describes as a "free boldness of creation" (1047), I do not intend to argue that *Cloud Atlas* is definitively an epic and not a novel by virtue of certain generic rules. Mitchell's novel is much richer for not sufficiently conforming to such generic boundaries. I agree strongly with Wai Chee Dimock when she writes, "[F]or what genre is dealing with is a volatile body of material, still developing, still in transit, and always on the verge of taking flight, in some unknown and unpredictable direction. 'Genre is much less of a pigeonhole than a pigeon,' Alasdair Fowler has suggested" ("Genre" 86). Ultimately, Mitchell's use of the epic as a generic touchstone implements a mode of readership and textual reception that speaks to his vision of an age interconnected beyond the capitalist, world-contracting dynamics of globalization — a sense of positional awareness in relation to others on a global scale, part of a profoundly-connected human continuum. Mitchell's evocation of epic form consists, among other things, of his efforts (similar to what he achieved in *Ghostwritten*) to yoke together a wide swath of human experiences through a set of linked char-

acters whose connections among one another are unexpected and coincidental. In *Cloud Atlas*, he adds a temporal dimension, diagramming these connections in the context of generational shifts that extend from the 1850s to the 31st century.

According to Dimock, such questions of temporality and multiple narrative voices are integral to the epic form. Employing as evidence Aristotle's argument for the simultaneous risk and necessity of using foreign words in poetry, as well as scholarship on the peculiarly archaic and stylized speech in the epic *Gilgamesh* ("Genre" 92-94), Dimock argues: "[T]he lexical map of the epic is a map, not only of space, but also of time. The cumulative life of humankind is captured here as a looping, bulging, swirling net, featuring both the linguistic norm and its nonstandard variants. It is this that gives the epic its scope" ("Genre" 94).[11] Her sense of epic temporality demonstrates a notion of time that, she claims, forces us to rethink our sense of genre, periodization, and even history and cultural-national affiliation:

> National territoriality is no longer the sole determinant in the conduct of human beings, the loyalties they sustain, the frames of reference they adopt. National chronology is even less a determinant. For much of the world's population, time has perhaps always been subnational in one sense, supranational in another. Supranational time seems to me especially important, if currently undertheorized, in the context of globalization. What I have in mind is a duration antedating the birth of any nation and outlasting the demise of all. The unit of analysis here is large-scale but not standardized, due in part to the context-dependent time frames and in part to the vectorial arrow running in both directions. Supranational time goes backward (a recursive loop into the past), and it goes

forward (a projective arc into the future). This bidirectional arrow maps the entire length of history as a field of globalization. World governance takes on new meaning as a result. ("Planetary Time" 490-91)[12]

The surface similarity between the structure of Mitchell's novel and Dimock's sense of supranational time is readily noticeable, especially in the novel's time scheme that extends past "the demise of all" nations and progresses both forwards and backwards.[13] However, the similarities run deeper when considering that Mitchell's sense of supranational time is as politically charged as Dimock's, as his soon-to-be-murdered character Isaac Sachs astutely points out shortly before his murder: "The present presses the virtual past into its own service, to lend credence to its mythologies + legitimacy to the imposition of will. Power seeks + is the right to 'landscape' the virtual past. (He who pays the historian calls the tune.)" (*CA* 392-93). The evocation of power and its time-altering proclivities represents a crucial factor in describing the narrative arc of *Cloud Atlas*, in which Mitchell evokes the supranational as the only frame of reference that will accommodate his theme of textual transmission, which spans disparate locales, generations, and characters; the novel's space-time orientation offers the potential for defining the path of the history we are sharing, as well the hope that perhaps we can pick another path. In doing so, Mitchell makes explicit Dimock's argument about the supranational quality of epic, but he also interacts with the shape and telling of past epics.

At first, the correspondences may seem superficial. For example, the casual reader can see the repetition of the number six in the text — in the number of stories told, as well as in the content of the stories told — a number that recalls the hexametric line used by Homer and Virgil, taken

so for granted as a standard of epic poetry that Aristotle admonishes those who "attach 'poetry' to the name of the verse-form, and thus refer to 'elegiac poets' and 'hexameter poets'; i.e. they do not call people 'poets' because they produce imitations, but indiscriminately on the basis of their use of verse" (4).[14] Most significantly, the musical composition that occupies Frobisher for the rest of his life is called the "Cloud Atlas Sextet," described by Frobisher as: "[A] 'sextet for overlapping soloists': piano, clarinet, 'cello, flute, oboe, and violin, each in its own language of key, scale, and color. In the first set, each solo is interrupted by its successor: in the second, each interruption is recontinued, in order. Revolutionary or gimmicky? Shan't know until it's finished…" (*CA* 445).

On the surface, then, Mitchell hearkens back in prose to an established poetic form, the hexameter verse, that is intimately linked to the classical epic, and which Homeric scholar Milman Parry identified as an example of the close linkage between epic content and form (Clark 117). As Parry explains it, Homeric diction, "in so far as it is made up of formulae, is entirely due to the influence of the meter" (9). These formulae consisted of set expressions of differing length that could be inserted into the verse when necessary "so as both to make a sentence and to fill out the hexameter" (9).[15] If the dactylic hexameter and frequent repetitions of Homeric verse speak to a link between epic poetry and oral recitation, the shared focus on transmission in Parry's scholarship and Mitchell's novel positions the classical epic as a highly performative genre. Whereas Parry focuses on how Homeric dactylic hexameter and repetition enabled and even helped dictate the content of the orator's recitation (9), Mitchell constructs *Cloud Atlas* to highlight how the modern incarnation of the epic depends upon its dynamic reception by the audience.

This is not to say that the transmission of

texts *within* the novel is seamless. Cavendish is not initially sold on the Luisa Rey novel (*CA* 156). Frobisher muses about the authenticity of Ewing's journal (*CA* 64). Sonmi-451 also suggests the inauthenticity of the events in her own tale, that they had been pre-arranged by the state (*CA* 348). Finally, Zachry's son claims that "most o' Pa's yarnin's was jus' musey duck fartin'" (*CA* 308). However, while the characters in each narrative may be skeptical of the tale they are pursuing and mostly do not realize the larger framework they fit into, novelistic form overcomes the skepticism of individual characters, and ultimately, as the second half of each narrative winds down, it becomes clear that the narrative artifacts of the past each find more willing and engaged audiences in the time frame subsequent to its composition. In contrast, the contemporary audience is either absent (Jackson Ewing and Rufus Sixsmith as addressees for Ewing and Frobisher), potential (the readership of *Half-Lives* and Timothy Cavendish's to-be-written autobiography), or skeptical (Sonmi-451's archivist and Zachry Bailey's son).

This relationship among texts and readers across generations as depicted in *Cloud Atlas* finds an analogy in rhyme. To some extent, *Cloud Atlas* is a novel with a rhyme scheme, an epic rhyme scheme no less. In her description of *terza rima*, the verse Dante first used in *The Divine Comedy*, Catherine Addison writes: "Whereas *ottava* divides discourse into discrete little eight-line packets, *terza rima* is a continuous form, rhyming ABA BCB CDC DED … etc. It is a kind of unchecked alternating pattern, each tercet unclosed and forever hearkening forward towards as-yet-uncompleted rhymes in the next tercet" (134). Addison's description emphasizes a prosody of incompletion, evoking the halved narratives Mitchell presents as the first five stories of *Cloud Atlas*.[16] Just as the enclosed rhyme in a terza rima tercet finds its anchoring sound in the stanza following it, the texts produced in each *Cloud Atlas* subnarrative find a true audience in the next subnarrative in rhyme; this correspondence of sounds is also a correspondence of temporality (Tsur 84). Rhymes, in other words, force a sense of simultaneity, which to some extent is experienced by the characters in the novel who encounter texts from previous eras. Certainly, each text that finds a foothold in a later time frame is incorporated into the current narrative, so that by the last time frame (falling in the middle of the novel) Zachry's narrative bears the cumulative weight of all the narratives that came before it, and ends by gesturing back towards the unfolding of these prior stories as Zachry's grandchildren sit attentively to marvel at Sonmi's orison. However, the texts falling forward through the time schemes of *Cloud Atlas* ultimately evoke a sense of simultaneity for the reader of the novel itself as a whole; Mitchell positions this reader to grasp all six interlocking narratives *as if* they unfolded in one moment. *Cloud Atlas* uses its experiments with temporality to train its readership to hold the mindset of a broad passage of time shot through with a sense of simultaneity.

Mitchell's efforts to inculcate a new sense of time and relationality are, I believe, central to his project in reimagining the epic for contemporary times, specifically to articulate a new set of experiences inflected by globalization. While it is a commonplace assumption that a work of literature is bound to the era of its telling, the epic seems to stand in a particularly curious relationship to its own. As Hegel writes:

> The relations of ethical life, the bond of the family, as well as the bond of the people — as an entire nation — in war and peace must all have been discovered, framed, and developed; but, on the other hand, not yet developed into the form of universal institutions, obligations, and laws valid in themselves without any

ratification by the living subjective personal-
ity of individuals, and indeed possessed of
the power of subsisting even against the will
of individuals. (1052)

The epic is responsible, in other words, for codi-
fying that which is culturally available yet not
fully expressed or reified into concrete cultural
practice. The paradox emerging from Hegel's
statement is that while the structure of human
relations and obligations are already perceptible,
"they can acquire their existence only in and
through the actions and character of individuals"
(1052). Hegel's description — sounding a great
deal like Raymond Williams's sense of the "emer-
gent" (123) — fits evocatively with a description of
globalization as both a historical era and a histori-
cal process. My question for Mitchell's novel thus
becomes: how does *Cloud Atlas* represent — as
would an epic in the Hegelian sense — an estab-
lished order of globalization while still attempting
to flesh out through its characters "the relations of
ethical life" that mark this era of transition?

Linking the epic to globalization is the cat-
egory of totality, which Fredric Jameson defines
as "the ensemble of society's structure as a whole"
(51). Specifically, in *Theory of the Novel*, Lukács
advances totality as the crucial determining factor
of the status of epic; for Lukács, the modern epic,
or rather the novel as a sort of post-lapsarian epic,
is a testament of loss, specifically a loss of some
concrete notion of totality: "The novel is the epic
of an age in which the extensive totality of life is
no longer directly given, in which the immanence
of meaning in life has become a problem, yet
which still thinks in terms of totality" (56). As
Martin Jay points out, totality for Lukács in *The-
ory of the Novel* concerns the organic connection
between nature and society (95). I see immanence
as referring to the perceptibility of such connec-
tions, encompassing along with totality a broad

cosmological scope in the opening statement of
Theory of the Novel, an encomium to a bygone
age: "Happy are those ages when the starry sky is
the map of all possible paths — ages whose paths
are illuminated by the light of the stars. Every-
thing in such ages is new and yet familiar, full of
adventure and yet their own. The world is wide
and yet it is like a home, for the fire that burns
in the soul is of the same essential nature as the
stars…" (*Theory* 29). Here totality extends beyond
the social or material to represent the spiritual
and cosmological integration of mortal life with
matters considerably more vast and universal.

For Lukács, then, the epic world presents an
integrated social universe functioning in con-
cert with the cosmic; the loss of this integration
enables the development of the novel as genre,
which he describes as "the form of the epoch of
absolute sinfulness" (*Theory* 152). Emblematic of
this shift is the novel's focus on the interior life
of the protagonist to the exclusion of an engage-
ment with the social world, which is "possible and
necessary only when the distinctions between
men have made an unbridgeable chasm; when the
gods are silent and neither sacrifices nor the ec-
static gift of tongues can solve their riddle; when
the world of deeds separates itself from men and,
because of this independence, becomes hollow
and incapable of absorbing the true meaning of
deeds in itself…" (*Theory* 66). This description of
the shift from epic to novel derives from a deep-
ening perception of what amounts to alienation,
or what Lukács refers to later in *History and Class
Consciousness* as "the capitalist separation of the
producer from the total process of production,
the division of the process of labour into parts at
the cost of the individual humanity of the worker,
the atomisation of society into individuals who
simply go on producing without rhyme or reason"
(*History* 27). In a sense, the epic recalls a pre-
capitalist sense of totality, a historical moment of

perfect and perceptible unity and meaning. Such is implicit in Hegel's summation of epic as well. As Simon Dentith claims, "Infused into Hegel's position both with respect to nationality and modernity, and in some ways his central category both aesthetically and historically, is his insistence on the totality of epic — that is, the view that a genuine epic poem is both an all-encompassing form in its own right and achieves a summation of a whole and undivided social unity" (110).

Certainly, one of the popular narratives of globalization is that it represents a larger schema of worldwide unity through a broadening of informational, cultural, population, and economic exchanges. However, globalization as a phenomenon is just as likely to evoke images of fragmentation on a subnational level, as the demands on the nation-state as a participant in the global economy become incommensurate with the demands and desires of subnational groups. The referent for totality is thus up for grabs, and far from being a univocal expression of national tradition, the epic under globalization must somehow speak to the more fragmentary experiences of humankind. Franco Moretti gets at this conclusion early in *Modern Epic*, pointing out that the meaning of modern epic arises from "a kind of antagonism between the noun and the adjective: a discrepancy between the totalizing will of the epic and the subdivided reality of the modern world" (5). To support this claim, he provocatively reverses the classic Bakhtinian formulation of epic as monologic and novel as polyphonic:

> The nineteenth-century novel, for example, with its dialectic or provinces and capital pinning the story at the centre of the nation-state, acts in the opposite way to a centrifugal force. And the same holds for novelistic conversation, or the impersonal voice of the narrator: rather than nourishing polyphony,

they impose a drastic reduction of it, giving birth to a more compact and homogeneous 'verbal-ideological' world in each generation. *Pace* Bakhtin, in short, the polyphonic form of the modern West is not the novel, but if anything precisely the epic: which specializes in the heterogeneous space of the world-system, and must learn to provide a stage for its many voices. (56-57)

The reversal Moretti enacts here establishes a point not just about literary genre, but about the state under globalization as well. For Hegel, Moretti claims, the state stands in for the totalizing function of the epic:

> For once "State life" becomes established, the unity of universal and individual dissolves: "the ethical and the right" cease to "depend exclusively upon individuals" and become objectified in laws and the state apparatus. [...] With the coming of the State, in short, individuality must no longer give totality a form, but confine itself to obeying it: master its own energies and keep to what is prescribed. (Moretti 12)

According to Hegel, via Moretti, the modern development of the state negates the epic, in that heroic communal or national ideals that can manifest themselves as the qualities of an individual fade in light of the codification of these ideals in the form of the law and authority represented by the state. The state, in other words, usurped and embodied the totality once expressed through the epic. We can extend this line of thinking further when accounting for the changing role of the state under globalization. If the state — which according to Moretti has usurped the role of the hero as representing totality — renders the classical, univocal epic impossible in modern times, what

occurs when the state begins to diagram the limits of its own influence?

As Saskia Sassen asserts, "[t]he embeddedness of the global requires at least a partial lifting of these national encasements and hence signals a necessary participation by the state, even when it concerns the state's own withdrawal from regulating the economy" (243); her implication is that members of the elite with whom the state's interests are aligned benefit structurally from weakening its economic sovereignty under globalization. However, the strength of the state remains in other arenas. As Doug Henwood points out, "[a]lthough there is no question that the state's positive role [under globalization] has been either sharply reduced or under sharp attack, its negative and disciplinary role has grown" (60). In both cases, as the state asserts its coercive authority (Henwood) and strategic obsolescence (Sassen), long-standing fault lines in state sovereignty and national allegiance become exposed, and the sense of totality projected by the modern epic becomes even further unmoored from its traditional docking points of community, cosmos, nation, and state.

David Mitchell offers in *Cloud Atlas* a modern epic that rejects the notion of totality in a Marxist sense. By today's standards, after all, the celebration and promotion of whole and undivided social unities carry a more sinister edge, a possibility signaled by Emmanuel Levinas in his gloss on totality, which he argues is predicated on totalizing thought:

> Totality has to be understood as the reign of the same wherein everything and everybody exists as part of a whole or as case under a law. For Levinas it makes no great difference whether the totality is represented by the archaic form of religious or mythical participation or by the modern forms of rational

mediation, achieved by economics, politics and culture. [...] The totality, which forces everybody into certain roles, is based on violence, on a general war which does not end when the individual's striving for self-preservation makes use of rational means. This totality contrasts with the infinity of the other whose otherness exceeds the limits of any order whatsoever. (Waldenfels 66)

Mitchell, on the other hand, ultimately posits a world in which the individual can manage not to become subsumed into violent and exploitative constructions of the nation, the state, or global capital. His approach to the epic thus has a deeply ethical quality, in that he sees the possibility of individual autonomy and agency as a necessary component to the recounting of history.[17] In *Cloud Atlas*, individuals across history are not lumped into one totalizing category; instead, as they are confronted by those historical Others whose traces they encounter through the transmission of texts, their senses of self are called into question. In the words of Emmanuel Levinas: "A calling into question of the same — which cannot occur within the egoist spontaneity of the same — is brought about by the other. We name this calling into question of my spontaneity by the presence of the Other ethics" (43). For Mitchell, ethical consciousness is fixed in an awareness of the Other that transcends one's immediate spatial and temporal context; *Cloud Atlas* evokes the epic as a means not only of conveying this awareness to the reader, but of directly implicating the reader in that same sense of awareness.

I see in *Cloud Atlas* Mitchell's creation of a sense of epic totality without the more violent totalization decried by Levinas, against the backdrop of globalization as a long historical process of disruptive forces. Ultimately, the emphasis on cross-generational reception suggests to me

that Mitchell's evocation of epic totality lies more within the Levinasian model than a Marxist one, as there is no systematic attempt to delineate a unified sense of interlocking social, cultural, and economic factors over the course of the novel. Rather, each character is able to identify with an Other removed by history and geography. There is no totality of social structures in *Cloud Atlas*; rather, it is a totality of human development, and its characters and readers are oriented not in relation to some vast social whole, but in relation to others — distinct points in a vast network of transhistorical and transglobal connections. In Mitchell's hands the epic seeks to re-establish in a modern context the individual subject's sense of connection to what Dimock terms "the cumulative life of humankind" ("Genre" 94).

In a *Washington Post Book World* interview, Mitchell sketches out the processes of human development he wished to represent in *Cloud Atlas*:

> Perhaps all human interaction is about wanting and getting. (This needn't be as bleak as it sounds — a consequence of getting can be giving, which presumably is what love is about.) Once I had these two ideas for novellas, I looked for other variations on the theme of predatory behavior — in the political, economic and personal arenas. These novellas seemed to marry well with the structure I had in mind: Each block of narrative is subsumed by the next, like a row of ever-bigger fish eating the one in front. (BW03)

Mitchell's focus on predatory behavior takes on considerable geopolitical weight from the very beginning of the novel, as it stages two men — Adam Ewing (an American) and Dr. Henry Goose (an Englishman) — who encounter each other on a beach in the Chatham Islands, causing Ewing to muse: "If there be any eyrie so desolate, or isle so remote, that one may there resort unchallenged by an Englishman, 'tis not down on any map I ever saw" (*CA* 3). When he is first introduced, Goose is looking for teeth — the detritus of cannibalistic feasts held on the beach, Goose claims — to sell to a denture-maker in Piccadilly, who in turn will use them to fashion false teeth for the wealthy classes of London. This satirical take on the exploitative character of commercial flow to the colonial metropolis is enlarged upon in the history of the Chatham Islands presented by Ewing, specifically English complicity in the weakening and eventual slaughter of the Moriori by the Maori. While he muses on England's global presence, however, he also represents the process of America extending its global reach as well. In the mid-1800s, according to John Carlos Rowe, "United States trade with Asia, the development of Pacific trade routes, and competition with European colonial powers for Asian spheres of influence certainly played crucial roles in the development of the United States as a free-trade imperialist power and helped pave the way for our twentieth-century ventures in the Korean and Vietnam wars" (87). In effect, Mitchell stages a meeting between representatives of one nation in the thick of its imperial era and the other nation at the dawn of its own.

The language in this opening section of *Cloud Atlas* evokes attitudes towards empire that are both racialist and paternalistic. Ewing, who is a sympathetic (albeit somewhat hapless and clueless) character overall, relies on racial stereotypes to classify the Maori or Moriori around him as either blacks or Indians; when passing by and greeting a servant, he states, "The sullen miss was hanging laundry on a shrub & ignored us. She has a tinge of black blood & I fancy her mother is not far removed from the jungle breed" (*CA* 6). Ewing's racism, however, fits within a larger context of empire as a mission of salvation, as

he makes clear in a conversation: "I protested, to civilize the Black races by conversion should be our mission, not their extirpation, for God's hand had crafted them too" (*CA* 16). As an antebellum American, Ewing finds his words are jeered away as naiveté and rank hypocrisy, but in other senses he is smart enough to see empire for what it is: a rationale for solidifying and extending power by any means necessary. His narration of Maori and Moriori history demonstrates his self-contradictory viewpoint:

> Now the strangers [Maori] proceeded to lay claim to Chatham by takahi, a Maori ritual transliterated as "Walking the Land to Possess the Land." Old Rēkohu was thus partitioned & the Moriori informed they were now Maori vassals. In early December, when some dozen Aboriginals protested, they were casually slain with tomahawks. The Maori proved themselves apt pupils of the English in "the dark arts of colonization." (*CA* 14)

On the one hand, Ewing's ability to recognize colonization as a dark art is admirable, especially in light of statements like Henry Goose's, who questions, "As philanthropists, might it not be our duty to likewise ameliorate the savages' sufferings by hastening their extinction? [...] More humane, surely & more honest, just to knock the savages on the head & get it over with?" (*CA* 16-17). However, Ewing also assumes that the only way the Maori would have learned about colonization was from the British, even though he cites a Maori concept in Maori language for conquering and possessing territory.

The different imperial worldviews expressed in Chapter One inaugurate a theme that will persist throughout the novel, that of the tribal and the transnational as manifestations of human predatory behavior. I borrow these terms from Benjamin Barber's "Jihad vs. McWorld" because Mitchell seems to acknowledge and adapt this same dualistic mindset for his own novelistic purposes. By evoking the tribal (the Maori conquest of the Moriori) and transnational (in this case, the imperial/commercial enterprises of both Henry Goose, the wayfaring doctor, and Adam Ewing, the overseas actuary), Mitchell shows that far from being a natural evolution from one organizing structure to the next, the tribal and transnational exist in recursive relation to one another. In short, "the cumulative life of humankind" takes new shapes but does not progress; thus, the novel stresses the double-edged effects of recursion, that we share the predatory and cannibalistic impulses of earlier individuals and cultures while still progressing through time to experience these impulses in different ways. Oddly enough, the character who establishes this sense of continuity is Ewing's would-be murderer Henry Goose, who taunts his victim one last time by staging a mock dialogue between them and mimicking Ewing's part:

> "'Tis absurdly simple. I need money & in your trunk, I am told, is an entire estate, so I have killed you for it. Where is the mystery? 'But Henry, this is wicked!' But Adam, the world is wicked. Maoris prey on Moriori. White prey on darker-hued cousins, fleas prey on mice, cats prey on rats, Christians on infidels, first mates on cabin boys, Death on the living. 'The weak are meat, the strong do eat.'" (*CA* 503)

Goose's logic is pervasive throughout *Cloud Atlas*, and his final honesty in expressing to Ewing what has been happening all this time (indeed what Ewing has been participating in himself) exposes the amount of self-deception needed to view as progress and human uplift the funneling of resources from third-world to first-world econo-

mies. Taking the long view of history, Mitchell shows how such progress is nothing more than planting the seeds of self-destruction, with different iterations of people preying on their environments and each other; the end result is not progress, but rather recursion.

We see this sense of recursion at the opposite end of the tribal-transnational spectrum, in the Sonmi-451 chapters in which Mitchell evokes a futuristic McWorld, in which the prevailing political force (Unanimity) works hand-in-hand with Papa Song Corp (*CA* 196), the leader of which, Papa Song, is both father and deity to Sonmi-451 and her fellow fabricants, and whose logo is a set of golden arches (*CA* 201). This system of government — referred to as a corpocracy — has already witnessed (and likely caused) vast environmental destruction; there existed territories called deadlands, some of which were "so infected or radioactive that purebloods perish there like bacteria in bleach" (*CA* 206); at different points in her narrative, rebelling fabricant Sonmi-451 refers to both England and Bombay as having been "deadlanded," suggesting that this is a human rather than a natural process. According to the archivist interviewing her, the corpocratic system of government is indeed natural, stated in terms reminiscent of Marxist reification: "Be that as it may, future ages will still be corpocratic ones. Corpocracy isn't just another political system that will come and go — corpocracy is the natural order, in harmony with human nature" (*CA* 234). While it is nothing new for a reigning system of control to declare itself as the perfect articulation of the natural order of things, bending circumstances to ideology to create a justification for continuing the status quo, Mitchell furthers this point by highlighting the predatory aspects of corpocracy. In this sense, corpocracy is indeed natural, does indeed express human nature, but not in the way the archivist thinks. Sonmi-451 herself witnesses

the underside of corpocracy — a neologism signifying corporate governance that takes on the extra meaning of a government of bodies — as her fellow fabricants, who have lived out their term of service and sent off to what they think is a retirement colony called Xultation, are taken instead to a slaughterhouse. There, they are killed with a bolt fired at close range into their heads. The corpses are then hoisted, moved, and processed:

> A slaughterhouse production line lay below us, manned by figures wielding scissors, sword saws, and various tools of cutting, stripping, and grinding. The workers were bloodsoaked, from head to toe. I should properly call those workers butchers: they snipped off collars, stripped clothes, shaved follicles, peeled skin, offcut hands and legs, sliced off meat, spooned organs … drains hoovered the blood… The noise, you can imagine, Archivist, was deafening. (*CA* 343)[18]

Whereas in the mythology that comprises Sonmi's education retired fabricants become "transformed into consumers with Soulrings" (*CA* 186), they instead constitute the base elements of the corpocracy that have been recycled as food. The society evoked in the Sonmi chapters of *Cloud Atlas* is not simply based on a cannibalistic relationship; it is auto-cannibalistic. The citizen/consumers of Nea So Copros literally consume the processed remains of the servant class that upholds the political and ideological system in which they are invested, and the servants who meet their deaths on this slaughterhouse floor have also internalized their fates. Although they are deceived as to what will actually happen, their abject gratitude as the death-helmet is placed on their heads (*CA* 342) is reminiscent of Winston Smith's declaration of love for Big Brother as the executioner's bullet enters his brain. Rattled by

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this Orwellian nightmare but ultimately unconvinced, the archivist interviewing Sonmi-451 refuses to believe her account — he assumes that what she sees is a tableau staged by those who would politically exploit her — but nonetheless gives what she sees a name: "industrialized evil" (*CA* 344).

The concept of industrialized evil, and the processes of recursion that raise the implied cannibalistic behavior of the past to the systemic cannibalism of the future, suggests that Nea So Copros descended directly from Buenas Yerbas, California, in the 1970s, where intrepid and determined tabloid reporter Luisa Rey foils Seaboard Power's conspiracy to cover up the dangers of its Hydra nuclear reactor. This section of *Cloud Atlas* has a high body count, most of which is created by the efforts of Bill Smoke, Seaboard's shadowy chief operative and executioner who kills for the sheer joy of it. As its plot — composed of a series of short, vignette-length chapters — rises in the first half of *Cloud Atlas* and falls in the second, Mitchell has so thoroughly inhabited the familiar corporate espionage genre that Luisa Rey's story does not work as a catalog of human cruelty on the same level as the other narratives. As the novel moves backwards in time from the tribal warfare of the "Sloosha's Crossin'" chapter and the corporatized cannibalism of the Sonmi-451 chapter, the implied cannibalism of corporate corruption spurs events that are depicted largely as parody. For example, after the serious setback of being forced off the road by Bill Smoke, running her car off a cliff, and plunging sixty to seventy feet into the ocean, Rey survives the crash, gropes for and finds the top-secret cover-up negating report under the front seat of her car while the murky waters close in and nearly drown her, and manages to escape. She responds to questioning about her miraculous escape ("So you crashed through a barrier, dropped into the sea, got out of a sinking car, and swam three hundred yards to shore, with no injuries worse than mild bruising" [*CA* 395]) with commendable bravado: "It hurts plenty when I think of my insurance claims" (*CA* 395).

Apart from its ironic value, the effect of Mitchell's entry into the genre of the narratively predictable potboiler is the sense that — after we as readers have already seen in the later chapters the lower points to which humankind can descend through unrestrained capitalism — it's all been done before. In *Cloud Atlas*, the story of Luisa Rey is history repeating itself as farce. What ultimately helps to break the spell of this most explicit of Mitchell's pastiches is the brief yet intense friendship Rey strikes up with Rufus Sixsmith and, through this, her loyalty to and sense of transgenerational, transcontinental connection with Robert Frobisher. Rey is most moved personally by her sense of an authentic link to the past that she receives from Frobisher's letters, as a kind of prolonged déjà vu: "It is not the unflattering light they shed on a pliable young Rufus Sixsmith that bothers Luisa but the dizzying vividness of the images of places and people that the letters have unlocked. Images so vivid she can only call them memories" (*CA* 120). Mitchell's use of the potboiler genre here drags pastiche away from Jameson's notion of "speech in a dead language" (17); instead, it is replaced by an attempt to commune with the dead. Or in the words of minor character Janice from Esphigmenou, Utah — "matriarch" at the Hotel Bon Voyage, where Sixsmith was killed — as she tries to comfort a sobbing Luisa Rey, "You see, honey? They pass over, but they ain't gone" (*CA* 115).[19] Luisa reimagines her connection to the past more intensely through her interactions with the physical letters: "She removes one of the yellowed envelopes, postmarked October 10, 1931, holds it against her nose, and inhales. Are molecules of Zedelghem Château, of Robert Frobisher's hand,

dormant in this paper for forty-four years, now swirling in my lungs, in my blood?" (*CA* 436). The experience of the past as an intensely felt bodily reality disrupts the Luisa Rey sections as merely a production of ironic distance, as blankly postmodern play.

Furthermore, Rey's bodily interaction with the past, of literally feeling like it is a part of her body, breaks down the Bakhtinian sense of "absolute distance" attaching to the epic:

> [T]he epic past is locked into itself and walled off from all subsequent times by an impenetrable boundary, isolated (and this is most important) from that eternal present of children and descendents in which the epic singer and his listeners are located, which figures in as an event in their lives and becomes the epic performance. On the other hand, tradition isolates the world of the epic from personal experience, from any new insights, from any personal initiative in understanding and interpreting, from new points of view and evaluations. The epic world is an utterly finished thing, not only as an authentic event in the distant past but also on its own terms and by its own standards; it is impossible to change, to re-think, to re-evaluate anything in it. It is completed, conclusive and immutable, as a fact, an idea and a value. This defines absolute epic distance. (17)

Rather than defining absolute epic distance, Mitchell defies it. The explicitly metatextual case of Luisa Rey indicates an emphasis on storytelling and the transmission of narrative as a human activity, a source of interaction and connection that is as real as human-to-human contact. Reflecting a direct literary appropriation — a reference to Thornton Wilder's *The Bridge of San Luis Rey* — Rey is a fictional character whose fictionality is

exaggerated by the author. With the revelation in the following section that she is the creation of a minor character, who has submitted his novel manuscript to Cavendish for publication, Mitchell creates a hermeneutic problem. If we read to respond to a novel's characters as we would respond to the actions and decisions of any other person, real or fictional, whose story we follow, then surely it disrupts that response if Luisa Rey, and by extension Robert Frobisher (whose letters she reads) and Adam Ewing (whose journal is read by Frobisher), are all fictional even within this fictional world. However, Rey's second-order fictionality is not a revelation to readers of Mitchell's other works: both she and Cavendish appear in his earlier novel *Ghostwritten*. (In her appearance in that novel, she claims, "The human world is made of stories, not people" [378].) More central to understanding *Cloud Atlas*, the revelation of Rey's hyperfictionality points out that every main character is known to subsequent generations through text; in other words, every character in this novel is encountered by other characters as a textual artifact. By calling attention to Luisa Rey not just as a textual trace for Cavendish to discover, but as a metatextual trace, Mitchell presents a fiction that is still in the process of its fictionalizing. Far from being "utterly finished," *Cloud Atlas* evokes a text that is continuously fashioned and refashioned, by its readers and even by its characters.

Intuitively, Mitchell's rejection of absolute epic distance makes sense. He is not trying to establish a sacrosanct past that prefigures a contemporary national collective. Instead, he is trying to establish a sense of the past and present that is recursive. We experience this most acutely in the second half of Frobisher's chapter. While the ethical climax of the novel, as I have argued previously, comes at the very end with the political rebirth of Adam Ewing and his decision to devote his life to the cause of abolitionism, the climax

of the novel-as-epic arises through Frobisher's attempts to remain alive through his music even after he has committed suicide. As the most accessible of the novel's narrators, whose sense of humor, endearing self-awareness (even when his behavior borders on the despicable), and second-person narration, Frobisher evokes a feeling of narrative intimacy that the other styles do not. He is also the only creative artist depicted in the six *Cloud Atlas* narratives and has experienced the geopolitics of the age as a very personal loss, as he recalls the death of his brother Adrian during World War I. A telling conversation with Morty Dhondt, a friend of Frobisher's composer patron, Ayrs, targets the institutions that promote predatory behavior — in this case, nation-states:

> Another war is always coming, Robert. They are never properly extinguished. What sparks wars? The will to power, the backbone of human nature. The threat of violence, the fear of violence, or actual violence is the instrument of this dreadful will [to power]. You can see the will to power in bedrooms, kitchens, factories, unions, and the borders of states. Listen to this and remember it. The nation-state is merely human nature inflated to monstrous proportions. QED, nations are entities whose laws are written by violence. Thus it ever was and ever shall be. (*CA* 444)

Frobisher counters: "The reduction ad absurdum of M.D.'s views, I argued, was that science devises ever bloodier means of war until humanity's powers of destruction overcome our powers of creation and our civilization drives itself to extinction. M.D. embraced my objection with mordant glee" (*CA* 444). From Dhondt's perspective, then, there is continuity in the will to power from private and domestic spaces to corporate and industrial spaces to national and international spaces. Frobisher, however, refuses to subscribe to Dhondt's sense of the inevitability of human destruction as humankind's linear progress through history, leaning instead on a redeeming notion of cyclical time:

> Strip back the beliefs pasted on by governesses, schools, and states, you find indelible truths at one's core. Rome'll decline and fall again. Cortés'll lay Tenochtitlán to waste again, and later, Ewing will sail again, Adrian'll be blown to pieces again, you and I'll sleep under Corsican stars again....
>
> Time cannot permeate this sabbatical. We do not stay dead long. Once my Luger lets me go, my birth, next time around, will be upon me in a heartbeat. Thirteen years from now we'll meet again at Gresham, ten years later I'll be back in this same room, holding this same gun, composing this same letter, my resolution as perfect as my many-headed sextet. Such elegant certainties comfort me at this quiet hour. (*CA* 471)

Here we see that Frobisher has been influenced by his former mentor, Vyvyan Ayrs, whose fondness for Nietzsche (*CA* 3, 63-64, 84) leads him to entitle his final symphony *Eternal Recurrence.* In his final words before killing himself, Frobisher articulates this Nietzschean doctrine. As Nietzsche writes in *The Gay Science*:

> "This life as you now live it and have lived it, you will have to live once more and innumerable times more; and there will be nothing new in it, but every pain and every joy and every thought and sigh and everything unutterably small or great in your life will have to return to you, all in the same succession and sequence — even this spider and this

moonlight between the trees, and even this moment and I myself. The eternal hourglass of existence is turned upside down again and again, and you with it, speck of dust!" (qtd in Kain 53)

Frobisher's personal and familial history intermingles with world history, and death as a sabbatical here is merely a break between one's old existence and the new existence in which one must do it all over again. Frobisher's sense of cyclical history, of repetitive events, reflects Nietzschean recurrence, but it stands as part of a larger pattern of recursion. It is not merely that, in Frobisher's dying vision, history repeats itself. If Frobisher's events start anew, then so too do all the dependent events in the novel, including the writing and discovery of Ewing's journal, the writing and discovery of the letters to Sixsmith by Luisa Rey, and so on. The cycle of Frobisher's life is embedded within the larger cycle of interdependent and linked narratives in *Cloud Atlas*, representing a nesting of cycles that spells out a dynamic of recursion. The cynical view of world history is matched by a warmer view of personal life — it is optimistic, but it seems to be based on the premise that if world tragedies recur, then so can quotidian happiness. Why this sort of recursion, which repeats both tragic and happy events, would be comforting to Frobisher may be indicated by the closing of his letter: "Sunt lacrimae rerum" (*CA* 471).

   The Latin phrase preceding Frobisher's signature on his final missive to Sixsmith is Mitchell's most direct nod to the classical epic. Early in Virgil's *Aeneid*, Aeneas awaits Dido, Queen of Carthage, when his attention is captured by depictions of the Trojan War carved upon the Temple of Juno. What follows is a well-known and heavily pondered line, described by Douglas J. Stewart as "probably the most famous line of the Aeneid

after the first, and surely one of the oddest" (116), and by James A.W. Heffernan as "stubbornly untranslatable" (qtd in Amir 232): "Sunt lacrimae rerum et mentem mortalia tangunt" (Stewart 116). The theme from the varied translations I have found remains consistent:

> Amir: There are tears for things, and what men suffer touches the human heart. (232)
> Fagles: Even here, merit will have its true reward...
> even here, the world is a world of tears
> and the burdens of mortality touch the heart. (63; I.557-59)
> Fitzgerald: Even so far away
> Great value has due honor; they weep here
> For how the world goes, and our life that passes
> Touches their hearts. (20; I.627-31).
> Stewart: *Even here fame (laudi) shows its rewards.* And the universe has sympathy for us, and deeds of the past do affect men's minds. (119)[19]

As Aeneas confronts what must be extremely traumatic images, depicting the near eradication of his people at the hands of the Greeks, he draws what can be read as a specious conclusion, namely that the history of the Trojans has impacted others in the world, and that to recognize the sorrow in the temple friezes is to recognize sorrow as a universal condition (cf. Stewart 117). While Stewart's translation views the political content of the scene as paramount — he classifies this moment as a crucial early instance of Aeneas realizing that he can turn a particular historical and diplomatic situation to his advantage (118) — my reading of this line as it applies to *Cloud Atlas* focuses on the fact that no matter how badly the relationship between Aeneas and Dido will end, no matter how strongly this meeting will prefigure the eventual doom of Carthage, Virgil presents us with a

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moment that operates both within and outside of history, a gesture Mitchell homes in on with Frobisher's farewell.

Aeneas must confront these temple carvings as a version of history that both contains him and excludes him. He is part of the action before the gates of Troy — he sees himself depicted — yet his existence is exilic, and his destiny is only to resume in earnest once he lays the foundation for what will become Rome. Aeneas is also a reader and an interlocutor. Though the temple carvings are in themselves described as "a mere image" (Fitzgerald 20), "an empty picture" (Dryden), or "empty, lifeless pictures" (Fagles 63), with them Aeneas is able to "feed his spirit"/"feast his eyes and mind" (Fagles 63; Fitzgerald 20). At this moment, Aeneas channels Virgil's retelling of Homer's epic for the *Aeneid*'s audience, while also interpreting them for his companion Achates. This act of reading is recursive; the narrative of Aeneas's Carthaginian present gives way to Aeneas's Trojan past, which then pops back to the present. We also have in effect a moment of textual transmission, in which receiving a story provides the grounds for the continuation of one's own. Both the revelation of this traumatic history, as well as what is revealed, may be shot through with tears, but the ability — hints both Mitchell and Virgil — to view oneself in this fashion offers a moment of freedom to make one's own destiny anew. As if in confirmation of this sentiment, Aeneas utters his famous line and then turns to his companion Achates, counseling him not to be afraid.

David Mitchell's *Cloud Atlas* is not, to use Masaki Mori's terminology, an epic of national grandeur (cf. note 16) — it does not enshrine the heroic story of a nation in the life of a fearless and crafty warrior. Instead, it is an epic of globalization, gesturing towards meanings to be derived from postnational frames of knowledge and experience. To quote one more definition of epic:

> What, then, distinguishes the epic? The epic is a narrative that focuses simultaneously on the lives of its characters and on a pivotal moment in the history of a community, whether that community be a nation or a people or the whole of humanity. That pivotal moment may be the founding of a civilization, the collapse of a civilization, or any other major event, such as an invasion or another sort of threat. The narrative deals with both the pivotal moment and with the individual characters as they live through that moment. (Steinberg 29)

Writing from well in the midst of that sum total of processes we generalize for better or for worse as globalization, Mitchell can hardly lay claim to the discovery of a pivotal moment. However, *Cloud Atlas* displays no interest in doing so. Mitchell has produced a work of epic scope to reflect upon "the whole of humanity," but with much less emphasis on the linear progress implicit in a history of pivotal moments and much more emphasis on the recursive processes of history, of power configurations replicating themselves in similar yet more advanced forms, of predatory dynamics that change not in their effects but in their scope and kind. By looking at the epic in terms sug-

gested by globalization, we can rethink the genre by reconsidering what conceptions of community are evoked by the epic now that some of its earlier frames of reference have been weakened: the listening community has become a collection of alienated individuals; the hero has become the nation, which has become the state; and the nation-state has been diminished by globalization's sub-national/transnational tug-of-war. Mitchell gives us a bleak sense of the sweep of global history, but the bleakness is repeatedly punctured by the desire to connect on individual and communal levels through the acts of imagination implicit in narrative creation and consumption.

Mitchell's epic thus refigures the potential of community and storytelling under globalization. As Mitchell seems to recognize, globalization –while certainly presenting new political and cultural frameworks for which we must account — is neither a paradigm shift nor the dawning of a new era. Instead, it is a multi-state, multi-generational process, as Immanuel Wallerstein states:

> We do indeed stand at a moment of transformation. But this is not that of an already established, newly globalized world with clear rules. Rather we are located in [an] age of transition, transition not merely of a few backward countries who need to catch up with the spirit of globalization, but a transition in which the entire capitalist world system will be transformed into something else. The future, far from being inevitable and one to which there is no alternative, is being determined in this transition that has an

extremely uncertain outcome.
The processes that are usually meant when we speak of globalization are not in fact new at all. They have existed for some 500 years. (250)

Wallerstein's vision of the processes of globalization, consisting of multiple short cycles recursively operating within longer cycles (250), works in harmony with Mitchell's vision in *Cloud Atlas*. As a type of literature that invokes a massive scope of events and must by necessity dramatize interconnectivity on a larger scale, the epic throws some of the central processes of globalization into bold relief. Ultimately, when we listen to an epic, we are undergoing an act of sharing and complicity, so it is incumbent upon us to ask what story we as a community of readers and citizens (however defined) are ratifying. The continued primacy of the west and of capitalism? The opportunities for accelerating and more complex moments of cultural exchange? The expansion of a predatory world-system? A greater arena for conceiving of ethical action? Mitchell's achievement in *Cloud Atlas* ultimately comes down to these questions, and its demand for an active reading that encourages us to scrutinize the ongoing efforts by which we attempt to make sense of literature, ethics, and the globe.

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NOTES

[1] My interest in *Cloud Atlas* began when, through a series of fortunate coincidences, I was able to attend the Man Booker Prize ceremony in 2004. In the midst of the buzz following Hollinghurst's victory for *The Line of Beauty*, I marched over to Mitchell's table and informed him that I thought he should have won; I also vowed to teach *Cloud Atlas* as soon as I could. (Note: I did end up teaching *Cloud Atlas* in Fall 2005, adding all of thirteen readers to Mitchell's total.) I am extremely grateful to Alvaro Ribeiro, S.J. of Georgetown University, who, during his term at St. Joseph's University as Donald I. MacLean, S.J. Chair, arranged for me to attend the 2004 ceremony. Thanks also go to my co-panelists at our 2008 MLA Convention Mitchell panel — Jennifer Cary, Ryan Trimm, and John David; the students in my Fall 2005 Anglophone Epic course; as well as my colleague and fellow Mitchell fan Dr. Jo Alyson Parker and, as always, Deirdre McMahon for her kind, wise, and very patient assistance in developing and revising this essay.

[2] All references to *Cloud Atlas* will be cited parenthetically as *CA*.

[3] In 2007, Mitchell was ranked sixteenth in *Time*'s list of "100 men and women whose power, talent, or moral example is transforming the world," Artists and Entertainers category, just behind pop musician John Mayer and just ahead of model Kate Moss. See "The Time 100: The People Who Shape Our World," May 2007.

[4] *The Daily Telegraph*'s review of *Cloud Atlas* concludes: "In short, *Cloud Atlas* spends half its time wanting to be The Simpsons and the other half the Bible. Even for David Mitchell, that's a difficult balancing act to pull off" (Tait, para 8). In the New York Times Book Review, Tom Bissell writes, "Taken as a whole, 'Cloud Atlas' seeks to give the novel a steely new rigging of the possible. It is an impressive achievement. Unfortunately, impressive is usually all that it is" (7). Sarah Lyall sums up this strain of criticism rather succinctly: "If there is a caveat in some reviews, it is the suggestion that 'Cloud Atlas' is merely first-rate literary ventriloquism. Has Mr. Mitchell perhaps hidden too convincingly behind his bravura pyrotechnics, they ask, so that it is impossible to tell which voice is really his?" (Lyall B9). Mitchell's reply to this charge is worth seeing: "'If you're writing narratives set in very different times and places, surely you need the voice which best fits the world that you're creating,' he said. 'I suppose my response to the critics would be that, given my subject matter, wouldn't it be rather odd if it was the same voice?'" (Lyall B9).

[5] Nietzsche's concept of "eternal recurrence" is relevant to our understanding of the life and death of Robert Frobisher, as I will discuss near the conclusion of this essay.

[6] The temporal setting of this chapter is one of the more difficult to locate. Conventional filmmakers were called "ancients" (*CA* 234), and Sonmi-451 refers to the film's main character as "scripted over a century ago" (*CA* 236). England itself has been "long-deadlanded," so the timing may extend much later into the millennium than 2100 C.E.

[7] For a list of sentences displaying different types of recursion, see Christiansen and MacDonald 158-61, including "The chef who the waiter who the busboy offended appreciated admired the musicians" (160).

[8] Jeremy Kilpatrick cites a number of alternate definitions of recursion as follows: "One can think of recursion as a method of defining a function 'by specifying each of its values in terms of previously defined values, and possibly using other already defined functions' (Cutland, 1980, p. 32). Or one can think somewhat more generally of a recursive function or procedure as one that calls itself (Cooper and Clancy, 1982, p. 236)" (3).

[9] Vico's notion of the *ricorso*, described by Lynn Wells as the process by which "the society would save itself by repeating more primitive time-forms in their most valuable aspects" (674), provides a model of history that uses a sense of temporality comparable to Mitchell's. A process that suggests both forward movement as well as cyclical repetition, the Vichian *ricorso* is suited to the primitivism Mitchell evokes on the Chatham Islands in Adam Ewing's chapters, through its development of opportunism, alienation, and capitalism run amok through the following chapters, all the way to the return to the primitive in the pivotal Zachry chapter. While the term, as Max Harold Frisch points out in his introduction to *The New Science of Giambattista Vico*, can refer to the "retraversing of the same stages in the same order" (xlii), it also includes an additional connotation: "A *ricorso* does not, like the recurrence of a cosmic cycle, merely repeat the *corso*. It is a historical, not a purely natural, process, and it has the legal sense of a retrial or appeal. Since the historical *corso* has not received justice, it must, as it were, appeal to a higher court for a rehearing of the case" (xliii). If one views the *Cloud Atlas* narratives as a series of successive attempts on the part of its characters to strive towards some sort of ethical action, the correspondence to Vico becomes much more evocative.

[10] While Dimock's claim is about the gradual accretion of spatial and temporal awareness to be found in the epic, Mitchell dramatizes such accretion in one fell swoop, but in doing so offers a suggestion of how one might begin to represent "the cumulative life of humankind" in a modern context. A useful caveat to acknowledge here is that Dimock's emphasis is on a "deep time" approach to literature as a whole, one that accounts for thousands of years of transhistorical and transcontinental literary flow. Mitchell is obviously taking shortcuts, but I would argue that the effect is the same: a sense of the epic based on representing a totality that is signified through linguistic and temporal variation.

[11] Ultimately, I find Dimock's sense of epic recursion more applicable to *Cloud Atlas* than Jeremy M. Downes's in *Recursive Desire*. Downes links the epic to recursion in such a way that initially connotes repetition by using the term interchangeably with recurrence (13). His argument about recursion comes into sharper focus when he discusses the relationship of the authors of epics to prior epics in terms of a tradition they simultaneously celebrate and reject (17-18). According to Downes, the epic's attempt to engage with its predecessors' "quite deliberate (as well as inevitable) assumptions of the forms of epic power, voice, and story" (23) carries psychoanalytic weight. While I do not wish to dismiss Downes's sense of narrative desire from his perspective as influenced by Peter Brooks's Freudian analysis of narrative in *Reading for the Plot*, I would suggest that a more productive approach to Mitchell's work involves his shared focus with Dimock not on the epic tradition, but rather on the historical field in which the epic operates.

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12 There are many other conceptions of time and historicity that are comparable to Dimock's sense of the supranational, including Braudel's notion of the *longue durée* (*On History* 27) and Jared Diamond's time scale laid out in *Guns, Germs, and Steel*, which Mitchell read before writing *Cloud Atlas*, and which takes the year 11,000 B.C.[E.] as a starting point for "a whirlwind tour of human history on all the continents, for millions of years, from our origins as a species until 13,000 years ago" (36). For another concept of supranational time, as applied particularly to Mitchell, see Jo Alyson Parker's essay on *Cloud Atlas* and the "long now," "David Mitchell's *Cloud Atlas* of Narrative Constraints and Environmental Limits."

13 By way of a brief sampling of this six-storied novel, Rufus Sixsmith turns sixty-six years old shortly before he meets Luisa Rey (*CA* 89); Sonmi-451 and her fellow fabricants recite Six Catechisms as part of their daily morning ritual; the University where Sonmi-451 is assigned a drunk and dissolute graduate student observes Sextet Recess shortly before the New Year (*CA* 212 — perhaps named so because of the six days between Christmas and New Year's Day). This connection between *Cloud Atlas* and classical epic was suggested by an attendee of our 2008 MLA panel on Mitchell, whose name I sadly did not catch before realizing the astuteness of the observation.

14 Hence, according to Matthew Clark, the often-noted repetition in Homeric verse: "At the centre of Parry's theory is his conception of the formula. Before Parry, the term had been used in a rather vague way, but he offered a clear definition: 'the formula can be defined as an expression regularly used, under the same metrical conditions, to express an essential idea'" (119).

15 If each time frame in *Cloud Atlas* represents a tercet, then we can see its central character encountering the story of the previous time frame's central character as comparable to an ABA BCB rhyme scheme. For example, Ewing's journal in Chapter One finds its "rhyme" in Chapter Two, when it is found and read by Frobisher.

16 Masaki Mori theorizes an "epic of peace" as a more ethical evolution of the more warlike epic of national grandeur, "an epic that encourages people to think in non-confrontational terms, making peace and harmony its utmost priority and concern" (94). I would group *Cloud Atlas* with the dovish former category Mori establishes rather than its bellicose counterpart, and while Mitchell's novel is certainly not without its political content, its sense of ethics tend more towards the relational rather than the historic promotion of peace.

17 The provenance of this passage becomes clear when one considers Lyall's point that Mitchell had been influenced by Eric Schlosser's *Fast Food Nation* (B9), for its descriptions of work in slaughter-houses and, it seems, Schlosser's overall message about America's culture of consumption: "Unlike other commodities … fast food isn't viewed, read, played, or worn. It enters the body and becomes part of the consumer. No other industry offers, both literally and figuratively, so much insight into the nature of mass consumption" (10).

18 I have as yet been unable to find a reference to an Esphigmenou in Utah. Esphigmenou is, however, the name of a monastery in Greece, the subject of a siege and mass eviction of its monks in 2003 (the year before the publication of *Cloud Atlas*). According to Helena Smith, "[t]he monastery's 117 inhabitants are fiercely opposed to efforts to improve relations between the Orthodox Church

and the Vatican" (para. 4). I can only guess what inspired Mitchell about the monastery itself or the controversy in which it became embroiled: it is possible that he linked Esphigmenou and Utah to signify a sense of particularly quixotic religiosity.

[19] My thanks to Melanie Subacus — key participant in my Anglophone Epic course and current Ph.D. candidate in classics at NYU — for getting me started with her own translation of Frobisher's quotation from Virgil: "These are the tears of things [human affairs] and mortal sorrows touch the heart" (e-mail to the author, 5 August 2008).

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