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Abstract

The tradition of global disasters in literature is long-standing and David Mitchell contributes to that discussion. For him, the possibility of political, social, and environmental collapse is imminent based on patterns he traced throughout human history. One common thread Mitchell weaves throughout his works is the presence and the relevance of the apocalyptic. In his best known work, *Cloud Atlas*, Mitchell explores the cyclical trends of humanity across time and space, including the recurrence of predacity, cruelty, and systematic oppression. Rather than being overwhelmed by a nihilistic reality, Mitchell centers *Cloud Atlas* around recurring figures of revolution, resisting and fighting against those tendencies. Throughout the connected world of Mitchell’s novels, he explores the problem of truth and the soul and how they are inextricably tied with the reality of the apocalypse. The apocalypse in *Cloud Atlas* and *The Bone Clocks* becomes representative of the culmination of revelations and revolutions, and in that sense, it becomes a reminder of past truths and a warning about the future. Despite the harrowing path of humanity Mitchell depicts in his novels, he maintains optimism as he pushes back against postmodern conceptions of truth and the soul. The prominence of cycles within the narratives not only point to the eternity of evil and predatory forces but also suggest the recurrence of forces of resistance and a deep hope in the possibilities of the future.

Keywords

post-apocalyptic fiction, clifi, postmodernism, David Mitchell

Disciplines

Fiction | Literature in English, British Isles | Modern Literature

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“Around we go”: The Apocalypse as Revolution and Revelation in
David Mitchell’s *Cloud Atlas*

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Gettysburg College English Honors Thesis
April 2021

ABSTRACT:

The tradition of global disasters in literature is long-standing and David Mitchell contributes to that discussion. For him, the possibility of political, social, and environmental collapse is imminent based on patterns he traced throughout human history. One common thread Mitchell weaves throughout his works is the presence and the relevance of the apocalyptic. In his best known work, *Cloud Atlas*, Mitchell explores the cyclical trends of humanity across time and space, including the recurrence of predacity, cruelty, and systematic oppression. Rather than being overwhelmed by a nihilistic reality, Mitchell centers *Cloud Atlas* around recurring figures of revolution, resisting and fighting against those tendencies. Throughout the connected world of Mitchell's novels, he explores the problem of truth and the soul and how they are inextricably tied with the reality of the apocalypse. The apocalypse in *Cloud Atlas* and *The Bone Clocks* becomes representative of the culmination of revelations and revolutions, and in that sense, it becomes a reminder of past truths and a warning about the future. Despite the harrowing path of humanity Mitchell depicts in his novels, he maintains optimism as he pushes back against postmodern conceptions of truth and the soul. The prominence of cycles within the narratives not only point to the eternity of evil and predatory forces but also suggest the recurrence of forces of resistance and a deep hope in the possibilities of the future.

I. INTRODUCTION

David Mitchell has built a career on the apocalyptic in the mundane, from his earliest works that touch on the tragedy of the everyday to his best-known work, *Cloud Atlas*, and his later fantasy epic, *The Bone Clocks*, which take the familiar reality of Mitchell's earlier works and injects into them a sobering look at humanity on the scale of generations, spanning time and space. Mitchell's works are all interconnected by recurring characters and events—like the near-future apocalypse—which form what he calls his “über-book.” When asked about the interconnected aspects of his books, Mitchell said, “I’m beginning to see an über-book that overlays everything I write. Everything I write is an individual chapter” (*Goodreads*). With those individual chapters, Mitchell sees himself creating a tapestry of different perspectives that point towards recurring themes and motifs and combine to form the core of his novels. Mitchell explains in an interview with *Independent*:

I write novellas and I combine them. But they're my optimum size. I like the length of the arc, the length of the journey. It has that Goldilocks rightness about it for me... [B]y writing about conflict and war and mortality from different view points, from different genres, in a kind of complex overlapping Venn diagram-type way, thoughts and ideas about these themes can be generated – semi-randomly! But just because an idea is a semi-random one doesn't mean it's without value.

Mitchell's über-book is filled with vignettes of different lives from different ages but rather than keeping them totally separate from each other, he weaves familiar characters and themes into a complex fabric in order to tackle impossibly large questions about revolution, mortality, truth, and the soul, while keeping his narratives grounded in the characters. Ultimately, almost all of Mitchell's novels hang in the shadow of some apocalyptic event, varying in scale from the global to the personal. If Mitchell's earliest works, *Ghostwritten* and *Number9dream*, have endings burdened by the bleak realities and reminders of the cruelty of humanity, *Cloud Atlas* and *The Bone Clocks* still have the apocalypse at the heart of their narratives but choose to focus on the

possibilities of the future and present rather than the defeats of the past and the nihilism of a doomed fate.

Cloud Atlas marks a turning point in Mitchell's career and is also the work with the greatest scope, both narratively and thematically. In it, Mitchell traces humanity from the 1800s to the distant, post-apocalyptic future and around the globe. The novel takes themes of the apocalyptic, mortality, and the destructiveness of human nature and Mitchell's questions about the nature of truth and the soul and weaves them into six interrelated narratives. The protagonists are not weighed down by their realities of being caught up in endless cycles of predacity but rather are driven into their revolutionary roles by the possibility of humanity renewing and bettering itself for the sake of future generations. *The Bone Clocks* fills in some of the narrative holes of the same future apocalypse and condenses many of the themes of *Cloud Atlas* into the span of just one lifetime. Mitchell's ecocritical perspective also becomes more developed and prominent in this later work, which furthers the intensity and the relevance of an apocalypse that looms over humanity's near future.

Mitchell uses the apocalypse, and the speculative writing of the future destiny of the world, in order to think through the cyclical nature of humanity. In order to write about that future, Mitchell starts in the past. The problem of cyclicity is deeply tied to his considerations of revolution and apocalypse as culminations of patterns of corruption and predacity. With the revelation of the apocalypse, humanity reveals something about itself and through the lens of the apocalypse, Mitchell explores humanity as having souls, seeing truth through illusions, and galvanizing revolution.

The world of David Mitchell is powerlessly caught up in cycles that end in horrifying realities of violence and yet, throughout each cycle, and each generation, Mitchell places the

focus on those who manage to not only maintain and defend their own humanity but those who are called, often reluctantly, to find heroism in themselves and maintain virtues for their own sake. In a world trapped by the recurrence of predatory forces, Mitchell emphasizes the role of the heroic figure who resists that trend. However, heroism lies not in being more than human, but in being fully human, and embracing the morality of a universal truth and the existence of the soul. In Mitchell's works, the world is not doomed to fall, but rather it is a world of inescapable processes, and therefore always carries with it the potential for redemption, even after the apocalypse.

II. STRUCTURAL AND NARRATIVE CYCLES IN *CLOUD ATLAS*

Mitchell builds the foundation for the themes of *Cloud Atlas* from the structure of the novel itself, and specifically in the ordering of the stories within it. The novel is arranged as a series of six interconnected novellas that take place throughout time and space. In "The Pacific Journal of Adam Ewing," lawyer Adam Ewing sails from California to New Zealand in the mid-1800s and decides to join the Abolitionist movement after a self-freed slave saves him from being poisoned and killed by a greedy friend of Ewing's, Dr. Henry Goose. In "Letters from Zedelghem," young composer Robert Frobisher flees to Belgium in the 1930s to become the amanuensis for aging composer Vyvyan Ayrs. In the 1970s, Luisa Rey is a rookie journalist investigating corruption at an energy company in "Half-Lives: The First Luisa Rey Mystery." In the present day, Timothy Cavendish, a publisher in deep financial debt and hiding from gangsters, narrates his daring escape from a retirement home in "The Ghastly Ordeal of Timothy Cavendish." Moving into the future, "The Orison of Sonmi-451" replays the final interview of

clone-turned-revolutionary Sonmi-451 in Eastern Asia. In the sixth and final narrative, “Sloosha’s Crossin’ an’ Ev’rythin’ After,” Valleysman Zachry orates his life story on Hawaii in the distant post-apocalyptic future. The first half of each story is told in chronological order until Zachry’s, which is told without interruption. The novel then works backwards through the second half of each story until it reaches the chronological beginning again with the conclusion of Ewing’s journey. The structure of the novel creates a puzzle that can be interpreted and pieced together in different ways that are all compatible but lead us in various directions.

Alone, each narrative features the complete arc of a character with conflict and resolution. Together, the stories form a tapestry of cycles and revolutions throughout history. The significance of each story is intensified from the stories that precede and succeed it. By placing them not only beside each other but also inside of each other, like a nesting doll structure, Mitchell creates an interdependency between each section of the novel. Mitchell refers to the motif of the nesting dolls three times in the novel. In “Letters from Zedelghem,” Vyvyan Ayrs’ has written a piece called *Matryoshka Doll Variations* and in “The Orison of Sonmi-451,” “Madame Matryoshka and her Pregnant Embryo” is a circus act (337). In “Half-Lives,” scientist Isaac Sachs contemplates one way to consider time:

One model of time: an infinite matryoshka doll of painted moments, each ‘shell’ (the present) encased inside a nest of ‘shells’ (previous presents) I call the actual past but which we *perceive* as the virtual past. The doll of ‘now’ likewise encases a nest of presents yet to be, which I call the actual future but which we *perceive* as the virtual future. (393)

Mitchell mirrors the structure of the novel with the imagery of a nesting doll. Taking it a step beyond Sachs’ musings, the nesting doll of *Cloud Atlas* doesn’t end at the present or the previous presents but rather the future presents, which we only *perceive* as virtual pasts and virtual futures but are instead actual. Labelling the novel as a nesting doll structure is apt because, much like a nesting doll, the direction is always moving inward, and with each layer, something new is

unveiled until it culminates in the final doll at the center. As each story pushes further inward, there is a sense of perpetual darkening and a growing unease and uncertainty at what lies at the center of the puzzle. The first half of each story propels the unveiling of the next until the center when the apocalyptic is fully revealed at the novel's epicenter and its actual future.

The novel doesn't end at the center of the nesting doll, however, and instead recedes back to the beginning, creating a sense of symmetry. The symmetrical structure works in tandem with the nesting doll structure and both feed into the interconnectedness of the individual stories, both in terms of their plots and their themes. The symmetry comes from the V-shaped format of the six stories that all adhere to the same basic template in terms of how each is interrupted half-way through. At the end of the first half of Luisa Rey's narrative, Mitchell cuts the narrative at a cliffhanger, when Luisa, driving away from Swanekke with the Sixsmith report about the design flaws of the HYDRA-Zero reactor, is forced off of the bridge by hitman Bill Smoke. She survives, but the reader has to wait until every future story has been told before the novel returns to the past. Similarly, Cavendish's narrative ends with him suffering from an unexpected stroke, but it isn't revealed to be a stroke—induced by the nurses at the retirement home to which he has been lured—until Mitchell returns to his story in the second half of the novel.

With the return to the second half of each story comes a moment of dramatic return as we move backwards through time and restart the cycle. In Frobisher's final letter, he tells Sixsmith that he can see the steps of the windmill on which he slept on his first morning in Bruges from his hotel window. As Frobisher finds himself ending his journey—and life—in sight of the beginning, he remarks, "Fancy that. Around we go" (469). Mitchell returns to the beginning of the chronology with Ewing's journal at the end of the novel. Ewing's final decision to join the abolitionist movement is informed by his actions in that section but is made even more

significant for the reader because of the knowledge of what happens in the future of the novel's chronology. Mitchell has already engulfed the reader in centuries of oppression and revolution that culminate in Zachry's post-apocalyptic reality. Ewing's joining of the abolitionist movement is the beginning point of the revolutions in each of the following stories, but it is the final moment in the novel. In addition to returning to the beginning chronologically, the novel concludes its circumnavigation of the world as both Ewing's and Zachry's narratives take place on the Pacific Islands. By ending at the beginning, both spatially, temporally, and thematically, Mitchell "indicates that the behavior of mankind does not change across time" (Ng 116).

Recurrence is structurally important in the novel, and it is introduced first in the novel's title *Cloud Atlas*, which is implicated in both the recurrent structures and in the way the novel conceptualizes identity. The title comes up three times in the novel. The first is as the *Cloud Atlas Sextet*, the piece that Frobisher composes before his death. He describes to his lover Rufus Sixsmith how it came out of fragments of ideas for other pieces and has come together as a "sextet for overlapping soloists': piano, clarinet, 'cello, flute, oboe, and violin, each in its own language of key, scale, and color" (445). The sextet serves as a symbol for Frobisher and a metafictional symbol for the novel itself. As a representation of the six protagonists, the structure of the piece also mirrors the novel's: "In the first set, each solo is interrupted by its successor: in the second, each interruption is recontinued by order. Revolutionary or gimmicky? Shan't know until it's finished"(445). Frobisher's description of the piece comes at the end of the novel, long after Rey first learns about it from Sixsmith's letters in the first half. We learn during her section that only a handful of copies had been made and that Frobisher died young, setting up a mystery of Frobisher's impending death and the origin of the sextet. In other words, we already know the piece and its future before it has even been written in the novel. As he's working on it, Frobisher

admits that it is a “[l]ifetime’s music, arriving all at once” and as he writes while composing it, “When it’s finished, there’ll be nothing left in me” (460, 461). What Frobisher doesn’t know, and what he couldn’t possibly know, is that the sextet is not just his life, but the lives of the revolutionaries that precede and succeed him. What he does realize while composing the score that will define the entire novel is that boundaries, like the boundaries of time and space or between life and death are not immovable: “Boundaries between noise and sound are conventions, I see now. All boundaries are conventions, national ones too. One may transcend any convention, if only one can first conceive of doing so” (460). With Frobisher’s sextet, Mitchell composes the soundtrack to the revolution and to the cycle of humanity that transcends time and space in the world of the novel.

As Frobisher’s sextet introduces one interpretation of the title, Zachry presents another.

At the end of his tale, Zachry says:

Souls cross ages like clouds cross skies, an’ tho’ a cloud’s shape nor hue nor size don’t stay the same, it’s still a cloud an’ so is a soul. Who can say where the cloud’s blown from or who the soul’ll be ‘morrow? Only Sonmi the east an’ the west an’ the compass an’ the atlas, yay, only the atlas o’ clouds. (308)

Tying into the theme of reincarnation and the significance of souls, Zachry presents souls as an entity that transcends time and corporeality, much like the boundaries Frobisher ‘transcends’ with his sextet. The final mention of the title comes from Cavendish musing about his youth and his naivety about growing up. He says, “What wouldn’t I give now for a never-changing map of the ever-constant ineffable? To possess, as it were, an atlas of clouds” (373). While Zachry’s reference to an atlas of clouds refers to the infinite journey of souls across time and space, Cavendish’s is more about a desire to know the future and to be able to use that to his advantage. The varying meanings of the title within the novel serve to represent how ideas and perspectives transform over time in order to fit their time; however, they still carry with them the weight of

everything that came before. The title serves to establish and introduce the themes of the soul, interconnectedness, and cycles that the rest of the novel builds upon.

The structure of the novel also sets up a cyclical pattern in which the themes, symbols, and plot points of each story echo endlessly throughout. One character in each story, usually the protagonist—with the exception of Meronym in “Sloosha’s Crossin’”—has a comet shaped birthmark that is meant to not only connect the characters visually but to suggest a theme of reincarnation. The reincarnation of the protagonists becomes most obviously implied first in “Half-Lives” when Rey reads Frobisher’s letters to Sixsmith and is startled by the “dizzying vividness of the images and places and people” that were so lucid she could “only call them memories” (120). Later in the section, Rey passes the ship Ewing sailed in—*The Prophetess*—preserved at a boathouse, is startled by a pain coming from her birthmark, and is distracted by the ship for a moment: “She grasps for the ends of this elastic moment, but they disappear into the past and the future” (430). The implication of Luisa feeling connected, even if briefly, to the past *and* the future suggests somewhat paradoxically that the six protagonists are all subconsciously aware of their past and future lives.

The implication of reincarnation continues in the narratives following Rey’s. After reading the manuscript of *Half-Lives*, Cavendish remarks that “the insinuation that Rey is this Frobisher chap reincarnated” has to be taken out for being “[f]ar too hippie-druggy-new-age” though he admits that he has a similar birthmark (357). In the final narrative, Zachry believes that Meronym is the reincarnation of Sonmi because of her comet-shaped birthmark. This stems from the Valleysmen’s belief in reincarnation. They believe that when they die, their goddess Sonmi will take their soul and lead it into a new body for a new life in the Valleys. As one of the Abbess’ prayers goes, “Dear Sonmi, Who art amongst us, return this beloved soul to a valley

womb, we beseech thee” (241). Fitting with only some of the protagonists remembering parts of their past lives, Zachry says about reincarnation in the Valley:

Time was we mem’ried our gone lifes, times was we cudn’t, times was Sonmi telled Abbess who was who in a dreamin’, times was she din’t ... but we knew we’d always be reborned as Valleysmen, an’ so death weren’t so scarysome for us, nay. (244)

Reincarnation’s role in the religion Sonmi inspires comes from her own introduction to Buddhism and Siddhartha, when she tells an Abbess that she “hoped that Siddhartha would reincarnate me in her colony” (332). The implied reincarnation of the characters feeds into the prominence of cycles within the stories and death becomes just another boundary that the characters transcend.

The characters are not only connected by their birthmarks and their implied shared souls, but also by the way that they pass their stories to one another, sometimes by accident. Frobisher stumbles on Ewing’s journal on Ayr’s bookshelf; Luisa is given Frobisher’s letters by Sixsmith; *Half-Lives: The First Luisa Rey Mystery* is submitted to Cavendish’s publishing company; Sonmi watches the film adaptation of Cavendish’s memoir; and the recording, or “orison,” of Sonmi’s final interview and her *Declarations* are passed down for generations until they become practiced creeds and religious artifacts worshipped by Zachry’s tribe. In order to study the Valleysmen, Meronym keeps the final interview of Sonmi on her orison, thus completing the trail of transmission. Each of these transmissions of stories passed from one person to the next propels the actions of the people who encounter them. At the same time, the passing of something physical from one generation to the next represents the tangibility of the past in the present and future moments. In this way, the narrative function of transmission mirrors how the novel merges time periods separated by centuries.

Some of the defining features of each story include its unique mode and style. Each character relates their story in first-person—with the exception of Luisa Rey—but in a different

narrative mode. Ewing records the events of his voyage in a journal, Frobisher writes letters to Sixsmith, a novelist writes Luisa Rey's first detective story, Cavendish pens his own autobiography and the future film adaptation of it, Sonmi's final interview is recorded by an Archivist with a yet un-invented technology, and Zachry orates stories from his youth to his grandchildren. The mediums of their stories reflect the nature of the characters' reality at a certain point in time. The narrative mode of each also varies, from historical fiction to epistolary, mystery novel, memoir, interview, and an oral tale. The characters' voices are immediately established and distinguished by the unique style through which their stories are framed. Even as the characters share a single soul, they are all presented as individuals and differentiated from each other, emphasizing individuality in the midst of a novel with a grand multi-generational scope.

When talking about her fascination with the film *The Ghastly Ordeal of Timothy Cavendish*, Sonmi tells the Archivist recording her testimony that film, called *disneys* in the future, serves as a sort of time capsule for a long-gone past. She says, "Time is the speed at which the past decays, but *disneys* enable a brief resurrection" (235). While the text of the novel suggests physical rebirth as one form of reincarnation, the subtext of this conversation between Sonmi and the Archivist suggests another: the transmission of narratives across time. In that sense, Cavendish and the story of his escape are not only retold but relived by Sonmi's engagement with the film, as are Rey and her investigation, Frobisher and his composition, and Ewing and his voyage. Through the reading, retelling, and reliving of each of the narratives, the characters have a metaphorical resurrection that not only serves to propel the novel seamlessly from one perspective to the next but also transfer the thematic weight of one narrative and one life to the next. As the stories are transmitted and retold, so are the conflicts. Themes of

predacity, oppression and resistance fill the novel as each generation fosters a form of revolution in response to the unjust society it inhabits. Each section sets up and leads into the plots and themes of the next, creating a spiraling motion. At the center of it, is the inevitable reality of the apocalypse, and the world afterwards, that holds the entire novel together.

Through this inevitability, as in *Cloud Atlas*'s structure, time undergoes various upheavals until it eventually collapses. By rejecting a temporally linear story in favor of thematic momentum, Mitchell reframes the cause and effect constraints of a narrative. Ayrs dictates music to Frobisher that he heard in a prophetic dream: "I dreamt of a ...nightmarish café, brilliantly lit, but underground, with no way out. I'd been dead a long, long time. The waitresses all had the same face. The food was soap, the only drink was cups of lather" (79). His dream is not just an uncanny coincidence or some prophetic dream but rather Cavendish hears the music playing from the underground café Sonmi works with other fabricants—clones—who share her face and where the food for fabricants is called soap. Ayrs builds his symphony *Eternal Recurrence* around his "dream music" that came from the future (84). As much as the past impacts the present and the future, so do the future and the present exert influence over the past. Ewing's final journal entries cannot be read or understood without the knowledge of his future lives and the generations of suppression and revolution that succeed him. As *Cloud Atlas* expands "the parameters of novelistic narrative time by stringing together stories from centuries in the past to centuries in the future," it "change[s] the fundamental grounding and scale of novelistic narrative time" (Harris 149). With that, *Cloud Atlas* posits that because "our lives are unfolding and embedded in several temporal scales nested in one another, we act in a 'present' that can be situated within the scope of individual lives, cultural and political histories, and ecological planetary history alike" (Harris 149). Since ecological history is also ecological fate, the novel

constantly looks forward and backwards. Time itself becomes a nesting doll in which Mitchell situates the narratives. In *Cloud Atlas*, we are our past, present, and future simultaneously.

Beyond the cycles present in the formal structure of the novel, the characters and conflicts in the novel reinforce the idea of endless cycles. With this, *Cloud Atlas* becomes a sort of novelization of Nietzschean principles. Some of the characters find themselves obsessed with the idea of inevitable recurrence, most notably with Frobisher and Ayr in 1930s Belgium. At the chateau, Frobisher finds a copy of Nietzsche's *Also sprach Zarathustra*, which he refers to as "Ayr's bible" (63). Nietzsche's theory of eternal recurrence becomes the backdrop for the "Letters from Zedelghem" section, and eventually bleeds into the rest of the novel. The main implication of his eternal recurrence is that alongside an acceptance of the endless repetition of history comes an understanding of the futility of breaking that cycle. His philosophy permeates the pages not only in reference—Ayr plans to name his final *symphonic* major work *Eternal Recurrence* "in honor of his beloved Nietzsche"—but also in Frobisher's existential musings in his final letter (84). In *Also sprach Zarathustra*, Nietzsche writes:

Everything goes, everything returns; eternally rolls the wheel of existence. Everything dies, everything blossoms forth again; eternally runs on the year of existence. Everything breaks, everything is integrated anew; eternally builds itself the same house of existence. All things separate, all things again greet one another; eternally true to itself remains the ring of existence. Every moment begins existence, around every "Here" rolls the ball "There." The middle is everywhere. Crooked is the path of eternity. (Nietzsche 171)

In *Cloud Atlas*, Nietzsche's concept of the cyclicity of eternity is fully embraced and reimagined, especially in how Mitchell thins the line between beginnings and ends until it disappears entirely into an endless spiral and twists the stability of time, making each narrative in each time the "middle." Frobisher echoes Nietzsche's certainty about cycles in his final letter when he muses about "Nietzsche's gramophone record" that is played again and again until eternity (471).

Before his death he writes to Sixsmith:

Certainties. 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, you and I'll sleep under Corsican stars again. I'll come to Bruges again, fall in and out of love with Eva again, you'll read this letter again, the sun'll grow cold again. (471)

Although this moment conveys a sense of liberation for Frobisher, in that he is comforted by these “elegant certainties” in the moments before his death, the extremity of suicide and Frobisher's youth “invite a reading of Nietzsche's much debated notion of cycles as a destructive alternative to history's ‘unspeakable forms’” (Hicks 9). With the ultimate tragedy of Frobisher's narrative, Mitchell seems to suggest the destructiveness of blindly embracing Nietzsche's philosophy because it shifts the importance of a life to the next life and beyond rather than the present. Mitchell's nuanced deconstruction of Nietzsche's philosophy suggests that even in a novel framed around the concept of reincarnation and the endless cycles of humanity, Mitchell pushes back against the insignificance of one lifetime.

The nihilism in the novel is present, but it is not absolute. Alongside the cycles of violence and tragedy comes a rippling effect of idealism and hope, sustained from generation to generation. Although “individual characters may be powerless to alter their immediate circumstances, taken together, their stories constitute the transhistorical promise of something beyond them” (Shoop and Ryan 95). In other words, *Cloud Atlas* suggests that across time, there are and will be records of individuals who resist the will-to-power and act as sources of hope and resilience. The physical transmission of one narrative to the next person is vital to sustaining revolutionary forces across generations. The comet birthmark is another symbol for that hope, with the comet connecting centuries of human history as a “symbol for the transforming and recurring universality of human predacity and those who resist against it” (Dimovitz 11). The six reincarnated souls who carry the comet birthmark are fated to become the revolutionary figures opposing the oppressive forces that threaten each of their lifetimes.

The unending revolutions cement Nietzsche's philosophy of eternal recurrence that permeates the entire novel. While the cycles in the novel continue to expose the reality of the perpetual nature of predacity and cruelty amongst people across time, they also reveal the necessity of continuing to resist those trends. When Hae-Joo questions Sonmi's argument that "winners...are the real losers because they learn nothing," Sonmi says, "If losers can exploit what their adversaries teach them, yes, losers can become winners in the long term" (225). Sonmi's statement, although tucked inside of a conversation about playing games of Go against a computer, reflects the novel's own philosophy on the nature of revolution and resistance. There is no singular battle that saves humanity from all cruelty and greed, but rather it is a struggle across different lifetimes and around the world. The battle for the soul of humanity is long-term, and is often a losing battle, especially in this novel; that does not, however, prevent the protagonists from acting but rather inspires them to.

In each of the sections, the protagonists are faced with some moral dilemma, from the personal to the global, with consequences that scale up to the apocalyptic. The main forces of conflict in each of the sections is a predatory figure or group that leeches off the weak in a struggle for power. In the opening page of the novel, Mitchell introduces the theme of predacity and cannibalism with the villain of Ewing's story, Dr. Henry Goose, who searches for human teeth on a beach and remarks to Ewing, "In days gone by this Arcadian strand was a cannibals' banqueting hall, yes, where the strong engorged themselves on the weak" (3). For Dr. Goose, the world is a simple binary in which Darwin's theory of natural selection becomes "the weak are meat, the strong do eat," which Goose tells Adam after poisoning him and stealing all of his belongings (503). The line is another way to express Darwinism's natural selection taken to its most sinister extreme. Goose claims that it is the way of the world and gives the world its natural

order: “Adam, the world *is* wicked. Maoris prey on Moriori. Whites 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... Your turn to be eaten” (503-4). Goose’s ideology is shared by all of the antagonists in the rest of the novel, even when they are not as explicitly stated. Regardless of the generation or the scale of the conflict, those in power abuse that power and take advantage of those around them.

While the same binary carries throughout the novel, and history, the predators become better at hiding themselves. Ayr is isn’t the “vampire” syphoning away Ewing’s life for money that Dr. Goose is, but Frobisher is paranoid that he will steal his sextet, which Frobisher says “holds my life, is my life” (64, 470). When Ayr tries to steal Frobisher’s compositions for himself, he tells Frobisher why he won’t succeed in becoming a great composer himself: “You’re not hungry enough, boy” (455). Seaboard Power Inc, the corporation that hides the threat of a major nuclear disaster because of one of their reactors, is not a predator in the same way as Dr. Goose or the cannibalistic Kona of Zachry’s tale, but Luisa Rey uncovers how the men running the company and its hit-team are driven to cover-up the reports of failed tests solely by the promise of power and wealth. Their greed corrupts them and leads to the death of anyone who tries to challenge them. In Nea So Copros, the future of what is implied to be Seoul, South Korea incorporated into an authoritarian government modeled on modern-day North Korea,¹ the government creates an illusion of unity and peace while feeding fabricants to each other as sustenance. Those butchered bodies of fabricants, reduced to the food-stuff “soap,” not only feed other fabricants, but are part of the food supply that are unknowingly “eaten by consumers in the

¹ When referring to the government, Sonmi and the Archivist reference the “Juche”—the official ideology of socialism and self-reliance of North Korea—implying that Nea So Copros is a future North Korea and draws a direct connection from present-day authoritarian bodies and their future longevity or recurrence.

corp's dineries all over Nea So Copros" (343). A step beyond cannibalism by an individual, the government body Unanimity injected cannibalism into the everyday life of its citizens—called consumers—to literalize Goose's conception that "the weak are meat, the strong do eat." The consumers backed by the government are the strong and the government has designated the fabricants as the weak meat. Even in Cavendish's comedic escape from the retirement home, the theme of predacity is included in the form of Nurse Noakes. Her control over the bodies of the people living there, sometimes against their will as in the case of Cavendish, is a modern—though less physically gruesome—form of cannibalism. The reversion to cannibalism in Nea So Copros, however, marks the continuing cycle of humanity and predacity, and after the apocalypse, literal cannibalism returns, first in the form of soap and then by the Kona tribe.

In response to the seemingly endless stream of predators and disasters comes an act of resistance against those forces: a revolution. The revolutions are the natural response to and rejection of oppressive forces. With this pattern comes a double meaning behind the concept of revolutions in *Cloud Atlas*: Revolution as cycles, in this case of violence, and revolution as rebellions. One cannot exist without the other. The predatory and cannibalistic forces are invariably met with a counterforce of resistance. Each narrative features a protagonist "who refuses to take part in the universal predacity and tries to counteract it" (Kucala 108). Because of the endless reappearance of oppressive and power-seeking forces, resistance to those forces needs to be renewed year after year and generation after generation. Each of the narratives tells a story about humans taking advantage of each other and about how cruelty and predacity cycle endlessly but are always met with figures of resistance.

III. REVOLUTION AND THE REVOLUTIONARY

When stripped to their foundations, each of the six narratives in *Cloud Atlas* is a story of revolution and because of the implications of reincarnation and cycles, they are implied to be variants of the same sustained revolution, varying in scope and focus. Each of the six sections in *Cloud Atlas* is fundamentally the same story, told in different genres, by different people, in different contexts. Mitchell even acknowledges this when Cavendish is reading the *Half-Lives* manuscript. Cavendish imagines “the Ghost of Sir Felix Finch” criticizing the unoriginal premise of the novel: “But it’s been done a hundred times before!” (357). To which, Cavendish rebuts, “[A]s if there could be anything *not* done a hundred *thousand* times between Aristophanes and Andrew Void-Webber! As if Art is the *What*, not the *How!*”(357). While the ‘what’ of each narrative in *Cloud Atlas* – resistance against a predatory force – stays consistent throughout, the ‘how’ changes dramatically depending on the protagonist, the time period, and the form the evil force takes.

Framed around the context of the slave trade and the abolitionist movement, “The Pacific Journal of Adam Ewing” is the journey of Ewing realizing that he can no longer be complacent and passive towards the institution of slavery. After he is poisoned by Goose, a man he thought was his friend, and saved by a self-freed slave Autua, Ewing realizes that his life had been guided by predetermined ideas of a ‘natural order’ that no longer made sense to him. Ewing’s voyage is also framed around imperialism and the conflict between the Maori and Moriori people on the Chatham Islands in 19th century New Zealand. The dynamic and history between the two groups are explained to Ewing by Autua and a preacher Mr. D’Arnoq. D’Arnoq explains that the Moriori followed a pacific creed in which they “enshrine[d] ‘Thou Shalt Not Kill’ in word & *in deed* & frame[d] an oral ‘Magna Carta’ to create a harmony unknown elsewhere for the sixty

centuries since Adam tasted the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge. War was as alien a concept to the Moriori as the telescope to the Pygmy. *Peace*, not a hiatus betwixt wars but millennia of imperishable peace, rules these far-flung islands” (12). The Moriori experienced peace for centuries until the English invaders came and brought Maori with them. The Maori “thrive on wars & revenge & feudin” (32). They enslaved and massacred the Moriori people with the help and endorsement of European colonizers. Not only were the Moriori colonized and killed, but they were also eaten by the Maori, an act which “renders [the Maori] truly terrifying, suggesting that they operate on a wholly different moral basis beyond the comprehension of the Europeans” (Ng 109). Despite that, Mitchell repeatedly draws comparisons between the brutality of the Maori and the colonizing Europeans. Intermittently during D’Arnoq’s telling of the history, Goose interjects to provide the imperialist perspective. In response to the peace that the Moriori cultivated for millennia, Goose expresses his disbelief: “I could never describe a race of savages too backwards to throw a spear straight as ‘noble’” (12). And in response to the Moriori elders urging appeasement and to make peace with the Maori even after members of their tribe “were casually slain with tomahawks,” Goose quips, “Embrace your enemy...to feel his dagger tickle your kidneys” (14, 15). Directly after that meeting of the Moriori leaders and elders, they were met with an ambush and massacre by the Maori. Violence is a sign of weakness, not strength, for the groups governed by violence. D’Arnoq comments that the “Maori proved themselves apt pupils of the English in ‘the dark arts of colonization’” (12). Violence spreads and kills like a weed. But for those who “thrive on wars & revenge & feudin,” as Autua, a Moriori, explains to Ewing, “peace kills ‘em off” (32). The history of the Moriori and the Maori serves as a microcosm for the narrative’s—and the novel’s—critique of powerful, violent, and predatory

forces consuming those deemed weaker, and by doing so, destroying the utopic possibility of a peaceful reality.

The name for his journal posits a dichotomy and a paradox of the “pacific.” In its most literal sense, Ewing’s voyage on the *Prophetess* is across the Pacific Ocean from San Francisco to New Zealand and so it is, on the surface, just a geographical marker for the setting of the story. However, a figurative reading of the title reveals a tension between the ideal and the reality of pacifism. Ewing, a deeply religious man, is a self-proclaimed pacifist. In his justification of imperialism, Ewing says, “[T]o *civilize* the Black races by conversion should be our mission, not their extirpation, for God’s hand had crafted them, too” (16). For the men with Ewing, this is a naïve example of “sentimental Yankee claptrap” (16). Ewing is able to hide in his passivity and his delusions of not being implicated in the genocide and enslavement of the Moriori people he witnesses until Autua sneaks onto the *Prophetess* and asks him for help to convince the captain to let him work on the ship in return for passage aboard. Ewing wants no part in determining the fate of Autua, but Autua reminds him that to not act is just as bad as killing him: “I not mad, you no help I, you kill I, just same. It’s true, you know it” (27). There is no way for Ewing to remain guiltless. To remain passive is the same as actively taking part in Autua’s death. The only way for Ewing to hold onto his Christian values, then, is to help Autua, which he does, and which leads to Autua saving Ewing’s life in return later. By the end of his journey, Ewing accepts the impossibility of remaining passive and reality of a world defined entirely by action and inaction: “What precipitates outcomes? Vicious acts and virtuous acts” (507). The only choice he and the other protagonists have is how to act. To remain passive in the face of oppression is an act of violence. For his first act as a figure of revolution, Ewing joins the Abolitionist movement and chooses to act against the atrocities he has previously passively acknowledged and accepted.

Frobisher's revolution is the most internal of the six. It comes from his music and his rejection of the boundaries the world has put around him. He is not the charming, righteous leader of a revolution but rather a manipulative, narcissistic, and lost man. We meet him after his brother has died in World War I and he has been disowned by his family because of his sexuality. He tells Sixsmith about "growing up in [his] legendary brother's shadow," and how "every rebuke began with an 'Adrian never used to...' or 'If your brother were here now he'd...'" (441). Frobisher leaves Britain for Bruges, broke and alone save for his letters and relationship with Sixsmith, to become an amanuensis for an old composer Vyvyan Ayrs. Out of Frobisher's moral ambiguity comes him breaking the conventions of music in order to challenge the traditions of the past and pioneer the potential of the future. It is within this musical journey where Frobisher finds the only version of himself that he is satisfied with.

In one of the novel's most tragic moments, Frobisher finds that after completing his masterpiece that he has nothing left to live for and commits suicide. Frobisher is not the traditional hero in that he is a deeply complicated and flawed figure, and in many ways is one of the most unsympathetic protagonists. He steals books from Ayrs to sell, he has an affair with Ayrs's wife and daughter, and he is manipulative towards everyone around. Behind all of that, however, is also a vulnerability that Frobisher seems to reserve for Sixsmith and his musical compositions. Early in the letters, Frobisher is hopeful that he will find some kind of redemption in the eyes of his father and the world through his music. He imagines his father admitting that "yes, the son he disinherited is *the* Robert Frobisher, greatest British composer of his time" (45). Frobisher doesn't find that redemption, at least not during that lifetime, and his death at the end of "Zedelghem" becomes a moment of tragedy renewing itself.

While Luisa Rey fights against a greedy corporation, Sonmi against a corporatic government, Zachry against a cannibalistic tribe, Cavendish against a sinister institution, and Ewing against a global evil, Frobisher struggles against Ayr's and the older generation Ayr's signifies. For Frobisher, Ayr's initially represents a rejection of the norms of the older generation. He writes to Sixsmith, "[H]e's one of the greats. The only Briton of his generation to reject pomp, circumstance, rusticity, and charm" (45). Ayr's is Frobisher's musical idol. After Frobisher becomes Ayr's amanuensis and their partnership grows, Frobisher's role in composing the pieces grows too. As Frobisher's letters continue, he reveals that he has become as much a victim as the wrongdoer, such as when Ayr's becomes manipulative and threatens to steal Frobisher's compositions to publish them under his own name and to ruin Frobisher's reputation:

Reputation is everything...Yours, my disinherited, gambling, bankrupt friend, is expired...Leave Zedelghem whenever you wish. But be warned. Leave without my consent and all musical society...will know a scoundrel named Robert Frobisher forced himself upon purblind Vyvyan Ayr's wife. (455-6)

Ayr's threats are not just towards Frobisher in the physical sense but rather towards his name, future, reputation, and the possibility of redemption and achievement that Frobisher hopes to gain from his musical career. His threats, however, do not prevent Frobisher from leaving the chateau, finishing his sextet, and sending it to be published by Sixsmith.

The revolution of Rey's narrative comes from a series of individuals choosing to stand up against the corruption of a corporation. The conflict of Rey's narrative is the prevention of an apocalyptic disaster from a potentially faulty nuclear reactor. The effort to prevent that apocalypse is successful but only because of the figures who take it upon themselves to actively resist the will of the greedy heads of Seaboard Corps. If Frobisher's narrative fully embraces the Nietzschean concept of eternal recurrence, Rey's narrative refocuses the philosophy to the role of the individual in those cycles. The first individual to do so, fittingly, is Sixsmith, whose report on

the defects of the HYDRA-Zero reactor is kept hidden by Seaboard Corps until he coincidentally meets Luisa Rey in an elevator. That decision by an individual spirals out to Rey taking on the corporation almost single-handedly, Isaac Sachs, another scientist at the company, giving her another copy of Sixsmith's report to publish, and Joe Napier, a guard at the company, rebelling against the corporation and helping Luisa survive her encounters with the hitman hired by the corporation to murder anyone who tries to publish the report, including Sixsmith and Sachs. Whereas there was a sense of hopelessness in Frobisher's narrative with an acceptance of the inability to change the cycles of life, there is a renewed sense of individuality and the power of the individual in Rey's narrative. The power of the individual to change the course of the narrative is driven home with Rey's dedication to the exposing the company's corruption. And the reverberations of that choice ripple through the succeeding stories as the protagonists refuse to accept the corruption that they see around them. The figure fighting against the organization first appears with Ewing joining the Abolitionists against the institution of slavery but carries through in the adventures of Rey and Cavendish until we reach Sonmi's narrative, in which she fights against the government known as a Corpocracy.

Because of the possibility of Rey as a reincarnation of Frobisher (and Ewing) that is so often mentioned in her section, "Half-Lives" could be read as a continuation of Frobisher's story, and in that sense, she is regaining the power that Frobisher, and her past self, felt he had lost because of how Ayrs manipulated him and his family abandoned him, leaving him with nothing but his music and Sixsmith. Rey even locates a copy of Frobisher's *Cloud Atlas Sextet* and hears the official recording of it, and thereby finishing Frobisher's journey with the composition. Rey, after her initial chance conversation with Sixsmith, makes the decision to start digging into Seaboard Corps, and risks her own life to expose the corruption at the top of the energy

company. Rey's decision inspires those around her to do the same. When trying to find another copy of the Sixsmith report that Seaboard killed Sixsmith to keep from the public, Rey tries to convince Isaac Sachs to help. As a seeming callback to Autua telling Ewing that there is no pacifist option, Rey tells Sachs, "Do...whatever you can't *not* do" (133). Likewise, Joe Napier, head of security for Seaboard, has kept silent despite knowing that Seaboard hired a hitman, Bill Smoke, to kill anyone who challenges the financial interests of the heads of the company. When the company offers him an early retirement in return for his silence, he initially agrees. However, he is haunted by the guilt of being culpable for another woman's death by the hands of Bill Smoke, so he returns to Buenas Yervas and helps Rey, sacrificing his life in the process.

Luisa Rey gets her name from Thornton Wilder's *The Bridge of San Luis Rey*, which Mitchell read at university. He said about it, "It's a glorious thing, packed with ideas for other possible books. Wilder's novel is an attempt to explain why a certain group of people died when a rope bridge collapse in Peru—to locate meaning in randomness. It's an essay in fiction about causality" (*The Paris Review*). Rey's first appearance in Mitchell's work was as a minor character in his debut novel *Ghostwritten*, which is a collection of apparent short stories connected loosely by coincidence and chance meetings. Mitchell takes the accomplished journalist who writes a true-crime novel in one of the sections in *Ghostwritten* and turns her into the protagonist and rookie journalist of her own crime novel. As well as providing Mitchell with the opportunity to expand on a minor character from his first novel, the inclusion of Luisa Rey in *Cloud Atlas*—and her near-death experience on a bridge—allow him to expand on the significance of coincidence and fate in his novel that are called to mind by the reference to Wilder's. When deciding to look into the lives of the five people who died when the San Luis Rey bridge collapsed, Brother Juniper thinks to himself, "If there were any plan in the universe at

all, if there were any pattern in a human life, surely it could be discovered mysteriously latent in those lives so suddenly cut off. Either we live by accident and die by accident, or we live by plan and die by plan”(Wilder 2). With Rey’s life almost being cut short half-way through the narrative, and the word play of “Half-Lives”² in the title, Mitchell threads the needle of themes associated with the allusions to Wilder into his own landscape of patterns, coincidences, and fate. Luisa Rey is, much like her namesake bridge, the focal point of coincidental and tragic meetings. She is not the reason for the tragedies, but rather a figure of hope and change for those caught in the bureaucratic trap created by the nuclear reactor plant.

In comparison to the high-stakes conspiracies and espionage of “Half-Lives,” Timothy Cavendish’s comedic escape from a retirement home into which he is mistakenly admitted is a dramatic change of pace. “The Ghastly Ordeal” is the most light-hearted section of the novel, but at the same time, it serves as a microcosm for the global-scale revolutions in the other sections. Cavendish’s narrative is revolution and resistance at its most ordinary. After finding himself in debt to some gangsters and in desperate need for money, Cavendish turns to his brother for help. Despite his financial problems, he leads a relatively easy and secure life. When Cavendish finds himself admitted into a retirement home by his brother, he is subjected to a sudden loss of freedom and bodily autonomy. The first night he is there, he still believes that he’s at a hotel and that there will be an opportunity for a sort of do-over in the morning. He thinks to himself, “ In the morning life would begin afresh, afresh, afresh. This time round I would do everything right”

² The title “Half-Lives” carries varying significances for not only Rey’s narrative but the entire novel. First, half-lives refers to the radioactive decay of atoms, necessary for an understanding of nuclear energy. Second, the title is a nod to the structure of the novel in which every story—or every character’s life—is cut in half by the novel’s layered structure. Luisa almost dies in the first half of her section and is only revealed to still be alive in the second half, after her first “half-life” had been lived. It could also be pointing to the theme of reincarnation in that every protagonist is only living a partial life, in terms of their shared soul spanning centuries of lifetimes. In this sense, each protagonist of *Cloud Atlas* is living only one part of their life-span: one half-life. The decay of a half-life also parallels the decay of the world after each protagonist’s lifetime, eventually ending with a fully decayed, post-apocalyptic reality.

(173). Not only is Cavendish echoing the theme of recurrence here, but he is also holding onto the naivety that there will be a second chance to get it right the next time around and uses it as a justification for inaction. Still, he believes his time at the retirement home will be short-lived. That is, until he has a stroke, induced by his ‘caretaker’ Nurse Noakes. After this, Cavendish realizes the seriousness of his “imprisonment.” He tells the reader, “No, I was stuck in Aurora House all right. A clock with no hands. ‘Freedom!’ is the fatuous jingle of our civilization, but only those deprived of it have the barest inkling re: what the stuff actually is” (356).

It is also at this point in Cavendish’s narrative that he reads Hilary V. Hush’s manuscript of *The First Luisa Rey Mystery* and as a publisher decides that “the young-hack-versus-corporate-corruption thriller had potential” (357). With “Half-Lives” as inspiration, Cavendish has to fight to regain his own freedom by escaping from the nursing home with some of the other patients. Through deception, quick wit, and luck, Cavendish and some new friends steal a car and leave the grounds of the retirement, but they are followed by Nurse Noakes to a nearby pub. Mr. Meeks, whose only two words had been “I know, I know” for most of the narrative, inspires a revolution of his own when Nurse Noakes threatens the success of their escape. Mr. Meeks, for the first time in the novel, becomes his fully realized self again in their moment of need and calls for help from the Scotsmen in a bar, “Are there nor *trrrruuuue Scortsmen* in tha *hooossse*? ... Those there English *gerrrunts* are trampling o’er ma God-gi’en *rrraights!* Theeve used me an’ ma pals most *direly* an’ we’re inneed of a wee *assistance*” (384). Like in Rey’s narrative, there is a call to action for the characters around the protagonist to aid in their revolution against the autocratic forces that threaten them. Under the cover of the ensuing barfight, Cavendish and the others escape to freedom.

Cavendish's comedic escapades are further elevated into being a true act of revolution in "The Orison of Sonmi-451." Watching Cavendish's film becomes an act of rebellion itself in Nea So Copros. When Sonmi asks the Archivist if he had seen the film, he responds, "Sweet Corpocracy, no! An eighth-stratum archivist wouldn't get such security clearance in his wildest dreams! I'd be fired for even applying" (234). This inclusion serves a couple of key functions. The first is how Cavendish's tale is elevated from just a comedy to something that is considered "dangerous" because of its rebellious themes. The second is that it reveals the true motives of Corpocracy.³ Although archivists play a key role in the government in order, Corpocracy still controls what history is recorded. The similarity between the title of Nea So Copros and Seaboard Corp, also suggests a connection between those two bureaucratic bodies, both of which attempt to conceal dangerous realities and therefore try to create a comforting illusion of reality for their "consumers." As Sonmi tells the Archivist, "[I]f historical discourse were permitted, the downstrata could access a bank of human xperience that would rival, and sometimes contradict, that taught by Media" (234). The rebellious qualities of the hero in Cavendish's film contradict the ideal consumer in Nea So Copros and is therefore dangerous to the carefully crafted narrative of history that Nea So Copros has created and funded. Cavendish's story, then, as a representation of being trapped in an authoritative system and escaping from it, is something to be feared by an autocracy and has to be banned from the public.

The revolution in which Sonmi believes herself to play a crucial role, is revealed at the end to have been staged by the government from the start, but that doesn't prevent Sonmi from

³ The government of Nea So Copros being labeled as a "corpocracy" represents how the entire foundation of society and government have become completely defined by consumerism (citizens are universally referred to as "consumers"). The persisting socialist ideology of Juche suggests Nea So Copros to be built on an extreme form of communism; however it also depicts, somewhat paradoxically, the extreme of capitalism, with the goal of profit at the cost of morality leading to monopolies that companies—or in this case the single bureaucratic company of Unanimity—hold over not only business markets but also political and social markets. Unanimity even controls the market of revolution by staging the Union rebellion and thereby influencing public opinion.

becoming a revolutionary martyr. Created as a human clone for the purpose of serving consumers in an underground restaurant. After another fabricant, Yoona-939, starts to challenge the hierarchical order and by deviating from the rules, “Catechisms”, that fabricants are expected to live by, Sonmi’s ascension begins, meaning that she becomes more observant and individualized from the other fabricants, and she becomes an object of study for a university student. As Sonmi learns more about her world, and the real world she had been kept ignorant of while in the restaurant, she becomes more determined in joining the abolitionist movement. During Sonmi’s recount of her entire life to the Archivist in a final interview before her execution, she tells him about how the rebellious group Union recruited her from her station as a server, introduced her into the world, exposed her to the reality of clones, slavery, and cannibalism in Nea So Copros, and fomented a staged revolution between Union and Unanimity, the corporatic body of government in Nea So Copros. Even the Archivist, someone seemingly dedicated to the recording of historical truths, is unaware of the atrocities of the government and refuses to believe them when Sonmi recounts them: “No crime of such magnitude could take root in Nea So Copros. Even fabricants have carefully defined rights, guaranteed by the Chairman!” (344). Like the abolitionist movement Ewing joins, Sonmi’s revolution is an anti-slavery one, and as in Ewing’s time, the ignorance and unwillingness of everyday people—even people seemingly dedicated to the truth—to see and accept the reality of the horrors fuels the corruption and oppression.

Although Sonmi’s revolution is a failed one, it is not a failure for her. The revolution was staged by the government, so it was doomed from the start. The Archivist asks Sonmi why she agreed to cooperate if she knew it was fake. She responds, “Why does any martyr cooperate with his Judases?”(349). Sonmi sees herself as part of a real and necessary revolution buried inside of

a nesting doll of faux revolutions and she believes that her sacrifice will expose the truth hidden at the center and inspire future generations.

She becomes much like Siddhartha, about whom she learned about from an Abbess who still illegally practices a “non-consumer religion.” She told Sonmi, that while many called Siddhartha a god, he does not “influence fortune or weather or perform many of a divinity’s traditional functions” (332). Instead, he is “a dead man and a living ideal. The man taught about overcoming pain, and influencing one’s future reincarnations” (332). This also becomes Sonmi’s fate as revealed in Zachry’s narrative when she is prayed to as a god by the Valleymen. Even in the final days of her life, she is transformed from a defected fabricant to a sort of forbidden prophet and heretic. Her *Declarations* are referred to as Catechisms, carrying with it religious and educational connotations. The Catechisms outline her doctrine and her ideals. She tells the Archivist, “Media has flooded Nea So Copros with my Catechisms. Every schoolchild in corpocracy knows my twelve ‘blasphemies’ now. My guards tell me there is even talk of a statewide ‘Vigilance Day’ against fabricants who show signs of the *Declarations*. My ideas have been reproduced a billionfold” (349). As long as her Catechisms are passed down, her revolution will continue and as Meronym tells Zachry, her revolution found success after her death: “A short ‘n’ judased life Sonmi had, an’ only after she’d died did she find say-so over purebloods ‘n’ freakbirths’ thinkin’s” (277). Like Siddhartha, Sonmi even influences her future reincarnation as Meronym in “Sloosha’s Crossin’,” and therefore she remains a living ideal, long after her execution.

In “Sloosha’s Crossin’,” Zachry’s revolution is directed against three different fronts. The first is against the violent Kona, a cannibalistic tribe on Hawaii that threatens the Valleymen and killed Zachry’s father and brother, which haunts him for the rest of his life.

Internally, he is fighting against himself and the temptations that manifest in the form of the devilish Old Georgie. On the last front is Meronym, a stranger on the island who has come to Hawaii to research and learn about the Valleymen. She brings with her advanced technology that has been absent from the island since The Fall. If the Kona are reminiscent of the Maori from the 18th century, Meronym and the Prescients are much like the European missionaries of the same time period. Meronym reveals to Zachry the real reason that she and the other four Prescients are on the islands of Hawaii, so far from their home: “We anxed this plague’d reach Prescience an’ snuff out Civ’lize’s last bright light. We was searchin’ for good earth to plant more Civ’lize in Ha-Why” (295). However, by the end of the story, she is not a colonizer or a savior. She and Zachry survive an attack from the Kona, but Zachry’s entire village is murdered and they both leave the island with the other Prescients.

Meronym is a complicated figure. On one hand, she is like the missionaries and the colonizers and so is taking advantage of the Valleymen’s hospitality. On the other, it is her, not Zachry, who carries the comet birthmark and so she is our final representative for the line of reincarnated characters. She should be, by the rules of the rest of the novel, the protagonist and the figure of resistance. But she’s neither. Although she does save Zachry by the end of the section, Zachry distrusts her for most of it, and it is revealed that his distrust is not unwarranted because she is there to study the land as a possible home for Prescients, who are dealing with another devastating outbreak of their own. Believing in Sonmi, however, Zachry believes Meronym to be the reincarnated god, and so he therefore comes to trust and even somewhat idolize her by the end. As the figure of resistance in the sixth narrative, Meronym has a role that is subtle but with the potential for the greatest impact, as she and Zachry have the chance to effectively rebuild the world.

The revolution is not against a specific group but rather the trends of humanity that the rest of the novel has tracked up to that point. While most of the preceding sections feature a clear binary between ‘good’ and ‘evil’, the difference between the two becomes blurred in “Sloosha’s Crossin’.” Even with the apparent opposition between ‘civilized’ Valleysmen and Prescients and the ‘savage’ Kona, Meronym tells Zachry how she sees the distinctions blurred between the two. She says, “The savage sat’fies his needs now. He’s hungry, he’ll eat” and “the Civ’lized got the same needs too, but he sees further. He’ll eat half his food now, yay, but plant half so he won’t go hungry ‘morrow” (303). When Zachry asks her which one is better, she responds:

List’n, savages an’ Civ’lizeds ain’t divvied by tribes or b’liefs or mountain ranges, nay, ev’ry human is both, yay. Old Uns’d got the Smart o’ gods but the savagery o’ jackals an’ that’s what tripped the Fall. Some savages what I knowed got a beaustome Civ’lized heart beatin’ in their ribs. Maybe some Kona. Not ‘nuff to say-so their hole tribe, but who knows one day? One day. (303)

This moment becomes an important one in the novel because the apocalypse has effectively reset the world. Because of that, there is an opportunity for the characters to redefine the assumed and established binaries that “tripped the Fall.” It’s fitting then, that when Zachry leaves the island, he brings his traditions and his religion with him as the equivalent of a new start for humanity. His religion was born from the revolution of Sonmi-451, which was itself the culmination of all of the revolutions and rebellions of her past lives, going all the way back to Ewing’s final decision to join the Abolitionist movement. Zachry has the opportunity to inspire a civilization built on the foundation and ideology of revolution against oppressive and dehumanizing systems. Whether an idyllic utopia is possible in the world of *Cloud Atlas* is left open for interpretation – and doubtful based on the endless cycles the novel suggests – however, this centerpiece of the novel chooses to remain optimistic and confident in humanity to meet those oppressive systems with forces of resistance, even in the form of ordinary people. When Zachry says, “‘One day’ was only a flea o’” hope for us,” Meronym responds, “Yay...but fleas ain’t easy to rid” (303).

Similar to Sonmi as she dictates her final testimony, Meronym expresses the same hope in the future of humanity and in the resilience necessary to combat the next generations of recurring predacity while acknowledging the reality of how hard the resistance is.

The revolutionary tendencies of the narratives come from a rejection of the violation of people's humanity. The hierarchies of greed and power that the protagonists resist arise from the dehumanization of those deemed weak or lesser. With dehumanization comes the absence of the soul, which for Mitchell is an apocalyptic actuality. As he declares the reality and the persistence of the soul in his protagonists, Mitchell ties humanity, and the morals and virtues he emphasizes, directly to the soul. Revolution against forces that seek to monopolize, control, or restrict the soul is vital to saving humanity itself. Revolution, then, becomes an affirmation of the soul.

IV. THE PROBLEM OF THE SOUL

Cloud Atlas rests on the idea of reincarnation, with the implication that six of the protagonists share one soul, reborn over generations. Because of how the novel stresses the possibility of reincarnated characters, it cannot ignore the question of the human soul. Mitchell posits that the mind, body, and soul are deeply interconnected, in that the interdependence between the three defines the narrative and thematic course of the novel. Fitting into the novel's nesting doll structure, the characters can be read as dolls and as individual variations of the figures—or souls—nestled within each other. The motion of the opening of a nesting doll is inward, and it always driving towards something at its heart, affirming an inmost soul. The same logic that places Zachry's narrative at the center of the novel puts Meronym at the inmost of the nesting dolls as the most future reincarnation. She then becomes a powerful metaphor for the

nature of the soul. Mitchell asks the reader to not be skeptical or dismissive of the soul because a failure to do so may lead to the future in his novel, in which those in power devalue and commodify the soul until it loses any essence of morality. Mitchell's novels almost always feature some aspect of the fantastical and *Cloud Atlas* is no exception to this, veering from historical fiction to science fiction while always holding onto some aura of the supernatural with the implication of reincarnation and traveling souls.⁴

Throughout the novel, Mitchell places increased attention on the soul. Mitchell begins investigating the question of the soul through his narrative of the Moriori on the Chatham Islands and their pacific creed that states that “whosoever spilt a man’s blood killed his *mana* – his honor, his worth, his standing & his soul” (12). The novel raises the question of whether this concept can affect the human in a way that its narrative and themes reaffirm. For Mitchell, the corruption of the soul isn’t just the death of an individual, but the death of humanity. Ewing says, “In an individual, selfishness uglifies the soul; for the human species, selfishness is extinction” (508). Violence killing the soul becomes a recurring motif.

⁴ Mitchell has been concerned with the problem of the soul starting from his very first novel, *Ghostwritten*. In his debut, one of the protagonists is a non-corporeal being who transmigrates from person to person trying to learn his origins. At the end of that section of *Ghostwritten*, the non-corporeal entity finds a body when it is told, “My granddaughter’s body is *your* body. She was born with *you* as her soul and mind” (194). The non-corporeal being’s decision to accept the short human life over an eternity of immortality speaks to Mitchell’s insistence on the soul being connected to the essence of humanity. In *The Thousand Autumns of Jacob de Zoet*, a mountain monastery that kidnaps women and murder their babies in order to grant immortality to a 600-year-old being, Abbot Enomoto. This manufactured immortality through the theft of souls represents someone who has been morally corrupted to the extent that they are a monster and a shade of a human. Similarly, *The Bone Clocks* and *Slade House* feature immortal beings who are either naturally reincarnated into new bodies after they die or murder people in order to steal their soul and sustain their artificial immortality. In his most recent novel, *Utopia Avenue*, Enomoto makes a return as a non-corporeal soul trapped in the body of Jacob de Zoet’s descendent Jasper. The soul as something unmistakably human and as something always threatened by the temptations of greed, violence, and cruelty is a through-line that connects the world of Mitchell’s über-book beyond the repetition of characters and events.

Mitchell investigates the problem of the soul through fictional practices and takes the concept of a soul one step beyond a philosophical or theological notion with the separation of souls from bodies in *Nea So Copros*. Even from the name, which is implied to have evolved from Seoul, has removed the phonetic “soul” from its identity and by doing so, immediately exposes the superficial ideology of the place. Fabricants like Sonmi are born without “Souls,” which have become something manufactured, presumably pieces of technology, to distinguish them from the consumers. Souls are used to control the fabricants. Sonmi explains, “elevators do not function without a Soul onboard” (194). The simulation of a soul means that Sonmi doesn’t know what a soul is outside of the context of the manufactured version of it, until she discovers that every living being has one. Souls become a physical trait that differentiates natural-born humans and fabricants and is a way for the government to dehumanize and commodify fabricants as lesser humans and slaves. Souls could be given or taken from fabricants such as with a “Soulring” that Sonmi is given to wear after her Ascension into the world of the consumers. By Zachry’s time, souls are no longer physical significations of people but have reverted back to being intrinsically tied to humanity and spirituality. As part of their faith, the Valleysmen pray to Sonmi. Zachry explains, “Sonmi helped sick uns, fixed busted luck, an’ when a truesome ‘n’ civ’lized Valleysman died she’d take his soul an’ lead it back into a womb somewhere in the Valleys” (244). Souls, for the Valleysmen, are sources of hope and are reminders of the necessity of kindness and good will in this lifetime in order for their soul to be rewarded in the next by returning home again. However, that is only for the Valleysmen. Meronym tells Zachry that Prescients don’t believe in reincarnation or an afterlife and that they “don’t b’lief souls exist” (302). She admits that the Prescients’ “truth is terrorsome cold” (302). The irony of Meronym

not believing in souls is that she is suggested to be the carrier of a centuries-old soul that has been reborn into her body.

Although every protagonist struggles with some level of temptations or personal vices, in Zachry's story, a personification of sin takes the form of Old Georgie. He is the devil counterpart to Sonmi in the religion of the Valleymen: "See, if you b'haved savage-like an' selfy an' spurned the Civ'lize, or if Georgie tempted you into barb'rism an' all, then your soul got heavy'n'jagged an' weighed with stone. Sonmi cudn't fit you into no womb then. Such crookit selfy people was called 'stoned' an' no fate was more dreadsome for a Valleysman" (244-5). Old Georgie threatens Zachry's life and the possibility of his reincarnation, because of how he taunts souls through lies: "Lies are Old Georgie's vultures what circle on high lookin' down for a runty'n'weedy soul to plummet'n'sink their talons" (242). Because of his cowardice in the face of the Kona tribe, Zachry believes that Old Georgie was already close to devouring his soul and that his "soul was 'ready half stoned, yay, surefire I'd not get rebirthed" (269). Old Georgie seeds doubt into Zachry's mind about Meronym and tries to convince him to kill her, however, when Meronym is finally honest with him about why she is on the island and she shares her knowledge of who "tripped the Fall if it weren't Old Georgie" being humanity's ancestors who couldn't master "a hunger for more", Zachry isn't swayed so easily by Old Georgie's lies and manages to save his own soul by helping Meronym (272).

If violence kills the soul and the soul is quite literally separated from the body in the future, then the reclaiming of the soul as a part of humanity in the post-apocalyptic world is an integral part of rebuilding civilization. As Mitchell traces the state of the soul throughout time, he makes a connection between the decline of civilization with the loss of belief in what religions understand the soul to be. The apocalypse of the novel is therefore inextricably tied to the

concept of the soul. Mitchell's proclivity for writing novels that follow the lives of different people in different ages, all connected by some mark of coincidence or fate suggests that he is not looking to recreate a life but to search for the very essence of life. For him, the idea of the soul is innately tied to our understanding and our awareness of a universal truth, which in turn leads us to facing the unmistakable reality of ourselves.

V. UNIVERSAL TRUTH AND ITS MISTRUTHS

For Mitchell, the soul is directly tied to curiosity, and seeking out and fully embracing truths. As Zachry leaves his home island for the first time, he realizes how small his world was: "Yay, my Hole World an' hole life was shrinked 'nuff to fit in the O o' my finger'n'thumb" (308). Sonmi experiences a similar thing when Wing-027 asked her how big she believed the world to be and she responded, "I was unsure but said I had been driven all the way from Chongmyo Plaza to this mountain, so I must have seen most of it, surely" (206-7). Although it is stated most plainly in these two examples, all of the protagonists experience some type of awakening to a larger world than they had imagined. Specifically in Sonmi's narrative, Mitchell draws direct comparisons with Plato's Allegory of the Cave, having Sonmi read from his *Republic*. When Yoona-939 first shows Sonmi a "sony" with pictures and videos of the world outside of the restaurant, they only understand the world through what they see on the sony. Sonmi explains to the Archivist, "Her 'broken sony' promised a world of lost forests, folded mountains, and labyrinthine hiding places. To mistake a book of fairy tales for Nea So Copros may seem laughable to you, a pureblood, but perpetual engagement endows any mirage of salvation with credibility" (193). Similarly, Zachry only knows the world from the perspective of

the Valleysmen, so when Meronym speaks of a world beyond that it is overwhelming and implausible. When the protagonists are exposed to the reality of a larger world, they don't hide from it but embrace the possibilities a larger world provides. Sonmi tells the Archivist that she first questions how she could "understand such a limitless world," but soon becomes determined to learn as much as she could: "We are only what we know, and I wished to be much more than I was, sorely" (207). Because knowledge was kept from fabricants like Sonmi, her seeking out knowledge is tied to the recognition of her soul and her search for a hidden universal truth leads to her revolution.

Mitchell and his protagonists are concerned with the problem of "truth." On a subtextual level, one of the central conflicts of *Cloud Atlas* is the seemingly obscure nature of truth. The lines between truth and fiction become increasingly blurred as the stories progress. While there are in-text commentaries on truth, the novel itself structurally challenges any notion of certainty that whether or not what is being read is true in the world of the book. For most of these narratives, the characters are telling their own stories in first-person. They only give the reader a singular biased perspective on the events, which may or may not be entirely true, even as each section spends time pondering the possibility and reality of something that is "true." Most notably is the paradox of Luisa Rey's narrative. Luisa Rey's story is written by Hilary V. Hush, a character only mentioned a few times by name in *Cloud Atlas*. The veracity of his mystery novel comes into debate on a structural level because she could be a fictional detective; however, Sixsmith's presence in her story complicates it, as do her memories of the chateau from Frobisher's letters. Because we know from his later novel *The Bone Clocks* that Mitchell's apocalypse happens in the mid-21st century, it is most probable that Cavendish's narrative takes place in the early 21st century, thus being the narrative closest to the present day of the novel's

publication in 2004. The direct reincarnation of characters is impossible between Rey as a 25-year-old in 1975 and Cavendish as an older man in the 2000s. This suggests that Rey's story is just a fictional crime thriller, which then calls into question Frobisher's existence and Ewing's. However, in Mitchell's other works, connected by his "über-book," Rey is premised as 'real.' She first appears in *Ghostwritten* and then again in Mitchell's most recent novel *Utopia Avenue*. Despite this, the novel isn't particularly concerned with the veracity of "Half-Lives" and instead focuses its attention on the truth that Rey unveils: the corruption of a major corporation and the terrifying proximity of a possible reality that is not unlike our own. Likewise, at the end of Zachry's oration, there is a jump in time to after his death to when his child says that most of the story was made up: "Oh, most o' Pa's yarnin's was jus' musey duck fartin'" (308). But at the same time Zachry's kid says, "Most yarnin's got a bit o' true, some yarnin's got some true, an' a few yarnin's got a lot o' true" (309). Regardless of to what extent the narratives are 'true' within the reality of the novel, there is a desire throughout to discover and tell truth even, or maybe especially, through fiction.

In "The Orison of Sonmi-451," the narrative mode of the section is vital to its focus on truth, both how it is obscured and how it is preserved. This section is the only one in which there are two unique voices in first person without the filter of memory or narration. The final interview of Sonmi-451 is conducted by a young "eighth-stratum" archivist (189). Senior archivists had no interest in interviewing Sonmi because they saw her case as "too hazardous to risk their reputations-and pensions-on" but Genomicists had "pulled levers on the Juche to have Rule 54.iii-the right to archivism-enforced against Unanimity's wishes." In response, Sonmi tells him, "Your frankness is refreshing after so much duplicity" (189). As much of the narrative is focused on Sonmi discovering the truth behind Nea So Copros, it is also invested in examining

the recording of history. The role of the archivist is to record history as it happened; however, as Sonmi explains here, the truth has been obscured by the imperatives of totalitarian government to the extent that even the official recorders of history are wary of interviewing Sonmi. Because of this, the task has been passed onto a young, naïve, and optimistic Archivist, who still believes in the government's propaganda because he has never experienced anything to contradict it. At the same time, he still believes that the role of the archivist is to document history fully and honestly. He tells Sonmi, "A duplicitous archivist wouldn't be much use to future historians, in my view" (189). For Mitchell, the revolutionary position is to speak truth, which suggests the Archivist as a potential future revolutionary at the close of Sonmi's narrative.

There are two major twists in Sonmi's narrative. The first is the horrifying revelation that the cloned fabricants are killed and turned into food, called soap, that is then fed to the other fabricants as well as natural-born consumers. When the Union rebels share this government secret with Sonmi, she agrees to join the Union cause and tells Hae-Joo what she believes has to happen in her revolution:

That ship must be destroyed. Every slaughtership in Nea So Copros like it must be sunk...The shipyards that build them must be demolished. The systems that facilitated them must be dismantled. The laws that permitted the systems must be torn down and reconstructed. (346)

Sonmi is faced with the realization that she must act because, with the knowledge of the reality, there is no choice other than to act and to dismantle the corrupt systems of power to their foundations.

Sonmi's position resonates in various ways and with different degrees of intensity. Even in Frobisher's narrative, there is a moment of revelation when the illusion of Ayrs's musical genius is broken down after Frobisher lives and works directly with Ayrs. Ayrs begins as Frobisher's inspiration as "one of the few men in Europe whose influence I want my own

creativity informed by,” but by the end Frobisher writes that Ayr’s “robbed at gunpoint” pieces of his compositions for his own (61, 455). Ayr’s cruelty and intellectual dishonesty become more apparent, which allows for Frobisher’s full story to emerge. For Rey, when Sixsmith brings her the documents, she is faced with a similar realization as Sonmi: to act is the only path she can take. As with Ewing realizing that passivity is a form of violence against victims of powerful people, Rey, Sixsmith, Sachs, and Napier all choose to act and expose Seaboard Corps’ faulty reactor before it can kill thousands of people. As Sachs debates whether or not to help Rey get a copy of the report on the HYDRA nuclear reactor, he tells her that his “tragic flaw” is that he is “[t]oo cowardly to be a warrior, but not *enough* of a coward to lie down and roll over like a good doggy” (131). Like Ewing, Sachs is caught between the difficulty of taking action against something he knows will be “much, much worse than bad” and the consequences of inaction (132).

The other major reveal in Sonmi’s narrative comes in the final pages of her testimony when Sonmi tells the Archivist that the entire revolution was staged by Unanimity. For them, it was nothing more than an elaborate play to attract “social malcontents ...and keep them where Unanimity can watch them,” to provide Nea So Copros “with the enemy required by any hierarchical state for social cohesion,” and to “generate the show trial of the decade. To make every last pureblood in Nea So Copros mistrustful of every last fabricant” (348). In short, Nea So Copros discredits the abolitionist movement by providing a compelling narrative of Unanimity bravely capturing a fabricant inciting violence and revolution from other fabricants and threatening the natural order established by the government. By creating this faux-revolution, Unanimity has discredited the Abolitionist movement and generated support for a new “Fabricant Xpiry Act” (349). Up until this point, Sonmi’s story has been a story about the

beginning of a revolution, but with this sudden revelation, her testimony shifts its focus to become a search for truth hidden behind the lies of propaganda, comfortable ignorance, and accepted natural orders. Her story does not end at her enlightenment, either. The exposure of the faked Union rebellion is not a moment of defeat for Sonmi, but rather an opportunity to broadcast her Catechisms and the truth behind the government's conspiracies. While the faux revolution was doomed to fail, she believes that by the widespread sharing of her Catechisms the revolutions of the future will be destined to succeed.

The final revelations in Sonmi's narrative do not come as a surprise to her, since she is the one telling her story, but to the Archivist, and through his recordings, any audience watching them, including the reader. Throughout the section, she breaks down all of the Archivist's preconceived notions about Nea So Copros and his reality. When Sonmi labels fabricants as slaves, the Archivist denies it. He says, "*Slaves*, you say? Even infant consumers know, the very word *slave* is abolished throughout Nea So Copros", to which she responds, "Corpocracy is built on slavery, whether or not the word is sanctioned" (189). Sonmi breaks down the propaganda that has become so ingrained in the public, and in the Archivist, that reality can only be seen through its tinted lens. Although she already knows about the atrocities of Nea So Copros during her interview with the Archivist, she narrates every step of that journey for him. She tracks her own revelations about the reality of slavery and how the government considers fabricants like Sonmi to be no more than livestock. While recounting her enlightenment to the Archivist, Sonmi simultaneously starts the process of not only educating him on these horrors but also her future audience, who will watch her final testimony and take up the revolution after her.

Each narrative is played as a discovery of hidden truths and each narrator undergoes some sort of revelation by the end of their narrative. Those truths are, however, never revealed

without some sort of action made by the protagonist. Slavoj Žižek argues that there is a universal truth but that it is not always accessible. He says, “There always is one universal truth of a certain situation. But this truth is accessible only from a specific partial, engaged in the struggle, standpoint... We should fully assume the paradox of universal truth being accessible only through a partial, engaged position” (Žižek 53:46). In this sense, truth is not just acquired or ingrained knowledge but rather a recurring action. Although Žižek suggests that multiple truths, or versions of truth exist, there can only be one universally accepted truth, which can only be understood through a perspective that is actively engaged and subjective. In this sense, while all perspectives are biased and subjective, not all perspectives can be considered true.

Mitchell challenges postmodern skepticism towards a universal truth by putting the concept at stake in the novel. Accepting variations of the truth is, for Mitchell, an embrace of lies. Sonmi says in the opening lines of her narrative, “Truth is singular. Its ‘versions’ are mistruths” (185). Mitchell, through Sonmi’s narrative especially, argues against the legitimacy of ‘truth’ that come from a perspective that has been purposefully distracted from the reality of a corrupt and oppressive government. The Archivist, for example, claims to be someone who seeks the truth as a historian; however he rejects Sonmi’s testimony because he is blinded by his own distance from the real problems within Nea So Copros. The government has carefully constructed narratives that the consumers are willing to believe in, which are comforting, easy-to-consume storylines. Sonmi asks the Archivist, “Did you not detect the hairline cracks in the plot?” (348). It only takes someone looking closely and becoming even partially involved to see the horrors that lay just beneath the pristine paradise Nea So Copros has sold its consumers. Sonmi forces the Archivist to become engaged and partial by revealing to him all of the secrets that she has unveiled and, so by the end of her testimony there is the implication that he can now

see the universal truth, too. With that knowledge, there is no returning to ignorance and the Archivist will be left with only one choice: to join the Anti-Abolitionists or to remain passive and be culpable for the continuing horrors.

At the end of his journey, Ewing writes, “My recent adventures have made me quite the philosopher...Scholars discern motions in history & formulate these motions into rules that govern the rises & falls of civilizations. My belief runs contrary, however. To wit: history admits no rules; only outcomes” (507). After Ewing is poisoned by Goose and saved by Autua, his perspective on the “‘natural’ (oh, weaselly word!) order of things” changes completely (508). His first-hand experience has also led to his disagreement with scholars, who observe patterns from a distance but are not actually engaged in the events of history themselves. Likewise, Sonmi only learns the full truth about Union, Unanimity, the corruption of the government and the false revolution she is the martyr for until after she agrees to join the cause and becomes active in the anti-abolitionist revolution. The realization that many of the protagonists come to is that the ‘natural order’ of the world is a façade put in place by the people in power. In other words, there is a fundamental truth to the world that is often obscured or twisted by those in power. However, they only come to this understanding after they have been fully implicated in the issue and personally involved in the revolution.

The truth, much like the structure of the novel itself, is a process of unveiling layers of narrative. Sonmi warns the Archivist of the dangers of ignorance and blind acceptance of laws put in place by the most powerful: “Rights are susceptible to subversion, as even granite is susceptible to erosion. My fifth *Declaration* posits how, in a cycle as old as tribalism, ignorance of the Other engenders fear; fear engenders hatred; hatred engenders violence; violence engenders further violence until the only ‘rights,’ the only law, are whatever is willed by the

most powerful” (344). Ewing approaches this universal truth as well, but it evades him until the final pages of the novel. Early in his journal he writes, “As many truths as men. Occasionally, I glimpse a truer Truth, hiding in imperfect simulacrum of itself, but as I approach, it bestirs itself & moves deeper into the thorny swamp of dissent” (17). Although Ewing is aware of some “truer Truth,” it remains inaccessible to him because he is still blinded by his acceptance of global institutional horrors like slavery. The distinction between a truth and the singular truth returns in Zachry’s story when he asks Meronym, “Then the true true is different to the seemin’ true?” (274). To which Meronym responds, “Yay, an’ it usually is...an’ that’s why true true is presher ‘n’ rarer ‘n diamonds” (274). As her prior incarnation as Sonmi discovered, for Meronym there is only one actual truth but it is strenuously accessible.

Truth as it is discovered in engagement must lead to action. Knowing the truth means that someone has to act. When these characters learn the truth about the atrocities around them, they are left with no choice but to engage in a resistance against them because they have learned the singular, universal truth that is impossible to ignore: the reality of the cyclicity of cruel oppression that surrounds civilizations is impossible to prevent but necessary to resist. To know the past and to be engaged in the present is to seek a universal truth that foretells the future. The implication of seeing into the future explains certain names throughout the novel. Ewing sails on *The Prophetess*, the same ship Rey passes in Buenas Yervas harbor on her way to retrieve the only remaining copy of Sixsmith’s HYDRA report. Meronym’s people live on Prescience Isle, one of the only civilizations to survive the Fall. Even the magazine Rey works for, *Spyglass*, carries connotations of clearly being able to see into the distance. The label of prophet or prescient is attached to these groups somewhat ironically, however, with Frobisher remarking that Ewing “never saw the unspeakable forms waiting around history’s corner” and even the

knowledge and technology of the Prescients do not prevent another plague from threatening their entire civilization. Despite that, the pursuit of those truths is never depicted as anything other than a revolutionary act and as something necessary for humanity to exist.

The process of approaching the universal truth in *Cloud Atlas* recurs in every narrative section because it requires continuous active engagement and must be relearned in the face of the powerful who benefit from mistruths. The reminders of the lessons learned by the previous generation or incarnation of a character are vital to not only to the narratives themselves but also to the thematic resonance of the entire novel. Each protagonist goes through a process of rediscovering a reality that a previous character has already learned. Although Ewing is the first character to learn this truth chronologically, he is the last in the novel. By placing Ewing's epiphany at the end, Mitchell stresses that importance of discovery for the individual characters over intrinsically understood and accepted knowledge.

VI. THE APOCALYPSE

With the nesting doll structure, Mitchell creates a sense of unveiling as each layer of the story is peeled back to reveal the next generation. At the center of the novel, and the center of the nesting doll, has to be the heart of the novel; the final truth to be uncovered. Apocalypse, coming from the Greek word for 'revelation,' becomes the force that uncovers the final truth of the novel. The revelation of this apocalypse is not only a dystopic future but also the current and historical trends of humans across time that make us directly responsible for that future.

Although the post-apocalyptic setting of "Sloosha's Crossin'" suggests that apocalypse is at the

heart of the narratives, the apocalypse has already taken place centuries before Zachry's time. At the heart, is not the apocalypse but the rebuilding of humanity afterwards.

As the singular truth becomes clear for the characters, the novel creeps towards its chronological endpoint: "Sloosha's Crossin'," which takes place centuries after a series of apocalyptic events that deadlanded most of the world. During Sonmi's narrative, Nea So Copros on the Korean peninsula could be the last stronghold of civilization. The Archivist says, "Nea So Copros is the world's only rising sun! Pre-Skirmish East Asia was the same chaos of sickly democracies, democidal autocracies, and rampant deadlands that the rest of the world still is! If the Juche had not unified and cordonized the region, we would have backslid to barbarism with the rest of the globe!" (325-6). While the Archivist is reciting "corpocracy propaganda," there could be some truth to the statement because Asia is depicted as one of the only remaining thriving civilizations. By Zachry's time, one of the only civilizations left with any form of technology is that of the Prescients who were originally formed on Iceland. Meronym explains to Zachry the fate of the rest of the world:

Fin'ly five decades after my people's landin' at Prescience, we relaunched the Ship what bringed us there...They finded the cities where the old maps promised, dead-rubble cities, jungle-choked cities, plague-rotted cities, but never a sign o' them livin' cities o' their yearnin's. We Prescients din't b'lief our weak flame o' Civ'lize was now the brightest in the Hole World, an' further an' further we sailed year by year, but we din't find no flame brighter. So lornsome we felt. Such a presh burden for two thousand pairs o' hands! I vow it, there ain't more 'n sev'ral places in Hole World what got the Smart o' the Nine Valleys. (272-73)

Rather than one individual cause, the apocalypse was the culmination of a series of disasters, from natural disasters brought about by pollution to epidemics to radiation poisoning from nuclear war. According to Meronym, the world felt apart slowly and in isolation until only the Prescients and secluded pockets of civilization like the tribes on Hawaii remained.

Despite the novel's post-apocalyptic settings, the actual moment of the apocalypse is jumped over. Rather, Mitchell chooses to focus his narratives on the times before and after the series of apocalyptic events that deadlands most of the world. It is implied that it happens between Cavendish's and Sonmi's narratives. Europe becomes deadlocked due to reasons that are made clearer in Mitchell's later novel *The Bone Clocks*. While Europe and North America are both deadlocked, countries in eastern Asia find global dominance and continue to rapidly develop new technology, leading to a future of clones and giant lunar projections that "beamed AdV after AdV onto the moon's face" (226). The distant future of Zachry finds us back in the west in Hawaii long after most civilizations have collapsed. There are some explanations given for the cause of the apocalypse in Sonmi's and Zachry's narratives, but even then, they are just asides rather than the focus, thematically or structurally. Meronym explains to Zachry that humans destroyed the world through greed, pollution, and nuclear disaster, which leads to the skirmishes and deadlanded countries that Sonmi references. The decision to not dwell in the moment of the apocalypse and only allude to it lends itself to the novel's interest in tracking the destructive tendencies throughout the history of humanity and not just a singular catastrophe. After generations of greed, predation, cruelty, and oppression, humanity is faced with endless humanitarian crises and global ecological disasters of their own making.

The apocalypse in *Cloud Atlas* also carries echoes of ecocriticism. As *Cloud Atlas* expands from centuries in the past to centuries in the future, it attempts to capture a brief account of humanity. Referring back to Harris' argument, the novel situates the 'present' as the consequence of cultural, political, and ecological history and with that becomes "a novel of the Anthropocene, the geological epoch defined by humans being a force that changes global natural history" (Harris 151). As a new epoch of geological time, suggested by Paul J. Crutzen in 2002,

the Anthropocene begins from “that moment in which human actions...have begun to reshape the geological future of the planet” (Baucom 137). As *Cloud Atlas* traces the Anthropocene from the beginnings of the Industrial Revolution to the post-apocalyptic future, Mitchell is not just looking at the impacts of capitalistic over-consumption of material goods but rather overarching trends in humanity that lead to apocalyptic consequences. In that sense, Mitchell considers the Anthropocene as something that is “potentially introspective and more” and as something that “strikes at the core of our culpability” (Scott 590). While Mitchell depicts humanity as the cause of the disaster, he also presents humanity as being capable of the cure. Although “history is revealed as driven by biological, ecological, and geological processes that function beneath or beyond any kind of deliberative human control, we are invited to take comfort in the fact that as individuals...our ‘virtuous acts’ might precipitate positive outcomes of which we are unaware” (Shoop and Ryan 94). At the end of the novel Ewing questions if “doom [is] written within our nature,” a fate that the novel plays over and over throughout its timeline (508). Ewing ultimately pushes back against that fatalistic mindset by suggesting that it is not history that determines the future but rather the belief that “humanity may transcend tooth & claw” and then acting on that belief (508).

Throughout the narratives, Mitchell consciously references warnings from the past and the future about the fate of the world and the inevitable apocalypse. Ewing says that the natural order has to be fought against because “one fine day, a purely predatory world *shall* consume itself” (508). In Sonmi’s narrative, souls have been entirely separated from the body and the government has created a system in which people quite literally consume each other. In the broader apocalypse, the end was spurred on by selfish people and greedy corporations like the

Seaboard Power Inc. of Luisa's mystery. Meronym tells Zachry that people caused their own downfall:

Yay, Old Uns' Smart mastered sicks, miles, seed an' made miracles ord'nary, but it din't master one thing, nay, a hunger in the hearts o' humans, yay, a hunger for more...Oh, more gear, more food, faster speeds, longer lives, easier lives, more *power*, yay. Now the Hole World is big, but it weren't big 'nuff for that hunger what made Old Uns rip out the skies an' boil up the seas an' poison soil with crazed atoms an' donkey 'bout with rotted seeds so new plagues was borned an' babbits was freakbirthed. Fin'ly, bit'ly, then quicksharp, states busted into barb'bric tribes an' the Civ'lize Days ended, 'cept for a few folds'n'pockets here'n'there, where its last embers glimmer. (272-3)

Mitchell places responsibility for the end of the world on individuals and larger organization whose greed led them to prey on and abuse the people and the planet to the point of annihilation. The "hunger for more" that Meronym explains as the beginning of the end for humanity, is the global manifestation of the cannibalism and predacity of individuals. With this, Mitchell shifts the focus from individual acts of greed to a trend of collective greed. He focuses more sharply on the beginning of the apocalypse in his later novel, *The Bone Clocks*.

VII. (IM)MORTALITY AND THE APOCALYPTIC IN *THE BONE CLOCKS*

The narrative of *The Bone Clocks*, written almost a decade after *Cloud Atlas*, is imbedded within the plot of the earlier novel. In *The Bone Clocks*, Mitchell fills out some of the structural and thematic gaps left ambiguous in *Cloud Atlas*, such as with his late reference to the formation of the Prescients who play a crucial role in "Sloosha's Crossin'," and who represent a hope for the future in the midst of the despair of the apocalyptic conclusion of *The Bone Clocks*. The two novels are inextricably intertwined together, from the apocalyptic overtones to a poetic reference late in the novel to the recurrence of characters and themes from Mitchell's über-book.

Unlike *Cloud Atlas*, *The Bone Clocks* only spans one lifetime, but like *Cloud Atlas*, *The Bone Clocks* passes the narration from one character to the next in six sections. The novel spans the years 1984 to 2043, following the life of Holly Sykes, who narrates the first section as a young teenager and the last as an old woman. The middle sections are told from the perspective of four people who play major roles in Holly's life: Hugo Lamb (a one-time lover and future Anchorite), Ed Brubeck (her partner and a war journalist), Crispin Hershey (an unexpected friend and fellow writer), and Marinus (an immortal Horologist who reveals secrets that have been following Holly for her entire life). In the backdrop of the novel is an immortal struggle between two different groups, the Horologists, who are naturally immortal beings who are reincarnated into a new body after they die, and the Anchorites, who have created artificial immortality by murdering and stealing souls to sustain themselves. Holly Sykes finds herself tied up in that conflict as a teenager when she unknowingly agrees to give asylum to one of the Horologists, Esther Little, who, after a near-fatal battle recedes into Holly's mind for decades until the final battle in the penultimate chapter of the novel. In *The Bone Clocks*, Mitchell works with similar themes to *Cloud Atlas* but on a more limited temporal and spatial scale and focuses on characters connected by an immediate sphere of influence, rather than one that spans generations. He remains consistent in his concentration on the prevalence of cycles, the problem of the soul, and in the position of the apocalypse as the culmination of the novel's narrative and themes.

Despite its significantly shorter time span in comparison to *Cloud Atlas*, the recurrence of cycles remains an important part of the novel. Horologist's lives are just cycles of fully-lived lives: "Prick us, we bleed...tickle us, we laugh, poison us, we die, but *after* we die, we come back" (450). Esther Little, one of the oldest Horologists whose "metallife" spans seven millennia

across two hundred bodies and who was considered a spirit of “collective memory” by the Noongar in Australia, predicts that in 2025, “[b]ooks’ll be back... Wait till the power grids start failing in the late 2030s and the datavats get erased. It’s not far away. The future looks a lot like the past” (433, 502). As a character whose meta-life spans the rise and fall of almost every civilization in history, Esther Little represents the whole of human history and therefore is the most appropriate observer of its patterns. The souls of Esther Little and Xi Lo date back millennia, so they become the embodiment of time itself—hence the name “Horologists” as those who study time. Because of that, they reflect humanity over time. The novel situates itself in a relatively short span of time, however, it evokes a vast scale, placing the present moment in conversation with the entire history of humanity. With the perspective of millennia, Esther Little accurately predicts the impending apocalypse that was, for her, an inevitable culmination. On a smaller scale, Ed Brubeck, a war journalist, finds himself trapped in the cycle of war as a “war junkie” working for *Spyglass*—the same magazine Luisa Rey worked for—and covering “Baghdad or Afghanistan Part Two or someplace else” because “there’s *always* someplace else, and on and on until the day your luck runs out” (217). All of the focal points of conflict that Mitchell traces across the centuries of his novels are concentrated into a single lifetime in *The Bone Clocks*.

The Anchorites are a literal incarnation of the thematic predacity Mitchell explores in *Cloud Atlas*. As explained by the Horologists, the Anchorites are “carnivorous Atemporals...who consume the psychovoltaic souls of innocent people in order to fuel their own immortality” (489). Dimovitz argues, “*The Bone Clocks*...wants to cannibalize the symbolism into the larger literal war of the predacious soul-sucking Anchorites against reincarnating Horologists—the ultimate literalization of this tension (even if, Mitchell makes clear, this is still

a metaphor for a very real human predacity)” (11). Even before the Anchorites are introduced to the novel, Mitchell establishes the thematic importance of power and cannibalism with the immediate references to Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*. The novel opens in Holly’s hometown of Gravesend, England, the same Gravesend near where Marlow narrates his voyage up the Congo River. The Sykes Family also fittingly owns a bar called the Captain Marlow. The third section of the novel follows Holly’s partner Ed Brubeck and his struggle between being present for his family and returning to reporting on the war in Iraq. Through the references to Conrad, Mitchell connects the past to the present through the thematic reverberation of literature and the prevalence of the themes and commentaries from Conrad’s 19th-century continuing into the 21st century.

In a slightly different approach than in *Cloud Atlas*, Mitchell’s focus on the soul in *The Bone Clocks* appears in the framing of mortality and morality. In between the supernatural battle between good and evil happening between two groups of immortals, Mitchell grounds his novel by not only framing it within the lifetime of one mortal woman but also constantly reminding the reader of the mortality of all of the characters. Ed Brubeck and Crispin Hershey, two of the narrators, die by the end of the novel. Holly’s daughter and son-in-law die in a plane crash. Ed Brubeck feels responsible for the deaths of two men who worked for him in Iraq. Holly becomes sick with cancer with a low chance of survival. Mitchell even forces the immortal Horologists to come to terms with their mortality. During their Second Mission to kill the Anchorites, the Horologists have to enter the Dusk, the place “between life and death...All the souls, the pale lights, crossing over, blown by the Seaward Wind to the Last Sea” (451). Horologists return to a new body before they reach the “Last Sea;” however, in their Second Mission, the Horologists are faced with the reality that to completely destroy the Anchorites and the Blind Cathar that

feeds their power, there is a high chance that they, too, will face real death, and most of them do die in the battle in the Dusk.

With the linear structure of the novel, the struggle between two groups of immortals, and the dystopian post-apocalyptic future lurking in its final pages, Mitchell takes a novel that makes complex use of fantasy and the supernatural and uses it as a funnel towards the haunting reality of mortality. In a review for *The Guardian*, Ursula K. Le Guin writes, “For all the stuff and nonsense about escaping mortality by switching bodies and devouring souls, death is at the heart of his novel. And there lies its depth and darkness, bravely concealed with all the wit and sleight of hand and ventriloquistic verbiage and tale-telling bravura of which Mitchell is a master.” The novel’s title, *The Bone Clocks*, is itself a reference to mortality. The phrase is the derisive name used by the Anchorites to refer to time-bound humans. Hugo tells Holly before the final battle in the Dusk, “They cured me of a terrible wasting disease called mortality...The young hold out for a time, but eventually even the hardest patient gets reduced to a desiccated embryo, a Strudlebug ... a veined, scrawny, dribbling ...bone clock, whose face betrays how very, very little time they have left” (525-6). With the graphic imagery and the reference to Swift’s immortal Struldbruggs who never die, but also never stop aging, the novel “employs an obvious allegory for the frailty and fragility of the human condition” (Shaw 3). However, instead of positing a moral in which some humans can overcome that frailty, Mitchell presents the “Anchorites’ desire to freeze time and violate the universal march towards death that is the fate of the rest of the human ‘bone clocks’... as something that is inhuman, and thereby wrong” (Dimovitz 16). In the juxtaposition between Anchorites and Horologists, Mitchell creates a microcosm through which to explore the larger themes of the novel. The Anchorites as a group are obsessed with the ability to evade death through immortality. This evasion of change makes the immortality the Anchorites seek

sinister. The Anchorites' artificial immortality preserves their bodies; they lose pieces of their soul every time they steal other's souls to sustain themselves. Violence still kills the soul, and so the Anchorites can never truly achieve immortality because they have killed their souls—their essence of humanity—in the process. The Horologists, on the other hand, are considered heroic immortals because their immortality is not a choice and it is not a vain attempt to hold onto youth, beauty, and power. They have mortal bodies that grow old and die, but their souls live on in different bodies across time. As Mitchell stresses the connection between the soul and humanity in *Cloud Atlas*, so does he in *The Bone Clocks*. True immortality, then, is only achieved when the soul remains intact.

The title, with the circular and temporal connotations of a clock, also points to the cycles of life and death and renewal that flood the novel's grander conceptions of humanity, like in *Cloud Atlas*, while also grounding the novel in the limited life of his main mortal protagonist Holly, and the power that even she has amongst the supernatural immortal beings. Fittingly, Holly discovers a form of immortality that is most meaningful to her at the end of her life. As she puts her grandchildren to sleep, Lorelei tells Holly, "Sleep tight, Gran, don't let the bedbugs bite," which for Holly carries the weight of generations: "Dad used to say that to me, I used to say it to Aoife, Aoife passed it on to Lorelei, and now Lorelei says it back to me. We live on, as long as there are people to live on in" (552). In the final section, Holly's granddaughter Lorelei recites an excerpt from Shelley's "The Cloud," which not only calls back to *Cloud Atlas* and the different significances of that work's title, but also mirrors the novel's balancing point between life and death:

I silently laugh at my own cenotaph,
And out of the caverns of rain,
Like a child from the womb, like a ghost from the tomb,
I arise and unbuild it again. (qtd. in Mitchell 566)

The apocalypse is the world rising and unbuilding itself again as part of the endless cycle of life itself. People, and the stories they share of the past and present, become the cenotaphs and keepers of memory for humanity. The poem's inclusion is also a reference to Zachry's musing about how "[s]ouls cross the skies o' time ... like clouds crossin' skies o' the world" (302). Even after the apocalypse, as long as souls persevere, so too can humanity.

By writing a novel that centers on the immortal battle between two supernatural groups of beings but choosing to focus on the mortal humans, Mitchell does two things. First, he shifts the stakes of the plot away from the battle between the immortals. Although it is the major plot point of the novel, the actual battle itself has relatively minor consequences in comparison to the novel's apocalyptic ending. The possible consequence of the Horologists failing their Second Mission is not the end of the world. Second, he recontextualizes the culpability of the characters for the novel's ending. The dystopian future of *The Bone Clocks* "is caused by a very specific reason, and the novel is practically a catalogue of disaster literature's recurring imagery...all set in motion very specifically by climate change" (Dimovitz 560). While *Cloud Atlas* only leaves hints about the cause of the fall of global civilization coming from skirmishes, plagues, and radiation, the beginning of the apocalypse is laid out explicitly in *The Bone Clocks*. Holly directly points to people's culpability, including herself, with the collective 'we':

People talk about the Endarkenment like our ancestors talked about the Black Death, as if it's an act of God. But we summoned it, with every tank of oil we burned our way through. My generation were diners stuffing ourselves senseless at the Restaurant of the Earth's Riches knowing—while denying—that we'd be doing a runner and leaving our grandchildren a tab that can never be paid. (561)

This acknowledgement of direct responsibility is implied in *Cloud Atlas*, but it is not as fully realized as it is in *The Bone Clocks*, signifying a shift in focus from Mitchell's earlier works. Although the apocalypse plays a role in *Cloud Atlas*, and the structure of the novel drives the

reader towards the post-apocalyptic future, it isn't until *The Bone Clocks* that Mitchell fully commits himself to the imminence of the apocalypse.

Whereas the apocalypse in *Cloud Atlas* is ambiguously placed somewhere in the centuries between Cavendish's and Sonmi's narratives, Mitchell places the apocalypse in the 2030s with a global plague and quarantine in 2031, deadly flooding and a series of catastrophes that played like a "plotless never-ending disaster movie" on the news, and a Gigastorm in 2038 that results in a global "Endarkenment" (551, 560). Set between 1980 to the mid-21st century, *Bone Clocks* overlaps slightly with the present-day narrative of Cavendish in *Cloud Atlas*, but it also extends beyond Cavendish's lifetime into the middle of the century and outlines the beginning of the apocalypse that completely resets the world by Zachry's lifetime. The specificity of Mitchell's apocalypse reflects Mitchell's renewed ecocritical focus that appeared in *Cloud Atlas* but plays more of a central role in *The Bones Clocks*. With this, Mitchell acknowledges a present that is unusually destructive. The culmination of militarization, economic scarcity, capitalistic greed, and ecological pollution is the apocalypse of a near-future present.

The genocidal and predatory forces in history manifest themselves in Ed Brubeck's story, as he covers a seemingly endless sequence of wars and remarks on the all-encompassing destructive nature of those wars. Routine and widespread militarization rots the world, and as in *Cloud Atlas*, the pervasive violence threatens the soul. Even after the apocalypse, militarized groups form and raid the remaining pockets of civilization. When one group invades Sheep's Head and steals supplies and solar panels. Holly remarks that the leader is wearing "a green beret of military origin, a flak jacket, like Ed used to wear in Iraq" (598). The connection between

previous wars and the raiders, represents the continuation of destructive, militaristic impulses, even as civilization has effectively started over and reverted to its beginning.

Although *The Bone Clocks* is a fantasy epic, the apocalypse grounds the fantastical with the familiar and relevant stakes in the real world outside of the novel. With this comes a desire to reveal truth through fiction. Kristin Shaw argues, “By resisting the abstract escapism of fantasy fiction, the novel demonstrates the genre’s innate capacity to reach beyond the limits of realism and image potential dystopian crises on the horizon” (16). The supernatural is useless at preventing the disaster of the apocalypse. The failure of the supernatural characters to avert disaster, then, serves to mark the apocalypse as something grounded in the rules of reality and not in the realm of fantasy. Ursula K. Le Guin goes further. She writes in “Why Are Americans Afraid of Dragons” about the importance of fantasy as a lens through which to investigate truth: “For fantasy is true, of course. It isn’t factual, but it is true. Children know that. Adults know it too, and that is precisely why many of them are afraid of fantasy. They know that its truth challenges, even threatens, all that is false, all that is phony, unnecessary, and trivial in the life they have let themselves be forced into living” (Le Guin 44). The truth that Le Guin sees as terrifying to adults is that fantasy will not only reveal something about the nature of our world but also the nature of us. Rather than being a distraction from reality, the supernatural is a reminder of it and of a universal truth that Mitchell presents in *The Bone Clocks* as being too easily ignored: people have chosen to perpetuate the destructive trends of humanity—pollution, war, greed—for profit and personal gain, which will endlessly cycle until they culminate in a social, political, and ecological apocalypse. By the investigation of reality through the lens of fantasy and fiction, the novel becomes an expression of our uncertainty of the present moment and for social, political, and ecological degradation that threatens our future.

With “An Horologist’s Labyrinth,” Mitchell could have ended the novel with the satisfaction of the defeat of the Anchorites, Holly’s survival, Hugo Lamb’s redemption and attempted sacrifice for Holly, and Marinus saving herself and Lamb at the last moment. Instead, Mitchell continues the novel with “Sheep’s Head” as a sort of coda. The final section jumps ahead to 2043 and picks up with Holly’s life after a series of events has resulted in an apocalyptic reality across Europe and North America. It is a painful ending for what could have been a happily-ever-after story with evil conquered and the sacrifices that Holly and the Horologists made being worth it. However, with this coda, Mitchell reminds the reader of the same rules he stressed in *Cloud Atlas*. Although the group that represents a physical embodiment of evil and cannibalism has been defeated, that does not signify the defeat of all evil but just one instance of it. The apocalypse is still the culmination of centuries of human nature repeating itself until a global climate disaster wipes out western civilization.

Although the final section of *The Bone Clocks* centers on an unexpected and inevitable apocalypse in terms of the narrative and the trends of history, as in *Cloud Atlas*, the ending of *The Bone Clocks* looks forward to the future and to the rebuilding of civilization. Marinus and the remaining Horologists form “Prescience” on Iceland. Even though the reader already knows the weary fate of the world and of the Prescients in *Cloud Atlas*, seeing the origin is a moment of hope that civilization can be preserved. As Holly remarks, “Civilization’s like the economy, or Tinkerbell: If people stop believing it’s real, it dies” (601). Without that belief, humanity would be doomed to fall eternally and without the possibility of redemption. Amidst cycles of defeat, Mitchell refuses to let his characters live without hope or the belief and action required to maintain the essence of humanity and morality across time and space.

VIII. ENDINGS

The apocalyptic overtones of *Cloud Atlas* and *The Bone Clocks* can be traced by to the first installment of Mitchell's über-book, *Ghostwritten*. Mitchell's debut novel features his first attempt at creating short stories that are simultaneously self-contained and interconnected. Like his later novels, it also has aspects of the supernatural with non-corporeal beings.⁵ The narratives in *Ghostwritten* are, however, more strenuously connected than in *Cloud Atlas* and *The Bone Clocks*. The novel features the origins of Mitchell's familiar themes of predacity, with hitmen, cruel authoritarian governments, the greed of corporations, and most notably with the novel opening and closing with a terrorist. And as in *The Bone Clocks* and *Cloud Atlas*, that endpoint is the apocalypse, or at least the apocalyptic.

Although Mitchell never directly returns to the novel's earlier protagonists in the final two sections of *Ghostwritten*, there is an implication that their stories are all connected by this endpoint because of the allusions to the characters through familiar symbols or imagery. The inclusion of Luisa Rey at the end of the novel—and the epigraph of *The Bridge of San Luis Rey* included before the start—emphasizes the interconnectedness of characters, plots, and themes, with characters who encounter each other by pure coincidence but are otherwise in no way related all hurtling towards the same end. The apocalypse in *Ghostwritten* takes place around the turn of the 21st century. In the novel's penultimate section, Bat Segundo, a late night radio host broadcasts an "End of the World Special" in New York City. There is a threat of nuclear war and mass rioting in the streets. Although a nuclear disaster is avoided, another catastrophe comes a

⁵ The presence of non-corporeal and atemporal beings almost becomes a trademark for Mitchell in his works, with *Ghostwritten*, *The Thousand Autumns of Jacob de Zoet*, *The Bone Clocks*, *Slade House*, and *Utopia Avenue* all building on Mitchell's concept of souls that transcend corporeal bodies and with every one of these books—aside from his debut novel—featuring the Horologist Marinus during at least one of their lifetimes.

couple years later in the form of a comet heading for Earth. An AI called the Zookeeper, developed by one of the novel's earlier protagonists Mo Muntervary—who reappears on Sheep's Head with Holly in *The Bone Clocks*—decides that this comet should not be prevented because it “begins to realize that the ethical laws it has been given by Mo—preserving human life *and* the planet's integrity—are impossible to reconcile” (Caracciolo 59). The Zookeeper blames humanity: “The visitors I safeguard are wrecking my zoo” (419). While scientists believe the comet will pass by Earth harmlessly, the Zookeeper controls the data that the scientists are using to calculate the comet's course and the section ends with the approaching comet and an implication that it and Earth are on a collision course. Like in *The Bone Clocks* and *Cloud Atlas*, the apocalypse is directly tied to the destruction humanity has caused the planet, but unlike in *The Bone Clocks* and *Cloud Atlas*, the presumed apocalypse in *Ghostwritten* is avoidable but is also to be determined or prevented by a machine created by a human to save and protect humanity. The Zookeeper's decision represents a Biblical apocalypse as he believes that the only way to save and redeem humanity is by destroying it.

After the ambiguity of the penultimate section, the novel finishes with a coda and a return to the first protagonist, a terrorist and member of a doomsday cult. By ending *Ghostwritten* with the first protagonist, Mitchell introduces the theme of cyclicity that he develops more in his later works. He plants a bomb in a subway and pushes his way through a crowd to get back onto the platform. Because of the connections with the other works by Mitchell, the apocalypse by comet is avoided, but within the text of his debut novel, Mitchell refuses the reader a happy ending with the threat of the comet still looming by the final page as the terrorist thinks, “Wait for the comet, wait for the White Nights” (426). Despite the near-miss with the end of the world, nothing has changed on Earth: there are still people who prey on those they consider weak, or “unclean”

(426). In comparison to his later works, the ending to *Ghostwritten* carries the most pessimistic outlook of the world.

Likewise in Mitchell's second novel, *Number9dream*, the ending features a minor apocalyptic event that is unexpected and unresolved. The story follows Eiji Miyake on his quest to reconnect with his estranged father in Tokyo. After a series of ambiguous events that balance between fantasy, dreams, and reality, Mitchell ends the novel when a massive earthquake hitting Tokyo:

The subway system ... Rush hour has started ... All those people in tunnels ... Here on Yakushima, centuries of quiet rain are falling among the pine needles. What now? What now? I cannot think straight, so my body takes over. I fly down the polished hallway, scrunch my feet into my sneakers, fight with the knots, scrap open the door, and begin running. (400)

The disorientation and chaos of these final words are followed by the final chapter of the novel: a secret ninth chapter left off of the table of contents. This final chapter is blank, leaving the reader with a sense of expectation and dissatisfaction because of the lack of answers at the end of a novel already full of questions without answers. It also suggests that even Eiji's wild creativity cannot envision the apocalypse that the final pages imply. The apocalypse here is unimaginable and indescribable.

The differences in outlooks between Mitchell's first two novels and his later works are startling, especially considering *Number9dream* and *Cloud Atlas* were published only a year apart. While *Ghostwritten* ends with a subway bombing and *Number9dream* with a devastating natural disaster, *Cloud Atlas* and *The Bone Clocks* are framed around a series of civilization-ending, world-changing apocalyptic events. And yet, the endings of *Cloud Atlas* and *The Bone Clocks* are not as ambiguous or cynical as in his previous works. Instead, each manages to be simultaneously heart-breaking and hopeful as they look to the possibilities of the future and of future generations. The apocalypse, or at least the moment of it, still remains indescribable as

Mitchell avoids writing it as something in the present; however unlike in his earlier works, with *Cloud Atlas* and *The Bone Clocks*, he is able to imagine a future in which humanity starts to rebuild itself afterwards.

The ending of *Cloud Atlas* is almost paradoxical in its message and delivery. The novel ends before Ewing officially joins the abolitionist movement and without any declarations of his success or failure or his involvement at all. Instead, it just concludes with a promise.

Ewing imagines his father-in-law's—a representative of the older generation—response to his decision to join the Abolitionists:

Oh, you'll grow hoarse, poor & gray in caucuses! 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 of 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! (508-509)

With this imagined conversation, there is an acknowledgement from Ewing that even he has some doubts about the possibility of real change. The novel seems to reinforce that doubt with the recurrence of evil and oppressive bodies that replace themselves like the heads of a hydra over the generations. In the final line—and final question—of the novel, Ewing challenges his father-in-law's imagined taunt: “Yet what is any ocean but a multitude of drops?” (509). It is an idealistic and hopeful ending, especially for a novel that is drenched in apocalyptic overtones and framed around the seemingly hopeless eternal cycle of predacity and cruelty. However, Ewing's final line becomes a call to action for himself and future generations to act and renew the revolution in spite of the seeming futility of resistance.

Mitchell's choice to end on a note of optimism calls attention to the moments of hope sprinkled throughout the rest of the novel. Between the recurrences of hydras in corporations like Seaboard Power with their HYDRA-Zero Reactor, gangs like “the “Hoggins Hydra,” and the

“Hydra Nursery Corp” in Nea So Copros appear reminders of the heroism of the many-headed protagonist who fights the unkillable beast for eternity, represented fittingly in Frobisher’s “many-headed sextet” (386, 323, 471). Rey succeeds in exposing the corruption at the top of Seaboard Power Inc., Cavendish escapes from the nursing home and finally finds success in his career and happiness in his life, Sonmi fails to lose her unwavering belief in the success of her revolution even while she faces imminent execution, Zachry and Meronym, after losing everything, escape from the Kona with their lives and forge new lives for themselves elsewhere in the world. Even Frobisher, despite his tragic ending, finishes his masterpiece and expresses some hope for the promise of a better life, the next time around.

With its mirrored structure, Mitchell ends the novel not at the chronological ending but rather the beginning. Ewing’s journal leaves an impression on Frobisher’s music and letters, which influences Rey’s case. Cavendish’s daring escape inspires Sonmi’s revolution, and she becomes a god that spiritually and morally guides Zachry. With that, the novel’s idealist ending becomes connected to every narrative as if the idealism and hopefulness of Ewing’s decision is renewed in every generation. Sonmi’s final interview in many ways echoes Ewing’s, especially when questioned about why she chose to join the rebellion when she knew it was faked and doomed to fail from the start. She tells the Archivist, “We see a game beyond the endgame” (349). Sonmi’s revolution started with her, but she is content with the knowledge that it will outlive her: “As Seneca warned Nero: No matter how many of us you kill, you will never kill your successor” (349). Although Sonmi has failed to bring about the revolution she is to be executed for, she is certain that there is an ocean of people to take up the cause.

Ewing’s entire final letter is not just hopeful but determined. Throughout *Cloud Atlas* is a sense of nihilism, tying back to the Nietzschean influences in “Letters to Zedelghem,” suggesting

that an individual cannot change the world or the future, not really. But that doesn't stop any of the protagonists. Across the narratives are choices that each of the characters makes because of corruption, greed, and sin, or for revolution and resistance. It's fitting then, that after following each of the protagonists make the choice to resist, the novel ends on the first character, the one entrenched in the privilege and comfort of the oppressors, choosing to resist that temptation, if not for himself, then for his son—the next generation: “A life spent shaping a world I *want* Jackson to inherit, not one I *fear* Jackson shall inherit, this strikes me as a life worth the living” (508). Ewing is not, however, blinded by naivety. He says that if we believe the world can be just and fair, then “such a world will come to pass,” but that world is also “the hardest of worlds to make real” and that “[t]orturous advances won over generations can be lost by a single stroke of a myopic president's pen or a vainglorious general's sword” (508). Despite that, he pledges himself to the abolitionist cause, because he “must begin somewhere” (508).

Mitchell's response to the apocalypse seems to have changed after his first novels. Maybe it was his rejection of the nihilism that darkens the final section of *Ghostwritten* or the meaninglessness of reality that invades the pages of *Number9dream*. In contrast, *Cloud Atlas* ends on Ewing's promise to his son and *The Bone Clocks* ends on Holly's promise to her grandchildren. Ewing's hope for his son and Holly's love for her grandchildren are the final emotions with which Mitchell leaves the reader, not the fear and confusion of an apocalyptic reality. While all four of the works mentioned have some degree of an apocalyptic ending, the two with the actual apocalypse end more optimistically than the ones without. Mitchell still refuses to give the reader the utopic ending that Ewing hopes for, but *Cloud Atlas* and *The Bone Clocks* are not without utopian undertones, even when the novels are steeped in fully dystopian realities. Utopia, in these novels, especially utopia bookended by the reality of violence and an

apocalyptic destiny, is not a place. Like the concept of the soul and truth, utopia isn't even unambiguous. Utopia is as elusive as the truth and as mysterious as the soul, but the possibility of it is felt nonetheless in the final pages of *Cloud Atlas* and *The Bone Clocks*. The ending to *The Bone Clocks* is much like *Cloud Atlas* in that it is not an ending so much as a beginning. In *Cloud Atlas*, it is the restart of a familiar story, but for *The Bone Clocks*, it is the start of a new one. As Holly watches her granddaughter and adopted grandson leave Sheep's Head for the final time as the "youthful ancient" Marinus takes them to one of the last bastions of civilization, she remarks, "For one voyage to begin, another voyage must come to an end, sort of" (623, 624).

Mitchell's novels aren't prophecies but rather reminders of the past and warnings about the possibility of a future he wants to avoid. In an interview with Gaby Wood about the Future Library, for which Mitchell wrote a novella⁶ that will be buried alongside other texts for a century, he says that his contribution to the project reflects his hope that the seemingly inevitable destruction predicted in his works won't happen. Instead, in the future, "things that are important to me will still exist, and that orchestral blast of bad news that you get when you open newspapers and click on websites – all the dystopian stuff about climate change, about terrorism, about demagogues seizing control of large, industrial countries – that side won't win." He says that the winning side will be the one that "values seeing things from other people's point of view" and that the currently "deeply embattled side has an equal shot at influencing the future." Mitchell even echoes his characters' decisions to act when he explains that the project represents "a tiny way for me to do a little bit more than hoping" (qtd. in Wood 12). One key feature of Mitchell's novels, throughout his career, is the power of the individual, and in *The Bone Clocks*,

⁶ *From Me Flows What You Call Time* was written in 2016 and will be published along with 99 other novels that will be submitted one-by-one every year until 2114. The Future Library project was conceived by Scottish artist Katie Paterson (Wood 12).

the power of a mortal, to influence the present and the future. With this perspective, the individual is responsible for resisting against those predatory forces that seek to silence and suppress others. Mitchell places an increased importance on the decision his characters make to act; to do good, in the face of evil—whether it be the everyday or the extraordinary, if not for the sake of the global civilization, then for the sake of those they love and some form of a personal redemption.

Amidst all of his high-concept ideas like reincarnation and immortality are his human characters, grounded by their mortality and their flaws. Much of this essay has been focused on how Mitchell tracks and depicts the cycle of predacity, greed, corruption, and evil throughout time. The ripple effects of evil are so emphasized throughout the individual stories that his novels appear to become obsessed with a destructive, pessimistic outlook that permeates the plots. The endings, however, challenge that reading of *Cloud Atlas*, *The Bone Clocks* and of Mitchell's über-book as a whole. Within the global, centuries-spanning scale of his works, he chooses to focus on intimate character studies of complicated figures. However, even his most flawed protagonists are given and act upon a chance for redemption and a chance to become figures of revolution and truth. Their redemption often starts with small acts of good and for every recurrence of evil come figures who resist it. Holly transforms everyone around her, bringing out the best in the conflicted Ed Brubeck, the conceited Crispin Hershey, and even the cruel Hugo Lamb. Sixsmith's decision to print his report ripples out until the entire company is taken down. Cavendish's film becomes an inspiration for Sonmi's revolution, which grows for generations until the destruction of Nea So Copros and she becomes a god and symbol of morality for the Valleysmen. The apocalypse in these works reveals the best in us as much as it reveals the worst. Over generations, the ripples of good, tiny as they might seem during each

lifetime, become part of Ewing's ocean of drops. From all of these small acts appears a cycle of the best of humanity resisting emergences of predacity, rippling across time and space, and extending into and beyond the apocalypse.

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