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Re-Construction Through Fragmentation: A Cosmodern Reading of David Mitchell's *Cloud*

*Atlas*

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A thesis

presented to

the faculty of the Department of Literature and Language

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In partial fulfillment

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Master of Arts in English

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by

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## ABSTRACT

Re-Construction Through Fragmentation: A Cosmodern Reading of David Mitchell's *Cloud*

*Atlas*

by

Beth Miller

A cosmodern reading of David Mitchell's *Cloud Atlas* creates a positive vision of the future for readers through various techniques of fragmentation including fragmentation of voice, language, and time. By fragmentation, I have in mind the consistent interruption of the novel's voice, language, and time that requires an active and aware readership. The reader's interaction with the text makes the novel re-constructive. In fact, the global nature of Mitchell's novel, its hopeful ending, and its exploration of the effects of globalization can be considered as a means of exploring the dynamic relationships between the characters, the reader, and Mitchell's authorial voice. Rather than falling back on familiar postmodernist truisms such as the hopelessness of genuine communication or the impossibility of truth, Mitchell creates a hopeful vision of the future of the world, one that champions the life, agency, and personal narrative of the individual.

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

David Mitchell's popular third novel, *Cloud Atlas*, follows a series of narratives that range from a Victorian journal of colonialism to a futuristic world of cannibalism and the end of human civilization, stopping along the way to explore an artist in the 1930s, a reporter in a 1970s spy novel, an old man trapped in a nursing home, and a condemned clone. Mitchell says of his novel that it's about "predacity and predation... individuals preying on groups, groups preying on individuals" and it certainly is, but it's also about hope, a subject almost entirely absent from the critical discourse surrounding *Cloud Atlas* (Denes). Criticism of *Cloud Atlas* has generally focused on one of three elements, or some combination thereof. First, many critics have focused on the novel's structure and debated whether Mitchell is utilizing the technique of recurrence, "the Nietzschean trope of endless repetition," or something closer to a Russian matryoshka doll structure, a nested series of narratives "that relies on stacked subnarratives" (Mezey 14). (In fact, his complex novel is employing both.) Second, some critics have traced the Neo-Victorian trauma created by the first and last storyline of the novel, "The Pacific Journal of Adam Ewing," which explores British colonialism, and have placed Mitchell within the conversation of contemporary British authors rewriting the trauma of the Victorian era and World War I. Lastly, critics have paid a great deal of attention to the two apocalyptic storylines of *Cloud Atlas*, both of which take place after the early 2000s, when the novel was written, the first set in the 22<sup>nd</sup> century and then several hundred years after that, when mankind is on the brink of extinction. These stories, critics argue, offer Mitchell's vision of unchecked capitalism, human greed, and cruelty.

As one might expect, criticism surrounding the novel's multiple-perspective structure,

themes of trauma, and dystopian narrative has been distinctly postmodern. While acknowledging the validity of these critical approaches, I would like to transition from these readings of the novel and contribute a “cosmodern,” rather than postmodern, reading of *Cloud Atlas*, one that will explore the positive possibilities of agency and storytelling. In doing this, I will argue that, paradoxically, Mitchell creates this positive, cosmodern vision of the future for his readers through various techniques of fragmentation. These include fragmentation of voice, language, and time, which I will explore in consecutive chapters: Chapter One explores fragmentation of voice towards an expression of the self; Chapter Two explores fragmentation of language for understanding, and Chapter Three explores fragmentation of time in order to reimagine the narrative arc of History.

Cosmodernism charts the relatedness and interconnectedness of our globalizing world, re-imagining postmodern tropes into a new *Weltanschauung* of human experience. The term is coined from a combination of the ideas of the “kosmopolites (world citizen)” as well as the cosmos (Moraru “Introduction” 3; D’haen “European” 271). Christian Moraru’s theories of cosmodernism, which I draw from extensively in this thesis, primarily focus on American literature in the post-Cold War period, starting with the fall of the Berlin wall, but Theo D’haen applies cosmodern theory more broadly, using *Cloud Atlas* as a means to discuss the union of the postcolonial and the postmodern in scholarship. Moraru defines cosmodernism in this way:

Neither the only ‘new thing’ eager to supplant, say, postmodernism or multiculturalism nor full-blown movement or school, cosmodernism is principally (a) an *imaginary modality* of mapping out today’s world as a cultural geography of relationality; (b) by the same token, a *protocol of subjectivity formation*; (c) an *ethical imperative* pointing to the present as much as to the future; and (d) a *critical algorithm* for decrypting and

assembling a range of post-1989 narrative and theoretical imaginings into a reasonably coherent and, again, ahead-looking model. (6, emphasis in original)

Moraru's definition perfectly encompasses the elements of *Cloud Atlas*. The novel cognitively maps events and their effects around the world, charts power structures and their formation, asks the reader to develop agency, and further requires that they shape a new world view, based on possibilities of globalization rather than the despair of postmodernism. Theo D'haen, who also draws upon the work of Linda Hutcheon and Moraru, argues that *Cloud Atlas* aims to be "re-constructive" (274). My argument adds to his reading of the novel as cosmodern through a re-constructive focus in fragmentation; the reader actively participates in making sense of the fragmented voices, and these voices create a new narrative and future for existing paradigms and structures. In fact, the global nature of Mitchell's novel, its hopeful ending, and its exploration of the effects of globalization can be considered within a cosmodern reading of *Cloud Atlas* as a means of exploring the dynamic relationships between the characters, the reader, and Mitchell's authorial voice. It is in these relationships that agency exists. Said in another way, cosmodernism's emphasis on relationship looks for a necessity of identity with one another rather than an isolated, self-reflexive identity.

At the same time that it depends on relationships, cosmodernism embraces fragmentation, difference, and variety as necessities of the real post-Cold War world. It allows novelists to define themselves by this more contemporary global environment rather than the postmodern melancholy and resignation that typify much of the literature written after the Second World War, Auschwitz, and the dropping of the atom bombs. Moraru explains, "the relatedness inherent in cosmodernism speaks to and upholds unabashedly an ethics of difference.... It is... the distinct, the singular, that makes... for the 'most common' in us and thus for the basis of 'real

community” which is founded upon “a structure of ‘with-ness’ (8).<sup>1</sup> A cosmodern reading of *Cloud Atlas* allows Mitchell’s prodding of the reader to find self-agency through personal voice, storytelling in community, and activism within the historical moment by reclaiming language and rewriting the dominant narrative of history. In this way, the reader becomes one of many global literary voices encouraging social activism and global, relational, other-defined identity and motivation.

One further note about fragmentation: By fragmentation, I have in mind the consistent interruption of the novel’s voice, language, and time that requires an active and aware readership. Rather than falling back on familiar postmodernist truisms such as the hopelessness of genuine communication or the impossibility of truth, Mitchell creates a hopeful vision of our real world, one that champions the life, agency, and personal narrative of the individual. Instead of dismissing the idea of community, Mitchell privileges those who work within a community, and he offers a vision of communities working within the globalized world. Cosmodern novels often work in this way, utilizing tropes of postmodernism to create new worldviews and cope with the positive possibilities of globalization.

In order to create this optimistic space for the future, *Cloud Atlas* reclaims history. Beginning with European colonization and slavery, Mitchell offers characters who stand for abolition, art, the environment, personal memory, equality, and community—values not commonly associated with historiographic fiction specifically or postmodernism generally. Put simply, Mitchell’s characters speak out against the negative dominant narratives of their time even as they are seemingly bound within them, and in this way they connect with voices from every age. *Cloud Atlas* resists the paralyzing analyses of many postmodern critics such as

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<sup>1</sup> Moraru also cites Giorgio Agamben’s *The Coming Community* in the formation of this definition.



Derrida, Jameson, and Levi-Strauss, instead creating a narrative arc that suggests the possibility of a new world, one of agency and change, and one in which an ocean of unique voices continually speaks itself into being. In this way, Mitchell suggests the possibility of a new history, a new future, one infinitely more hopeful than the apocalyptic and devastating one we so often imagine.

## CHAPTER 2

### FRAGMENTED VOICE

Fragmented voice is the most unique (and controversial) element of Mitchell's novel. By fragmentation, I have in mind the ways the novel's voice and its presentation of language and time appear to be interrupted and distressed; as a result, their dispersal throughout the novel creates what might be called a consistent discontinuity. At the level of characterization, this discontinuity is also a kind of nonconformity, allowing characters to claim agency by breaking away from linear, historical narratives. Contemporary novelists often use fragmented narratives to more vividly and accurately depict the experience of life in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, with the aim of a semblance of truth, rather than a definitive truth. Mitchell's six characters, like the storylines in which they appear, have wildly different voices. The characters' manner of communicating is meant both for the moment and for posterity. In other words, the characters are aware that their mode of expression will have repercussions beyond their historical moment. Mitchell's authorial control, for its part, is demonstrated by reflective breaks in each of the narratives—either by an insertion of authorial voice, an overly aware character reflection, or a joke about genre, writing, or literature.

The first person narration of many of the novel's storylines increases the immediacy of each voice and, as a result, brings the reader closer to each narrator's community. As a reader experiences community through the narrator's eyes and voice, she comes very close to acting as storyteller; as a result, the acts of reading and telling become defined and shaped by one another. Cosmodernism privileges authenticity and seeks for it at the level of self-knowledge but with the caveat that the self can only be known through definition of the other. In the case of *Cloud Atlas*, the characters come to understand themselves by expressing (narrating) how they relate to the

rest of their world. Because this relation can only be defined by the other, the voice is necessarily *contingent*, or fragmented. Moraru views this as a

post-multiculturalist ‘politics of recognition’ – and with it a less conventional idea of identitarian ‘authenticity’ – whose motto is no longer the autonomist ‘I want to be known for what I am’ but the more humbly relational ‘I want to be known for who or what I am with,’ for, *in fine*, ‘I have accepted this ‘co-definitional’ world’s ‘challenge of knowing [my]self *with* others’ (22).<sup>2</sup>

*Cloud Atlas* draws its relational contingency in part from its relationship with the reader, characterized by “the new togetherness emerging in turn-of-the-century reading practices” for which Moraru and I both use Wolfgang Iser’s work of the “Interaction Between Text and Reader”<sup>3</sup>. Moraru beautifully reinterprets Iser’s theory for cosmopolitanism

Reading, the cosmopolitans tell us, is creative and self-creative. The foray into another’s work is not merely reproductive. It is productive. Through it, the reading self produces itself, makes itself into something it has not been before. The logic of cosmopolitan reading and cosmopolitanism in general is then ‘metamorphic,’ critically transformative rather than simply iterative. (10)

This particular type of reading, in the case of *Cloud Atlas*, involves the reader in composing the narrative structure of the novel, which, while it may appear to be a carefully embedded doll sequence, exists for the reader at the level of fragmentation. Said in another way, reading as a

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<sup>2</sup> Here Moraru also references Charles Taylor’s essay “The Politics of Recognition” within *Multiculturalism: Examining the Politics of Recognition* as well as Timothy J. Reiss’s *Against Autonomy: Global Dialectics of Cultural Exchange*.

<sup>3</sup> Iser theorizes that a work of literature occurs between two poles: the artistic and the aesthetic. “The artistic pole is the author’s text and the aesthetic is the realization accomplished by the reader” (1524). Iser specifically believes that in literature “the message is transmitted in two ways, in that the reader ‘receives’ it by composing it” (1524).

communal and creative activity necessarily breaks previous notions of self, language, and narrative.

Through a cosmodern reading of *Cloud Atlas*, the reader's narrative becomes personal, and in this sense it becomes art. One might even argue that the reader becomes the eighth character/voice in the novel (Mitchell's voice being the seventh) and that the reader's voice is able to take on the *aura* of art, in Walter Benjamin's sense of that word. The reader not only alters the definition of self through relation with that of the characters and Mitchell, but also critically transforms and is able to move in a different direction than was imagined upon the initial embarkation of the novel. The reader's implied, fragmented self is created, and re-created, through its identification with each character. This, in turn, leads to a new critical understanding of the world because, again, it's never about self-understanding in an autonomous sense, but rather the understanding of self in relation to that of other.

A cosmodern reading of *Cloud Atlas* enlightens this multiplicity of possibility further by celebrating difference along with relationships. Six of these characters can share a soul across time, in a fictional interpretation of our real world, but they can also each serve as a partial embodiment of an implied author and his experience. In this sense, everyone involved in this relationship has a part in creating a soul, or, in this case, a story. Each story is told in a unique voice relating to its historical moment as well as one recognizable to readers through varying genres and voices through time. For example, Adam's journal reads as a personal historical narrative, but it is read by Robert Frobisher *and the reader* as being slightly false, something manufactured. Robert's letters befit an artist in the thirties, certainly, but they also suggest to the reader the trauma of WWI in Europe, something that Robert is not yet able to work through but that the reader possesses as historical "fact," or as part of the larger metanarrative. Similarly,

Robert's compositions are symbolic to the reader. *The Cloud Atlas Sextet* is arguably the novel's grand metaphor. But for Luisa Rey, the next protagonist, this is real music, and the letters she reads are equally real.

On the most basic level, characters break down metanarrative through personalized voice, which allows them to assert agency, take control over their own narratives, make their mark in history, and personalize their use of language. When individuals speak outside the norm of their historical moment, this creates agency; it also fragments the metanarrative, becoming art through difference<sup>4</sup>. In *Cloud Atlas*, art uses history's language to refute history. However, rather than privileging one art form or audience over another, the novel more loosely envisions *any* form of storytelling as art. As a result, stories possess aura, which Benjamin describes as the peculiar, distinctive quality of a work of art, one that has waned in the age of mechanical reproduction.

Fragmentation in the novel distinguishes between the voices of the characters and that of Mitchell. Celia Wallhead and Marie-Luise Kohlke even refer to the narrator's voice as a distinct moment in time, separate from the other narrative frames of the novel (218). The lack of fragmentation in the implied author's voice, juxtaposed with the disparate voices of the novel's characters, allows the reader to trust Mitchell's control of, and connections between, the various narratives. In fact, Mitchell draws attention to the disparate character voices to the degree that some characters even begin to hear the voices of one another. Mitchell's exploration of difference over time allows the reader to "narrate" positive possibilities for the future.

Mitchell's novel also agrees with Benjamin concerning the importance of the storyteller in communal life, ending the narrative timeline with community storytelling as Zachry relates his story to his community and his son carries on his legacy. Benjamin writes, "Experience which is

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<sup>4</sup> Derrida's deconstruction of the French *differer*, which has the dual meaning in English of "to differ" and "to defer" (1683).

passed on from mouth to mouth is the source from which all storytellers have drawn. And among those who have written down the tales, it is the great ones whose written version differs least from the speech of the many nameless storytellers” (1). The trajectory of Mitchell’s narratives emphasizes storytelling communities and their peaceful natures, starting with the Moriori and ending with Zachry’s community.

Mitchell combines both of the types of storytellers explored by Benjamin: the local folklorist and the distant traveler. The fragmentation of two types of storytellers and characterization in different forms throughout the novel allows this repeating soul to be “at home in distant places as well as distant times” (Benjamin 2). Mitchell’s self-conscious, other-defined narratives create a bodily consciousness on part of the reader. This awareness as being separate from the fictional world concurs with not destroying the agency of the imaginary, seen most bodily through the role of Sonmi’s orison. Readers experience her orison as her story to the archivist, but in the world of the novel, her orison doubly exists as an egg-shaped orb that also contains and tells her story, leading to her existence as a deity in Zachry’s narrative.

Benjamin also compares storytellers to craftsmen because the story and storyteller become part of one another (5). He explains, “Thus traces of the storyteller cling to the story the way the handprints of the potter cling to the clay vessel” (5). Keeping Benjamin’s metaphor, we might say that Mitchell’s novel places the hand of the reader under that of the potter, allowing readers to feel the shaping of the narrative and place their own fingerprints into the clay. The consistency in the hand of the author highlights the details of fragmentation in the clay. Benjamin extrapolates that the storyteller “fashion[s] the raw material of experience, his own and that of others, in a solid, useful, and unique way” (14). In this case, the material is actively shaped,

through reading<sup>5</sup>, and relating the experience of the reader, the implied author, and the characters.

Mitchell asks the reader to relate his or her own story, as well as his or her storehouse of familiar genres, stories, and tropes, to each character and to the voice of their story, and their interpretative retellings. Simultaneously, Mitchell interrupts the text with the voice of the implied author or over-awareness on the part of the characters, alluding to their recurrence through time. For example, when Robert is reading Adam's journal, he takes a moment to observe to Sixsmith, "Something shifty about the journal's authenticity – seems too structured for a genuine diary, and its language doesn't quite ring true – but who would bother forging such a journal, and why?" (64). Robert's narrative voice remains consistent in this interruption, but his interpretation of Adam's voice, and the reader's awareness of Mitchell's, changes. This fragmentation of voice pulls the reader from the fiction of the text into an awareness of Mitchell's authorial hand and the creation of the story.

Several critics<sup>6</sup> have analyzed this particular textual interruption, but have failed to mention Robert's contextualization of the story within the metanarrative of history before questioning the diary's legitimacy. Robert clarifies the time period of Ewing's journal, contextualizes it for readers, and interprets Ewing's character and narrative. This process of character-to-character interpretation is one of relationship, also involving the reader's awareness of the fictional nature of the text. Robert's interpretation, rather than the implied narrator's, asks the reader to identify with the novel through relationship. This self-aware reader maintains real-

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<sup>5</sup> This act of reading is, according to Iser, one of interpretation, "And this need for interpretation arises from the structure of interpersonal experience" (1525).

<sup>6</sup> Heather J. Hicks writes of the two characters, "Adam's innocence and religiosity, underscored so powerfully by his name, are contrasted with the waywardness and despair of a man who lives in the shadow of twentieth-century history... The contrast between Ewing and Frobisher serves as a powerful iteration of the desolation produced by the 'terror of history'" (4).

world agency through unique voice in personal narrative while also relating on the level of the characters, adding in the eighth perspective of the novel. Mitchell's authorial presence through the consistent voice of the implied author and his relationship to the reader is interpreted for cosmopolitanism by Moraru as "the readerly imaginary" and a "new togetherness emerging in turn-of-the-century reading practices" (10).

Paul Valery writes, "Artistic observation...can contain an almost mystical depth...[Artists] get their existence and value exclusively from a certain accord of the soul, the eye, and the hand of someone who was born to perceive them and evoke them in his own inner self" (Benjamin 14). Mitchell's novel encompasses all three of these characteristics. Mitchell's characters can be interpreted as sharing the same soul as well as each having a unique life, and the souls of readers are connected relationally to theirs as well. At the end of the linear narrative, Zachry's son seems to address the reader directly; "Sit down a beat or two. Hold out your hands. Look" (309). The reader's hands are physically invited in the holding of the stories of the novel, eyes are invited by the experiencing of the novel, and soul is invited through the created aura of the novel. In this way, the reader understands his or her own narrative as art, and uses his or her own voice to speak.

However, Luisa's narrative "actuality" is turned on its head by her successor, Timothy Cavendish, when the reader discovers that her story is a portion of a novel. This further fragments the storyline: a character in a detective novel has been reading the letters of a composer who, in turn, has been reading a maritime journal. At some point we begin to question the authenticity of the entire endeavor, and every voice becomes the voice of a *fabricant*, in the sense of being fabricated. We might say that the reader's suspension of disbelief becomes less willing. While a few critics have been thrown off by this and have questioned the validity of



Adam and Robert's stories by virtue of this revelation, Mitchell is again creating an equality of narrative through relationship and experience; rather than simply maintaining Robert Frobisher as an artist and telling the stories of five other pseudo-artist storytellers, Mitchell aligns the creation of narrative, whether it be fictional or lived, with that of art. *Cloud Atlas* allows for the ultimate realization of Benjamin's theories of aura by making the lives of readers, of characters, and of Mitchell's own implied presence into art. Benjamin sees in the stories of the storyteller the entirety of the storyteller's being, and the stories as borrowing elements of his life, envisioning the life of the storyteller as a candle and the stories as "gentle flame" that consumes (Benjamin 14). The consistency of art-creation is encouraged by the fragmentation between fiction and experience of the storyteller.

Benjamin's conclusion perfectly embodies the artistic experience of cosmopolitanism; "The storyteller is the figure in which the righteous man encounters himself" (14). The reader doesn't have to be an iteration of the soul, marked by a comet-shaped birthmark, just as not every narrator is marked this way. Zachry tells the story of Meronym, the rebirth of the soul, and his son retells his story. Sonmi consumes Timothy Cavendish's narrative in terms of a film, and hers is preserved as religion in an Orison. In this sense, the re-telling of each narrative in the latter half of the novel not only allows for an interpretation free from time, which is Benjamin's ideal of the ladder, but also allows the reader to ultimately be interpreted by Adam Ewing, aligning the reader's life with that of the rest of the characters as "one drop in a limitless ocean" (509). The reader is art and aura, along with the characters and the implied David Mitchell, and each speaks into every moment of history, unbound by time; because "what is any ocean but a multitude of drops?" (509).

## CHAPTER 3

### FRAGMENTED LANGUAGE

Rather than arguing for a solely optimistic reading of language in *Cloud Atlas*, this chapter will explore the positive possibilities created *for* language in the novel, but also acknowledge the negative outcomes of fragmented language that are apparent in the novel. Fragmented language is less consistent than voice or time in the novel, happening in some narratives at the level of speech while in others it operates as a mental awareness only. In a novel that explores familiar narratives of the thirst for power (colonialism, slavery, capitalism), Mitchell uses language that serves as the building block for an alternate empowerment, one focused on community and personalized narratives. Mitchell explores the space between the will to power and empowerment through fragmentation of language – a combination of the language of power and individual speech creates a personal belief that reframes reality. What is more, rather than focusing on the impossibility of communication, Mitchell explores language in a way that allows for a deconstruction of metanarratives, followed by a more optimistic reconstruction.

Mitchell, in fact, sets up a multiplicity of possibilities for language so that optimistic and pessimistic views of language function along a sliding scale rather than as absolutes. Additionally, to differentiate between the concepts of language and voice, my analysis of language focuses on understanding, or lack thereof, whereas my analysis of voice in the first chapter focused on expression. While voice in *Cloud Atlas* is closely tied to narration, I view language and understanding as concepts that function at the communal level of society, and community, like expression, exists uniquely for each of the novel's main characters. As a result, *Cloud Atlas* outlines the possibility for understanding of the self, or self-actualization, as well as the understanding of the self's place within community and time.

Similarly to fragmentation of voice, fragmentation of language is nuanced, so it is no surprise that critical interpretations of the language in *Cloud Atlas* have varied widely, ranging from an ending of history and a dying language to freed language, and various places in between. Language is, as Heidegger posited, the mode by which authors, readers, and characters become aware of their own reality, define themselves and the world around them, and determine their own agency and place within the dominant narrative of history. Modern British authors struggled with the idea that language could not properly express their own thoughts and ideas, so they turned to fragmentations of form in order to account for their postwar reality and envision a new world. However, this process was also encumbered by memory. That is, the new world was unable to appear because of remembered trauma, and language did not have the words or content, the expression, broken or unbroken, that would allow it to speak a new world into being.

Mitchell's exploration of language in *Cloud Atlas* is certainly aware of this ineffability, but it is also fragmented in the positive sense of that term, namely the creating of agency. We might say that the language of the novel is torn between cosmodern possibility and predatory extinction. Because cosmodern interpretation of language is global in its impulses, it frees language from the necessity of appearing in any correct form. It encourages multilingualism (in the sense of both spoken and cultural languages) and sees language as something borrowed from society, something owed for the necessity of communication, rather than owned, and belonging to the self.

However, the novel's capitalist ideas lead the reader towards a focus on the novel's narratives of predation, and this has led scholars to focus almost exclusively on the language of two stories: "An Orison of Sonmi-451" and "Sloosha's Crossin' an' Ev'rythin After." But these stories, important as they are, offer an incomplete view of the way Mitchell uses language. This

is because, rather than strictly a battle for community and shared language (in a cosmodern sense), the conflict of language in *Cloud Atlas* is primarily for understanding. Mitchell leaves the reader to explore linguistic themes that are personal and global. The linear narrative of language in the novel charts its destruction and rebuilding, following the theme of predation. Conversely, fragmented language in the novel questions whether the characters can understand themselves, their places in their communities, and their places in time, all of which Mitchell sees as necessary in order to survive and make an enduring impact upon their own world.

Moraru writes that language provides “a sense of belonging,” which, in *Cloud Atlas*, unites characters that would likely otherwise be separated from one another, connecting them by crossing time and language barriers (78). In *Cosmodernism*, he posits,

The hope for self-expression and communication... does not lie in a one-language but in our ability to speak each other’s language and give it the intonations and connotations likely to reinscribe it into the multivocality it comes from... the self *articulates* itself in the strongest sense of the word, that is, it enunciates itself as it ascertains its link, its articulation unto an other. (81)

This interpretation of self-understanding is necessarily tied to the self’s desire to unite language to the communal voices it has originated from while simultaneously aiming to define what is unique and different in its own expression. This understanding comes from recognizing that language is shared, rather than individually owned. Mitchell’s characters experience this connection overtly in the text by the experience of their shared soul. They sense a connection to something outside of themselves, something that they remember or are taking part in. For example, when Luisa hears Robert’s *Cloud Atlas Sextet* for the first time, she tells the clerk, “I have to own this music too. I *have* to... But I know it. I’m telling you I *know* it” (408-9). Luisa is

part of a shared community through time, and she recognizes her own, or an element of her own, language when she hears Robert's music.

In a related moment with a different outcome, Robert's experience of shared language causes him to contemplate suicide. He senses the linked soul and believes that time follows Nietzsche's theory of eternal recurrence and that he will be born and live again, that all history and time will continue to repeat themselves, unchanging. He believes, based on his musical interpretation of the shared soul, that it is his time to die, so that his music will remain as the embodiment of his person. As a musician, he experiences a duality of language - music and spoken language. He feels these come to him across time and space, and their interconnected relationship leads him to understand his own role in the communal language, which is to unite them in his *Cloud Atlas Sextet*. (This is why his life ceases to have purpose after he has finished his composition.) For example, he writes of his brother's letters from the Great War as being "hauntingly aural" and observes, "One can shut one's eyes but not one's ears...European music is passionately savage, broken by long silences" (442). He describes music in terms of the sound of warfare, and his descriptions double for the content of his brother's letters and experience. He also discusses the way that later understanding, shaped by conversation, adds in more violent, larger sounds.

In the latter half of his narration, Robert pieces together the six separate voices of the novel in terms of his sextet. He writes that he is "reworking my year's fragments into a 'sextet for overlapping soloists': piano, clarinet, 'cello, flute, oboe, and violin, each in its own language of key, scale, and color. In the first set, each solo is interrupted by its successor: in the second, each interruption is continued in order" (445). This is an apt description of how language functions in *Cloud Atlas*: although fragmented across time, it is formed by the experience of the

voices coming together. The shape they make and notes they play overlap to become a shared narrative. Their overall expression would be hampered were they each speaking alone. The anxiety of reception that follows Robert's description of his work mirrors what could be interpreted as Mitchell's own anxiety in a metafictional moment.

Robert sees his contribution to music as one that will affect not only his own life, but all lives (460). As he completes his masterpiece, his experience and awareness of fragmentation grows as well. He describes "Lifetime's music, arriving all at once. 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... Violin note, misplayed, hideously – that's my sextet's final note" (460-1). The fragmented voices of *Cloud Atlas* and of the *Cloud Atlas Sextet* are one and the same, reinterpretations of one another using different language. Robert intuitively feels that it is first necessary to name a convention as such, and then, once it has been linguistically identified, its reality and malleability shift. The ending of the *Cloud Atlas Sextet*, is a note hideously misplayed. But a note misplayed speaks, and it is remembered; crucially, it requires a necessary shift in the understanding of intentionality. Music is the perfect double for language in the novel because music is language without words, necessarily interpretive, potentially universal, and it begs to be understood as a unity of fragmented voices that produces a language of its own.

Language in Robert's narrative is part of the complicated nature of language itself in the novel. Although it contributes to and synthesizes a communion of fragmented voices, it also shows how each of those voices is fiercely individual. Even as he chooses to express himself to the whole of society and to memory via musical language, this expression remains self-expression. To Sixsmith, his lover and friend, he chooses to express himself through words in his

letters. Robert also takes possession of the music he creates, which Ayrns believes should be appropriated to himself. Robert's suicide is partially caused by his desire for his music to be his own and not taken by someone else. In *Cosmodernism*, Moraru asserts that language is owed to others and part of relationships, but Robert's reaction to the idea of sharing the creation of his music complicates this explanation and belief. In other words, it warns against destroying linguistic aura. It shows the dangers of language and artistic expression becoming truly universal, rather than fragmented, as happens in Sonmi's narrative, when art is transformed into forced consumption and advertisements.

Sonmi-451's language changes from her limited expression as a pre-Ascention fabricant to writing her *Declarations*. Sandrine Sorlin's linguistic analysis of *Cloud Atlas* details Sonmi's insertion of metaphors and active, -ing verbs into the mathematical, engineered language of Neo So Copros, which leads to the nature-oriented, presently-active speech and language of Zachry's narrative. For example, in Neo So Copros, the word "slave" has been abolished from use. The archivist reacts strongly to Sonmi's self-identification as a slave and she responds, "Corpocracy is built on slavery, whether or not the word is sanctioned" (189). I would like to also add to Sorlin's analysis the origin of Sonmi's language and its enabling of her powerful "linguistic resistance" (Sorlin 86). Sonmi-451 studied classic literature of her culture, literature that had mostly been forgotten in consumer-ridden Neo So Copros. She tells the archivist, "My mind traveled the length, breadth, and depth of our culture" and in her travels, she went beyond the current literature sanctioned by the government into pre-Skirmish thinkers. This led her to two "Optimists translated from the Late English, Orwell and Huxley" (211). Sonmi's literary experience enabled her to fragment the rigid linguistic structure created by the Corpocracy. Her

language rebelled cognitively as well as linguistically, and her *Declarations* and Catechisms began a revolution.

Sonmi's orison creates a new space for language at the end of "Sloosha's Crossin' An' Ev'rythin' After" not by being able to communicate, but by creating a communal experience through the impossibility of communication. She can no longer be understood by anyone living, but she can captivate and hold the attention of her audience. While technology in Sonmi's time was responsible for the destruction of language, the remaining aura of her memory, her preserved orison, is able to captivate and enrapture. Zachry's son explains, "It ain't Smart you can use 'cos it don't kill Kona pirates nor fill empty guts, but some dusks my kin'n'bros'll wake up the ghost-girl jus' to watch her hov'rin'n'shimm'rin'. She's beaustome, and she 'mazes the littl' uns an' her murmin's babbybie our babbits" (309).

While I agree with Sorlin's analysis of Sonmi's use of language, she also asserts that language within Zachry's narrative has been set free from the structures previously binding it. Linguistically, the active verbs and nature-dependent language of Zachry's narrative seems to return mankind to a Garden of Eden of sorts, but the reader's experience of this portion of the novel is anything but freeing. The former fabricants of Zachry's society have lost their history and their ability to understand the past because of their loss of language. This loss is one of the most gripping of the various forms of predation the novel explores, linking linguistic loss to the extinction of mankind through disease and cannibalism. Zachry's community cannot understand Sonmi's orison and solely find comfort in her beauty and voice. This linguistic destruction demands the fragmentation of narrative in order to reconceptualize a different future for the path of mankind, and so Mitchell starts the reader, through the physicality of storytelling, backwards on the narrative arc of the novel.



The physical ending of *Cloud Atlas* is moving and beautiful, and it is Adam's logical charting of empowerment through language that explores the optimistic possibilities of belief. Adam's logic flows from history to outcomes, and then a choice between "vicious acts and virtuous acts" and concludes with the idea that belief precipitates acts (507). Adam says, "Belief is both prize and battlefield, within the mind & in the mind's mirror, the world" (508). He continues,

If we *believe* that humanity may transcend tooth & claw, if we *believe* diverse races & creeds can share this world as peaceably as the orphans share their candlenut tree, if we *believe* leaders must be just, violence muzzled, power accountable & the riches of the Earth & its Oceans shared equitably, such a world will come to pass. (508)

Language shapes belief in the battlefield of the mind and determines internal understanding, which causes outward action. Belief is the battlefield of the novel because it determines where power resides. The predatory forces in the world use language to shape their ownership of power, but Adam's articulation of the world as a mirror of the mind speaks into the power of language to shape social and global forces, rather than armies and corporations.

Adam continues this strain and makes reference to the cliché phrase of the pen being mightier than the sword. Mitchell turns this on its head, however, and aligns them both together in Adam's narration: "Tortuous advances won over generations can be lost by a single stroke of a myopic president's pen or a vainglorious general's sword" (508). Creating personal language is as powerful as the violence of swords. The predatory linear narrative of the novel explores the negative side of language, meaning and comprehension completely devolving for the reader in parts of Zachry's section or the way Soap suppresses unnecessary words for fabricants (188). However, the physical ending of the novel creates the possibility for the power of the pen,

language, and benevolent acts. Adam asks, “Is this doom [the consumption of a predatory world – human extinction] written within our nature?” and the answer, created using language, is no (508).

The postmodern critique of language is that it imprisons the speaker within the inescapable language of power. But language is also what we use to form thoughts, be they thoughts of subversion or of obedience. Adam points out that this optimistic world “is the hardest of worlds to make real” (508). This world has to be envisioned, made real, through language, the lifeblood and creative force of belief. And belief has the power to change acts, and acts have the power to shape outcomes, and outcomes are what write history. What would happen if the dominant narrative of history were one of virtuous, unselfish, generous acts? Adam’s use of language for the final, logical understanding of the beautiful ending of the novel contrasts with previous clarifications of dominant power structures and their cognitive rule through language.<sup>7</sup> His father in law tells him that he will be unable to change anything and that his life “amounted to no more than one drop in a limitless ocean” (509). Adam counters this imagined conversation, “Yet what is an ocean but a multitude of drops?” (509). Language functions in the same way, small pieces of understanding that can build upon one another and turn tides.

Given that belief is both “prize and battlefield,” the creation of language, which formulates belief, is going to be an ongoing conflict, as it is in each narrative (508). Nurse Noakes poisons Timothy Cavendish when he tries to escape and causes him to have a stroke, which affects his language, causing it to be broken and fragmented. His desire to ask for information, “When did it happen?” becomes “Airn-dit-hpn” (354). Without language, his self-

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<sup>7</sup> In a mirror scene to Adam’s epiphany, Isaac Sachs uses similar logic to reach a vastly different conclusion; “Like Utopia, the actual future + the actual past exist only in the hazy distance, where they are no good to anyone” (393).

understanding is further fragmented, because he has no access to his own memories or identity, and becomes complicit in the power paradigm. Rafael, the young boy who is molested on the ship Adam is sailing, tries to express his distress as well as his battle with hope and despair to Adam through song, but is unable to do so. The song he sings about the Shenandoah Valley is one his mother taught him and is, according to Rafael, “the only thing of hers I still got. It stuck in me” (38). Adam is amazed that an Australian boy would know an American song, but this adds to the creation of the global framework of the novel. Rather than fragmenting Rafael’s actual language, Mitchell’s narration fragments his expression, and the reader’s understanding of reality diverges from Adam’s.

Adam is an interesting character choice for this frame, particularly for a frame of language. His innocence and naivety are at times infuriating and provoke inertia and even impotence. And yet, it is his innocence—tied to his belief in the ideology of empire and colonial expansion as well as his profound religiosity—that helps to make him a believable mid-nineteenth century character. Robert mocks him for this when reading his narrative. Adam’s innocence (his name links him with that first story of innocence in the Garden of Eden) is particularly obvious in the sections when Adam is observing Rafael and not understanding that Rafael is being raped. Adam observes that Rafael has ceased to glow and “has become this sullen youth in only six weeks” (39). He concludes that Rafael is “revealing the timber-muscled seaman he shall become” and fails to understand and, more importantly, fails to question when he doesn’t understand Finbar’s crude comment after asking after the boy’s welfare. Adam recounts, “I asked Finbar if he thought the boy was ‘fitting in well.’ Finbar’s Delphic reply, ‘Fitting *what* in well, Mr. Ewing?’ left the galley cackling but myself quite in the dark” (39). But this is this same innocence that allows Adam to become an abolitionist at the end of the novel, by allowing

him to ignore probabilities and believe in the future of mankind. His near-death experience, rather than destroying his innocence, allows him to view the world in a more enlightened and thoughtful way, but still have a positive vision for the future. The milieu of characters in *Cloud Atlas*, however, allows readers to see that they can have Adam's views of the possibilities of the future, but they can also seek out answers and meaning, as well as seek to change their own fate, like Sonmi-451.

The ending of Adam's story leaves the reader where most of the other narratives left as a cliffhanger in the first half of the novel, which embodies the experience of the text and involves the reader into the structure of these unfolding narratives. We will not know what Adam actually does with his life as an abolitionist, and we leave him about to embark on that journey, a new beginning rather than an ending as in the rest of the storylines. And so as Adam goes to embark on his own journey of altering belief, the reader is left to do the same as well, to set out for a new world order, based on belief in the possibility of good, even in the face of fragmentation. Language creates, for the reader, a space to write in and include their own narrative, and sharing their voice allows them to be part of this language as well.

Agency of language in *Cloud Atlas* allows Sonmi-451 to speak with the language of the corpocracy and still speak out against them. It allows Timothy Cavendish's friend to speak, sensibly for the first time, and request aid from his fellow countrymen in the face of oppressors. Robert, living in a time that has been traumatized by nationalistic language speaks through music to his own time, and letters to his intimate friend. Language in Adam's narrative is a beautiful mix of cultures, as is language in Zachry's, and so in both the "beginning" and "end" of time, children are able to find space for communion and communication. Language is the building block of communication, and community. These different accents, accounts, and communities,

are able to speak to the world differently than linear voice or narrative would be. And through a cosmodern reading, the fact that they are all different Englishes is just as possibly positive as if Mitchell had written in a multiplicity of different languages, as would most likely be more accurate.

## CHAPTER 4

### FRAGMENTED TIME

Fragmentation of time in *Cloud Atlas* contributes to the novel's hypothesis that the narrative of history is woven together and shaped by individuals as well as by large organizations and governments. By depicting historical (and imagined, ahistorical) time periods as unique, yet interwoven perspectives, Mitchell makes shaping history much more manageable. Mitchell's novel does follow a linear narrative through time with the first six stories, but the re-telling of the stories, experienced second hand, as characters discover the second halves of the earlier narratives, fragments time and undermines the fixity of historical narratives. In this way, each storyline writes a place for agency and change. This chapter will make use of Linda Hutcheon's theory of historiographic metafiction, for "novels which are both intensely self-reflexive and yet paradoxically also lay claim to historical events and personages" and Bakhtin's theory from *The Dialogic Imagination* of the novel's contemporaneity of form, being the only living and developing genre (5).

Outside of the historiographic metafiction of the novel, fragmentation in time allows for the same historical event to be played out in different ways and creates a multiplicity of outcomes as well as layers to each outcome. Strong critical attention has been paid to the neo-Victorian frame of *Cloud Atlas* so I will not be exploring that particular frame as in-depth except to explore its fragmentation. Much critical attention has also been paid to "An Orison of Sonmi-451" and "Sloosha's Crossin' an' Ev'rythin' After," with most critics examining their possible messages and meanings for the future. Rather than re-plow already furrowed ground, I will instead focus on what has not been discussed: the optimism achieved through fragmentation of time, particularly within the storylines of Robert Frobisher, Luisa Rey, and Timothy Cavendish.

These characters, upon realizing the false intractability of power structures and their dominion over the narrative of history, set out to work against narrative power structure. Connecting each of these narratives to the other three, particularly in the retellings and discoveries of the second half of the novel, the arc of *Cloud Atlas* allows the reader to transform narratives of the slave trade—and corresponding movements of imperialism, colonialism, and capitalism—into a new narrative which follows virtuous rather than vicious acts and, by fragmenting the perspective, imagine a new place for the present and an alternate, positive vision for the future.

In the novel, Mitchell undermines monolithic interpretations of History by retelling individual histories, which reframe the larger, or “umbrella” narratives of time for the reader. Many late twentieth and early twenty-first century novelists work to subvert meta-History in this way by privileging personal narrative. In *Cloud Atlas*, Mitchell also allows his characters (not just the reader) to be aware of grand narratives and strategically react against them. This repeating pattern throughout the six interlocking narratives, along with other, smaller recurrences, allows the novel to set up, for the reader, the two ways of looking at History: a story of virtuous acts, or a story of vicious acts.

While Hutcheon’s theory specifically explores historiographic and metafictional texts within the umbrella of postmodern novels, I add it to the cosmodern reading of *Cloud Atlas* as part of the “soft”-ness of the cosmodern movement, and because Mitchell’s novel is also working to self-reflexively reframe the past (Moraru 2). Hutcheon’s analysis of the origin of historiographic novels mirrors Iser’s reader response theories and their implementation in this thesis, explaining that the self-reflexiveness of these novels allows the reader “the pleasure of a double awareness of both fictiveness and a basis in the ‘real’” (107). Mitchell chooses lesser-known historical gaps to fill in his novel in order to provide a reimagining of the historical

outcome. The pleasure of this particular double-awareness allows the reader to experience narratives that are often lost or overshadowed by the narrative arc of History.

Hutcheon's theory argues, "to re-write or to re-present the past in fiction and in history is, in both cases, to open it up to the present, to prevent it from being conclusive and teleological" (110). The unique position of the historical events being rewritten in *Cloud Atlas* fragments the reader's understanding of historical events and the way certain moments are read and remembered and others are forgotten. Mitchell's historical narratives are situated between or before wars, and his characterization of these moments allows for the historical narrative to be rewritten. Adam Ewing's journal was written in 1851, and Adam's exploits as an abolitionist would have been lost in the greater historical event of the Civil War. Robert Frobisher's symphony, composed in part to imagine a Europe that didn't enter into a second world war, would have lost its significance after the actual occurrence of World War II. Luisa Rey's work on nuclear energy would have been overshadowed by wars in the Middle East and the renewed preeminence of fossil fuels. Her narrative serves as a type of historiographic metafiction within the novel itself, looking backwards from the energy crises of the early twenty-first century and imagining the environmental movements of 1970s America.

Robert Frobisher's narrative parallels Europe's journey dealing with the after-effects of The Great War. As a young, unknown, bankrupt composer, he is dependent on the favor of Vyvan Ayrs, who begins to feed off of Robert's creativity and vision for his own reputation. Europe, meanwhile, slowly works toward a second world war, and the reader inhabits a middle, creative space, knowing the war did happen, but imagining what might have stopped it. Robert's position and vision as a modernist composer is wrapped into this "mind of Europe" through European music (Eliot).



Robert's understanding of the narrative of history, particularly the remembrance of art, changes as he begins to understand that Ayr's is using rather than teaching him. He says at first that Ayr's taking his suggestions for composing is "Quite sobering. People in the future will be studying this music" (60). As established earlier, Robert's voice is expressed as much in spoken language as it is in music. As Robert begins work again, the nature of his own music and his ideas of creation begin to shift from those of Ayr's. Their first shared composition, "Todtenvogel," is interpreted as being highly political and anti-German, and becomes very popular throughout Europe. Ayr reacts against Robert's music being refined, consistently demanding that he "master the Ancients before he frolics with the moderns," representing the domination of structures of power throughout time (70). Robert, a composer, can be a visionary for the future; his music is able to envision a new, interconnected world, through fragmentation of the old.

Through discussions of European politics, Robert notices the difference between his own views and Ayr's. For Ayr, civilization is a glorious temple, built up by generations of rulers, "The masses, slaves, peasants, and foot soldiers exist in the cracks of its flagstones, ignorant even of their ignorance. Not so the great statesmen, scientists, artists, and most of all, the composers of the age, any age, who are civilization's architects, masons, and priests. Ayr sees our role is to make civilization more resplendent" (81). He then goes on to clarify that Ayr would like this resplendence to go back and be a reflection of himself. Robert's vision of the need for music is much different. He writes, "How vulgar, this hankering after immortality, how vain, how false. Composers are merely scribblers of cave paintings. One writes music because winter is eternal and because, if one didn't, the wolves and blizzards would be at one's throat all the sooner" (82). Robert sees music as a way to fragment time through reinterpretation. By

responding to historical events and voicing something new, art can provide a break from an eternal tyranny and oppression.

The second half of Robert's narrative directly aligns his story with that of Europe in the early 1930s, but Robert, in dealing with this trauma, distances himself from the soldiers who fought it, but only based on age and chance. He recalls seeing "All those Adrians" lined up, going to war, and then imagines them buried tightly in cemeteries throughout Europe. He reflects, "We cut a pack of cards called historical context – our generation, Sixsmith, cut tens, jacks, and queens. Adrian's cut threes, fours, and fives. That's all" (442). Robert then reflects on the music and aural quality of Adrian's letters, moving from personal reflection into the global effects of the collection of these memories. He writes, "European music is passionately savage, broken by long silences" (442). European history, too, is often viewed as "passionately savage;" it is normally recounted as a series of wars, fragmented by long pauses. What Mitchell allows the reader to begin to understand through Robert's experience in 1931 is that agency is created when the focus is on the pause, not the incoming war.

Dhondt explains to Robert, after they leave the cemetery, the old way of viewing European history, one focused on wealth and war. He tells Robert, "Another war is *always* coming" (444). Robert questions his certainty and Dhondt replies that wars "are never properly extinguished. What sparks wars? The will to power, the backbone of human nature. The threat of violence, the fear of violence, or actual violence is the instrument of this dreadful will" (444).

Dhondt argues that "The nation-state is merely human nature inflated to monstrous proportions...nations are entities whose laws are written by violence... War, Robert, is one of humanity's two eternal companions," the other being "Diamonds" (444). Mitchell, in writing the character of Dhondt as a jewel merchant, is demonstrating a personalization of the narrative of

history in a way that is personally advantageous and logical for him. Because Dhondt is part of the upper class and invested in diamonds, his narrative functions very well alongside the dominant narrative, but that does not erase his fear at the next war which he fears “will be so big, nowhere with a decent restaurant will be left untouched” (444). The silliness of this concern contrasted with the reality of World War II pulls the reader slightly out of the text into a place of reflection of Dhondt’s historical analysis.

Robert then questions if there are other alternatives to war, such as diplomacy, the League of Nations, or ruling forces for nation-states besides warfare. Dhondt responds that diplomacy “mops up war’ spillages; legitimizes its outcomes; gives the strong side the means to impose its will on a weaker one, while saving its fleets and battalions for weightier opponents” (444). Historiographic metafiction opens up a gap-reading for readers here because, looking back on the twentieth century in Europe, the narrative runs from WWI, WWII, and then the Cold War, each leading into the other because of the “weightier options” or because they were “never properly extinguished.” Even literary movements are commonly marked by the traumas of war, but the after-effects of this means of charting history’s narrative only begets war.

Robert engages with Dhondt’s views, but plays out their disturbing outcomes. He argues, “science devises ever bloodier means of war until humanity’s powers of destruction overcome our powers of creation and our civilization drives itself into extinction” (444). This idea is shared in all the other narratives as well, in addition to the linear projection of the novel. Dhondt agrees and further aligns this process with the evolution to civilization of man, and proposes that mankind will be extinct by the end of the century. He parallels destruction and violence, what Adam refers to as vicious acts, with creation, or virtuous acts. Robert’s response to the dark

world projection presented by Dhondt is the creation of *Cloud Atlas Sextet*. Creation of music, for Robert, parallels the use of his voice.

Composing *Cloud Atlas Sextet* begins to take over Robert's focus and consciousness, but also awakens him to the possibilities of creativity and its importance. Mitchell's character is so attune to the political situation of Europe as well as the domination-extinction trajectory of mankind and so he works to make his vision for this music a reality. Ayr's demands the right to continue to steal Robert's music and name it as his own, and "The stakes rose like inflation in Germany" as Ayr's threatened to ruin Robert's reputation to prevent him from being able to work within the field of music anywhere in Europe (455). Robert describes Ayr's taking of his music as it being "robbed at gunpoint" for the final, great masterpiece of Ayr's life. Music again parallels the narratives of history; one piece is the vision of creativity, the other a narrative of theft, appropriation, and violence.

In the final days of his life, Robert revels in creative possibility, pouring the entirety of his being into *Cloud Atlas Sextet*. He writes, "My mind is capable of any creative task it can conceive. Composing the best work of my life, of all lives" (460). Robert's confidence in his own creative power is necessary to begin this work that could envision and inspire a new future for Europe. He also writes, "My head is a Roman candle of invention. Lifetime's music, arriving all at once. Boundaries between noise and sound are conventions. I see now. All boundaries are conventions, national ones too" (460). If Europe in the 1930s could have imagined a different trajectory after the Great War and envisioned a future that did not rely on nationalism, the twentieth century could have been one that charted virtuous acts.

The problem with Robert's creative vision is that it does not venture beyond the realm of music. Though Robert writes, "One may transcend any convention, if only one can first conceive

of doing so,” he cannot write a new narrative for himself outside of the power structure Ayrs laid out (460). When he encounters Ewing’s journal, it becomes obvious the extent that Ayrs’s threat to his reputation is haunting him. He writes, “Happy, dying Ewing, who never saw the unspeakable forms waiting around history’s corner” (460). Robert believes that he is compressing the entirety of his being, his life, into the body of *Cloud Atlas Sextet* and that when he finishes there will be nothing left of him (461). The novel’s containment of Robert’s *Sextet* argues otherwise, as well as the reader’s experience of his letters rather than his music.

Bakhtin’s theory of the novel further enriches Hutcheon’s theory when applied to *Cloud Atlas* because of the fragmentation from an “epic” or “absolute” past that the novel, as a living genre, provides (30). Bakhtin argues that the novel’s added flexibility of the past re-frames its interpretation in the present, and makes its interpretation of both a prediction of the future. Similarly to Iser, Bakhtin adds, “the artistic image...acquires a specific actual existence. It acquires a relationship...to the ongoing event of current life in which we, the author and readers, are intimately participating” (30-1). The concurrence of the past, presence, and future, and their reference to the reader and author’s moments in time contribute to the agency-inspiring message of time in Mitchell’s novel; by fragmenting the linear nature of time, either through the artistic aura of the novel for the reader or the multiplicity of times of the narrative, *Cloud Atlas* makes even this conventional boundary one which is open for reinterpretation.

Transitioning from Robert Frobisher to Luisa Rey, the form of the narrative changes from personal letters to an action-packed 1970s spy novel, written in the early twenty-first century and sent to Timothy Cavendish to consider publishing. Much of the prose in her section is overwritten, as Cavendish is not a very prestigious editor, but this also allows Mitchell to be very didactic with the interpretation of history from the third-person omniscient place of the implied

author. Just as the narratives of Robert and Adam conclude, belief shapes the past, present, and future.

“Half Lives: The First Luisa Rey Mystery” adds the explanation of the virtual past versus actual past and the virtual future versus the actual future to the novel and its beliefs of the positive possibilities of fragmented time. Isaac Sachs writes a list of the characteristics of the actual and virtual pasts and futures: The “actual past” “is brittle, ever-dimming + ever more problematic to access,” and “descends into obscurity as its eyewitnesses die off” (392). In contrast, the “virtual past” “created from reworked memories, papers, hearsay, fiction – in short, belief – grows ever ‘truer;’” it is also “malleable, ever-brightening + ever more difficult to circumvent/expose as fraudulent” (392). This experience of a novel within a novel problematizing the reader’s experience of the past is doubled by the distancing of the novel’s present from its beginning. Moraru explains this movement in fragmented time, “More than ever before, the self finds itself in a Bakhtinian ‘world of others’ words.’ It grows, tells the story of this growth – defines itself – in relation to an other and her own relations or stories” (“Introduction” 3). Time, be it virtual or actual, is further fragmented in each narrative by the character’s relation to all of the others’ narratives – Luisa Rey’s experience of Robert influences her experience of Adam, and the reader’s experience of all three.

The virtual future and actual future follow a similar dynamic and are shaped by the narrative portrayal of the past and the present. The virtual future, according to Sachs, is “constructed by wishes, prophesies +daydreams...may influence the actual future, as in a self-fulfilling prophesy, but the actual future will eclipse our virtual one as surely as tomorrow eclipses today” (393). The use of fiction, memories, letters, in short, the narratives of the novel, according to Sachs, is the formulation of the present and actual future under the domination of

the most powerful, and he would be correct if the novel stopped at the end of Zachry's story. However, by fragmenting time further in retelling each story, and working backwards, Mitchell opens up a new narrative arc for the reader, which refines the actual and virtual futures but more importantly, retells the actual and virtual past. Bakhtin echoes the belief for the future of *Cloud Atlas* for novels in general; "The novel...is determined by experience, knowledge, and practice (the future)" and "is associated with the eternally living element of unofficial language and unofficial thought" (15, 20). According to Bakhtin's definitions, the actual and virtual pasts exist in novels as experience and knowledge, and work toward the future. What separates the actual from the virtual is official and unofficial language and thought.

Sachs follows the scientific logic of his experience of the world, and his explanation of the movements of narrative does not allow for the positive possibilities of fragmentation laid out by Adam through belief. He writes, "The present presses the virtual past into its own service, to lend credence to its mythologies + legitimacy to the imposition of will. Power seeks + Is the right to "landscape" the virtual past. (He who pays the historian calls the tune)" (392-3). His use of "landscape" for the imposition of power and will traces back to the colonial narrative set up by Adam's journal, the mythology of power and domination placed on Robert by Vyvan Ayrs, and the historical readings and understandings of WWI and WWII. He continues along the logical connections that offer no agency, "Like Utopia, the actual future + the actual past exist only in the hazy distance, where they are no good to anyone" (393). In *Cloud Atlas*, the actual past and future play an interesting role as they are set, because the novel must be printed in order to be read on a wide scale, but the fragmenting of time through the narratives allows both the actual past and actual future to seem up for question and determination, particularly the actual

future. The actual past is understood as the reader learns each narrative, but the historiography of the novel resets dominant narratives and gives them a new frame of focus.

Luisa Rey adds to the understanding of power and the future when she discusses them with Javi. She views them as more malleable than Sachs, but not yet as entirely determined by belief. She speaks of being able to see the future, as clearly as one can see the end of the street, as making it unchangeable, because it is already there (401). The next logical jump the novel asks the reader to make, outside the text, would be to reframe the view of the end of the street as the beginning of something else. She does reframe the physicality of seeing the future, clarifying that “planners, architects, and designers” determine what happens at the end of the street “unless you go and blow up a building or something. What happens in a minute’s time *is* made by what you do” (401). The remaining irony of this passage, of course, is that Luisa is part of a building exploding later in the novel, which would not have been brought about without her minute-by-minute actions. When asked “Can you change the future or not?” she mentally reframes the realm of the answer as “not a function of metaphysics but one, simply, of power” (401).

Luisa Rey’s story reframes, as part of the actual past of the novel, the story of Robert Frobisher. Luisa asks a recording store to track down a copy of *Cloud Atlas Sextet* for her and the clerk frames, for the reader, the way history has remembered Frobisher;

Frobisher was a wunderkind, he died just as he got going...Only five hundred recordings pressed...in Holland, before the war, my, no wonder it’s rare...The dealer has a copy of an acetate, made in the fifties...by a liquidated French outfit. *Cloud Atlas Sextet* must bring the kiss of death to all who take it on. (119)

Luisa later goes into Lost Chord Music Store and explains the feeling of listening to Robert’s *Sextet* “as if living in a stream of time” (408). Particularly in Luisa’s narrative, Mitchell



fragments time through her senses and surroundings. In a way, her encounter with Sixsmith is Robert coming back to him. Also, when she passes the *Prophetess*, Adam's boat, she feels a "strange gravity" connecting her to it and her "birthmark throbs. She grasps for the ends of this elastic moment, but they disappear into the past and the future" (430). Overt moments of writer-reader interaction in Luisa's storyline help the reader to trust Mitchell's hand through the text, enhanced by the greatest writer to reader winking moment of the novel and fragmentation of time – the revelation that Luisa's story is a novel written in the early twenty-first century.

While the twisted journalism of Luisa's narrative explains, "Anything is true if enough people believe it," Timothy Cavendish's narrative is very clear about the immediate power structures and struggle he faces, but less clear as to his place within the dominant narrative of History. Being the closest narrative to the time period of Mitchell's writing and my own reading, and to add to the discussion of Luisa's narrative being revealed as fiction, Timothy Cavendish's narrative interestingly aligns fiction with blindness. This blindness doubles for the reader's experience as Cavendish does not seem to fit as clearly as the other characters in the linear narrative of the novel working towards the extinction of humanity; he is also isolated from important events occurring in his time. Even the power structure of the nursing home is at first difficult to spot and understand because of the blindness in his perspective.

First, the meta-textual jokes between the reader and Mitchell are particularly enjoyable in the quippy Cavendish portion of the novel, especially his discussions of fiction and, most particularly, *Cloud Atlas*. Cavendish writes, "As an experienced editor, I disapprove of flashbacks, foreshadowings, and tricky devices; they belong in the 1980s with M.A.s in postmodernism and chaos theory. I make no apology, however, for (re)starting my own narrative with my version of that shocking affair" (150). This, in a novel which employs all of these

gimmicks in addition to a shared soul by the characters, marked by a birthmark, asks the reader to pay particular attention to the discussion of fiction in this section, particularly through use of humor and postmodern qualities like metatextuality. Cavendish comments on these tropes in *Cloud Atlas* particularly when editing Luisa Rey's story; "One of two things will have to go: the insinuation that Luisa Rey is this Robert Frobisher chap reincarnated, for example" (357). The overwritten narrative of Luisa is overtly called out as created in Cavendish's.

He moves from a discussion of *Cloud Atlas* in particular and speaks of fiction in general, as well as what art means and where it finds its meaning and place in society. He aligns his experience of books with Robert's belief in the reason of music, "Books don't offer real escape, but they can stop a mind scratching itself raw" (357). Having just recovered his memory and language after a stroke, Cavendish turns to books for mental solace as Robert turned to music. He also claims that "Art is the *What*, not the *How!*" which directly responds to Dhondt's disagreement with Robert that "who and what run deeper than why" (357). The why for Robert is the force behind creation, and the what for Cavendish is similar; the thing Art is about, what it means, not its particular form or plotline. Cavendish's emphasis on fiction pulls the reader from the text at this moment as well, demanding that the "what" of *Cloud Atlas* be internalized more deeply than the "how."

This comprehension of "what" is intensified when Cavendish aligns the process of reading novels to blindness. It started with responding to his mother's belief that reading could provide real escape even though it didn't improve any of the very real sufferings of her life (357). Mitchell is nodding to the reader, removing them from the narrative again, to make them conscious of using the book solely as a frame or lens, and not a means to feel satisfied with thinking of solutions or new ways of viewing the world. In each storyline, a change in belief

necessitated a change in action. Though Cavendish observes, “Once any tyranny becomes accepted as ordinary...its victory is assured,” in order to read he puts on his bifocals, detailed in parentheses. The actual, overt text of this same sentence names Luisa Rey as belonging to Hilary V. Hush, a named authorial presence completely absent from Luisa’s story, but often referred to in Cavendish’s. Mitchell’s metatextuality forces the reader to acknowledge the created nature of the text in front of them, not to point out the “who” of the author or “what” of the type of writing, but instead the “what” and “why” of the novel’s content. For this, the reader-storyteller-artist must put on bifocals of their own to follow Robert’s advice and inhabit two worlds: the one of the novel and of reality – one of reframed actual/reclaimed virtual past, and one of an empowered virtual and actual future.

## CHAPTER 5

### CONCLUSION

The implications of my research ask for a re-viewing of the use of fragmentation in post-Berlin Wall literature which focuses on capturing globalization. Fragmentation moves toward an expression of global identity in artists like Salman Rushdie, Zadie Smith, and Junot Diaz's. While critics like Richard Bradford see late postmodernist writers toning down the tropes and showiness of their literature in order to reach more wide-selling audiences, I think that artists like Arundhati Roy, Jeanette Winterson, and Olga Grushin are experimenting in fiction with reconciling past narratives with a new, not yet imagined future for mankind. While I do not believe that global identity in general or cosmodernism specifically are always positive, I do think that literary scholars should move along with writers in creating new worldviews that honestly and creatively balance realism of the past and present with optimism for the future. Beyond art or scholarship (though ideally intensified by them), we can move into a place of understanding our own individual, communal, and global relationship as "one drop in a limitless ocean" and find our own agency over dominant power structures of voice, language, and time, and write a narrative of virtuous acts all our own (509).

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