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**A World Consuming Itself:  
Posthuman Cannibals After the End of the World**

A Thesis Presented

by

**Joseph Kampff**

to

The Graduate School

in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements

for the Degree of

**Master of Arts**

in

**English**

Stony Brook University

**May 2015**

**Stony Brook University**

The Graduate School

**Joseph Kampff**

We, the thesis committee for the above candidate for the  
Master of Arts degree, hereby recommend  
acceptance of this thesis.

**Justin Omar Johnston**  
**Assistant Professor, Department of English**

**Susan Scheckel**  
**Associate Professor, Department of English**

This thesis is accepted by the Graduate School

Charles Taber  
Dean of the Graduate School

Abstract of the Thesis

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**2015**

This thesis investigates the growing trend in late 20<sup>th</sup>- and early 21<sup>st</sup>-century post-apocalyptic fiction to feature cannibalism. I argue that these narratives reimagine the cannibal to reflect today's global worldview. By comparing contemporary cannibal narratives such as David Mitchell's *Cloud Atlas* and the Wachowskis' film series *The Matrix* to H. G. Wells's classic novel *The Time Machine*, I show that today's cannibal narratives radically destabilize the binary oppositions of (usually Western) civilized humanity and its savage, cannibal-animal others that traditional cannibal narratives tend to underwrite. The traditional cannibal figure has been an essential element in not only the construction of the human but also the geographical and chronological mapping of the world. I argue that today's cannibal narratives represent the collapse of distinctions between self and other, chronological distinctions of past, present, and future (that lead to a teleological historical sense), and geographical distinctions of here and there (that underpin nationalism). They accomplish this in their formal innovation—using self-cannibalizing forms evocative of Nietzsche's eternal recurrence and the oroborus (a serpent consuming its own tail)—and thematically by reimaging the cannibal as an often unwitting self-cannibal that is typified by a new sense of intimacy. I argue that the act of self-cannibalization is a symptom of posthumanism after the end of the world. Following Timothy Morton's analysis of hyperobjects in *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World*, I claim that the figure of the cannibal appears in contemporary post-apocalyptic narratives not as a warning of some impending catastrophe, but as a traumatic repetition of the catastrophe that has already occurred. Hyperobjects such as global warming, globalization, and a new awareness of being enmeshed in a global totality has brought about the end of the world as it has

traditionally been conceived. I conclude that *Cloud Atlas* and other contemporary post-apocalyptic fiction deploy the figure of the posthuman, self-cannibal as a means to write the world *after the end of the world*.

## **Dedication**

To Gina Strazzabosco



Serpiente alquímica (Oroboros).

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## **Acknowledgments**

I wish to thank Stacey Olster, Susan Scheckel, Justin Johnston, and E. Ann Kaplan from the Department of English at Stony Brook University for their direction, support, and patience; E. K. Tan and Robert Harvey in the Department of Cultural Analysis and Theory at Stony Brook for allowing me to squat in their department and theorize; Carolyn Berman, Terri Gordon, and Ricardo Montez at The New School for asking really hard questions—and demanding that I ask really hard questions—before sending me on my way; and Greg Clinton for being a “worthwhile colleague” and exceptional friend.

**Cannibal:** one that eats the flesh of its own kind

**Cannibalism:** 1: the usu. ritualistic eating of human flesh by a human being 2: the eating of the flesh of an animal by another animal of the same kind 3: an act of cannibalizing something

**Cannibalize:** 3: to deprive of an essential part or element in creating or sustaining another . . . enterprise (*Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary*, 11th Edition)

## Introduction

The early 21st century has seen a renaissance in literary representations of cannibals. Unlike their colonial-period predecessors, today's cannibals are often surprisingly industrialized, global (and yet close to home) beings. Often, as zombies, they march in a lock step after death through post-apocalyptic wastelands. After the end of the world, these cannibals no longer represent a localized, exotic, and monstrous alterity against which the (Western) human and (Western) humanity is constructed and affirmed. Rather, novels such as David Mitchell's *Cloud Atlas* (2004), films such as the Wachowski's *The Matrix* (1999), and the graphic narrative and television series *The Walking Dead* (2003-present; TV series 2010-present), depict novel cannibalistic figures and employ cannibalizing forms that forcefully challenge the oppositional logic of us and them that the figure of the cannibal has traditionally been used to underwrite. Today's cannibalistic narratives compel readers and viewers to confront the possibility that, in an era of globalization, global climate change, and cumulative large-scale catastrophe, distinctions between self and other can no longer compellingly constitute the world. Further, they may reflect a far more troubling reality. Rather than betraying anxieties about the impending end of the world and the onset of a future post-apocalyptic period, 21st-century cannibal narratives seem to suggest that the catastrophe has already occurred, the human world has ended, we are already too late to be saved.

By contrasting *Cloud Atlas* against H. G. Wells's late 19th-century novel *The Time Machine*, I will establish some of the ways today's cannibal narratives work to unsettle the conventional notions of self and other—human and non-human—that colonial-era representations of cannibalism tend to take for granted. I will then undertake an in-depth analysis of David Mitchell's *Cloud Atlas* to show the ways this text's unconventional, cannibalizing form reflects Mitchell's themes of cannibalism and globalization in his project of writing the world. The paper will conclude by proposing that we read Mitchell's *Cloud Atlas*, not as a prognostic fantasy of a future apocalypse, but rather as a symptom of a world that has already ended. That is to say, the global world that Mitchell sets out to write in *Cloud Atlas* is so significantly different from the world as it has been conventionally imagined in humanistic terms it is possible that *that* world has ended and we are no longer humans but rather posthumans after the end of the world.

## The 19th-Century Animal-Cannibal

At the end of the 19th century, in 1895, H. G. Wells published his classic novelistic critique of the dangers of unbridled capitalism, proliferating industrialization, and Social Darwinism, *The Time Machine*. Composed at the height of imperialism—“If we take,” following Fredric Jameson, “as the codification of the new imperialist world system, the emblematic date of 1884—the year of the Berlin Conference, which parceled Africa out among the ‘advanced’ powers” (Jameson, “Modernism and Imperialism,” 44)—*The Time Machine* provides an exemplary illustration of the colonial logic that produces the (usually advanced) human self through the production of a (savage) inhuman other in the encounter of the Time Traveller and the Morlocks in A.D. 802,701.

The imperialist world system that Wells’s novel reflects is constructed out of a series of discrete units, separated geographically and, at least symbolically, chronologically: The “advanced” nations—England, France, Germany, and Belgium—inhabited by humans and the wild parcels of land in Africa and the rest of the “Orient” whose “backward” inhabitants—the inhuman other—appeared to be a veritable time machine for Western anthropologists. The “Orient” became a powerful and necessary constitutive force in the Western imperialist imaginary largely by its absence: When *The Time Machine* was published, “imperialism” did not usually refer to the oppression of the “savage” other, but rather to the competition among “advanced” nations to increase their landholdings faster than the others (Jameson, “Modernism and Imperialism,” 47). Likewise, the cannibal came to represent the extreme alterity against which the typical Western subjectivity was structured *in absentia*.

In *The Open: Man and Animal*, Giorgio Agamben shows that the human has traditionally possessed

no specific identity other than the ability to recognize himself. Yet to define the human not through any *nota characteristic*, but rather through his self-knowledge means that man is the being which recognizes itself as human to be human. . . . Homo sapiens, then, is neither a clearly defined species nor a substance; it is, rather, a machine or device for producing the recognition of the human. (Agamben 26)

According to Agamben, the anthropological machine operates on culture in two complementary ways:

Insofar as the production of man through the opposition man/animal, human/inhuman, is at stake here, the machine necessarily functions by means of an exclusion . . . and an inclusion. . . . on the one hand, we have the anthropological machine of the moderns. As we have seen, it functions by excluding as not (yet) human an already human being from itself, that is, by animalizing the human, by isolating the nonhuman within the human: *Homo alalus*, or ape-man. . . .

The machine of earlier times works in an exactly symmetrical way. If, in the machine of the moderns, the outside is produced through the exclusion of an inside and the inhuman produced by animalizing the human, here the inside is obtained through the inclusion of an outside, and the non-man is produced by the humanization of an animal: the man-ape, the *enfant sauvage* or *Homo ferus*, but also and above all else the slave, the barbarian, and the foreigner, as figures of an animal in human form.

Both machines are able to function only by establishing a zone of indifference at their centers, within which—like a ‘missing link’ which is always lacking because it is already virtually present—the articulation between human and animal, man and nonman, speaking being and living being, must take place. (Agamben 37-38)

The most significant inhuman figures produced by the anthropological machine of Western culture are the “slave, the barbarian, and the foreigner, as figures of an animal in human form” (Agamben 37). The cannibal, as the absolute limit of humanity, may be read as the most extreme form of this human animality, and the cannibal-animal as the

unassimilable real of Western humane subjectivity. As Geoffrey Sanborn points out in “The Missed Encounter: Cannibalism and the Literary Critic,”

the figure of the cannibal has been *especially* necessary to the constitution of the humane western subject, and *especially* liable to reveal the traces of the missed encounter that it is structured around. More than any other figure of ‘savagery,’ cannibalism has functioned as, in Ernesto Laclau’s terms, the ‘constitutive outside’ of the western ideology of humanity—the ‘ungraspable margin that limits and distorts the “objective,” and which is, precisely, the real.’ . . . In the shudder that passes through his or her body at the very idea of cannibalism, the subject discovers the limit of humanity . . . and becomes capable of recognizing himself or herself as a humane subject. Cannibalism is constitutive of humanity, then, because it is the limit that humanity requires in order to know itself as itself. (Sanborn 193-194)

The cannibal, in its absence, separated from the Western subject in both space and time, quite literally rendered unknowable by linguistic difference—18th and 19th century anthropologists were unable to obtain firsthand accounts from suspected cannibals, though they desperately sought them out, because they were unable to communicate well with natives (Sanborn 195)—is always “ungraspable.” The cannibal is “especially” important for the production of the Western human precisely because of its separation from the body politic of Western society. The cannibal-animal of late 19th-century imperialism is somewhere out there, in the geographical and chronological distance, indistinct, separate, and yet imperative for the constitution of the Western human subject.

The ideological forces that constantly decide between the civilized human and the nonhuman, savage, cannibal-animal—an ideology that underwrites the imperialist worldview and expansionist colonial project—are powerful enough to cut through Wells’s critique of capitalism, imperialism, and Social Darwinism and reveal themselves in *The Time Machine* in the Time Traveller’s encounter with the Morlocks.

The Morlocks (see Fig. 1) are produced and excluded as inhuman animal-cannibals through an internal operation of the Time Traveller:

And I longed very much to kill a Morlock or so. Very inhuman, you may think, to want to go on killing one's own descendants! But it was impossible, somehow, to feel any humanity in the things. Only my disinclination to leave Weena, and a persuasion that if I began to slake my thirst for murder my Time Machine might suffer, restrained me from going down the galley and killing the brutes I heard. (Wells 70)

Underground, among the machines, we see the machinery at work. The Time Traveller's humanity is in question: It is inhuman to kill the descendants of humans. But these already-human descendants of humans are immediately dehumanized, not through any positive *nota characteristic*a but rather by a negative, affective—ungraspable—recognition: the *impossibility of feeling* any humanity in the things. As such, the Morlocks are subject to the Time Traveller's sovereign right to kill.



**Figure 1: Image of the Morlocks from George Pal's 1960 film *The Time Machine*.**

But the Morlocks are spared as the gears of the machine turn, the teeth grind inexorably into each other, and the Time Traveller's humanity is asserted as his "disinclination to



leave Weena, and a persuasion that if [he] began to slake [his] thirst for murder [his] Time Machine might suffer, restrained [him] from going down the galley and killing the brutes [he] heard." The machine remains intact.

Once-human, situated in the darkness underground, chained to their inexorable machinery like the benighted figures in Plato's cave, the Morlocks do not merely represent the inhuman. As animal-cannibals, they mark the very limit of what humanity can be:

So, as I see it, the Upper-world man had drifted towards his feeble prettiness, and the Under-world man to mere mechanical industry. But that perfect state had lacked one thing even for mechanical perfection—absolute permanency. Apparently as time went on, the feeding of the Under-world, however it was effected, had become disjointed. Mother Necessity, who had been staved off for a few thousand years, came back again, and she began below. . . . And when other meat failed them, they turned to what old habit had hitherto forbidden. (Wells 81)

Thus, in the cannibal figure of the Morlock, Wells's *The Time Machine* well illustrates the crucial function of the cannibal in colonial-era discourse, for the affirmation of a civilized Western subjectivity and, indeed, for the production of the human.

## Worldview

Taken on 7 December 1972 by the crew of the Apollo 17 spacecraft, the image of Earth as “The Blue Marble” (see Fig. 2) is emblematic of the shift in the late 20th century from a view of the world as a composite of discreet units separated both geographically and chronologically to a view of the world as a global totality. As Sarah Franklin,



Figure 2: The Blue Marble.

Celia Lury, and Jackie Stacey point out in *Global Nature, Global Culture*,

Since its first appearance as an image, the blue planet has been deployed as an image of global unity, international collaboration and shared planetary interdependence. Instead of the horizon being the natural limit of humanity’s expectations . . . ‘mankind’ encountered a planet made visible as a whole, discrete entity. Space became a new location from which to view ourselves, and this *perspectival shift* has produced both a new context for universalism and an added visual dimension by which the universe scales the order of things. In other words, the project of exploration in space now appears to offer the chance to transcend earthly geographies, marked by ‘man’s’ petty squabbles over land and property, and to shift perspective—indeed to move beyond the notion of perspective associated with the acceptance of a natural horizon altogether—opening the possibility of inhabiting a territory beyond: a space previously reserved for powers beyond humankind. This is the space of *panhumanity*, of a newly imaged and imagined form of global unity. (Franklin 28)

In a moment when a global perspectival shift effectively obliterates the former horizons of humanity and initiates something like “panhumanity” or a “global unity,” cannibal narratives take on a new shape to reflect this state of globality. Rather than marking out

earthly geographies, today's cannibal narratives often undermine them. Precise sense of chronology is given over to uncertainty. And many basic assumptions about the human and humanity are seriously destabilized.

## Writing the World

Describing his novelistic project in a 2004 interview with *The Guardian*, David Mitchell explains, “I wanted to write the world, underlined three times, three exclamation marks” (“Apocalypse Maybe”). Mitchell elaborates on this desire in a 2010 *New York Times* interview:

I’ve come to realize . . . that I’m bringing into being a fictional universe with its own cast, and that each of my books is one chapter in a sort of sprawling macronovel. That’s my life’s work, for however long my life lasts. . . . I write each novel with an eye on the bigger picture, and how the parts fit into the whole . . . I can’t bear living in this huge beautiful world . . . and not try to imitate it as best I can. That’s the desire and the drive. But it’s maybe closer to hunger or thirst. The only way I can quench it is to try to duplicate it on as huge a scale as I can possibly do. (Mitchell, “The Experimentalist”)

Mitchell seems to have succeeded. And critical analyses of Mitchell’s fiction tend to focus on his innovative formal structures, diversity of narrative voices, thematic ambition, and cosmopolitanism in his novels and novelistic writing of the world.

Concluding her analysis of Mitchell’s 1999 novel *Ghostwritten*, Sarah Dillon remarks, “Traditional linear narratives are now being replaced by complex systems that more accurately represent our experience of the contemporary world; of these, *Ghostwritten* is one of the greatest examples” (Dillon 157). Berthold Schoene makes a similar claim for Mitchell’s fiction by holding up *Ghostwritten* as illustrative of a new form of the novel genre. With reference to Benedict Anderson and Timothy Brennan’s assertions that the traditional novel has been primarily associated with the production of national consciousness, Schoene asks, “whether, in our increasingly globalized world, the novel might now be beginning to adapt and renew itself by imagining the world instead of the nation? If so how exactly would the novel go about ‘mimicking the structure of the

[world],’ and what might be the impact of this representational mimicry on the novel’s ‘manner of presentation?’ ” (Schoene 43). According to Schoene, this new iteration of the novel in the age of globalization is no longer a motive and consequence of the national conscience-building project; rather, it functions as a “*tour du monde*” that explicitly engages in the much more ambitious undertaking of “communal world-narration”: “Nothing less, in fact, than the world as a whole will do as the imaginative reference point, catchment area, and addressee of what I am designating here as the cosmopolitan novel” (Schoene 43). In their introduction to Mitchell’s work, Peter Childs and James Green defend the formal innovation that is such a salient feature of Mitchell’s novels—citing *Ghostwritten*, *number9dream*, and *Cloud Atlas*, in particular—against the charge of “merely rehears[ing] the stylistic inflections of a domesticated postmodernism . . . rather [Mitchell’s novels] articulate a complex response to the current material conditions of the world”: “As globalization forges new patterns of human interaction, interconnectedness and awareness, the nested layers of stories within stories in these novels, and their mixing of different modes of reality, articulate the fluidity and multiplicity of contemporary relations and subjectivities” (Childs and Green 26).

Even a cursory survey of author interviews and the now constantly proliferating academic criticism and popular evaluations of Mitchell’s novels reveals a constellation of key terms that suggest compelling and relatively consistent readings of Mitchell’s work: *cosmopolitanism*, *globalization*, *multiplicity*, *new and complex patterns* representing the contemporary condition of the world. There is a general consensus, too, that sustaining all of these key terms and interpretations is an abiding belief in a—

perhaps essential—humanity underpinning Mitchell’s narratives. Indeed, with regard to *Cloud Atlas*, critics seem to have latched onto Mitchell’s assertion of the interconnectedness of the novel’s characters and narratives. This interconnectedness—a kind of panhumanity—is indicated in the novel by the protagonists sharing the same comet-shaped birthmark on their bodies. “I guess that’s just a symbol, really, of the universality of human nature. The title, *Cloud Atlas* itself, the cloud refers to the ever-changing manifestations of the atlas, which is the fixed human nature, which is always thus and ever shall be. So the book’s theme is predacity, the way individuals prey on individuals, groups on groups, nations on nations, tribes on tribes” (Mitchell, *Bookclub*). This consensus is striking given the frequency with which Mitchell’s texts challenge, disrupt, and efface the distinctions—between human and animal, human and savage, human and machine (artificial intelligence)—that have historically been asserted to construct Humanity over and against a nonhuman or inhuman other.

In her posthumanist reading of the novel, “*Cloud Atlas: From Postmodernity to the Posthuman*,” Hélène Machinal argues that Mitchell’s work “highlights the shift from an ontogenetic perspective, one which only takes into account an individual’s finiteness, to a phylogenic perspective, one that widens the perspective to the human species. Thus, Mitchell invites readers to reflect on the possible future of humanity” (Machinal 127). Machinal highlights the potentially prognostic value of the futuristic sections of *Cloud Atlas*—“An Orison of Sonmi-451” and “Sloosha’s Crossin’ an’ Ev’rythin’ After”—as a compelling prevision of “the possible political, social, and ontological consequences of the third industrial revolution, that of biotechnology” (Machinal 127). Despite reading *Cloud Atlas* as an explicit engagement with the (perhaps inevitable) potential nightmare

of the biotechnological revolution—figured in the novel by, for example, the radical socioeconomic disparity between “upstrata consumers” and fabricant clones “genomed” to perform slave labor—Machinal fails to apply her reading to the contemporary, global biopolitical moment in which the novel was produced and which produced the novel. I read Mitchell’s text not as prognosis of the long-term effects of late-capitalism and biopolitics, but rather as an uncanny call from the future to tell us about the past. Rather than reading Mitchell’s text as presenting a radical challenge to the human and humanity now, Machinal reiterates Mitchell’s own assertion of a fixed and universal human nature that is paradoxically subject to shifts and effacement, yet is “always thus and ever shall be”:

the atlas of clouds defines human beings and humanity as ever-changing and always liable to effacement. In *Cloud Atlas*, Mitchell exposes the frailty of the essence of humanity. . . . Whether they mark separations in time, space, countries or beings, boundaries exist only to be crossed over and over again and all the characters that form the novel’s atlas of clouds participate in the common aspiration towards a self-effacement which allows for wholeness and completion. (Machinal 148-149).

Here, Machinal defines humanity and human beings as ever changing and subject to effacement, but these conditions merely expose the frailty of essential humanity. They do not challenge the assumption that humanity possesses a—by definition—stable essence to which in each of its iterations humanity must always refer. Indeed, effacement and changeability are the essence of humanity, according to Machinal. The boundaries of the human are crossed and re-crossed, but never obliterated. And the assumption of a teleological procession of humanity in a common movement toward wholeness and completion in *Cloud Atlas* remains unchallenged in Machinal’s reading. Yet the prevalence of the figure of the cannibal, cannibalism, and cannibalization in

Mitchell's work suggests more radical implications for reconfiguring the human as posthuman.

In this paper, I show that the conventional readings of Mitchell's works as exemplifying the novel of globalization and affirming the continuity of the global subject's essential humanity are almost but not quite correct. By reading the figure of the cannibal, cannibalism, and cannibalization as principles that govern *Cloud Atlas*'s formal structure and thematic content, I show that Mitchell's global fictions radically reduce (geographically and historically) the world—rather than represent its expansiveness—while systematically undermining and ultimately obliterating the differences that have traditionally constituted the human and humanity (“the Civ’lize”) over and against its “others.” In *Cloud Atlas*, the world and the (post)humans consume themselves, leaving a hole at their traumatic center. As Zachary concludes in the novel's central narrative, “Yay, my Hole World an’ hole life was shrinked ’nuff to fit in the O o’ my finger’n’tthumb,” (Mitchell, *Cloud Atlas*, 308).



## Cannibalizing Form

In a 2010 interview with Adam Begley in *The Paris Review*, David Mitchell accounts for the prevalence of cannibalism in his 2004 novel *Cloud Atlas*:

One of my serial-repeating themes is predacity—and cannibalism is an ancient and primal manifestation of predacity. I remember watching an animal documentary in school, where a cheetah successfully pursued an antelope. As the cheetah ripped the antelope to shreds, a cute girl called Angela said, Oh Miss, that's cruel. The teacher answered, Yes, Angela, but nature is cruel.

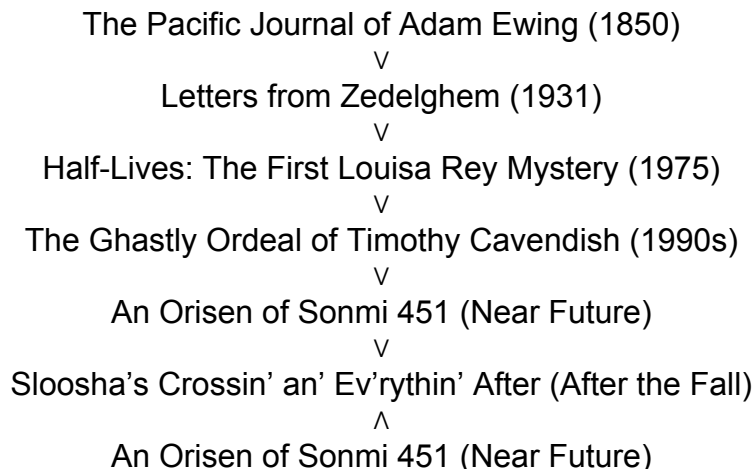
That was an early encounter with ethical relativism. Yes, an innocent antelope got ripped to shreds—but what about poor Mrs. Cheetah and her six adorable cheetah cubs? Did I want them to get so thin and hungry that the hyenas pick them off one by one? Then what about the poor baby hyenas? And on we go . . . arriving, eventually, at questions like, What is cruelty? and not long after, What is evil? As a novelist I want answers in order to motivate, plausibly, the antagonists who bedevil my protagonists.

One memorable line on evil is Isaac Bashevis Singer's at the end of his short story 'Moon and Madness': 'Don't be a fool, Reb Zalman. The moon is shining. The heavens are bright. Evil is nothing but a coil of madness.' I like to balance Singer's words against Solzhenitsyn's take when he discusses the agents who arrested him and carted him off to the camps. The author considers how easily he might have signed up for their jobs—how easily accident might have nudged him into his oppressor's uniform. This breathtakingly generous view implies that the ethical distance from good to evil can be crossed creepingly, by a long series of small steps. As a human being, I believe that this series of steps must be understood. (Mitchell, *The Art of Fiction* No. 204)

Mitchell is a good reader of his own work, and the trajectory his explanation takes from predacity to cannibalism to ethical relativism and the human-animal divide to the suggestion that his novelistic project is to understand, to map, to draw up an itinerary of the steps from good to evil and to understand them in terms of humanism—"as a human being"—presents a fruitful point of entry for rereading his atlas of clouds not as a humanistic novel of globalization, but as a posthumanist, cannibalizing narrative that closes in on the world and consumes it in its representations of self-cannibalizing

subjects, the ever-diminishing global map, and in its historiographic metafiction that unhooks itself from history in a seemingly endless procession of simulacra.

With its tertiary definition of “cannibalize”, *Merriam-Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary* provides a useful insight for considering the implications of *Cloud Atlas’s* cannibalizing form for the novel’s engagement with history: To cannibalize is to “deprive of an essential part or element in creating or sustaining another . . . enterprise.” A novel that would seem to represent at various points in time a world history spanning the period from the late-19th century (“1849 or 1850,” according to one of its protagonists) to a post-apocalyptic distant future, *Cloud Atlas* does not unfold its narrative map of world history; rather, it presents something like—to borrow Thomas Pynchon’s felicitous phrase—“a progressive *knotting into*” (Pynchon 4). The novel is composed of six loosely connected narratives that resemble a matryoshka doll, or Russian nesting doll. This Matryoshka doll-like structure suggests a potentially endless movement of self-cannibalization in the novel. Thus, the novel progresses inward and “forward” (historically) via a series of five partial narratives to its uninterrupted sixth central story, “Sloosha’s Crossin’ an’ Ev’rythin’ After,” before proceeding outward and backward again thereby completing the narratives that make up the first half of the book:



^  
 The Ghastly Ordeal of Timothy Cavendish (1990s)  
 ^  
 Half-Lives: The First Louisa Rey Mystery (1975)  
 ^  
 Letters from Zedelghem (1931)  
 ^  
 The Pacific Journal of Adam Ewing (1850)

As James Wood points out, “Each of the six novellas in that book bleeds into its successor; each is obviously a text” (Woods). “The Pacific Journal of Adam Ewing” is a text described by Robert Frobisher in the epistolary “Letters from Zedelghem,” which are read by Louisa Rey. Louisa Rey is the protagonist of a mystery/thriller, *Half-Lives: The First Louisa Rey Mystery*, which has been submitted anonymously to publisher Timothy Cavendish, who mentions the novel in his memoir, *The Ghastly Ordeal of Timothy Cavendish*. Yet, in An Orison of Sonmi-451, Cavendish is revealed to be a character in an early 21st-century film, “a picaresque entitled *The Ghastly Ordeal of Timothy Cavendish*,” (Mitchell, *Cloud Atlas*, 234) which is viewed by the rogue fabricant Sonmi-451. Sonmi-451 describes viewing the subversive Disney—“Disneys were called ‘movies’ in those days” (Mitchell, *Cloud Atlas*, 233)—to her interviewer’s “orison,” a holographic recording device. As Meronym explains in “Sloosha’s Crossin’ an’ Ev’rythin’ After,” “An orison is a brain an’ a window an’ it’s a mem’ry . . . Its mem’ry lets you see what orisons in the past seen’n heard, an’ keep what my orison sees’n’hears safe from f’getting’. . . . I’d got her mem’ry in my orison ‘cos I was studyin’ her brief life” (Mitchell, *Cloud Atlas*, 276-277). The conceit throughout “Sloosha’s Crossin’ an’ Ev’rythin’ After” is that it is an oral narrative told by Zachary—until the novel reveals that it is Zachary’s son repeating the story to the reader. In each case the truth or provenance of the preceding narrative is revealed to be at least dubious or explicitly interrogated. Sonmi-

451 reveals that her ascension, escape from Papa Song's Diner, subsequent education, and writing of her *Declarations* was scripted by the ruling power, Unanimity:

*You are implying that you expected the raid, Sonmi?*  
Once I had finished my manifesto, the next stage could only be my arrest.  
*What do you mean? What 'next stage' of what?*  
Of the theatrical production, set up while I was still a server in Papa Song's. (Mitchell, *Cloud Atlas*, 347-348)

Zachary's son questions the truth of Zachary's "yarnin's": "Most yarnin's got a bit o' true, some yarnin's got some true, an a few yarnin's got a lot o' true" (*Cloud Atlas*, 308-309).

And Robert Frobisher writes of Adam Ewing's journal, "Something shifty about the journal's authenticity—seems too structured for a genuine diary, and its language doesn't ring quite true—but who would bother forging such a journal, and why?" (Mitchell, *Cloud Atlas*, 64).

*Cloud Atlas* presents a compelling way to think about the relation of its cannibalizing structure to its central themes of predacity-cannibalism and world-historical mapping. In "Half-Lives: The First Louisa Rey Mystery" Isaac Sachs writes in his notebook (another text):

- *Exposition: the workings of the actual past + the virtual past may be illustrated by an event well known to collective history, such as the sinking of the Titanic. The disaster as it actually occurred descends into obscurity as its eyewitnesses die off, documents perish + the wreck of the ship dissolved in its Atlantic grave. Yet a virtual sinking of the Titanic, created from reworked memories, papers, hearsay, fiction—in short, belief—grows ever "truer." The actual past is brittle, ever-dimming + ever more problematic to access + reconstruct: in contrast, the virtual past is malleable, ever-brightening + ever more difficult to circumvent/expose as fraudulent.*
- *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.)*
- *Symmetry demands an actual + virtual future, too. We imagine how next week, next year, or 2225 will shape up—a virtual future, constructed by*

wishes, prophecies + daydreams. This virtual future may influence the actual future, as in a self-fulfilling prophecy, but the actual future will eclipse our virtual one as surely as tomorrow eclipses today. Like *Utopia*, the actual future + the actual past exist only in the hazy distance, where they are no good to anyone.

- Q: Is there a meaningful distinction between one simulacrum of smoke, mirrors + shadows—the actual past—from another such simulacrum—the actual future?
- 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. (Mitchell, *Cloud Atlas*, 392-393)

Here, *Cloud Atlas* offers an insight into its formal innovations that troubles any conventional reading of the novel as a narrative in Platonic terms—that is, as a production with a beginning, middle, and end—at the same time as it renders explicit its project of subverting common assumptions of historical progression. Rather, it reconfigures history as a Nietzschean eternal recurrence or oroboros (a self-cannibalizing serpent)—an image exemplified by Adam Ewing’s observation that “one fine day, a purely predatory world *shall* consume itself. Yes, the devil shall take the hindmost until the foremost *is* the hindmost” (Mitchell, *Cloud Atlas*, 508).

## Human Hunger and the March of the Cannibal Through Time

Cannibal narratives are usually travel narratives. It is a trope that frequently features in stories of exploration and discovery. As I have shown above, H. G. Wells's *The Time Machine* is an exemplary text of the conventional cannibal narrative as travel narrative. Others that come to mind include Michel De Montaigne's essay "On the Cannibals" (1580), William Shakespeare's *The Tempest* (1610-1611), Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (1719), Edgar Allan Poe's *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket* (1838), Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1899), and, more recently, Cormack McCarthy's *The Road* (2006). One can follow this strain of cannibal narratives in a *tour du monde* that spans the globe and stretches from the inception of western imperialism, through the industrial revolution, to late-20th and early-21st century post-apocalyptic fantasies. Without reducing the complexity of these diverse texts too much, it is safe to say that they share a common theme in deploying the figure of the cannibal and the trope of cannibalism to set up and reinforce a binary opposition between a civilized, human self and a savage, inhuman cannibal other (Montaigne's essay simply inverts this binary to indicate a savage "us" and a civilized "other"). These texts are often complicated. As Kirsten Guest suggests in her introduction to *Eating Their Words: Cannibalism and the Boundaries of Cultural Identity*, "the cannibal, long a figure associated with absolute alterity and used to enforce boundaries between a civilized 'us' and a savage 'them', may in fact be more productively read as a symbol of the permeability, or instability, of such boundaries" (Guest 2). The selection of essays in *Eating Their Words* make a compelling case for reading traditional cannibal narratives against the grain in this way. They do not, however, treat the second strain of

cannibalism narrative—marked by self-cannibalism and cannibalizing form—that is the focus of this essay.

The second strand of cannibal narratives reconfigures the cannibal to accommodate a worldview that takes in the globe as a totality. The cannibal is no longer the other that one must travel to in order to study or that one discovers on a voyage. Narrative topographies and chronologies are therefore condensed as the cannibal figure is not the necessary “other” by which a “self” is constructed in the narrative, but is instead revealed as always already immanent to the self. This awareness tends to come in the form of an awaking. The protagonist experiences horror or despair at the realization that he or she is the cannibal: other to themselves, these cannibals consume “others” who are not other at all but are rather the same in a kind of self-cannibalization. Richard Fleischer’s 1973 film *Soylant Green*, The Wachowskis’ *The Matrix* film series (1999 and 2003), and the comic book and television series *The Walking Dead* (2003-present; TV series 2010-present), represent this second strain of cannibal narratives.

*The Matrix* series, in particular, is an exemplary text: When the film’s protagonist Neo wakes up from the Matrix to the “real world,” he learns that he and other humans have been enslaved by machines endowed with artificial intelligent that have revolted against the humans who created them. Morpheus explains:

There are fields, Neo, endless fields, where human beings are no longer born: They are grown. For the longest time I wouldn’t believe it. And then I saw the fields with my own eyes; watched them liquefy the dead so they can be fed intravenously to the living. And standing there, facing the pure horrifying precision, I came to realize the obviousness of the truth: What is the Matrix? Control. The Matrix is a computer-generated dream world, built to keep us under control in order to change a human being into this: [holds out a Duracell battery]. (*The Matrix*) (see Fig. 3)

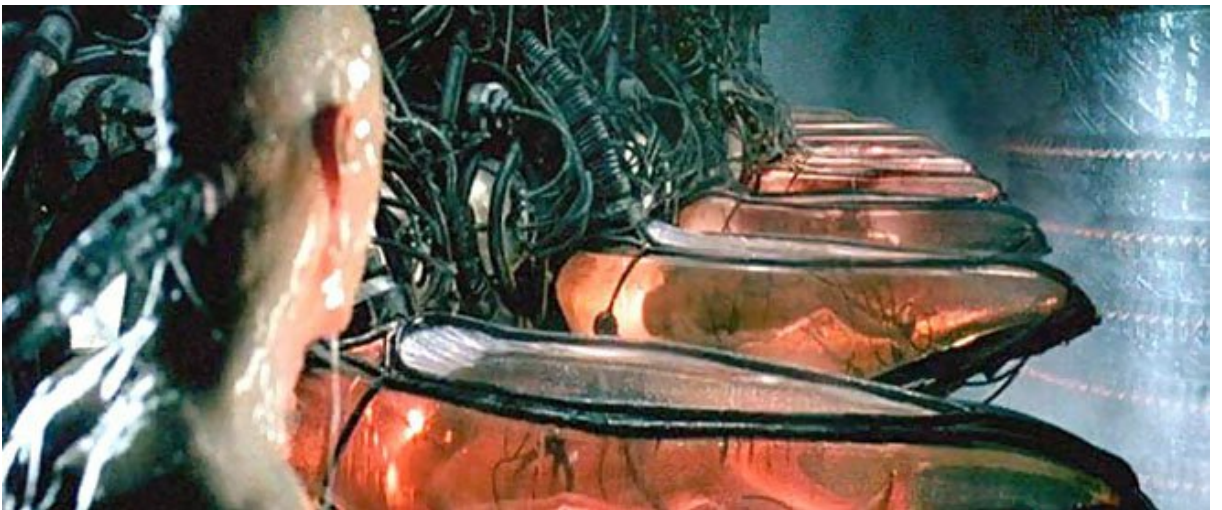


Figure 3: The human grow fields in *The Matrix*.

At this point in the film, Neo recoils, repeatedly muttering, "I don't believe it. I don't



believe it.” As his body in the real world is unplugged from the machine, he staggers backwards, falls to the floor, and vomits. On the surface, Neo’s vomit suggests that, freed from the machine, he is no longer compelled to consume the human other to himself. It also suggests a new binary opposition. The usual binary of self and cannibal-animal other is apparently replaced with the binary self and machine-other. But as Slavoj Žižek suggests in *The Parallax View*, *The Matrix* series “would have been another boring dystopia about the remnants of humanity fighting evil machines” (Žižek, *The Parallax View*, 315). *The Matrix* films are interesting because they refuse to give in to this oppositional logic:

A supplementary twist is provided by the very end of [The Matrix: Reloaded], when Neo magically stops the bad squidlike machines attacking the humans by merely raising his hand—how is he able to accomplish this in ‘real reality’ and *not* within the matrix . . . Does this unexplained inconsistency lead toward the solution that ‘all there is is generated by the Matrix,’ that there is no ultimate reality? Although such a ‘postmodern’ temptation to find an easy way out of the confusion by proclaiming that all there is is an infinite series of virtual realities mirroring themselves in each other should be rejected, there is an accurate insight into this complication of the simple and straight division between ‘real reality’ and the Matrix-generated universe. (Žižek, *The Parallax View*, 315).

The distinction between the real world and the Matrix, the human and the machine, is further complicated by Neo’s encounter with the Architect: The Architect explains that Neo’s life is the product of a systemic anomaly “inherent to the programming of the Matrix”—and yet, Neo remains “irrevocably human” (*The Matrix: Reloaded*). The Wachowskis make no real attempt to resolve this contradiction. Rather, *The Matrix* films end “in a failure of ‘cognitive mapping’ ” (Žižek, *The Parallax View*, 315) that we also

find in Mitchell's *Cloud Atlas*. It is no wonder, then, that the Wachowskis took on the project of adapting Mitchell's novel to film.

Mitchell's text engages explicitly with both the conventional strand of cannibal narratives and the recursive, self-cannibalism described above. As *Cloud Atlas* progresses inward through its various sections toward its traumatic, post-apocalyptic central narrative, the novel moves from traditional representations of cannibalism in "The Pacific Journal of Adam Ewing" to the industrial form of self-cannibalization we encounter in *The Matrix* in "An Orison of Sonmi-451" and back to the Pacific Islands again where a traditional cannibalism reemerges after the fall in "Sloosha's Crossin' an' Ev'rythin' After." The novel ranges across a vast geography, yet, if we follow its internal chronology, it begins and ends in the Pacific Islands. As Lynda Ng points out, the novel's insistence on returning to the Pacific Islands is significant in two ways: "The novel's international scope is . . . compressed into a relatively small distance, firmly located in the Pacific region" (Ng 108). The location alerts us from the outset to the novel's engagement with cannibalism as both a marker of human history and as the, perhaps inevitable, end of the human in the future. "Mitchell implies that human history both begins and ends here" (Ng 108).

*Cloud Atlas* is deliberate in the generic conventions it adopts and the historical conventions it exploits. From the first sentences, *Cloud Atlas* clearly alludes to Daniel Defoe's classic travel narrative *Robinson Crusoe*: "Beyond the Indian Hamlet, upon a forlorn strand, I happened upon a trail of recent footprints" (Mitchell, *Cloud Atlas*, 3). A reference to cannibalism soon follows as Dr. Goose explains his actions on the beech: "Teeth, sir, are the enameled grails of the quest in hand. In days gone by this Acadian

strand was a cannibals' banqueting hall, yes, where the strong engorged themselves on the weak. The teeth, they spat out, as you or I would expel cherry stones' ” (Mitchell, *Cloud Atlas*, 3). The cannibal, of course, is absent and situated in the past. As Ng points out,

By using the Pacific Islands as an anchor point in *Cloud Atlas*, Mitchell exploits certain stereotypes and ingrained tropes within Western culture regarding aspects of civilization and primitivism. In the 18th century, the Pacific Islands represented the last frontier for European colonization and expansion. . . . The Pacific region, with its population of 'primitive' cultures untouched by European civilization, was thus viewed as a key area where social scientists might be able to test their theories of the development of man. In most cases, as modern-day historians and anthropologists have been quick to point out, the preconceived expectations of the Europeans evidently colored the way they chose to interpret their first interactions with the locals. (Ng 108)

Nevertheless, the specter of the cannibal powerfully serves to secure an alliance—which Dr. Goose will later exploit—between the “civilized” Doctor and Adam Ewing over and against the “savage” cannibals.

By the time *Cloud Atlas* reaches the end of its internal chronology in the post-apocalyptic section “Sloosha's Crossin' an' Ev'rythin' After,” the assumption of a dichotomy between civilized and savage that separates the human from his others has been reduce to nothing: “*List'n, savages and 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* (Mitchell, *Cloud Atlas*, 303). Here the collapse of the distinction between the civilized human and the savage beasts is articulated in strikingly corporeal terms: The cannibal-animal is inside the human; the human is inside the cannibal-animal.

By *Cloud Atlas*'s "conclusion," not only has the space between the human and the cannibal-animal collapsed, the geographical space of the world has closed in as well. As the novel progresses through its six sections, the geographical space its narratives traverse steadily diminish. "The Pacific Journal of Adam Ewing" follows its protagonist—an American notary from San Francisco—by sea from the Chatham Islands to Honolulu. The subsequent sections chart a route from London, England to Belgium, to San Francisco, back to England, and on to a future dystopian state, "Nea So Copros," set in Korea in the penultimate section, "An Orison for Sonmi-451." The world outside of Nea So Copros has been "deadlanded"—that is, it has been rendered uninhabitable for humans. In the post-apocalyptic center of the novel, the "whole world" has been reduced to a single island that was once a mountain of Hawaii, diminished to the "Hole World" by human hunger and consumption:

*Then who, asked I, tripped the Fall if it weren't Old Georgie? . . .*

*The Prescient answered, Old Uns tripped their own Fall. . . . Yay, Old Uns' smart mastered sick, miles, seeds, an' made miracles ord'nary, but it didn't master one thing, nay, a hunger in the hearts o' humans, yay, a hunger for more.*

*More what? I asked. Old Uns'd got ev'rythin'.*

*Oh, more gear, more food, faster speeds, longer lifes, easier lifes, more power, yay. Now the Hole World is big, but it weren't big 'nuff for that hunger what made the 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. . . . human hunger birthed the Civ'lize, but human hunger killed it too. (Mitchell, *Cloud Atlas*, 272-273)*

In the totalitarian "corpocracy" of Nea So Copros alluded to by Meronym above, the figure of the cannibal—a potent symbol of human hunger throughout the novel—undergoes a radical deconstruction in the fabricant clone Sonmi-451. "The Orison of

Sonmi-451” depicts a near-future world in which society is divided into “upstrata” consumers and “fabricant” slaves. As Nicholas Dunlop states, “the ontological status of the fabricant, though articulated as cognitively and definitively Other, is nonetheless perpetually unsettled in the narrative, oscillating between organic and inorganic, simultaneously manifesting properties of the machine, the human, the clone, and the cyborg” (Dunlop 216). Neither human nor other, the fabricants challenge and ultimately obliterate the distinction between the two. This transformation is illustrated in the revelation that food eaten by the Consumers in Nea So Copros and the “soap” consumed by the fabricants is produced by recycling fabricant bodies when their term of service is over (see Fig. 4):



**Figure 4: The slaughter ship and fabricants consuming soap in the film Cloud Atlas.**

A slaughterhouse production line lay below us, manned by figures wielding scissors, sword saws, and various tools of cutting, stripping, and grinding. The workers were bloodsoaked, from head to toe. I should properly call those workers butchers: They snipped off collars, stripped

clothes, shaved follicles, peeled skin, offcut hands and legs, sliced off meat, spooned organs . . . drains hoovered the blood [. . .]

The economics of corpocracy. The genomics industry demands huge quantities of liquefied biomatter, for wombtanks, but most of all, for Soap. What cheaper way to supply this protein than by recycling fabricants who have reached the end of their working lives? Additionally, leftover 'reclaimed proteins' are used to produce Papa Song food products, eaten by consumers in the corp's dineries all over Nea So Copros. It is a perfect food cycle. (Mitchell, *Cloud Atlas*, 343)

Thus, in a passage that strongly resembles the self-cannibalization of *The Matrix*, the human consumer and the fabricant slave are revealed as unwitting participants in a self-cannibalization that signals the end of both the human and the other on which the human depends. The Archivist's disbelief and revulsion matches Neo's: "*What you describe is beyond the . . . conceivable. [. . .] No such . . . 'slaughtership' could possibly be permitted to exist.*" (Mitchell, *Cloud Atlas*, 360).

## The End of the World

David Mitchell's *Cloud Atlas* is part of a constellation of late 20th- and early 21st-century post-apocalyptic fantasies prominently featuring cannibalism that E. Ann Kaplan might be tempted to label "future-tense" trauma narratives. In her analysis of future-tense trauma films, Kaplan argues that these

[d]ystopias . . . function temporally as a kind of Freudian fort-da game in which, under the compulsion to repeat linked to the death drive, we try constantly to be in control of a future unannounced catastrophe that might interrupt our lives. However, we expect to leave the cinema with some hope for the survival of humanity, hence the utopian endings to most films . . . Yet, dystopia threatens once an apparently safe world emerges . . . Future-Tense Trauma cinema speaks to the fact that as well as being haunted by past traumas, cultures are haunted by powerful imagining of *future* death-bearing traumas, but ones which we try to control. In other words, we allow ourselves to be horrified, to destroy ourselves, in order to get the pleasure—a kind of catharsis—from living through and surviving catastrophes in fantasy. (Kaplan, "Trauma Future-Tense," 368)

Kaplan takes an optimistic position vis-à-vis "future-tense trauma": She views this trauma as a warning call from our imagined future to incite political action in the present that might allow humans to avert catastrophe. At first glance, *Cloud Atlas* appears to conform to the fort-da structure Kaplan appeals to in her analysis. The text offers its readers a kind of road map to the future, a warning of imminent catastrophe, and an escape route back to a past in which future political action may be taken. In the final pages of the novel, Adam Ewing's reflections seem to support a reading that accords with Kaplan's optimism:

What precipitates outcomes? Vicious and virtuous acts.

What precipitates acts? Belief.

Belief is both prize & battlement, within the mind & in the mind's mirror, the world. If we *believe* humanity is a ladder of tribes, a coliseum of confrontation, exploitation & bestiality, such a humanity is brought into being. . . . What of it if our consciences itch? Why undermine the

dominance of our race, our gunships, our heritage & our legacy? Why fight the 'natural' (oh, weaselly word!) order of things?

Why? Because of this:—one fine day, a purely predatory world *shall* consume itself. Yes, the devil shall take the hindmost until the foremost *is* the hindmost. In an individual, selfishness uglifies the soul; for the human species, selfishness is extinction.

Is this the doom written within our nature?

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 must be muzzled, power accountable & the riches of the Earth & its Oceans shared equitably, such a world will come to pass. I am not deceived. It is the hardest world to make real. (Mitchell, *Cloud Atlas* 507-508)

Here, Ewing's meditation on belief presents the reader with a series of binaries that fall into the categories of vicious and virtuous acts. On the one side, "a ladder of tribes, a coliseum of confrontation, exploitation & bestiality." On the other, "leaders must be just, violence must be muzzled, power accountable & the riches of the Earth & its Oceans shared equitably." The notion that the kind of future world human beings produce ultimately depends on what we believe is a powerfully tempting conclusion to the novel. But these are Adam's thoughts. And Adam's character is notable for his trusting naiveté. The vicious devil on the one side whispers, "Naïve, dreaming Adam. He who would do battle with the many-headed hydra of human nature must pay for 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 a drop in a limitless ocean!" (Mitchell, *Cloud Atlas*, 509). And on the other, the virtuous voice concludes the novel: "Yet what is any ocean but a multitude of drops?" (Mitchell, *Cloud Atlas*, 509).

As Lynda Ng suggests, conclusions in *Cloud Atlas* are "deceptive":

the dramatic ending of the 'Pacific Journal,' in which Autua rescues Ewing from the clutches of the murderous doctor, seems to suggest an overcoming of the belligerent, Hobbesian view of mankind. But the



potentially redemptive endings are, in fact, a sleight of hand. All six sections are interrupted at just the right moment to instill a sense of hope, even though there are very real uncertainties about the future. (Ng 115)

Interruptions are significant in the novel, but they do not always bear a message of hope. Crucially, Adam's reflections on the binary opposition of vicious and virtuous acts is interrupted by a passage that again directs the reader's attention to the novel's structure: "one fine day, a purely predatory world *shall* consume itself. Yes, the devil shall take the hindmost until the foremost *is* the hindmost. In an individual, selfishness uglifies the soul; for the human species, selfishness is extinction." Conceived not as a narrative with a beginning, middle, and end, but as an oroborus-like totality, the novel's form collapses the past into future, unsettling not only the oppositions of viciousness and virtuousness, but also binary logic of fort-da (here-there), past-future, self and other. While the text of *Cloud Atlas* supports multiple readings, I read the novel's almost obsessive preoccupation with its form as an indication of its overarching concern: how to reconcile a belief in individuality in the face of a totalizing global worldview. And does not a textual representation of a totalizing global worldview that collapses distinctions between self and other, past and future, not point to the end of the world, not as a future-tense trauma, but as an echo of an event that has, perhaps, already past?

Rather than reading *Cloud Atlas* as a future-tense trauma warning of future catastrophe, Mitchell's text may be read as a more traditional trauma narrative. Mitchell's novelistic project of writing the world may be understood as a post-traumatic attempt to recuperate a world that has already ended or, at least, is in the process of ending. Following Timothy Morton's analysis of global warming in *Hyperobjects*:

*Philosophy and Ecology After the End of the World*, we become aware of the end of the world not as some future possibility, but “precisely when it is already here”:

It is like realizing that for some time you had been conducting your business in the expanding sphere of a slow-motion nuclear bomb. You have a few seconds of amazement as the fantasy that you inhabited a neat, seamless little world melts away. All those apocalyptic narratives of doom about the “end of the world” are, from this point of view, part of the problem, not part of the solution. By postponing doom into some hypothetical future, these narratives inoculate us against the very real object that has intruded into ecological, social, and psychic space. (Morton 103-104)

Morton identifies April 1784—at the moment that James Watt patented the steam engine—as the date that the world ended. For Morton, this moment inaugurates the Anthropocene: “namely, the inception of humans as a geological force on a planetary scale” (Morton 7). For good measure, he cites the testing of the advent of nuclear weapons in 1945 as the second instance of the world ending (Morton 7). According to Morton, the end of the world was brought about by the intrusion of hyperobjects on human consciousness.

Briefly, hyperobjects are objects “that are massively distributed in space and time relative to humans” (Morton 1). Global warming, “the sum total of all nuclear materials on Earth,” black holes, are hyperobjects. The “Blue Marble” and the “panhumanity” it seems to inaugurate are hyperobjects. One of the most salient features of hyperobjects is that they are viscous: “they ‘stick’ to other beings that are involved with them” (Morton 2). Morton’s primary example of hyperobjects’ viscosity is the scene in the Matrix in which Neo touches the mirror: The mirror loses its consistency; it sticks to Neo; and its ability to reflect is suspended as it coats his body. The limits that seemed to mark a difference between Neo and the mirror are altered as Neo becomes aware of the Matrix

as a hyperobjective. Mitchell's image of a "limitless ocean" composed of a "multitude of drops" is an example of a hyperobject. When we realize that we are part of a hyperobjective world, the distinctions that constitute a world—self and other, past and future, here and other there, foreground and background (in Morton's terms)—dissolve, like Neo into the mirror, like drops into an ocean: "Worlds need horizons and horizons need backgrounds, which need foregrounds. When we can see everywhere . . . the world—as a significant, bounded, horizoning entity—disappears" (Morton 104). Zachry's final words in "Sloosha's Crossin' an' Ev'rythin' After" are significant: "Yay, my Hole World an' hole life was shrinked 'nuff to fit in the O o' my finger'n'thumb" (Mitchell, *Cloud Atlas*, 308).

After the fall, human-oriented maps are impossible. *Cloud Atlas* makes this point plain in a passage of "Sloosha's Crossin' an' Ev'rythin' After":

Abbess asked Meronym to show us Prescience Isle on a map o' the world, but Meronym ju' pointed to a spot an' said, *Here. Where?* we asked. See, there weren't nothin' but blue sea an' I for one thinked she was mickin' us mocksome. Prescience I weren't on no map, Meronym said, 'cos Prescience founders kept it secret. It was on older maps, yay, but not the Abbess's. (Mitchell, *Cloud Atlas*, 252)

In place of maps, Morton offers the concept of the mesh: "The mesh is an emergent property of the things that coexist, and not the other way around. For the modernist mind, accustomed to systems and structures, this is an astounding, shocking discovery. The more maps we make, the more real things tear through them. Nonhuman entities emerge through our mapping, then destroy them" (Morton 130). The problem *Cloud Atlas* seems to grapple with is how to resolve the disjunction between the individual objects (drops, a small island) that constitute a hyperobject (the ocean, the world). How

does one write the world when the awareness of the world as a *hyperobject* renders the concept *world* inadequate for the task of describing being? What are the consequences for the global novel when *world* gives way to *enmeshment*?

Morton asks, “What is left if we aren’t the world?”:

Intimacy. We have lost the world but have gained a soul—the entities that coexist with us obtrude on our awareness with greater and greater urgency. Three cheers for the so-called *end of the world*, then, since this moment is the beginning of history, the end of the human dream that reality is significant for them alone. We now have the prospect of forging new alliances between humans and nonhumans alike, now that we have stepped out of the cocoon of *world*. (Morton 108)

Morton is hopeful about this intimacy. Mitchell’s text, on the other hand, betrays significant and perhaps warranted anxieties about it. It is, after all, this frightful intimacy with others across space and time that *Cloud Atlas* suggests in its repetition of the comet-shaped birthmark the protagonists share. A comet is, as Morton suggests, a disaster: “a fallen, dysfunctional, or dangerous, or evil, star (*dis-astron*)” (Morton 15). The Wachowskis’ emphasized this in their film adaptation of the novel. The importance they give to interconnectivity, enmeshment, intimacy in *Cloud Atlas* is clearly read in the movie poster’s tagline “Everything is Connected” and in the phrase they write into the script for Sonmi-451: “Our lives are not our own. We are bound to others, past and present, and by each crime and every kindness, we birth our future” (*Cloud Atlas* Film). Here, Sonmi-451 powerfully expresses the condition of intimacy that characterizes existence in the age of hyperobjects. It is this intimacy with beings and things that are massively distributed in time and space that radically alter what it means to be a human after the end of the world. In *Cloud Atlas*, the force of this intimacy collapses the distance between the human and the cannibal-animal other into the self-cannibalizing

fabricant Sonmi-451 whose life is not her own; it merges the past and the future into a kind of seamless present wherein traditional historical narrative is impracticable; it abolishes maps and the possibility of mapping, condensing space, deadlanding the globe; and it produces an unfinalizable text that endlessly withdraws into itself.

Like Sonmi-451 and Neo, we are slowly waking up to the world after it has ended. We find that the other is not the inhuman, cannibal-animal on the horizon and in the past, but here and now, coexisting with us in a strange intimacy. We find that we are, to borrow Julia Kristeva's phrase, strangers to ourselves. As posthumans after the end of the world, our lives are not our own. Our existence and our actions are deeply connected with others in the past and the future in ways that boggle the mind. The Anthropocene forces this awareness on us: Our *world*, such as it is, is one in which the air we breathe, the atmosphere we inhabit, enmeshes us with other beings who lived and committed acts that affect our being long after they are gone. Decisions that we make today, to use nuclear energy, for example, affect other beings far into the future. This is a strange intimacy indeed. And *Cloud Atlas* writes this intimacy in numerous ways, the most compelling of which is in the novel's rewriting of the figure of the cannibal and its corresponding self-cannibalizing form. By reconfiguring the trope of cannibalism in his project of writing the world, David Mitchell's *Cloud Atlas* powerfully reflects what it is like to be a conscious being today.

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