

Toward a Theory of Experimental World Epic: David Mitchell's *Cloud Atlas* Wendy Knepper

Abstract: Drawing on world-systems analytic perspectives and development studies, this article argues for the emergence of an experimental world epic during our era of global capitalist transition. As represented by David Mitchell's *Cloud Atlas*, among other fictions, this epic demonstrates a radical commitment to global justice through its multi-scalar efforts to reconstitute the histories and horizons of world development, both for the subjects it represents and the global readership it addresses. For Mitchell, an ambivalent aesthetics of global cannibalism serves as a way to encode, critique, and exceed the logic of unfettered global capitalist accumulation, especially as the text self-consciously problematizes its role as a "global cannibal" of world culture and status as a commodity fiction to be consumed in the global literary marketplace. While the aesthetics of cannibalism may be distinctive to Mitchell, this article proposes that the experimental world epic might generally be characterized by its radical commitment to interrogating pivotal moments in world development and global transformation. Such an epic mobilizes world cultural knowledge and global literacies to highlight the deprivations associated with uneven development, enact global cognitive justice, and involve readers as active participants in articulating more ethical horizons for global transformation.

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Contemporary fiction abounds with innovative accounts of globalization, including tales that crisscross the planet, traverse time and space,

project the outcomes of capitalist crisis in post-apocalyptic or dystopian worlds, bear witness to transnational trauma, unfold as network narratives, or navigate digital culture. But innovation should not be confused with experimentation. Liam Connell observes that experimental works do not merely “grapple with the supposed novelty of globalization” but seek to “draw attention to their own capacity to represent globalization successfully” (225). If experimental writing is characterized by a certain creative anxiety about its ability to track transformations on a planetary scale, one might wonder about its capacity for the kind of radical creative expression that “lays everything open to challenge, reconceptualization and reconfiguration” (Bray, Gibbons, and McHale 1). Given the seemingly diminished horizons for social transformation under late capitalism and neoliberal globalization, not to mention the challenges associated with collective action on a planetary scale, it may well seem that we live in “tragic times” when “the slow settling loss of any acceptable future” (Raymond Williams qtd. in Scott 2) has muffled literary experimentation’s emancipatory impulses. Yet if we accept the view that “human intervention and creativity” are both urgently needed and capable of consequential effects in our turbulent times of transition and political crisis (Wallerstein 267), then experimental writing might well have a vital and even viable role to play in our globalizing world.

Reflecting on such challenges and potentialities, I make a case for an experimental epic that critiques world development and reconfigures the horizons for global transformation through its world-making activities. Such an epic maps the actions of the capitalist world-system, but it also incorporates alternative constructions of worldhood and acknowledges the impact of longer scales of transformation, particularly through the influence of culture as a resource for negotiating and reorienting developmental thought and action. In the first part of this paper, I sketch out the contours of the experimental epic, noting how it addresses world-systemic inequalities and reconfigures “development as freedom,” in Amartya Sen’s words, through its world-making activities for furthering global cognitive justice and more inclusive world literacies. Then, I present a close reading of David Mitchell’s *Cloud Atlas*, a novel widely recognized for its globalized aesthetics.¹ As I will show, Mitchell’s epic

mobilizes histories, discourses, and avant-garde aesthetic practices of cannibalism to critique the violence associated with economic globalization, even as the narrative self-consciously interrogates its own acts of cultural cannibalism and its capacity to convey a more inclusive and participatory narrative of world development. *Cloud Atlas* experimentally renews the epic tradition through an anxiously creative aesthetics of cannibalism and thus repositions the epic protagonist as a dissident figure in the making, reconstitutes the epic journey to the underworld as a quest to revitalize global politics, and reconfigures the search for epic totality as an ongoing and collective exercise in post-abysal thought and action. With its multi-scalar and long historical view of change, the experimental world epic encourages readers to expand and exercise their global literacies as capabilities for challenging inequalities and rethinking developmental freedoms.

I. Toward a Theory of the Experimental World Epic

Since ancient times, epic has played a role in constituting the histories and horizons of social transformation, particularly through its emphasis on accounting for “pivotal moments” (Steinberg 29) of crisis and change in the lives of individuals and communities, its effort to map those events in world contexts, and its widespread influence on readers and writers through time and space. John Miles Foley presents epic as the “master-genre of the ancient world,” noting that it “presents real challenges to conventional literary history” (1) on account of its composite form and formative influence on other genres. The editors of *Epic Traditions in the Contemporary World* observe that “epic has been an object of study for two millennia, in part because the great classical epics and their modern counterparts continue to inspire cultural definition and self-definition” (Beissinger, Tylus, and Wofford 2). In *Epic and Empire*, David Quint emphasizes how epic engages in a kind of interplay as it addresses the particular circumstances of its own inception in relation to “a political genealogy of the genre itself,” such that “epic becomes part of a larger literary history . . . *already* freighted with political ideas and expectations” (13; emphasis in original). As a world literary genre, epic prompts its readers to think about culture as an object and agent of development

and change through the *longue durée*. David Damrosch's world literary historical account of *The Epic of Gilgamesh* positions the world literary text as a participant in the vagaries of cultural history, circulation, and shifting interpretations about development (Damrosch, *What is World Literature?* 39–78; *The Buried Book*). For Wai Chee Dimock, epic provides a way of mapping cultural contact and transformation through “deep time” and multiple scales of experience (Dimock, *Through Other Continents* 83–84) or functions as a kind of “cross-genre and cross-media relay” for “indexing new developments in the world” (148). In *Modern Epic*, Franco Moretti argues that epic has been transformed by the pressures associated with the capitalist world-system such that its poetics work to consolidate global inequality.

However, the epic of the world-system can also play a disruptive role, perhaps especially so during our era of late capitalist crisis and transition. David Cunningham argues for the dissident potential of a global capitalist epic that renders visible the limits that constrain its narrative pursuit of “the abstract and terribly concrete” tendencies of economic globalization (20). Peter Boxall observes that post-millennial fiction has seen “the emergence of a new kind of epic fiction, what Roberto Bolaño would call a ‘world-encompassing’ seeing, that is shaped by the balance that is now emerging between the national and the global” (189). Citing the examples of Mitchell's *Cloud Atlas*, Haruki Murakami's *1Q84*, Jonathan Franzen's *Freedom*, Jennifer Egan's *A Visit to the Goon Squad*, and Roberto Bolaño's *2666*, he writes of the “world fashioning experiments” and “world building work of the new epic novel” as a response to “a crisis in our understanding and experience of freedom and equality, in the very meaning of democracy” (189). While neither Boxall nor Cunningham refers to contemporary epic as an experimental genre, both critics highlight the highly charged aesthetic innovations that arise as the epic of globalization interrogates its capabilities to intervene socially and politically.

This revitalized form of epic takes an experimental turn because of its long historical and multi-scalar efforts to understand the full scope of developmental change and transformation. This form of epic belongs to a category of world literature that Pheng Cheah describes as an “active

process in the world”: it acknowledges various “imaginings and stories of what it means to be part of a world that track and account for contemporary globalization as well as older historical narratives of worldhood” (36). Such a world-making fiction “seeks to be disseminated, read, and received around the world so as to change that world and the life of a given people within it” (Cheah 36). In the case of world epic, I argue that, it also seeks to expand and alter the global knowledge and world literacies of its readers. This category of experimental epic includes world literary texts such as Derek Walcott’s *Omeros*, Ngũgĩ wa Thiongo’s *Wizard of the Crow*, Bolaño’s *The Savage Detectives* and *2666*, Margaret Atwood’s “Maddaddam trilogy,” Yan Lianke’s *Lenin’s Kisses* and *The Four Books*, and Orhan Pamuk’s *My Name is Red*, *The Museum of Innocence*, and *A Strangeness in My Mind*. These globalized epics attend to the *longue durée* of developmental transformation, but they also typically reach beyond the capitalist world-system to map the full scope and scale of crisis and change, whether to investigate historical transition, analyze relations among world-systems, speculate on alternatives to history, or project future outcomes.

In the words of Ursula Le Guin, the new form of contemporary world epic tends to be relayed by storytellers who act as “realists of a larger reality.” As realists, they inscribe an epic world literature of “combined and uneven development” (Warwick Research Collective 6), which registers the intermixtures of the modern and archaic brought about through global capitalist incorporation, accumulation, (under)development, and crisis. The “larger reality” of their experimental epics emerges as a result of the narrative quest to understand the full scope of transformation on a planetary scale. By reframing pivotal moments of change, this freshly conceived fiction of world development seeks to reawaken its readers to “a multitudinous coexistence in History itself” (Jameson, *Antinomies* 313). The experimental world epic engages in critical and creative world-making activities through its efforts to mobilize, reincorporate, recycle, or revitalize cultural resources, frameworks of knowledge, and global literacies that hitherto have been neglected, forgotten, or repressed. Such narratives attend to the dispossessions and selective inclusions that have structured economic integration, but they also acknowledge how

residual, reclaimed, and partly integrated cultural resources influence and might even dramatically reconfigure social transformation.

The experimental epic discloses alternative frameworks for understanding transformation on a planetary scale, particularly through its capacity to rethink culture as an object and agent of world development—a semi-autonomous participant in the actions and events of world history. Implicitly or explicitly, the experimental epic politicizes development in radical ways as it not only “gets to the roots of a problem” but also effectively “turns over, or ‘roots out’, and redefines how society functions,” providing “an alternative view of the world, when that world is in trouble” (Pugh 2). In a globalizing world, this radical genre interrogates subjective and collective aspirations for “development as freedom” in the sense that Sen intends in his focus on “the ‘capabilities’ of persons to lead the kind of lives that they value—and have reason to value” (18). As Sen observes, the pursuit of such freedoms entails a firm commitment to addressing major sources of unfreedom, such as poverty, tyranny, state-based oppression, patriarchal violence, and intolerance, among others (3). Nonetheless, this pivotal fiction of development gains a critical edge because it acknowledges the inequalities that have already structured, and to a certain extent constrain, its disruptive efforts to re-inscribe development as freedom. Through its more inclusive account and analysis of developmental crisis and transition, the epic enacts global cognitive justice by acknowledging a new plurality and co-existence of world knowledges. Furthermore, it involves readers as active interpreters and participants in its narrative of transformation. The experimental world epic seeks to play an active role in shaping development by problematizing its position and interventions in the world.

II. *Cloud Atlas* as Experimental Epic: The Global Cannibal

Turning to *Cloud Atlas*, I would like to begin by addressing how this epic thematizes and politicizes its experimental world-making activities as a “global cannibal” of world culture and site of cannibalistic activities for readers as consumers of global culture. Mitchell observes that “[o]ne of [his] serial-repeating themes is predacity—and cannibalism is an ancient and primal manifestation of predacity” (Begley and Mitchell).

Certainly, cannibalism embodies a visceral threat to the vitality of individuals and communities in *Cloud Atlas* and enables Mitchell to map a violent global history of change and crisis through the *longue durée*. Yet I suggest that this epic gains a radical edge through its ethically oriented aesthetics of *cultural* cannibalism. Stephanos Stephanides has described world literature in a global era as “still Janus-faced—. . . critiqued as the global cannibal consuming minor and peripheral literatures and at the same time hailed for its cosmopolitan sensibilities” (101), an approach that extends Fredric Jameson’s reflections on the ethics of cannibalizing others’ experiences (*Conversations* 167–68). As will be seen, Mitchell’s novel encodes and problematizes the ethico-political aspirations and actions of the world literary text, especially its capacity to perform world-making activities through forms of cultural cannibalism.

Cloud Atlas experiments with the epic tradition by emphasizing the long historical arc of global transformation. Theodore L. Steinberg defines epic as “a narrative that focuses simultaneously on the lives of its characters and on a pivotal moment in the history of a community, whether that community be the whole of a nation or the whole of humanity” (29). *Cloud Atlas* complicates this understanding of epic by drawing together six pivotal fictions of development to convey a fractured yet interlocking narrative of global transition, capitalist crisis, and post-apocalyptic development on a planetary scale. It follows the narrative strands of six characters: Adam Ewing, a global businessman of the mid-nineteenth century, whose encounters with Autua, a Moriori slave who claims his freedom, lead him to become an abolitionist; Robert Frobisher, an aspiring composer whose crisis ends in suicide in the 1930s; Luisa Rey, a journalist swept up in a narrowly averted environmental crisis in the 1970s; the contemporary Timothy Cavendish, an aging publisher, whose personal financial crisis precipitates incarceration in a care facility from which he and a small group of affiliated rebels eventually escape; Sonmi, a cloned person, who is executed for her dissident actions against the State of Nea So Copros in the late twenty-second or early twenty-third century; and Zachry, a member of a post-apocalyptic tribal society who faces a crisis when cannibals threaten his community and that of an extra-planetary visitor named Meronym.

Taking a long view of global transformation, the novel registers various influences on development, including the tribal mini-system, world-empires, the global capitalist world-system through various phases, and a post-capitalist future of uneven development.

Inspired by the “giddying . . . intertextuality,” stylistic shifts, playful representations of reading, and “audacious structure” of Italo Calvino’s *If on a Winter’s Night a Traveler* (1979), Mitchell’s novel reconciles the avant-garde propensity for disruption with a market-oriented desire to create a readable story, one likely to appeal to a mass readership with preferences for traditional modes of storytelling and a sense of narrative closure (Mitchell, “Enter the Maze”; Naughtie and Mitchell). As a “global cannibal” of world literature, *Cloud Atlas* consumes various genres, multimodal forms, cultural intertexts, and idioms to convey its ambitious world vision. Allusions to *Robinson Crusoe*, Melville’s fictions, Thomas More’s *Utopia*, the Grateful Dead, and B-movies indicate an overwhelming awareness of Western cultural traditions, both high and low. For genre readers, *Cloud Atlas* offers a textual smorgasbord of maritime adventure, historical fiction, airport thriller, memoir, prayer, epistolary forms, dystopia, and post-apocalyptic science fiction. For postcolonial readers, Mitchell’s epic subverts colonial discourses, reclaims Moriori and Maori history, depicts indigenous communities of Hawaii (albeit somewhat problematically), and offers comparative histories of abolition, all of which are mobilized within the novelistic discourse to address issues of oppression, exploitation, and cultural translatability through the rise of global capitalism. Cannily crafted to appeal to a wide range of readers, *Cloud Atlas* has been “cooked up” for mass-market consumption in the global literary marketplace.

Yet this avant-garde commodity fiction also interrogates its own narrative procedures and practices of cultural cannibalism in radical ways. Structurally, this novelistic discourse consists of multiple auto-cannibalistic activities, operating on various scales of action. At a macro level, sections of the narrative seem to consume one another. At a micro level, the novel thematizes the global incorporation of cultural texts and resources as “letters eat diary, novel eats letters, film eats novel, and so on” (Hopf 119).² By structuring the novel as an epic act of cultural cannibal-

ism, the novel's aesthetic actions frame globalization as a large-scale historical action that involves multiple forms of world literary integration and cultural consumption. Thematically, the novel highlights the role of reading as a critical and creative practice in shaping world development: each of Mitchell's protagonists consumes a minor, peripheral, or as-yet unpublished story or text of world culture (book, music, film, manuscript, or digital narrative) that addresses the individual's own moment of developmental crisis, even if only obliquely or tangentially. With its cannibalistic narrative structures and activities, *Cloud Atlas* frames and thematizes the ethics and politics of world literary circulation, incorporation, and reading practices in a globalizing world.

Indeed, one could argue that this experimental epic functions as an allegory³ of world literature's role as a politicized object and agent of global transformation. Set against the backdrop of mercantile capitalism and the abolitionist movement, Adam Ewing's Pacific journal documents his conversion to political consciousness as he witnesses the realities of slavery and hears the story of the formerly enslaved Autua. Ewing's text has a profound effect on its interdiegetic reader, an aspiring composer named Frobisher, whose quest for sexual freedom is stifled in a homophobic world. Subsequently, Frobisher's letters about his struggles and experimental musical composition, entitled "Cloud Atlas," come into the possession of Luisa Rey and influence her thinking as she pursues an inquiry into corporate crime. The manuscript of Luisa Rey's investigation almost falls prey to literary oblivion before Timothy Cavendish escapes from a care home for the elderly and publishes it. In the projected future of Nea So Copros, the film adaptation of Cavendish's life becomes a rare find in an archive for Sonmi, a fabricant (a cloned person) server in a totalitarian society. Sonmi's testimonial survives a projected apocalypse to circulate as an orison, where it reaches a refugee community compelled to flee the earth. Inspired by the stories of the world and the global cultural texts they consume, the protagonists—cultural cannibals in their own right—dream of a world beyond inequality and unfreedom.

This cannibalistic structure of incorporation, operating through exchanges among distant readers, suggests that texts can be cannibalized and cannibalizing in affirmative ways. As Courtney Hopf argues, *Cloud*

Atlas shows “that one medium never replaces another, but merely ingests or consumes it, incorporating it into a new mode of being and communication” (119). This form of cultural cannibalism might be viewed along Glissantian lines as constitutive of a “Poetics of Relation, in which each and every identity is extended through a relationship with the Other” (Glissant 11). In the words of Rabindranath Tagore, Mitchell’s epic renders perceptible “the interrelations among all human efforts at expression” (57), even as it interrogates the bonds of necessity, reason, and joy that bring people together. Mitchell’s understanding of world literature defies any uncritical form of cosmopolitan universality because it highlights the discrepancies, difficulties, and (often creative) misunderstandings that ensue as texts circulate beyond their point of origin and gain fresh, and even radically altered, meaning in the world.

By tracking acts of readerly incorporation, reception, and renewal, Mitchell’s experimental epic situates reading as a cannibalistic form of world-making and implies a radical view of world literature. Damrosch argues for a historical understanding of world literature as “*an elliptical refraction of national literatures,*” a form of writing that “*gains in translation*” and represents a “*detached engagement with worlds beyond our own time and place*” (281; emphasis in original). But Mitchell’s *Cloud Atlas* further politicizes world literature by encompassing texts that show unseen connections and correlations among developmental moments, enabling each story to gain fresh meaning as it is reanimated and reconceived in shifting world contexts. As such, reading emerges as a vital and critical effort to grasp more fully the pluralistic relations and shifting realities of the world’s own unfolding developmental narrative. With this world literary perspective in mind, I will look at how Mitchell’s novel reconfigures the epic’s protagonist, journey to the underworld, and aspirations for a sense of totality.

III. Cannibalism as Capitalism: Experimental Figurations of the Epic Protagonist(s)

Thematically, *Cloud Atlas* overdetermines the motif of cannibalism from the start, which signals the need for an attentive and even wary close reading of histories of accumulation and incorporation. Through his

epic representation of cannibals and cannibalized subjects, Mitchell defies the binary opposition of the civilized/savage and participates in a counter-narrative tradition of social critique that troubles the received understanding of the cannibal other. Examples of such a dissident world literary tradition include Michel de Montaigne's "Of Cannibals" and Herman Melville's various subversions of colonial discourses of cannibalism in books such as *Typee: A Peep at Polynesian Life* (1846), *Omoo: A Narrative of Adventures in the Seven Seas* (1847), and *Benito Cereno* (1855).⁴ Mitchell draws on Michael King's *A Land Apart* (cited in the Acknowledgements to *Cloud Atlas*) and Jared Diamond's *Guns, Germs, and Steel*, both of which recount the history of Moriori conquest at the hands of the Maori and the enabling presence of European settlers, imperial forces, and capitalist expansion. The narrative calls attention to its cannibalization of source texts through metatextual cues, particularly depictions of the reader as a consumer of fiction. In "Letters from Zedelghem," Robert Frobisher notes that "Ewing puts me in the mind of Melville's bumbler Cpt. Delano in *Benito Cereno*, blind to all conspirators" (Mitchell, *Cloud* 64) and observes that there is "[s]omething shifty about the journal's authenticity—seems too structured for a genuine diary, and its language doesn't ring quite true" (64). The spectral qualities of the ship, the story about a revolt against slavery, the threat of poison, the theme of mutual aid, and the motif of false appearances, all found in *Benito Cereno*, surface in Mitchell's text, albeit in a transmogrified form.

Stylistically, "The Pacific Journal of Adam Ewing" unfolds through explicit and implicit acts of textual cannibalization, which foreground the incorporation and consumption of texts. In the opening scene to *Cloud Atlas*, Adam Ewing, an American notary whose business has taken him to Australia, writes that "[b]eyond the Indian hamlet, upon a forlorn strand, I happened on a trail of recent footprints" (3). The image of footprints in the sand alludes to Robinson Crusoe's discovery that he is not alone on a deserted island and his subsequent fear that he will be consumed by cannibals. In the experimental tradition of Montaigne, Mitchell inverts this trope by representing the Western subject as a savage and cannibal other. The sign of the cannibal, the footprint in the

sand, leads to Dr. Henry Goose, a surgeon to the nobility in London who is in the midst of collecting the teeth of long-deceased peoples and was allegedly consumed by cannibals. Reflecting on the meaning of the cannibal scene in front of him, the doctor remarks:

“Teeth, sir, are the enamelled grails of the quest in hand. In days gone by this Arcadian 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. But these base molars, sir, shall be transmuted to gold & how? An artisan of Piccadilly who fashions denture sets for the nobility pays handsomely for human gnashers. Do you know the price a quarter pound will earn, sir?” (3)

This episode not only revisits what Peter Hulme calls the “cannibal scene” of the banquet on human flesh (2) but also recasts it in order to interrogate the violence born of capitalist accumulation. Most obviously, the predations of cannibalism and capitalism are brought together in the story concerning the extracted tooth of the cannibalized subject. Taking up where the cannibal left off, Goose outlines his grisly plans to extract profit from the trade, traffic, and reincorporation of the human teeth of formerly cannibalized persons. Goose’s discourse is striking because it extends the discourses of acquisition and conquest through the *longue durée*. The doctor’s references to the pursuit of the Holy Grail and early modern efforts to transmute common metals into gold may appear somewhat arbitrary. But these aspects of early modern culture shaped the imaginaries and actions of explorers as they sought to extract gold (and profit) from the lands and peoples they “discovered,” particularly as they conflated the spiritual quest for the Grail with the material quest for a valuable object (Goodman 3–4). Through a multivalent cannibalistic discourse, Mitchell interrogates culture’s role in shaping the long developmental histories of conquest, incorporation, and accumulation, ranging from the world of mini-systems to the world-system of global capitalism.

Mitchell’s epic reclaims and experimentally reconfigures a globalized history of cannibalism in order to highlight the violence associated with

capitalist expansion. In *Moriori: A People Rediscovered*, Michael King provides an account of the Waitanagi massacre, which saw the defeat, conquest, cannibalization, and enslavement of the surviving Moriori at the hands of the Maori in 1830s. King notes that dentures were composed of actual human teeth at this historical juncture:

Four years after the Moriori had been killed there, a surgeon from the London whaler Harriet was observed going to Waitangi beach each day “knocking the teeth out of the numerous skulls laying about the beach, belonging to the original islander,” prompting the witness, Richard Cropper, a whaler to remark, “I have often thought while watching them, that some English beauty might some time be praised for her beautiful teeth at the expense of some of the poor Chatham islanders.” (63)

Cloud Atlas playfully reworks this peculiar history of economic globalization. Goose plans to vanquish his arch-enemy—a certain Marchioness Grace of Mayfair who has impugned the doctor’s reputation and thus forced him into exile—by exposing the fact that her denture work consists of cannibals’ teeth, which marks her as an equally savage figure. Goose is not exempt from this symbolic chain of cannibalistic associations. In the popular imaginary, cannibalism has been linked with the revenge motif, namely, eating the human flesh of one’s enemy (which has appeared in works ranging from Shakespeare’s *Titus Andronicus* to Peter Greenaway’s film *The Cook, the Thief, His Wife and Her Lover*). Furthermore, the fantasy of throwing the “cannibals’ gnashers” into the Marchioness’ “tortoise shell soup tureen” (Mitchell, *Cloud Atlas* 4) contributes to Mitchell’s satire of the tastes and consumer habits of stylish, aristocratic, and cosmopolitan London, which sups on “exotic” foods and the teeth of exterminated indigenous peoples in acts of core-periphery consumption.

Consequently, in world-systemic terms, the savagery of the “civilized” Western world comes into focus through its “primitive” practices of capitalist accumulation. In an essay exploring “the complex relationship between the trope of cannibalism, the economics of capitalism, and the

poetics of the literary text” (183), Jerry Phillips observes that “capitalism is the ultimate statement of the ‘savagery’ of history” and “a bloody and barbarous system” linked with the supposed promise of historical “progress” (185). Mitchell’s approach to the cannibal motif echoes that of Karl Marx, who “imagined capitalism as cannibalism with two ends in mind: to emphasize the sheer brutality of the profit-motive as a measure of human affairs, and to emphasize the sheer irrationality of a system that must perforce devour itself” (Phillips 185). Indeed, this opening scene in Mitchell’s novel foreshadows Goose’s symbolic act of cannibalism, enacted when he later attempts to poison Ewing to acquire his wealth, which he justifies with a Darwinian claim: “The weak are meat, the strong do eat” (*Cloud* 524). Ironically, Goose represents the cause rather than the cure of Ewing’s illness: the parasite that seeks to drain his patient/victim’s vital and material resources. Cannibalism emerges as a sustained allegory for the endemic predations of capitalist accumulation, which potentially render any life precarious (nonetheless some more than others). This leads Ewing to observe that “one fine day, a purely predatory world *shall* consume itself” (528; emphasis in original).

This opening scene in which Ewing meets Goose is largely comic, but it sets the stage for a much darker account of the history of the Moriori peoples. Mitchell registers the inequalities of empire when his narrator observes that “[t]he Maori proved themselves apt pupils of the English in ‘the dark arts of colonization’” (14). This investigative epic considers a series of external forces that drive unequal development and create conditions of dispossession, including the arrival of the British and the planting of the Union Jack as a claim of sovereignty, the devastation of the seal population followed by whaling expeditions, disease, and Moriori invasion. The novel’s analysis of Western hegemony owes much to Diamond and King, who attribute the oppression of the Moriori peoples to acts of strategic intervention and non-intervention on the part of Western peoples. The West provided the Maori with weapons, foodstuffs (potatoes), and access to the Chatham Islands (King, *Moriori* 75), thus supporting acts of conquest. By failing to intervene when violence erupted, Western peoples tacitly supported the

near extermination of the Moriori people and culture. Through its postcolonial interventions, *Cloud Atlas* provides a compelling example of a counter-hegemonic epic. This is more broadly expanded upon in the closing of the novel with its call for a “life worth the living” (Mitchell, *Cloud* 528) in which it is possible to share the world peaceably because “leaders must be just, violence muzzled, power accountable & the riches of the Earth and the Ocean shared equitably” (528). Nonetheless, the humorous handling of the cannibal motif suggests a degree of complicity with the global marketplace’s tastes for palatable and easy-to-digest narratives.

This world epic thematizes its cannibalization of peripheral cultural resources. For instance, the narrative of Autua and Ewing finds an antecedent in a memoir entitled “Koche, King of Pitt” published in *The Catholic World* in 1873. It provides a history of the mythology, conquest, and adventures of Koche, a Moriori, who escapes slavery at the hands of the Maori and travels as a stowaway on board a ship travelling from the Southern Pacific Ocean on an American vessel.⁵ The narrator of “Koche, King of Pitt” claims that the memoir springs directly from Koche, “from whose mouth this narrative has been taken” (Ewing 545). However, in *Moriori: A People Rediscovered*, King says of “Koche, King of Pitt” that “[o]ne must express some reservation about Koche’s memoir. Parts of it are clearly influenced by [Ernst] Dieffenbach (1841 and 1843), and the writer, the American lawyer, Ewing, must have had access to those sources” (216). Mitchell’s novel passes the tale of Koche on to Autua, a stowaway who tells his story of survival to an American lawyer named Ewing. Significantly, Mitchell changes Ewing’s given name to Adam, foregrounding the colonial trope of paradisiacal encounters.

With this textual act of cannibalization, Mitchell re-embeds the “teeth” of Koche’s narrative, passing this minor fiction/history onto his global readers. Thus, fiction consumes purported (possibly fictionalized) history, which consumes history. But these unreliable narrations also regurgitate nearly obliterated histories, conveying truths through storytelling. The name “Autua” might be considered in experimental terms: it is a palindrome, suggestive of a message that travels in many

directions. It consumes and regurgitates its own constitutive parts, forming a whole that survives history, whether read from the beginning or the end. The palindrome uncannily echoes the novel's larger structure, performing its cannibalistic aesthetics *en miniature*. In terms of its signification, "Autua" is reminiscent of the Moriori word "atua," the "spiritual presences who controlled and protected the lives of living descendants" (King, *Moriori* 35). Appropriately, such a name seems to encode, however cryptically, his role in the narrative as a bearer of Moriori ancestral memories and cultural identity. Through a self-consciously arcane poetics, the novel signals its debt to peripheral cultural resources and thus foregrounds its own uneasy identity as a text that cannibalizes others.

Pairing protagonists from the core and periphery, Mitchell reanimates the kind of epic coupling found in *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, a text that follows the (mis)adventures of Gilgamesh, a leader of a developed city, and Enkidu, an "uncivilized" subject in the undeveloped wilderness. Where Enkidu is sacrificed in the service of Gilgamesh, Ewing and Autua come to one another's aid. Whereas *The Epic of Gilgamesh* reinforces the power of the city-state, even as it attests to its violence, Mitchell's world-making epic challenges dominant cultural discourses of development through its efforts to integrate idioms, histories, and voices from the periphery. Autua, a peripheral figure, plays a pivotal role in shaping Ewing's abolitionist agenda, thus contributing to the recasting of epic as a counter-hegemonic form. Unlike many postcolonial novels, which tend to focus on the developmental struggles of communities, Adam Ewing's section of *Cloud Atlas* presents the struggles to overcome the global injustices of capitalist violence through smaller scales of collaborative action, networking, and narrative exchange. But the novel also interrogates various discourses and practices of "cannibalism" by remediating its signification in the context of global capitalist accumulation and predation. With its revisionary aesthetics of cannibalism, the narrative works towards a shared vision of development in which individual and collective freedoms are defended and extended.

IV. Confronting the Cannibal Threat: An Epic Journey through the Underworld

In *How to Read World Literature*, Damrosch notes that epic action has long functioned as “a way of linking the tale and its hero with the past” and provided “a setting for predictions of the future” (35). He claims that modern and contemporary epics situate “the infernal realm closer to home,” “using extended patterns of underworld reference to portray hell on earth” (38). I suggest that *Cloud Atlas* complicates and extends the epical journey through its multiple scales of representation, beginning with its focus on the cannibalistic threat of unfettered capitalist accumulation within each story-world. The presence or sign of the cannibal unifies the six sections, linking disparate histories of capitalist violence into an epical whole. Furthermore, a series of dialogues with the dead emerge as each of the six stories reanimates a preceding history about a cannibal threat. Consequently, this epic extends a sense of community through space and time, reshaping collective action through its expanded field for global action.

Through its repeated and self-conscious representations of cannibalistic threats, *Cloud Atlas* serves up a “banquet” of cannibalized figures and cannibalizing processes for its reader to digest, thus involving the reader as an active participant in the epical process of making sense of the world through the underworld journey. These repeated cannibal codes and signs create a narrative network, which cues its readers to engage in distant reading practices such as those outlined by Moretti. In *Distant Reading*, Moretti shows how diagrams of character-networks can illuminate relations among various temporalities (215), enabling various parts of the narrative to enjoy equal visibility (217). I argue that Mitchell very deliberately calls upon his readers to engage in just such reading practices through his various cannibal codes and signatures. The effect, as will be seen, is to involve the reader as an active participant in the unfolding action.

Mitchell’s narrative is both literally and symbolically rife with cannibal figures and threats of cannibalism. The narrative network of cannibal threats performs a unifying function by linking various narrative crisis points together to form a cohesive epic of world development. The

section titled “Sloosha’s Crossin’ An’ Ev’rythin’ After” describes how the Kona “chief licks Pa’s blood off the steel” (Mitchell, *Cloud* 251), and Zachry himself fears that he will become a victim of cannibalization. In fact, the Kona seem more preoccupied with enslaving others to labour on their behalf in a world of underdeveloped technologies, tools, and labour resources. This practice suggests that slavery operates as a mode of cannibalism, subjugating the lives of others to the power of death, whether for power, profit, or both. “The Pacific Journal of Adam Ewing” moves from the threat of Maori cannibals to the possibility of capitalist consumption as well as forms of “cannibalism by proxy” (514). The account of the man who consumes a shark who consumes a man (514) and Goose’s claim that “The Weak are Meat the Strong do Eat” (508) provide visceral examples of cannibalistic consumption, but these form part of a wider story about the economic and bodily risks of a globalized world of trade, traffic, and transactions. In “Letters from Zedelghem,” Frobisher refers to “[a]ll those cannibals, feasting on my dignity” (484) when he is publically disgraced, which suggests how his talents, person, and spirit are slowly consumed through a system of patronage that is nothing short of larceny.

Elsewhere the motif of cannibalization attests to the violent effects of the market-driven forces on societies and their subjects. “An Orison of Sonmi” represents cannibalism in literal and symbolic terms, radically challenging systemic unfreedoms in the process. Sonmi testifies that Yoona abducted a boy in order to escape a dinery owned by Papa Song Corp, but that she did not intend to “eat him and spit out his bones” as a cannibal would (201). Yet she learns that fabricants are recycled and their “‘reclaimed proteins’ are used to produce Papa Song food products, eaten by consumers in the corp’s dineries all over Nea So Copros” (360) (an acronym for “New East Asian Sphere of Co-Prosperity” and an allusion to the imperial Japanese proposal of the 1940s to create a bloc of Asian nations free of Western powers). The fabricants also unwittingly cannibalize one another as their liquefied biomatter is used for Soap, a form of nourishment. Thus, the entire society, fabricant and consumer alike, participate in acts of cannibalism: the clones consume one another, and the society feeds off its clones.

But the situation is also more complex: Sonmi is both an inadvertent cannibal in an auto-cannibalistic system and a rebel who investigates and discloses the hidden predations of her society, such as when she journeys into the peripheries where deprivation is rampant. The sections of the novel entitled “The Ghastly Ordeal of Timothy Cavendish” and “Half Lives: The First Luisa Rey Mystery” examine the forms of cannibalism incarnate in corporocracy and the neoliberal state. Timothy Cavendish’s “incarceration” in a care facility is represented in biopolitical terms as a form of internment (in Cavendish’s view like that of Solzhenitsyn), comparable to that found under repressive regimes where the leader consumes his subjects. In a prescient and uncanny echo of Sonmi’s experience, Cavendish witnesses the early technologies of cloning for “shady Koreans” (170), faces the threat of being made to eat soap powder as punishment (175–76), and envisions a future film based on his life experience (370–71). He refers to his fellow inmates in the care facility as the “Undead.” Not only are they stripped of rights, these zombified entities are also subject to forms of economic parasitism as relatives seek to control their financial assets, feeding off of their life’s work and profit for their own gain. By cross-indexing the cannibal motif, Mitchell’s textual network prompts readers to critique the economically motivated unfreedoms that lead to social death in a globalized world.

Through a sustained focus on acts of cannibalistic predation, the narrative exposes the necropolitical and necro-economic tendencies of the one and unequal world-system. Achille Mbembe defines necropolitics as the “subjugation of life to the power of death” (186). He cites the example of slavery, which imperils the life of the enslaved person and robs him/her of a socio-political and economic life (169). While Mitchell’s work is certainly concerned with slavery and the political death it entails, his biopolitical critique extends to other unfreedoms that rob persons of political voice and representation, such as the status of the cloned person or the elderly person who is forced to relinquish legal rights. Almost always, necropolitics is linked to the profit motive in Mitchell’s work. His epic insists on the economic underpinnings of a political death-drive in ways that are closer to Warren Montag’s claims

that the market governs “the production and reproduction of life, the life of a people, the life of people” (201). For Montag,

alongside the figure of Homo Sacer [as defined by Giorgio Agamben], the one who may be killed with impunity, is another figure, one whose death is no less spectacular than the first and is the object of no memorial or commemoration: he who with impunity may be allowed to die, slowly or quickly, in the name of the rationality and equilibrium of the market. (213)

Through market forces, lives are de/politicized, inadvertently and deliberately, in ways that enable their exploitation, torture, and even death to go unpunished. Mitchell’s narrative bears witness to such injustices and provides new forms of visibility and representation. Mitchell’s journey through the underworld of economic globalization represents the socially dead—persons whose lives have been reduced to bare life, subsumed by necro-economics or devastated by the necropolitical.

The epic’s underworld quest strives to reintegrate excluded histories and silenced voices, thus transforming world developmental horizons in the process. Mitchell’s discrete-yet-connected narratives present a sustained and systemic challenge to the necro-economic and necropolitical dimensions of globalization. My close reading of “The Journal of Adam Ewing” highlights the motif of capitalism as cannibalism. As a survivor, Ewing is able to memorialize the threat of necro-economics, and, in doing so, he shows its connections to the necropolitical, particularly through his analysis of slavery. The modernist tale of Frobisher reveals another kind of entanglement as his life of servitude as an amanuensis is likened to the conditions of slavery, but his death is not represented as an act of despair so much as one of resistance to the market forces that govern his life as well as to the homophobia of a world where he cannot express freely his love and sexual desires. The Luisa Rey mystery uses an investigative format and thriller conventions to expose the violence and human costs associated with ruthless efforts to capitalize on the HYDRA project. Moreover, the novel uncovers and critiques the failures of government in the face of neoliberal economic development. For Timothy Cavendish, the treatment of the elderly, the Undead, is symp-

omatic of necro-economics, but the events of resistance are also politicized, particularly through allusions to Solzhenitsyn's imprisonment and the English conquest of the Scottish. In Sonmi's world, economic profitability and neoliberal governance result in the production and death of fabricants. Moreover, the narrative exposes a world of excluded and peripheral subjects whose lives are easily expunged in the interest of the state. In the section titled "Sloosha's Crossin," the devastated world conditions of lawlessness and the regression to a "state of nature" can be directly attributed to capitalist crisis and collapse. Thus, this narrative journey through the underworld of globalization performs an investigative function, uncovering the major sources of unfreedom arising from the unequal processes of world-systemic formation.

Mitchell's epic journey through the underworld of global capitalism revives the global political sphere. Rendering the invisible visible and the inaudible audible, this pivotal fiction of world development takes action on behalf of globally disenfranchised subjects. Through its reawakening of voices, *Cloud Atlas* strives to resurrect politics as a vital space of encounter for and egalitarian dialogue about social change. This world epic reanimates and reconstructs history, highlighting affiliated acts of resistance and struggle through time and space—signs of an expansive global imaginary and community. This mimetic action is re-enacted in diegetic terms through the interlocking and dialogic relation among stories and forms. Mitchell's epic politicizes and intercuts multiple commodity art forms, most notably popular genres, to generate a collective and pluralistic critique—historical, romantically troubled, thrilling, confining, anti-dystopian, and post-apocalyptic—of the world-system. By rendering visible the invisible actions of the market and disclosing emergent political spaces, this avant-garde genre fiction reconstitutes a sense of community in a globalizing world. Where many epics, from *The Odyssey* to *Omeros*, constitute an epic past for a given community, Mitchell's narrative links various small-scale narratives of globalization such that a new sense of global community emerges through the narrative's actions. Mitchell's epic highlights the vast dilemma posed by the (dis)continuities among subjects and communities as well as between past, present, and possible future(s).

V. Cultural Cannibalism and the Post-Abyssal Imaginary

Finally, I will consider *Cloud Atlas*' self-positioning as a "global cannibal," a world literary text that is manifestly anxious about the global cultural politics and ethics of incorporation, representation, consumption, and reading. I suggest that this epic's acts of cultural cannibalism challenge and rethink the epic quest for totality, particularly as the fiction critiques the limits of a global imaginary constrained by world-systemic inequalities and histories of violence. To some extent, Mitchell's approach to cultural cannibalism resembles the anthropophagic aesthetics of the Brazilian avant-garde during the twentieth century, particularly as articulated by Oswald de Andrade in "Manifesto Antropófago" (1928), in which he links a cannibal aesthetic to decolonization, and Caetano Veloso's claims that the *Tropicalismo* movement freely engaged in multiple acts of cultural cannibalism on a global scale as "a means of radicalizing the demand for identity" (Veloso 156). In the words of Veloso, I suggest that Mitchell's cannibalistic aesthetic represents the "development of a social, and then political and economic, conscience, combined with existential, aesthetic, and moral concerns" (161). Yet where Andrade was largely concerned with fostering a new sort of imagined community along national lines and Veloso with the desire for a counter-hegemonic form of world music, Mitchell addresses contemporary concerns about the epic's capacity to engage in affirmative modes of world-making.

Mitchell's aesthetics of cultural cannibalism share certain affinities with the post-abyssal thinking of Boaventura de Sousa Santos who suggests that there is "no global social justice without global cognitive justice" (*Rise of the Global Left* 44). Global cognitive justice recognizes the plurality of knowledge and the right of different forms of knowledge to co-exist; it also seeks to address the injustices of cognition associated with uneven developmental histories, especially as evidenced by Western economic and epistemological power. By attending to excluded, disavowed, and rearguard developmental perspectives, Sousa Santos thinks beyond the dominant histories of global knowledge formation and production, thus putting forth more inclusive and ethically oriented horizons for transformation on a planetary scale ("Beyond Abyssal Thinking"). *Cloud*

Atlas can be read as an example of a post-abysal imaginary through its efforts to bridge Western and non-Western knowledge, particularly as such cognitive mappings lend new visibility to the uneven processes of social formation. The epic gains an ethical edge through its pursuit of the kinds of questions that so trouble Sousa Santos: “In the search for alternatives to domination and oppression, how can we distinguish between alternatives to the system of oppression and domination and alternatives within the system or, more specifically, how do we distinguish between alternatives to capitalism and alternatives within capitalism?” (“Beyond Abyssal Thinking”). Mitchell’s epic self-consciously interrogates world literature’s complicities and capacities for ethical intervention in the production and dissemination of global knowledge and experience.

Cloud Atlas problematizes its efforts to “fight against the abyssal lines using conceptual and political instruments that don’t reproduce them” (Sousa Santos, “Beyond Abyssal Thinking”). For instance, in its representation of the Moriori, the novel tracks shifting concerns about the global ethics of knowledge production and dissemination through the world-system. Ewing observes that the Moriori failed to defend themselves, when invaded, because their “priestly caste dictated that whosoever spilt a man’s blood killed his own *mana*—his honour, his worth, his standing & his soul” (Mitchell, *Cloud* 12; emphasis in original). In seeking to uphold their values of pacifism and preserve their souls, the Moriori rendered themselves vulnerable to the violence of Maori conquest, cannibalization, enslavement, and near extinction (12–16). Initially, Ewing himself, a dissident in the making, seems less concerned with the fate of the Moriori peoples and more interested in how a history of peripheral violence foregrounds the ethico-political dilemmas of a globalizing world: “Peace . . . is a cardinal virtue only if your neighbours share your conscience” (16). His account of the dendroglyphs (20–21) contains the kind of ambivalence found in Melville’s fictions, with its references to “black suspicion” (Mitchell, *Cloud* 21) and fears concerning indigenous peoples. Only later, through his personal relationship to Autua, does he come to see that the exchanges of narratives can generate a new kind of global consciousness. But that relationship remains highly transactional—involving reciprocal self-interest rather

than the kind of ethical commitments to peace intrinsic to Moriori culture. Mitchell reintegrates a pre-capitalist approach to social justice but questions its capacity for transformation on a global scale. Thus, the narrative inaugurates a more participatory poetics, but one could argue that it only partly succeeds in its efforts to enact global cognitive justice as some pre-capitalist ideas cannot readily be reincorporated into an unequal capitalist world-system.

That said, perhaps the novel nonetheless succeeds in its careful ethical scrutiny of the uneven and shifting power dynamics that inform global cognitive mappings. Even as the novel reclaims and reintegrates peripheral knowledge, it acknowledges the ideological constraints of its represented subjects—for example, in the account of Ewing’s “discovery” of a site of Moriori dendroglyphs (20–21). Ewing sounds rather like one of Melville’s protagonists when he recounts his “black suspicion that a human heart hung on that tree” (21), a comment that invokes the spectre of cannibalism or at least barbarous activities. Mitchell’s epic may seem suspect in its efforts to reanimate a certain nineteenth-century literary taste for exotic tales of colonial terror, but it also registers its distance from such a worldview in a number of ways. Ewing states that he will not reveal the sites of indigenous artistry to others because he fears that this will open up the Moriori culture to the “final violation” of commodification in the world cultural marketplace (20). An editorial footnote by Ewing’s son further complicates matters by stating that he has decided to publish this passage in the journal because the Moriori are now “a race over extinction’s brink” (21). Certainly, this was the prevailing view by the turn of the twentieth century, but the Moriori have indeed survived, a fact that any reader might already know or easily discover. Interlocking cultural reflections about the Moriori are drawn together to track and critique shifting views of these indigenous peoples and their knowledge in an expanded history of global transformation. The discourse may revive colonial discourses, but it also problematizes them in ways that establish a post-abyssal orientation.

The story concerning Frobisher’s composition and the resonant influence of “Cloud Atlas” upon *Cloud Atlas* is central to the novel’s attempts to foster a post-abyssal imaginary. Commenting on a perfor-

mance of Vaughan Williams' *A Sea Symphony* (1903–09, 1910; originally entitled "The Ocean") with lyrics based on Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*, Frobisher remarks that "R.V.W. conducted *Sea Symphony* in the Orchestra of the Mind, *Sail forth, steer for the deep waters only, Reckless, O Soul, exploring I with thee, and thou with me.* (Don't much care for this work but it was perfectly programmed)" (Mitchell, *Cloud* 46; emphasis in original). These lyrics celebrating the soul derive from Whitman's "Passage to India" (Whitman 428–36), a poem that sublimates the work of empire and capitalist exploitation in a globalizing world, ranging from journeys of "discovery" to the 1869 opening of the Suez Canal and completion of the American transcontinental railway. Frobisher's parenthetical remark that "it was perfectly programmed" might be interpreted as an ironic commentary on this veiling of globalization's underlying history of violence as it allegedly moves from material to spiritual grandeur, from West to East and East to West. If Whitman's poem seeks to transcend the material world through the "enlightenment" of the global soul, Frobisher's letters take a reverse route, returning repeatedly to the realities of imperial crisis and economic expansion: "Rome'll decline and fall again, Cortazar'll sail again . . . for an eternity of eternities" (490). Frobisher's sextet, "Cloud Atlas," experimentally remediates Stravinsky, Debussy, and Scriabin (489), making it both a mystical and avant-garde composition. And this "Cloud Atlas" inspires the future of its auditor, Luisa Rey, who emerges as a double for its composer, Frobisher, and the consumer of the musical sextet, entitled *Cloud Atlas*, which doubles as a title for the novel. Consequently, the narrative tracks the interactions among multiple pivotal moments of world-making activities and world development. Out of various interlocking acts of cultural cannibalism, tracked through time and space, it elicits a sense of epical unity.

At pivotal moments, the novel reincorporates world cultural resources to problematize the histories and horizons of global transformation. The Luisa Rey section of the epic provides an especially compelling example of Mitchell's efforts to involve readers as active participants in the unfolding drama of global capitalist crisis. This story investigates and exposes corporate efforts to conceal the unsafe

conditions of a nuclear facility, the Seaboard HYDRA. In order to protect their financial interests, the company resorts to multiple forms of violence, including the use of extreme force to quell protesters and assassinations of persons who threaten to go public with their knowledge of the situation. Looming in the background is the wider threat of corporate environmental disaster and genocide, should a nuclear disaster occur. The novel tracks Luisa Rey's quest to expose corporate crime alongside protesters' efforts to close down the plant. As this thriller races towards its climax, Mitchell juxtaposes several critical moments when the life-and-death of various individuals and the community hang in the balance. In one scenario, Margo Roker, a protester, has been hospitalized as a result of injuries sustained during a corporate-financed assault aimed at stifling activist resistance to the HYDRA nuclear project (451). Hester Van Zandt, a fellow activist, watches over Roker, now lying comatose in the hospital. To comfort her friend, she begins to recite one of her favourite poems, Ralph Waldo Emerson's "Brahma" (Mitchell 451; Emerson, *Essential Writings* 732), which famously addresses the Hindu topic of "Brahman," a term that Emerson interpreted as "the Absolute and Universal Soul" (Chandrasekharan 507). Very abruptly, Van Zandt's recitation falls apart in mid-stream, when Roker suddenly awakens from her coma: "The strong gods pine for my abode,/And pine in vain--" (Mitchell, *Cloud* 451). Roker's remarkable "return from the dead" at just this moment prevents Van Zandt from uttering the remaining words of the fourth stanza concerning the "Sacred Seven" as well as the final line of the poem: "Find me, and turn thy back on heaven" (Emerson, *Essential Writings* 732). These elicited but unspoken words function as an intertextual spectre, reliant on the reader's ability to give voice to the inaudible relationship between the events of the novel and its intertextual ghost. Roker's reawakening from her coma quite literally responds to Emerson's (and Van Zandt's) call to "turn thy back on heaven." This poem about Hinduism's cycles of return finds fulfilment in Roker's own return from a death-like state. Mitchell, perhaps too cleverly, lends new life to the meaning of the poem by reanimating the meaning of the verse in the context of his own epic action.

Indeed, this sequence can be seen as an experimental reworking of the Emersonian precept that “[w]ords are also actions, and actions are a kind of words” (Emerson, *Essential Writings* 290) as the unfolding actions and plot provide an ontological fulfilment of the unspoken verse. Roker’s reawakening corresponds to another pivotal moment in this global epic, when environmental disaster is averted through Luisa Rey’s successful efforts to overcome her would-be assassin and expose the corporate cover-up. Mitchell’s experimental world epic lends new visibility to global capitalist crisis through its cannibalization and partial recycling of world literary source materials that bridge Eastern-Western poetics. This particular intertext gestures toward global cognitive justice, for it requires a certain understanding of non-Western beliefs in order to appreciate the relationship between the globalized speech and actions of the characters and the world literary poetics at play. Through such experiments *Cloud Atlas* lends new visibility/audibility to the relationship between global cognitive justice and social justice: often the epic’s experimental world-making activities hang in the balance, contingent upon the reader’s interpretive actions and world literary knowledge as they come to bear on the vitality and scalability of textual meaning.

Cloud Atlas rises to the Emersonian challenge of actively learning “to think new thoughts” (Corrigan 435) about worldly belonging and more egalitarian modes of participation. Mitchell mobilizes world cultural resources and global literacies to encode and acknowledge the wider resonance of counter-hegemonic resistance in the epic discourse. The allusion to the “Sacred Seven” is worth considering more closely. According to Andrew McLean, the “Sacred Seven” refers to the seven great Prajapati of the *Bhagavad Gita* who are represented in the sky by the seven stars of the Great Bear constellation (120–21). In Hinduism, the Prajapati, born of the mind and imagination of Brahma, are envisioned as cosmic presences in the sky, whose role is to protect life. Mitchell’s meta-epic novel exceeds abyssal thinking by bringing one epic of world literature into a critical dialogue with another, namely the *Bhagavad Gita* with the *Dodekathlon* or *Twelve Labours of Hercules*. The HYDRA nuclear project refers to Hydra, a multi-headed monstrous figure who threatens to poison the sky and the earth in Greek mythology. Roker’s “rebirth”

signals a shift in this epic narrative: a successful moment of resistance to corporate predation and nuclear catastrophe. This narrative gains its experimental edge by actively engaging the reader as a cultural cannibal in the process of “digesting” the meaning of global transformation through the vital incorporation and active reanimation of world literacies.

Mitchell’s epic undertakes its own post-abyssal act in bridging accounts of the HYDRA of neoliberalism and the hydra of slave trafficking, thus highlighting the epical arc of unfettered capitalist accumulation as a toxic presence in a globalizing world. Both incarnations might suggest that one cannot fight against the realities of “a purely predatory world” that “*shall consume itself*” one day (Mitchell, *Cloud* 529; emphasis in original). From such a perspective, resistance may well appear futile: “He who would do battle with the *many-headed hydra of human nature* must pay a world of pain . . . & only as you gasp your dying breath shall you understand, your life amounted to no more than one drop in a limitless ocean!” (529; emphasis added). In opposition to this worldview, the novel ends with a rhetorical question: “Yet what is any ocean but a multitude of drops?” (529). Ewing’s comment echoes a comment found in Emerson’s 1836 journal entry (Emerson, *Journals and Miscellaneous* 169), which is later repeated in “The Individual” (1837). In the latter, the author reflects on the question of scale, observing that “the ocean is a large drop; the drop a small ocean” (Emerson, “The Individual” 185) and contrasts the trade-offs for the robust native New Zealander and the “civilized” but weakened American with his abstract knowledge and technologies (174). In cannibalizing Emerson’s reflections on the scale of planetary, collective, and individual development, Mitchell extends and elaborates upon Emerson’s transcendental materialism, but he is perhaps more of a materialist in his emphasis on the signatures of world-systemic inequality and rewriting of history from below and in between.

As a “global cannibal” of world culture, Mitchell’s experimental world epic interweaves world histories, intertexts, and narrative accounts of capitalist accumulation and dispossession with pre-capitalist and post-capitalist cosmologies and world-making activities. The effect is to enact global cognitive justice by rethinking established works of world literature, culture, and religion in dialogue with actual and imagined cultural sources and knowledges that have been peripheralized or repressed along

the way. Ending with the abolitionist's urgent reminder that developmental freedoms are worth fighting for, this epic offers a timely inquiry into the uneven politics of culture as a resource and driver of world development. Through its prompts to develop and hone post-abysal world literacies—to expand vertical and lateral modes of knowledge and critique—this experimental epic conveys the kind of “larger reality” Le Guin seems to have in mind. Thinking through the long history of world cultures of development, a reality more expansive than global capitalism, *Cloud Atlas* discloses ethically oriented horizons for grasping and re-evaluating transformation on a planetary scale.

In our globalizing world, contemporary epic has emerged as a radical world literary form, both for the communities it represents and the readers it addresses. As this reading has shown, *Cloud Atlas* provides a compelling example of how an experimental world epic reframes the prevailing histories of development and horizons for transformation through its politicized aesthetics. The experimental world epic seeks to provide a fuller and more ethical account of global transformation by reintegrating and disseminating the peripheral stories, marginalized perspectives, and unevenly developed cultural resources of the world. Such a radical world epic exposes the abyss between the prevailing global imaginary (conditioned by world-systemic inequality, violence, and exclusion) and the ethical planetary vision that might emerge through post-abysal forms of cultural, epistemic, economic, and political reintegration. The experimental world epic incites its readers to indulge their appetites for global knowledge and hone their world literacies as ethically oriented capabilities for assessing the developmental freedoms that individuals and collectives have reason to value and defend. Seeking to reconceptualize and reconfigure development along more ethical lines, Mitchell's *Cloud Atlas* interrogates and arguably even inaugurates pivotal moments of change in a globalizing world. In working toward a theory of the contemporary world epic, I propose that an experimental world epic highlights the deprivations associated with uneven development, enacts global cognitive justice as a pre-requisite to more ethical forms of world development, and involves readers as active participants in a widening sphere for articulating global transformation.

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Notes

- 1 This recognition includes important discussions of the novel’s cosmopolitanism (Schoene), networking techniques (Childs and Green; McMorrán), innovative remediation of reading (Hopf), posthuman perspectives (Machinal), epic renewal (Mezey; Boxall), representation of cannibalism (Ng), and revision of historical realism (Jameson, *Antinomies*). This article extends the work of Mezey, Hopf, Boxall, and Jameson.
- 2 Hopf is referring to the chain of actions among the sections of the novel, which opens with a diary written by Adam Ewing. In the next section of the novel, Frobisher’s diaries contain references to those letters. Both the letters and reference to the diaries fall into the hands of Luisa Rey whose story is incorporated in the tale of Timothy Cavendish. And Timothy Cavendish’s story becomes a film that is later consumed by Sonmi. The texts surface in each section, leaving the reader of *Cloud Atlas* to construct a sense of the relations among the various readers and to understand the wider relevance of this pattern of globalized incorporation and networking.
- 3 In using the term allegory, I have Jameson’s sense of the term in mind, particularly when he refers to “*the story of the private individual destiny is always an allegory of the embattled situation of the public third-world culture and society*” (“Third-World Literature” 69; emphasis in original). Mitchell’s epic allegorizes the embattled politics of world literary circulation and reception, focusing particularly on the ways in which texts serve as renewable resources for negotiating developmental crisis points.
- 4 The threat of cannibalism plays a key role in the changing power dynamics of *Benito Cereno*. Don Alexander Aranda is killed and stripped of his flesh, with the implication that he has been cannibalized in the hull of the ship by the rebel slaves. For a discussion of this cannibal signature in the narrative, see chapter four of Sanborn’s *The Sign of the Cannibal*.
- 5 King attributes this text to C. Ewing, an American lawyer, but it seems that the author’s name was actually Hugh Boyle Ewing, son of Thomas Ewing.

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