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Get Yourself Connected: Time, Space, and Character Networks in David Mitchell's Fiction

A Thesis

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BY

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Get Yourself Connected: Time, Space, and Character Networks in David Mitchell's Fiction

All boundaries are conventions, national ones too. One may transcend any convention, if only one can first conceive of doing so.

David Mitchell, *Cloud Atlas*

This thesis reads David Mitchell's body of work as a whole, and in particular will analyze his fiction's relationship to a modern and technologically advanced world that he often thematizes. Taken as a whole, his five novels (as of August 2014) seem to reflect specifically modern ideas such as global networks, artificial intelligence, and the collective ownership of the creative impulse, even while they span multiple centuries of human history and human future. I will investigate each novel individually, noting its connection to each of its fellows, as well as how each novel, on its own, introduces or furthers Mitchell's specific authorial tendencies and preoccupations, including but not limited to such concepts as global or transnational literature, remediation, appropriation and homage, and, most importantly, his character network.

The most intriguing aspect of David Mitchell's work, I will argue, is the manner in which his fiction remediates, in both form and content, how contemporary electronic

networks dominate our lives today. In the first world (and increasingly in developing nations) virtually everything we do is connected in some way to the Internet, and thus to the massive global network that dominates our lives. Once the exclusive domain of nerds and college students, social networks are widely used today by people in virtually all walks of life. A quick browse through my own personal Facebook page, a service I have been a member of since 2004, when it was limited to a few select University-based networks, shows not only friends in the usual sense, but also older colleagues, former teachers, friend's parents, work contacts, and the occasional band, website, company, or celebrity. When I was part of the vetting process for the board of a charitable foundation, we used not only the resumés potential members gave us, but also their LinkedIn profiles. We increasingly get our news from Twitter and our art from Instagram. We live a substantial part of our lives through social media and the Internet, and that is without even mentioning correspondence via email or group texts or Snapchats, acquiring reference materials via Google and Wikipedia, and shopping via Amazon¹. Mitchell seems to not only understand (and be a part of) these networks, but to go out of his way to integrate them into his novels. But in doing so he recalls and emulates the actual networks themselves, rather than just an acknowledging their existence. The represented time in Mitchell's novels covers hundreds of years of human history, both before and after our present. And yet he has set very little of his fiction in the immediate present. As such, having a character send an email or access Facebook is not an option. Notably, in his settings both before and after our present, Mitchell centers on networks, but they are

¹ In the interest of full disclosure, in researching this thesis I accessed nearly all of my secondary source material via online databases such as JSTOR or Project Muse, purchased books via Amazon.com to be read via Amazon's Kindle app, and constantly sought out interviews through Google and referenced individual characters and plot points on Wikipedia.

accomplished through other media. At the same time, the networks he fashions between his characters, regardless of when they happen in the represented time – nineteenth century, early twentieth, or far future – still emulate the networks we use daily today. This is a brilliant conceptual investigation of the nature of networks, and one of the many hallmarks of contemporary society and artistic expression that Mitchell weaves into the body of his narratives.

In his book *Here Comes Everybody*, Clay Shirky explores how social networks have changed the way people interact, form communities, and take action. Two of his ideas are especially relevant to Mitchell's work. In his chapter "Sharing Anchors Community," Shirky describes the change in access to images of Coney Island's annual Mermaid Parade. He first describes how things used to be: "A handful of these pictures end up in local newspapers, but for most of the history of the Mermaid Parade, most pictures were seen only by the people who took them and a few of their friends."² Fast forward to 2005, and the rise of image sharing services, like Flickr.com, which allows users to upload images for public sharing, and, more importantly, "tag" them, allowing users to access groups of images with the same tag all at once. Previously, even if hundreds of people took hundreds of pictures, a person in another part of the country would not have access to any of them unless they happened to know one of the photographers. Now, if 100 people each took 100 pictures, and each of them uploaded the pictures to Flickr and tagged them as "Mermaid Parade", a person half way around the world could view 10000 images of the Mermaid Parade, even if they had never met a person who attended it. This kind of network, and these previously unavailable (or at

² Shirky 32.

least unseen and inaccessible) connections, are a large part of David Mitchell's work. Mitchell's characters often do not know they are part of larger networks, just as the individual photographers may not be aware of the larger body of work to which they are contributing. But the experience of *reading* David Mitchell's novels, especially reading multiple ones together, allows the reader to see the individual parts contributing to the greater whole. When Jason Taylor first mentions Neal Brose in *Black Swan Green* (2006), he has no idea that that name will mean anything to the reader, but it does mean something, if the reader has already read Mitchell's first novel *Ghostwritten* (1999).³ This type of virtual connection, beyond the knowledge of the individual subject, is explored even more fully by Shirky's explanation of "Small World networks."⁴ Working off of a research paper that introduced this concept (by Duncan Watts and Steve Strogatz), Shirky explores how the Internet and social media allow us to mine and combine Small World networks into a series of increasingly larger networks that eventually constitute an entire network platform such as Facebook. Small World networks take their name from the experience, which Shirky describes, of meeting a stranger (for example, on an airplane) and discovering you have an acquaintance in common "the thing that makes you exclaim 'Small world!'"⁵ Though we have all experienced this phenomenon, many people don't realize how commonplace it is, though the Internet is helping to close that gap (The online equivalent is receiving a "friend request" and noticing how many friends you have in common with this new person, or

³ I am aware that in addition to this, Jason Taylor, the character, would have no idea what "the reader" even meant, as he is a character and, outside of a Pirandello play, not likely to be aware of his status as such or his role in the larger corpus of David Mitchell's work. But that is another argument altogether.

⁴ Shirky 215.

⁵ Shirky 214.

scrolling through a friend's wall post and discovering one by a mutual friend you didn't know you shared). Shirky discusses how Watts and Strogatz, among others, noticed that,

Social networks somehow manage to be sparsely connected (most people have only a moderate number of connections), but despite this sparseness the networks are both efficient (any two people are connected together by only a few links—the Six Degrees of Separation pattern) and robust (the loss of a random connection, or even several, doesn't destroy the network).⁶

Small networks, in other words, are great for passing along messages. And if your message only needs to go to, say, 5 or 10 or 50 people, that will suffice. But what if you want to build bigger networks? The bigger the network, they also found, the more sparse the connections, and the more likely that a message would get dropped along the way. The key, then, was to maintain the small networks but to connect them to each other and form a larger group that way. As Shirky puts it: “You let the small groups connect tightly, and then you connect the groups...As long as a couple of people in each small group know a couple of people in other groups, you get the advantages of tight connection at the small scale and loose connection at the large scale.”⁷ This is, in essence, what makes Facebook so powerful. As of this writing, I have 965 Facebook friends, which is a lot for me to handle but a drop in the bucket of Facebook's reported 1.23 billion monthly users.⁸ I am just one node in a much larger network that includes my friends, their friends, those friends' friends, etc. And as opposed to the pre-internet age, when it was also true that my friends had friends, and so on, the likelihood of me being able to communicate with those friends of friends' friends was slim. But with web-

⁶ Shirky 214.

⁷ Shirky 216.

⁸ <http://www.theguardian.com/news/datablog/2014/feb/04/facebook-in-numbers-statistics>

mediation, now we are all barely separated. As a thought experiment, say that Jeff is a friend of mine. Jeff grew up with John, whom I have never met, and John works with Jim, who has never met Jeff. Jeff, John, and I all live in different states. The chances that Jim and I would ever have a conversation, or even learn of each other's existence, without the help of social networks, would be incredibly slim. But now, say Jim posts a really great article on John's wall. Jeff, who is friends with John but not with Jim, sees the post and decides to share it as well, which is how I (friends with Jeff but not John or Jim) now see it, and, if I choose, can interact or send something back to Jeff that may get back up the chain to Jim. Jim and I are connected, we are engaged in a conversation online, even though we have never met and may never meet, and are separated by geography. This kind of socio-technical phenomenon is where Mitchell's work finds a literary analogue. Each of his characters is a node in a vast network, just as Jim and I are. And just like Jim and I, those nodes are part of small networks—family, friends, acquaintances on a narrative level, and chapters, stories, or novels on a metatextual one. What Mitchell excels at, and what makes him so fascinating, and representative, as a contemporary writer, is that he goes out of his way to show that, those nodes are connected and networked whether they know it or not, just as they are in the real world. In Mitchell's fictional universe, Adam Ewing, writing his journal in *Cloud Atlas* in 1850, is connected to Dean Moran, hanging out with Jason Taylor in *Black Swan Green* in 1983.⁹

⁹ I will do this extensively throughout the paper, but for the record, this is how: Ewing's journals are published by his son, and then that book is discovered and read by Robert Frobisher in the "Letters from Zedelghem" section of *Cloud Atlas*. Another character from "Letters" is Eva, who will grow up to be the woman Jason Taylor goes to talk to about poetry and take French lessons from in *Black Swan Green*. Jason's best friend is Dean Moran.

It is significant that Mitchell explores connections between characters not only *within* his novels but (recall Shirky's small, intimate networks growing into larger networks by connecting them to each other), again, by connecting those characters *to characters in other novels as well*. Mitchell's ever-expanding, interconnected world that encompasses his entire body of work can be seen in continuity with mythic narrative patterns such as those in the Bible, for example, ("Adam begat Seth, and Seth, Enos ... And Cush begat Nimrod" for example)¹⁰ and made mainstream by Tolkien and his many fantasy-fiction imitators.¹¹ But one feature that separates David Mitchell's network of characters from, say, the writer of a multi-volume fantasy epic like George R.R. Martin's, is that Mitchell does not seem particularly interested in his characters meeting or interacting with each other, and he devotes very little page space to what happens in between appearances or generations. It is for the benefit of the reader, not the characters in each individual fiction, to know that *Black Swan Green*'s Neal Brose grows up to be *Ghostwritten*'s Neal Brose or that Eiji Miyake (in *Number9Dream* [2001]) and Yaiyo Miyake (*Thousand Autumns of Jacob De Zoet* [2010]) are distant relatives. Their familial relationship is not a means to an end: in these works there is nothing passed down, no legacy or land rights or lordships to be inherited. (As we will see, this is not always so; in *Cloud Atlas* the links do manifest themselves to characters through time and space.) There is no extra insight into the Texan to be gleaned from *Number9Dream* that is missing in *Ghostwritten*. It is just a simple fact that all of these stories, no matter the

¹⁰ Paraphrased from the King James Bible, Genesis 5:1-32.

¹¹ A Google search with the terms "Tolkien Family Trees" returns almost 150,000 results. One particularly ambitious project, named simply "The LOTR Project," includes not only images charting the ancestry of various Middle Earth races and families, but also tabs including census data like "life expectancy" and "age distribution" based on race.

time, place, or circumstance, exist in the same world; and just as in the real world, if you meet enough people, you are bound to meet two who know each other, or are related, or you recognize from another context. That connectedness, the recognition of the global network that pervades our daily lives now is the point, and, as stated above, Mitchell remediates it in his print fiction. His works constitute an analogue to our real life experience of global connectedness.

Another modern lens through which to look at Mitchell's character networks might be the comic web app "Six Degrees of Kevin Bacon", a party game turned web-based thought experiment by Google. The game and new interface work similarly: by naming a Hollywood actor it should, theoretically, be possible to link that actor or actress to actor Kevin Bacon in six steps or less. Each "step" is a movie or TV show where said actor co-starred with another. The number of steps (or connections, or distinct nodes transversed) is that actor's "Bacon Number". So if the actor named was Hugo Weaving (relevant here as an actor who appeared in both the *Cloud Atlas* adaptation and the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy), the connections might go like this. Step 1: Hugo Weaving was in *Cloud Atlas* with Tom Hanks. Step 2: Tom Hanks was in *Apollo 13* with Kevin Bacon. (Hugo Weaving's Bacon number is 2.) In the past, making these connections would have to be done off the top of one's head, or, a few years later, with the help of IMDB.com or a similar website. But now, the idea of being connected, or people being nodes in a network, is so engrained that all one has to do is type "Bacon Number" and the name of an actor into Google, and the algorithm does all the work. It is easy to imagine David Mitchell's characters populating a similar network, where it is possible to trace the steps that connect every character, and assigning him or her a "Mitchell number." Mo

Muntervary's son, Liam, to *Jacob De Zoet's* Dr. Marinus? Dr. Marinus teaches Orito Aibagawa, who befriends Yayoi Miyake during her captivity. Yayoi Miyake is a distant ancestor of Eiji Miyake, who is friends with a hacker named Suga. Suga is recruited for the Saratoga project, where he works (presumably) with Mo Muntervary, mother of Liam. Six degrees separating an 18-year-old boy in a small town in Ireland in the end of the 20th century from a middle-aged ex-pat doctor living in Dutch-controlled Dejima, Japan, in 1799. Mitchell lives in the same world we do, a world where Google and Ancestry.com and Facebook have brought to light the connections and coincidences that have always tied people together, and into a place where they are nearly constantly visible and always instantly accessible.

As I have stated above, Mitchell is unique in that he not only explores the connections between human beings *within* his novels, but by connecting those characters *to characters in other novels as well*. While this may not seem to be an unprecedented fictional practice, it is not common. John Shanahan in a recent article argues that Mitchell's brand of narrative connection has possible sources in nineteenth-century American transcendentalism. Transcendentalist models of the world, according to Glen Hughes, hold that "all humans of all times [form] a single community, participating in a reality that, transcending all specific places and times, binds the meaning of each to the meaning of all."¹² Mitchell himself explained in an 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."¹³ These connections are no

¹² Quoted in Shanahan, "Digital Transcendentalism in David Mitchell's *Cloud Atlas*." "15

¹³ "David Mitchell the Experimentalist" Wyatt Mason, NYTimes

accident; they are deliberately placed by Mitchell, as a kind of global easter egg hunt of genealogy and chance meetings that spans five novels, three continents, and many centuries. A brief, chronological (and non-exhaustive) list of inter-novel connections in Mitchell might include: Neal Brose, the lawyer in *Ghostwritten*, appears as a teenager who terrorizes protagonist Jason Taylor in *Black Swan Green*. Subhaatar, who appears twice in *Ghostwritten* (in the “Mongolia” and “St. Petersburg” sections) swoops in to save Eiji Miyaki’s life by killing off the entire yakuza gang threatening him in *Number9Dream*. A man known only as “the Texan”, head of a shadowy science base in Saratoga to which he recruits Mo Muntervary in *Ghostwritten*, also shows up to recruit Eiji Miyaki’s hacker friend Suga to the same project in *Number9Dream*. Timothy Cavendish, a minor character in *Ghostwritten* (he is Marco’s publisher in the “London” section), is one of the narrators and central characters in *Cloud Atlas*, and the star of a film made after his death entitled *The Ghastly Ordeal of Timothy Cavendish*. His brother Delholme briefly appears in both books as well. The idea of a “cloud atlas” is first introduced in *Number9Dream*, and becomes an (obvious) central idea in *Cloud Atlas*, and gives its name to the piece of music Robert Frobisher composes in that novel before his death.¹⁴ A recording of that work, the “Cloud Atlas Sextet,” is purchased later in the novel by Luisa Rey, and then listened to by Jason Taylor in *Black Swan Green* during one of his visits to Mrs. Van Crommelynck. The latter is, of course, an elderly version of the woman first introduced as a (teenage) Eva in the “Letters from Zedelghem” section of

¹⁴ Robert Frobisher’s symphony is first referred to as the “Cloud Atlas Sextet” by the music clerk in the aptly named “Lost Chord Music Store” in the first section of “Half-Lives” (CA 120). The phrase itself is first found, however, in *Numer9Dream*. Eiji Miyake, having finally come face-to-face with his father without revealing their connection, sits outside and tries to make sense of the passing of time, saying “Twenty years translated to two minutes...The cloud atlas turns its pages over.” (NN9 352)

Cloud Atlas. The man Jason mistakes for the “butler” is Eva’s husband, whom she chose over Robert Frobisher, leading (in part) to Frobisher’s suicide at the end of that story. Eva’s father, Vyvyan Ayrs, and Robert himself, are both mentioned in *Black Swan Green*, though both are long dead by the time that novel takes place. In the “Pacific Journals of Adam Ewing” section of *Cloud Atlas*, Ewing is tormented by the ship’s second in command, a man named Boerhaave. Boerhaave seems to be almost pure evil, and eventually causes the object of Ewing’s affection, a young seaman named Raphael, to kill himself. Boerhaave appears as a young man towards the end of *The Thousand Autumns of Jacob De Zoet*, although he is, at that time, not yet the monster he will become. (We might note that “Boerhaave’s syndrome” is the name of a medical condition, most common in alcoholics, that results in a spontaneous rupture of the esophagus. The connection is not made explicit in the novel, but given Mitchell’s penchant for what we could call ‘motivated’ naming in all of his works, it seems unlikely to be an accident). In that same novel, Orito Aibagawa is shown an escape path from the monastery in which she is imprisoned by a “moon gray cat.” This same cat (presumably, as it is described simply as a “moon gray” each time) appears to Jacob De Zoet during his failed rescue mission, and again as a specter multiple times to Jason Taylor, two centuries later and thousands of miles away, in *Black Swan Green*.¹⁵ Finally, the formerly unknown lineage of two major characters is revealed in *Thousand Autumns*. Irish ship architect Con Twomey reveals to Jacob De Zoet, during the siege of Dejima, that he changed his name after a run in with the law, and his real surname is Muntervary, making

¹⁵ The fact that it is a *gray* cat is at the same time one of many examples of Mitchell’s cribbing of devices from Haruki Murakami. Mysterious and/or lost cats feature prominently in *The Wind Up Bird Chronicle* (1994) and *Kafka on the Shore* (2005), which both predate Mitchell’s gray cat. Cats feature prominently again in Murakami’s recent *1Q84* as well.

him a distant ancestor of *Ghostwritten*'s Mo Muntervary. Likewise, cat-eared Yayoi, the woman whose complicated pregnancy causes Orito to give up her freedom, shares her last name and past with Orito in a moment of intimacy. Yayoi's last name is Miyake, and she is from the tiny island of Yakushima. 150-odd years later, Eiji Miyake will be born on the tiny island of Yakushima, and star in his own novel *Number9Dream*.

Mitchell's world building does not stop simply at his characters. Through the robust character networks he creates, coupled with the extreme variety in setting (both time and place) between his five texts, Mitchell enters into conversation with a genre that seems to have captured the contemporary zeitgeist. This genre is alternately referred to by such titles as world literature, global literature, transnational literature, etc. Whatever name it is given, whether aptly earned or buzzword generated, it is neither a new concept nor one that lends itself to an easy definition. In the fall of 2013, the editors of New York literary journal *n+1* cited Goethe and his notion of *Weltliteratur* in order to begin a conversation about it: "I am more and more convinced that poetry is the universal possession of mankind...[and] the epoch of world literature is at hand, and everyone must strive to hasten its approach."¹⁶ However, the editors hasten to point out, the idea of a shared world literature that crosses national and language borders both predates Goethe (in the form of myths, religious texts, and oft-appropriated stories and folktales like *The Thousand and One Nights*) and would not be fully realized as a *genre* until the late 20th century, with writers such as (according to the article) Salman Rushdie, J.M. Coetzee, Haruki Murakami, Orhan Pamuk, Kalleid Hosseni, and many others "who successfully transcend their homelands and emerge into a planetary system where their work can

¹⁶ Goethe, quoted in *n+1* <https://nplusonemag.com/issue-17/the-intellectual-situation/world-lite/>

acquire a universal relevance.”¹⁷ The n+1 editorial traces what they believe to be the path from Goethe (and later Marx’s) dream of a world literature through the nationalism (and national literature) that marked the 19th and most of the 20th century: the rise of capitalism and the industrial revolution; the striation of nations into first-world, third-world, and Soviet bloc countries; the First and Second World Wars and the accompanying horrors of the Holocaust and Hiroshima, etc. They envision Global Literature (which they argue is nicer sounding and more apt than “World”) as a reaction to these causes. But though the article is written in an age dominated by it, it is lacking one key factor. It is true, many of the authors discussed (especially Rushdie and Coetzee) were writing in the 1980’s and early 90’s, and thus were not privy to this particular technology per se, but it is almost beyond imagining that an article written in 2013 about the “globalization” of anything could not mention the Internet *even once*. Though globalization is a phenomenon that certainly predates modern technology, it has been greatly enhanced by the rise of online technology that takes the connections between nations out of the realm of the economic or diplomatic and into the cultural, personal, and affective. And it is an author not mentioned in the editorial, I would argue, who embodies the Global Literature of the internet age, an age where everyone and everything can be connected with a few clicks of a mouse (as the cliché goes). That author is David Mitchell.

Another, perhaps more optimistic, view of Global Literature (this time called “transnational literature”) comes from Wai Chee Dimock. In *Through Other Continents*, Dimock proposes a new critical term to challenge the notion of a national literature. She

¹⁷ <https://nplusonemag.com/issue-17/the-intellectual-situation/world-lite/>

attempts to complicate the idea of what is commonly accepted to be “American literature” (her model could certainly double for “British literature” or “Japanese literature” or any other modern form of national identity in art). Dimock writes: “What we call ‘American’ literature...rather than being a discrete entity it is better seen as a crisscrossing set of pathways, open-ended and ever multiplying, weaving in and out of other geographies, other languages and cultures. These are input channels ... connective tissues binding America to the rest of the world.”¹⁸ She name this concept “deep time.”¹⁹ Dimock goes on to say that “Scale enlargement along the temporal axis changes our very sense of the *connectedness among human beings* ... Some historical phenomena need large-scale analysis.”²⁰ While Dimock is speaking specifically about American literature in her introduction, it is easy to apply her ideas to David Mitchell as well. His novels (especially *Ghostwritten* and *Cloud Atlas*, but also his body of work as a whole) embody Dimock’s idea of “deep time,” covering thousands of miles of geography and centuries of human history in order to explore the “connectedness among human beings.” It is also easy to see Mitchell agreeing with Dimock’s notion that some historical phenomena need large scale analysis to comprehend, whether it is the unplanned awakening of an artificial consciousness (*Ghostwritten*) or the unlikely karmic connection of six people spanning the course of modern human history (*Cloud Atlas*).

This network of characters, both within and between novels, gives the impression that Mitchell is creating a world not unlike our own, a world where not only does the

¹⁸ Dimock 3.

¹⁹ Dimock 3.

²⁰ Dimock 5, italics mine.

butterfly famously flap its wings to cause a tsunami half a world way, but where we can via computation also track said butterfly and see the connections. A world, in other words, that is completely networked, completely connected. This impression is heightened in Mitchell's two works that feature interlocking stories (or intra-novel connections). As Peter Childs and James Green note in their essay on Mitchell entitled "A Novel in Nine Parts," "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."²¹ On the micro level, there are the connections within the two sprawling narratives mentioned above, such as the ones noted by Rita Bernard. Bernard focuses on *Ghostwritten*, drawing attention to Mitchell's ability to slowly peel back the layers to expose the web he has spun beneath his stories (this particular metaphor is especially apt and important to Mitchell, as he will show in *Number9Dream*, but more on that later). Bernard writes: "The connections are often on the order of small incidents or details: the idea of a highlighted *hyperlink*, in fact, works very well as an analogy. The most striking example of this is the first one, where the device is still a surprise."²² The metaphor of "hyperlinking" is a particular apt one, as it also foreshadows Mitchell's understanding and interaction with what would come to be known as Web 2.0. She then goes on to describe the appropriate passages: in the novel's first section a cultist on the run calls a Tokyo number, appealing for help with the code "The dog needs to be fed" (*GW* 26). In the second section, titled "Tokyo", a record store

²¹ Childs and Green 2

²² Bernard 4.

clerk named Saturo is at work when he receives a mysterious call which consists only of an unknown caller demanding “the dog needs to be fed” (*GW* 53).

The two novels that exemplify network dynamics best are *Ghostwritten* and *Cloud Atlas*. Each is full of internal connection, and both represent in microcosm what Mitchell is doing across his entire body of work. Both traverse time and geography in their storytelling: *Ghostwritten* begins and ends in Tokyo, but travels to the outer islands of Japan, Hong Kong, China, Mongolia and the Trans-Siberian Railroad, Russia, London, Ireland and New York throughout its many narratives; *Cloud Atlas* begins in Polynesia in the 1850’s before jumping to Belgium in 1931, then to a fictional central California city in the mid-1970’s, to London and northern England in the present day, a near-future reunified Korea (renamed “Nea So Copros”), and finally to a dystopic Hawaii several centuries in the future, before finishing back in the 1850’s on a trans-Pacific voyage to San Francisco. Simply in terms of setting, Mitchell has already satisfied many of the requirements of global literature, and embraced the globalization that we enjoy today. But Mitchell goes beyond simple jet-setting, as Childs and Green note. Citing Meronym, the seemingly magical elder who rescues the narrator of “Sloosha’s Crossing and Everything After”, the middle/final story of *Cloud Atlas*, they point out “a meronym in linguistics denotes a constituent part of a whole. In Mitchell’s fiction ... each character is a meronym of the web of relations entangling all the others.”²³ For example, this chain of characters and events in *Ghostwritten*: In the third section British lawyer Neal Brose dies of unknown causes at the base of a Buddhist shrine in Hong Kong. It is revealed in the eighth section that Irish physicist Mo Muntervary witnessed his death (though they are

²³ Childs and Green 10

strangers to each other) while on the run in China. Muntervary, at the end of her section, is secreted away to Texas (by the man identified solely as “the Texan”) with her husband to continue her work on quantum cognition, and she is revealed to be successful in the ninth section, when an entity called “the Zookeeper”, a “quancog” (artificial intelligence) program she created, details its creation and the destruction of the Texas base while calling in to Bat Segundo’s “Night Train” radio show in New York (it is worth noting that a “night train” [without capital letters] is what cultist Quasar releases his toxic gas on to start and end the novel). Elsewhere, in the London section, Music of Chance drummer Marco (whose day job is as a ghostwriter) has just slept with Katy Forbes, the ex-wife of not-yet-dead Neal Brose. On his way out of her apartment, he saves a woman from being hit by a taxi (a woman who is later revealed to be Mo Muntervary), and then arrives at work to continue his ghostwriting, only to find his subject is too grief stricken to continue due to the news that his friend Jerome has just been killed. Jerome, readers know, was killed in Russia by the hitman Subhaatar, who first appeared in the Mongolia section. So Marco leaves and instead visits his publisher, Timothy Cavendish, brother of Delholme Cavendish, Neal Brose’s boss. In addition to being connected in *Ghostwritten*, Mitchell’s first novel, Brose, Subhaatar, the Texan, and both Cavendishes will appear again in *Black Swan Green*, *Number9Dream*, and *Cloud Atlas*.

These examples, and there are more, speak to Mitchell’s densely related fictional universe, a sprawling network of friendships, acquaintances, and family trees. None of these books are related to each other by plot—the aforementioned connections do not fill in gaps that are left open for the reader to ponder. Besides revealing older or younger versions of a handful of characters, no story that is started in one novel is continued in

another; despite his repetition of characters, Mitchell has yet to publish a sequel, prequel, or series. Furthermore, no one comes away from reading *Ghostwritten* burning to know what Neal Brose was like at 13, or hoping to know more about the Texan's recruiting practices (though *Black Swan Green* and *Number9Dream* include information on both of those things). But Mitchell allows the reader to drop into his world for glimpses at what might be going on behind or beyond covers of a given novel; Mitchell creates the illusion that every character he writes, like every real human being, has his or her own fully developed story, and he can, in principle, pick up any character's unique thread at any time.

This device, when deployed by Mitchell, seems to describe a narrative analogue of contemporary experience in a wired age. As I mentioned in the opening pages, Mitchell's novels represent devices and features that have become central parts of the fabric of life in the modern developed world—internet databases and social networks. Facebook friends, LinkedIn connections, Google alerts, etc. all allow us an unprecedented ability to keep tabs on our connections, and to see how those connections are created and grow and change. Anyone who has ever clicked on the “see mutual friends” tab on Facebook has participated in precisely the kind of exercise Mitchell is exploring with his fictional universe: a mapping of the connections that until very recently existed only out of sight, undocumented. It goes without saying that if we were to assume our favorite literary characters were real in some way, they too would have ancestries and lineages. But outside of Dostoyevsky and Tolkien, such virtual family trees were rarely made explicit unless they were integral to the plot of the novel. Likewise, it was not until recently that a person could casually and cheaply trace his or her own lineage and genealogy unless

one belonged to a family that kept meticulous records, or there was a genetic health issue that needed to be monitored. The average citizen before the late 1990s was unlikely to have easy access to that information. Now, a click-through to Ancestry.com or 23andme.com will yield more information than most people would know what to do with. And because these are the waters in which we now swim in the contemporary world, a realist fiction should follow suit. I will now attempt to delve deeper into the individual novels themselves, approaching them in the order they were released in an attempt to locate what about each adds to the ideas discussed in this paper.

***Ghostwritten*: In the beginning**

It has subsequently become clear that *Ghostwritten* was a template for all that would come for David Mitchell. In addition to telling a transnational story of interpersonal connection, the novel ticks many of the formal boxes discussed thus far. It features multiple interlocking narratives, remediation, science fiction tropes, shoplifting from other authors, a focus on technology and artificial intelligence: all are present in Mitchell's first novel, and would go on to be hallmarks of his later works. Many people have read *Ghostwritten* as a trial run for Mitchell's best-known work, *Cloud Atlas*. And while the two novels share many narrative strategies and overall themes, *Ghostwritten* offers much more than that. Where *Cloud Atlas* deals with cosmic, even magically "karmic," connections between its six or seven protagonists, *Ghostwritten* is more concerned with the plausible real-world passing of strangers in the night. If *Cloud Atlas*

is ancestry.com, a website that promises by “starting with your family tree” and filling in as much biographical and familial information as possible, it will “discover the story”, a “snapshot of your family’s past...there’s no telling what you will find” then *Ghostwritten* is Facebook, a place where you can discover hitherto unknown connections, seemingly at random, such as that acquaintances are actually past friends, or an uncle was on vacation the same place and time as a girlfriend.²⁴ The shock of the discovery of “mutual friends” and the butterfly flapping its wings-- these are the connections Mitchell plants for the reader in *Ghostwritten*.

Ghostwritten is told through a series of short stories, each with its own protagonist and own geographic location, most of which serve as section titles as well. The story begins in Okinawa, where a man who calls himself “Quasar” is lying low in the aftermath of his terrorist gas attack carried out on behalf of a “doomsday cult”²⁵ headed by “Serendipity”. While on Okinawa, Quasar places a distress call, in code. The reader discovers in the next section, “Tokyo,” that the call did not go to his superiors in the cult, but to a boy named Saturo who works in a jazz record shop. Saturo is stuck in a rut, it seems, until he meets a mysterious girl who occupies his thoughts. They meet and begin dating, and he quickly decides he will run away with her, starting in Hong Kong, which is the title and setting of the next section. The Hong Kong story follows ex-pat accountant Neal Brose, English but assigned to Hong Kong, as he deals with a shady bank account, with his wife leaving him and returning to England, his affair with his Chinese maid, and the possibility that his condo is haunted by the spirit of a little girl. Hoping to escape all

²⁴ all from ancestry.com homepage.

²⁵ Modeled on the real life doomsday cult known first as Aum Shirenko (“Supreme Truth”) and then Aleph, which carried out Sarin attacks on the Tokyo subway system similar to those in the novel.

this, he wanders to Holy Mountain, the title of the next section, and attempts to climb to the top, only to collapse on his way (it is later revealed he dies of diabetic shock). “Holy Mountain” tells the story of a woman who lives in and then owns a teashop on the pilgrimage path up the Holy Mountain. Through the recalled autobiography of the teashop proprietor, we learn the course of its history of terrible visits by various warlords, Japanese soldiers, and eventually, communists. Over the course of the 20th century, we learn that the tea shop owner was raped as a young girl by soldiers, and that the tea shop has been ransacked and looted multiple times. In spite of that, both woman and shop persevere. The woman has developed supernatural powers, she thinks, and can commune with a tree and the nature around her. Eventually, the land around her teashop is bought and developed, as Hong Kong and Holy Mountain are modernized (thus beginning Mitchell’s fascination throughout his novels with the development of modern Asia, from the humble beginnings of the teashop and the Dutch/English occupation of Japanese ports, through modern times, and into the far future of *Cloud Atlas*’ Nea So Corpus). Then the book jumps to Mongolia, and follows the trans-Siberian rail journey of European backpackers Sherry and Caspar. Their travels are described by a third party, speaking in first person, who will eventually be revealed to be one of the spirits or entities referred to later in the novel as quantum cognitions. This vague being will save their lives by temporarily inhabiting the Mongolian hit man Subhaatar, a character who features in multiple stories and novels by Mitchell (it is suggested that this entity is also what was speaking to the old woman, through the tree, in the Holy Mountain section). Then the novel moves to St. Petersburg, where an art heist goes poorly and the perpetrators are shot and killed by Subhaatar, acting on orders from shady characters first

introduced in “Hong Kong”. The narrative then moves to London, where musician/ghostwriter Marco has just had a one-night stand with Katy Forbes, ex-wife of Neal Brose. He then goes to visit his employer, an elderly man named Alfred, for whom Marco is ghostwriting an autobiography. But he finds Alfred too distraught to write much that day, as he has just gotten word that his friend Jerome has died (the reader already knows this, of course, as Jerome was part of the art heist in St. Petersburg, and was dispatched by Subhaatar). Marco then goes to visit his editor, one Timothy Cavendish, brother of “Hong Kong” character Delholme Cavendish and future protagonist of *Cloud Atlas*’ “The Ghastly Ordeal of Timothy Cavendish” before ending up in a casino mixed up in a family squabble, and eventually deciding that the events of the section were enough to make him consider his life, decide to settle down, and propose to his girlfriend. Along the way, he will also prevent a woman from being hit by a car. This woman is Mo Muntervary, protagonist of the following section, “Clear Island.” Mo, a quantum physicist, was in London after years of traveling the world, hiding out from shady government officials who want to buy, hire, or steal her work (according to her willingness to participate). She returns, however, to her home on Clear Island, off the coast of Ireland. She is followed by the mysterious “Texan”, who insists she join his team in the US to work on the quantum cognition project. She eventually agrees, but only if her husband can come with her. Along the way it is revealed that not only was she in London with Marco, but also witnessed Neal Brose’s death on Holy Mountain. The connections and seemingly random coincidences continue to pile up the penultimate section, and the first not to be named after a geographic location, “Night Train”. Night Train, besides being a play-on-words, is a radio call in show hosted by Bat Segundo in a

near-future New York City. Some sort of global war is raging, and New York is in a state of chaos, if not nuclear winter.²⁶ Yet Bat continues to broadcast and take calls, including one from a-then NYC based journalist named Luisa Rey (who will become a central protagonist of *Cloud Atlas*’ “Half-Lives: the First Luisa Rey Mystery”). But his primary caller is an entity that calls itself “the Zookeeper” and is revealed to be a quantum cognition entity Mo Muntervary and her team (which also is composed of a hacker named Suga who will be recruited by the Texan in *Number9Dream*) created. The Zookeeper was created to protect “the zoo” (the world) and its inhabitants (people), but as people are destroying themselves, the Zookeeper’s directives begin to clash with each other, and “it” calls in to Bat Segundo to try to get advice and clarify its directives. After a few calls, another quan cog entity calls in to mock the Zookeeper, and it is implied that there are at least 8 other quan cogs out there, possibly including the one the reader met in “Mongolia,” and that the one Zookeeper and Bat are speaking to that inhabited a body in order to become Serendipity, the cult leader that Quasar worshipped way back in “Okinawa”. Bat tries and struggles to advise the Zookeeper in a way that results in the least, or at least the most acceptable, human causalities, but neither seem convinced. The section ends with Bat Segundo signing off and, punning on the name “Night Train”, which is important, if a bit obvious, as it segues into the final section “Underground”, where Quasar boards a train to Tokyo with his biological weapon and experiences

²⁶ It is never directly addressed, but it seems likely this crisis, caused at least in part by the quan cogs, is what will precipitate the events that lead to the creation of new countries like Nea So Corpos in *Cloud Atlas*.

hallucinations of visiting the other characters and locales in the novel, before leaving his package and watching the train recede down the tunnel.²⁷

Number 9 Dream: Son of Murakami

Number9Dream is often overlooked in discussions of David Mitchell's works. Published in 2001, in between *Ghostwritten* and *Cloud Atlas*, it does not have the shine of a debut or reach the narrative heights of its successor, and seems to be an example of a novelist still finding his voice. It has neither the benefit of the autobiography or strict chapter structure of *Black Swan Green*, or the departure into historical fiction and intertwining narratives of *The Thousand Autumns of Jacob De Zoet*. At times, it reads like a novel-length extension of the "Tokyo" section from *Ghostwritten*, and, like that section, suffers at times from a perception that it is Mitchell's attempt to write his own Haruki Murakami novel. In spite of all of this, there are some very interesting tactics deployed in *Number9Dream*, and a departure at the novel's heart sheds light on some of Mitchell's major thematic concerns and influences.

Number9Dream is the story of Eiji Miyake, a young man from the tiny island of Yakushima who moves to Tokyo in a quest to find his birth father. The novel opens with

²⁷ We might also note that *Underground* is the title of the English translation of Haruki Murakami's 1994 non-fiction work about the Aum Shinrikyo gas attack.

Eiji sitting in a cafe and staring at the Panopticon building, where his father's lawyer works. He passes the time daydreaming about the many ways he could storm the building and demand the information he needs while at the same time obsessing over one of the waitresses and her "perfect neck." As the novel continues, Mitchell will interweave Eiji's present, his fantasies, and memories of his past, often without alerting the reader that the timeframe is shifting.

Eiji, now in Tokyo permanently, gets drawn into a series of dangerous and somewhat fantastical situations. He befriends a rich law student who he accompanies to high-end clubs and love hotels, but also a hacker named Suga who works at the lost and found desk in a train station.²⁸ He is kidnapped by the Yakuza and drawn into a power struggle between two Yakuza underbosses fighting to take control of the whole organization in the absence of the previous boss. One of the two underbosses, Morino, promises Eiji he information about his father if Eiji joins his gang in the fight against the rival Yakuza members. There is a bloody showdown, in which Morino is killed and Eiji seems certain to also be murdered, but he is saved by a *deus ex machina* in the form of Subhaatar, the Mongolian hit man from *Ghostwritten's* "Mongolia" and "St. Petersburg" sections. Eiji is taken to a house to lay low, where he reads the first of what we could term "Goatwriter" stories. The Goatwriter stories were written by his landlord's aunt, and Mitchell allows the reader to read them as if it is the same text that Eiji Miyake is reading. What seems at first like a silly diversion (and a Murakami allusion both in form and content) become something else as they become increasingly about technology and matters of mediation (I will explore this dimension of the stories in full later). Eiji's landlord asks him to mind

²⁸ Although Mitchell never explicitly states which underground station Quasar uses for his terrorist attack in *Ghostwritten*, it could easily have been Ueno Station, where Eiji and Suga work, and which is a major hub in Tokyo's train network.

his video store while he and his wife go on holiday (another very Murakami-esque job for an aimless young protagonist, and similar to Saturo's job in a record store in *Ghostwritten*). Eiji is contacted by his grandfather, and receives a handwritten journal that his grandfather's brother kept during WWII. In that chapter, Mitchell now alternates, as he did with the Goatwriter stories, between Eiji's point of view and replicating the journal entries on the page, which may be an early attempt at the kind of remediation of other forms of print Mitchell would use again extensively in *Cloud Atlas*. Eiji returns to meet the man who gave him the journal (who turns out to have been his grandfather in disguise) only to find he has passed away and he meets his step-mother and step-sister instead (that is, his unknown father's new wife and daughter). They convince him to abandon the quest for his father, which, after all that Eiji has learned of him and his "family" so far, Eiji is all too ready to do. So he stays on in Tokyo, finds a job at a pizza shop, and begins to see Ai Imago, the girl with the perfect neck. While there, Eiji comes into possession, through a private detective he met earlier in the novel, of a disc containing secret information about Yakuza misdeeds, including forced prostitution and the selling of children's organs on the black market. Around this time, Suga the hacker tries to hack the Pentagon computers. He is discovered, but rather than being prosecuted or arrested, is recruited to join the same top secret project in Saratoga, Texas that the Texan recruited Mo Muntervary to in the "Clear Island" section of *Ghostwritten*. As a parting gift, he leaves Eiji a virus that will allow its user to send an email that replicates and sends itself to every address in the recipients address book, and every address in that recipients address book, and so and on, another sly wink by Mitchell at the growing connectedness and reliance of global networks that the internet is creating. While at the

pizza parlor, Eiji is given an order to deliver to a lawyer at the Panopticon building. He realizes this man is his father, but is so turned off by both his experiences so far and by the way his father (who doesn't know who he is) acts towards him and those around him that he chooses not to reveal the secret and leaves without telling him. Eiji uses Suga's virus to send the Yakuza evidence to thousands of emails across Japan, and decides to return to Yakushima. He gets there but cannot find anyone he knows, and then hears on the radio of a massive earthquake in Tokyo. He tries to call Ai or any of his friends there but cannot get through. Chapter Eight ends with Eiji wishing he was dreaming, and then deciding to start running, presumably all the way back to Tokyo if possible. Chapter Nine has no title, and consists only of the word "Nine" and a blank page.

While it seems to be a strange (and at times completely unnecessary departure from the main storyline), nowhere is Mitchell's ability to take the concepts and behavior of modern technology and bend them to suit his storytelling needs more apparent than in the strange interlude that interrupts the main narrative in *Number9dream*. That strand, when Eiji Miyake finds a manuscript of stories in the house where he is taken to hide after his encounter with Subhaatar, tells the highly fantastic story of "Goatwriter." Goatwriter is a talking, sentient goat who drives a bus, is a writer, and is looking for the thief who stole his writing brush and parts of his manuscript. He goes with his friends Mrs. Comb (a chicken) and Pithecanthropus (an ancient Neanderthal man) to recover them. They chase the perpetrator, ScabRat, into the lair of a character named Queen Shrouds, which is where the intention of this bizarre episode of interpellated content becomes clear. Queen Shrouds is a spider-woman hybrid who is made out of computer part and is capable of controlling any and all technology. She proclaims, "The future is

my empire” and her lair is covered in screens and “strewn with electrical cables” (NN9 229). As a reward for his role in the theft, she turns ScabRat into a “CyberRat” leading to this exchange: “Goatwriter chewed his beard. ‘Why would you voluntarily renounce your solid state for the virtual?’ ‘Da whole internet is my rat run now, Beardy!’” (229). Queen Shrouds’ intentions are hardly subtle, as she crows “Paper is dead, have you not heard?” before launching into a monologue calling Goatwriter and his friends “luddites” and strewn with tech-speak like “digitize you away” and “RAM-raid your virtual brain” before lambasting the idea of fulfillment or originality in writing (229). While this seems like a victory for the virtual over the real, she is eventually defeated only when Pithecanthropus thinks to literally “pull the plug on the project,” (234) killing (or shutting down at least) both Queen Shrouds and ScabRat, and allowing Goatwriter to regain his possessions and finish his writing.

Read on its own, this detour from the main plot seems to have very little to do with anything else—it certainly does not add to the principal story of *Number9Dreamx*. On one level, it is a thinly veiled allusion to Murakami, as well Mitchell’s own previous novel. “Goatwriter” evokes not only “ghostwriter” and *Ghostwritten* but also echoes the mysterious “Sheep Man” who occasionally appears to the protagonist of Murakami’s *Wild Sheep Chase* and *Dance Dance Dance*. This narrative form is also similar to the kinds of breaks and digressions Murakami includes in his novels, including the letters in *Norwegian Wood* and *Wild Sheep Chase* (the latter of which are written by a character known only as “the Rat”, another connection to this section), and relies on more and more in his later and more complex novels like *Kafka on the Shore* and *1Q84*. But the key to understanding the story of Goatwriter seems to be in the rest of Mitchell’s work.

Viewed in context of his entire canon, this seemingly nonsensical fable begins to make perfect sense as an allegory of Mitchell's own experience as a writer whose career has risen entirely during the digital age –an analog manifesto in a story about a small town boy recently moved to Tokyo, one of the most technologized cities in the world. Rather than bemoaning the state of print culture, or decrying the Internet as evil, Mitchell lets fiction speak for itself. He acknowledges the present state of the digital world, and allows it to influence, augment, and bleed in to his analog works, but maintains, time and again, his commitment to, and the supremacy of, print.

Cloud Atlas: Cosmic Networks

“The form of [*Cloud Atlas*]...is both highly original and profoundly derivative.”²⁹

This could indeed easily refer to any of Mitchell's texts, or his body of work as a whole. But *Cloud Atlas*, his most complicated and most celebrated novel, can stand as synecdoche for the rest of his works. Written in six different genres, spanning at least seven centuries and circumnavigating, over the course of 500+ pages, the entire globe, *Cloud Atlas* is nothing if not ambitious. But that ambition is not limited to its narrative arc, but also its form. *Cloud Atlas* is most often compared not to other novels but is often described, as imitating Russian nesting dolls: each story opens to reveal another story contained within. The experience of reading *Cloud Atlas* involves traveling both forward and backward in time, and keeping straight six disparate stories that seem to begin and

²⁹ Heather Hicks, “‘This Time Round’: David Mitchell's *Cloud Atlas* and the Apocalyptic Problem of Historicism”

end on a whim.

Cloud Atlas begins with a title page bearing the words “The Pacific Journal of Adam Ewing”, in what appears to be calligraphic handwritten script. The first section of the novel is the journal of that title, written in 1850 by an American notary named Adam Ewing. Ewing is a part of an expedition to the Chatham Islands aboard a Dutch ship. His journal details his time on the island interacting with the local missionaries, witnessing and being horrified by the native Moriori and their treatment at the hands of the conquering Maori, arguing theology, befriending Dr. Henry Goose, and trying to withstand the indignities done to him by ship’s savage crew. That crew includes one Mr. Boerhaave, a particularly sadistic officer (who we will recall appears as a young man in the epilogue of *The Thousand Autumns of Jacob De Zoet*). Once the ship disembarks, headed back to San Francisco, Ewing discovers and endeavors to protect a Moriori stowaway named Autua. The first section of Ewing’s story ends abruptly, mid-entry, during a description of a young sailor named Rafael.

The next section, entitled “Letters from Zedelghem”, takes place two continents and 80 years removed from Adam Ewing. Rather than the journal entries that had composed the novel thus far, Mitchell now switches to epistolary correspondence, as the story of Robert Frobisher is told entirely through letters that he writes to his friend and lover, Rufus Sixsmith. Frobisher is a rakish English twenty-something, cut off by his father and on the run from various minor offenses and petty thefts. He dreams of being a world famous composer, and with that in mind, travels to Zedelghem, Belgium, to cynically offer himself as amanuensis for an aging, but famous, composer named Vyvyan. As his tenure in Zedelghem lengthens, Frobisher begins helping himself to Arys’

valuables (which he fences through Sixsmith) and Arys' wife, though Arys' daughter Eva seems immune to his charms. The section ends on a wistful note, as Frobisher begins drawing inspiration from his surroundings and composing his own work. The reader is also first introduced, in this section, to the comet shaped birthmark that Robert Frobisher bears. "She plays with that birthmark in the hollow of my shoulder, the one you said resembles a comet," Frobisher writes to Sixsmith (CA 85).

This is the first appearance of the birthmark, but it will be one link between characters in the next five stories. Luisa Rey is the first to note the connection, as when she reads the letter excerpted above in her own section, she begins to suspect something greater than mere coincidence is at work.

[What] bothers Luisa [is] the dizzying vividness of the images and places and people that the letters have unlocked. Images so vivid she can only call them memories. The pragmatic journalist's daughter would, and did, explain these "memories" as the work of an imagination hypersensitized by her father's recent death, but a detail in one letter will not be dismissed. Robert Frobisher mentions a comet-shaped birthmark between his shoulder blade and collarbone. *I don't believe in this crap. I just don't believe it. I don't.* (CA 119-120)

Despite her affirmations that she doesn't believe it, the next page shows her in front of the bathroom mirror, examining her own comet-shaped birthmark. "*Coincidences happen all the time.* But it is undeniably shaped like a comet" (CA 122). Though Mitchell never explicitly explains the connection or the origin of the birthmark, it seems to point towards a cosmic connection, or perhaps even that the characters that share it are reincarnations or new vessels for one soul.³⁰ At the very least, coupled with Frobisher's discovery of

³⁰ The meaning of the birthmark could be the subject of an entirely separate paper, and speculation abounds on the Internet as to what it signifies and why Adam Ewing and Zachry don't seem to have one but Meronym does. Further complicating issues is the film adaptation of *Cloud Atlas*. One of the many changes made in the adaptation is that Adam Ewing is given a birthmark, and the birthmark in "Sloosha's Crossin'" is transferred from Meronym to Zachry.

Ewing's journal, Luisa's encounter with Rufus Sixsmith (and her subsequent possession of Frobisher's letters) the birthmark points to the much larger themes at play in the novel.

"Letters from Zedelghem" gives way to the third section, "Half Lives: The First Luisa Rey Mystery". Here, for the first time, Mitchell switches to straightforward prose, overtly fictional, though the connections to previous sections is apparent from the very first line: "Rufus Sixsmith leans over the balcony..." (CA 89). "Half Lives" is told like a potboiler—though it takes its protagonist's name from Thornton Wilder, it owes more of a debt to Dashiell Hammett in style and tone. Luisa Rey (first featured in the Mitchell-verse as a caller to Bat Segundo's "Night Train" radio show in *Ghostwritten*) is a journalist working for the gossip magazine called *Spyglass*. After being trapped in an elevator with Rufus Sixsmith, now in his 70's and a nuclear physicist, Rey is tipped to a story that a new reactor being built by the Seaboard Corporation in her (fictional) town of Buenas Yervas is not safe. Remediating 1970s films such as *All the President's Men* and *The China Syndrome*, Mitchell's intrepid and fearless reporter-protagonist pitches the story to her reluctant editor and heads to the power plant to investigate. This proves to be a difficult task, as the company's CEO and Head of Security are trying to keep things secret.. Luisa is determined to get to the bottom of the story, and she seeks out Isaac Sachs, a young scientist working on the reactor. He hides Sixsmith's report, the smoking gun proving the reactor is unsafe, in Luisa's car, but before she can find it, the plant's enforcer runs her off the bridge connecting the reactor site to Buenas Yervas, and the section ends, without revealing Luisa's fate.

"The Ghastly Ordeal of Timothy Cavendish" reads like the autobiography of the titular Timothy Cavendish (first seen in *Ghostwritten's* "London" section as ghostwriter

Marco's editor and publisher). It is related in first person, and Cavendish tells the story of how he rose from minor publisher to literary mogul on the back of the biography of a man most famous for throwing a book reviewer off a building. That event leads to a huge spike in sales, and its author's brothers come to collect their share from Timothy. Out of money and fearing for his life, Cavendish tries to get help from his brother Delholme (first seen in *Ghostwritten's* "Hong Kong" section as Neal Brose's superior) who refuses to give him money but offers him asylum at a house in the country. Timothy accepts, but to his horror finds that his brother has actually arranged for him to be placed in an Elderly Care Home he cannot leave. Timothy at first believes he can talk or badger his way out of the home, but to no avail. The section ends with Timothy considering his fate before suffering some sort of injury, the nature and seriousness of which is not revealed before the end of the section.

With "An Orison of Sonmi-451", Mitchell moves into science-fiction territory. The exact year is not revealed, but it is far enough in the future that cloning technology has been discovered and perfected, leading to the invention of "fabricants", human clones who are created solely to perform tasks that humans no longer wish to do and function essentially as genetically-engineered slaves. The story is told as an interview between one such fabricant, Sonmi-451, and an unnamed man referred to as an archivist. Sonmi-451 lived in Nea So Corpus (which has replaced modern-day North and South Korea) and was a server in a fast-food restaurant chain called Papa Song's, living and working sixteen hour days with the other fabricants assigned to the restaurant. Servers have no time of their own and no choice or free will. They were unable to leave Papa Songs even if they wanted to, as the elevators (and nearly everything else technology-based in this

world) is activated by a “soul” a chip that only “purebloods” (humans) may possess. The fabricants are kept pacific through a manufactured religion, in fact nothing more than a series of strict “catechisms”, and a promise that after 12 years of servitude they would be released to a paradise called Xultation. Sonmi-451 is a normally-functioning fabricant until another fabricant she works with, Yoona-939, begins to act strangely. She takes risks, breaks rules, and voices doubts about Papa Song and their world. Yoona gets a hold of a picture book (which Sonmi-451 describes as a “broken Sony”³¹) and eventually tries to escape, only to be killed by police officers. But Yoona’s awakening (which Sonmi and the archivist refer to as an “ascension”) has triggered something similar in Sonmi-451, and later with help she is able to effectively escape. She leaves Papa Song’s for the first time, is taken to Taemosan University, and put under the care of a student name Boom-Sook Kim. When Kim’s carelessness puts her in danger, she is rescued yet again by Boardman Mephi, who works for the ruling power, the Unanimity. He helps her continue her education and provides a companion named Hae-Joo to take her outside the university; they even visit Papa Song’s. The two of them are watching a movie, *The Ghastly Ordeal of Timothy Cavendish*, when they are interrupted by a Unanimity raid. Hae-Joo reveals he has been keeping a secret, but before the reader finds out their fate or what that secret is, the section ends.

The middle section of *Cloud Atlas*, “Sloosha’s Crossin’ an’ Ev’rythin’ After” is

³¹ Mitchell here borrows/steals the concept of proprietary eponyms (the way we use “Kleenex” to mean “tissue” or “Aspirin” to mean any pain alleviating medicine) and extreme corporate sponsorship/ubiquity from other speculative fiction works, such as “Hosakas” in *Neuromancer* or the sponsored years in David Foster Wallace’s *Infinite Jest*. In a move both Mitchell and Kenneth Goldsmith would undoubtedly approve, this idea was taken to its logical extreme in later dystopian works like Mike Judge’s 2006 film *Idiocracy*, which features characters like “Frito” and “President Dwayne Elizondo Mountain Dew Herbert Camacho”, or Gary Shytengart’s 2010 novel *A Super Sad True Love Story*, where all broadcasted news is incorporated into “Fox Liberty Prime” and fictional brands like “JuicyPussy” and “OnionSkin” refer both to the brand and synecdoche for the products they produce and the people who wear them.

the only story told without interruption. It is also told in first person, but here instead of print and then film autobiography, Mitchell uses remediated oral storytelling. This is especially appropriate for this section, as it takes place in a post-apocalyptic far future, where the people of Hawaii no longer have access to any technology beyond fire and basic tools. The storyteller and protagonist is Zachry, a member of a peaceful tribe on the big island. Zachry tells the story of his life, starting with the death of his brother and father at the hands of Kona savages. Zachry believes this to be his first encounter with “Old Georgie”, the devil in his primitive belief system. We learn that Zachry’s religion is a monotheism centered on a Goddess named Sonmi. Zachry’s village is later visited by a “prescient” named Meronym. The prescients are worshipped as something like angels or demi-gods, though in reality they are just a group of people who still have access to some of the advanced technology that was wiped out in the apocalyptic event that happened between the time of Sonmi and this section. Zachry dislikes Meronym, who has a code, seemingly similar to Star Trek’s “Prime Directive”³² to not use her technology to intervene in the islanders issues. But Zachry convinces her to try and heal his sister Catkin when she is stung by a scorpion fish, and in return he agrees to act as a guide for her as she attempts to climb Mauna Kea, which is one of Old Georgie’s reputed haunts. On the top of the mountain, they find a long-abandoned observatory (likely the ruins of the real-life Mauna Kea Observatory).³³ Later, Zachry’s tribe is captured by Kona raiders, but Meronym rescues him and they manage to escape across the island and are

³² According to the Star Trek episode “Bread and Circuses”, the Prime Directive can best be summarized as “No identification of self or mission; no interference with the social development of said planet; no references to space, other worlds, or advanced civilizations.”

³³ <http://www.ifa.hawaii.edu/mko/>

rescued by Meronym's people. In the end, it is revealed that Zachry passed this story down to his children, and that Meronym owned the egg-shaped "Orison" that contained the goddess Sonmi, which is in actuality the holographic projection of Sonmi-451's interview with the archivist.

From the end of "Sloosha's Crossin'", the previous tales are told in reverse narrative order. The reader picks up Sonmi-451's tale and learns her fate. She has to escape Unanimity and is on the run before eventually being captured and interviewed by an archivist before her execution, the recording of said interview being what the reader has read and what Zachry's clan watched by firelight at the end of his tale. Her final request is to be allowed to finish watching *The Ghastly Ordeal of Timothy Cavendish*. This brings the reader back to that story, wherein Timothy Cavendish manages to escape the home and tracks down the author of the partial manuscript he had read, *Half-Lives: The First Luisa Rey* mystery. He acquires and reads the second half. The reader then moves back to "Luisa Rey", who has managed to survive her car crash with the evidence intact, and, with the help of Rufus' niece Megan Sixsmith, exposes the corporate conspiracy. Megan also gives Luisa some of her uncle's possessions, which include the remainder of the letters he had received in 1931 from Robert Frobisher (Luisa had found the first stack in her first section). Frobisher continues his work for Ayr, but becomes increasingly dissatisfied with their work and with Jocasta. His affair is found out, and he begins to develop feelings for a newly mature Eva, but she rebuffs him. Frobisher finishes his own magnum opus, the "Cloud Atlas Sextet", before taking his own life in his hotel room. Before he dies, however, he finds the rest of a book he had stumbled upon in Ayr's mansion, entitled *The Pacific Journals of Adam Ewing*. He recovers the

second half of the journals, and discovers they were published posthumously by Ewing's son. The final section of the novel takes the reader back to the ship, where Ewing's condition is worsening and the sailors' behavior is becoming increasingly sadistic. Ewing is unable to help Autua or his beloved Rafael due to his condition, which is revealed to be not a disease that Dr. Goose was treating, but in fact a poisoning at the hands of the doctor. Ewing manages to avoid death, but just barely, by the help of Autua, and after recuperating on Hawaii, he will return to San Francisco.

In many ways, *Cloud Atlas* is David Mitchell's thesis statement, the best synthesis of many of the major themes, tactics, and tropes he deploys throughout his entire body of work. It is told in myriad ways through seemingly disparate narratives, yet it is a novel that is chiefly concerned with the cosmic connections between people. Five characters (Frobisher, Luisa Rey, Timothy Cavendish, Sonmi-451, and Meronym) share the "comet shaped birthmark" without explanation, and they each discover that detail about each other through the reading/viewing of the others' stories. It is a novel that explores the idea of the post-human he first explored in *Ghostwritten*, where Serendipity and the Zookeeper threaten to destroy and/or save humanity (and, to a lesser extent, represented by Queen Shrouds in the Goatwriter section of *Number9Dream*). But despite the fact that the novel moves from the human to the post-human, it is a novel that comes out firmly on the side of the human. In "The Exhaustion of Literature: Novels, Computers, and the Threat of Obsolescence," Kathleen Fitzpatrick writes about the post-human stories that emerged in the last part of the 20th century. She begins with *Neuromancer*, while pausing to note the ubiquity of such a gesture (in fact, the very first line of the article reads, "It has become something of a cliché to begin an academic article on the electronic future

with a reference to William Gibson's *Neuromancer*, and yet doing so is almost irresistible.")³⁴ Before going on to discuss other classic examples of technologies evolving to threaten or replace the humans who created them, Fitzpatrick notes:

The computer age seems to offer new, potentially dangerous threats to the category of 'human' itself, as well as to its privileged forms of knowledge. Representations from Phillip K. Dick's *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* to *The Terminator* films act out the anxieties about the tenuous relationship between the human and the computer, imagining a computer that does the living species in, or a computer-based organism (a cyborg) that is able to "pass" for human, disrupting the coherence of the category.³⁵

Fitzpatrick chooses two classic examples of stories of AIs attaining consciousness and agency from the many that were published before her 2002 article, and there have been many more since (she could certainly could have included *Neuromancer*'s Wintermute or *Ghost in the Shell*'s Puppet Master). But those anxieties are also ones that Mitchell takes up. Serendipity and the Zookeeper both have the capacity to wipe out humanity, though one seems to need human agents to do so and the other grapples with the morality of that decision. And Sonmi-451 and the other fabricants who ascend are feared by Nea So Corpus' Unanimity for precisely the reason Fitzpatrick points out, the idea that one or more of them could pass for human and be integrated (or at least feel they deserve to be integrated) into human society. But despite those threats (and assuming, again, that all of Mitchell's novels do in fact take place in one continuous world), humanity is emphatically not wiped out. In "Sloosha's Crossin'" the reader discovers that *something* catastrophic happened (whether it is man-made, a war between fabricants and Unanimity, an extension of the Serendipity terrorist plot, or something else entirely), and though

³⁴ Fitzpatrick 1

³⁵ Fitzpatrick 7

Mitchell cleverly never explains exactly what, he implies that even if technology wasn't the direct cause of civilization's "fall", it certainly contributed. Zachry believes Old Georgie was the root of the fall, but Meronym explains that humanity did itself in, telling him "Old Uns tripped their own Fall" (CA 272), "Old Un's" being the pidgin term for the people who lived prior to the fall (in other words, us). And when Zachry protests "But Old Un'sd got the Smart!" Meronym explains:

Yay, Old Un's Smart mastered sticks, misles, seeds, an' made miracles ord'nary, but it din't master one thing, nay, a hunger in the hearts o'humans, yay, a hunger for more...more gear, more food, faster speeds, longer lives, easier lives, more *power*, yay. Now the Hole World is big, but it weren't big 'nuff for that hunger what made Old Uns rip out the skies an' boil up the seas an' poison soil with crazed atoms an' donkey 'bout with rotted seeds so new plagues was borned an' babbits was freak-birthded. Fin'ly, bit'ly, then quicksharp, states busted into bar'bric tribes an' the Civ'lize Days ended. (CA 272, all [sic], obviously)

This explanation, that it was humanity's insatiable drive for power that led to an eventual cataclysm and the downfall of civilization, harkens back to the Zookeeper's dilemma in *Ghostwritten*: how is it supposed to protect humanity, when humanity's greatest threat seems to be itself? But human beings survive and rebuild, and they rebuild, at least on Zachry's island, without electronic technology. Obviously, it is not a utopia, and Meronym's people, with their access to modern technology, are clearly in a superior position. Nevertheless, by continuing to exist, humanity triumphs over the post-human threats it faces in *Cloud Atlas* (and, again, by extension, *Ghostwritten*). Considering Mitchell's preoccupations, this seems to speak to Fitzpatrick's other point as well. She brings up these post-human concerns as part of her exploration of the so-called "death of the print novel", a battle she feels is remediated within the pages of these kinds of stories. Fitzpatrick implies that as novelists struggle with the advent of new media, both those that seem to replace the written word (television, the internet) and those that offer new

and improved delivery systems for it (e-readers, cell phones, the internet), the struggle between new and old, human and post-human, is played out in the very narratives they write. She writes, “I will explore the implications of this conflation of the post human and post humanism in the anxiety of obsolescence ... [and the] waning of both the human and the humanist.”³⁶ Mitchell is also exploring those themes, I would argue, in the ways he chooses to tell the stories in *Cloud Atlas* (and, again, in the way the animals are able to defeat the Queen Shrouds by unplugging her).³⁷ Though he takes on many different genres, only two of the stories, “Timothy Cavendish” and “Sonmi-451,” are told using electronic technology (Cavendish’s story is a film, Sonmi’s is the orison itself). Once technology disappears, storytelling doesn’t cease—it reverts, regressing back to the primitive oral storytelling traditions that predated writing. The structure of the novel supports this as well. Each story is contained in the following/previous story (depending which side of “Sloosha’s Crossin’” one is on), again recalling the Russian nesting dolls to which the novel is so often compared. And if the novel is read front to back, the reader moves through the technological advancements in storytelling, but then moves backwards through them in the novel’s second half. Though Mitchell creates a world where at times stories are told by three-dimensional holograms projected out of a small metal egg, the last words the reader reads are handwritten entries in a journal in the 19th century.

³⁶ Fitzpatrick 9

³⁷ It is worth noting, however, that Mitchell does not seem opposed to new media’s role in literature. In addition to his remediation techniques, Mitchell recently followed other contemporary novelists like Jennifer Egan into new forms of storytelling by publishing a story on Twitter. That story, titled “The Right Sort”, was written as a series of 280 tweets, forcing Mitchell to work within the 140-character constraint and teasing the story out over a series of days. While “The Right Sort” was at least in part a tease for his upcoming print novel, *The Bone Clocks*, the fact that he was willing to embrace this new delivery system seems to put him in a minority of print novelists.

Black Swan Green: David Mitchell grows up

Black Swan Green is the outlier in Mitchell's work. Whereas the novels that came before it are complicated narratives built of interlocking stories (*Ghostwritten*, *Cloud Atlas*) or are stories of grand quests, profound mysteries, and strange diversions (*Number9Dream*), *Black Swan Green* is in many ways a very traditional text. It tells the story of Jason "Jace" Taylor, a 13 year-old living in the village of Black Swan Green outside of Worcester, England. Over the course of the novel, Jason will deal with bullies, his parents' divorce, his sister leaving for university, his first kiss, and, most of all, his stutter. Mitchell has been candid about the fact that in addition to being a traditional *bildungsroman*, *Black Swan Green* is also, at least partially, autobiographical. Having lived with a stutter his entire life, Mitchell says that, in writing the novel, "I felt a little like how I imagine a gay man feels when he comes out."³⁸ *Black Swan Green* may not follow his previous three books as an example of translit, speculative fiction, or experimental narrative in form or subject matter (not only is it set in very middle-class England, it begins in January of 1982 and ends the following January; the furthest anyone travels is Lyme Regis). It is also different, in its own way. Speaking of the writing process, Mitchell says "This is true, real, and liberating,"³⁹ adjectives that certainly can't be attached to "Sloosha's Crossin'" or the "Night Train" section of *Ghostwritten*. Furthermore, Mitchell has not completely abandoned the practices that marked his other novels. While he may no longer be able to steal from his favorite source, Murakami, this

³⁸ "The Art of Fiction, No. 204" *The Paris Review*

³⁹ *Paris Review*

time Mitchell has other writers from whom to shoplift. And while it may be simple, it is deliberately simple, a challenge in and of itself. Mitchell told an interviewer: “After *Cloud Atlas* I wanted a holiday from complexity. I was reading Raymond Carver, John Cheever, and Alice Munro ... I wanted to see if I could write a compelling book about an outwardly unremarkable boy stuck in an outwardly unremarkable time and place without any jiggery-pokery, without fireworks—just old-school.”⁴⁰

While Mitchell may claim *Black Swan Green* to be totally “old school”, the contemporary hallmarks that mark all of his novels remain in many ways. While it may be a work separate from the rest of his oeuvre, it is not isolated from the networked world Mitchell had been building through three previous novels. Though it may be thematically and tonally different from *Ghostwritten* and *Cloud Atlas*, it exists in the same universe, and moreover, in the same timeline. Neal Brose, middle-aged accountant and protagonist of the “Hong Kong” section of *Ghostwritten*, is a teenager in *Black Swan Green*, a member of the pack of bullies that terrorizes Jason Taylor. Lest that be seen as an accident (or that Mitchell just can’t think of any new names), Jason also comes under the tutelage of an elderly woman living off the beaten path in *Black Swan Green*. One of the aspects of his own life that Mitchell wrote into *Black Swan Green* was the pseudonymous poetry both boys published in magazines, Mitchell as “James Bolivar” (itself a stolen character name, from a character by *Soylent Green* author Harry Harrison) and Taylor as “Eliot Bolivar” (for T.S. Eliot). The poems catch the eye of Madame Eva Van Crommelnyck. It is not clear how the young woman who so captured Robert Frobisher’s attention in *Cloud Atlas* ended up living in a vicarage in *Black Swan Green*, but it is clear

⁴⁰ see above

that they are the same woman. These new webs, the ones that tie Neal Brose and Eva and her husband to their older and younger selves, respectively, are particularly sneaky. Whereas the quan cog-filled world of *Ghostwritten* or the world that gives birth to Nea So Copros in *Cloud Atlas* may seem like fantasies, Jason Taylor's world is recognizably ours. It is the true boyhood story of its author, who lives in our modern present. It is a simple transitive connection, then, to say that *our* world, the world of Jason Taylor and David Mitchell (and by extension Neal Brose and Eva Van Crommelynyck) is the same world of Eiji Miyake, Luisa Rey, Mo Muntervary, and, eventually Zachry and Meronym. They are all fictional, but by linking the speculative to the real, Mitchell seems to be suggesting that they are not *fantastical*, and that is an important distinction.

The connections to Mitchell's previous works are not the only qualities of note in *Black Swan Green*. While it is a simple, straightforward story by Mitchell's standards, it still has interesting formal elements. Each chapter takes place during a calendar month, with the first, "January Man" marking Jason's 13th birthday in January, 1982, and the 13th and final chapter, also called "January Man" marking his 14th. Mitchell also practices the kind of paratextual remediation that seems to have found a resurgence in post-modern fiction, though dates back at least to Laurence Sterne's *Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman*. A note from Jason's mom on page 68 is not included at all in the text itself, but rather is written across two facsimile post-it notes that seem to have been xeroxed into the novel itself. Similarly, the diary/chart that Jason makes for his speech therapist, Mrs. De Roo, in the second chapter, "Hangman", is a replicated version of the graph paper table that Jason wrote. It is a teenager's sloppy handwriting the reader has to decipher on the top of page 30, rather than the clean typeset of the rest of the novel. The

novel is also filled with many similar allusions and intertextual references as one finds in Mitchell's earlier novels. And while many of these are more in the pop culture realm than the highbrow art of *Cloud Atlas*' "*sunt lacrimae rerum,*" (CA 490) nevertheless they require the reader to either have an encyclopedic knowledge of 1980's pop songs, or, more likely, have easy access to today's repository of immediate knowledge, the Internet. It is of course possible to read a work like *Black Swan Green* and not need to understand every last reference to the 80's new wave scene ("That *ace* song 'Olive's Salami' by Elvis Costello and the Attractions drowned out whatever Dean yelled at me" (BSG 242)) or the films Jason Taylor discusses with his classmates ("Tom Yew started saying he'd seen *The Great Escape* and everyone agreed everything else'd been crap compared to *The Great Escape*, specially the bit where Steve McQueen gets caught by the Nazis" (BSG 9), or know what subbuteo is, but Mitchell colors every page and episode with such specific cultural ephemera that to ignore or be ignorant of it would surely cheapen the experience of reading the novel. Given this, unless the reader also came of age in Thatcherite England, some research will be necessary to understand the endless stream of reference. And while Mitchell is hardly the only author to include pop culture references or literary send-ups in his work, he is able to be both erudite and populist. On the one hand, Mitchell's novels (especially *Cloud Atlas*) are sometimes mentioned in the same breath as notoriously complicated and heady works such as Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow* or Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest*. On the other, a more pulpy novel might pack in the pop culture (Ernest Cline's *Ready Player One*, with its endless stream of video and computer game references, comes to mind) but not also allusions to high art and literature. But Mitchell allows his readers both the joy of simple recognition and the hard

work of unpacking a dense allusion. Mitchell seems to understand this, and to make the very contemporary, search-engine-enhanced, point that access to esoteric knowledge is, at the level of media, more or less equivalent to access to pop culture. There is a wiki devoted to Michelangelo the painter and Michelangelo the Ninja Turtle, and, content aside, it is impossible at the level of servers and bits to differentiate the mode of being of one from the other. Google's search bar is the great equalizer: it is just as easy to find the entry on the scene from *Titanic* that Buntaro watches on page 77 of *Number9Dream* as the entry on Foucault's "Panopticon" that lends its name to the building Eiji Miyake's surveils on that novel's first page.

The Thousand Autumns of Jacob De Zoet: A voyage to the past

In *The Thousand Autumns of Jacob De Zoet*, Mitchell's most recent novel at the time of this writing⁴¹, Mitchell returns to many of his themes and devices but in a new format altogether. Though both *Ghostwritten* and *Cloud Atlas* had portions of narrative that took

⁴¹ His newest, *The Bone Clocks*, is scheduled for release in September, 2014. This also does not include "The Right Stuff", the aforementioned short story that was "published" on Twitter over the course of four days in July of this year.

place in the somewhat distant past, neither fully commit to traditional historical fiction in the way that *Thousand Autumns* does. Set primarily in 1799 and 1800, with brief excursions to 1810 and 1817, the novel tells two intertwining stories. One follows Dutch clerk Jacob De Zoet, stationed on the artificial island of Dejima in Nagasaki harbor with the Dutch East India company. The other follows Orito Aibagawa, a mysterious young Japanese woman with whom Jacob becomes infatuated. The novel paints a historical picture with pinpoint accuracy, and Mitchell himself has spoken at length about the specificity of research that was necessary to tell the story he wanted, as well as the authors and novelists who wrote in or about that period whose influence bled into this work. In his interview with the *Paris Review*, Mitchell admits that while there is an echo of Melville in *Jacob De Zoet* (the same story, *Benito Cereno*, is often compared to the Adam Ewing section of *Cloud Atlas*), he was also stealing from *Master and Commander* author Patrick O'Brien ("Patrick O'Brien is the great source for life aboard ships in the Napoleonic Era") and Joseph Conrad ("His [Conrad's] story 'Youth' has this beautiful passage about your first landfall in Asia and how it haunts you for the rest of your life ... there's something of that in *Thousand Autumns*"⁴²). But in typical Mitchell fashion, he also steals from less likely sources. During Orito Aibagawa's abortive escape attempt, she overhears two monks talking about writing. Master Chimei is fabricating a letter home from one of the Sister's trapped in the monastery, and he considers his work to be "storytelling." "Tricks of the trade, you see?" he says. "Storytellers are not priests who commune with an ethereal realm but artisans, like dumpling makers, if somewhat slower" (*TA* 266). While this belief seems certainly to be in line with Mitchell's own ("I even

⁴² Paris Review

distrust the phrase *creative process*” Mitchell tells an interviewer), it is in fact another shoplifted idea.⁴³ In *Mao II*, Don DeLillo⁴⁴ puts a similar sentiment into the mouth of one of his characters, the writer Bill Gray. Gray says “I’m not a great big visionary, George. I’m a sentence-maker, like a donut maker only slower.”⁴⁵

Thousand Autumns begins in 1799 in the port of Dejima, Japan. Jacob De Zoet is a young Dutchman who is in the midst of a five-year contract with the Dutch East India company. He is hoping to fulfill his contract without incident, and to return home with enough money to marry and begin a life with his betrothed, Anna. But Dejima turns out to be a complicated place for an honest clerk like Jacob, and he is soon pulled into various intrigues and political machinations by the other ex-pats stationed in the port. He does find a few allies in a Japanese translator named Ogawa and the island’s Doctor, the brusque but progressive and intelligent Dr. Marinus. Jacob also becomes infatuated with a student of Dr Marinus, Orito Aibagawa, who becomes the second focus of the novel. Jacob begins to develop feelings for her, despite his fiancé and her disfigurement (Aibagawa has a burn scar “covering much of the left side of her face. It is dark, blotched, and, close up, very conspicuous” (*TA* 48)). But Miss Aibagawa, as she is mostly referred to, is secreted away from Dejima with Jacob looking on, helpless.

After this key event in the narrative, Mitchell pulls the rug out from under the readers, and the novel switches tacks. Whereas the entire story up to this point, save the very first brief chapter, almost a prologue, was told from Jacob’s point of view (or at least followed

⁴³ Paris Review

⁴⁴ DeLillo seems to be a favorite source of material for Mitchell. *Number9Dream* begins with an epigram from Don DeLillo’s *Americana*: “It is so much simpler to bury reality than it is to dispose of dreams.”

⁴⁵ DeLillo, 162

his actions; he was clearly the protagonist), now it switches to follow Aibagawa.

Whereas each chapter up to this point was given a title and a time stamp using the Roman Calendar (for example: “Chapter Eleven. WAREHOUSE EIK. *Before the typhoon of October 19, 1799.* (TA 140)) each is now based on the Japanese lunar calendar (for example: “Chapter Fourteen. ABOVE THE VILLAGE OF KUROZANE IN KYOGA DOMAIN. *Late on the twenty-second day of the tenth month*” (TA 177). The second section of the novel alternates between Jacob, back in Dejima, trying to find a way to rescue Orito from what he eventually learns is her imprisonment at the hands of Lord Abbot Enomoto, and Orito’s time in the Mount Shiranuru Shrine. Mitchell also fills in gaps in the narrative with chapters from the point of view of others, including an herbalist named Otane who becomes essential to the Enomoto’s eventual defeat, and Ogawa as he attempts and fails to find Orito and bring her back to Dejima. In the shrine, Orito meets the other “sisters,” who are being kept by the Lord Abbott as breeders and are drugged twice a day. They all have some disfigurement or other that keeps them from being married, and most believe this situation is the best they could hope for (Yayoi, the woman Orito becomes closest to, has cat ears). As that chapters progress, the sense that something strange and supernatural takes hold, and Mitchell changes the reality of the story once again. Ogawa tries to rescue Orito, but Lord Abbot Enomoto’s reach and omniscience is such that it is impossible for Jacob to enlist the help of anyone who is not under his sway. Orito tries to escape, notably by following a “moon-gray cat” (TA 239), but she is discovered and given an option: she can leave, or she can stay and act as a midwife for the other woman at the monastery. Yayoi, specifically, is pregnant with twins and will likely die without Orito’s help. Both Jacob and Orito eventually learn the

truth about the monastery: the children that the sisters give birth to, which they are told are taken down the mountain and given to families who nurture them, are actually ritual sacrifices. Enomoto and those of his order use babies' blood to prolong their life, and Enomoto himself has been alive for centuries. Significantly, the false promises of a blessed life for their children and a peaceful twilight for the sisters after their service heavily recalls the 12th catechism and the promise of paradise in Xultation from *Cloud Atlas*' "Orison of Sonmi-451". In classic Mitchell fashion, though the stories could not be further apart in time, or differ more in form, the similarity in this narrative device binds them together and provides a through-line in showing how people (especially men) retain their power by promising a better life for those beneath them (mostly women) just over the horizon.

The third and final section of the novel changes again, as the focus shifts back to Jacob and Dejima. Jacob is now in possession of the scroll with the damning evidence about Enomoto, but there is no one in power to whom he can give it and be believed. The Dutch presence on Dejima is faltering, and a British ship appears and lays siege to the city. On it is Daniel Snitker, the former Dutch clerk who was relieved of his duties for theft at the beginning of the book. Jacob is part of the delegation to the Japanese Magistrate in regards to negotiating with the British. The British ultimately do attack, and Jacob is spared only because during the height of the assault he reminds the British captain of his own son (they both have red hair). Jacob uses his newfound position of influence to give the incriminating scroll to the Magistrate, who, knowing he can neither outsmart nor confront Enomoto directly, poisons himself and the Abbot, and gives his life to stop the Abbot's perfidy. The novel then jumps forward 11 years, to find Jacob still in

Japan and married with children, though not to Orito Aibagawa. It jumps again in its final pages, to 1817, to find Jacob leaving his life and son in Japan and returning to Holland to live out the rest of his days.

While a novel beginning in 1799 and ending in 1817 may not seem to have much in common with novels that either take place entirely in the present or travel into the distant future, the same tools Mitchell uses to give his other novels their contemporary relevance are also on display here. And Mitchell makes sure to include *Thousand Autumns* as part of the world he had built in his previous four novels. One human character appears in person in both *Thousand Autumns* and *Cloud Atlas*: Mr. Boerhaave (no first name is ever given). He is introduced in the epilogue of *Thousand Autumns* as a midshipman who is to be De Zoet's servant, and Jacob even comments on the seaworthiness of his name "Boerhaave ... a fine nautical name" (TA 475). This seems to be a bit of foreshadowing (though the book it foreshadows was written six years previously) as in fact Boerhaave remains on the sea, and rises up the ranks, until he is the officer Mr. Boerhaave, who torments Adam Ewing aboard the *Prophetess* in "The Pacific Journal of Adam Ewing," 33 years after the events of the epilogue. Again, this is not simply a case of name recycling, no matter how different the two Boerhaave's actions may be. Mitchell has admitted they are meant to be the same character. Furthermore, though the rest of the crew is never introduced, the ship Jacob De Zoet leaves Dejima on is called "the *Profetes*", (TA 475) and the ship Adam Ewing is aboard is called "the *Prophetess*", (CA 11) making them likely the same ship.⁴⁶ Boerhaave may be the only human character to

⁴⁶ The "Prophetess" actually appears a third time, as well. In the second half of "Half-Lives: The First Luisa Rey Mystery", Luisa meets Joe Napier at the "Cape Yervas Marina" which claims to be the "Proud home of the *Prophetess*, best-preserved schooner in the world." Rufus Sixsmith's boat, the *Starfish*, is moored just past the *Prophetess* (CA 430).

appear in another novel besides *Thousand Autumns*, but the “moon-gray cat” that appears to Orito Aibagawa appears as well, almost 200 years later, to Jason Taylor in *Black Swan Green*, where it makes as many as five appearances, each time described as “a moon-gray cat.”⁴⁷ To further the universe building, two characters from previous novels are given ancestors in *Thousand Autumns*. Yayoi, the girl with pointed ears Orito befriends in the monastery, tells Orito that she is from “A little-known place, a full day’s sail from Kagoshima Port, called Yakushima” (*TA* 240). She goes on to say that she is from, or at least her father is a member of, “the Miyake clan” (*TA* 240). This most likely makes her a distant ancestor of Eiji Miyake, who will be born and raised on Yakushima before he sets out to find his father, kicking off the plot of *Number9Dream*. Also of note, Jacob has a conversation with an Irish carpenter named Con Twomey. In it, Twomey admits that this is not his real name, and he is actually a criminal who was tormented by a British Marine during his exile to Australia (or “New South Wales” as it is still called in the novel) before he accidentally killed one of his captors and escaped. Twomey’s real name is Fiacre Muntervary, and, as he is from Ireland originally, it makes it extremely likely that he is a distant ancestor of Mo Muntervary, the physicist from *Ghostwritten*’s “Clear Island” section. These family connections and cameo appearances, even in a novel that is strictly historical and set apart from his other works, only serves to strengthen the network Mitchell has created.

Keeping his network alive is not the only way Mitchell ties *Thousand Autumns* to his other novels. The remediation that takes place in the contemporary novels, though

⁴⁷ *BSG* 38, 138, 238, 283. The fifth time it is only described, on page 16, as something “furry and moon gray” that Squelch, the local mentally handicapped boy, has caught and is petting. Squelch calls it a “kit kat”.

not possible in the same way in *Thousand Autumns*, is nevertheless still present. It is present in the content and pretext of the novel itself, in a similar way as it is in *Black Swan Green*. Whereas in *BSG* Mitchell chose to represent and remediate everyday objects from Jason's life as paratextual objects as opposed to as text themselves (examples include the post-it notes from Jason's mom and his "hangman" journal), in *Thousand Autumns* it is mostly Jacob De Zoet's skill as an artist that is represented paratextually. There are numerous examples where Jacob's skill in drawing is noted, but Mitchell is not content to let other characters serve as the only witnesses. The first drawing is on page 17, as Jacob sketches the Dejima port as he rides a boat in to his new home for the first time. An oarsman asks to see his sketch, and rather than simply commenting on its merit, or describing in prose what was on the page of the sketchpad, Mitchell writes "Jacob shows them the page:" (TA 16) followed by a blank space, and then devotes two-thirds of the opposite page to the drawing itself, rendered to look as much like what Jacob would have shown the oarsman as possible. Only then is the oarsman allowed to pass judgment (after the reader himself has had a chance to) "The older oarsman makes a face to say, *Not bad*" (TA 17). This is repeated throughout the novel, whether it is Orito Aibagawa remembering Jacob and seeing the picture of her that he drew on a fan (on page 247) or Enomoto showing Ogawa Uzaemon Jacob's sketches of Orito on page 315. But the remediation of sketching is not only in the content of the novel, but also in its form. This aspect of the writing may be lost on the average reader, if not for Mitchell himself stepping in to explain it in an interview with *Vanity Fair*. Even though the novel takes place well before the birth of film technology, that does not mean Mitchell, a cinephile, can't remediate the form in his work. "We [modern novelists]

can't help but be influenced by film ... For example the cut. In [*The Thousand Autumns of Jacob De Zoet*] there's a bit where Jacob and Dr. Marinus are gambling ... and Jacob agrees that if he loses he'll spend a day working Marinus' garden ... Cut to the next chapter, which opens with Jacob digging in horseshit [sic] in the garden. The 19th century writer, I argue, simply wouldn't have done that. We simply would have seen Jacob lose that billiards game."⁴⁸ This quotation seems to sum up much of Mitchell's approach to writing: not only is he aware of his own remediation, but even in a historical novel, he can't help but be a contemporary novelist.

It is not simply by including pictures or jump cuts that David Mitchell practices remediation. J. David Bolter and Richard Grusin define remediation, in their seminal book on the subject, as "the incorporation or representation of one medium in another medium."⁴⁹ In addition to creating networks, appropriating text, making pop culture references, and the like, David Mitchell's work attempts to take on the very media that it will be judged alongside. Mitchell's extensive use of remediation is another way he acknowledges the contemporary world and allows it to influence his work, even when that work is not set in contemporary times. It is another aspect of his work that puts his work on the forefront of the contemporary genre, and allows it to be in the conversation

⁴⁸ Vanity Fair

⁴⁹ Bolter and Grusin, 45

with new media works, despite the fact that his medium is almost entirely print, an “old” media. Bolter and Grusin themselves claimed this connection, saying “we will argue that remediation is a defining characteristic of the new digital media.”⁵⁰ John Shanahan argues that “one strategy for the contemporary serious novel ... [is] to place the novel (and print literature more generally) in a larger-scale story of media evolution. [O]ne can place Mitchell in the ongoing struggle of print fiction with electronic text in a medial ecology of competitive remediation.”⁵¹ Mitchell’s novels are full of such conceits, including the written account of the transmission of the Bat Segundo show in *Ghostwritten* or Orito Abigawa’s face sketched in *The Thousand Autumns of Jacob DeZoet*.

Remediation is more than just a novelistic parlor trick. Just as Walter Benjamin famously wrote about the change in perception and reception that occurred as mechanical means of production in visual art (film and photography) began to take over from painting, much has been made of the so-called “new media,” from television to the Internet, spelling the end of the print novel. One weapon in the print novelist’s arsenal, then, is to assimilate these new technologies, so that the print novel can adapt alongside them. An American contemporary of Mitchell who also seems just as concerned with these issues is Mark Z. Danielewski. His *House of Leaves*, released in 2000, one year after *Ghostwritten* and one year before *Number9Dream*, is perhaps the standard bearer for the kinds of remediation possible in the print novel. Whereas Mitchell seems to prefer to represent other media within the narrative of his writing, Danielewski goes further, allowing the remediation to literally change the way words are represented on the

⁵⁰ Bolter and Grusin 45

⁵¹ Shanahan 17

page. Writing about remediation in *House of Leaves*, N. Katherine Hayles posits “[f]irst, it extends the claims of the print book by showing what print can be in a digital age; second, it recuperates the vitality of the novel as a genre by recovering, through the processes of remediation, subjectivities coherent enough to become the foci of the sustained narration that remains the hallmark of the print novel.”⁵² Mitchell’s work takes on the media that are said to replace it, and imagines what might come next. Or, as Jessica Pressman puts it, writing about another of Mitchell’s “new media” contemporaries, Stephen Hall, “The contemporary aesthetic of bookishness appropriates characteristics of digital technologies and Web 2.0 reading practices into the book-bound novel in order to enhance the book’s status as an innovative medium.”⁵³ Given all the remediation in Mitchell, that quotation could just as easily apply to him as to Hall. But unlike Stephen Hall, or other much-written about authors with similar concerns (again, Danielewski being the primary example), Mitchell is not concerned, per se, with changing the object of the book to mimic or co-opt newer technologies (Hall’s *Raw Shark Text* famously contains pages where the text becomes a graphic [a shark], whereas Jennifer Egan, another contemporary author Mitchell is often lumped in with, has a chapter in her *A Visit From the Goon Squad* that tells a story set in the near future entirely through print remediations of Power Point slides, to cite two examples) but with bringing these newer forms of media into the print fabric of his stories themselves. We are surrounded by remediation: websites try to replicate books or newspapers while newspapers and magazines change to more resemble websites. A simple phone call is

⁵² Hayles 7

⁵³ Pressman 467

now a movie. A TV show can exist on the Internet as well as your TV, and you are probably watching it on a phone which is built to resemble the windowed screen of your computer. It goes on and on. David Mitchell seems to understand this modern tendency, and to seek to represent it in his work.

The novel in which remediation is most apparent—the one in which, in fact, it takes center stage—is *Cloud Atlas*. Each of *Cloud Atlas*' six stories is written in a separate style, and much has been made of Mitchell's ability to take up the voice and technique of a variety of genres. But beyond the genre-hopping lies a more telling truth. Not only is the style of each different, but each story is being delivered to the receiver (separate from the reader of the novel as a whole) in a separate medium, one appropriate for the time period in which that particular story/section takes place. *Cloud Atlas* unfolds in multiple narrative media: "The Pacific Journal of Adam Ewing", written as a journal by the titular explorer, is followed by "Letters from Zedelghem", a series of letters written and sent by Robert Frobisher while living in Belgium. This is followed by "Half-lives: The First Luisa Rey Mystery," written as a pulp detective novel; "The Ghastly Ordeal of Timothy Cavendish", a film; and "An Orison of Sonmi-451", an interrogation that is somehow broadcast as a three-dimensional hologram. The "final" section of the novel, "Sloosha's Crossing," is told in full while the other five sections are cut off halfway through their respective stories (and at times halfway through a sentence) and picked up again, this time in descending order, before finishing with the end of Adam Ewing's tale. Both the disparate way these stories are told and the way they are delivered are remediations of the way we consume media in the digital age. The way the first five sections end abruptly (sometimes mid sentence) only to be picked up from the same thread in the second half of

the book, creates an effect Shanahan describes as “a powerful mimesis of multimedia literacy in the age of Web 2.0: this print novel’s six different stories run *simultaneously*, as it were, like separate browser windows dedicated to various media platforms.”⁵⁴ He goes on to posit that *Cloud Atlas* “delivers web 1.0 content...in web 2.0 form.”⁵⁵

It is in these second halves that Mitchell’s conceit becomes apparent, and the most telling clue for this comes at the end of “Sloosha’s Crossing.” As it is the final section to begin, it is the furthest in the future (the tales are told in ascending chronological order). “Sloosha’s Crossing,” recall, is the story of Zachry, an elderly survivor living on post-apocalyptic Hawaii. Zachry’s story is told via the only medium he has at his disposal: oral storytelling. But Meronym, the prescient, has with her a remnant of a past time, an egg-shaped device that can among other things broadcast holographic images. The egg-device is called an “orison.”⁵⁶ The orison she possesses tells the story of Sonmi-451. Mitchell has remediated the Sonmi section in the Sloosha section, and in a technology that does not yet exist in our world: the ability to record both the audio and visual of a conversation, store it, and project it back as a hologram. What we, the readers, see on the page is the remediated version of what Zachry and his clan are watching on Meronym’s orison (and what is to us just another means of storytelling is enough to confirm Sonmi’s presence as a deity in this primitive culture). And as Mitchell descends through the sections, the nesting dolls of the rest of the stories begin to unpack, and the full scope of

⁵⁴ Shanahan 19, emphasis mine

⁵⁵ see above

⁵⁶ Here Mitchell seems to have stolen a word and modified it to his own purposes; “orison”, which commonly means “prayer”, appeared first in *Hamlet*. At the end of the “To be or not to be” soliloquy, Hamlet spies Ophelia and asks that she pray for him when he is gone (“Nymph, in thy orisons/Be all my sins remembered”) (Shakespeare III.1.91-92)

his remediation comes into focus. “Sloosha’s Crossing” remediates oral storytelling, and Sonmi-451 holographic projection. “The Ghastly Ordeal of Timothy Cavendish” is the remediation of a film, and this becomes clear as Sonmi begins, in her first section, watching said film, but her viewing (and the reader’s reading) is interrupted. In her second section, she requests (and is granted) permission to finish the film. As she is able to finish it, the reader is granted access to the second half of Cavendish’s story.

Cavendish, in his first section, has and reads the manuscript version of what will become “Half-Lives”, but he only has the first half. He tracks down the author to acquire the rest of the novel, and as he reads it, so does the reader. Even the two more straightforward mediums are part of this chain. Continuing backwards, Luisa Rey, in her first section, has in her possession half of the letters Robert Frobisher wrote from Zedelghem, as the letter’s recipients, Rufus Sixsmith, is a character in her story. After Sixsmith’s death, Luisa, in her second section, comes into possession of the rest of the letters. In those letters, the reader discovers that Frobisher has found the second half of the book *The Pacific Journal of Adam Ewing*, published by Ewing’s son after the death of his father. Frobisher had read the first half in his first section. Thus, the story is allowed to end, as all characters have been able to access both halves of the various storytelling media that exist in their stories. Along the way, Mitchell remediates on the printed page journal entries, love letters, a pulp novel, a film, a hologram, and the kind of storytelling usually done around a campfire. By making the subject of the remediations actual physical objects in the novel itself, Mitchell is sure to draw the reader’s (and the critic’s) attention to the fact that the words printed on the page are doing double-duty: telling the reader a story, but also representing and describing (in other words, remediating) the actions of

those other physical, non-print, forms of media.

Another reading of this remediation of multiple means of transmission is a historical one. Frederic Jameson uses *Cloud Atlas* as a lens through which to view certain tropes of recent historical fiction, and the way Mitchell works his way through the history of media does not escape him. Of *Cloud Atlas*, Jameson writes

There is, however, yet another history hidden in these sequences ... and that is what must be called the medium as such. Each segment, each story, is indeed registered by a different material apparatus of transmission, so that to that extent *Cloud Atlas* offers a kind of experimental history, not so much of styles and events, as rather of *communicational technology*.⁵⁷

Jameson goes on to outline the same ideas about the means of transmission (each character's story is part of a physical object in the following story, and cannot be continued until the object is found/put back together/viewed, etc.) that I outline above. He goes on to conclude that "the heterogeneity of narratives has been revealed to be a multiplicity of informational and communicational technologies,"⁵⁸ further reinforcing the importance of Mitchell's use of remediation as a significant device.

Remediation is just one arrow in Mitchell's quiver of thoroughly modern and post-modern devices. I have alluded to Mitchell's propensity for appropriation in his novels elsewhere. Appropriation has long been a hallmark of the post-modern visual art world, and has become an increasingly important part of contemporary music. But literature has lagged behind to an extent, and authors like Mitchell seem to be trying to close that gap.

In 2007, *Harper's* magazine published Jonathan Lethem's essay "The Ecstasy of Influence". In it, Lethem describes and argues for the acceptance of a practice many artists have already long participated in: intellectual theft, in the form of inspiration,

⁵⁷ Jameson 309, emphasis mine

⁵⁸ Jameson 309.

influence, and at times, outright cribbing. The kicker comes at the end of the essay, where Lethem reveals that his entire manifesto in favor of what others might ungenerously call plagiarism was written using the words and ideas of others. Lethem constructed, rather than wrote, an essay about stealing others words by stealing their words. Writing about Lethem in the introduction to his own manifesto *Uncreative Writing*, Kenneth Goldsmith points out:

Lethem's provocation belies a trend among younger writers who take his exercise one step further by boldly appropriate the work of others *without* citation, disposing of the artful and seamless integration of Lethem's patchwriting⁵⁹. For them, the act of writing is literally moving language from one place to another, boldly proclaiming that *context is the new content*.⁶⁰

Goldsmith imagines a brave new world wherein unoriginal genius is a recognized form (that itself is a term lifted from Marjorie Perloff's essay of the same name), where the concepts and methods of Duchamp's readymades or Sherrie Levine's *After Walker Evans* series are adopted by authors as well as visual artists. One of those "younger writers" Goldsmith is talking about could very well be David Mitchell.

Mitchell embraces the contemporary, post-modern idea of recontextualizing or rewriting existing works. Mitchell, like Lethem and Goldsmith, is not shy about the fact that not all of his ideas are original, saying he goes "shoplifting" in other author's works (asked whether he reads contemporary literature in an interview with *The Morning News*, he said he'll read new works and "one in 20, one in 30, I'll turn the pages and have the

⁵⁹ The term patchwriting, which I will use elsewhere, seems to have been coined by Rebecca Moore Howard in a 1993 essay entitled "A Plagiarism Pentimento." Moore wanted to be able to describe a process that was similar to, yet different (and more positive) than plagiarisms, and she defines patchwriting in that essay as "copying from a source text and then deleting some words, altering grammatical structures, or plugging in one-for-one synonym substitutes."

⁶⁰ Goldsmith 3, italics in original

urge to shoplift”⁶¹) The examples throughout his novels are myriad, and create yet another network of connections—this time to other novels and other authors who populate the wider world in which Mitchell’s characters swim. Mitchell’s “stealing” can be small – a character name here, an epigram there. These intertextual references, on their own, may not mark anything grand, but taken in context with the larger allusions and references, they add up to more than the sum of their parts.

For instance, in *Cloud Atlas*, Robert Frobisher signs his final letter before he suicides “*sunt lacrimae rerum. R.F.*” (CA 490). Neither Frobisher or Mitchell attribute (or even translate) this line, which was first written by Virgil in the *Aeneid* where it read “*sunt lacrimae rerum et mentem mortalia tangunt.*”⁶² The translation of this line out of the original Latin has been hotly contested by classicists, but it lies somewhere between “‘Here too is sorrow for men’s fortunes’—Conway” and “‘they can weep at human tragedy; the world has tears as a constituent part of it’—Knight.”⁶³ Whatever the translation, it is a poignant and fitting set of last words for Frobisher, connecting him to the much larger scope and tradition of classical epic and tragedy. But for someone well versed in contemporary literature, it may point to another story of a man living in someone else’s home and lacking direction in life (though for very different reasons). “*Sunt lacrimae rerum*” also appears in J.M. Coetzee’s Booker-winning novel *Disgrace* (1999), whose protagonist David Lurie gives this phrase to the character of Lord Byron in an opera he is writing. Byron, of course, was an artistic genius who wandered around

⁶¹ <http://www.themorningnews.org/article/david-mitchell-redux>

⁶² Wharton 259

⁶³ Wharton 261

Europe, took lovers of both sexes, and died young—just like Robert Frobisher. Another example from *Cloud Atlas* comes from the story that follows Frobisher's. "Half-Lives: the First Luisa Rey mystery" features, as its protagonist, young journalist Luisa Rey. The name "Luisa Rey" is undoubtedly an homage to Thornton Wilder's novel *The Bridge at San Luis Rey*. Despite the fact that *Ghostwritten* (often seen as a trial run or rough draft for *Cloud Atlas*, and the novel in which Luisa Rey first appears, albeit briefly) begins with an (attributed) epigram from the same novel, or the fact that a bridge plays a major role in "Half-Lives", or the similarities between the two novels themselves (like *Cloud Atlas*, *The Bridge at San Luis Rey* is told through a series of interconnected stories and seeks to draw a cosmic connection between its disparate characters and their fates), neither the novel nor Wilder are ever mentioned in the pages of *Cloud Atlas*.

It is not just lines or character names that seem to be lifted from existing literature. In fact, the majority of *Cloud Atlas*' sections seem to owe debts to other novels and writers. Multiple critics have pointed out the similarities in plot and style between "The Pacific Journals of Adam Ewing" and Melville's *Benito Cereno*. Mitchell claims that this was not a conscious decision, though he concedes "it is a strong echo."⁶⁴ If the connection between Frobisher and Lord Byron seems tenuous, another similarity presents itself in a young man, rebuffed by a woman who is engaged to another man, composing one last letter to his friend (who is never seen, but is present as the recipient of the letters that made up the entire story) before killing himself, much like Werther does in Goethe's *Sorrows of Young Werther*. A more egregious example of strong cribbing can be found in the middle section, "Sloosha's Crossin and Ev'rythin After". What seems like an invented pidgin dialogue is actually lifted almost whole cloth from Russell Hoban's post-

⁶⁴ Paris Review

apocalyptic novel from 1980, *Riddley Walker*. Zachry of “Sloosha’s Crossin’” tells the story in first person, starting with when he was quite young and interspersing his own tale with other oral tales. Both Riddley and Zachry go on a quest or journey, and both stumble upon remnants of technology from the pre-apocalyptic world. But the most striking similarity (or the most conspicuous form of Mitchell’s shoplifting) is in the language and dialect both writers use to tell their respective stories. Consider the opening paragraph of *Riddley Walker*:

On my naming day when I come 12 I gone front spear and kilt a wyld boar he parbly ben the las wyld pig on the Bundel Downs any how there hadn’t ben none for a long time befor him nor I aint looking to see none agen. He dint make the groun shake nor nothing like that when he come on to my spear he wernt all that big plus he lookit poorly. He done the reqwyrnt he ternt and stood and clatter his teef and made his rush and there we wer then. Him on 1 end of the spear kicking his life out and me on the other end watching him dy. I said, ‘Your tern now my tern later.’ The other spears gone in then and he wer dead and the steam coming up off him in the rain and we all yelt, “Offert!”⁶⁵

And the first lines of Mitchell’s “Sloosha’s Crossing”:

Old Georgie’s path an’ mine crossed more times’n I’m comfy mem’ryin’, an’ after I’m died, no sayin/ what that fangy devil won’t try an’ do to me...so gimme some mutton an’ I’ll tell you ‘bout our first meetin’. A fat jooesome slice, nay, none o’your burnt wafery off’rin’. (CA 249)

While not identical, they do bear striking similarities, especially coming out of similar characters mouths in similar settings and situations. Mitchell does add an apostrophe to the ends of contracted words that Hoban chooses to leave out, but both drop vowels and final consonant’s almost indiscriminately (Hoban’s drops the “d” in “groun” and the final “e” in “wer” but not the “g” in “nothing” or “watching” or the “a” in “dead”. Mitchell drops the “g”’s in “meetin’” and “off’rin’s”, the “d” in “an’” and contracts remembering to “mem’ryin’” but keeps the “e” in “some” and the “d” in “crossed”) and both use

⁶⁵ Hoban 1

strange phonetic spellings that suggest the transcribing of a monologue given by someone with a speech impediment (Hoban's "teef", "ternt" and "yelt"; Mitchell's "jooce").

Mitchell, again, is not shy about his appropriation. Quoted in an article written to celebrate Hoban's birthday, Mitchell says of the language he "invented" for his narrator: "I wanted his narrative to use period speech ... Zachry's voice is less hard-core and more Pacific than Riddleyspeak [sic], but Mr. Hoban's singular, visionary, ingenious, uncompromising, glorious angelic and demonic novel sat on my shelf."⁶⁶ This time he stops short of actually calling it theft (or "shoplifting"), but certainly it is not hard to read between the lines to see *Riddley Walker* as one of those "one in 20, or one in 30" he can't resist stealing from.

But back to Goldsmith. Like many of today's critics, he is not just a thinker, but a teacher as well, and he uses his classroom to put his theories into practice. In *Uncreative Writing*, he devotes a chapter to "Uncreative Writing in the Classroom," discussing his experiences teaching a class of the same name. The class, which he began offering in 2004 was given this course description:

It's clear that long-cherished notions of creativity are under attack, eroded by file-sharing, media culture, widespread sampling, and digital replication. How does writing respond to this new environment? This workshop will rise to that challenge by employing strategies of appropriation, replication, plagiarism, piracy, sampling, plundering, as compositional methods [sic]. Along the way, we'll trace the rich history of forgery, frauds, hoaxes, avatars, and impersonations spanning the arts, with a particular emphasis on how they employ language. We'll see how the modernist notions of chance, procedure, repetition, and the aesthetics of boredom dovetail with popular culture to usurp conventional notions of time, place, and identity, all as expressed linguistically.⁶⁷

Over the course of the class, Goldsmith and his students participated in more traditional

⁶⁶ "The Book of Revelations", David Mitchell, *The Guardian*.

⁶⁷ Goldsmith 201

“uncreative writing” projects (to the extent that such a thing exists), including retyping five pages of preexisting text word for word, or transcribing an episode of *Project Runway*. They also looked at the vast amount of appropriation and theft that goes into internet culture, from visual memes to the redubbing of Hitler’s breakdown in *Downfall*. Meanwhile, half a world away David Mitchell was releasing one of the most critically acclaimed books of the decade in *Cloud Atlas*. But Mitchell’s path seems to run right through Goldsmith, or at least through some of Goldsmith’s theories. I have written at length already about some of the small-scale appropriation and “shoplifting” that Mitchell engages in throughout his work. But all of that pales in comparison to his emulation (or, as you wish, theft, appropriation, sampling, mashing-up) of his literary idol, Haruki Murakami.

At the beginning of his career, Mitchell moved from the UK to Japan, and he admits that Murakami was a huge influence on his work. In an interview with the *Paris Review* Mitchell says,

I had a crush on Murakami in those days—specifically on *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle*. I was living in Japan, somewhat alienated, and not sure where the page ended and the world around me started, and in that rather porous state, I was overly impressionable. I hope there’s enough of me in the book to ensure that it’s more than just an homage or an imitation of Murakami—but I’m not the best person to make that judgment.⁶⁸

Mitchell is responding to a question about his second novel, *Number9Dream*, and that novel, with its Japanese protagonist caught up in a plot much more complicated than he can fathom, certainly owes a deep debt to Murakami and *Wind-Up Bird Chronicle*. But it goes beyond that, both in that novel, and in the whole of Mitchell’s work. When viewed

⁶⁸ *Paris Review* 204

in concert with Mitchell's stated views on shoplifting, and how savvy Mitchell is at riding the same cultural and technological waves that Goldsmith is tapped in to, it is possible to see Mitchell's Murakami-derived texts as more than mere fanboy homage. Consider the second section of *Ghostwritten*, named only "Tokyo." Mitchell is still building up the momentum that will eventually take over the story at this point, and "Tokyo" mostly serves as a table-setting section. It is revealed that the mysterious Quasar, from the first section, made his desperate phone call not to a clandestine operative but to a random record shop staffed by a teenage boy named Saturo and later, Saturo and his girlfriend will be spotted (and fantasized about) by Neal Brose, protagonist of the third section, "Hong Kong." Saturo and the other characters in "Tokyo" seem to be merely points of reference for the larger story -- like small stops in between major transit stations, they are necessary to establish the connections that are so important to the overall picture, but not much happens besides that. But what "Tokyo" really represents, I think, is what Goldsmith refers to as "patchwriting." Mitchell is trying his hand at writing a chapter in a novel by Haruki Murakami. Standing alone in a novel that would generate great acclaim (A.S. Byatt blurbed *Ghostwritten* as "The best first novel I've ever read") is an MFA emulation exercise writ large. "Tokyo" follows a young man, an aimless orphan who lives above and works at a jazz record store. He has two friends: a relentless womanizer and another outcast, as well as an older and somewhat shady benefactor/surrogate mother. He smokes a lot and thinks almost exclusively about jazz, vinyl records, and the weather. He is then shocked out of this stupor by a chance meeting with a girl who is "completely, completely different" (*GW* 41). He thinks he'll never see her again, but he does, and, defying odds and circumstance, they turn out to be made for

each other. Jazz, record stores, young aimless male protagonists, and especially mysterious girls who enter in and out of a man's world and reshape his life are all hallmarks of Murakami's novels, especially his early ones.⁶⁹ The "moon grey cat" from *Thousand* and *Black Swan Green* has already been mentioned, and it should be noted those are Mitchell's only two novels to come out after the publication of Murakami's *Kafka On the Shore*, which, like *Wind-Up Bird Chronicle* before it, has a number of mysterious cats that help move the plot forward. But it is *Number9Dream*, Mitchell's only novel set exclusively in modern-day Japan, that most recalls his mentor.

There are myriad ways in which *Number9Dream* resembles a Murakami novel. Many of the lifts seem so obvious upon consideration that Mitchell may have been making such moves deliberately. For example: in one of Murakami's earliest novels, *Wild Sheep Chase*, the unnamed main character begins a relationship with an unnamed girl because he is obsessed with one supernaturally perfect part of her body: her ears. "Those ears had me in their thrall. They were the dream image of an ear. The quintessence, the paragon of ears ... they were like some rest whirlpool of fate sucking me in."⁷⁰ There are pages and pages devoted to her ears—what they look like, their strange power, her ability to turn that power off and on, etc. At one point, even she admits the synecdoche Murakami is employing, telling the narrator "I am my ears, my

⁶⁹ In 2012, the *New York Times* published a graphic entitled "Haruki Murakami Bingo" to coincide with the release of Murakami's *1Q84*. The piece, drawn by cartoonist Grant Snider, remediates a traditional Bingo board, only instead of numbers, the squares were commonly occurring plot points, characters, or motifs in Murakami novels. Examples included "Feeling of Being Followed", "Something Vanishing", "Mysterious Woman", and "Speaking to Cats". Though tongue-in-cheek, the Bingo board captured well Murakami's particular style and penchant for certain events. But the board could double as a checklist for Mitchell's cribbing from his idol, as over half of the squares apply to Mitchell as well, such as "Unexpected Phone Call" or "Old Jazz Record" (*GW*, "Tokyo"), "Historical Flashback" (*N9D*'s WWII journal section), "Train Station" ("*GW*" "Underground" and *N9D*), and of course, "Cats."

⁷⁰ Murakami 34

ears are me.”⁷¹ In *Number9Dream*, Eiji Miyake, sitting alone in the Jupiter Cafe also picks his object of affection based on the transcendence of one particular body part: not ears this time, but neck. “Waitress Three is turned away right now, but her hair is up and I can see she has the most perfect neck on Earth. I mean it. A syndicate of love poets could not describe how smooth and curved this neck is” (*N9D* 4). And later: “The waitress with the living, wise, moonlit, viola neck” (*N9D* 7). Later, Eiji will begin to refer to her as simply “The waitress with the perfect neck” (*N9D* 122, 126, 127 et al), even after he learns her name. Considering that *Wild Sheep Chase* also introduces the characters of “Sheep Man” and “the Rat”, who seem to have clear echoes *Number9Dream*’s “Goatwriter” and “ScabRat”, the shared synecdoche does not seem coincidental, and is deployed enough that it rises above the level of simple homage. The repurposing of Murakami’s favorite tropes doesn’t end there. *Number9Dream* takes its title from the John Lennon song “#9 Dream”. John Lennon is mentioned multiple times throughout *Number9Dream*; he, and the Beatles, are Eiji Miyake’s favorite music artist. Eiji has a dream towards the end of the novel that he meets John Lennon in New York, and asks him to explain the meaning of the song “#9 Dream”, which is Eiji’s favorite. Lennon says “The meaning of the ninth dream begins after all other meanings are dead and gone,” which seems to go some way towards explaining the meaning of the blank page that is Chapter Nine, after the earthquake which may have wiped out Eiji’s new life in Tokyo. But more importantly, John Lennon also tells Eiji Miyake “‘#9 Dream’ is a son of ‘Norwegian Wood’” (*N9D* 379). While both songs were written by John Lennon, there doesn’t seem to be much to connect them, lyrically or musically. But “Norwegian

⁷¹ Murakami 31

Wood” is significant in another sense: it is the title of a Haruki Murakami novel. So while outside of Eiji Miyake’s dreams there might not be any sense to the idea that one song is “the son” of the other (or is related in any way), in reality, Mitchell seems to be acknowledging the breadth of his shoplifting from Murakami. He may not be rewriting or quoting Murakami directly, but *Number9Dream* (the novel) is “a son” of *Norwegian Wood* (the novel). As a final note on the connection of the two books, while Wikipedia certainly is not the authoritative source on any subject, there is at least one point of interest in the entry on *Number9Dream*. While nowhere in the plot or analysis is the link between the two authors mentioned, the “See Also” section contains three links: One to the entry on “#9 Dream” (the song), one to an entry about a movie that adapts part of the novel, and one to Haruki Murakami.

Through five novels, David Mitchell has shown a commitment to emulating our contemporary world. Though his works span centuries and continents in terms of setting, they all exhibit hallmarks of our current human condition without becoming anachronistic. Mitchell practices remediating and patchwriting, openly acknowledging his tendency to “shoplift” whole cloth from sources as varied as Virgil, Murakami, and modern cinema. He is keenly aware of the precarious position the printed word finds itself in today, and remediates the struggle between analog and digital in his narratives, while finding time to use his narratives to recreate non-print media from sketching to radio to cinema to campfire stories. Most importantly, Mitchell has created one immense, global, interconnected universe for his characters to live in. Though his five novels do not share a common narrative and vary widely in form, setting, and content, they all clearly take place in the same timeline on the same version of planet Earth.

Characters from one novel show up years later and miles away in another novel, with no explanation or comment about how they got from point A to point B. A minor character in Japan in 1799 is revealed to be the distant ancestor of a protagonist whose story is set in Ireland in the 1980's, and who is featured in a novel that was written 11 years prior. These connections create the impression that each of Mitchell's characters is one node in a great network, each contributing his or her small presence to something much greater than the sum of its parts. And Mitchell has shown that just because a character's story in one novel ends, that does not mean that character's story is complete—any and all characters are fair game to show up as younger, older, or alternate versions of themselves in a new novel. These connections, coincidences, and network threads are his biggest remediation of all, as the web he has woven through his body of work recalls the way each of us is a node in our socio-digital network today. Via Facebook, LinkedIn, Ancestry.com, and countless other social networking sites and Internet databases, our narratives are linked to those around us, whether they live next door or on the other side of the world. We all contribute our narratives to a larger whole, and an outsider can drop in and out of our narratives just as Mitchell drops in and out of his characters'. As Courtney Hopf puts it, "Mitchell's novels engage with contemporary culture by challenging our ideas about how readers can interact with a text—they *depict* that challenge in their plot...but they also simultaneously encourage the reader to *experience* these slippery conceptions of narrative, identity, and subjectivity."⁷² Mitchell's newest novel will be released less than a week from the time of this writing, four years after his previous one and 15 years after *Ghostwritten*. Surely it too will embrace our current

⁷² Courtney Hopf, "The Stories We Tell: Discursive Identity Through Narrative Form in *Cloud Atlas*," 112.

condition, and present a contemporary world in the pages of a medium that is not quite dead yet.

Works Cited

Mitchell Citation Key

GW: Ghostwritten

N9D: Number 9 Dream

CA: Cloud Atlas

BSG: Black Swan Green

TA: The Thousand Autumns of Jacob De Zoet

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