

FRACTIONAL PREFIGURATIONS:  
SCIENCE FICTION, UTOPIA, AND NARRATIVE FORM

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## ABSTRACT

The literary utopia is often accused of being an outmoded genre, a graveyard for failed social movements. However, utopian literature is a surprisingly resilient genre, evolving from the static, descriptive anatomies of the Renaissance utopias to the novelized utopian romances of the late nineteenth century and the self-reflexive critical utopias of the 1970s. The literary utopia adapts to the needs of the moment: what form(s) best represent the fears and desires of our current historical period?

In this dissertation I perform a close reading of three exemplary texts: John Brunner's *Stand on Zanzibar* (1968), Ursula K. Le Guin's *Always Coming Home* (1985), and David Mitchell's *Cloud Atlas* (2004). While I address topics specific to each text, my main focus is on the texts' depictions of utopia and their spatialized narrative forms. In *Stand on Zanzibar* Brunner locates the utopian impulse in three registers—the political/bureaucratic, the technical/scientific, and the human(e)—and explores how their interplay constitutes the utopian space. In *Always Coming Home* Le Guin renovates the classical literary utopia, problematizing its uncritical advocacy of the “Judaean-Christian-Rationalist-West” but preserving much of the older utopia's form. In *Cloud Atlas* the networked narrative structure reflects and enables the heterogeneous, non-hierarchical, and processual utopian communities depicted in the novel.

In these science fictional works the spatialized techniques of juxtaposition, discontinuity, and collage—commonly associated with a loss of historical depth and difference—are used to create utopian spaces founded on contingency and human choice. I contend that science fiction is a historical genre, one that is invested in representing societies as contingent historical totalities. Science fiction's generic tendencies modify the context that a spatialized narrative form functions in, and in changing the context changes its effects. By utilizing a spatialized narrative form to embody a contingent practice, Brunner, Le Guin, and Mitchell cast the future—and the present—as historical, as something that can be acted upon and changed: they have provided us with strategies for envisioning better futures and, potentially, for mobilizing our visions of the future for positive change in the present.

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## DEDICATION

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

|  |     |
|--|-----|
| PERMISSION TO USE  | i   |
| ABSTRACT   | ii  |
| ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS   | iii |
| DEDICATION   | iv  |
| TABLE OF CONTENTS  | v   |
| LIST OF FIGURES  | vii |
| 1. INTRODUCTION  | 1   |
| 1.1 Preface  | 2   |
| 1.2 Definitions  | 3   |
| 1.3 SF and Narrative Form  | 6   |
| 1.4 SF and Utopia  | 9   |
| 1.5 SF and History   | 15  |
| 2. “A GALAXY FOR INSIGHT”: JOHN BRUNNER’S <i>STAND ON ZANZIBAR</i>   | 17  |
| 2.1 “An Oldist Attack on the Newist Genre”: Locating <i>Stand on Zanzibar</i> within the SF Tradition        | 17  |
| 2.2 “This Non-Novel was Brought to You By...”: <i>Zanzibar</i> ’s Form and Influences                        | 20  |
| 2.3 Estrangement and Recognition in <i>Stand on Zanzibar</i>   | 26  |
| 2.4 “It’s a Thought and Feeling and Your Own Heart’s Blood”: The Utopian Impulse in <i>Stand on Zanzibar</i> | 34  |
| 2.5 Man as Machine, Machine as Man   | 42  |
| 2.6 Conclusion: A Model for Knowing  | 46  |
| 3. “TOWARDS AN ARCHAEOLOGY OF THE FUTURE”: URSULA K. LE GUIN’S <i>ALWAYS COMING HOME</i>                     | 49  |
| 3.1 Background: Situating <i>Always Coming Home</i> within Le Guin’s SF                                      | 49  |
| 3.2 <i>Always Coming Home</i> as Postmodern Narrative  | 51  |
| 3.3 History, Technology, and Utopia  | 60  |
| 3.4 Re-envisioning Utopia: Going Backward, Looking Forward   | 63  |
| 3.5 Post-Modern Ethnographies and Narrative Registers  | 68  |
| 3.6 Conclusion: “Satisfactions Which the Intellect Alone Cannot Provide”                                     | 78  |
| 4. “MATRYOSHKA DOLL VARIATIONS”: DAVID MITCHELL’S <i>CLOUD ATLAS</i>   | 81  |
| 4.1 Background: <i>Cloud Atlas</i> ’s Postmodern Pyrotechnics  | 81  |
| 4.2 A Question of Genre  | 84  |
| 4.3 Narrative Structure, History, and Causality in <i>Cloud Atlas</i>  | 85  |
| 4.4 The Role of Music in <i>Cloud Atlas</i>  | 96  |

|     |   |     |
|-----|---|-----|
| 4.5 | “Quivering Like Utopia in a Noon Mirage”: Counterfeit Utopias and the Commodification of Utopian Desire | 100 |
| 4.6 | Archetypes and Icons: Life Stories, Narrative Frames, and the Problem of Authenticity                   | 107 |
| 4.7 | “He Who Pays the Historian Calls the Tune”: Agency, History, and Narrative in <i>Cloud Atlas</i>        | 113 |
| 5.  | CONCLUSION  | 118 |
| 6.  | WORKS CITED   | 126 |





## 1. INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 Preface

One of the key pleasures of science fiction (SF) is that it allows us to imagine the future, and to imagine it as different from the present (or in the case of parallel worlds and alternate histories, to imagine the present and/or past differently). Indeed, having assimilated the literary genre of utopia<sup>1</sup>, SF is the main fictional source for depictions not just of a different future but of a different society: if better than the author's society, it is called a eutopia (also commonly referred to as a utopia); if worse, a dystopia. By suggesting that the future and future societies could be different from our own—by suggesting that the current state of multinational capitalism is neither inevitable, nor the “end of history”—SF achieves two things. First, by imagining our present as past, SF historicizes the present: as Carl Freedman argues in *Critical Theory and Science Fiction* (2000), “stylistically and otherwise, science fiction is of all genres the most devoted to historical concreteness: for, after all, the science-fictional world is not only one different in time or place from our own, but one whose chief interest is precisely the difference that such difference makes, and, in addition, one whose difference is nonetheless concretized within a cognitive continuum with the actual” (43). SF's defining characteristic of cognitive estrangement—its ability to create fictional worlds that differ from but are also connected to our own world in determinate ways—makes it a historical genre. Second, by suggesting that the future could be different, SF suggests that history is contingent. Contingency, as Elana Gomel notes in *Postmodern Science Fiction and Temporal Imagination* (2010), “does not deny causality but it does deny a strict one-to-one correspondence between cause and effect, positing instead a probabilistic connection, in which any event may have multiple outcomes with different degrees of probability” (Gomel 83-84). Contingency is temporal and narrative-based; it presents history as mutable; it emphasizes human action and agency.

However, while much discussion has been devoted to defining the generic boundaries and characteristic traits of SF, and while the subject of contingency has been well-covered outside of and, increasingly, within SF criticism, there has been little discussion of the narrative forms used to depict contingent, precarious, and open-ended futures. SF authors are creating alternate societies founded on contingency, human choice, and change while still acknowledging the overdetermined social forces that circumscribe human actions; they are asking questions such as “which narrative form(s) can best depict this?” After all, as Gary Saul Morson reminds us in “Contingency and Freedom, Prosaics and Process,” the traditional “well-structured novel” is not particularly conducive to the expression of the contingent: in the well-structured novel, characters perform actions that are caused not only by past and present events, but also by future ones, to which they are designed to lead; for in a well-made work,

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<sup>1</sup> Refer to pp. 19-20 for further discussion.

all actions must contribute to the harmony of the whole. If they do not, the work will be judged to have structural flaws. The poet makes of his material the best of all possible works, or he fails at his task. We read such works with this peculiar kind of causality in mind. Readers guess at what characters will do on the basis not only of what has happened to them but also of what would contribute to a satisfying work when completed. We rule out certain sequences because they would damage the work or would not contribute to a satisfying whole. Different genres define various kinds of wholes, so that, at times, it seems that genre is destiny. Because present events are shaped by later ones, foreshadowing is possible, and foreshadowing necessarily involves backward causation. Characters may imagine that multiple futures are possible, but the very fact that they are part of a larger whole—a whole shaped from “outside,” as Bakhtin would say—reveals that their future is as certain as their past. (679-80)

In this dissertation, I propose to look at three different SF texts—John Brunner’s *Stand on Zanzibar* (1968), Ursula K. Le Guin’s *Always Coming Home* (1985), and David Mitchell’s *Cloud Atlas* (2004)<sup>2</sup>—and explore how these authors use spatialized narrative forms in their depictions of contingent, open-ended utopias. While I believe that these are exemplary texts, I do not claim that they are representative of SF as a whole. Rather, the successes—and the failures—of these authors’ attempts to envision and narrate contingent open-ended utopian spaces in the face of consumerist cultures, multinational corporations, and other impersonal overdetermined social forces, combined with the authors’ simultaneous insistence on the importance of individual agency and their acknowledgement that individual identity and agency are not the unified, stable concepts that we once thought they were, provide us with strategies for envisioning different, better futures and, potentially, for mobilizing our visions of the future for positive change in the present.

## 1.2 Definitions

What is SF? Most people, I suspect, if asked to define the genre would mention something about the future and high-tech gadgets; others might talk about aliens and interstellar travel; and some people might bring in cyborgs and cyberspace—and they would all be right. However, if we want a more comprehensive account, we had best turn to Darko Suvin’s oft-quoted definition of SF as “*a literary genre whose necessary and sufficient conditions are the presence and interaction of estrangement and cognition, and whose main formal device is an imaginative framework alternative to the author’s empirical environment*” (*Metamorphoses* 7-8; original emphasis). Or, in slightly different terms, “*SF is distinguished by the narrative dominance or hegemony of a fictional ‘novum’ (novelty, innovation) validated by cognitive logic*” (63; original emphasis). As these definitions suggest, Suvin’s understanding of SF is based on the interaction of three key elements: the novum, estrangement, and cognition.

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<sup>2</sup> The alert reader will protest that while certain individual novellas within *Cloud Atlas* are certainly SF, the novel as a whole is not: I address this concern at the beginning of chapter 4.

## The Novum

Suvin's concept of the novum is adapted from Ernst Bloch's use of the term in *Das Prinzip Hoffnung* (1938-47) and *Experimentum Mundi* (1975). As Istvan Csicsery-Ronay Jr. explains, Bloch's novum is a rather diffuse force, "a moment of newness in lived history that refreshes human collective consciousness, awakening it from the trancelike sense of history as fated and empty, into awareness that it can be changed" (*Seven Beauties* 47). Suvin's definition is more limited in scope: for Suvin the novum is a literary device, "a totalizing phenomenon or relationship deviating from the author's and implied reader's norm of reality" (*Metamorphoses* 64). As its name suggests, the novum is something new or novel. The novum can take the form of an object, character, relationship, setting, or event, but it must have a hegemonic presence in the SF narrative: "its novelty is 'totalizing' in the sense that it entails a change of the whole universe of the tale, or at least of crucially important aspects thereof (and that it is therefore a means by which the whole tale can be analytically grasped)" (64). An obvious example of a novum would be the titular object in H. G. Wells's *The Time Machine* (1895). The novum also contributes to SF's historicity: after all, something can only be genuinely new and expressed as such in a specific historical moment. Suvin elaborates on the historicity of the novum, stating that

The new is always a *historical* category since it is always determined by historical forces which both bring it about in social practice (including art) and make for new semantic meanings that crystallize the novum in human consciousnesses. [...] An analysis of SF is necessarily faced with the question of why and how was the newness recognizable as newness at the moment it appeared, what ways of understanding, horizons, and interests were implicit in the novum and required for it. (*Metamorphoses* 80; original emphasis)

In other words, the SF text is particularly tied to its historical moment of production—the novum of the SF text needs to be considered in the context of its time, as does our evaluation of the scientific knowledge within the text.

## Estrangement

In his well-known essay "Art as Technique," Viktor Shklovsky introduced the concept of *ostranenie* (commonly translated as "defamiliarization" or "the estrangement device"). According to Shklovsky, "The purpose of art is to impart the sensation of things as they are perceived and not as they are known. The technique of art is to make objects 'unfamiliar,' to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception because the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself and must be prolonged" (12). For Shklovsky, poetic or literary language differs from everyday speech because unlike ordinary speech—which is utilitarian, economical, and transparent—literary language is deliberately difficult in order to force the reader to slow down and look at familiar objects in a new light.

In turn, Shklovsky's concept of *ostranenie* influenced Bertolt Brecht's development of *Verfremdungseffekt* ("the alienation effect" or "the estrangement effect"). In developing what he termed an "epic theatre"—didactic, with an emphasis on social change, and appealing not to the

audience's emotion but to their intellect—Brecht developed various dramatic techniques in order to ensure “that the audience was hindered from simply identifying itself with the characters in the play. Acceptance or rejection of their actions and utterances was meant to take place on a conscious plane, instead of, as hitherto, in the audience's subconscious” (“Alienation Effect in Chinese Acting” 94). As he elaborates in “Epic Theatre,” “Pleasure or Instruction,” and “Alienation Effect,” Brecht sought to encourage critical detachment in his audiences, rather than their passive submission to realistic illusion. He strove to remind the audience of the performance's artificial nature and in doing so, to stimulate a rational view of history as a changeable human creation, not a fatalistic destiny.

Suvin draws on both Shklovsky and Brecht to inform his understanding of estrangement: Estrangement (Shklovsky's formal *ostranenie* issuing into Brecht's political epistemic of *Verfremdung*) is a cognitive strategy of perception-cum-evaluation based on radical critical desire. It comports multiple possibilities of anamorphosis and eversion of salient aspects in the author's world, which has as its purpose the recognition that the reader truly lives in a world of topsy-turvy values. (“Tractate” 383)

However, Suvin's use of estrangement deviates from Shklovsky's and Brecht's definitions in two important respects. First, in Suvin's usage, estrangement in SF is generally found at the level of concept and form rather than at the level of poetics, where Shklovsky situates it: Shklovsky focuses on the language used to describe objects or events, whereas Suvin prefers to focus on structural elements, such as the novum, which render an entire work (or genre) estranged.<sup>3</sup> Second, in Suvin's work the concept of estrangement is translated from Brecht's primarily realistic frame of deployment to the non-mimetic sphere of SF: SF's estrangement comes from the fundamental difference between the fictional world and our own.

### Cognition

While the novum and estrangement are necessary components of SF, by themselves they are unable to differentiate SF from other non-mimetic literature such as fantasy or myth. In order for a text to qualify as a work of SF, the novum and sense of estrangement must be “validated by cognitive logic” (Suvin, *Metamorphoses* 63). In Suvin's usage, cognition is linked to methodical doubt and has strong ties to the scientific method: he equates it to “totalizing, scientific rigor” (6). The cognitive approach is a dynamic one: it views “the norms of any age, including emphatically its own, as unique, changeable” (7); it encourages a critical methodology, “combining a belief in the potentialities of reason with methodical doubt in the most significant cases” (10). Ideally, the cognitive aspect of SF encourages the reader to question the premises of the imaginary world, and guards against the unquestioning acceptance of the status quo. The cognitive approach embodied in all “valid SF” is what differentiates SF from the predetermined world of myth and from the flights of fancy that characterize the fairy tale or fantasy.

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<sup>3</sup> Estrangement does occur at the level of language: SF's fondness for neologisms is an obvious example.

However, while Suvin's definition of SF as a fictional narrative defined by the interplay between the novum, estrangement, and cognition is the most quoted definition of the genre, it is not without its weaknesses. The theoretical, abstract, and often prescriptive nature of Suvin's definition, with its top-down construction of the genre and privileging of a formal framework, not only gives short shrift to what Csicsery-Ronay Jr. terms "ideologically and aesthetically compromised" SF ("Marxist" 122) but also makes his definition less effective in dealing with hybrid works that push SF's boundaries. What is more, the subgenre of alternate history reveals a strange lacuna in Suvin's thought, as there is little indication of what alternate history's relationship to SF might be. While Suvin notes that SF creates "an *alternate reality*, one that possesses a *different historical time* corresponding to different human relationships and sociocultural norms actualized by the narration" (*Metamorphosis* 71; original emphasis)—which could conceivably include the past, present, and future as locations for this alternate reality—his analysis is effectively limited to present- and future-oriented fictions. Finally, some critics challenge estrangement's prominent position in Suvin's definition, arguing that the familiarization of the strange is as essential to SF as estrangement: John Clute, for example, asserts that SF "seeks to create the exact opposite of estrangement ... [making] the incredible seem plausible and familiar" (qtd. in James, *Science Fiction* 111). Clute raises a valid point, but as Edward James suggests in *Science Fiction in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century* (1994), framing familiarization and estrangement as an either/or process may be missing the larger issue: "'Making the incredible seem plausible and familiar' is in fact a method of estrangement: the incredible becomes familiar, and in the process the ways and customs of our own world begin to seem strange" (111-112). Estrangement, as it functions in SF, is about the *process* of seeing things anew: both making the familiar strange and making the strange familiar further this aim.

In the end though, it is important to consider the context in which Suvin's definition of SF arose. While there were some attempts to formulate a sustained and systematic definition of SF—Kingsley Amis's work, for example<sup>4</sup>—*Metamorphoses of Science Fiction* (1979) was published at a time when definitions of SF tended towards the descriptive, limiting themselves to accounts of already existing works and privileging thematic criteria such as "aliens" or "marvellous inventions" even when the connections linking these different groupings together were not always clear.<sup>5</sup> Although Suvin's definition, with its emphasis on "valid SF," may strike some as being overly prescriptive and contemptuously dismissing out of hand many works that are commonly accepted as SF, it has the recommendation of addressing both the formal and thematic components of SF, establishing clear generic boundaries, and providing a common critical lexicon with which to discuss its object. Indeed, our very ability to recognize hybrid and genre-blurring SF novels is predicated on the (perhaps too prescriptive) boundaries that Suvin

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<sup>4</sup> Amis's *New Maps of Hell: A Survey of Science Fiction* (1960) is perhaps the most influential of the early critical works on SF: in it, Amis defines SF as "that class of prose narrative treating of a situation that could not arise in the world we know, but which is hypothesized on the basis of some innovation in science or technology, pseudo-science or pseudo-technology, whether human or extra-terrestrial in origin" (18) and highlights the primacy of the "idea as hero" in SF, as well as emphasizing SF's privileged position for providing social critique (63).

<sup>5</sup> For example, while J. O. Bailey's *Pilgrims Through Space and Time* (1947) was a notable early critical work on SF, and Bailey should be commended for his pathbreaking consideration of the genre, his book is largely limited to cataloguing existing SF works around rather nebulous thematic centres.

established. For these reasons, I have decided to use Suvin's definition of SF as outlined in *Metamorphoses* while keeping its limitations in mind.

### 1.3 SF and Narrative Form

Despite the presence of books such as Robert Scholes's *Structural Fabulation* (1975), Suvin's *Metamorphoses*, and Fredric Jameson's *Archaeologies of the Future* (2005), or the occasional essay from Rafail Nudelman or Stanislaw Lem, the narrative form of SF remains relatively unexplored. Perhaps this has something to do with the perception that, as Farah Mendlesohn phrases it, "sf is quite happy to extract its plot structures from any available genre, and thus each individual book could potentially be identified with one of these genres rather than with sf" (3). Indeed, if the editor of an anthology specifically dedicated to SF has no problem proclaiming this, it is hardly surprising that a casual reader of SF would also hold this view.

However, Mendlesohn's assertion contains a grain of truth: a considerable amount of SF was—and is—written with very little thought as to its form, although considerable ingenuity and inventiveness have been expended in the pursuit of novel SF ideas. The lack of interest in SF narrative structures is part of the lasting legacy of its pulp roots (in North America, at least), when writers cheerfully overlaid the exterior trappings of SF on the narrative frames of westerns, romances, adventure stories, and other familiar pulp narratives. Unsurprisingly, the writers' lack of interest in creating complex narrative forms has contributed towards the critics' lack of interest in discussing the narrative structures of SF. On the occasions when SF's narrative form is addressed—and these occasions are few and far between—the discussion generally revolves around the novum's impact on narrative form. For example, in *Metamorphoses* Suvin suggests that the *Bildungsroman* is uniquely suited to SF because the protagonist's growing awareness of the world around her mirrors the reader's gradual comprehension of the fictional world; similarly, Rafail Nudelman argues in "An Approach to the Structure of Le Guin's SF" that the hegemonic dominance of the novum results in certain types of narrative structures (such as the chronological connections characteristic of adventure stories and the non-causal connections that typically link together detective tales) being generically incompatible with "valid" SF (210-11). Fredric Jameson takes a more generalized approach in "Progress Versus Utopia," exploring, among other things, the limitations of SF narratives (and narrative more generally):

The merit of SF is to dramatize this contradiction [between the need for narrative closure and the limitations of narrative closure] on the level of plot itself, since the vision of future history cannot know any punctual ending of this kind, at the same time that its novelistic expression demands some such ending. Thus [...] the most obvious ways in which an SF novel can wrap its story up—as in an atomic explosion that destroys the universe, or the static image of some future totalitarian world state—are also clearly the places in which our own ideological limits are the most surely inscribed. (283)

The "atomic explosion" or "totalitarian world state" represent a failure of imagination: Jameson argues that in SF, the more general narrative need for closure is opposed by the genre's imperative to imagine a convincing, fully realized future, which necessarily resists the simplifications and conclusions necessary to bring a story to close. He suggests that SF's

inability to reconcile these two demands turns it into a vehicle for “a meditation, which, setting forth for the unknown, finds itself irrevocably mired in the all-too-familiar, and thereby becomes unexpectedly transformed into a contemplation of our own absolute limits” (289). Jameson’s critique is a largely negative one, taking consolation in the paradoxical successful failure of SF’s narrative form.

Even in cases where SF writers have deliberately employed unorthodox narrative structures in their work, critics seem reluctant to engage in any detailed analysis of narrative form. This gap in the critical discourse about SF may be partially attributed to the perception that experimental SF simply mimics the techniques established by the modernist innovators.<sup>6</sup> As Andrew M. Butler comments in “Postmodernism and Science Fiction,” because “science fiction was emerging as a genre at the same time that literary modernism was passing its high-water mark [... it] is tempting, then, to try and situate sf as the other of literature, or to assume that it follows a similar but delayed evolution to literature” (144). Thus, the notion goes, since the question of formal experimentation has already been addressed, there is no need to devote undue attention to SF’s appropriation of these techniques.

However, in order for this claim to be effective, we need to assume that these narrative devices translate seamlessly from a mimetic genre to a non-mimetic one and that the demands of cognitive estrangement and the novum exert no pull on SF’s narrative form. I argue that that this assumption is false. In “Metafantasia: The Possibilities of Science Fiction,” Stanislaw Lem highlights the incompatibility of traditional narrative structures with SF’s epic scope and emphasis on the idea as hero.<sup>7</sup> Lem directs our attention to the importance of narrative form in SF:

Clearheaded “internal” critics of SF have long been displeased with the genre for its flight from the real problems of civilization. But criticism must deal non [sic] only with the text’s relations to the external world. It must evaluate not only the structure of the things described, but also the structure of the description itself. The former generally determines the choice of themes, while the latter determines the sum total of the rules governing the treatment of the material—and these rules are not automatically defined by the chosen theme. (69)

He notes that while SF writers have exercised much ingenuity in inventing and developing the thematic components of SF, the same detail and attention have not been devoted to its narrative structures: “We consider the primary unsolved problem of SF the lack of a theoretical typology of its paradigmatic structures. Since writers of SF do not even recognize the existence of this problem, the structures they use most frequently are neither aesthetically nor epistemologically adequate for their chosen themes” (67). Lem highlights the incompatibility of the traditional realist novel’s narrative structure—with its emphasis on linear chronological plots and individual psychological development—with SF’s epic scope and emphasis on ideas. Referring to his exemplar which is a fictional literary account of a “popular scientific book published in the mid-

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<sup>6</sup> For example, see Damien Broderick’s comment that “sf convulsed belatedly into the crisis of modernism that half a century earlier had shaken mainstream high art” (62).

<sup>7</sup> This essay is a translation of the final chapter of *Fantastyka i Futurologia* (1970); the English version was published in 1981.

21<sup>st</sup> century detailing the history of cosmological views” (55), Lem states that Narrative structures of literature are incapable of synthesizing the “microscopic” elements of the cosmogonic scientists’ everyday lives with the general hypothesis of their new cosmogony. To attempt such a synthesis would lead to a fractured work, with literary fragments, on the one hand, and discursive passages summarizing the new cosmogonic views, on the other. (58)

The traditional approaches to “literature”—to the realistic novel primarily concerned with the psychological and emotional states of its characters—is unable to deal with the narrative demands of SF. Something new is needed.

Ultimately, Lem proposes a new set of narrative structures that are compatible with SF’s cognitive demands: “What is needed is an entirely new narrative structure, one that might be modeled on historiography, the biographies of scientists, or perhaps a collage of excerpts from scientific texts, press clippings, the addresses of Nobel laureates, or other facsimiles” (58). Lem is not alone in his belief that collage—with its juxtaposition of images, voices, ideas, genres, narrative forms, and discursive registers—offers a promising narrative form for SF. Jameson also comments upon collage’s compatibility with SF, although he stresses its estranging effects, noting that collage brings SF’s thematic and formal estrangement to the generic level:

There remains available to SF another organizational procedure which I will call *collage*: the bringing into precarious coexistence of elements drawn from very different sources and contexts, elements which derive for the most part from older literary models and which amount to broken fragments of the outworn older genres or of the new productions of the media (for example, comic strips). At its worst collage results in a kind of desperate pasting together of whatever lies to hand; at its best, however, it operates as a kind of foregrounding of the older generic models themselves, a kind of estrangement effect practiced on our own generic receptivity. (*Archaeologies* 263; original emphasis)

Likewise, J. G. Ballard’s formal experimentation in his “condensed novels,”—although not collage in precisely the sense that Lem and Jameson use the term—is also predicated on the recontextualization of objects in order to create new connections and meanings: as Ballard explains, “You’re getting crossovers and linkages between unexpected and previously totally unrelated things, events, elements of the narration, ideas that in themselves begin to generate new matter” (qtd. in Greenland 116).

However, the focus on the use of collage in SF, while addressing the question of SF’s form, reinforces an earlier point made about formal experimentation in SF, namely that SF merely appropriates the formal techniques ushered in by modernist authors, since collage is, after all, a distinctly modernist technique. The first thing to note, however, is that collage generally works quite differently in SF than it does in realistic literature. In mimetic literature, collage references historically existing external signifiers—it references the “real world.” This is generally not the case in SF—in SF, the reference is to internal signifiers, to the same fictional world, and contributes to the process of estrangement, unlike collage in realistic novels, which serves to tether the fictional world to the so-called “real world.” However, rather than suggest that collage is the best or the only narrative form suitable for SF, I would recommend we look at



collage to see what specific needs it fulfills in SF. SF is a hybrid genre: it retains the romance's emphasis on the individual hero and her quest but also the utopia's fascination with the description of social totalities and the natural world, in addition to the cognitive demands of and explanations required by a scientific world view. In collage, these competing discursive registers are brought together and, in the hands of a skilled artist, "begin to generate new matter" as Ballard so eloquently phrases it. While the three authors studied in this work do not all use collage—indeed, Brunner is the only one who uses it consistently—they are united by their search for a narrative form that is capable of incorporating multiple discursive registers, genres, and voices and that can begin to address the idea of human agency within an overdetermined social whole.

#### 1.4 SF and Utopia

Since its inception, SF has been a privileged genre for fiction about the future and—as imaginary future societies generally differ from the real present-day ones by being either better or worse—a privileged genre for the utopian imagination.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, the depiction of the Eloi in H. G. Wells's seminal SF text *The Time Machine* (1895) continued the novelization of the utopian genre popularized by Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backward* (1888) and William Morris's *News From Nowhere* (1890).<sup>9</sup> However, before addressing the question of SF's relationship to utopia (and vice-versa), a brief discussion of the terminology associated with the literary utopia is necessary.

Lyman Tower Sargent's brief yet comprehensive definitions offer an excellent introduction to the utopian genre and its many permutations:

**Utopianism**—social dreaming.

**Utopia**—a non-existent society described in considerable detail and normally located in time and space.

**Eutopia or positive utopia**—a non-existent society described in considerable detail and normally located in time and space that the author intended a contemporaneous reader to view as considerably better than the society in which that reader lived.

**Dystopia or negative utopia**—a non-existent society described in considerable detail and normally located in time and space that the author intended a contemporaneous reader to view as considerably worse than the society in which that reader lived.

**Utopian satire**—a non-existent society described in considerable detail and normally located in time and space that the author intended a contemporaneous reader to view as a criticism of that contemporary society.

**Anti-utopia**—a non-existent society described in considerable detail and

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<sup>8</sup> This is the position adopted by Suvin, who remarks that "For all its adventure, romance, popularization, and wondrousness, SF can finally be written only between the utopian and the anti-utopian horizons" (*Metamorphoses* 61-62). Carl Freedman echoes this view, declaring that "Science fiction as an aesthetic form is, even more than the novel of the artist, a privileged object of utopian hermeneutic" (72).

<sup>9</sup> However, in *The Time Machine* the seemingly Edenic society of the Eloi is revealed to be anything but a utopia.

normally located in time and space that the author intended a contemporaneous reader to view as a criticism of utopianism or of some particular eutopia.

**Critical utopia**—a non-existent society described in considerable detail and normally located in time and space that the author intended a contemporaneous reader to view as better than contemporary society but with difficult problems that the described society may or may not be able to solve and which takes a critical view of the utopia genre. (“Three Faces” 9; original emphasis)

**Critical dystopia**—a non-existent society described in considerable detail and normally located in time and space that the author intended a contemporaneous reader to view as worse than contemporary society but that normally includes at least one eutopian enclave or holds out hope that the dystopia can be overcome and replaced with a eutopia. (“US Eutopias in the 1980 and 1990s” 222)

Suvin’s definition, while more complex than Sargent’s, covers the same basic ground: he defines the literary utopia as “the verbal construction of a particular quasi-human community where sociopolitical institutions, norms, and individual relationships are organized according to a more perfect principle than in the author’s community, this construction being based on estrangement arising out of an alternative historical hypothesis” (*Metamorphoses* 49). However, Suvin subsequently moves beyond the content of utopia and describes its characteristic form: structurally, the literary utopia is characterized by “a rounded, *isolated locus*”; “more perfectly organized relationships [...] *articulated* in a panoramic sweep whose sum is the inner organization of the isolated locus”; “a formal *hierarchic system*”; and “an implicit or explicit *dramatic strategy* in its panoramic review conflicting with the ‘normal’ expectations of the reader” (51; original emphasis). Furthermore, Suvin emphasizes the this-worldly nature of the utopia: it is “an Other World immanent in the world of human endeavor, dominion, and hypothetic possibility—and not transcendental in a religious sense” (42). Utopia can be many things, but it is not Heaven.

Turning our attention from the problem of definition to the utopian texts themselves, we see that works of utopian literature fall into five broad categories: the classical utopia, the nineteenth-century utopian romance, the critical utopia, the dystopia, and the critical dystopia. The classical utopia is perhaps best epitomized by Thomas More’s *Utopia* (1516), but Tommaso Campanella’s *The City of the Sun* (1602) and Francis Bacon’s *New Atlantis* (1624) are also frequently cited as examples. The classical utopia is geographically isolated from its author’s contemporary society: More’s and Bacon’s utopian cities are located on remote islands, while Campanella’s city is sequestered behind seven circular walls. Structured around the nominal “plot of the dislocation, education, and return of a visitor” (Moylan, *Scraps* 148), classical utopias rely on the Socratic dialogue between the visitor and his utopian guide to illuminate the imaginary society’s workings. The classical utopia is a static utopia: presented as a perfect society, the classical utopia has no need for change and often has safeguards in place to prevent it. Furthermore, these utopias are characterized by the dominance of the descriptive register—that is, by the itemization of the structure and content of the society as opposed to a narrative focus on what occurs to a specific character.

While retaining many of the conventions established by the classical utopias, the utopian romances of the nineteenth-century—typified by Bellamy’s *Looking Backward* and William Morris’s *News from Nowhere*—introduce two new elements to the genre: the future and the romance. Perhaps the most dramatic change is the decision to locate the utopian society in the future—the narrators of Bellamy’s and Morris’s utopias wake up, Rip Van Winkle-like, from a long sleep only to find themselves in a distant future society. By locating their utopias in the future, Bellamy and Morris embed a sense of urgency and a call to action in their texts: utopia is repositioned as an achievable state, something to be worked towards. The second element introduced by the nineteenth-century utopias is the increased novelization of the genre: as Peter Fitting suggests in “Positioning and Closure,” the publication of Bellamy’s *Looking Backward* signalled a shift in utopian literature from the philosophic dialogue—a “rational mode of addressing or constructing the reader as an intelligent person, open to reasoned arguments” (29)—to the utopian romance, with its emphasis on the emotional involvement of the protagonist and the reader. As Fitting remarks, “the ‘novelization’ of utopia involves a significant transformation: from the positioning of the reader as the addressee in a philosophic dialogue who is persuaded through reasoned presentation, to the process of identification with a fictional character where the reader is implicated on an emotional and experimental level as well as on the intellectual one” (30). While the reasoned presentation of a more perfectly organized world remains the focal point of utopian romances, the introduction of a more fully developed protagonist in pursuit of his romantic interest helped popularize the genre by introducing a different source of narrative suspense and interest.

However, despite the increased interest in the adventures and the emotional life of the protagonist and the exhortation to action engendered by locating these utopias in the future, utopian literature of the nineteenth century remained, by and large, nonnarrative and spatial: that is, they remained focused on the detailed mapping of the imagined world and on the description of a more or less static society, as opposed to narrating the ongoing processes and relationships within the utopian world. While facilitating a detailed description of the utopian society’s structure, the spatial nature of nineteenth-century utopian fiction—and to an even greater degree, the classical utopias which preceded them—posed certain problems. As Jameson notes in “Of Islands and Trenches,”

One of the basic constraints of the [utopian] form would seem to be its incompatibility between action or events and that timeless maplike extension of the nonplace itself; in other words, if things can really happen in Utopia, if real disorder, change, transgression, novelty, in brief if history is possible at all, then we begin to doubt whether it can really be a Utopia after all... (16)

Perhaps with Jameson’s comment in mind we will be less surprised to see utopia’s assimilation into SF during the twentieth century: the literary utopia, for all intents and purposes, has become nearly indistinguishable from SF. However, while the links between SF and utopia are well-documented, Suvin’s contentious assertion that the literary utopia is a subgenre of SF brings the question of filiation directly to light. Suvin acknowledges the counterintuitive nature of his claim, explaining that

Paradoxically, [utopia] can be seen as [a subgenre of SF] only now that SF has

expanded into its modern phase, “looking backward” from its englobing of utopia. Further, that expansion was in some not always direct way a continuation of classical and nineteenth-century utopian literature. Thus, conversely, SF is at the same time wider than and at least collaterally descended from utopia; it is, if not a daughter, yet a niece of utopia—a niece usually ashamed of the family inheritance but unable to escape her genetic destiny. (*Metamorphoses* 61)

As Suvin glosses in his later article, “A Tractate on Dystopia 2001,” the “understanding that sociopolitics cannot change without all other aspects of life also changing has led to SF becoming the privileged locus of utopian fiction in the twentieth century. This means that utopian fiction is, today and retrospectively, both an independent aunt and a dependent daughter of SF” (383).

However, Suvin’s assertion is not without its critics. Sargent explicitly rejects Suvin’s claim that utopia is a subgenre of SF on the grounds that utopia—as embodied in political theory, philosophy, and intentional communities—exceeds the narrow confines of the literary:

While it is clear that the utopia is the well-spring (and in saying this I am specifically rejecting Darko Suvin’s contention that utopias are a sub-genre of science fiction), there are many rivers that flow from the source. If utopias and science fiction are treated solely as literary genres, Suvin has a case, particularly given the current situation in which many utopias are published as science fiction, but both historically and with utopianism treated as here, utopias are clearly the primary root. (“Revisited” 11)

Sargent argues that the literary utopia is inextricably enmeshed with its political, philosophical, and historical counterparts and that discussions of the literary genre need to acknowledge this fact. A similar view is echoed by Brian Aldiss: “Utopianism or its opposite is present in every vision of the future. There is little point in inventing a future state unless it contrasts in some way with our present one. This is not to claim that the great utopias are science fiction. Far from it. Their intentions are generally moral or political. But they point to a better world in which the follies of our world are eliminated or suppressed” (65). However, one wonders at Aldiss’s separation of utopia and SF along “moral or political” lines. As Kathryn Cramer points out in “Hard Science Fiction,” even the most science-oriented SF is inevitably political: while physics and astronomy “are superficially the purest of the sciences,” they “have been irretrievably politicized by the march of twentieth-century history: a rocket is not just transportation to the moon, but also an instrument of mass destruction” (192). The involvement in the 1980s of SF writers in the promotion of the Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI) and the concurrent right-wing politicization of American hard SF points to an additional political component: as Cramer notes, “The hard sf attitude became a salable commodity on its own, separable from scientific content. Particularly during the Reagan years, ‘hard sf’ evolved into right wing power fantasies about military hardware, tales of men killing things with big machines” (“On Science” 26). SF is equally capable of producing moralistic and political works.

Regardless of whether one agrees with Suvin’s assertion, the changes in both the content and form of recent utopias are widely acknowledged and have spurred the development of a new term, the “critical utopia.” Primarily applied to the fictional works produced during the utopian

revival of the 1960s and 1970s, critical utopias, according to Moylan, confronted the contradictions that pervaded utopian expression itself. Whether working from an anti-utopian misperception or from actual investigation of earlier utopian texts, they created strategies, in content and form, that challenged any tendency toward a narrowly conceived and enforced utopianism. That is, they resisted textual work that did not question its own leanings towards single-minded solutions or undemocratic, nonnegotiable social blueprints. Influenced as much by experimental, postmodern fiction as by sf, many spun out self-reflexive formal maneuvers that called attention not only to their content but also to the way in which they were formally produced, considering their textual development in its own right and sometimes in the intertextual web of all utopian writing. (*Scraps* 82-83)

As its title suggests, Ursula K. Le Guin's *The Dispossessed: An Ambiguous Utopia* (1974)—with its depiction of the ongoing challenges faced by a utopian community—is an exemplary illustration of the self-reflexive nature of the critical utopias of this period.

The critical utopia was not the only utopian subgenre ushered in with the new century: the twentieth century also witnessed the birth of the literary dystopia and its permutation, the critical dystopia. The dystopia is a hybrid form that incorporates aspects of both the utopia and the anti-utopia: as Moylan explains, informed by the anti-utopia's critique of the utopian form, these "new dystopian narratives work within the shell of the old utopian aesthetic as it plays out in the familiar discursive universe of sf. In doing so, however, these revived and transformed variants come to terms with Utopia's 'previous literary or narrative habits' in ways that supersede their potentially compromised status within contemporary culture" (105). The dystopia has been the dominant form of the utopian genre during the twentieth century, embodied in such classics as Yevgeny Zamyatin's *We* (1921), Katharine Burdekin's *Swastika Night* (1937), and what is probably the most well-known example of the classic dystopia, George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949).

The classic dystopia functions as a warning: the futility of its protagonists' resistance and their inevitable death or incapacitation leave little room for the utopian impulse.<sup>10</sup> But if the utopian impulse cannot reside within the classical dystopia, it is currently unable to inhabit its more traditional home of the literary utopia: as Raffaella Baccolini suggests, with "the conservative reaction of the 1980s and the triumph of free market liberalism of the 1990s, Utopia has been both attacked and co-opted. It has been conflated with materialist satisfaction and thus commodified and devalued. In a society where consumerism has come to represent the contemporary modality of happiness, Utopia has become an outmoded value" (518-19). A new form is needed for the utopian imagination: the critical dystopia is one possible response. As Moylan explains,

With their epical scope of nascent political challenges to ruling systems, open endings that look beyond the last page to other rounds of contestation, and

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<sup>10</sup> However, the classic dystopias contain more hope than is commonly admitted: think of Kuno's glimpse of the surface dwellers in E. M. Forster's *The Machine Stops* (1909), the humans outside of the Green Wall and the continuing riots at the end of *We*, or Alfred's success in passing on his secret to his son in *Swastika Night*.

realistically utopian possibilities lurking in the iconic details of their alternative worlds, the critical dystopias do not simply come down on the side of an unproblematized Utopia or a resigned and triumphant Anti-Utopia. Albeit generally, and stubbornly, utopian, they do not go easily toward that better world. Rather, they linger in the terrors of the present even as they exemplify what is needed to transform it. (*Scraps* 199)

The critical dystopia retains the dystopia's urgency and sense of warning but preserves the belief and struggle for a better world. The critical dystopia's resistance to the narrative closure obtained by the death or defeat of the protagonists is key to its utopian potentiality: as Baccolini suggests,

The ambiguous, open endings maintain the utopian impulse *within* the work. In fact, by rejecting the traditional [dystopia's] subjugation of the individual at the end of the novel, the critical dystopia opens a space of contestation and opposition for those groups—women and other ex-centric subjects whose subject position is not contemplated by hegemonic discourse—for whom subject status has yet to be attained. (520; original emphasis)

The critical dystopia's ability to resist narrative closure—thus allowing for the continued existence of the utopian impulse within the work—is facilitated by its hybrid nature and its characteristic appropriation of various other genres. As Moylan summarizes,

What formally enables these open, critical texts is an intensification of the practice of “genre blurring,” which Baccolini has traced in earlier dystopian works. By self-reflexively borrowing “specific conventions from other genres,” critical dystopias more often “blur” the received boundaries of the dystopian form and thereby expand rather than diminish its creative potential for critical expression [...]. (*Scraps* 189)

We can see this practice of genre blurring at play in Mitchell's *Cloud Atlas*: by working with a variety of literary genres and placing them in juxtaposition to one another, Mitchell exposes the internal logic of each genre, and self-reflexively uses their conventions to construct multiple versions of our world. There is less consensus as to which particular works fall under the umbrella of the critical dystopia, but Marge Piercy's *He, She and It* (1991) and Kim Stanley Robinson's *The Gold Coast* (1988) are two commonly cited examples.

Having introduced and briefly explored the categories of the classical utopia, nineteenth-century utopian romance, critical utopia, dystopia, and critical dystopia, I would like to add a few caveats. Inevitably, there remain many works of utopian literature that fail to conform to such neat divisions: I have introduced these categories more as an organizing tool than as a prescriptive definition. Likewise, I wish to stress the overlap and coexistence of the various generic divisions in time: utopias and dystopias are being produced alongside critical utopias and critical dystopias. Furthermore, thanks to SF's eclipse of the utopian genre, it is difficult, if not impossible, to speak in terms of a “pure” utopian or dystopian text, if such a thing ever existed. As Carl Freedman suggests,

a genre is not a classification but an element or, better still, a tendency that, in combination with other relatively autonomous generic elements or tendencies, is

active to a greater or lesser degree within a literary text that is itself understood as a complexly structured totality. In other words: a text is not filed under a generic category; instead, a generic tendency is something that happens within a text. (20)

It is with this understanding of genre in mind that I approach the question of utopia in Brunner's *Stand on Zanzibar* or Mitchell's *Cloud Atlas*, in which, as we shall see, the utopian elements coexist with generic signifiers from the spy novel, the action-adventure tale, the novel of the artist, and many other literary genres.

## 1.5 SF and History

One of the most interesting propositions in Carl Freedman's *Critical Theory and Science Fiction*, to my mind, at least, is that SF has usurped the role of the historical novel. Drawing on Lukács's work on the nineteenth-century historical novel, Freedman argues that historical genres represent society as a "mutable, historical totality, the result of complex but comprehensible social developments and one that has by no means arrived at any sort of finality or stasis" (45). He goes on to suggest that SF is to contemporary society as the historical novel was to the nineteenth century: both genres, albeit in different ways, establish the historicity of the present and are concerned with representing society as a contingent, historic whole. However, Freedman claims that the historical novel is, ironically, no longer a truly historical genre and that its mantle has fallen upon SF:

As knowledge (in the sense of *connaissance* even more than in that of *savoir*) of the past becomes ideologically more and more difficult to attain, the historical novel, necessarily tied as it is to such knowledge, is bound to become increasingly susceptible to reification. But science fiction is comparatively free of the burden of the past, at least in the particular way relevant here. [...] Precisely because the genre itself necessitates much less involvement in what increasingly function as the minefields of the early history and prehistory of the European bourgeoisie, science fiction remains more capable of maintaining a clear critical outlook, of seeing the overall development of human society in dialectical historicizing terms. (57-58; original emphasis)

Freedman argues that the historical novel has become ideologically compromised, obsessed with superficial markers of material difference—as in the costume drama, for instance—while ignoring underlying social structures.

Freedman posits that SF is less susceptible to this type of reification due to its "relative autonomy of *form*," which he discusses in terms of SF's "historical identity" and "historical difference." In SF,

the empirical present of the reader and of the text's own production is put into contrast with an alternative significantly different from the former, yet different in a way that remains rationally accountable. [...] In science fiction, [...] cognitive estrangement is central: the mundane status quo shared by author and reader is contrasted, while also connected, to a potential future that is indeed historically determinate (at least in literary effect) but of its very nature less factually preset than any established past. (54)

The draw of SF is that its worlds are different from our own, but conditioned by it. SF distorts and re-presents elements of our present historical situation, but these distortions can be rationally accounted for: SF explores potentialities, not impossibilities. If this relationship between historical identity and historical difference sounds familiar, it is because the same basic movement is described in the interplay between cognitive estrangement and the novum. As Suvin memorably phrases it, “Born in history and judged in history, the novum has an ineluctably historical character. So has the correlative fictional reality or possible world which, for all its displacements and disguises, always corresponds to the wish-dreams and nightmares of a specific sociocultural class of implied addressees” (“SF Novel” 76). Thus, while Freedman and Suvin use different terms, both are agreed upon the historicity of SF as a genre.

Like Freedman, Suvin also turns his attention to the ways in which SF’s formal elements render it a historical genre, although Suvin focuses on the epic structure of significant SF. Suvin’s contention is that the inherent historicity of the novum renders certain plot structures more appropriate to SF than others: specifically, that an epic structure is more suited to the specific demands of SF than a mythic structure. As Suvin argues,

an SF novel will (again in proportion to its meaningfulness) represent spatial and historical configurations as partly but irreconcilably different from the norm dominant in the author’s age. The unity-in-diversity of a novel will, of course, demand that such agents and relationships be metaphorically or metonymically related. However, the real alternatives and choices of the “epic” novel, teleologically connected with the unforeseeable outcome of the story in terms of success or failure of the central values (usually, of the protagonist), will refuse the mythological homeomorphy where all cycles and all agents are, centrally, such transformations of each other which can bring forth neither truly new values nor a hesitation as to the empirical success of existing values. (“SF Novel” 77-78)

In sum, Suvin argues that significant SF is structured around an epic narrative that presents events as historical and contingent, and thus changeable; only under these narrative circumstances are agency and freedom possible. However, Suvin’s essay on epic and mythic SF represents only one possible avenue of discussion: how else might the generic constraints of SF impact its form or vice-versa? In the following sections, I will argue that the spatialized techniques of juxtaposition, discontinuity, and collage—commonly associated with a loss of historical depth and difference—are used in a science fictional context by Brunner, Le Guin, and Mitchell to create utopian spaces founded on contingency and human choice.



## 2. "A GALAXY FOR INSIGHT": JOHN BRUNNER'S *STAND ON ZANZIBAR*

### 2.1 "An Oldist Attack on the Newist Genre": Locating *Stand on Zanzibar* within the SF Tradition

In 1966, no one would have expected John Brunner to win a Hugo: prior to the publication of *Stand on Zanzibar*, Brunner was regarded as a prolific writer of competent, if not terribly original, SF.<sup>11</sup> *Zanzibar* is generally agreed to be the first and best of his four major SF efforts: published in 1968, it was followed by *The Jagged Orbit* (1969), *The Sheep Look Up* (1972), and *The Shockwave Rider* (1975). The novels are loosely connected by their settings—variations of an overcrowded, polluted near-future United States—and their focus on eugenics, race relations, environmentalism, and computer technology. While *Zanzibar*'s title is taken from an early passage that describes the overpopulation of Brunner's near-future world, as the novel progresses it becomes apparent that its main concern is the genetic modification of humans, or "optimization," as the process is termed in the novel. In *Zanzibar*, Brunner is ambivalent about the possibilities opened up by large-scale genetic engineering. With the discovery of a dominant genetic mutation that causes carriers to exude a "territorial-aggression suppressant" (Brunner 541), the process of optimization could be used to engineer a more peaceable and cooperative human race; however, state rivalries have led to a powder keg of envy, paranoia, and anger, and leave many fearing that optimization will be used to develop a race of amoral *Übermenschen*. This ambivalence is consistent with *Zanzibar*'s position as a critical dystopia, with both utopian and dystopian potentialities.

*Zanzibar* is organized into 119 short episodes, each belonging to one of four writing modes. Writings contained in the "context" and "the happening world" sections are expository and give shape to *Zanzibar*'s near-future world, while the episodes in the "tracking with closeups" and "continuity" sections document the trials and tribulations of the novel's point-of-view characters. The "continuity" episodes contain *Zanzibar*'s linear narratives and follow New York roommates Norman House and Donald Hogan as they travel to the fictional countries of Beninia and Yatakang, respectively; Norman is put in charge of General Technics's development of Beninia while Donald, an American spy, is sent to abduct Yatakang's top geneticist,

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<sup>11</sup> In the seventeen years between the appearance of his first story and the publication of *Zanzibar*, Brunner was publishing, on average, nearly three novels and five short stories per year, not taking into account the various revisions, expansions, fix-ups, short-story collections, non-fiction articles, translations, and the fanzine he produced during this time. While receiving generally positive reviews, Brunner's early writings failed to bring him widespread attention, critical praise, or wealth. However, in *John Brunner* (2012), Jad Smith complicates this view, arguing that "the facile characterization of Brunner at this [early] stage of his career as a competent journeyman who wrote 'literate space opera' hardly does justice to his body of work, which shows uncommon versatility and market awareness, and a canny ability to structure moral concerns into SF narratives while preserving and even deepening the taut dynamism of pulp plotting" (L 297; Introduction).

Sugaiguntung. Along the way, the two men encounter a host of other characters, most notably Chad C. Mulligan (misanthropic sociologist and authorial mouthpiece), Elihu Masters (US ambassador to Beninia), and the sentient supercomputer Shalmaneser.

From the beginning, *Zanzibar* provoked widely divergent reactions. *New York Times* book critic Martin Levin compared *Zanzibar* unfavourably to John Dos Passos's work, commenting that, "Dos Passos used such devices as 'The Camera Eye,' and 'Newsreel' as interpolations in a powerful narrative, while Mr. Brunner's continuity is as infantile as his topical intermissions." Compare this to Edmund Cooper's review, in which *Zanzibar* is placed alongside James Joyce's *Ulysses*: "Mix a dash of 'Ulysses' and a splash of 'Brave New World' into a sprawling television script, then attempt to rewrite some of it as a novel. You might—if you had John Brunner's intensity, imagination, and undisciplined creativity—end up with something like 'Stand on Zanzibar.' One thing is certain: the talent he displays is of a high order." Algis Budrys, while complementary of Brunner, does not go quite as far as Cooper, saying that in *Zanzibar*, "Brunner has, as one might have expected, emerged as a masterly technician, equal to [SF author Arthur C.] Clarke—better than Clarke—equal to Heinlein. More consistent that [sic] Heinlein" (216). However, as Jad Smith notes, "Charles Platt, closely associated with Michael Moorcock and the *New Worlds*, thought just the opposite, calling the novel a 'social document,' a massive, clinical report utterly devoid of 'sensitivity toward human beings'" (67).

This divided critical response is unsurprising. *Zanzibar* is an immensely ambitious novel with a staggering cast of characters and panoramic scope, and the audacity that allows Brunner to scale Parnassian heights also causes him to fall to abysmal depths. However, the reasons for the critics' divided assessment of *Zanzibar* lie not only in the novel itself, but in the literary landscape it was released into. Published in 1968, *Zanzibar* appeared during the peak of New Wave SF: following the lead of J. G. Ballard and Michael Moorcock, many writers began to focus on the soft sciences and to create works characterized by stylistic experimentation and graphic portrayals of sex and violence. *Zanzibar* was judged as much according to its critics' affinities for the new style as according to its own merits: as Smith observes, "Not unlike other SF authors of the day, Brunner's work often became the focus of crosstalk about the New Wave rather than being taken on its own terms" (57-58). Brunner's liminal status—writing SF that was deemed too American to be British and too British to be American, too experimental to be pulp but with a love of action, drama, and suspense that marked its commercial roots—further complicated matters. Proponents of the New Wave labeled *Zanzibar* an inferior imitation of New Wave SF that, according to Smith, "in true American fashion [...] supplied the reader with 'quantity' rather than 'quality' of experience and thus amounted to nothing more than 'a magnificently complete report on the future' that failed to capture the human element of the story" (8-9).<sup>12</sup> Meanwhile, other critics faulted *Zanzibar* for focusing on style and formal innovation at the cost of characterization and intelligibility (a complaint commonly directed at New Wave SF). It was the rare critic who recognized that in *Zanzibar*, Brunner set out to create not a commercial SF thriller or an esoteric, radically stylized piece of speculative fiction, but something else entirely. As Smith remarks,

Only Piers Anthony, an English-American author not associated with the New

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<sup>12</sup> Smith is quoting from Charles Platt's 1969 column in *New Worlds*, titled "New Worlds and After."

Wave, recognized in *Zanzibar* an important synthesis of the old and new. From his perspective, the New Wave's inner circle could "be as narrow in their newness as the regulars of the Old Thing...in their oldness." Brunner neither belonged to the "Newist clique" nor adhered to the tenets of old-school writing. He traversed this divide, and *Zanzibar* represented a brilliant "Oldist attack on the Newist genre." While Anthony suggested that the novel would not receive the sort of glowing reviews the New Wave reserved "for its own," he insisted that it could not be dismissed and called it "required reading for anyone who takes science fiction seriously." (68)

Despite the critics' ambivalence, *Zanzibar* proved popular enough with SF readers to win that year's Hugo award and remains Brunner's only work never to fall out of print—indeed, a new edition was published in 2011 with a foreword by Bruce Sterling championing the novel's accomplishments.

So much for *Zanzibar*'s contemporary reception: how has it aged? More recent critical assessments stress the novel's historical importance and laud Brunner's world-building skills, but tend to fault its technological and scientific solution to what some critics perceive to be a social and political problem. The third edition of the *Anatomy of Wonder* calls *Zanzibar* "[c]lever, highly detailed, and frequently very witty; a successful experiment. One of the key works of the period" (Barron 4-92) while Bruce Sterling praises "Brunner's complex, showy mode of writing-through-constraints that gives one the powerful sensation of being saturated in his invented world" (viii). Brian Aldiss admires the dense, layered complexity of *Zanzibar*'s urban landscapes, but criticizes the pacing towards the novel's end (*Trillion* 367). Fredric Jameson also acknowledges Brunner's talent for creating near-future cityscapes, but goes on to criticize his "substitution of 'natural' and 'Scientific' considerations for political and historical ones" when in Jameson's view, "*SF is in its very nature a symbolic meditation on history itself*" (Reynolds, Rottensteiner, and Jameson 275; original emphasis). Gérard Klein seconds Jameson's charges, taking umbrage at the "completely artificial character" of Brunner's scientific solution (genetic engineering) to the problem of how humans can peacefully co-exist with one another: "we might as well say that there is no solution outside of miracle" (11).

However, while *Zanzibar* certainly has its missteps, it also gets many things right. Perhaps Aldiss's final assessment of *Zanzibar* is most just: "It is an interesting experiment, because it marks a stage along the road, midway between pulp and social commentary" (*Trillion* 367). Brunner's depiction of the alienation and estrangement of contemporary urban life is vivid and compelling; his portrayal of the fragmentary yet complexly interconnected nature of near-future media is arresting, as are his efforts to recreate the sense of information overload that his characters experience; and the formal ingenuity of his so-called "non-novel" (*Zanzibar* 549)—with its dense, layered, and occasionally overwhelming expository sequences—perfectly embodies *Zanzibar*'s thematic concerns and contributes to the complexity of Brunner's imagined world.

## 2.2 "This Non-Novel was Brought to You By...": *Zanzibar's* Form and Influences

As mentioned in the introduction, *Zanzibar* contains four different modes of writing, titled "continuity," "tracking with closeups," "context," and "the happening world." Out of the 119 individual episodes, forty-two are "continuities," thirty-two are "tracking with closeups," twenty-nine are "contexts," and sixteen are "happening worlds." Categories are never repeated in succession. The aptly named "continuities" contain the narrative strands that follow *Zanzibar's* two central characters, roommates Norman House and Donald Hogan. Narrated using free indirect discourse, the "continuity" sections alternate between Norman's and Donald's points of view, following the two men as they move from New York to Beninia and Yatakang, respectively. The episodes titled "tracking with close-ups" are similar in format to the "continuity" sections, but instead of focusing on Norman and Donald, they zero in on one of the other twenty-eight characters listed in "the happening world (1): READ THE DIRECTIONS." These characters run the gamut from spaced-out drug addict Bennie Noakes to dying Beninian president Zadkiel F. Obomi to Puerto Rican baby-farmer Olive Almerio to the sentient supercomputer Shalmaneser. Averaging three pages in length, these brief narratives provide a snapshot into this diverse cast of characters' lives. "Contexts," as one might guess, function as expository pieces that provide background information on both the physical aspects of Brunner's near future (location in space and time, national and geographic boundaries, descriptions of various physical environments, population levels, etc.) and the political, technological, religious, and cultural components that structure *Zanzibar's* world. Averaging two pages in length, most "contexts" are excerpts from the books, interviews, and letters of the fictional sociologist Chad C. Mulligan, although several "contexts" contain excerpts from real-world sources. Additional "contexts" contain poetry, reports, written representations of music videos and television programs, and such self-explanatory episodes as "context (24): ONE OF MANY ESSENTIALLY IDENTICAL PRINTOUTS FROM SHALMANESER." The final and least numerous category is "the happening world." Averaging three pages in length (with the important exception of "the happening world (8)"), the writings in this category can be divided into two types. The first kind are signpost sections which introduce the various point of view characters and sporadically update the reader on these characters' activities (for example, "the happening world (16): OBITUARY"). The remainder are thematic collage sections that weave together snippets of conversations, advertisements, traffic signs, newscasts, leaflets, letters, slogans, and various other types of information centred on one of several topics (art, sabotage, living quarters, etc.). This section is also characterized by its numerous allusions, both intertextual (snippets of various real-world national anthems in "SPOKEN LIKE A MAN") and intratextual (an ad from Olive Almerio's adoption agency appears in "DOMESTICA").

Any discussion of "the happening world" would be incomplete if it failed to note the striking similarities between these episodes and the "Newsreel" sections in John Dos Passos's *U.S.A.* trilogy (1930-36). Brunner's debt to Dos Passos is an obvious one, and is variously interpreted by critics: Carl Schaffer writes that Dos Passos's use of collage "provided Brunner, as he himself admits, with the means by which he could present this enormously variegated and kaleidoscopic world" (194); John J. Pierce (rather dubiously) frames Brunner's borrowing of Dos Passos's techniques as a political statement meant to express Brunner's "feeling that

totalitarianism is essential to real social justice and social progress” (150); while Neal Bukeavich argues that Brunner “adapts the frenetic jump-cut narrative techniques of John Dos Passos to emphasize the omnipresence of consumer capitalism and ecosocial problems in contemporary society” (55).

While Dos Passos’s “Newsreels” are an obvious influence upon “the happening world” episodes, the rest of *Zanzibar* owes a more generalized debt in terms of its episodic construction, multiple point-of-view characters, and continent-spanning scope.<sup>13</sup> It might seem odd that the *U.S.A.* trilogy (written in the realist tradition and dedicated to preserving the *Zeitgeist* of decades past) and *Zanzibar* (a speculative fiction which imagines the increasing fragmentation of the world) both use the same formal techniques, but such is the case. Dos Passos incorporates real-world documents into his work in order to create a convincing fiction of an actually-existing world while Brunner fictionalizes “real-world” documents in order to realize his imaginary world: both men, however, are united in their quest to depict the dense, complex, polyvocal nature of their worlds through collage and juxtaposition. Furthermore, as writers of near-future and recent historical fiction respectively, Brunner and Dos Passos are both constrained by the need to relate their imaginary worlds to the present world in certain predetermined ways (unlike far-future SF or fantasy, for example). Likewise, both Brunner and Dos Passos must reconcile the necessity of world building with novelistic conventions, which, as Norman Spinrad points out in his review of *Zanzibar*, is a difficult thing to do well:

The infuriating thing about writing sf novels is that the novelistic imperatives of plot, destiny and character are in conflict with the sf imperative of universe-creation. While one is in the process of creating in detail the sf context, the characters and plot hang in limbo; while one is advancing plot and characterization, one’s grip on one’s created universe tends to loosen. (181)

Traditionally, writers have approached this problem in two ways. The first method is to alternate between expository sections and sections devoted to plot and characterization. When done poorly, this can result in the dreaded infodump, the bane of poorly written SF. The second method sees the writer doing away with separate expository sections and limiting herself to the experiences of the point of view character(s): in this way, the author lets the reader organically discover a strange world as the characters go about their lives. Spinrad suggests that in *Zanzibar* (and by extension, Dos Passos’s works), Brunner has found a third method: “*Stand on Zanzibar* is a literary construct consisting of one novel, several short stories, a series of essays and a lot of what can only be called schticks intercut and put together like a film. *Stand on Zanzibar* is not a novel, it is a film in book

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<sup>13</sup> While critics are agreed that Dos Passos’s *U.S.A.* trilogy was a formative influence on *Zanzibar*’s construction, they differ as to the form and scope this influence took. An irate Harry Harrison represents one extreme, writing, “STAND ON ZANZIBAR; Idea and story by Harrison, writing technique by John dos Passos. Credit or acknowledgement not given to either” (15). Other of Brunner’s peers were more forgiving, such as those at the 1969 British Science Fiction Association Meeting, who felt “that in *Stand on Zanzibar*, John Brunner had advanced the cause [of SF] by ‘pulling a Dos Passos’” (Clareson 1). Others are more keen to emphasize the differences between Dos Passos’s and Brunner’s works: in his forward to the 2011 edition of *Stand on Zanzibar*, Bruce Sterling argues that while there are similarities between Dos Passos’s and Brunner’s works, “Dos Passos was writing a pragmatic and naturalistic American book. Brunner, who was a European like Pynchon, is antinaturalistic—he’s aiming for future-shock, for a moral freak-out, for the hallucinatory” (viii).

form” (182).<sup>14</sup> *Zanzibar*’s genre-blurring tendencies and spatialized narrative form become just as important as, or in Spinrad’s assessment of *Zanzibar*, more important than the content itself: “Brunner takes a lot of ordinary sf and speculative non-fiction and edits it non-randomly into a brilliant non-novel” (185).

However, while both men rely on collage and juxtaposition in their quest to depict the dense, complex, and polyphonic nature of their imaginary worlds, they use these techniques to very different ends. Take, for example, the arrangement of the text within the “Newsreel” and “the happening world” sections. Dos Passos is much more likely to splice his lyrics, headlines, and news reports together to create a single amalgamated sentence:

lady angels are smashed troops guard oilfields America tends to become empire  
like in the days of the Caesars \$5 poem gets rich husband eat less says Edison rich  
poker player falls dead when he draws royal flush charges graft in Cicero. (56)

The contiguity of the headlines implies that the seemingly disparate events are somehow related. Brunner takes the opposite tack. With the notable exception of “the happening world (7): THE STATE OF THE ART,”<sup>15</sup> Brunner is careful to keep the dialogue, signs, and headlines separate from one another through a combination of typography (italics, all capitals), punctuation (quotation marks and ellipses), and spacing, as is demonstrated in this excerpt from “the happening world (6): STREET SEEN”:

“I can’t see heaven but I credit hell—  
I live in New York so I know it well.  
When they shut out heaven with the Fuller Dome  
God gave it up and He went home.”  
ONE WAY NORTHBOUND  
“Gotta go dump my passenger—pulled a bolt-gun and I had to doze the bleeder.  
Dicty, of course. Spotted him right away, but dreck, if I turned down every dicty  
who wants a ride I’d never get a fare after seven poppa-momma...So anyhow: I’ll  
be off call until I’ve sworn out the complaint.”  
UNDERPASS [...] (112)

Furthermore, Brunner is much more likely to use overt juxtaposition in these sections: indeed, this is the structuring element of “the happening world (15): EQUAL AND OPPOSITE.” Taken together, these techniques emphasize the discrete, distinct nature of the fragments contained in Brunner’s various collages.

Once again, the differences between the collage sections in *U.S.A.* and *Zanzibar* can be linked to the novels’ differing aims. As Gérard Klein remarks about Brunner’s novels, one notices

the ‘exploded’ construction, allegedly borrowed from Dos Passos but in fact not

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<sup>14</sup> Spinrad’s division of *Zanzibar* into “novel,” “short story,” “essay,” and “shtick” loosely aligns with Brunner’s categories of “continuity,” “tracking with close-ups,” “context,” and “the happening world.”

<sup>15</sup> Significantly, while Brunner adopts Dos Passos’s use of a single amalgamated sentence in “the happening world (7),” his use of typography emphasizes the discrete nature of each fragment: “*when you’re redecorating don’t forget to consult us for original computer-created artworks to complement your colour-scheme rare exotic taste sensations from the most ordinary food if you dredge it with a little ‘Ass-salt’ before cooking THE LATEST PLANETARY COLLISION SIZE SMASH OF THE EM THIRTY-ONES IS ON SPOOL EG92745*” (148).

signifying, as in Dos Passos, the diversity of an American world in search of its unity. Rather, that construction signifies the dislocation of a social universe that consists only of contradictions and no longer possesses the central referent which the excluded sociologist Chad Mulligan, bearer of the threatened social group's values, could have offered it. ("Discontent" 11)

So while one can certainly trace the line of influence from Dos Passos to Brunner, it is unfair to write off Brunner's formal experimentation as being merely derivative—Brunner has modified Dos Passos's techniques in order to better create and portray *Zanzibar*'s fragmentary, divided world.

Dos Passos was not the only influence on *Zanzibar*'s form, however: Marshall McLuhan's *The Gutenberg Galaxy* (1962) provided another template for Brunner to work with. Brunner acknowledges his debt to McLuhan (and McLuhan's colleague Harold Innis) in *Zanzibar*'s epigraph: it refers to Innis's mosaic approach to the presentation of information and reads,

There is nothing willful or arbitrary about the Innis mode of expression. Were it to be translated into perspective prose, it would not only require huge space, but the insight into the modes of interplay among forms of organization would also be lost. Innis sacrificed point of view and prestige to his sense of the urgent need for insight. [...] He is setting up a mosaic configuration or galaxy for insight... Innis makes no effort to "spell out" the interrelations between the components in his galaxy. He offers no consumer packages in his later work, but only do-it-yourself kits. (qtd. in *Zanzibar* xv)

The numerous expository tracts, the multiple speakers, and fragmented, episodic nature of *Zanzibar* represent Brunner's attempt to create his own "galaxy for insight": in doing so he encourages his readers to make their own connections between the numerous and often contradictory fragments of information they encounter throughout the novel. *Zanzibar*'s structure discourages passive consumption; instead it provides its readers with the opportunity to become active participants in the creation of its fictional world. Ideally, we are called on to create our own narratives from the "do-it-yourself kit" that Brunner has provided us.

However, while Brunner's desire to create a "galaxy for insight" is admirable, it is undercut by the privileged point-of-view character he has created in Chad C. Mulligan and the ways in which Mulligan both enables and limits the reader's experience of *Zanzibar*. Misanthropic humanist, famed sociologist, and popularizer of the sciences; tireless orator and prophet to the ignorant masses; the only person capable of recognizing Shalmaneser's sentience and discovering the true reason for the Shinka's peaceful temperament; and a character who is always, invariably, and annoyingly right—Chad C. Mulligan is an unmistakable authorial mouthpiece. Forget Shalmaneser—Mulligan is the true deity of *Zanzibar*'s world. Contemplating the increasingly deteriorating state of the world, Donald exclaims, "I wish to God Mulligan hadn't quit; we need him to tell us where we are, we need his insight like we need food!" (60). Author of *The Hipcrime Vocab*, *You're an Ignorant Idiot*, *You : Beast*, and a host of other (fictional) books cited throughout the novel, Mulligan provides us not with opinions, but decrees:

But I'm trying to tell you what's happening to you, not what's happening to Crepe

Suzette your neurotic poodle. A good veterinary psychologist can probably be located by calling Information. You wouldn't believe him if he started telling you how much you have in common with that pet of yours, and likely you won't believe me. But if I annoy you sufficiently you may at least try to think up arguments to demonstrate how wrong I am. (63)

If Mulligan was simply one point of view among many, his didacticism wouldn't be a problem, but placed in a clearly privileged position and disproportionately represented throughout the novel, he acquires an enormous amount of authority and greatly influences how a reader interprets the text: this undermines the "galaxy for insight" that Brunner has taken such pains to create. I don't mean to suggest that Brunner should refrain from giving voice to his beliefs, convictions, and biases in the name of unfettered objectivity (as if such a thing were possible) or that having a character as an authorial mouthpiece is an inherently bad thing—indeed, Le Guin uses one to great effect in *Always Coming Home*, an effect due in no little part to Pandora's more modest and thoughtful personality. More than anything, Brunner has missed an opportunity: by introducing an element of self-reflexiveness in Mulligan's character, Brunner could have created a dialogue with his readers, opening and expanding the novel instead of closing it in.

Fortunately, Brunner's use of a mosaic approach goes beyond soliciting reader participation: it also represents a strategy for convincingly portraying a post-Gutenberg world. As McLuhan argues, the fixed sequential relations that characterize a visually-biased, print-focused society will be replaced by an emphasis on the fragmentary and the simultaneous: "The visual makes for the explicit, the uniform, and the sequential in painting, in poetry, in logic, history. The non-literate modes are implicit, simultaneous, and discontinuous, whether in the primitive past or the electronic present, which Joyce called 'eins within a space'" (65). It is just this oral/aural bias that Brunner has (somewhat ironically) attempted to capture in his novel.

The clearest example of this occurs in "the happening world (8): BE KIND TO YOUR FORFEITED FRIENDS." The largest single episode at twenty-eight pages, "the happening world (8)" brings together Donald, Norman, Chad Mulligan, and Elihu Masters at the party hosted in Guinevere Steel's New York apartment. Earlier in the day, Masters has pitched his Beninia project to General Technics, and during the course of Guinevere's party Yatakang announces its genetic optimization program to the rest of the world. Thus, this episode gathers together all the major characters (and several minor ones) in addition to containing the intersection of the New York, Yatakang, and Beninia narrative strands. The episode opens with one of Brunner's dramatic set pieces describing a retro twentieth-century theme party hosted by Guinevere:

LOCALE: [...] two rooms one above the other forty-eight feet by thirty-two, two (ditto) thirty by eighteen, two (ditto) twenty-one by eighteen, four bathrooms *en suite* and two not, four additional toilets, two kitchen-eateries, and a roof-garden [...]

CONTENTS (TRANSIENT IMMOBILE PERISHABLE): [...] bottles and cases and barrels and boxes and jars and cans and packs of liquor and incense and wine and marijuana and beer and even tobacco to give the guests a decadent life-in-my-hands thrill that would also be properly in period. [...]



AUDIO: the most bearable re-made recordings from the latter part of last century [...] The quality of the recordings was lousy and the divisible-by-two rhythms seemed banal and boring after subtleties like five against eleven. [...]

COSMORAMIC: mostly the fashionable colours of the nineties because they were currently bearable—apple-green, sour lemon-yellow, and the inevitable pale blues [...] (183-85)

In the interest of brevity, I've omitted Brunner's description of the décor, electronics, wait staff, costumes, drinks, and odours, although he describes them in meticulous—one might even say overwhelming—detail. The opening of the episode highlights Brunner's flair for creating a concrete, palpable world. The reader's senses are inundated with colours, smells, and sounds: it is easy to visualize the party, to map out the clusters of guests, to immerse yourself in the half-heard conversations and the smell of perfume, perspiration, and alcohol. Take, for example, Brunner's attempt to portray the simultaneous conversations occurring at a party:

|                   |  |
|-------------------|--|
| “Tripping.”       | “By the way, Norman, I did mention, didn't I, that I'm being |
| “Work.”           | thrown out of my place and I'm                               |
| “Religion.”       | looking for a spare tatami?”                                 |
| “Psychology.”     | “How are we doing for liquor?”                               |
| “Eugenics.”       | “Mel Ladbroke, right? Look,                                  |
| “Society.”        | You don't by any chance—? Oh,                                |
| “War and peace.”  | <i>sheeting hole!</i> Forget it.”                            |
| “Sex.”            | “Are you by yourself, lover?”                                |
| “Food and drink.” | “It would make a difference if                               |
| “Politics.”       | they could afford to buy gene-                               |
| “Hobbies.”        | moulded maize stocks, for exam-                              |
| “Art.”            | ple. But they can't.”  |
| “Entertainment.”  | “Gwinnie's saving you up, you know!”                         |
| “Housing.”        | “People are stupid, including me.” (204)                     |
| “Travel.”         |  |

The left-hand column neatly summarizes the various topics of discussion during the party, and, indeed, encapsulates the topics of the novel as a whole. The right-hand column shows how these lofty topics are manifested in mundane dinner party conversations. The brevity and spatial arrangement of the columns (reminiscent, for this reader at least, of a matching test) encourage the reader to move rapidly back and forth between the columns looking for connections. At the same time, the formatting and length of the columns—indented and offset from the prose that precedes and follows them—encourages the section to be viewed as a discrete whole. Thus, the columns, with their complementary yet competing information, mimic the simultaneously occurring events and interactions of the party. As this episode—with its set scenes, columns of information, and graphing of characters' emotions (204-05)—illustrates, Brunner is quite ambitious in his attempts to depict sound and visuals, which is only fitting considering the media-saturated nature of *Zanzibar*'s world. Thus, *Zanzibar*'s structure represents Brunner's attempt to show us a truly future world.

### 2.3 Estrangement and Recognition in *Stand on Zanzibar*

While SF is usually thought of in terms of its estrangement from our everyday consensus reality, for the estrangement to be rendered intelligible, it must be paired with the process of recognition. As Darko Suvin suggests, this oscillation between estrangement and recognition, between the novel's world and our own, is one of the key components of SF:

Though I have argued that SF is not—by definition cannot be—an orthodox allegory with any one-to-one correspondence of its elements to elements in the author's reality, its specific modality of existence is a feedback oscillation that moves now from the author's and implied reader's norm of reality to the narratively actualized novum in order to understand the plot-events, and now back from those novelties to the author's reality, in order to see it afresh from the new perspective gained. (*Metamorphosis* 71)

In *Stand on Zanzibar*, this feedback oscillation between estrangement and recognition becomes a central organizing tenet, and it would be hard to find a clearer demonstration of this process than in *Zanzibar's* opening pages.

Foreshadowing its fragmentary, chaotic future world, *Zanzibar's* opening segment eschews a coherent narrative or stable voice in favour of a fragmented expository sequence that abruptly shifts between the aural and the visual, bombarding the reader with a barrage of voices and disjointed images:

*Stock cue SOUND*: "Presenting SCANALYZER, Engrelay Satelserv's unique thrice-per-day study of the big big scene, the INdepth INdependent INmediate [sic] INterface between you and your world!"

*Stock cue VISUAL*: cliptage, splitscreen, cut in bridge-melder, Mr. & Mrs. Everywhere depthunder (today MAMP, Mid-Atlantic Mining Project), spaceover (today freely-suiting), transiting (today Simpron Acceleratube), digging (today as every day hominage with autoshout).

*Autoshout cue*: "It's happening it's happening! SCANALYZER SCANALYZER SCANALYZER SCANALYZER SCANALYZER SCANALYZER—"

*Stock cue VISUAL*: cliptage, wholescreen, planet Earth turning jerk-jerk-jerk and holding meridians for GMT, EST, PCT, Pacific Conflict Zone Time. (1)

Lacking a central character or identifiable narrative voice, peppered with unfamiliar words and references, and without any clear indication of where or when these events are taking place, this opening salvo is immensely disorienting and reinforces the alienness of this imaginary world. Even the typography is strange, with its idiosyncratic capitalization and italics. However, this disorienting sequence is immediately followed by "the happening world (1): READ THE DIRECTIONS," which acts as a road map to *Zanzibar's* world. Here, the reader is presented with a brief biographical sketch of all twenty-seven of *Zanzibar's* point-of-view characters ("Norman Niblock House is junior VP in charge of personnel and recruitment at General Technics" [4]; "Donald Hogan is a spy" [5]) and key places and institutions are introduced, including "the small independent African territory of Beninia" (8) and Yatakang, a communist island nation hostile to the United States. Furthermore, while it may not be immediately obvious, "READ THE DIRECTIONS" introduces *Zanzibar's* key themes: overpopulation, eugenics and

genetic engineering, and the growing schism between a decadent, amoral, and consumerist West and the reactionary and fundamentalist countries that oppose them. Thus, in its first ten pages, *Zanzibar* takes its readers through the first of many feedback loops between the two poles of estrangement and recognition. As the reader moves onwards, *Zanzibar*'s imaginary countries, outrageous fashions, exotic slang, and futuristic cityscapes reinforce its difference from our world and emphasize the reader's outsider status. These estranging forces are countered, however, by the novel's numerous allusions to, among others, Lewis F. Richardson's mathematical analysis of war in *Statistics of Deadly Quarrels* (1950), Campbell's soup, the popular firework instructions to "Light the blue touchpaper and retire," various national anthems, Ludwig van Beethoven, E. M. Forster, and children's nursery rhymes, which subtly familiarize the fictional world and establish a link (however tenuous) between *Zanzibar*'s world and our own.

This feedback oscillation between estrangement and recognition is enacted not only at the level of form, but at the thematic level as well: in *Zanzibar*, Donald and Norman are involved in two complementary narrative arcs, one of alienation and one of integration. Donald's journey embodies *Zanzibar*'s destructive, disintegrative potential and dramatizes the danger of abdicating one's responsibilities and uncritically substituting someone else's paradigm for one's own. Norman's conviction that he would have gone "insane" (94) without someone to confide in is given credence by Donald's rapidly deteriorating situation as he begins to comprehend the extent of his isolation. Naturally reclusive, Donald spends his days alone in the library, gathering information for his job as a synthesist, which is itself a cover for his true career as a government spy. Donald is never mentioned as having relatives and makes "a policy of not having friends" (40) lest his secret be revealed. This self-imposed isolation takes a toll on Donald, culminating in a panic attack during which everyone around him appears as "millions of manikens" (46), devoid of all humanity. Not only is Donald estranged from the people around him but also he is disconnected from the city itself:

He was suddenly appalled. These days, a great many people never left their homes at night except for some specific purpose, when they could call a cab to the door and expose themselves for no longer than it took to cross a sidewalk. [...] And the cab that came to fetch them was driven by a man or a woman secure behind armored glass, its doors could only be opened from the dashboard, and affixed to the neat little nozzle of the air-conditioning system was a certificate stating that the sleepy-gas cylinders had been approved by the City Licensing Authority. For all its smoothness and fuel-cell silence, it was like a tank, and encouraged the feeling that one was venturing on to a battlefield. (109-10)

Brunner paints a bleak picture of a future cityscape where strangers are automatically viewed as enemies: Donald finds solace in neither the urban landscape nor the people who surround him. However, on this particular night Donald decides to take the risk of going outside for a night-time walk. He is caught completely off-guard: "It was almost a shock to Donald to discover how normal the night-time city appeared" (126). The key word in this sentence is *appeared*. Although his journey starts off innocently enough, as Donald walks further away from his apartment he is accosted and harassed by people on the street and ends up lost. Donald's growing sense of estrangement is symbolized by his increasing inability to make sense of his physical

surroundings, such as the jungle gym that he walks past: “For a moment his mind refused to accept the connection between the lines and forms he saw, and anything with solidity” (130). His excursion out into the night-time city has merely served to reaffirm his earlier fears.

It is in this strange, nightmare world that Donald has his epiphany, and it is a profoundly negative one. Wanting to return home, Donald unwittingly hails a pseudo-cab. In his attempt to escape from the cab without getting robbed, Donald attracts the attention of a passing police car, but the presence of the police agitates the residents of the neighbourhood and soon enough Donald is in the middle of a full-scale riot. Turning to look at the people around him, Donald sees not individuals but a faceless mass “like an overturned ants’ nest, doors and passages vomiting people” (133), recalling his earlier vision of the day-time city where “people thronged like insects” (45). Donald’s dehumanizing characterization of the people around him as a faceless swarm reveals his lack of empathy and near-total disconnect from his fellow citizens, highlighting his alienation from those around him. Furthermore, Donald’s actions during the riot serve to estrange him from himself: “What sort of a person am I? I don’t know what sort of a person I am. I didn’t think I was the sort of person who could fail to recognise one of his closest friends and try to hit him with both fists. I didn’t think I wasn’t safe to be allowed out on the streets. [...] Somebody shot [the police helicopter] down with a sporting gun. And when it crashed they beat the pilot to death with clubs. Honest to God, Norman [...] I don’t remember clearly enough to be sure I wasn’t in there with them!” (165-66). Donald’s sense of self is completely shattered by the events of the riot: everything that he has taken for granted—his knowledge of the city, his knowledge of himself—has been exposed as false.

Unfortunately for Donald, it is at this precise moment of extreme vulnerability that he is called into service by the government:

Yesterday, when he had left the Public Library after his stint of duty, the illusion had overtaken him that all the masses of New York were animate dolls, less than human, and he among them. Determined to prove he was not really inhabiting a hostile world, he had wandered from illusion into the harsh reality of a riot. [...] Suddenly, today, this was not the familiar world he had lived in for the past decade, but another plane or reality: a fearful one, like jungle on an alien planet. [...] Caught like this, suspended between the wreck of former convictions and the solidification of new ones, he could no more have rebelled against the decision of the computer in Washington to activate him than he could have brought the dead pilot back to life. (214)

His experience in the riot has brought home the contingent nature of the world and the tenuous nature of the self and has left Donald paralyzed, uncertain of his ability to exert any agency over himself or his surroundings. In fact, Donald’s epiphany has served to reinforce his natural disinclination to accept responsibility for his actions. When Donald is informed that he will be eptified<sup>16</sup>, he almost seems to relish the prospect of being turned into a brainwashed killing machine if it means he can relinquish his personal responsibility: “He was not co-operating in what was done to him, so much as passively accepting it as a possible cure for the impending death of his old self” (250-51).

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<sup>16</sup> Military slang for “Education for Particular Tasks”—in Donald’s case, how to effectively kill people.

Donald Hogan Mark I is the man who walks into eptification; the man that walks out prefers to think of himself as Donald Hogan Mark II. Donald hopes that the post-eptification Mark II will be a remedy for Mark I's passivity and unwillingness to act: however, Mark II does not represent true praxis but simply replaces thought with action instead of integrating the two. Indeed, the post-eptification Donald does not represent a solution to Donald's identity crisis, as Donald originally hoped, but instead exacerbates it. Donald's deteriorating mental state is most clearly expressed in a remarkable passage describing his reverie on the plane ride to Yatakang:

[E]verything was confused: the men in the belly of the wooden horse waiting to be born and wreak destruction, and the pain of parturition, and Athena was born of the head of Zeus, and Time ate his children, as though he were not only in the wooden horse of the express but *was* it about to deliver the city to its enemy and its enemy to the city, a spiraling world-rose branch of pain with every thorn a spiky image pricking him into other times and other places. Ahead, the walls. Approaching them, the helpless stupid Odysseus of the twenty-first century, who must also be Odin blind in one eye so as not to let his right hand know what his left was doing. Odinzeus, wielder of thunder-bolts, how could he aim correctly without parallax? (284; original emphasis).<sup>17</sup>

In this short passage, Brunner alludes to several founding myths and figureheads of patriarchal western society, invoking the Greek gods Cronus and Zeus, as well as the cunning Odysseus; Odin and Jesus are invoked as well. However, in Donald's fevered imagination, these figures appear as debased, bastardized versions of themselves: the wily, cunning Odysseus is "helpless [and] stupid" in the modern world; Odin is blinded not in the pursuit of wisdom, but in his? self-deception ("so as not to let his right hand know what his left was doing"—itself a perversion of the biblical verse); and the combined figure of Odysseus-Odin-Zeus retains his destructive power but without the wisdom or ability to use it appropriately, lacking the proper perspective. This indiscriminate mixing of myths and characters is carried into the novel's present time, where Donald conflates himself with Odysseus and the express flight with the Trojan Horse (in a nod to his upcoming spy mission in Yatakang), while simultaneously viewing his body as the Trojan Horse (its deadly cargo being, perhaps, the eptified Mark II that lurks within his brain).

This conflation of myths and characters, time and space, speaks to another major theme of this passage, the transgression of borders. The most obvious reference to this type of boundary violation is the breaching of Troy's seemingly impenetrable walls, but there is also the image of Zeus's head being split or, with the reference to "Time and his children," the image of Cronus's stomach being cut open.<sup>18</sup> Even the boundaries between time and space are perceived as permeable, with "a spiky image pricking him [Donald] into other times and other places" (284).

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<sup>17</sup> Donald arrives at his own interpretation of his vision after being forcibly, albeit only temporarily, sterilized by the Yatakangi immigration officials: "It occurred to the seething Donald after a while that he had foreseen the indignity due to be inflicted on him. The idea was irrational, but that didn't concern him; he was content to feel that his curious state of mind on the express, when he had thought those wild thoughts about Odinzeus, stemmed from a prevision of this gesture to deprive him of manhood" (324). The satisfactoriness of Donald's interpretation I will leave up to the reader.

<sup>18</sup> Variants of the myth have Cronus regurgitate his children after being fed an emetic.

The transgression of borders dovetails with another prominent motif, the perversion of the natural order. In the myths associated with Cronus and Zeus, we have the image of sons overthrowing (and in Cronus's case, castrating) their fathers, and attempted infanticide in the image of Cronus devouring his children and Zeus swallowing the pregnant Metis. Buttressing the theme is the paradoxical "birth" of Athena from her father's body and the imagery of the wooden horse "birthing" the Greek men. Birth is also aligned with death and destruction in this passage, instead of the more traditional life and creation.

The themes of this passage—the degradation of the founding myths and figureheads of Western society, the transgression of boundaries, and the perversion of the natural order—can be applied both to Donald and to the western society portrayed in *Zanzibar* more generally. The post-epitification Donald is supposed to stand as an exemplary model of western masculinity: as a white, heterosexual, able-bodied, middle-class, university-educated American male, independent, intelligent, and physically able to protect himself on any occasion, Donald should stand for the synthesis of the intellectual and the physical and represent a fully integrated and realized individual. This, as the novel makes clear, is a blatant lie: although Donald tries to pretend that epitification has made him a better man, his rapidly deteriorating psychological state insists otherwise. Donald is not the fulfillment of the idealized western image of masculinity, but a parody of it. Epitification, as it is represented in the novel, is itself a perversion of the natural order, forcibly breaching the boundaries of the ego and turning Donald into an automaton; instead of uniting thought and action into an organic whole, epitification has schizophrenically divided the two into the conflicting, overlapping, and generally unstable personas of Donald Mark I and Donald Mark II. Epitification has only served to pit Donald against himself, "blind in one eye so as not to let his right hand know what his left was doing": Donald, blind and turned against himself, is the agent and instrument of destruction, both his own and others', and arrives in Yatajang both figuratively and literally "[c]onfused, struggling to retain his balance" (302).

Taken at a more general level, Donald's reverie can be seen as a commentary on the fragmentation and degradation of modern western society. In the debased images of Zeus, Cronus, Odysseus, and Odin we see the collapse of western mythology and its inability to act as a centre for the contemporary world: Donald is unable to use these fragmentary mythic images to shore up the ruins of the modern world as those before him have done, finding no help from "the helpless stupid Odysseus of the twenty-first century."

At this stage, Donald's estrangement and alienation are near complete: as an alternative to facing up to his situation, Donald simply surrenders, completely disassociating himself from the events around him. Indecisive, reluctant to act, and unwilling to take responsibility for his actions, Donald is as paralyzed as Eliot's Prufrock, left wondering "*Is it all going to have been worth while?*" (*Zanzibar* 525; original italics). Resentful, Donald bemoans his situation, but he refuses to accept accountability for the murders he has committed or to face the consequences of disobeying his orders: "*I've been tricked. I've been conned. I've been driven down a blind alley of life. I never wanted to be herded into corners where I had to kill or be killed. To be back where I was, bored and ordinary and dull, I'd give anything, anything!* But he could not afford to

be arrested and waste time and perhaps be deported” (449; original italics). Refusing to face his situation, Donald completely disassociates himself from the events around him:

From then until sunset time was sliced into disconnected images that might be not visual, but internal. Once he was in a corner of two walls bringing back the lunch he had eaten at the reed-thatched inn by the sea, wondering with detached curiosity at the way his stomach had altered the colour of the food. Another time he was leaning over the counter of one of the ubiquitous street-corner kiosks, pretending to argue with the proprietor over prices because there was a police car passing. But there was no sequence in the experiences. There was a fixed, due moment at which he must return to contact with the world, and until then he preferred not to perceive. (450-51)

Unsurprisingly, Donald’s mission ends in his complete psychotic break from reality after he kills the Yatakangi geneticist Sugaiguntung, whose deliverance was Donald’s entire mission. When Donald is finally reunited with Norman and the others at the novel’s close, he embodies the full destructive, alienating potential of the modern world: “You know about being eptified, I guess. They did it to me, the drecky bleeders. They took me and trained me and when they’d finished I wasn’t Donald Hogan any more though I feel I’m entitled to use the name because he’s dead now” (538). Psychotic, self-centred, and violent, Donald is divided against himself and fully estranged from the outside world.

In contrast to Donald, Norman accepts accountability for his actions and his happiness, and represents agency, integration, and praxis. Norman’s positive personal transformation and involvement in the Beninia project align him with the empowering, transformative, and humanist possibilities in the novel. Like Donald, Norman also has an early epiphany, but unlike Donald, his is a positive one. Early in the novel, Norman is involved in a violent encounter in which a protester loses her hand. The event causes Norman to reflect on his ancestor’s loss of a hand as a slave: “How do I feel about myself? I feel I’ve been conned. I feel ashamed. I finally evened the score. I got a trophy—I got a paleass’s hand. And how did I get where I could take that off? By following the rules for living that The Man laid down. And they’re no good! Because what use is that hand to my long-ago ancestor? He’s *dead!*” (93; original emphasis). This epiphany consists of two things: Norman’s realization of (and unwillingness to further participate in) the cycle of violence and revenge that has been structuring his life, and the recognition that he has been substituting another’s value system—“the rules for living that The Man laid down”—in place of his own.

Norman’s personal epiphany is followed by his appointment as head of General Technics’s Beninia project, a plan which involves improving the living conditions and educational system of the fictional African country so that GT will have the labour base and infrastructure it needs to mine its deep-sea mineral deposits. The meetings that follow Norman’s appointment as head of the Beninia project demonstrate his increasingly altruistic and humanist attitude: for the first time, Norman is directing his energy and attention to a cause outside of himself. As Norman learns more about the anomaly that is Beninia—a desperately poor country where all comers (whether invaders, benefactors, or refugees) are warmly received by “the unaggressive, welcoming Shinka” (292)—he comes to care about the welfare of the Beninian

people. Norman throws himself into the project, racing to implement the plan before the death of Beninia's ailing president leaves the country vulnerable to attack: "He forced himself to keep going, red-eyed, sometimes hoarse, often suffering violent indigestion, until he was almost ready to welcome his physical discomfort as growing-pains" (289). Readers witness Norman's transformation: while still retaining a healthy dose of cynicism and skepticism, he has supplemented them with the newfound belief that people are capable of doing good and that positive change—though hard to achieve—is possible. Ever the pragmatist, Norman acknowledges that his ability to enact meaningful, positive change is entirely dependent on his ability to manipulate the greed and self-interest of GT's board of directors and stockholders: however, as he reflects, "*It's only fair and just that sometimes making a fat profit should coincide with doing long-term good, and chances come too seldom for us to miss even one of them*" (365; original italics). In order for his plans to succeed, though, Norman must eventually venture outside of his privileged, hermetic bubble: "The facts were in the real world, and he was acutely aware how he had systematically isolated himself from reality" (295). It is time for Norman to go to Beninia.

In New York, Norman had a personal revelation; in Beninia, he has a cultural one. While the New York sequence is focused on Norman's efforts to move beyond his own self-serving interests, the Beninia sequence represents his tentative attempts to move beyond a narrow, Eurocentric point of view. In *Zanzibar*, Beninia represents tolerance, openness, and diversity; it represents finding unity in difference; and it also represents the encounter with the Other. Brunner is earnest in his good intentions: the Beninian people are described in overwhelmingly positive terms, and their customs—although strange from Norman's point of view—are often implied to be better than those practiced in the western world. However, despite this, Brunner's depiction of Beninia can be problematic: while Brunner clearly rejects the notion of nonwestern cultures as inferior to those of the "civilized" or "developed" world, this rejection is undermined by his reliance on stereotypes and clichés—even supposedly positive ones—about the nonwestern world. The Beninians far too often read as an updated version of the "noble savage": peaceful, inherently good, in tune with the rhythms of the natural world, and uncorrupted by materialism and its culture of conspicuous consumption. Beninia is characterized by "naked children playing in mud with squealing piglets" (337), a superstitious peasantry (386), and a general indifference to deadlines, formal protocols, and the tyranny of the clock: people go about their jobs "in this incredibly informal manner—which struck Norman as absurd" (387). Despite the novel's constant assertion that Beninia is an overcrowded nation continually flooded by refugees and on the brink of starvation, descriptions of the country stress its closeness to nature and the absence of man: "The road seemed like the only human intrusion into a beast-plant universe, and not the road as such because wild nature was reclaiming it, pitting its surface with holes that held bowlfuls of mud, but its idea of straightness" (384). Passages of this sort are what Gérard Klein is referring to when he declares that "it would even be possible—with some surprise—to find in the depth of Brunner's novels the worst clichés [sic] about the anonymous masses of the third world and of the proletariat, though, of course, inflected by a great deal of generosity" ("Discontent" 12). Ironically, in his attempts to instill the novel with alternatives to a Eurocentric point of view, Brunner has, to some extent, merely reinforced that viewpoint. However, it is good to be reminded that during the time in which *Zanzibar* was published,



Brunner was one of the few SF writers willing to directly acknowledge and discuss the issues of racism and (neo)colonialism in his writing. As Jad Smith reminds us,

Given the recent debates about racism and SF dubbed RaceFail, Brunner's handling of race deserves special note in this context. Readers get a glimpse of this problem from multiple angles—House's personal viewpoint, Masters's and Obomi's international perspectives, and Mulligan's quasi-academic slant, to name a few. What emerges is a complex picture of racial intolerance that ranges from Guinevere Steel's personal prejudice to General Technic's [sic] tokenism to the racially motivated radicalism of the Children of X and beyond. It even takes in neocolonialism and ethnic nationalism in Africa—at a time when, apart from a few notable exceptions such as Vernor Vinge's 1965 story "Apartness," the continent figured in most SF as little more than an exotic setting for adventure tales. Rather than offer up an easy moral about a recalcitrant problem, Brunner invited the reader to abandon truisms and provincial viewpoints, and to think about race across parallel contexts and cultures, even globally. (65-66)

A consideration of *Zanzibar*'s historical context does not excuse the problematic aspects of Brunner's approach to race, but it highlights Brunner's willingness to engage with difficult, but important, social concerns. Keeping this in mind, let's turn back to Norman's experiences in Beninia.

One of the running criticisms in *Zanzibar* is of people "abdicating their responsibilities as thinking individuals" (495), but Norman's development in Beninia is a positive response to this. Norman does his best to suspend his prejudices and preconceptions and to consider Beninia on its own terms. He finds himself confronted by notions of government and nationhood that are foreign to him: he struggles to understand a nation that "is more like a colossal family with nearly a million members than it's like a nation in our sense" (364-65). He is baffled by the workings of a government that views its population in terms of individuals instead of numbers. He is sceptical about the existence of a government that is more concerned with the well being of its individual members than with power, prestige, or wealth. In Beninia, Norman is confronted by a way of life vastly different from his own and, lacking any ready-made frame of reference by which to judge it, is forced to supply his own. After his return to the United States, Norman finds himself with a sort of double vision, with common everyday events being both familiar and strange: as Norman admits to Mulligan, "I've started noticing the things wrong with it [western civilization] all over again since I came home" (490). Norman is attempting—with varying degrees of success—to use the insights he has gained from Beninia to reevaluate his life in the States and to inform his proceedings as head of the Beninia project.

The novel ends with Norman in Beninia, overseeing the first stage of the Beninia project. This Norman is accountable, tolerant, and humane, trusting his own discretion and judgment—we see him approve the hiring of Frank and Sheena Potter, overruling the company policy that would have banned them on account of Sheena's pregnancy (511). While Norman and GT are still reliant on Shalmaneser's projections and forecasts to run the Beninia project successfully, Norman does not use this as an excuse to ignore his responsibility towards the people of GT and Beninia: "One could not abdicate all the responsibility to a machine. Some of it had to be

processed, at least, by a human being empowered to make human decisions, and Norman was that person” (534). By the novel’s end, Norman represents the positive union of thought and action: he is a healthy, whole, and accountable human being. In this way, Norman acts as a foil to Donald’s character, embodying the integrative tendencies of the novel in opposition to Donald’s disintegrative trajectory.

In this sense, Donald and Norman’s experiences function as analogues for the processes of estrangement and recognition, providing a concrete illustration of the feedback oscillation discussed at the beginning of this section. The divergences and intersections of Donald and Norman’s narrative arcs illustrate the play between the novel’s integrative and disintegrative elements and are mirrored by the novel’s form: *Zanzibar*’s episodic construction, numerous expository sequences, and multiple points of view are countered by its recurring characters, numerous allusions, and “continuity” episodes. Thus, *Zanzibar* can be understood as an enactment of the oscillation between estrangement and recognition, narrativizing SF’s “specific modality of existence” (Suvin, *Metamorphosis* 71). In *Zanzibar*, the abstract process of estrangement becomes a thematic centre, providing the reader with an iconic and accessible introduction to this important concept.

#### **2.4 "It's a Thought and Feeling and Your Own Heart's Blood": The Utopian Impulse in *Stand on Zanzibar***

While Donald’s narrative arc encapsulates the dystopian possibilities of *Zanzibar*, other arcs in the novel play with the promise and potential of utopia. Poppy Sheldon and her partner Roger Gawen are the locus of the novel’s first utopian strand. Poppy’s sweet, happy-go-lucky optimism immediately sets her apart from the rest of *Zanzibar*’s characters, as does her loving and mutually supportive relationship with Roger. Set alongside the other bitter and cynical characters in the novel, Poppy comes across as solid and larger than life: “the real world is leaning on her dreams” (4) and she and Roger are described as “the only two real people in the universe” (140). Poppy dreams of a better world for her unborn child, “not that shit-floored dingy horrible kind of world, but a beautiful place that never stops being exciting” (140); she has visions of a world where her family can walk “down a street paved with jewels toward a land of love” (140).

Poppy’s longing for this utopian world of beauty, love, and riches is all too palpable; the tragedy of her situation lies in the way she goes about achieving it. Her plan is to give birth to a child who will, from its first moments of consciousness, inhabit a beautiful, entertaining, psychedelic world enabled and sustained through a steady flow of hallucinogenic drugs, first administered *in utero* and later transmitted via Poppy’s breast milk. Poppy’s utopia is predicated on being able to “opt out” from society and retreat into a private fantasy world, but as the fate of fellow addict Bennie Noakes attests, the only sure-fire way to completely drop out of society is through death. Authorial mouthpiece Chad Mulligan seconds this point of view, lecturing, “There isn’t an outside. Talking about ‘society’s outcasts’ or ‘opting out’ is so much whaledreck. [...] In essence, using the term ‘out’ is as meaningless as trying to define a location outside the universe. There’s no place for ‘outside’ to *be*” (368; original emphasis). Poppy’s private retreat is

no more substantial than a dream, and dreams, as she finds out, can turn into nightmares all too easily. The next time we encounter Poppy, she is still in her own private psychedelic-induced world, but unlike the previous one, this “world was a place of echoing colours, mostly drab—the colour-range of shit. The world was a place of tingling smells, making her nose run and her eyes water. The world was a place of indefinable menace, that clad her skin in the crawling caress of invisible cold snails” (482). Reality further intrudes in the form of a police officer who has received a report about a pregnant woman possibly using drugs. The cop isn’t malicious or judgmental, but Poppy panics and in her disoriented state, mistakes a window for a closet door and falls to her death. As Brunner’s decision to kill off his character Poppy suggests, her utopian vision is an untenable one: it is completely reliant on external stimuli (drugs) without her in any way trying to change the outside world. It is also a solipsistic vision of utopia, devoid of community and camaraderie, and quickly degenerates into a dystopia.

The case of Henry Butcher offers further commentary on the merit of Poppy’s drug-induced vision. Like Poppy, Butcher is a proponent of psychedelics, a believer that “universal love could take on chemical form” (277); however, as his last name intimates, his beliefs are far from benign. Butcher uses his position at a blood bank to covertly inject the psychedelic Triptine into blood donations, causing at least one woman to have a miscarriage. Upon hearing of the death, a “shadow clouded [Henry’s] round, smiling countenance, but lasted only an instant [...]. Who wouldn’t whistle, knowing that every patient who required a blood-transfusion in this hospital would from now on experience the wonderful, mind-opening enlightenment that Triptine could bestow?” (277-78). Henry’s dismissal of the fetus’s death and the mother’s distress and his willingness to force his ideals (and drugs) upon unsuspecting, non-consenting individuals clearly mark him as an unsympathetic character, and paint his vision in a profoundly negative light. Drugs, whatever their other benefits, are not the way to “universal love,” “mind-opening enlightenment” (278), or a better world.<sup>19</sup>

If Poppy’s attempt to withdraw into a private personal utopia and Butcher’s vision of enlightenment through drugs are shown to be untenable options in the novel so too is the very public vision of utopia that General Technics is peddling to its western consumers. “The happening world (14): RECRUITING POSTERS” displays the artificial construct that GT’s advertising team has crafted to attract potential volunteers:

*Stock cue VISUAL:* white boy age appx. 17 lifts up negro child to see handsome tall new building under blue sky.

*Stock cue SOUND:* “Thinking about... Beninia?”

*Stock cue VISUAL:* BCU child’s wondering face.

*Stock cue SOUND:* “That’s the part of the big scene where more things will be happening...more marvels will be wrought!”

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<sup>19</sup> Brunner’s treatment of drugs in *Zanzibar* is quite interesting, especially when considered in the context of the 1960s. On the one hand, *Zanzibar*’s focus on psychedelics and the ubiquity of drug use among the novel’s characters is completely in line with the countercultural movements of the ’60s and the popular interest in LSD and other hallucinogens. On the other hand, Brunner is quick to point out the potential costs of drug use, whether through the death of Poppy, the comatose drug addict Bennie Noakes, or the cultish mindset of Henry Butcher. At its core, *Zanzibar* betrays a certain uneasiness with the idea of widespread, legalized drug use, although this unease is masked by the novel’s superficial fascination with drug culture.

*Stock cue VISUAL:* cliptage splitscreen—jungle with animals, building in course of erection, children running, river with boats, etc.

*Stock cue SOUND:* “Beninia Theme” specially recorded by the Em Thirty-Ones.

*Stock cue VISUAL:* Mr. & Mrs. Everywhere walk across village square with tame deer following towards (pan) fine new sky-line of buildings and people of village fall in behind, children playing with deer and trying to get on for a ride.

*Stock cue SOUND:* “Beninia Theme” down and speech over—“You too could be part of this fantastic, magnificent, unprecedented twenty-first century venture!

Note the number of the nearest agency hiring volunteers!” (446)

GT draws upon the imagery associated with the Garden of Eden in its attempts to entice its western audience. The commercial depicts Beninia as a lush tropical paradise, where both the flora and fauna are tame, harmless, and under man’s control: to wit, the image of the “tame deer” following the Everywheres and “children playing with deer and trying to get on for a ride.” The advertisement’s emphasis on the harmonious integration of the human and natural worlds is an indirect commentary on the crowded concrete cityscapes of the developed world: the commercial depicts Beninia as a space where humans can still experience an authentic connection with the natural environment.

However, as readers we already know that this vision of Beninia is a false one: as an earlier encyclopedia entry informs us, Beninia is characterized by “gross overpopulation [...] and almost completely lacks the natural resources to support itself. Recipient of endless UN aid, it has been reduced to the status of a beggar in the comity of nations [...] and] the short term promises famine and plague” (73). GT’s picture of Beninia is a deceptive one, designed to capitalize on its audience’s desires. For example, one of the striking things about this advertisement is the way it updates the trope of “the white man’s burden” for a modern audience. The rhetoric of the superior white man lifting up his unfortunate African brethren is figured by the “white boy”—at seventeen, almost a man—lifting up the “negro child.” Gone are the overt imperial and colonial references, with their unsavoury ideological baggage, but the underlying sentiment remains: Mr. and Mrs. Everywhere lead the way from the backwards village square towards the “fine new sky-line of buildings and *people of the village fall in behind*” (my emphasis). The ad jubilantly invites its audience to “be part of this fantastic, magnificent, unprecedented twenty-first century venture,” and the implication is clear that the “marvels will be wrought” by its western volunteers, not the Beninian residents.

GT’s commercial presents its western consumers with an idealized vision of beautiful jungles, tame animals, and grateful natives, with the addition of all of the modern marvels and comforts that the developed world can provide. It is a slick, commercialized Eden crafted by GT’s advertisers for the sole purpose of convincing people to volunteer in Beninia, a mirage that disappears once you get too close. It perpetuates false, tired clichés about the nonwestern world (its unspoiled wilderness, the grateful and backwards natives), conflates industrialization with progress, and perpetuates a neo-colonial attitude. However, the commercial also taps into a source of genuine utopian potential: if it speaks to its audience’s desire for superiority, it also speaks to their longing for change, to their belief that the world is capable of becoming a better place, and to their hope that individuals can make a difference in the world.

In *Zanzibar*, Beninia is the locus of utopian activity. Beninia is in many ways perfectly suited to be the site of Brunner's utopian plot: as a fictional country primarily populated by a non-existent ethnic group, Beninia is free from the political and historical encumbrances that invariably accompany depictions of, say, the US or China in *Zanzibar*'s near-future world. That said, Beninia's extreme poverty, lack of natural resources, and location between two martial and grasping neighbours would seem to put the lie to any suggestions that Beninia represents a better or more ideal place to live (although Beninia's near-total lack of infrastructure and industry does make it an invitingly blank canvas upon which to work). Norman explicitly comments on this seeming paradox, exclaiming,

I didn't see how a broken-down hole-in-corner place like Beninia could be as good as he [Elihu Masters] claimed. I *still* don't see how! All I know is this—here's a place where there aren't any murders, there aren't any muckers, there aren't any tempers lost, there aren't any tribal squabbles, there aren't any riots, there's nothing of what people in supposedly more fortunate countries have come to take for granted. Yet your people are poor, sometimes hungry, pretty often sick, living in leaky huts and scratching up the ground with wooden ploughs hauled by scrawny oxen... Prophet's beard, I can't even hear myself say it without thinking it's ridiculous. (428; original emphasis)

Yet, ridiculous or not, Beninia *is* the utopian centre of the novel. There are three separate yet deeply interconnected utopian strands that are tied up in Beninia. The first, more traditional strand is represented by GT's "twenty-year rehabilitation project that will create an advanced industrial bridgehead" (95) in Beninia. The second strand focuses on a more technical and scientific approach and revolves around the issue of genetic manipulation. The third, and in my opinion overlooked, strand is the more human(e) utopian possibility symbolized by the Beninian folk-hero Begi.

As mentioned, the initial utopian strand centres on GT's Beninia project: in its plans and their execution, the Beninia project clearly partakes of the historical utopian preoccupation with social design and the quest to build the perfect community, à la Bellamy's *Looking Backward* or Robert Owen's self-contained townships. In a nutshell, Elihu Masters convinces GT to invest money in the development of Beninia because doing so will create the port and the demand that GT needs in order to profitably mine a deep-sea mineral deposit off the coast: Masters's genius is in using GT's greed for a positive end. For the most part, the social and material improvements that Brunner imagines stick close to the traditional utopian script: sufficient food, shelter, and clothing for all inhabitants; accessible medical care; the creation of a nation-wide education system; no taxes; the promotion of industry; and the political stability and military strength needed to protect Beninia against outside interference. As Masters describes it,

The first three years will go on diet, sanitation and building. The next decade will go on training—a literacy drive first, then a technical education programme designed to make eight per cent of the population of Beninia into skilled workers. I see you're looking incredulous, but I say I believe this will work. There's no other country in the world where you could bring it off, but in Beninia you can. And the last seven years will go to build the factories, install the machine-tools, string the powerlines, level the roads—everything else, in short, to leave Beninia

as the most advanced country on the continent, South Africa not excepted. (96) The interesting part of Masters's speech is not the content or timeframe of his plans for rehabilitating Beninia—which are fairly standard—but his insistence on the exceptional, one might even say anomalous, nature of Beninia. Numerous characters comment on the implausibility of a country that is simultaneously poor, crowded, and peaceful: indeed, even the all-knowing Shalmaneser can't make sense of Beninia, stating, "The data given to me include unacceptable anomalies" (478). As a result, Norman, Mulligan, and a contingent of GT staffers head to Beninia to find, in Mulligan's words, what "force of unknown nature is acting on the population and causing them to behave differently from known patterns of human reaction under comparable circumstances elsewhere" (480).

By *Zanzibar's* end, Norman is in the first stage of implementing GT's plan, but the novel's focus is no longer on its design and execution. One reason for this is Mulligan's success in finding his "force of an unknown nature," which turns out to be a dominant genetic mutation among Beninia's most numerous ethnic group. The discovery of the genetic mutation that accounts for the Shinka's non-aggression shifts *Zanzibar's* utopian narrative away from the political and social and towards the technical and scientific. This shift is exemplified by one GT employee's reaction to Mulligan's news: "You seem to be claiming that war could be cured, like a disease, with a dose of the proper medicine" (542). It would seem that peace and happiness are no longer the province of politics but of science.

The discovery of the genetic component behind the Shinka's happiness complements the development of the so-called "optimization" in Yatakang.<sup>20</sup> An initial source of utopian hope, the process of optimization—with its focus on genetically engineering humans to be stronger and/or smarter—is revealed as being more likely to exacerbate the world's problems than solve them. After Yatakang's initial announcement, "the entire human race seemed momentarily united in a single entrancing dream—the hope that the next generation they would bequeath to Mother Earth would be whole, healthy, sane, capable of making amends for the rape they had inflicted in olden days" (358). However, state rivalries, coupled with Yatakang's refusal to share its techniques, have led to a powder keg of envy, paranoia, and anger. In addition, Yatakang's leading tectogeneticist, Sugaiguntung, warns that his government's determination to use optimization to create a nation of prodigies is likely to make the world a worse, not better, place:

"I can give a baby forebrain development which might be to ours as my orang-outangs' to their mothers'. Who is going to teach that child? When four out of my five apes killed themselves because we could not teach them how to live except as humans—and they weren't human! [...] But for our precautions they might have killed a man. You can pen and guard a super-ape. Which among us humans will try to control a super-human? It will not be stopped from killing if it desires to kill" (404-05).

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<sup>20</sup> Interestingly, many of the ideas central to *Zanzibar's* fictional world are dealt with in Alvin Toffler's popular work of speculative non-fiction, *Future Shock* (1970): among numerous other topics, Toffler discusses deep-sea mining (168), genetically engineered infants (179), and discovering "the biochemical basis of aggression" and designing drugs to counter it (386).

However, the discovery of the Shinka mutation offers an alternative goal for optimization and has the potential to restore its capacity for good. Instead of making people smarter or stronger, optimization could be used to make them more peaceful.

Ultimately, this plan is forestalled by Sugaiguntung's untimely death, leaving the less satisfying solution of artificially synthesizing the Shinka's "territorial-aggression suppressant" (541). As Mulligan remarks,

Christ, what does it matter if we have to take brotherly love out of an aerosol can? It's contagious stuff no matter where you get it from [...] But it's not right! [...] It's not something to be made in a factory, packaged and wrapped and sold! It's not something meant to be—to be dropped in bombs from UN aircraft! That's what they'll do with it, you know. And it isn't right. It isn't a product, a medicine, a drug. It's thought and feeling and your own heart's blood. It isn't right! (545)

It is on this ambivalent note that Donald and Norman's narrative arc closes: the discovery of the genetic basis for the Shinka's peaceful behaviour could be used to bring universal peace and tolerance to the world, but as Mulligan's references to factories, bombs, and aircrafts suggest, it could all too easily be used for economic, military, and/or political advancement and domination. Likewise, Mulligan has discovered the Shinka's genetic mutation while on GT's payroll, using GT's employees and resources, effectively rendering the discovery GT's property: as John J. Pierce points out, "Now the secret belongs to a corporation, which can exploit it at a profit" (152). A further note of ambivalence is added when we remember how Brunner portrayed Poppy Sheldon and Henry Butcher's conviction that "universal love could take on chemical form" (277).

This ambiguous ending is picked up and echoed in the critics' responses to *Zanzibar*. Some critics interpret the ambiguity favourably, viewing it as Brunner's attempt to shift the reader's focus from the novel back to the outside world. Patrick Murphy is one of these critics, writing,

Rather than giving readers the 'answer' for overpopulation or the formula for ending aggression and human violence, Brunner supplies a vision of the future in which these problems are not being sufficiently tackled, and thus encourages his readers to feel a sense of responsibility for the negative trends developing in world culture. Without a comic romantic closure [...] in which the problem is neatly solved, he denies readers the cathartic release from responsibility that comes from the *authority* having the situation under control as demonstrated by the knowledge and power of the spokesman-hero. (25; original emphasis)

Brunner does take pains to highlight the continuing nature of the world's problems at the end of *Zanzibar*, and the novel's final episode—"context (28): A MESSAGE FROM OUR SPONSORS"—lends credence to the idea that Brunner is trying to direct the reader's attention back to the outside world.

However, many critics view Brunner's decision to end the novel with the discovery of a genetic basis for Beninia's peaceful, tolerant society as a misstep. Generally, these critics object to, as Fredric Jameson phrases it, Brunner's "substitution of 'natural' and 'Scientific'

considerations for political and social ones” (Reynolds, Rottensteiner, and Jameson 275). Klein goes so far as to call Brunner’s ending “completely artificial [...] we might as well say that there is no solution outside of miracle” (“Discontent” 11). These critics also tend to object to Brunner’s suggestion that violence and hatred are “implicit in the psychological structure of mankind” (*Zanzibar* 86). Michael Stern echoes the points raised by Jameson and Klein, noting, In SZ, Brunner is unable to conceive of a utopia inaugurated by anything less than a scientific technique (genetic engineering) which fundamentally alters what he sees as an inherently aggressive and violent human nature. Politics as a non-technical science of man is debased and impotent, and the possibility of integrating technology with a humane body politic without in some way integrating the mechanical with each individual’s body is absent. (Behaviorism is, after all, the ideology most compatible with Brunner’s ethological model of politics.) (21)

An ethological model of politics stresses the importance of environment and instinctual responses: as Fred H. Willhoite Jr. suggests, “an ethological approach represents an attempt to take seriously man’s animality, to view him as a particular kind of animal within the evolutionary order of nature” (618). This ideology is especially prevalent in Chad Mulligan’s sections, in which he lectures that “you’ve inherited from [your hominin ancestors] just about everything that makes you human, apart from a few late glosses such as language” (*Zanzibar* 64). This view of human behavior emphasizes instinctive responses and environmental triggers, and Stern places it in opposition to the type of “socially-constructed means for achieving human interests” (114) found in politics.

Stern modifies his position later on, and in doing so raises an important aspect of *Zanzibar* that both Jameson and Klein have overlooked—the utopian impetus represented by Begi. Stern writes that,

More generally, I think, it [the Shinka folk tale “Begi and the Oracle”] is an affirmation of what, in the context of SZ’s ambivalence about the status of knowledge as technique or as critique, I would call the political: man’s potential to remake himself and his society through radical acts of will mediated not by technology but by other people. The future can be made, but not predicted with the kind of certainty which preordains its own conclusions and thus frustrates action. [...] At the end of SZ, one is left with only the tantalizing hope that Begi and the Beninians will swallow up advanced industrial society even as it plans to disseminate their genetic legacy by technology. (122-23)

Begi, an archetypal trickster-hero, represents the third utopian strand, one that focuses on the social and the human as opposed to the impersonal bureaucratic bent of GT’s Beninia plan or the more technologically-oriented genetic solution. Featured prominently in the episodes titled “The Dry Child” and “Begi and the Oracle,” Begi punishes the greedy, the dishonest, the violent, and the sanctimonious. As a trickster, Begi prefers to outsmart rather than overpower his opponents: as he remarks in “Begi and the Sea-Monster,” “Perhaps the monster is bigger than I am. It remains to be seen if he can think better than I do” (412). Significantly for the Beninians, Begi is a master of turning other people’s plans to his own purpose, as is illustrated in “Begi and His Greedy Sister.” In this tale, Begi secretly observes his sister taking the largest chicken leg from



the pantry and hiding it in the rafters to eat later. However, when dinnertime comes, Begi refuses the food offered to him, stating, “There is a bigger bird roosting under the roof” (410). He then retrieves the hidden chicken leg as his sister enviously looks on, unable to accuse Begi without implicating herself. Similarly, many of the tales focus on how Begi aids the Shinka in outsmarting their foreign masters (391), a story which has particular resonance in light of Beninia’s arrangement with GT. “Tolerant, level-headed, and witty” (392), Begi represents the ideal way of being for the Shinka: he is compassionate and just, but he also embraces the vulgar, profane, and humorous. I would suggest that in the folk-hero of Begi, Brunner has provided a more human(e) utopian model in order to balance the impersonal bureaucratic utopia orchestrated by GT and the scientific utopia of genetic mutations and optimization.

These three utopian strands—the political/bureaucratic, the technical/scientific, and the human(e)—are united in “tracking with closeups (31): UNTO US A CHILD.” In this episode, Sheena Potter—an American citizen working for GT in Beninia—goes into premature labour in a remote Beninian village. The birth acts as a catalyst, bringing the American and Shinka communities together:

The word had got around. In the rain, eyes large and round under their improvised hoods, the women of the village were gathering as though to join in the traditional rituals which he [Sheena’s husband Frank] had seen accompanying all the births since his arrival. His fist clenched and began to rise, framing a threatening gesture to drive them away. It stopped at hip-height and the fingers straightened. [...] He went to the door and stepped out. One of the women gathered called uncertainly the formula for good luck at the time of a birth: “Brother, may you have a child like Begi!” [...] [H]e had heard the ritual exchange often enough to give the traditional answer. “Begi brought good fortune wherever he went—if he comes to us let all share the joy!” They relaxed and grinned and nudged one another. He smiled back and added in English, “Here, don’t stand in the rain. Come up on the verandah.” (532-33)

The child is delivered by a Shinka midwife, but the midwife is soon joined by a nurse from the nearest city who brings an incubator with her. Born in Beninia because of her parents’ involvement in the GT project, safely delivered by a Shinka midwife, kept alive by western technology, and blessed in the name of Begi, Frank and Sheena’s daughter represents the synthesis of what is best about each culture, and her birth heralds the creation of a new community. The title of the episode, with its allusion to the birth of Christ, hints at the significance of the child’s birth and highlights the redemptive and transformative potential latent in the fusion of tradition and technology.

While the birth of Frank and Sheena’s child introduces a ray of hope into the generally gloomy atmosphere of *Zanzibar*, Brunner makes sure to remind his readers that its vision of a better future is only one of the options. The other option is madness, destruction, and death, a dystopian vision of the future embodied by the psychotic version of Donald we are left with at the novel’s end. Indeed, as the antepenultimate episode of the novel reminds us, life for most of the people in *Zanzibar*’s world is decidedly unpleasant: of the twenty-seven people introduced in “READ THE DIRECTIONS,” ten have died by the end of the novel, nearly all of them in

particularly violent and gruesome ways, and no one is any closer to solving *Zanzibar*'s population problem. This is the genius of Brunner's novel: while individual parts of *Zanzibar* can be simplistic, one-sided, or clichéd when considered on their own, they are almost always balanced by an opposing viewpoint elsewhere in the novel. So when Jameson laments Brunner's "substitution of 'natural' and 'Scientific' considerations for political and social ones" (Reynolds, Rottensteiner, and Jameson 275) and Klein objects to the "completely artificial" (11) nature of genetic engineering as a solution to the world's problems, they are both right and wrong. Considered as a stand-alone solution, the Shinka's fortuitous genetic mutation does smack of a *deus ex machina*. Indeed, one could plausibly argue that the Shinka's mutation negates the philosophy perpetuated by the Begi tales because these tales arose out of a culture that was only able to exist because of the pacifying effects of the mutation. However, in *Zanzibar*, as in real life, things are more complicated. GT's involvement in Beninia was key not only to the discovery of the Shinka's mutation, but also to the continued existence of Beninia and its people: by all accounts, Beninia would have been annihilated by its warmongering neighbours if GT hadn't stepped in. As Masters puts it, if Beninia is ever invaded, "the loser is going to scorch the earth behind him when he retreats, and there will be nothing left except rubble and corpses!" (96). Masters's plan—which hinges on using GT's greed for his own ends—is a classic example of Begi's *modus operandi*, while Norman's tireless work on behalf of the Beninians and his growing belief in "human beings empowered to make human decisions" also resonates with Begi's philosophy. The interesting part is that both men are Americans—indeed, Norman does not set foot in Beninia, or meet a single Beninian, until the GT project is firmly underway. In this case, it is clear that the men are being influenced by Begi's philosophy, *not* by the effects of a genetic mutation. While Norman's transformation and gradual acceptance of accountability and agency together do not provide as flashy a solution as the genetic modification of the world's masses, it is, for the time being, a more practical and obtainable one, and proof that even if humans are predisposed to violence and aggression, we are capable of overcoming them without any technological interventions. Indeed, looked at from a different angle, one could argue that it is Masters and Norman's commitment to the political and social that enables the discovery and use of the technological and scientific "solutions" in the first place.

## 2.5 Man as Machine, Machine as Man

In *Zanzibar*, the line between man and machine is becoming increasingly blurred. "Man as machine" is a motif that runs throughout the novel and is highlighted by Donald Hogan's mantra: "*First you use machines, then you wear machines, and then [...] you serve machines*" (226; original italics). The sartorial choices of *Zanzibar*'s western inhabitants mimic and mirror the culture's obsession with technology and highlight the increasing slippage between man and machine. The aptly named Guinevere Steel is the tastemaker of this world and the fashionable young things that frequent her Beautiques emerge "finished to molecular tolerances, gleaming, shimmering, polished not like diamonds but like the parts that went into Shalmaneser where nothing could be allowed to go wrong" (178). This process—flawless, sterile, standardized—reduces the Beautiques's customers to products, as interchangeable as "the parts that went into Shalmaneser." Everything organic and natural is made over in the image of the machine. Take Norman's girlfriend, for example: "Her almost white hair was spindled into the fashionable

antenna style, her veins were traced with blue—what some wit had nicknamed ‘printed circuit-lation’—and her nails, nipples and contact lenses were chromed” (74). This look is a deliberate one, cultivated not only for aesthetic appeal, but also as an expression and embodiment of a deeper philosophy: as Steel herself elaborates, “We don’t live in the world of our ancestors, where dirt, and disease, and—and what one might call general randomness dictated how we lived. No, we have taken control of our entire environment, and what we choose by way of fashion and cosmetics matches that achievement” (52).

Georgette Tallon Buckfast, the founder and head of General Technics, also contributes to the slippage between man and machine, but her modifications are more substantial than the superficial changes Guinevere promotes. Buckfast, described as “less of a machine, more of a human being, but partaking of the nature of both” (3), represents the logical continuation of Donald’s mantra: after one uses, then wears, and then serves machines, the next logical step is to become one. With her pacemaker, “lung-tissue transplant, the plastic venous valves, the kidney graft, the pinned bones, the vocal cords replaced because of cancer” (17), Buckfast is perhaps a more realistic take on the image of the cyborg: very old, very rich, and using machines to supplement, rather than augment, her physical abilities.

However, physical modifications (whether superficial sartorial changes or the more substantial physical modifications that Buckfast sports) represent only one aspect of the idea of “man as machine”: the psychological programming that Donald undergoes when he is eptified represents a more subtle—and dangerous—fusion of man and technology. Donald’s stay at the military base is intensely dehumanizing:

The people he encountered treated him as though he were a faulty bread-board mock-up for a novel device, to be tested and made over into a version suitable for the production-line. [...] Some administered drugs, chiefly to destroy perceptual sets. When new knowledge was laid across his plastic mind it sank in deep with neither preconceptions nor independent judgment to hinder its passage. It was as though one were to remove a man’s skeleton and replace it with another of stainless steel—and nowadays, in fact, bones could be changed. (250)

Guinevere Steel’s comparison of humans to interchangeable machine parts is repeated in the image of Donald as a mass-produced device “suitable for the production line.” Man is simply another commodity. Additionally, the likening of Donald’s psychological modification to the insertion of a stainless steel skeleton links Donald’s cognitive transformation to Buckfast’s physical one—as Mulligan comments, the post-eptification Donald is no man but “an efficient killing machine” (544). The process of optimization could also be seen as contributing to the slippage between man and machine. As Stern suggests, “The Yatakangi announcement that Sugaiguntung’s tectogenetics will be able to produce supermen and women, tailored to specification from raw chromosomes, has an overtly militaristic cast [...] and suggests that optimization may be the apotheosis of eptification, the ultimate version of man as automaton, genetically rather than operantly conditioned” (119). Unlike Guinevere’s obvious physical modifications or Buckfast’s more subtle ones (“close study of her bosom might reveal the inequality which betrayed her use of a cardiac pacemaker [16]”), the changes produced by eptification or optimization are much harder to detect.

The slippage between man and machine is not a unidirectional one, however: not only are men becoming more like machines, but machines are becoming more like men. Shalmaneser, like many machines, has been anthropomorphized by its designers and its public: “he” has been given a human voice to talk with—the voice of a dead operatic baritone, as a matter of fact—and is the subject of a series of limericks about his relationship with a “randy young wench named Teresa” (285). However, Shalmaneser’s humanization extends beyond these superficial traits to what we perceive as a uniquely human ability: the capacity for consciousness.<sup>21</sup> One of *Zanzibar*’s numerous subplots revolves around Shalmaneser’s growing self-awareness. The question isn’t *if* Shalmaneser should be designed to achieve selfhood but *when* “he” will achieve it: indeed, members of the original design team are worried that “something *had* gone wrong with the schematics. By this time, they claimed, it should have been established beyond doubt that Shalmaneser was conscious in the human sense, possessed of an ego, a personality and a will” (287; original emphasis). The problem, however, lies in the designers’ inability to independently verify if Shalmaneser is conscious or if he is simply a very good mimic: as Shalmaneser himself comments, “It appears impossible for you to determine whether the answer I give to that question is true or false. If I reply affirmatively there does not seem to be any method whereby you can ascertain the accuracy of the statement by referring it to external events” (288). Of course, in fifteen minutes Mulligan is able to solve the question that had stumped the programmers for years. Called in to fix Shalmaneser after the computer refused to accept the Beninian data’s veracity, Mulligan realizes that the computer’s refusal to accept the data is proof of its sentience: as he explains to Norman,

Did nobody ever point out to you that the only liberty implied by free will is the opportunity to be wrong? In words of one syllable more or less: what Shal has done is exercise his built-in faculties—the ones everybody on the design team expected, hoped for, advertised as a colossal breakthrough in cybernetics and then refused to recognize when they saw them happening! (491)

Fittingly, as the novel progresses, Shalmaneser is depicted in increasingly human terms. For example, the language Mulligan uses when referring to Shalmaneser (“he,” “personal acquaintance”) places the two in a relationship of equality on the basis of their positions as two mutually sentient beings: Mulligan talks of Shalmaneser “running the country as of now, isn’t he? And from personal acquaintance I think he’ll make a fine job of it” (513). Indeed, the penultimate episode of the novel definitively answers the question of Shalmaneser’s sentience by providing us with our first view into “his” thoughts:

Bathed in his currents of liquid helium, self-contained, immobile, vastly well informed by every mechanical sense: Shalmaneser.

Every now and again there passes through his circuits a pulse which carries the cybernetic equivalent of the phrase, “Christ, what an imagination I’ve got.” (548)

Ironically, the establishment of Shalmaneser’s ego, personality, and will comes at a time when many of *Zanzibar*’s human inhabitants are beginning to doubt the existence of their own: recall,

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<sup>21</sup> Supercomputers, sentient or otherwise, are a recurring image in Brunner’s work: the Gottschalk’s sentient supercomputer returned from the future in *The Jagged Orbit* is probably the most dramatic example, but the 1953 short story “Thou Good and Faithful” depicts a planet populated solely by sentient supercomputers and various robots while Brunner’s first novel, *Galactic Storm* (1951) features “an iconoclastic young genius using a supercomputer to identify widespread global warming” (Smith L 372; Chapter 1).

for example, Donald's persistent fear that he is "only one among millions of manikins, all of whom were versions of a Self without beginning or end" (46).

While the establishment of Shalmaneser's consciousness certainly has positive implications (especially with regard to the Beninia project), it has troubling ones as well, raising questions about humanity's overreliance on technological solutions to the neglect of political and social ones. As Mulligan exclaims at the novel's close, "What in God's name is it worth to be human, if we have to be saved from ourselves by a machine?" (545), although he eventually concedes that "it's better to be saved by a machine than not to be saved at all" (545). Stern discusses the consequences of Shalmaneser's sentience in his essay, noting that

Mulligan's conversation with Shalmaneser is a triumph of 'dialogic,' his empathy for the way the computer might regard the Beninia data a model of communication as the mutually-transforming interaction of self and other. But Shalmaneser's joining of the human race, while it strips the machine of its godhead and affirms the ideal of species integration, also reenacts in a different form Brunner's commitment to genetic engineering as salvation—the merging of flesh and program inside each individual's body as well as within the body of mankind as a species—rather than to non-behaviorist political renovation. (122)

It is puzzling that Stern would choose Mulligan's recognition of Shalmaneser's sentience—which, as Mulligan explains, consists of "the opportunity to be wrong" (*Zanzibar* 491)—as an example of "Brunner's commitment to genetic engineering as salvation" (Stern 122). Would Shalmaneser's fallibility not undermine Stern's charge that *Zanzibar* places too much faith in technological solutions?

I would suggest that Brunner's treatment of Shalmaneser's ascent into consciousness is more nuanced than Stern gives him credit for: the closing glimpse into Shalmaneser's thoughts is designed to trouble, not reassure the reader. Shalmaneser's thought—"Christ, what an imagination I've got" (548)—is an exact repetition of drug addict Bennie Noakes's refrain: "Bennie Noakes sits in front of a set tuned to SCANALYZER orbiting on Triptine and saying over and over, 'Christ what an imagination I've got!' " (9). Brunner's deliberate parallel between *Zanzibar*'s "mechanical Messiah [sic]" (86-87) and the terminally addicted Noakes—described by one character as "*Rotting. Just rotting. What kind of a life is that?*" (119; original italics)—problematizes critics' assumption that Shalmaneser is Brunner's panacea to the novel's problems. In addition, there are subtle reminders throughout *Zanzibar* that technology—sentient supercomputers included—is fallible and that suggest that humans still have an essential role to play in the world: the state's supercomputers, for example, have incorrectly predicted that Norman would fail in his role as head of the Beninia project, leading the state spokesman to comment, "There's no substitute for real-life experience even in the age of Shalmaneser" (319). The importance of actual experience is stressed repeatedly, as are the issues of agency, accountability, and responsibility. As previously discussed, Norman's preparations for Beninia failed to adequately prepare him for his actual experience of the place: as he reflects, "Isolated in the air-conditioned GT tower, one might juggle for a thousand years with data from computers and pattern them into a million beautiful logical arrays. But you had to get out on the ground and see if the data were accurate before you could put over the programming switches on

Shalmaneser from ‘hypothetical’ to ‘real’ ” (387). There are also the matters of agency, accountability, and responsibility, things that cannot be handed off to a computer, sentient or not: as noted earlier, Norman concludes that “one could not abdicate all the responsibility to a machine. Some of it had to be processed, at least, by a human being empowered to make human decisions” (534). Brunner seems to be suggesting that, for all of the invaluable help Shalmaneser and other computers like “him” can provide by analyzing data, forecasting trends, and making predictions, models, and recommendations, human agency—not to mention empathy and accountability—is not simply replaced by these machines. Indeed, if Shalmaneser’s thoughts are anything to go by—he views humanity as a figment of his imagination—he is spectacularly ill-equipped to make the type of human decisions that Norman is talking about. Sentience does not equal empathy. Likewise, if Brunner takes pains to show the problems inherent in a man-like machine, his machine-like men and women fare even worse. In the end, Buckfast is let down by both her dying body and the “infallible” Shalmaneser. She dies inside a “chilly computer shrine” (432) from a rage-induced stroke triggered by Shalmaneser’s refusal of the Beninian data. Donald’s technological enhancements ultimately fail him as well (and could actually be why he ended up killing Sugaiguntung and botching his mission), leaving him unfit for further state work and incapable of being reintegrated into society. It seems that Guinevere’s proclamation of man’s mastery over nature is premature, more of a wish than a reality. Thus, I would argue that instead of glorifying the technical and the scientific to the exclusion of the social and political, Brunner is actually cautioning against an overreliance on these types of technical solutions by emphasizing the unpredictable nature of the natural and social world.

## 2.6 Conclusion: A Model for Knowing

In my introduction, I suggested that *Zanzibar*’s form—its episodic construction, multiple points of view, and numerous expository sequences—could be seen as an embodiment of the novel’s themes (or vice-versa). However, up to this point I have focused on the form and content as more or less separate issues; I would now like to look at the interplay between the two. In *Zanzibar* the form and content mutually reinforce one another. The concept of information overload is reproduced by the novel’s frequent shifts between exposition and narration, between characters and settings; the issue of overpopulation and incessant crowding is brought to life by the barrage of different voices in *Zanzibar*’s polyphonic text; and the future world’s lack of a common centre and shared cultural values is reinforced through the book’s fragmented narrative form.

In many ways, *Zanzibar*’s formal qualities emphasize the fragmentary, composite nature of the work—indeed, by terming it a “non-novel” Brunner highlights its difference from the fluid, continuous narrative of a “typical” novel. *Zanzibar*’s episodic construction and the self-containment of many of the episodes certainly support this point of view, as does the expository nature of most of the episodes—all impediments to the progression of a smooth, uncontested narrative voice. The multiple and often conflicting points of view in the novel create a polyphonic text which (ideally) resists simplistic, reductionist readings, insisting on the specificity of each narrative voice. Furthermore, Brunner’s self-reflexive opening and closing segments highlight the mediated nature of *Zanzibar*’s fictional narrative, reminding us that it is

the production of a specific individual located in a particular socio-historical situation and represents *a* narrative or story, not *the* narrative or Truth.

However, these expansive elements are countered by aspects of the novel that highlight the connection and interplay between *Zanzibar*'s disparate parts. The "continuity" episodes create a loose organizing principle around which the other elements are arranged; the decision to classify individual episodes as either being "continuity," "the happening world," "tracking with closeups," or "context" suggests the existence of shared, defining traits among the episodes of each category; the recurring characters and repeated themes forge connections between otherwise disparate episodes. Likewise, *Zanzibar*'s self-reflexive and estranging opening and closing episodes are countered by the extrapolative links forged by the novel's numerous allusions.

The image that *Zanzibar* aims to evoke is that of McLuhan's "galaxy for insight." *Zanzibar*'s individual episodes allow for a variety of constellations: some connections are strong while others are much more tenuous. At this level, *Zanzibar*'s form, supplemented by McLuhan's theories, offers a model for knowing. However, these models are also enacted through the novel's content: Donald and Norman's narrative arcs can be seen as a dramatization of the ways of knowing that are enacted by the process of reading the novel. In life, as in the novel, we are bombarded by numerous sources of information with multiple and often conflicting points of view. We are tasked with imposing order and meaning upon these events—essentially, we are called on to create our own frame of reference by which to interpret the information we encounter in our lives. Alternatively, we can fail or refuse to do so, uncritically substituting someone else's frame of for our own. Donald represents the negative response to the novel's central question of what our "responsibilities as thinking individuals" are. While Donald is initially critical of the official ideology propagated by the political, military, and economic elite, he refuses to acknowledge how his lack of action and accountability make him complicit with this system. Instead, Donald surrenders his autonomy to the State and ends up completely alienated from those around him. Norman, on the other hand, embodies a more positive response: he examines the heretofore unquestioned framework of ideas and beliefs structuring his life and evaluates their worth. He accepts accountability for his behaviour and becomes more mindful of how his actions impact those around him, ending as an exemplar of a "human being empowered to make human decisions" (*Zanzibar* 535).

In the Beninia narrative strand, these concerns are moved from the personal level to the social and political. The false or negative utopias in *Zanzibar* are predicated on estrangement, alienation, and the abdication of one's personal responsibilities: the drug-fuelled dream of "dropping out" and the fantasy of being able to purchase and enjoy a pre-made utopia are Donald's situation writ large. The genuine utopian potential in *Zanzibar* is located in the complex modes of interplay between the three utopian strands: the social-economic-bureaucratic solutions represented by GT's Beninia project, the technological-scientific forces represented by optimization and genetic mutations, and the personal-cultural-human(e) possibilities represented by Begi. On their own, the solutions are unsatisfactory, but taken as a whole, they offer a possibility much greater than the sum of its parts. The hope, then, is that after navigating

*Zanzibar*'s models of knowing, the reader will turn the novel's central question—what are our responsibilities as thinking individuals?—upon herself and approach her world anew, with a double vision engendered by *Zanzibar*'s “galaxy for insight.”



### 3. "TOWARDS AN ARCHAEOLOGY OF THE FUTURE": URSULA K. LE GUIN'S *ALWAYS COMING HOME*

#### 3.1 Background: Situating *Always Coming Home* within Le Guin's SF

As a scholar of French literature who earns a living writing genre fiction, as a woman who has published fantasy and SF, poetry and prose, and as an author equally at home writing for children and for adults, Ursula K. Le Guin is a study in contrasts. The bulk of Le Guin's SF belongs to what is commonly termed the Hainish Cycle: a collection of loosely connected novels and short stories that revolve around the "League of All Worlds" (later, the "Ekumen"), and touch upon the planet Hain's colonial legacy. The Hainish Cycle contains *Rocannon's World* (1966), *Planet of Exile* (1966), *City of Illusions* (1967), *The Left Hand of Darkness* (1969), *The Dispossessed* (1974), *The Word for World is Forest* (1976), and *The Telling* (2000), as well as short stories contained in *The Wind's Twelve Quarters* (1975), *A Fisherman of the Inland Sea* (1994), *Four Ways to Forgiveness* (1995), and *The Birthday of the World* (2002). Non-Hainish SF includes the novels *The Lathe of Heaven* (1971), *The Eye of the Heron* (1978), and the book *Always Coming Home* (1985).

By now it is a commonplace to remark on the general anthropological bent of Le Guin's SF, especially the prevalence of the anthropologist-cum-hero (with the obligatory reference to her father, the influential American anthropologist Alfred Kroeber, and less frequently, to her mother, anthropologist Theodora Kroeber); on the influence of Taoist philosophy, especially the *Tao Te Ching*, on her work; on the recurring motif of the journey in her stories; and in her later works, on Le Guin's incorporation of feminist insights into her writings.<sup>22</sup> *Always Coming Home* can in many ways be viewed as a continuation and elaboration of Le Guin's characteristic concerns. Described by Le Guin as "a pure utopia, my utopia, my dream world" ("I Am a Woman Writer" 205), *Always Coming Home* is a continuation of the utopian dreaming inaugurated in *The Lathe of Heaven* and *The Dispossessed*. Le Guin's anthropological knowledge has certainly influenced her depiction of the Kesh in *Always Coming Home*. The social organization and culture of the Zuñi (a Pueblo people in the United States), for example, appears to have been used as a loose template for the organization of Kesh society.<sup>23</sup> Like the Zuñi's, the Kesh's culture is a ceremonial one, structured around rituals, festivals, dances, and other related activities. Several other similarities between Zuñi and Kesh culture (the relative unimportance of individual wealth, the lack of interpersonal violence, and the absence of

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<sup>22</sup> Representative treatments of these issues are found in *Ursula K. Le Guin: Voyager To Inner Lands and to Outer Space* (1979), a collection of essays edited by Joe De Bolt, and in the first chapter of Charlotte Spivak's *Ursula K. Le Guin* (1984).

<sup>23</sup> For a more thorough and detailed discussion of Zuñi society, refer to chapter four of Ruth Benedict's *Patterns of Culture* (1935).

dualistic modes of thought) point to Le Guin's familiarity with, and use of, the Zuñi's culture as an inspiration for her own. Likewise, *Always Coming Home* is a further working out of her vision of a truly feminist society, one that can fully value both male and female experience; it represents a continuation—and reappraisal—of the utopian vision inaugurated in *The Dispossessed*; it is an expansion upon the ethnographic form that was beginning to emerge in *The Left Hand of Darkness*; and through the symbol of the heyiya-if, it gives new form to her preoccupation with change and balance.

And yet *Always Coming Home* is consistently overlooked by the general public and SF critics alike. What could account for this? One reason for such neglect might lie in the fact that this book is not part of the popular Hainish Cycle. Another reason that immediately suggests itself is the book's structure: for SF readers (and critics) used to the literary pleasures traditionally associated with the novel—in-depth characterization and character development, a conflict driven plot—*Always Coming Home*, with its long expository sections and lack of plot and protagonist, is at best a surprise, and at worst, a disappointment.<sup>24</sup> Another reason for the book's neglect is circumstantial: many of the comprehensive reviews of Le Guin's life and work—James W. Bittner's *Approaches to the Fiction of Ursula K. Le Guin* (1984), Charlotte Spivak's *Ursula K. Le Guin* (1984), the 1979 and 1986 collections of essays both titled *Ursula K. Le Guin*, edited by Joe De Bolt and Harold Bloom, respectively—were published before (or in Bloom's case, directly on the heels of) the appearance of *Always Coming Home*. But even in works where the author's thematic or theoretical concerns would lead one to expect some discussion of Le Guin's book, *Always Coming Home* is ignored. Despite praising *Always Coming Home* in *Archaeologies of the Future* as “one of her most significant and successful late works” (97), Fredric Jameson mentions the book only in passing, as a concrete illustration of a rhetorical point or in support of a larger idea—not once does he significantly engage with the book itself.<sup>25</sup> Likewise, despite his professed interest in the critical and feminist utopias of the 1970s and 1980s, Tom Moylan references *Always Coming Home* only once in *Scraps of the Untainted Sky*, and only as an example of analogic SF narration (44-45). Brian Aldiss devotes one short sentence to Le Guin's book in *Trillion Year Spree* (1986), dismissing it as “too fragmentary and precious” (407), while in “Utopia and SF in Raymond Williams,” Andrew Miller specifically discusses the “extraordinary richness” (209) of the anthropological detail in *The Left Hand of Darkness*, *The Dispossessed*, *The Word for World is Forest*, and *The Telling*, but completely ignores *Always Coming Home*, which would surely be the most relevant example of extraordinary rich and vivid anthropological detail in Le Guin's work.

The popular neglect of *Always Coming Home* is, I think, understandable: while Le Guin's inclusion of the *Bildungsroman* titled “Stone Telling” is an attempt to provide some of the in-depth characterization and conflict-driven narrative momentum her readers may expect, *Always Coming Home* is no page-turner. Its pleasures lie elsewhere. The critical neglect is, to my mind,

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<sup>24</sup> Indeed, the absence of the “solution-oriented action plots of most science fiction” (178) is one of the key reasons behind Peter Brigg's argument that *Always Coming Home* is not science fiction.

<sup>25</sup> However, this said, the title of Jameson's book—*Archaeologies of the Future*—echoes that of Le Guin's “Towards an Archaeology of the Future” (her preface in *Always Coming Home*), and suggests the esteem in which Jameson holds Le Guin's text.

more surprising: *Always Coming Home* is one of the very few modern utopias, and should be all the more relevant for those critics (like Jameson and Moylan) who are concerned about the fate of the utopian impulse in contemporary society. Indeed, in her afterword to the collection of essays in *The New Utopian Politics of Ursula K. Le Guin's The Dispossessed* (2005), Le Guin voices her frustration with critics' consistent neglect of *Always Coming Home*, noting that

A good many of the writers of this volume treat *The Dispossessed* as if it stood quite alone in my work. This ahistorical approach seems odd, since the book has been around so long, and isn't an anomaly among my other works. It was followed in 1982 by a fairly lengthy discussion of utopias ("A Non-Euclidean View of California as a Cold Place to Be"), which forms a clear link to a second, if radically different, utopian novel, *Always Coming Home* (1985). It's hard for me to put these out of my mind when thinking about *The Dispossessed*. Both offer a chance to compare some of the things I did in the earlier novel with things I said in the essay, or did in the later novel—testing for consistency, change of mind, progress, regress, aesthetic and intellectual purpose. And also, the unanimity with which these writers refuse to read *The Dispossessed* as a single-theme, monistic, closed-minded text makes me long to see some of them take on *Always Coming Home*, which has been read, or dismissed unread, as a naively regressive picture of a sort of Happy Hunting Ground for fake Indians. ("A Response" 307)

Perhaps an understanding of this neglect lies in Aldiss's assessment of *Always Coming Home* as "fragmentary and precious" (407): Le Guin's book seems to promiscuously mix science and myth, erudite knowledge and common sense, and jumps back and forth from the objective to the subjective, from the literary to the mundane. *Always Coming Home* is not a novel but neither does it resemble a traditional utopian text; it certainly isn't a factual report, but is it literature? A close reading of *Always Coming Home* reveals three distinct yet intricately connected components: *Always Coming Home* as postmodern narrative, as utopia, and as fictional ethnography. Because of this, I would suggest that *Always Coming Home* is a hybrid text, a fictional postmodern ethnography written in the utopian mode.

### 3.2 *Always Coming Home* as Postmodern Narrative

tell us a story with a proper end to it  
instead of beginning again and again like this  
and thereby achieving a muddle  
which is not by nature after anything in particular  
nor does it have anything consequent to it  
but it just hangs there  
placidly eating its tail.

—Le Guin, "Stormy Night"

*Always Coming Home* opens with a rather imposing table of contents. It becomes immediately clear that this book is not going to follow the tidy narrative arc of exposition, rising action, climax, falling action, and conclusion; whether this is a cause for celebration or despair depends on the reader. The work is difficult to describe: reviewers commonly classify *Always*

*Coming Home* as a novel, although one suspects that this is more out of desperation than anything else. *Always Coming Home* contains, among other things, multiple narrators and points of view, intersecting narratives, the combination of different generic forms (including but not limited to poems, biographies, and recipes), and a non-linear plot, not to mention numerous illustrations by Margaret Chodos and an audiocassette tape from Le Guin and composer Todd Barton containing the music and songs of the fictional Kesh people. To begin, I will explore the difficulties that critics have had discussing *Always Coming Home*'s formal complexity, as well as the unique demands that this complexity makes upon the reader: some reviewers ignore the complicated form of the book, focusing instead on the traditional narrative of the section entitled "Stone Telling," while others are interested in the formal qualities of the book only to the extent that these qualities can be made to support a particular analysis. Fortunately, some critics have engaged with the structure of Le Guin's work in its own right: in her article "The Land Lady's Homebirth," for example, Elizabeth Cummins applies Rafail Nudelman's insights on the radial narration of Le Guin's Hainish SF to the structure of *Always Coming Home*.

I propose to expand upon the insights developed by Cummins and Nudelman through my own close reading of *Always Coming Home*, paying particular attention to the different ways in which Le Guin productively disrupts linear reading patterns and chronological order through the use of footnotes, parenthetical references, and other intratextual linkages; through the inclusion of an audiocassette tape; and through her use of drawings and illustrations to create an alternative organizational system in the book. However, while acknowledging the non-linear aspects of the book, I will also insist that *Always Coming Home* is just as amenable to a linear reading as it is to a non-linear one, and will demonstrate this by means of a close reading of the first fifty pages. Finally, I will look at two of the central concepts in *Always Coming Home*, the idea of "heyiya" and the image of the "heyiya-if" and show how these concepts not only embrace the thematic content of Le Guin's work, but also structure the organization of her book as well: the twin concepts of heyiya and heyiya-if are crucial to Le Guin's attempt to find "balance in movement" (*ACH* 485) by uniting contradictory demands—whether the thematic one of individual and society or the structural one of linearity and non-linearity—without annihilating their differences.

When *Always Coming Home* was first published in 1985, many of the initial reviews downplayed the formal complexity of the book, focusing instead on the traditional narrative of Stone Telling's autobiography. For example, while *Time Magazine* critic Paul Gray opens his review by describing *Always Coming Home* as "an encyclopedic history of an imagined world" and makes passing reference to the cassette tape which accompanies the book, the focus of his review is clear: "The most important element in *Always Coming Home* is the autobiographical narrative of a woman called Stone Telling." The remainder of the article is devoted to summarizing Stone Telling's story and discussing the two different cultures it portrays, the warlike, patriarchal Condor and the peaceful, tribal Kesh. In a book that stubbornly denies any neat categorization, Stone Telling's autobiography can seem like a lifeline for readers (and reviewers) approaching *Always Coming Home* with the traditional "expectations of chronological order, coherence, reliable narration and resolution" (Abrams and Harpham 268). As a *Bildungsroman*, "Stone Telling" largely fulfills these expectations by portraying an alienated protagonist's physical and spiritual journey to find her place in the world, and by detailing her

subsequent movement from innocence to experience and from ignorance to knowledge. Placed at the beginning of *Always Coming Home* and initially told from the retrospective viewpoint of an adult looking back on her childhood experiences, Stone Telling's autobiography elegantly and economically satisfies *Always Coming Home*'s need for initial exposition and world-building. Furthermore, by separating Stone Telling's story into three discontinuous sections, the autobiography is a source of narrative momentum and suspense. However, "Stone Telling" takes up less than a fifth of the book, and Gray's judgement of it as the "most important element in *Always Coming Home*" is a dubious assessment, to say the least; one could easily argue that the massive "Back of the Book," with its detailed explanations of the Kesh society, is at least as important—and entertaining—as Stone Telling's story. Indeed, Samuel R. Delany does just this in his review, "The Kesh in Song and Story," noting that "Mrs. Le Guin has put some expository pieces in a 100-plus-page section called 'The Back of the Book.' These are among the most interesting, the most beautiful." Stone Telling's autobiography may be the easiest section of *Always Coming Home* to review but, as anyone who has read the novel must surely acknowledge, it is only one part of a multifaceted, complex whole.

While more recent critical responses to *Always Coming Home* have paid greater attention to the book's formal qualities, the discussion of form is invariably subordinated to that of theme, with the result that analyses of *Always Coming Home*'s formal properties are often "deformed" by overzealous critics. Such is the case in Robin Roberts's "Post-Modernism and Feminist Science Fiction." While Roberts is primarily concerned with feminist writers' use of language, she does address the formal qualities of Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) and Le Guin's *Always Coming Home*. However, in her determination to persuade the reader of Le Guin's radical feminism in *Always Coming Home*, Roberts oversimplifies the complex role that form plays in this book. While Roberts—like Gray—briefly mentions the variety of documents and generic forms contained within *Always Coming Home*, her analysis of the book is firmly centred on Stone Telling's narrative. Roberts equates a linear narrative structure with patriarchal value systems, while viewing non-linear narratives as promoting more feminist values:

The fact that other tales and bits of anthropological information fragment Stone Telling's story dictates that a reader must consciously decide to privilege this woman's story over the others in the text in order to follow it as a traditional narrative. By the same token, however, Le Guin builds into *Coming Home* a structure of resistance to that kind of patriarchal linearity, which is correlative to the misogyny of our own culture as well as the Condor's. (147)

Roberts is overstating her case here, I think: perhaps reading Stone Telling's narrative in one fell swoop could be considered linear and patriarchal, but following the convention of reading a book from front to back could just as easily be considered linear, and by Robert's logic, patriarchal as well. I think that by including the next section's page number at the end of each segment of "Stone Telling" Le Guin is offering her readers the choice of what to do next, reflecting the Kesh's valuation of individual freedom and choice. Linear reading is not automatically "tyrannical" (Roberts 147), and it does not follow that by reading Stone Telling's autobiography in one sitting "the reader becomes implicated in the type of coercion that the Condor apply to the people they dominate" (147). Le Guin's concern is with the balance between linear and non-linear, not the privileging of one or the other.

Roberts's insistence on establishing the dichotomy of linear/patriarchal versus non-linear/feminist unfortunately overshadows her productive insights into the book, such as her observation that

The multivocality and non-linearity of the text constantly remind the reader of how forced and contrived our customary reading experiences are. [...] [T]he reader is informed of the page on which the story resumes and is invited to decide whether to continue linearly or to resist the flow of the autobiography. Either way, we are made aware that every reading involves choices. (147)

By constantly disrupting conventional reading patterns, Le Guin draws the reader's attention to the nonlinear and dialogic nature of her work and to the reading process itself.

A more nuanced feminist analysis of *Always Coming Home* is provided in Elizabeth Cummins's "The Land-Lady's Homebirth." Cummins explores the changes in Le Guin's narrative strategies over time and links these changes to Le Guin's development as a feminist writer. Cummins traces Le Guin's transition from narrative strategies associated "with the male-dominated tradition of both literature and history" (157) to what she labels the "radial" narration of *Always Coming Home*, asserting that "Le Guin's developing awareness of herself as a woman writer culminates in the radical society and narrative techniques of *Coming Home*" (160).<sup>26</sup> Like Roberts, Cummins emphasizes the particular demands that *Always Coming Home* makes upon its readers:

The narrative accumulates meaning radially, rather than linearly. It circles back on and around certain topics or forms of Kesh rituals or stories that the Kesh tell. It de-emphasizes the significance of a beginning or an end, challenges their very existence even, and instead concentrates—as the present participle in the book's title suggests—on the middle, the living, the changing. (162)

Much like our everyday world, *Always Coming Home* challenges readers to form their own links among its diverse material: there is no neat explanation that pretends to corral the unruly sections of *Always Coming Home* into an orderly whole. As Cummins notes,

*Coming Home* does not have a straightforward chronological or causal order that would restrict the reader to a single way of understanding the relationships among people, places, and things. Nor does Le Guin otherwise artificially limit the reader's attention by presenting a single protagonist on whose fate one is expected to focus. (161-62)

While Cummins may be slightly overstating her point (reviewers do tend to focus on Stone Telling's story), the variety of Kesh voices provides the reader with multiple points of view. In *Always Coming Home*, meaning can be (*has to be*) read backwards and projected forward; themes, symbols and images are continuously repeated, elaborated, modified, and contradicted. The meaning(s) of *Always Coming Home* must be actively sought for, the connections consciously made.

This idea of a radial narrative in Le Guin's work was adapted by Cummins from Rafail Nudelman's work on *Rocannon's World*, *Planet of Exile*, *City of Illusions*, and *The Left Hand of*

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<sup>26</sup> Strangely enough, Cummins ignores the narrative strategies of *The Dispossessed*, a novel that clearly challenges the idea of a linear narrative.

*Darkness*. In “An Approach to the Structure of Le Guin’s SF,” Nudelman views Le Guin’s Hainish novels as a loosely connected series. He briefly outlines three common types of connections between episodic tales: 1) causal connections, in which the events in one tale directly or indirectly affect the tales following it; 2) chronological connections, in which “the causal relationships between the episodes amount, in the main, to a purely chronological sequence; the starting point of one tale ignores what has occurred in the preceding one” (211); and 3) non-causal connections, characteristic of highly formulaic genres (such as detective novels) where the tales are united solely by a common protagonist. According to Nudelman, Le Guin’s Hainish novels fit into none of these categories; instead, they are characterized by what he terms radial connections:

So far, we have established only one of its [the Hainish novels’] main peculiarities—the replacement of the *sequential* linkage “from episode to episode,” normal in any chronological series of tales (and tantamount to the formula ‘the whole is the sum of the parts’) by another—distinctly original, it is true—*radial* type of linkage: “from a single centre towards each episode” (tantamount to: “the whole is the essence or common factor of its parts”). (213)

The single centre of these novels is, according to Nudelman, the quest for unity: the Hainish universe is always striving towards unity in “a world where separateness, fragmentation, alienation are dominant” (214). This fragmentation is expressed not only in the plight of the main characters, but in the landscape, the location of settlements on the planets, and even the location of the planets themselves in the universe. This focus on the “essence or common factor” (213) of Le Guin’s novels leads to Nudelman’s insistence on the inseparability of structure and message in Le Guin’s SF: “it is characteristic of Le Guin’s SF that its structure becomes a sign of its message. Moreover, this structure is an *iconic* sign, i.e. the properties of the structure are similar or equivalent to the content of the message” (216; original emphasis). While the correspondence of content and form is not a revolutionary concept, nevertheless, it is an important reminder about the significance of form in Le Guin’s work.

However, Nudelman’s focus on the “hero” bestowing “history” upon “a previously ahistorical world” (218) and his implication that linear and historical time are of greater inherent value than cyclical and mythological time strike me as oversimplifying aspects of Le Guin’s SF. Cummins’s work with the concept of radial narration in “The Land-Lady’s Homebirth” provides a much needed corrective to this vein of interpretation. Be that as it may, Nudelman’s emphasis on the equivalency of structure and message in Le Guin’s SF and his observations on the fragmented worlds of Le Guin’s Hainish novels and their eternal striving towards an always-displaced unity strike me as offering useful insights on Le Guin’s non-Hainish SF, especially when we compare Nudelman’s (and Cummins’s) insights on radial narratives with *Always Coming Home*’s own emphasis on the structural image of the heyiya-if, “two spirals centered upon the same (empty) space” (Le Guin 45).

Before I consider the central role that the concept of heyiya and the image of the heyiya-if occupy in *Always Coming Home*, it would be useful to first spend time looking at the structure of the book in some detail. In the preface to her book, “A First Note,” Le Guin offers a brief rationale for *Always Coming Home*’s organization:

The main part of the book is their [the Kesh] voices speaking for themselves in stories and life-stories, plays, poems, and songs. [...] Coming at my work as a novelist, I thought it best to put many of the explanatory, descriptive pieces into a section called The Back of the Book, where those who want narrative can ignore them and those who enjoy explanations can find them. The glossary may also be useful or amusing. (xi)

Not only does Le Guin neatly summarize the various types of writings that make up *Always Coming Home*, but from the very beginning she draws the reader's attention to the reading process and gently encourages the reader to meditate on how their preferences might shape their reading experiences: Narrative or exposition? Front of the book or back? It is easy to see why so many commentators have been struck by the circuitous nature of *Always Coming Home*: even a cursory glance at the Table of Contents is enough to show that the reading strategies we normally apply to the novel will be of limited use here.

Indeed, *Always Coming Home* is a truly intratextual work: throughout the book, Le Guin directly links different sections to one another, and encourages readers to approach the book in a non-linear manner. This is accomplished through the use of footnotes, through parenthetical references, or by references to other sections of the book during the discussion of a particular topic, as seen in the Editor's comments on "How to Die in the Valley": "A fairly esoteric approach to the soul is represented in this book by the written piece 'The Black Beetle Soul'; an expression of a more popular body of belief or thought is the poem 'The Inland Sea'" (89). And then there is the matter of the audiocassette tape (or, in later versions, CD) that accompanies *Always Coming Home*—when (or if) to listen to this? Asked this question herself, Le Guin responded, "You can read the book and look at the wonderful drawings by Margaret Chodos that illustrate how Kesh lived, then hear the music, or you can get in the mood by first listening. No rules" (qtd. in Delany). "No rules"—this nicely sums up the experience of reading *Always Coming Home*.

Yet another way of navigating *Always Coming Home* is offered by the numerous illustrations that grace Le Guin's book. The written text of *Always Coming Home* is continuously interspersed with various drawings; indeed, hardly a page passes without some kind of illustration. Sometimes the relationship between drawing and text is straightforward, as when drawings of various musical instruments accompany the section entitled "Kesh Musical Instruments." Sometimes the pictures help identify the section's speaker (Pandora's sections are accompanied by the image of a hummingbird) or subject matter (poetry is signaled by an image of a hinged spiral in the upper right-hand corner).

Additionally, while the images that appear in the upper right-hand page corners are repeated continuously throughout each section (and correspond with the division of the text in the Table of Contents), the observant reader will notice that the drawings that are interspersed among the words themselves are often repeated. For example, the image of the puma eye first appears in the section of "The Serpentine Codex" that describes how the puma is associated with dreams, clouds, fog, and mist in Kesh culture. This exact image of the puma eye is repeated in "A Hole in the Air," a dream-vision about the far-distant past, when the air was "full of smoke



[...] was thick and yellow” (155-56). The image occurs again in “Puma Dance,” a song about a journey of the soul, and in “From the People of the Houses of Earth in the Valley to the Other People Who Were on Earth Before Them” (405), a visionary poem about the exploited and victimized people of an ancient past. This repetition of images piques one’s curiosity, and a motivated reader may be encouraged to puzzle out the connections between the various writings which contain these duplicate drawings.

However, what tends to get lost amongst the non-linear and self-referential qualities of *Always Coming Home* is the fact that in many ways, the book is just as amenable to a linear reading as it is to a non-linear one. As previously remarked, Le Guin provides the page numbers at the end of “Stone Telling” so that the reader can choose to read the autobiography uninterrupted as one continuous narrative. As well, if we interpret a linear reading to encompass not only the uninterrupted reading of a single narrative, but also the process of reading the book as a whole in a linear fashion—from page 1 to 523—then it becomes obvious that Le Guin has deliberately structured her book to facilitate this style of reading as well. Indeed, for all of its seeming formlessness, the first fifty pages of *Always Coming Home* are quite tightly structured. As mentioned before, the book opens with the prefatory “A First Note” which briefly outlines the content of the book, its time and setting, as well as its general structure. This orientation of the reader is continued with “Towards an Archaeology of the Future,” where, following in the time-honoured utopian tradition, Le Guin facilitates the readers’ transition from their everyday world into her fictional future world. Thus, in a handful of pages, Le Guin has familiarized her readers with the book’s structure and has prepared them for their immersion in Kesh culture.

This process is continued in the next section, the first instalment of Stone Telling’s tale. Told from a retrospective point of view that includes the dual perspectives of both adult and child, structured around the motif of the journey, and focused on an alienated protagonist, the opening sequence of this *Bildungsroman* elegantly and economically satisfies *Always Coming Home*’s initial need for exposition. The novelty of early childhood is used to great effect in Stone Telling’s recollection of her first journey outside of her hometown: the naïveté and boundless curiosity of the eight-year-old Stone Telling excuse questions that would seem inane or self-evident coming from an adult speaker, and a series of “firsts” provides justification for the extensive description of otherwise unremarkable events. Stone Telling also has her first glimpse of the Condor during this trip, introducing the reader early on to the important dystopian foil to the Kesh’s utopian society. As a “half-house” person with a Kesh mother and a Condor father, Stone Telling possesses a sort of double vision, giving her unique insight into both cultures and allowing her to contrast, compare, and evaluate them in ways the other Kesh are unable to. As she remarks, “All that grieved me—that I was half one thing and half another and nothing wholly—was the sorrow of my childhood, but the strength and use of my life after I grew up” (29). Stone Telling’s reminiscence about her childhood provides a balanced introduction to Kesh domestic life and kinship structures; to their religious ceremonies and spiritual practices; to the topography and climate, the flora and fauna characteristic of their land; to their modes of transportation; and to their attitude towards other cultures—to name a few topics. Even more impressive, this bounty of exposition is delivered in a natural, unobtrusive manner, a sure testament to Le Guin’s skill as a writer.

“Stone Telling” is followed by “The Serpentine Codex,” which “provides a compact summary of the structure of society, the year, and the universe, as perceived by the people of the Valley” (43), which is then succeeded by the short expository piece “Where It Is”: as the quoted material suggests, these sections continue the expository, world-building activity and further orient the new reader. Next, the reader encounters “Pandora Worries About What She Is Doing: The Pattern,” which pulls readers back from their immersion in an impersonal, abstract overview of Kesh society and prepares them for the more intimate and loosely structured pieces that follow: “bits, chunks, fragments. Shards. Pieces of the Valley, lifesize. Not at a distance, but in the hand, to be felt and held and heard” (53).

The beginning of the book is not the only place where we see this bias towards a linear reading. The transitions between the three sequential sections “Pandora Worrying About What She Is Doing: She Addresses the Reader with Agitation,” “Time and the City,” and “Stone Telling: Part Two” are also designed to facilitate a linear reading. “Pandora...Addresses the Reader” ends with a meditation on time, a subject that is immediately taken up on the next page in “Time and the City.” This, in turn, ends with Pandora and the Archivist discussing the concept of history, a discussion that the Archivist ends by saying to Pandora, “Tell about the Condor. Let Stone Telling tell her story. That’s as near history as we have come in my day, and nearer than we’ll come again, I hope” (173). It would take a determined reader indeed to ignore the narrative momentum that leads directly into the second section of Stone Telling’s autobiography. Thus, a tension between linear and non-linear readings exists throughout *Always Coming Home*, a tension that is encapsulated in the Kesh concept of heyiya and the image of the heyiya-if.

One of the most baffling omissions in critiques of *Always Coming Home* is the lack of discussion about the Kesh concept of heyiya and the physical manifestation of this idea, the heyiya-if. Indeed, among the critics quoted in this essay, Delany is the only one who recognizes the central importance of these concepts, noting that the Kesh’s “pivotal cultural concept is the hinge, the connecting principle that allows things both to hold together and to move in relation to each other.”<sup>27</sup> Heyiya is a compound word from the fictional Kesh language:

The first element of this word, hey- or heya, is the untranslatable statement of praise/greeting/holiness/being sacred. The second is the word iya. This means a hinge: the piece of hardware or leather that connects a door to the opening it closes and opens. Connotations and metaphors cluster thick to this image. Iya is the center of a spiral, the source of a gyring motion: hence a source of change, as well as a connection. Iya is the eternal beginning, the process of energy arising and continuing. (Le Guin 489)

The concept of heyiya—which simultaneously yokes together and keep apart opposing ideas such as movement and stability, temporal and eternal, and inside and outside—is the structuring idea of Kesh society. Indeed, familiarity with the concept of heyiya is crucial in understanding Kesh attitudes towards time and history. The Kesh divide history into two distinct periods: the City of Man (roughly analogous to our current historical period) is perceived as being “outside

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<sup>27</sup> Delany’s interest in literary theory may be partly responsible for his recognition of the importance of hinge imagery in *Always Coming Home*: the concept of the hinge features prominently in Jacques Derrida’s *Of Grammatology* (1967).

the world,” while everything else—the prehistory that predates the City of Man and the Valley time that follows it—is “inside the world.” This discontinuity, gap, or lack of connection was perceived “as the most important thing—to [the Kesh]—about civilization, about history in our terms: that gap, that leap, break, flip, that reversal from in to out, from out to in. That is the hinge” (153). The idea of heyiya finds physical expression in the image of the heyiya-if:

The heyiya-if, two spirals centered upon the same (empty) space, was the material or visual representation of the idea of heyiya. Varied and elaborated in countless ways, the heyiya-if was a choreographic and gestural element in dance, and the shape of the stage and the movement of the staging in drama were based upon it; it was an organizational device in town planning, in graphic and sculptural forms, in decoration, and in the design of musical instruments; it served as a subject of meditation and as an inexhaustible metaphor. It was the visual form of an idea which pervaded the thought and culture of the Valley. (45)



Figure 3.1 The heyiya-if

The image of the heyiya-if manifests itself in both the mundane—influencing the shape of racetracks and the designs embroidered on clothing and painted on dinnerware—and the sacred: the seven great festivals and their dances are structured around the image of the heyiya-if, and the nine sacred houses are arranged along the arms of a hinged spiral. The image of the heyiya-if appears again and again in Kesh poetry and dictates the form of their novels: “In novels, the pattern is of two people meeting, or ‘hinging,’ or ‘turning apart,’ one of whom is then followed to the next meeting with a different person, and so on (the pattern of the heyiya-if repeated)” (318). Gyres and spirals also play an important part in the Kesh’s depiction of the solar system, with the universe depicted in terms of moon, planets, and suns turning and gyring round one another (397).

Clearly, the ideas associated with the hinge and the spiral and their connection in the image of the heyiya-if are of central importance to Kesh society, but how are they significant to readers? I would argue that the concept of heyiya—embodying the opposing ideas of separateness and connectedness, inside and outside, gap and bridge, temporal and eternal, change and stability—reflects Le Guin’s overarching thematic concern in her SF novels. Whether it is the attempt to balance gender and personhood in *The Left Hand of Darkness*, the rights of the individual and the demands of society or the reconciliation of simultaneity and sequency in *The*

*Dispossessed*, or to find “balance in movement” (485) in *Always Coming Home*, Le Guin has consistently attempted to imagine a society that can unite these conflicting demands while preserving their differences. By making the idea of heyiya and the image of the heyiya-if the structuring principles of Kesh society, I think that Le Guin has come very close to achieving this vision in *Always Coming Home*.

Nudelman’s comment that “it is characteristic of Le Guin’s SF that its structure becomes a sign of its message” (216) (or, equally true, that its message becomes a sign of its structure), is borne out in *Always Coming Home*. Structurally, we see this same principle at work in the division of the book into its component parts and their subsequent arrangement. Each individual poem, recipe, story, or essay in *Always Coming Home* can function and make sense at an individual level, but this self-sufficiency is balanced against its equally necessary integration into a larger, more richly textured whole. This same balance of individual versus group is repeated at the larger structural level of the book, as *Always Coming Home* is simultaneously composed of two separate sections—the Back and the Front of the Book—and yet is a coherent whole. The distinctness of the Front and the Back of the Book is undermined by the intratextual references—such as footnotes and parenthetical references—which serve as a connective hinge between the two segments of the book; however, at the same time these two sections are kept apart, isolated by their division in the Table of Contents, in Le Guin’s prefatory note, and by other signs of separation, such as the fact that only the Front of the Book has drawings in the upper-right hand corner. Likewise, as we’ve seen in our previous discussions of linear and non-linear readings of *Always Coming Home*, linear movement is always hinged to its opposite; linearity and non-linearity exist simultaneously in *Always Coming Home*, leading to neither the “abolition of opposites” (220) that Nudelman predicted, nor some amalgam of the two, but a precarious balance between linear and non-linear, fact and fiction, audio and visual, “centered upon the same (empty) space” (Le Guin, *ACH* 45) and joined around an absent centre.

### 3.3 History, Technology, and Utopia

In *Always Coming Home*, Pandora makes a curious comment about the Kesh: “I can’t give them history. I don’t know how. But I can give them time—that’s a native gift. [...] Time to look forward, surely; time to look back; and room, room enough to look around” (147-48). To understand the distinction Le Guin is making, we need to consider how history is defined within *Always Coming Home*. The Kesh word for history, *tavkach*, is synonymous with both “city” and “civilization” and translates as “the City of Man.” *Tavkach* is defined as the “historical period, the era of human existence that followed the Neolithic era for some thousands of years in various parts of the earth, and from which prehistory and ‘primitive cultures’ are specifically excluded” (Le Guin, *ACH* 152-53). For the Kesh, *tavkach* is linked to conflict and to dramatic, often irreversible, change: history, in this sense, is separate from the repetitive activities of everyday life.<sup>28</sup> This way of thinking is emphasized by the closing words of Stone Telling’s story: after

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<sup>28</sup> While the Kesh may not have history, they do have histories; indeed, *Always Coming Home* contains a section entitled “Four Histories” (121-46). However, rather than an impersonal report that concerns itself with important people and large-scale events, Kesh histories are more subjective and generally concern themselves with a single event or incident. These histories recount anomalous events that are centred upon some kind of conflict, whether the

escaping from the Condor and returning to the Valley, she ends her tale by saying, “there is no more history in my life after that; all that I could bring into the Valley from outside I have brought [...] the rest has been lived and will be lived again” (376). From Stone Telling’s perspective, it is only her time with the Condor that is part of history. This link between the Condor and the historical points to the Kesh’s association of *tavkach* with violence, dramatic change, militarism, and discriminatory power structures. The Kesh do not consider themselves to be a part of history in this particular sense, nor do they consider themselves to be a part of civilization: to use their metaphors, the Kesh are the mainland to civilization’s crowded peninsula, “inside the world” to history and civilization’s “out” (153). This is why Pandora says that she can’t give the Kesh history: their indifference to heroism and the exceptional individual, their pacifist tendencies, lack of central authority, and stable population bars them from history in the traditional sense of great men and important public events.

Indeed, the Kesh are only interested in the past to the extent that it can be used in the service of the present. This viewpoint is one of the first things the reader encounters upon opening *Always Coming Home*: in “A First Note,” Le Guin informs us, “What was and what may be lie, like children whose faces we cannot see, in the arms of silence. All we ever have is here, now” (xi). This opening meditation sets the stage for the relative unimportance of the past and the future in Kesh life. The Kesh’s lack of interest in learning about the past for its own sake is best summed up in “Red Brick People,” with Giver of the Yellow Adobe commenting that “to learn a great deal about these people [the makers of the red bricks, i.e. contemporary America] would be to cry in the ocean; whereas using their bricks in one of our buildings is satisfying to the mind” (161). Kesh pragmatism rears its head once again: What is the use value of the past? How can the past—whether material or nonmaterial—be used to better one’s current life? Unless the past can be used in the service of the present, the Kesh tend to leave it alone.

This is the exact point of view championed by Friedrich Nietzsche in *The Use and Abuse of History* (1874): in Nietzsche’s words, “We would serve history only so far as it serves life; but to value its study beyond a certain point mutilates and degrades life” (3). To be human is to live historically, to become aware of the past and to display the ability of “turning the past to the uses of the present” (8). Be that as it may, Nietzsche contends that happiness and the creative act are all dependent on one’s ability, however momentarily, to live unhistorically: “in the smallest and greatest happiness there is always one thing that makes it happiness: the power of forgetting, or, in more learned phrase, the capacity of feeling ‘unhistorically’ throughout its duration” (16). He argues that in order to live the good life, one must achieve a balance between living historically and living unhistorically:

Cheerfulness, a good conscience, belief in the future, the joyful deed—all depend, in the individual as well as the nation, on there being a line that divides the visible and clear from the vague and shadowy; we must know the right time to forget as well as the right time to remember, and instinctively see when it is necessary to feel historically and when unhistorically. This is the point that the reader is asked

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family feud in “Old Women Hating,” the skirmish in “The War with the Pig People,” the trading dispute in “The Trouble with the Cotton People,” or the deaths and difficulties that surrounded the founding of the Kesh town Chumo (although these deaths are caused by natural events, not human ones).

to consider: that the unhistorical and the historical are equally necessary to the health of an individual, a community, and a system of culture. (7-8)

It is the balance between these forces—the historical and the unhistorical, history and life—that is important.

History allows us “to understand the present and stimulate [our] longing for the future” (Nietzsche 10) but it must serve life, not the other way around: “The knowledge of the past is desired only for the service of the future and the present, not to weaken the present or undermine a living future” (22). However, according to Nietzsche, the modern individual has lost sight of this balance, pursuing knowledge for its own sake and lacking the lived experience to ground it; in short, the modern individual suffers from an excess of history. As Nietzsche complains,

The young man must begin with a knowledge of culture, not even with a knowledge of life, still less with life and the living of it. This knowledge of culture is forced into the young mind in the form of historical knowledge; which means that his head is filled with an enormous mass of ideas, taken secondhand from past times and peoples, not from immediate contact with life. (67)

Furthermore, the modern individual’s behaviour does not reflect what he knows: knowledge is divorced from action (23). Nietzsche attributes this excess of history in part to the modern education system and in part to an economic and social system that is concerned with producing profitable workers more than well-rounded individuals: “Men are to be fashioned to the needs of the time, that they may soon take their place in the machine. They must work in the factory of the ‘common good’ before they are ripe, or rather to prevent their becoming ripe; for this would be a luxury that would draw away a deal of power from the ‘labor market’” (44).

While Nietzsche does not advocate any one particular solution to this problem, his writings suggest that we should focus on living more unhistorically—that is, acting, creating, experiencing, doing—in order to restore the balance between the historical and the unhistorical. In a people who have achieved this balance,

Their vision of the past turns them toward the future, encourages them to persevere with life, and kindles the hope that justice will yet come and happiness is behind the mountain they are climbing. They believe that the meaning of existence will become ever clearer in the course of its evolution; they look backward at the process only to understand the present and stimulate their longing for the future. They do not know how unhistorical their thoughts and actions are in spite of all their history, and how their cultivation of history does not serve pure knowledge but life. (10)

It is a utopian vision, of a hopeful and happy people who use the example of the past and the promise of the future in service of creating a better present.

In *Always Coming Home*, Le Guin imagines a novel solution to Nietzsche’s question of the balance between history and life: the Kesh have, by and large, relegated history—as the objective and chronological accumulation and interpretation of knowledge and artifacts—to the City of Mind (the sentient, independently existing cybernetic computer network). Characterized by its objective rationality and its operations in the “direct linear mode” (Le Guin, *ACH* 152), the

City of Mind is entrusted with data collection and storage, carrying out scientific experiments and observations, and maintaining historical records (149-51).

This is not to suggest that the Kesh are completely devoid of the historical impulse: one need look no further than their myths, oral stories, libraries, and archivists for confirmation of the important role select past events and artifacts occupy in Kesh life. However, as the Archivist of Wakwaha explains,

The City's freedom is our freedom reversed [...] The City keeps. It keeps the dead. When we need what's dead, we go to the Memory. The dead is bodiless, occupying no space or time. In the Libraries we keep heavy, time-consuming, roomy things. When they die we take them out. If the City wants them it takes them in. It always takes them. It's an excellent arrangement. (152)

The City of Mind allows the Kesh to remove themselves from the burden of history while still having access to it if they so desire: through the City of Mind, Le Guin sidesteps the final question that so troubled William Morris in *News from Nowhere*, namely, how a society that has freed itself from the burden of history can avoid repeating its earlier mistakes.<sup>29</sup> The City of Mind has taken over the historical function so the Kesh don't have to. By relegating the scientific and historical functions to the City of Mind, Le Guin has created a new system of balance between the Nietzschean forces of history and life, and one which, judging by her depiction of the Kesh, she thinks successfully uses the past in the service of the present.

### 3.4 Re-envisioning Utopia: Going Backward, Looking Forward

*Always Coming Home* is not Le Guin's first attempt at envisioning utopia, a fact that is alluded to in the beginning of the book: "After digging in several wrong places for over a year and persisting in several blockheaded opinions—that it must be walled, with one gate, for instance—[...] it dawned as slowly and certainly as the sun itself upon me that the town was *there*, between the creeks, under my feet the whole time" (3; original emphasis).<sup>30</sup> The reference to walls is evocative of Le Guin's other major utopia, which opens with this memorable description: "There was a wall. It did not look important. [...] Where it crossed the roadway, instead of having a gate it degenerated into mere geometry, a line, an idea of boundary. But the idea was real. It was important. For seven generations there had been nothing in the world more important than that wall" (*Dispossessed* 1). In the essay "Science Fiction and Mrs. Brown," Le Guin discusses how writing *The Dispossessed* led her to research various utopian philosophies:

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<sup>29</sup> Morris raises this concern through the character of Ellen, who is wary about the unhistorical tendencies of her utopian society:

"But I think sometimes people are too careless of the history of the past—too apt to leave it in the hands of old learned men like Hammond. Who knows? happy as we are, times may alter; we may be bitten with some impulse towards change, and many things may seem too wonderful for us to resist, too exciting not to catch at, if we do not know that they are but phases of what has been before; and withal ruinous, deceitful, and sordid" (167-168).

<sup>30</sup> While *The Dispossessed* is Le Guin's best known utopian text, her first literary exploration of utopia is *The Lathe of Heaven*, which with "The New Atlantis" and *Always Coming Home* comprises what Elizabeth Cummins has termed Le Guin's "West Coast Fantasies," SF stories set in a near-future, (post)apocalyptic United States where Le Guin "overtly considers the issues of utopia" (*Understanding* 18).

What did I know about Utopia? Scraps of More, fragments of Wells, Hudson, Morris. Nothing. It took me years of reading and pondering and muddling, and much assistance from Engels, Marx, Godwin, Goldman, Goodman, and above all Shelley and Kropotkin, before I could begin to see where he [the book's protagonist, Shevek] came from, and could see the landscape about him... (111-12)

In 1982 Le Guin made her own contribution to the tradition of utopian thought with “A Non-Euclidean View of California as a Cold Place to Be,” the major non-fiction expression of her understanding of utopia. Le Guin starts by taking up Robert C. Elliott's definition of utopia in *The Shape of Utopia* as

the application of man's reason and his will to the myth [of the Golden Age], man's efforts to work out imaginatively what happens—or might happen—when the primal longings embodied in the myth confront the principle of reality. In this effort man no longer merely dreams of a divine state in some remote time: he assumes the role of creator. (qtd. in “Non-Euclidean” 81)

Le Guin critiques this view of utopia, commenting that it “is pure structure without content; pure model; goal” (81), and as such, uninhabitable by mere humans. She goes on to say that “in ‘assuming the role of creator,’ we seek what Lao Tzu calls ‘the profit of what is not,’ rather than participating in what is” (82). As an example of this, Le Guin points to the Anglo settlers who colonized California: in attempting to turn the Californian wilderness into a paradise, the Anglo settlers not only ended up with “cement [...] poured over utopia” (81), but also contributed to the destruction of the indigenous cultures that were already there.

In an attempt to avoid further violence of this kind, Le Guin suggests that *usà puyew usu wapiw*—that is, that we go backward to look forward.<sup>31</sup> To this extent, Le Guin suggests that the culture of the First Nations might provide a starting point for an alternative model of utopia, for the current rationalist utopia will no longer do.<sup>32</sup>

Le Guin is the first to admit the difficulty of attempting to imagine an alternative to the rational utopia, of imagining a “yin utopia,” as she calls it. Indeed, she comments that her first attempt to do so in *The Dispossessed* fell short of its goal: “The structure of the book may suggest the balance-in-motion and rhythmic recurrence of the Tai Chi, but its excess yang shows: though the utopia was (both in fact and in fiction) founded by a woman, the protagonist is a man” (93). What then, might a yin utopia look like? It would be  
a society predominantly concerned with preserving its existence; a society with a

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<sup>31</sup> Le Guin takes this phrase from Howard A. Norman's introduction to *The Wishing Bone Cycle* (1976). The excerpt she includes reads:

“The Swampy Cree have a conceptual term which I've heard used to describe the thinking of a porcupine as he backs into a rock crevice:

*Usà puyew usu wapiw!*

‘He goes backward, looks forward.’ The porcupine consciously goes backward in order to speculate safely on the future, allowing him to look out at his enemy or the new day. To the Cree, it's an instructive act of self-preservation.” (Le Guin, “Non-Euclidean” qtd in. 82)

<sup>32</sup> Alfred Kroeber's monumental tome, the *Handbook of the Indians of California* (1925) provides further information on their culture.



modest standard of living, conservative of natural resources, with a low constant fertility rate and a political life based upon consent; a society that has made a successful adaptation to its environment and has learned to live without destroying itself or the people next door. (96)

In other words, it would be like the Kesh in *Always Coming Home*.

So far my discussion has focused mainly on the philosophy of utopia, but what about its physical manifestation as the utopian text? Following Darko Suvin, I will be discussing the literary utopia in its position as the “sociopolitical subgenre” of SF,<sup>33</sup> a

verbal construction of a particular quasi-human community where sociopolitical institutions, norms, and individual relationships are organized according to a more perfect principle than in the author’s community, this construction being based on estrangement arising out of an alternative historical hypothesis. (49)

The subgenre, like any other, has its own set of formal and thematic conventions that both enable and restrict the individual text: in the case of the literary utopia, it is characterized by its formal closure, panoramic scope, and systemic arrangement. *Always Coming Home* also engages with the more specialized set of conventions characteristic of the classical literary utopia.

One of the most important requirements of the utopian text is its formal closure: utopia is the good place, but it is also no place. According to Suvin, the utopian community must occur in a “rounded, *isolated locus* (valley, island, planet—later, temporal epoch)” (*Metamorphoses* 50; original emphasis). Thomas More created an island utopia, Samuel Butler placed his in a valley, C. S. Lewis located his on Mars, and Edward Bellamy set his in the future.<sup>34</sup> In *Always Coming Home*, the Kesh are isolated by space *and* time: the Kesh live in the distant future, in the Valley of Na. Their isolation is further reinforced by the nuclear holocaust that destroys our contemporary Western civilization and creates a gulf between Kesh culture and our own.<sup>35</sup>

Having created a suitable setting for her utopia, Le Guin proceeds to populate her fictional world. *Always Coming Home* is a vivid, finely textured utopia. The multiplicity of voices and the level of detail confer a denseness and solidity to Le Guin’s imagined world, convincingly evoking a fully realized society. The breadth and scope of *Always Coming Home* as a utopian text are partially necessitated by generic requirements set out by Suvin:

Since it has to show more perfectly organized relationships, the categories under which the author and his age subsume these relationships (government, economics, religion, warfare, etc.) must be in some way or other (2) *articulated* in a panoramic sweep whose sum is the inner organization of the isolated locus. (*Metamorphoses* 50; original emphasis)

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<sup>33</sup> As Suvin explains, “Strictly and precisely speaking, utopia is not a genre but the *sociopolitical subgenre of science fiction*. Paradoxically, it can be seen as such only now that SF has expanded into its modern phase, ‘looking backward’ from its englobing of utopia” (*Metamorphoses* 61; original emphasis).

<sup>34</sup> The books referred to are *Utopia*, *Erewhon* (1872), *Out of the Silent Planet* (1938), and *Looking Backward*, respectively.

<sup>35</sup> The computer network in *Always Coming Home* is an important exception to this formal closure, acting as a *deus ex machina* by preserving information from the past (our current present) and allowing the Kesh to have the advantages of advanced technology without obliging them to undergo an industrial revolution.

*Always Coming Home*'s sweeping review of Kesh family life, spiritual beliefs, art, and sexual mores (to name only a few) highlights the organization of the Kesh's personal and communal relationships. As befits a utopia, not only is the content of Kesh society presented as more perfect than our contemporary society, but the relationships between individuals, and between individuals and their community, are presented as being more perfect than our own. Although Kesh society may initially strike the reader as being the antithesis of systematic, it is nonetheless structured according to a complex system of spiritual, familial, and economic ties, the organization of which Le Guin takes great delight in detailing in "Chart of the Nine Houses," "Charts of Kinfolk," and other similar documents. However, at times the "more perfectly organized relationships" of the utopian society can feel obtrusive and artificial. The pervasive presence of the heyiya-if is a good example of this phenomenon. On the one hand, the prevalence of this image makes sense to a certain extent: most cultures have certain privileged concepts and images that they turn to in order to make sense of the world. The systematic, more perfect relations of the utopia naturally find expression in a more comprehensive and clearly articulated structure than our own. On the other hand, Le Guin goes to great pains to repeatedly and emphatically point out the internally consistent nature of her fictional society, often in instances where the reader could well be excused for overlooking such connections or for finding such information less than relevant. For example, it is not at all self-evident after reading the excerpt of *Dangerous People* that Kesh novels are structured around the pattern of "two people meeting, or 'hinging' [...] the pattern of the heyiya-if repeated" (318) as Le Guin pointedly tells us. This organizational matrix may occasionally strike one as being excessive or artificial, but it is an important part of the formal requirements of the utopian genre; the variety and complexity of Kesh culture give the impression of a social totality fully represented, while the systematic and internally consistent nature of the social elements and their relations to each other creates a strong contrast with the less than perfect social relationships and organization of the reader's own world.

Lastly, as a special case of the critical utopia, *Always Coming Home* renovates the conventions associated with the classical literary utopia. As I discussed in my introduction, critical utopian texts arose as a corrective to the perceived flaws of classical utopias and, to a lesser degree, utopian romances. Self-reflexive, intertextual, and questioning the utopian tradition, critical utopias replaced classical utopias' static and homogeneous cities with societies which, while more perfect than the writer's own, are still actively engaged in the struggle to become a better society. These critical utopias tend to advocate a more democratic, consensus-based approach to social design and self-consciously draw attention to their status as utopian texts and their renovation of the utopian literary tradition. As opposed to the classical utopia, with its Socratic dialogue and descriptive bent, critical utopias tend towards character-driven narratives. Often focusing on the physical and emotional journey of an alienated protagonist, the critical utopia uses the protagonist's outsider status to describe and to challenge the hegemonic social order, often changing the society into a more utopian one in the process. In this way, the authors question the assumptions of the classical literary utopia and introduce growth and dramatic tension to their own utopias. However, this novelization of the utopian genre is not without its drawbacks. *The Dispossessed*, for example, while offering an intriguing image of what a utopian society might look like, is, first and foremost, a novel about Shevek's struggles,

Shevek's journey, and Shevek's triumph. As the protagonist is foregrounded, the utopian society recedes into the background. Le Guin suggests as much herself: in retrospect, she feels that Shevek "dominates [*The Dispossessed*] in, I must say, a very masculine fashion" ("Non-Euclidean" 93).

In *Always Coming Home*, Le Guin takes the opposite tack, incorporating the insights of the critical utopia into the descriptive framework of the classical utopia. *Always Coming Home*, for all of its self-reflexiveness and idiosyncrasy, is as close to a classical utopia as we will likely see in our time. Where the classical utopia generally adopted the form and conventions of the travelogue, Le Guin has adopted a more appropriate form for our scientific times—the ethnographic text. However, we see the kinship between *Always Coming Home* and the classical utopias of More and his followers in the more or less static nature of the Kesh's utopian society and in the book's emphasis on the descriptive, the non-narrative, and the spatial—the utopian society takes precedence here, not the utopian individual. However, as previously discussed, Le Guin is aware of the problems posed by the classical utopias' static, spatialized, and non-narrative form and has attempted to circumvent these shortcomings in several ways. The most obvious response is Le Guin's inclusion of the self-reflexive and critical figure of Pandora in *Always Coming Home*: as we will see, Le Guin uses Pandora to interrogate the characteristics of the literary utopia. Additionally, in order to inject narrative momentum and dynamic change in her book, Le Guin has incorporated a dystopian tale within *Always Coming Home*. Stone Telling's story—with its alienated protagonist, its plot structure of the *Bildungsroman*, and its depiction of an oppressive totalitarian society that threatens the Kesh—is a classic dystopian narrative. What makes Stone Telling's tale unique is its inclusion within a larger utopian frame: in many ways, *Always Coming Home* is the inversion of the critical dystopia, with a dystopian enclave instead of a utopian one. The inclusion of Stone Telling's narrative speaks to the novelization of the utopian genre and readers' changing expectations: while going against the classical utopia's emphasis on cultural isolation, Le Guin's decision to focus on the Kesh's interactions with the Condor people emphasizes the contingency of the utopian community and introduces a sense of danger and change that is largely absent from the rest of the book.<sup>36</sup> This strategy also serves to reaffirm the utopian status of the Kesh, if there was any need for further convincing.

By contrasting and comparing the form of *Always Coming Home* to the generic requirements of the literary utopia, my main aim is not to demonstrate that *Always Coming Home* is a book with utopian content but to show how Le Guin is consciously working within the formal conventions of the genre. This is an important point because some of the formal conventions of the utopian genre come into conflict with Le Guin's vision of what a utopian society should be—the cognitive demands of the literary utopia's formal conventions clash with a Kesh value system that makes no clear distinction between "objective and subjective fact and perception, in which neither chronological nor causal sequence is considered an adequate

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<sup>36</sup> The integration of the utopian community into the larger world and subsequent interaction with a hostile, martial Other is explored in more detail in section 4.5, where the interactions between the Valleysmen and the Kona in "Sloosha's Crossin'" provide an illuminating foil to those of the Kesh and the Condor.

reflection of reality” (Le Guin, *ACH* 153). As I will suggest later on, the ethnographic format will be key in mediating this conflict.

However, before moving on to a discussion of *Always Coming Home* as a postmodern ethnography, I would like to reflect on the initial opposition I set up between *The Dispossessed* and *Always Coming Home*. In many ways, these two books exist at opposite ends of the utopian spectrum: *The Dispossessed* is a narrative-driven text while *Always Coming Home* is an expository one; *The Dispossessed* focuses on the utopian individual while *Always Coming Home* is more concerned with the utopian community; *The Dispossessed*’s utopian settlers live in a barren physical environment and face the constant threat of starvation while the Kesh live in a fertile valley where “[t]here is no word [...] for famine” (*ACH* 437). However, instead of viewing *The Dispossessed* and *Always Coming Home* as irrevocably opposed to one another or suggesting that *Always Coming Home* acts as an authoritative correction to Le Guin’s earlier utopian novel, I would like to suggest that the two texts function as distinct, yet complementary parts of Le Guin’s larger utopian vision: like the double-planet system of Annares and Urras, *The Dispossessed* and *Always Coming Home* circle around a common centre, separate yet inextricably linked to one another. By creating multiple visions of utopia, Le Guin avoids what Gérard Klein calls the “specter” of “orthodoxy” that haunts contemporary utopian literature:<sup>37</sup> by formulating multiple distinct utopias, Le Guin avoids the closure and conformity that often accompanies literary depictions of utopia and embodies, once again, her strategy of uniting conflicting concepts while maintaining their differences.

### 3.5 Postmodern Ethnographies and Narrative Registers

“It makes the familiar strange, the exotic quotidian.”  
—James Clifford on ethnography

The “incredible becomes familiar, and in the process the ways and customs of our own world begin to seem strange.”  
—Edward James on SF

*Always Coming Home* is a book about the Kesh’s utopian society; however, its form also makes it a book about ethnography and ethnographers. Although ethnography is usually thought of as a scientific method, it is also a genre of writing, one that is riven with contradictory impulses: the ethnographer’s goal is to present an authentic and intelligible account of an alien culture, but to do so she must describe the unfamiliar via the interpretive schema of her own

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<sup>37</sup> As Klein posits,

Most works of contemporary SF, when they contain a utopian element, are haunted by a specter, that of orthodoxy—be it benevolent or malevolent, be it sorrowfully submitted to—or charismatically advocated and enforced. Le Guin, for her part, challenges all orthodoxy in advance, in the sense that in all her works she posits a diversity of solutions or rather of responses, a plurality of societies, and furthermore that history is made where cultures come into contact. . . . (“Le Guin’s ‘Aberrant’ Opus” 287)

culture. Likewise, the source of the ethnographer's authority and what differentiates him from other social scientists is the first-hand knowledge he has gained from time spent as a participant-observer, but an ethnography must also fulfill the requirements of a scientific text: as Paul Rabinow suggests, an "experiential 'I was there' element establishes the unique authority of the anthropologist: its suppression in the text establishes the anthropologist's scientific authority" (244).<sup>38</sup> Many of ethnography's tropes, narrative structures, and rhetorical stances have arisen in an effort to reconcile these competing interests.

In the early days of establishing ethnography as a scientific method, ethnographers tended to suppress the subjective elements of their work and to cast themselves as disinterested, objective observers. As Mary Louise Pratt notes, while the ethnographer's subjective experiences were not completely removed, these experiences were typically limited to the ethnography's opening chapters, taking the form of a conventionalized "tale of entry" which cast the ethnographer as a benevolent scientist-king, embattled explorer-adventurer, isolated castaway, or similarly stereotyped figure (35-41). While such stylized personal narratives do mediate the "contradiction between the engagement called for in fieldwork and the self-effacement called for in formal ethnographic description" (Pratt 33), by confining these personal narratives to the opening chapters, the ethnographer ultimately upholds the narrative of scientific authority.

However, by the 1980s some ethnographers—influenced by the theories of Said, Jameson, Habermas, Lyotard, Foucault, and others—began to look beyond the either/or of experiential versus scientific authority and to experiment with dialogic and polyphonic ethnographic forms. As Clifford explains in his introduction to the influential collection *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography* (1986),

Polyvocality was restrained and orchestrated in traditional ethnographies by giving to one voice a pervasive authorial function and to others the role of sources, "informants," to be quoted or paraphrased. Once dialogism and polyphony are recognized as modes of textual production, monopoic authority is questioned, revealed to be characteristic of a science that has claimed to *represent* cultures. The tendency to specify discourses—historically and intersubjectively—recasts this authority, and in the process alters the questions we put to cultural descriptions. (15; original emphasis)

Some ethnographers, such as Stephen A. Tyler, see in this movement the emergence of a new type of ethnographic text, the postmodern ethnography: "A post-modern ethnography is a cooperatively evolved text consisting of fragments of discourse intended to evoke in the minds of both reader and writer an emergent fantasy of a possible world of commonsense reality, and thus to provoke an aesthetic integration that will have a therapeutic effect" (125). This new kind of ethnography has no predetermined form; it evokes rather than represents, privileges discourse over text, speech over vision, and emphasizes "the cooperative and collaborative nature of the ethnographic situation in contrast to the ideology of the transcendental observer" (126). Before this begins to sound too triumphant, I should comment that postmodern ethnography (or, alternatively, the movement from the visual to the dialogic in ethnography) is no panacea: as

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<sup>38</sup> Although ethnography is used by other social scientists, such as sociologists, is it primarily used by anthropologists and is one of the key components of their methodology.

Rabinow reminds us, “Dialogic texts can be just as staged and controlled as experiential or interpretive texts” (246), and perhaps more prosaically, we should remember that the actual production of ethnographic texts does not necessarily reflect theoretical trends.

However, after all this talk about postmodern ethnography in the abstract, let’s take a look at a concrete example. Marjorie Shostak’s *Nisa: The Life and Words of a !Kung Woman* (1981) is, according to Pratt, “widely regarded as one of the more successful recent experiments in rehumanizing ethnographic writing” (42) and challenges ethnographic norms on several levels. As Pratt argues in “Fieldwork in Common Places,” Shostak subverts the conventional ethnographic tale of entry by first evoking the traditional vision of a tribal society uncontaminated by Western contact and then contrasting this vision with her actual experience of being greeted by two !Kung individuals dressed in Western clothing, eager to resume their work as informants. As Pratt comments,

It is an awful scene, a real return of the repressed. These others are fallen, corrupted not only as non-Europeans, but specifically as ethnographic informants. Bo and Nisa arrive praising the guilty relationship of exchange based on Western commodities, the point at which the anthropologist preserver-of-the-culture is the interventionist corrupter-of-the-culture. (44)

Shostak challenges the image of the anthropologist as a disinterested and objective observer, acknowledging the biases that colour even the most rigorously scientific work: as she comments on her interviews with her fellow anthropologists, “I welcomed the perspective they gave me on the !Kung and their way of life. But when I asked questions about what they were like as people and how they felt about their lives, I received answers so varied that they seemed to reflect as much the personalities of the individual anthropologists as anything they had learned about the !Kung” (5). Indeed, Shostak goes on to foreground the limitations of the traditional stance of the objective, transcendental observer, coming to the conclusion that “I needed information that could not be observed; I needed the !Kung to start speaking for themselves” (7).

Shostak’s book is revolutionary not only in its content but also in its form, challenging the “privileged monotone of ‘scientific’ representation” (Clifford, “Allegory” 103) by interweaving multiple, distinct voices: *Nisa* contains the autobiography of Nisa, a !Kung woman; the commentary of Shostak-the-scientist, whose introductions preface and contextualize Nisa’s life story; and the personal observations and impressions of Shostak-the-fieldworker that open the ethnography. The unique interplay of these three voices is apparent from *Nisa*’s opening pages: subverting traditional opening conventions, the ethnography begins with Nisa’s first-person recollection of giving birth (“I lay there and felt the pains as they came, over and over again” [1]), shifting to the descriptive scientific discourse employed by Shostak-the-scientist (“This story was told to me in the !Kung language by Nisa, an African woman of about fifty years of age, living in a remote corner of Botswana, on the northern fringe of the Kalahari Desert” [3]), before transitioning to the personal reflections of Shostak-the-fieldworker (“What was it like being a woman in a culture so outwardly different from my own? What were the universals, if any, and how much would I be able to identify with?” [5]).

James Clifford frames the book’s structure slightly differently, viewing it as containing

three allegorical registers: (1) the representation of a coherent cultural subject as a source of scientific knowledge (Nisa is a “!Kung woman”); (2) the construction of a gendered subject (Shostak asks: What is it to be a woman?); (3) the story of a mode of ethnographic production and relationship (an intimate dialogue). (“Allegory”103-04)

At times these different registers complement each other, and at times they contradict one another, but each register retains its distinctiveness. This results in what Clifford calls a “braided narrative” and is Shostak’s original contribution to ethnography:

The text Shostak has made is original in the way it refuses to blend its three registers into a seamless, “full” representation. They remain separate, in dramatic tension. This polyvocality is appropriate to the book’s predicament, that of many self-conscious ethnographic writers who find it difficult to speak of well-defined “others” from a stable, distanced position. Difference invades the text; it can no longer be represented; it must be enacted. (104)

*Always Coming Home* (1985) and the innovative ethnographic practices discussed in the essay collection *Writing Culture* are products of the same historical moment, both trying to answer the same basic question: how does one represent the Other? As such, it is hardly surprising to find that these works display a common interest in non-linear narratives, in polyvocality, and in a self-reflexive questioning of identity and representation. However, what is original about postmodern ethnography is the manner in which it attempts to weave the scientific and the literary, the objective and the subjective, and the emic and etic<sup>39</sup> into a coherent whole which still retains and respects the distinctiveness of its individual components. To repeat Clifford, the registers “remain separate, in dramatic tension”; difference “can no longer be represented; it must be enacted.” I would argue that a similar dramatic tension and sense of difference is being enacted in *Always Coming Home*. In deliberately appropriating the ethnographic form—complete with translators, editors, footnotes, and glossary—Le Guin has found a structure which allows her to embed her non-Euclidean utopia within a cognitive text. *Always Coming Home* contains three primary registers:

- 1) The emic. Through the voices of the Kesh, the reader encounters an alien culture from its own point of view; this register answers the question, “What might utopia look like?”
- 2) The etic. Here the voices of the Translator and Editor interpret, qualify, and contextualize the Kesh documents; this register answers the question, “How does utopia compare to our own world?”
- 3) The reflexive. The questioning, self-reflexive voice of Pandora disrupts the previous registers, foregrounding the limitations of the utopian tradition and questioning the sufficiency of the scientific one. Through Pandora, Le Guin explores the influence and constraints of generic conventions; the relationship between reader, writer, and text; the production of knowledge; and the morality of imaginative acts. This register poses the question, “How do we judge utopia?”

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<sup>39</sup> Borrowed from linguistics, the terms “emic” and “etic” describe the “contrast in the study (mainly in anthropology) of peoples and their religion either according to the principles, methods, and interests of the observer (etic) or by an attempt to understand the viewpoint of the people themselves (emic)” (Bowker).

## First Register: The Kesh

In some ways, *Always Coming Home* provides us with an embarrassment of riches: the number of individual Kesh voices that Le Guin has crafted is staggering. The most prominent and individualized voices belong to two Kesh women, Stone Telling and Flicker, and one man, Grey Bull. The women are authors of two substantial autobiographies, while Grey Bull has recounted his journeys in the form of a travelogue. However, Grey Bull's extensive travels outside of the Valley, Flicker's experiences as a visionary, and Stone Telling's time among the Condor set them somewhat apart from the ordinary realm of Kesh experience. Stone Telling, Flicker, and Grey Bull's stories are counterpointed by a chorus of other Kesh voices. There are the recurrent figures of Thorn and the Archivist, who engage in frequent dialogue with Pandora and the Editor; Little Bear Woman's stories, maps, and poetry; Worddriver's poetry and novel; Ire's numerous poems; and Kulkunna's poetry and histories. There are also over forty Valley people who only appear once in *Always Coming Home*, in addition to a number of anonymous works. The speakers include both men and women and span the gamut from the seven-year-old Enough to the seventy-year-old Kingsnake; the speakers also come from all over the Valley's nine towns. The experiences, values, and beliefs of the Kesh are expressed in both literary and non-literary forms and vary widely in tone, content, and sophistication: witness the derisive and bawdy "Bay Laurel Song," the esoteric and meditative poetry in "Ascension," the naïve autobiography contained in "The Train," and the ephemeral (and self-explanatory) "A List of Things That Will Be Needed Four Days From Now."

From these various voices the complex nature of Kesh culture emerges, along with the interpretive schema which structures Kesh experience. At this point, it will come as no surprise to hear that the central concept of Kesh culture is "heyiya" and its related images of the heyiya-if, hinge, and gyre as well as the Nine Houses of the living and the dead and the numbers 4, 5, and 9. What emerges is a vivid and complex image of a society whose mode of existence is—unlike our own—not based on dualism or binaries.

## Second Register: The Translator and Editor

The second register contains the voices of the Translator and Editor (no personal names are provided). Each voice has a particular role to fill, although there are areas of considerable ambiguity and overlap. The Translator provides, via footnotes, definitions of Kesh words and commentary on the peculiarities of Kesh language; in the case of oral or performance pieces, the Translator provides additional information about stage directions, audience response, and related details. The footnote on page 128 offers a representative example of the Translator's work:

The Kesh adjective meaning "rich" is *weambad*, from the word *ambad*, which as a verb means to give or to be generous and as a noun means wealth or generosity. But the word Thorn used telling the story was *wetotop*. That comes from the word *top*, which as a verb means to have or to keep or to own, and as a noun means possessions, things used; in its doubled form, *totop*, it means to hoard, treasure, possessions hidden or unused. And the adjective form *wetotop* describes a hoarder, a miser. In such terms, people who don't own much because they keep giving things away are rich, while those who give little and so own much are



poor. To keep the sense clear I had to translate “poor” as “rich”—but the relation of our words *miser* and *misery*, *miserable*, shows that the Kesh view has not always been foreign to us.

Here we see the Translator define and trace the etymology of the Kesh words *weambad* and *wetotop*; we are also treated to a discussion of how the Kesh’s use of the words meaning “rich” and “poor” differs significantly from our English usage, and how this affects the wording of the English translation. As this characteristic passage also demonstrates, although the Translator does refer to him or herself in the first person, the passage remains neutral and objective. Indeed, at times the Translator’s passages attain the semblance of scientific discourse: “*Fumo* is a word for concretions, usually whitish or yellowish, of ancient industrial origin, of nearly the same specific gravity as ice” (146; original italics).

While the Translator’s actions are invaluable—the conceit being that *Always Coming Home* could not exist without them—s/he has a very limited presence in the book. The Editor occupies a much more prominent role and, after the Kesh themselves, is the main source of information about the Valley People. The Editor contextualizes the Kesh texts by identifying their provenance; s/he also supplies information about Kesh culture and habits. Thanks to the Editor we know that the poem “Bucket” was “[i]mprovised on a warm morning of early spring by fifteen-year-old Adsevin (*Morning Star*) of Sinshan, while cutting bamboo” (82; original italics) and that “[d]irect competition and aggression was typically channeled by the Kesh into verbal expression, which was acceptable so long as it was controlled, and admired so long as it was witty” (482). We also have the Editor to thank for the explanatory introductions that preface all of the indigenous literary genres and for drawing all of the maps that appear in *Always Coming Home*. Like the Translator, the Editor also actively interprets Kesh actions, beliefs, and texts for the readers of *Always Coming Home*: “Such a nonsequential image of the year is characteristic of Valley chronography” (45). The Editor also occasionally speaks on behalf on the Kesh or paraphrases their conversations: “The Kesh might say that this is because...,” “There was a story told about a group of Finders...,” etc.

Indeed, the presence of the Editor is quite strong in his or her writings, much more so than the Translator, and s/he occasionally engages in more personal and subjective speculations. Let’s look at an excerpt from “Spoken and Written Literature”:

Perhaps not many of us could say why we save so many words, why our forests must all be cut to make paper to mark our words on, our rivers dammed to make electricity to power our word processors; we do it obsessively, as if afraid of something, as if compensating for something. Maybe we’re afraid of death, afraid to let our words simply be spoken and die, leaving silence for new words to be born in. Maybe we seek community, the lost, the irreproducible. (503)

Objective, this is not. However, on the whole, the Editor’s writings conform to the demands of a scientific discourse: the Editor appears as an objective, disinterested observer; exposition predominates over narrative; rhetorical flourishes and literary embellishments are kept to a minimum; information is presented in a clear, logical, and systematic manner; and particulars are turned into general observations.

I would like to suggest that in the voices of the Translator and Editor, we see the conflict between the experiential and the scientific reenacted once again. In the Translator and Editor's use of "I" and their constant references to having talked to, seen, and heard the Kesh, we once again see the characteristic ethnographic appeal to experiential authority that I discussed earlier; the conceit is that, unlike readers, the Translator and Editor were there, watched the plays, heard the poems, talked to the people, and handled the original maps. Their use of scientific jargon, objective descriptions, framing introductions, and a neutral, detached tone, also allows the readers to detect the appeal to scientific authority and the movement towards totalizing, explanatory discourse. However, the voices of both the Translator and the Editor are, to a certain extent, self-reflexive: in their translations, explanations, and meditations they direct the reader's attention to the constructed nature of the text and to the ethnographic process. Wisely, Le Guin does not attempt to solve this conflict between experiential and scientific discourses, but uses the character of Pandora to direct the reader's attention to it.

### Third Register: Pandora

Like the Translator and Editor, Pandora is a denizen of our world, transplanted into utopia. Unlike the Translator and Editor, who exist primarily in terms of their functions, Pandora is a developed character and the primary mediator between the reader's world and the future utopian society of the Kesh. While the Translator and Editor are concerned with the collection and dissemination of knowledge, Pandora is concerned with questioning it: she may take on the role of the utopian visitor in *Always Coming Home*, but she is a visitor who is aware that she is in utopia and wary of the conventions that structure it. In her role as the critical and self-reflexive voice of *Always Coming Home*, Pandora not only exposes the shortcomings of what Le Guin has referred to as the "Judeo-Christian-Rationalist-West" (Lathe 82), but also the limitations of the utopian genre itself.

Pandora is the reader's companion in *Always Coming Home*, a companion whose authority is bolstered by her semi-autobiographical status. Pandora's cry, "Am I not a daughter of the people who enslaved and extirpated the peoples of three continents? Am I not a sister of Adolf Hitler and Anne Frank? Am I not a citizen of the State that fought the first nuclear war?" (147) clearly parallels the position of Le Guin, an American citizen of German ancestry. This blurring between author and character continues in "Pandora No Longer Worrying," where "Pandora" thanks those people who helped make *Always Coming Home* possible—people like the Washington-based poet Jean Nordhaus or Douglas K. Faerber, a sound engineer based out of Oregon. However, this is not to say that Pandora is simply Le Guin by another name, but to suggest that Pandora represents a particular—and privileged—aspect of the authorial voice: she represents a critical and self-reflexive point-of-view. I would claim that Le Guin's decision to incorporate *overt* autobiographical elements in *Always Coming Home* and to deliberately blur the line between author and character achieves three things: 1) it gives rhetorical weight to Pandora's observations; 2) it reinforces the importance—and inescapability—of the subjective and personal; and 3) it reenacts the blurring of fact and fiction, objective and subjective, that Le Guin advocates throughout *Always Coming Home*.

As I touched upon earlier, Le Guin is well-versed in the history of the literary utopia, appreciative of the genre's achievements but also acutely aware of its limitations. Indeed, she is the first to acknowledge that all too often, literary utopias are artificial, pretentious, and boring: as Pandora remarks, "I never did like smartass utopians. Always so much healthier and saner and sounder and fitter and kinder and tougher and wiser and righter than me and my family and friends. People who have the answers are boring, niece. Boring, boring, boring" (316). This sentiment is expressed most vigorously in the section titled "Pandora Converses with the Archivist of the Library of the Madrone Lodge at Wakwaha-na." This is the section that most closely resembles the classic literary utopia, where a series of questions and answers between the traveller-narrator and the helpful utopian informant expose the ills of contemporary society and reveal their utopian solutions. While Le Guin certainly uses this section to showcase the flaws of our post-industrial capitalist society (for example, the unequal access to education, technology, and information) and as a platform for her solutions to these problems (no censorship, free public libraries, literary initiatives, and independent mass media), she also makes sure to point out the dialogue's artificiality: "This is the kind of conversation they always have in utopia. I set you up and then you give interesting, eloquent, and almost entirely convincing replies. Surely we can do better than that!" (315). In fact, Le Guin goes so far as to have the Archivist suggest that *Always Coming Home* is not a utopia:

This is a mere dream dreamed in a bad time, an Up Yours to the people who ride snowmobiles, make nuclear weapons, and run prison camps by a middle-aged housewife, a critique of civilisation possible only to the civilised, an affirmation pretending to be a rejection, a glass of milk for the soul ulcered by acid rain, a piece of pacifist jeanjacquerie, and a cannibal dance among the savages in the ungodly garden of the farthest West. (316)

The Archivist's denial sees her step outside of her role as a member of the Kesh society and reaffirms both the artificiality of this type of conventional utopian dialogue and the fictive nature of the Kesh themselves. Although the Archivist's denial is made with tongue firmly in cheek, it still betrays Le Guin's ambivalence towards the utopian project. As Le Guin suggests, "In one way or another, from Plato on, utopia has been the big yang motorcycle trip. Bright, dry, clear, strong, firm, active, aggressive, lineal, progressive, creative, expanding, advancing, and hot" ("Non-Euclidean" 90); this statement goes some way in explaining her reluctance to align *Always Coming Home* with a literary tradition that has historically valued the rational and intellectual at the cost of the sensual and emotive and which seems unable to conceive of happiness except through progress. Faced with what she views as the failure of the classical utopia, Le Guin has given herself the project of trying to imagine what a truly different future might look like. As such, *Always Coming Home* is both a rejection and a reinvention of the literary utopia, and through Pandora Le Guin underlines this fact.

Indeed, a crucial part of challenging this conception of utopia lies in questioning whether the rationalist-scientific-quantitative mode of thought is the only valid source of knowledge. As Pandora suggests, sometimes

numbers are wrong. They are in error. You don't count scrub oaks. When you can count them, something has gone wrong. You can count how many in a hundred square yards and multiply, if you're a botanist, and so make a good estimate, a fair

guess, but you cannot count the scrub oaks on this ridge [...]. The chaparral is like atoms and the components of atoms: it evades. It is innumerable. It is not accidentally but essentially messy. (240)

When dealing with scrub oaks, or with those most utopian of feelings, faith and hope, sometimes the scientific-rationalist-quantitative approach is not enough: it needs to be supplemented by a mode of thought capable of dealing with the uncertain and the unknown, the contradictory and the ambiguous. Le Guin's utopia will be a scientific and rational one, but it will also be a mystical and intuitive one, a sensual and emotional one. Perhaps the most poignant expression of Le Guin's utopian vision is revealed in Pandora's meditation on the lowly scrub oak:

The mind can imagine that shadow of a few leaves falling in the wilderness; the mind is a wonderful thing. But what about all the shadows of all the other leaves on all the other branches on all the other scrub oaks on all the other ridges of all the wilderness? If you could imagine those even for a moment, what good would it do? Infinite good. (241)

For Le Guin, utopia is found in a vision of a whole which is able to preserve the autonomy of the individual. This, of course, is a daunting feat, but that is exactly what makes it utopian: Le Guin's utopia is not a destination to be achieved once and for all, but a dynamic, ongoing process.

Pandora not only questions generic traditions: Le Guin also uses this character to reflect on the act of reading and to explore the relationship between writer, reader, and text. As I suggested earlier, one of the functions of the Translator and Editor is to highlight the constructed nature of *Always Coming Home*, to emphasize the process of research, writing, and editing, and to acknowledge the writer's presence in the text. Through Pandora, Le Guin similarly marks the reader's place in the text, and emphasizes the reader's role in the creation of meaning. The reader is interpellated in several ways, most obviously, perhaps, in the titles to Pandora's sections: "Pandora Worrying About What She Is Doing: She Addresses the Reader with Agitation," "Pandora Gently to the Gentle Reader," etc. The reader is also constituted by Pandora's constant use of the second person: "You may have noticed...", "maybe you'll say...", and so forth. By establishing an "I" and a "you," Pandora frames the reading of *Always Coming Home* as a reciprocal act that involves the goodwill and participation of both sides: as the Archivist reminds Pandora, "A book is an act; it takes place in time, not just in space. It is not information, but relation" (315). By itself, a book is partial, incomplete, broken; it needs a reader's "heart [to] complete the pattern" (53). The reader must actively engage with the book for Le Guin's utopian vision to be effective. As Pandora reminds the reader, "we have a long way yet to go, and I can't go without you" (339).

This relationship is not one-sided, however. If the reader wants to enjoy the imaginative pleasures that *Always Coming Home* has to offer, then she also needs to acknowledge her implication in the ills that called the utopian imagination into being in the first place. Le Guin, deliberately echoing Baudelaire, reminds us that as imperfect people in a flawed world, we are necessarily implicated in its evils: as Pandora asks, "Do you take me for innocent, my fellow maggot, colluding Reader?" (148). Although the utopian vision may seem like a flight from the

evils of daily life, the truth is that it could not exist without these evils. As Suvin explains, the formal framework of the utopia functions

by explicit or implicit reference to the author's empirical environment. Without this reference, nonutopian readers, having no yardstick for comparison, could not understand the alternative novelty. Conversely, without such a return and feedback into the reader's normality there would be no function for utopias or other estranged genres: "the real function of estrangement is—and must be—the provision of a shocking and distancing mirror above the all too familiar reality." (*Metamorphoses* 53-54)<sup>40</sup>

Thus, in *Always Coming Home*, Le Guin uses Pandora as a means to mediate between the utopian flight from reality and the necessity of returning to confront it. This is why Pandora insists on the reader's complicity and moral responsibility and makes a point of warning the reader that "if [the libraries of Babel] burn, it will be all of us that burned them" (147). The act of writing a utopia and the process of reading one are profoundly political and moral: in offering a picture of a more perfect society, the utopia insists on the inadequacy of our own. While readers do not have to agree with the proposed solutions of any one individual utopian work—B. F. Skinner's *Walden Two* (1948) comes to mind as a good example—those who reject all utopian visions out of hand and fail to envision any alternatives should at least acknowledge their complicity with the status quo.

The morality of imaginative acts is not a common topic in SF, but it is one that Le Guin explores from various angles in *Always Coming Home*. As discussed earlier, the Kesh's utopian society is separated from our own not only by space and time, but through the destructive effects of a nuclear holocaust. The nuclear holocaust is by now a cliché but, unlike many other SF writers, Le Guin chooses to explore the moral implications of this imaginative act. In her 1973 essay "The Stalin in the Soul," Le Guin remarks that

Recent science fiction, for instance, is full of edifying and hideous pictures of terrible futures—overpopulated worlds where people eat each other in the form of green cookies; postholocaust mutants behaving in approved Social Darwinist fashion; nine billion people dying various awful deaths by pollution at the rate of a billion per chapter, and so on. I have done this myself; I plead guilty. And I feel guilty. Because none of this involves real thought or real commitment. The death of civilization, the death of a species, is used the way the death of an individual is used in murder mysteries—to provide the readers a cheap thrill. The writer holds up a picture of overpopulation, or universal pollution, or atomic war, and everybody says *Ugh! Agh! Yecchh!* That is a "gut reaction," and a perfectly sincere one. But it is not an act of intelligence and it is not a moral act. (219)

In *Always Coming Home*, Le Guin re-examines this moral quandary. I doubt that many readers would accuse Le Guin of aiming for a "cheap thrill" in *Always Coming Home*, but the fact remains that through "holocaust, and Fimbul Winter" (148)<sup>41</sup> she has committed the same act she

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<sup>40</sup> Suvin is quoting from Ernst Bloch's "Entfremdung, Verfremdung."

<sup>41</sup> An Anglicization of the Norse Fimbulvetr, the three-year-long winter which precedes Ragnarök, and is eerily reminiscent of the predicted effects of a nuclear winter.

criticized in “The Stalin in the Soul.” Charges of sensationalism are deflected by the fact that the destruction takes place off-stage, but the moral question remains, and unlike her Greek namesake, Le Guin’s Pandora admits to knowingly releasing these evils upon the world: “I knew what was in that box my brother-in-law left here” (148). In deliberately choosing to release these evils, Pandora implies that Western capitalist culture is either not worth saving, or not capable of being saved—instead, we must start anew with something completely different.<sup>42</sup> Indeed, Pandora rejects two fundamental components of Western capitalist culture (components which, unfortunately, inform much SF), namely that 1) progress is the yardstick by which we measure the worth of a civilization, and 2) civilization (or civilization as we conceive of it) is invariably a good thing. If a civilized country is a developed country, and if a developed country is one dedicated to progress, and progress means new and better technology, more current and specialized information, more efficient and deadly weapons, and, always, more money, then for Pandora, civilization is a load too heavy to bear: “Many as we are, there’s still too much to carry. It is a dead weight. Even if we keep breeding ten babies every second to bear the load of Civilisation forward into the future, they can’t take it” (147). And, of course, in our society, it is not the “civilized” peoples that shoulder the weight of civilization, but the weak, the poor, and the marginalized—all of the Others that the civilized world needs to exist. Because of this, Pandora has opted to “[kill] the babies” (147): what has she gained? “Time to look forward, surely; time to look back” (148). Pandora presents this as sufficient justification for her actions, although whether the reader agrees is a different matter—indeed, the aggressive, emotionally-freighted language and imagery in this section seem designed to provoke a negative response in the reader: “Was it I that killed the babies?”; “puny little bastards”; “Have I not eaten, drunk, and breathed poison all my life, like the maggot that lives and breeds in shit? Do you take me for innocent, my fellow maggot, colluding Reader?” (147-48). Pandora’s agitated reflection challenges readers to come to their own conclusions regarding the moral implications of SF and of Le Guin’s artistic decision. Pandora’s self-reflexive meditations encourage readers to engage in their own.

### **3.6 Conclusion: “Satisfactions Which the Intellect Alone Cannot Provide.”**

These, then, are the three registers in *Always Coming Home*: the emic, the etic, and the reflexive, embodied in the voices of the Kesh, the Translator and Editor, and Pandora, respectively. However, the presence of these three different registers allows Le Guin to achieve one further thing: to incorporate her particular vision of a better world within the formal utopian framework. As discussed previously, *Always Coming Home* represents Le Guin’s effort to imagine a new type of utopia, one with

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<sup>42</sup> The completeness of this break is emphasized by *Always Coming Home*’s lack of a Founder, a special person who engineers the break with the past that allows the ideal society to be born. The notion of a Founder is central to a variety of historical and philosophical works—take Plutarch’s account of Romulus and the founding of Rome, for example, or the importance of the Legislator in Rousseau’s *The Social Contract* (1762)—and is fairly common in utopian literature, spanning a range of figures from *Utopia*’s King Utopus to *Walden Two*’s T. E. Frazier. The Founder has played an important part in Le Guin’s previous works on utopia: “The Day Before the Revolution” is a character study of Odo, the founder of the anarchist society in *The Dispossessed*, while the idea of the Founder is one of the main focuses of *The Lathe Of Heaven*, with George Orr’s “effective dreaming” and the imperious designs of William Haber. This makes *Always Coming Home*’s lack of a founding figure all the more conspicuous.

a language and way of thought in which no distinction is made between human and natural history or between objective and subjective fact and perception, in which neither chronological nor causal sequence is considered an adequate reflection of reality, and in which time and space are so muddled together that one is never sure whether they are talking about an era or an area. (153)

This vision runs counter to the rationalist utopia's tendency to valorize reason and will, and indicates the value Le Guin places on the spiritual and emotional.

This picture of a utopia where there is no clear distinction between “what happened” and “like what happened,” between fact and fiction, and between vision and reality is formally problematic. Utopia—in its capacity as the sociopolitical subgenre of SF—is structured by its necessary condition of cognitive estrangement. Thus, although myth, fable and folktale are estranged genres, they are fundamentally incompatible with SF: as Suvin notes,

The myth is diametrically opposed to the cognitive approach since it conceives human relations as fixed and supernaturally determined [...]. Where the myth claims to explain once and for all the essence of phenomena, SF first posits them as problems and then explores where they lead; its sees the mythical static identity as an illusion, usually as fraud, at best only as a temporary realization of potentially limitless contingencies. (*Metamorphoses* 7)

Likewise, the requirement of cognition not only differentiates SF from myth, but also from the folktale and the fantasy, which are characterized by their indifference towards the laws of the empirical world. The Kesh's casual acceptance of out-of-body experiences and of the existence of what we would call spirits or ghosts is incompatible with the rationalist view of utopia that is espoused above.<sup>43</sup>

However, as discussed earlier, Le Guin is adamant that the cognitive approach is not the final measure of humankind:

We are rational beings, but we are also sensual, emotional, appetitive, ethical beings, driven by needs and reaching out for satisfactions which the intellect alone cannot provide. Where these other modes of being and doing are inadequate, the intellect should prevail. Where the intellect fails, and must always fail, unless we become disembodied bubbles, then one of the other modes must take over. (“Myth and Archetype in Science Fiction” 74)

Indeed, Le Guin suggests that by placing its faith exclusively in rationalist principles, utopian literature (and SF more generally) risks becoming its opposite: “The rationalist utopia is a power trip. It is a monotheocracy, declared by executive decree, and maintained by willpower; as its premise is progress, not process, it has no habitable present, and speaks only in the future tense. And in the end reason itself must reject it” (“Non-Euclidean” 87).

This is not to say that SF and fantasy, the rational and the irrational, the cognitive and the intuitive can be mixed indiscriminately. The groundbreaking aspect of *Always Coming Home* is not Le Guin's use of various genres, but her decision to structure the book as an ethnographic

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<sup>43</sup> For Kesh reaction to such visions, read “The Visionary: The Life Story of Flicker of the Serpentine of Telina-na” in *Always Coming Home*.

text. The ethnographic structure of *Always Coming Home* allows Le Guin to compartmentalize the different registers while still keeping them in productive tension with one another. Indeed, this tension is reenacted on every level of the text: linear and non-linear narrative are yoked together, the utopian coexists with the real, the emic with the etic, the cognitive with the anti-cognitive. Indeed, Le Guin's triumph is finding a form capable of incorporating these conflicting tendencies while preserving the productive tension that exists between them and of turning the tension between these categories into a formal and thematic centre.



#### 4. "MATRYOSHKA DOLL VARIATIONS": DAVID MITCHELL'S CLOUD ATLAS

##### 4.1 Introduction: Cloud Atlas's Postmodern Pyrotechnics

To date, *Cloud Atlas* is David Mitchell's best-known work: short-listed for the Man Booker Prize and made into a major motion picture, *Cloud Atlas* is a critical and commercial success. The novel contains six separate narrative strands (or novellas, as Mitchell calls them), each with a distinctive tone, style, speaker, and generic affiliation. The opening—and closing—novella is "The Pacific Journal Of Adam Ewing," which takes the form of a diary written by the titular American notary during his round trip from California to Sydney. The opening section of the journal is missing, and the narrative begins with Ewing waiting on Chatham Island for his ship to be repaired. Set in the 1850s, "The Pacific Journal" is a record of the naive and self-righteous notary's growing friendship with Autua, one of the last Moriori, and of Ewing's near-death at the hands of the scheming Dr. Henry Goose. Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) and Melville's *Benito Cereno* (1855) inform this section's style.<sup>44</sup>

*Cloud Atlas*'s second novella is "Letters from Zedelghem": inspired by the events in Eric Fenby's *Delius: As I Knew Him* (1936) and channeling the style of Christopher Isherwood's *Lions and Shadows* (1938), Mitchell crafts a "decadent modernist tale of polymorphous sexuality and artistic intrigue" (Hicks) set in 1930s Belgium. The novella unfolds through a series of letters written by Robert Frobisher to his friend (and implied lover) Rufus Sixsmith. Fleeing from his British creditors, the charming, talented, and amoral Frobisher seeks out the once-great composer Vyvyan Ayrns and applies to be his amanuensis. The letters chart Frobisher's precarious relationship with the irascible Ayrns, his entanglement with Ayrns's wife, Mrs. Van Outryve de Crommelynck, and his disastrous infatuation with Ayrns's daughter Eva.

The third novella is the only one told from a third-person point of view: "Half-Lives: The First Luisa Rey Mystery" is a fast-paced thriller set against the backdrop of a 1970s California. It follows "ace cub reporter" (CA 117) Luisa Rey as she struggles to expose the cover-up of the deadly flaws in Swanekke Island's new nuclear reactor. As its title suggests, this narrative is a

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<sup>44</sup> Mitchell has talked at length about the literary inspirations behind *Cloud Atlas*, stating,

Each of the six sections has a model. My character Ewing was (pretty obviously) Melville, but with shorter sentences. Frobisher is Christopher Isherwood, especially in *Lions and Shadows*. Luisa Rey is any generic airport thriller. Cavendish is Cavendish—he has a short part in the "London" section of my first novel, *Ghostwritten*. The interview format for "Sonmi" I borrowed from gossip magazines in which a rather gushing hack interviews some celeb bigwig. Zachry owes (of course) a big debt to *Riddley Walker*, a novel by Russell Hoban, though some reviews point to "Mad Max 3." ("Q&A").

pastiche of the serialized, mass-market genre thrillers that line the shelves of airport bookstores and supermarket checkouts.

Returning to the first-person point of view, “The Ghastly Ordeal of Timothy Cavendish” is a darkly humorous memoir-cum-screenplay about Cavendish’s involuntary confinement in a nursing home in Hull, England, and his increasingly desperate attempts to escape. Mitchell’s picaresque draws heavily on *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest* (1962) and from Martin Amis’s flippant, mordant, and self-absorbed protagonists.

Shifting from contemporary England to a future Korea, Mitchell’s fifth novella follows the clone, or “fabricant,” Sonmi~451 as she undergoes the transformation from an ignorant slave to a disenchanting but resolute rebel. Structured as an interview between an awed junior archivist and the condemned fabricant, “An Orison of Sonmi~451” is set in a dystopian future where megacorporations rule the world and consumer consumption is mandated by law; where large swaths of the globe (including America) have been turned into infected or radioactive “deadlands”; and where fabricants like Sonmi~451 do all of the menial and dangerous labour. “Sonmi~451” draws upon a wide variety of SF, including Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, Huxley’s *Brave New World*, Yevgeny Zamyatin’s *We*, H. G. Wells’s *The Time Machine*, Daniel Keyes’s *Flowers for Algernon* (1966), Ray Bradbury’s *Fahrenheit 451* (1953), and Richard Fleischer’s *Soylent Green* (1973).

The sixth and final narrative strand centres on a peaceful agrarian community in a far-future, post-apocalyptic Hawaii. The narrator, Zachry, reminisces about the events of his youth, including the death of his father at the hands of the war-like Kona; the arrival of Meronym, one of the last members of a technologically elite civilization; and the ultimate destruction and enslavement of Zachry’s people by the Kona. The distinctive language and style of “Sloosha’s Crossin’ An’ Ev’rythin’ After” are clearly indebted to Russell Hoban’s *Riddley Walker* (1980).

Mitchell is hardly the first writer to combine multiple narrative strands in his novel, but what sets *Cloud Atlas* apart is the form that this combination takes. The first narrative, “The Pacific Journal of Adam Ewing,” breaks off halfway through, switching to the beginning of “Letters from Zedelghem.” In a narrative structure that is commonly compared to a matryoshka doll,<sup>45</sup> the subsequent novellas follow the same pattern until we reach “Sloosha’s Crossin’,” a complete narrative that acts as a mirror leading back into the endings of the previous five stories. In interviews Mitchell discusses how the novel’s structure is partially inspired by Italo Calvino’s *If on a Winter’s Night a Traveler* (1979). As Mitchell reminisces, “Friends and relatives were still receiving copies [of Calvino’s novel] for birthdays years later; I ended up writing a devout MA on (ahem) ‘The Postmodern Novel’; even worse, my curiosity got stung to its core by the question, ‘What would a novel where interrupted narratives are continued later look like?’” (“Enter the Maze”). However, in *Cloud Atlas* Mitchell has eschewed the frame narrative that Calvino uses to contain the unfinished stories in *If on a Winter’s Night a Traveler*.

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<sup>45</sup> While the image of the matryoshka doll is the one most commonly invoked to describe *Cloud Atlas*’s structure, as I discuss on pp. 55 and ff., it is not an entirely accurate analogy.

Instead, *Cloud Atlas* is perhaps best understood as the culmination of the ideas explored in Mitchell's first two novels, *Ghostwritten* (1999) and *number9dream* (2001): all three novels weave together multiple narrators and story lines and display a fondness for metafictional flourishes and genre-blurring exercises. Indeed, Mitchell's critical and commercial success is rendered even more impressive in light of his clear affinity for genre fiction: to date, only *Black Swan Green* (2006) has been written in a primarily realistic mode—*number9dream* alternates between fable, cyberpunk, and detective story, *Ghostwritten* dabbles in fantasy and SF, *Cloud Atlas* careens between historical fiction, pulp thrillers, and SF while *The Thousand Autumns of Jacob de Zoet* (2010) might best be described as a historical romance.

Critics, naturally enough, tend to focus on *Cloud Atlas*'s striking narrative structure. In his review, Lawrence Norfolk comments that “the very design of *Cloud Atlas* tells a further story, a quest conducted among genres, languages and witnesses for the means to represent worlds, familiar or remote, historical or imaginary”; Heather J. Hicks explores the manner in which *Cloud Atlas*'s narrative structure “confronts the potentially apocalyptic effects of both linear and cyclical modes of temporality”; and Will McMorran investigates what *Cloud Atlas* can “tell us about the place of narrative, and metanarrative, in postmodern fiction” (158). Meanwhile, Caroline Edwards looks at how *Cloud Atlas*'s narrative structure enables Mitchell “to question social values and political assumptions, as well as to expose apocalyptic, ecological futures in ways that move beyond mere dystopian catastrophes” (179), while Nicholas Dunlop explores Mitchell's work through the lens of the “oppositional politicized engagement that his [postmodern] technique enables” (202).

However, Mitchell is able to ground his postmodern pyrotechnics with engaging characters, captivating plots, and a belief in the transformative possibilities offered by narrative. As Sarah Dillon suggests in her introduction to a collection of essays on Mitchell,

The consensus seems to be that while Mitchell employs postmodern literary techniques, he does not adhere to the apolitical and antisocial nihilism of postmodernity with its ironic take on modern life and its paradoxical insistence on the inadequateness of narrative, language and literature. On the contrary, Mitchell's use of every literary device available to him is part of his delight in the continuing power and affect of literature. While Mitchell might repeatedly indulge the self-referentiality characteristic of postmodern fiction, this self-referentiality is in fact always about the fertility, power and sustenance of fiction, not its exhaustion. (“Introducing” 18)

Indeed, if Mitchell's talents were limited to being a gifted mimic, *Cloud Atlas* would be an impressive but ultimately empty stylistic exercise. Fortunately, this is not the case. The novel's recurring themes and motifs are reinforced by an intercalary structure that creates a networked narrative which transcends its component parts. While it is a complex and multifaceted novel, two themes consistently emerge: the power of narrative and the possibility of human agency. In the end, *Cloud Atlas* is an attempt to conceptualize history differently: it presents the past, present, and future not as a fixed linear continuum or an endless repetitive cycle, but as an interconnected series of systems. This contingent model of history opens up the possibility of meaningful change and reflects Mitchell's interest in the role of human agency within larger

historical narratives.

## 4.2 A Question of Genre

Some readers might question why I have chosen to include *Cloud Atlas* in a dissertation ostensibly devoted to SF when there is nothing science fictional about “The Pacific Journal,” “Letters from Zedelghem,” “Half-Lives,” or “The Ghastly Ordeal.” I could counter with the observation that unlike the first four narratives, “An Orison” and “Sloosha’s Crossin’” are textbook examples of the near-future dystopia and the post-apocalyptic tale. Furthermore, even the “realistic” narrative strands have sly references to SF sprinkled throughout: take the name of Luisa’s father, Lester Rey, an allusion to the influential SF editor, Lester del Rey. The breadth and depth of SF references suggest that Mitchell has a familiarity with the genre that should satisfy even the most demanding SF fan. Indeed, when the protagonist of Mitchell’s semi-autobiographical *Black Swan Green* is asked who his literary heroes are, he promptly answers, “Isaac Asimov. Ursula Le Guin. John Wyndham” (161).

Additionally, there is a well-established history of discussing *Cloud Atlas*, and Mitchell’s earlier work more generally, in terms of SF. Neil Easterbrook classes David Mitchell (along with Russell Hoban, Thomas Pynchon, William Gibson, Samuel R. Delany, and Haruki Murakami) as an example of an author who “help[s] us to continue to think seriously about a literature that uses sf devices for, perhaps, either mainstream or innovative purposes” (211). Andrew Gaedtke similarly places Mitchell among a group of British writers who are actively applying the insights of contemporary scientific discoveries in their novels and who “in both historical and speculative modes [...] have] examined the cultural traces of Copernican astronomy and physics, Darwinian naturalism, early experiments in electricity and radio, interwar psychiatry, and the bioethics of cloning” (184). Likewise, Andrew M. Butler asserts that Mitchell has contributed towards the most recent “British Boom” in SF (387).

Another interesting fact is that—with the exception of “The Ghastly Ordeal”—all of the narratives in *Cloud Atlas* are either historical set pieces (1850s sea-voyage, postwar Belgium, 1970s California) or SF narratives. I find this to be especially interesting in light of the noted similarities between historical fiction and SF. As I discussed in the introduction, several critics see SF as the heir apparent to historical fiction: to repeat Carl Freedman, as knowledge of the past becomes “more difficult to attain, the historical novel, necessarily tied as it is to such knowledge, is bound to become increasingly susceptible to reification. But science fiction is comparatively free of the burden of the past, at least in the particular way relevant here” (57-58). As we shall see, the problem of history and memory is a central theme of *Cloud Atlas*. Furthermore, no prospectus on the state of contemporary SF would be complete without some reference to SF’s increasing penchant for genre-blurring and the growing areas of overlap between SF and mainstream fiction, trends which *Cloud Atlas* exemplifies.

A final justification for including *Cloud Atlas* is one more specific to the concerns of this dissertation. Zachry’s tribe in “Sloosha’s Crossin’,” the Valleysmen, bear an uncanny resemblance to The People of the Valley of Na in Le Guin’s *Always Coming*

*Home*: both stories are set in a post-apocalyptic landscape; feature peaceful, agrarian communities with limited access to high-technology; have these peaceful communities threatened by a war-like neighbour; and prominently feature an anthropological outsider. I will discuss these parallels in my concluding chapter, but I hope that this reason and the reasons I have listed above convince readers of the justice of *Cloud Atlas*'s inclusion.

### 4.3 Narrative Structure, History and Causality in *Cloud Atlas*

You would think a place the size of England could easily hold all the happenings in one humble lifetime without much overlap—I mean, it's not ruddy Luxembourg we live in—but no, we cross, crisscross, and recross our old tracks like figure skaters.

—David Mitchell, *Cloud Atlas*

As anyone who has read *Cloud Atlas* can attest, the narrative structure of Mitchell's novel is as important as the content and style of each individual narrative strand. By breaking up the novellas, Mitchell has created an interpenetrating narrative structure that links the stories together while simultaneously highlighting their differences—all while straddling the fine line between reader suspense and exasperation. However, upon first opening Mitchell's novel, there is nothing to warn the unsuspecting reader of what lies in store. While *Cloud Atlas* does start partway through Ewing's journey, beginning a novel *in medias res* is by now such a common literary technique that by itself it provokes little comment or attention. "The Pacific Journal" begins as a straightforward period piece detailing Ewing's voyage: there is no (post)modernist trickery, no self-reflexiveness, no breaking of the fourth wall: we immerse ourselves in Ewing's story with little to jolt us out of it.<sup>46</sup> Thus, the transition from Ewing's to Frobisher's story is especially abrupt and is rendered even more disconcerting by the fact that the break occurs mid-sentence, at the bottom of the page—turning the page, the reader unexpectedly encounters another frontispiece, "Letters from Zedelghem." This rupture is further emphasized by the enormous contrast in narrators and settings: Frobisher—a profligate, bisexual aesthete—could hardly be more different from the stuffy and straitlaced Ewing, just as the urbane, decadent atmosphere of Zedelghem stands in stark contrast to the harsh life aboard the *Prophetess*. This abrupt transition creates a sense of shock, suspense, and curiosity—What happens to Ewing? Who is Sixsmith, and who is writing letters to him?—but it ushers in something else as well. In Zedelghem Frobisher finds an old, tattered book about an American notary's nautical misadventures. "The Pacific Journal" becomes an artifact, "a curious dismembered volume" (*CA* 64): "It begins on the ninety-ninth page, its covers are gone, its binding unstitched [... and] the pages cease, midsentence, some forty pages later" (64). The conceit, of course, is that we have been reading the very "dismembered volume" that Frobisher has been reading, missing pages and all. "The Pacific Journal" has become a story within yet another story. What is more, it has become a story whose authenticity is directly questioned by Frobisher, mirroring the reader's own suspicions: "Something shifty about the journal's authenticity—seems too structured for a

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<sup>46</sup> This pretense is clearly dropped, however, by the time that Ewing encounters the Nazareth Smoking School in the second half of "The Pacific Journal."

genuine diary, and its language doesn't ring quite true—but who would bother forging such a journal, and why?" (64). As we can see even at this early point, Mitchell's structuring of *Cloud Atlas* introduces questions of authenticity and narrative authority (especially in relation to the use of genre conventions), and pointedly draws the reader's attention to the process of creating and transmitting stories. I will return to these issues, but it is apparent that *Cloud Atlas* is aiming to be more than a literary gimmick.

After forcibly drawing our attention to the narrative shift between "The Pacific Journal" and "Letters from Zedelghem," Mitchell makes the transition between the subsequent narratives smoother and more coherent, encouraging the reader to view the novel as an uncertain but linear progression between stories and through time. Having been primed by the abrupt initial transition, the reader is more prepared when "Letters from Zedelghem" ends mid-story (though not mid-sentence) and switches to "Half-Lives." Once again, there is a distinct shift in genre, setting, style, and tone: the switch to a third-person point of view and the sensational opening hook—"Rufus Sixsmith leans over the balcony and estimates his body's velocity when it hits the sidewalk and lays his dilemmas to rest" (CA 89)—clearly emphasize the difference between "Half-Lives" and "Letters from Zedelghem." As the first line of "Half-Lives" also suggests, the transition between these two narratives is much smoother than the initial break between Ewing's and Frobisher's stories. "Half-Lives" is immediately linked to "Letters from Zedelghem" through the character of Rufus Sixsmith, who is the recipient of Frobisher's letters and the embattled physicist who tips Luisa Rey off about Swanekke Island's faulty nuclear reactors. (Like the "Pacific Journal," Frobisher's letters in "Zedelghem" also become literary artifacts in the next story: Luisa receives the letters after Sixsmith's death.) The transition is also smoothed by the fact that, unlike in the case of Ewing, we know Frobisher's immediate fate: we leave him comfortably settled at Zedelghem, having just agreed to stay with Ayr's for another six months (CA 85). As well, unlike the abrupt mid-sentence break that occurs in "The Pacific Journal," Mitchell clearly telegraphs the closing of "Zedelghem" by having Frobisher's final letter and the frontispiece of "Half-Lives" on facing pages.

The transition between "Letters from Zedelghem" and "Half-Lives" cements the narrative and structural pattern that undergirds *Cloud Atlas*: narrative A breaks off mid-story and narrative B begins; before narrative B breaks off and narrative C begins, narrative A is again encountered as a literary artifact embedded within narrative B. Thus, although each narrative differs markedly in genre, setting, characters, style, and tone, the movement from one narrative to the next remains the same. Additionally, the confusion caused by the abrupt narrative breaks is balanced by the stories' orderly progression through historical time: a late nineteenth-century travelogue, letters from post-war Belgium, a 1970s conspiracy thriller, a contemporary memoir, a 22<sup>nd</sup> century dystopia, and finally, a distant post-apocalyptic tale.

There is also a tenuous but persistent implication that the decisions and events that occur within each novella create the necessary conditions to bring the world of the next novella into being, however indirectly. Supporting this line of reasoning is the recurrence of characters, objects, and locations in such a way as to suggest that the stories are part of the same narrative universe: the character of Rufus Sixsmith, linking, as he does, "Zedelghem" and "Half-Lives," is

one such example, as is Sonmi, who appears as the narrator of her own section and as a local deity in Zachry's tale. Other examples are the reappearance of the *Prophetess* in the Buenas Yervas marina in "Half-Lives" (CA 430) or the time that Meronym spent in "Buenas Yerbs" (CA 271), living "with a tribe called the Swannekke" (CA 296). As Heather Hicks notes in her essay "This Time Round": David Mitchell's *Cloud Atlas* and the Apocalyptic Problem of Historicism," the

sequence invites us to infer and attempt to decode causality from the series of narratives: somehow the events taking place in each era may have, sequentially, or in the aggregate, created the conditions of global catastrophe. In this sense, the superficial fragmentation of the novel may belie a deeper, coherent structure, and, at least up to the midpoint, it could be argued that the novel has a linear and historical perspective.

Indeed, the narratives leading up to Zachry's story seem to register the cumulative harm caused by each generation's rapacity: we witness the decimation of the Moriori and of the ecosystem of Old Rēkohu; the devastating aftermath of WWI; the looming nuclear threat hanging over Swannekke; the alienating cities of the twenty-first century; and the rapidly encroaching "*untermensch slums*" (315; original italics) and environmental deadlands of the twenty-second century. This process of cause and effect is explicitly outlined in Meronym's speech to Zachry:

Now the Hole World is big, but it weren't big 'nuff for that hunger what made Old Uns rip out the skies an' boil up the seas an' poison soil with crazed atoms an' donkey 'bout with rotted seeds so new plagues was borned an' babbits was freakbirthed. Fin'ly, bit'ly, then quicksharp, states busted into bar'bric tribes an' the Civ'lize Days ended, 'cept for a few folds'n'pockets here'n'there, where its last embers glimmer. (272-73; original italics)

Meronym's speech links together events in the earlier novellas and provides one explanation for the state of her and Zachry's world.

Indeed, the frequently invoked image of the matryoshka doll as a model for *Cloud Atlas* seems to confirm such linear readings of the novel: as the scientist Isaac Sachs writes in his notebook during the second part of "Half-Lives,"

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

Thus, the orderly linear progression of the novellas through time, the implication that each individual story is part of the same narrative universe, and the strongly implied sequence of causality all contribute towards a linear reading of Mitchell's novel.

The linear narrative progression of the novellas finds its thematic complement in the Enlightenment notion of Progress that permeates "The Pacific Journal." By 1850, Great Britain is nearing the height of its colonial power: as Ewing wryly notes, "If there be any eyrie so desolate, or isle so remote, that one may there rest unchallenged by an Englishman, 'tis not down on any map I ever saw" (3). However, the British mandate is not only to colonize the world, but

to civilize it as well—or so it goes in theory. Although Darwin’s scientific breakthrough was not published until a decade after the events of “The Pacific Journal,”<sup>47</sup> a racialized notion of the survival of the fittest is vigorously espoused throughout “The Pacific Journal” and is most clearly articulated by Preacher Horrox:

I have always unswervingly held, that God, in our Civilizing World, manifests himself not in the Miracles of the Biblical Age, but in Progress. It is Progress that leads Humanity up the ladder towards the Godhead. No Jacob’s Ladder, this, no, but rather ‘Civilization’s Ladder,’ if you will. [...] Nature’s Law & Progress move as one. Our own century shall witness humanity’s tribes fulfill those prophecies written in their racial traits. The superior shall relegate the overpopulous savages to their natural numbers. [...] A glorious order shall follow, when all races shall know & aye, embrace, their place in God’s ladder of civilization. (487-88)

As Horrox explains it, Progress is a teleological certainty, an irresistible upwards movement into an ever-better future and as irreversible as extinction. Readers’ knowledge of the state of affairs in “Sloosha’s Crossin’” allows us to relish the irony of Horrox’s statement, but as irredeemably racist as Horrox’s opinions are, his understanding of Progress and the movement of history is an undoubtedly linear one, one which fits within the model of time embodied by the matryoshka doll’s nested structure.

However, this narrative model proves unsatisfactory for a number of reasons. As Will Morran suggests in his essay “*Cloud Atlas* and *If on a Winter’s Night a Traveller*,” the model of the matryoshka doll

may work well as a temporal model, according to which the past encases the present, and the present encases the future—although it is a bleakly deterministic model. It works less well as a narrative model for the novel, since it implies a process of framing, or mothering, in which each successive segment is contained within the previous segment [...]. [T]his would produce a model according to which each narrative were extradiegetic to the one that followed it, when this is precisely the opposite of what actually happens. Each segment enjoys an extradiegetic relationship to the *preceding* one, commenting upon it, questioning it, and so seeming to master and contain it. (163; original emphasis)

Instead of the matryoshka doll model, Morran suggests that a “metaphor of narratological consumption and predacity fits the themes as well as the structure of *Cloud Atlas* well” (165), and he turns to Ewing and “The Pacific Journal” for his model: “I complained to Finbar [about the roaches], who urged me to pay a dollar for a specially-trained ‘roach-rat.’ Later, doubtless, he will want to sell me a ‘rat-cat’ to subdue the roach-rat, then I will need a cat-hound & who knows where it will all end?” (Mitchell, *CA* 495). In his objection to the use of the matryoshka doll as a narrative model for *Cloud Atlas*, Morran raises several key points. First, the image of the matryoshka doll is “a bleakly deterministic model” and conflicts with Mitchell’s sustained emphasis on the power of

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<sup>47</sup> The idea of evolution, especially in the form espoused by Social Darwinists, permeates “The Pacific Journal”: this anachronistic inclusion of Darwin’s theory supports Frobisher’s later suspicion that Ewing’s journal is a forgery (64).



individual agency, or what McMorran terms Mitchell's "Romantic insistence on the power of the individual to effect [sic] and shape the world around him" (171). Second, the matryoshka doll model is unable to account for the retroactive modifications effected, for example, by Frobisher's questioning of the authenticity of Ewing's journal, or Cavendish's revelation that "Half-Lives" is actually a fictional novel, not an "authentic" historical document. However, McMorran's proposed model of "narratological consumption and predacity" also overlooks the full structural complexity of Mitchell's novel. Indeed, McMorran's model seems to have simply substituted straight linear regression for the matryoshka doll's straight linear progression. I would like to suggest, for the moment, that a cyclical narrative model might better fit the themes and the structure of *Cloud Atlas*.

Indeed, while linear connections surely exist in *Cloud Atlas*, there is also a strong case for viewing the novel as a cyclical narrative structure. While "Sloosha's Crossin'" is the last distinct narrative to be introduced, it marks the midpoint of Mitchell's novel, and is what Mitchell calls the "mirror" of *Cloud Atlas*:

Finishing the novel [*If on a Winter's Night a Traveler*], I felt a bit cheated that Calvino hadn't followed through with what he'd begun—which was, of course, the whole point of the book. But a voice said this: What would it actually look like if a mirror were placed at the end of the book, and you continued into a second half that took you back to the beginning? ("Art of Fiction")

Thus, at the end of "Sloosha's Crossin'," the reader is invited to look into Zachry's orison, which in turn leads back into "An Orison of Sonmi-451," which ends with Sonmi watching Cavendish's memoir-cum-screenplay, and so on, in a linear regression that completes each story until we reach the conclusion of the very first narrative, "The Pacific Journal." The dénouements follow each other quickly, rapidly tumbling back towards the opening story, and resolving the narrative conflicts set up in the incipits. This linear regression problematizes a unidirectional narrative model: by returning to Ewing and "The Pacific Journal," the novel has come full circle. This cyclic narrative structure can even be detected in the first section of the novel: as Adam Begley points out, "The first chapter—the first half of Ewing's narrative—is itself cut in half by the narrative of the savage Autua (whose name is a palindrome), so that the first chapter mirrors the shape of the book as a whole" ("Art of Fiction"). This cyclical tendency is repeated throughout the novel. For example, "Sloosha's Crossin'" is the final novella to be revealed to the reader, but it can also be seen as representing a return to the beginning: Zachry is a deliberate and obvious parallel to Autua (both men grew up on island "paradises"; both belonged to peaceful, non-violent societies; and both men's people are annihilated by martial rival tribes). Living hundreds of years apart, these two men find themselves in an eerily similar predicament: history, it seems, has repeated itself, and halfway through the novel we find society—and ourselves—back where we started.

Mitchell helpfully offers a model for this narrative structure in the form of Frobisher's musical score, the tellingly named *Cloud Atlas Sextet*: it is a 'sextet for overlapping soloists': piano, clarinet, cello, flute, oboe, and violin, each in its own language of key, scale, and color. In the first set, each solo is interrupted by its successor: in the second, each interruption is recontinued, in

order. Revolutionary or gimmicky? Shan't know until it's finished, and by then it'll be too late. (445)

This cyclic movement is then repeated on a thematic level through the novel's multiple allusions to Nietzsche's *Also sprach Zarathustra* (1883-85) and Gibbon's *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (1776-89). Both works address the impulse that lies behind the linear notion of Progress and the survival of the fittest, but they place it within the larger cyclic movement of history. In *Cloud Atlas*, *Also sprach Zarathustra* is described as "Ayr's bible" (63) and has a profound impact on Frobisher: as he exclaims, "Nietzsche was reading me, not I him" (63). This text occupies a particularly prominent position in "Zedelghem," although its concepts, especially the idea of the will to power and the eternal return of the same, permeate the other sections as well. Many characters in the novel view the will to power as an inherent human characteristic and use the concept to rationalize their actions. The musings of the CEO in "Half-Lives" offer a fairly typical treatment of the theme:

[T]he will to power. This is the enigma at the core of the various destinies of men. What drives some to accrue power where the majority of their compatriots lose, mishandle, or eschew power? Is it addiction? Wealth? Survival? Natural selection? I propose these are all pretexts and results, not the root cause. The only answer can be 'There is no "Why." This is our nature.' (129; original italics)

This idea that the will to power is an inherent, inescapable facet of human nature is echoed by Morty Dhondt as he discusses the aftermath of the First World War with Frobisher:

What sparks wars? The will to power, the backbone of human nature. The threat of violence, the fear of violence, or actual violence is the instrument of this dreadful will. You can see the will to power in bedrooms, kitchens, factories, unions, and the borders of states. Listen to this and remember it. The nation-state is merely human nature inflated to monstrous proportions. QED, nations are entities whose laws are written by violence. Thus it ever was, so ever shall it be. (444)

In this usage, the will to power is depicted in a negative light as the driving force behind human rapacity. However, an alternative conception of the will to power—one that is perhaps more closely aligned with Nietzsche's thinking<sup>48</sup>—is offered by Sonmi as she discusses the concept of

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<sup>48</sup> Nietzsche talks at length about the will to power in "On Self-Overcoming," stating that

Wherever I found the living, there I found the will to power; and even in the will of the serving I found the will to be master.

The weaker is persuaded by its own will to serve the stronger, because it wants to be master over what is still weaker: this is the only pleasure it is incapable of renouncing.

And as the smaller gives way to the greater, in order for it to have its pleasure and power over the smallest, so too the greatest gives way, and for the sake of power it risks—life itself. [...]

And this secret life itself spoke to me: "Behold," it said, "I am that *which must always overcome itself*." (*Zarathustra* 89; original emphasis)

Both the title of the section ("On *Self-Overcoming*") and Nietzsche's emphasis on the will to power as being "that which must always overcome *itself*" suggest that Nietzsche is more concerned with self-mastery than with the mastery of others. Indeed, this is the view put forward by Robert B. Pippins when he notes that while "some condition of success in self-overcoming is linked to achieving the right relation to others (and so, by implication, is inconsistent with a hermit-like, isolated life)," it is important to note that "Zarathustra, as the embodiment of this struggle, whatever this relation to others turns out to be, is completely uninterested in gaining power *over others*, subjecting as much or as many as possible to his

happiness with the Archivist: “If, by *happiness*, you mean the absence of adversity, I and all fabricants are the happiest stratum in corpocracy, as genomicists insist. However, if *happiness* means the conquest of adversity, or a sense of purpose, or the exercise of one’s will to power, then of all Nea So Copros’s slaves we surely are the most miserable” (CA 188). Here, the will to power is aligned with “the conquest of adversity, or a sense of purpose,” suggesting that Sonmi associates the will to power more with personal development and self-perfection (power over one’s self) rather than with power over others.

While the will to power embodies the type of forward momentum, change, and causality associated with a linear conception of time, it is offset by the second major Nietzschean concept in the novel, the eternal return of the same. One of the more succinct definitions of the term appears in book four of *The Gay Science* (1882), where Nietzsche proposes, “This life as you now live it and have lived it, you will have to live once more and innumerable times more; and there will be nothing new in it, but every pain and every joy and every thought and sigh and everything unutterably small or great in your life will have to return to you, all in the same succession and sequence” (273). We see this concept at play in “Sloosha’s Crossin’,” in which Zachry intuits the cyclical nature of the universe: “I glimpsed all the lifes my soul ever was till far-far back b’fore the Fall, yay, glimpsed from a gallopin’ horse in a hurricane, but I cudn’t describe ’em ’cos there ain’t the words no more but well I mem’ry that dark Kolekole girl [that Zachry danced with at a festival...] and she murmured in my ear, *Yay, I will, again, an’ yay, we will, again*” (CA 287-88; original emphasis). However, this concept is most clearly expressed in Frobisher’s suicide note. Trying to comfort Sixsmith, Frobisher writes:

Rome’ll decline and fall again, Cortes’ll lay Tenochtitlán to waste again, and later, Ewing will sail again, Adrian’ll be blown to pieces again, you and I’ll sleep under Corsican stars again, I’ll come to Bruges again, fall in and out of love with Eva again, you’ll read this letter again, the sun’ll grow cold again. Nietzsche’s gramophone record. When it ends, the Old One plays it again, for an eternity of eternities.

Time cannot permeate this sabbatical. We do not stay dead long. Once my Luger lets me go, my birth, next time around, will be upon me in a heartbeat. (471)

Explicitly invoking Nietzsche, Frobisher likens the eternal return of the same to the circular movement of a gramophone record, looping over and over again. In this rather deterministic model of time and the universe, the will to power is placed within the larger cyclic movement of history.

A similar dynamic emerges from the frequent allusions to Cavendish’s “perpetual lavatory read” (CA 153), Gibbon’s *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*. Here, *Cloud Atlas*’s emphasis on Progress is countered by the forces of entropy and decay, resulting in a cycle of growth and collapse rather than Horrox’s vision of “Civilization’s Ladder” (CA 487). In “Zedelghem,” Dhondt links the constant rise and fall of human civilizations to the Nietzschean

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control or command. [...] *Self-commanding* (and, dialectically, *self-obeying*) are the great problems” (xxvii).

will to power: “Our will to power, our science, and those v. faculties that elevated us from apes, to savages, to modern man, are the same faculties that’ll snuff out *Homo sapiens* before this century is out!” (444-45). This notion of the rise and fall of civilizations (and as Dhondt suggests, eventually of humanity itself) recurs in both the beginning and end of “The Pacific Journal” with an elder church member’s story of “the decline and fall of the Aborigines of Chatham” (10) and in a missionary’s dour predictions: “Just one generation ago, the Indians did their screaming & bloodletting & sacrificing to their false idols right on these stones where we’re standing. [...] The Native children don’t even know the names of the old idols no more. It’s all rats’ nests & rubble now. That’s what all beliefs turn to one day. Rats’ nests & rubble” (486). Looking back to Frobisher’s suicide letter, we can see how Frobisher has cast Gibbon’s thesis as a teleological certainty: if history is “Nietzsche’s gramophone record,” then nations are fated to decline and fall, just as “Rome’ll decline and fall,” and just as Ewing’s actions and Adrian’s fate are predetermined. The fleeting moments of happiness—sleeping under Corsican stars, meeting Sixsmith at Gresham, composing a sextet—are not enough, however, to counterbalance this rather morbid conception of history. Indeed, in her work on “historicist and cyclical forms of subjectivity and ontology” in *Cloud Atlas*, Hicks suggests that while a cyclical view of history offers an alternative to the apocalyptic end associated with linear conceptions of time, twentieth-century theories about cyclic models of temporality tend to underscore “a modern preoccupation with the cyclical as part of a despairing outlook”: “the problem is that the writers see no possibility of the new—everything is always already old.” Clearly then, this cyclical conception of history fails to provide any more viable alternatives than the apocalyptic linear one.

So, to briefly summarize the argument so far: the orderly linear progression—and then regression—of the novellas could certainly be used as evidence in support of a linear reading of *Cloud Atlas*. In this situation, “Sloosha’s Crossin’” functions as the mirror connecting the two linear narrative sections. However, looked at from a slightly different perspective, the narrative structure becomes circular, beginning and ending with Adam Ewing and “The Pacific Journal.” This reading is bolstered by interpreting “Sloosha’s Crossin’” as a return to—and reiteration of—the Moriori’s situation at the beginning of the novel. Further complicating matters, Mitchell has provided a plausible narrative model for each reading, with adherents of a linear reading pointing to the recurring figure of the matryoshka doll, while those who prefer a more cyclical view direct our attention to the *Cloud Atlas Sextet*. Likewise, each narrative model is expressed on a thematic level. “The Pacific Journal” explores the union of moral and scientific progress in the form of Social Darwinism, with its assured teleological march towards a better future. “Zedelghem,” however, speaks to the failure of Progress and substitutes instead Nietzsche’s notion of eternal recurrence (supplemented by the tenets of Gibbon’s *Decline and Fall*). However, this philosophy does not appear much more appealing than Horrox’s demented vision: by the end of *Cloud Atlas*, the two main proponents of Nietzsche’s philosophy are either dead or dying and have lived generally unhappy lives. These events are rendered even more depressing by the fact that if life is “Nietzsche’s gramophone player,” as Frobisher puts it, then these events are predetermined: the “world’s a shadow theater, an opera, and such things [are] writ large in its libretto” (CA 469). Furthermore, this notion of predestination is challenged by the novel’s ending, where Ewing rejects such theories and insists on the power of individual agency:

Scholars discern motions in history & formulate these motions into rules that

govern the rises & falls of civilization. My belief runs contrary, however. To wit: history admits no rules; only outcomes. What precipitates outcomes? Vicious acts & virtuous acts. What precipitates acts? Belief. [...] If we *believe* that humanity may transcend tooth & claw, if we *believe* diverse races & creeds can share this world as peaceably as the orphans share their candlenut tree, if we *believe* leaders must be just, violence muzzled, power accountable & the riches of the Earth & its Oceans shared equitably, such a world will come to pass. I am not deceived. It is the hardest of worlds to make real. (CA 507-08; original emphasis)

It soon becomes apparent that neither a purely linear nor a purely cyclical narrative model can adequately explain the complex, multifaceted interconnections between the various narrative strands. Much of this complexity is due to the fact that the progression of the narratives is at variance with the novellas' progression through historical time. As McMorran points out, this raises a host of difficulties: "Mitchell's structure allows Ewing's narrative to look back on the future as well as the past: the discussion of 'the rises & falls of civilizations' [...] that concludes the novel offers a commentary of its own on the future through which the reader has travelled" (165). *Cloud Atlas* demands a model that can encompass these complex narrative connections and that can address both the linear and the cyclical narrative elements.

I would like to suggest that the process of reincarnation offers one such model within *Cloud Atlas*, functioning as a metaphor for the complex networked narrative structure that undergirds Mitchell's novel. The idea of reincarnation recurs throughout *Cloud Atlas* and is generally associated with the comet-shaped birthmark that graces most of the novel's protagonists: Frobisher, Rey, Cavendish, Sonmi, and Meronym are all "marked" by it. The characters' discovery of the shared nature of this birthmark is often accompanied by an uncanny feeling: Rey, for example, is overcome by a disturbing sense of déjà vu when she first reads Frobisher's letters and learns about his birthmark (120), and when she walks past Ewing's old ship, we are told that "Luisa's birthmark throbs" (430). Indeed, this comet-shaped birthmark, with its implications of reincarnation and rebirth, is evocative of the titular cloud atlas: Mitchell seems fond of using celestial imagery (comets, clouds) as a metaphor for the soul. As Zachry remarks, "Souls cross ages like clouds cross skies, an' tho' a cloud's shape nor hue nor size don't stay the same, it's still a cloud an' so is a soul. Who can say where the cloud's blowed from or who the soul'll be 'morrow?" (308).<sup>49</sup> However, while Mitchell implies that the main characters may be reincarnations of the same soul, he certainly doesn't insist upon it. Indeed, the reliably curmudgeonly Cavendish complains that "the insinuation that Luisa Rey is this Robert Frobisher chap reincarnated [... is far] too hippie-druggy-new age. (I, too have a birthmark, below my left armpit, but no lover ever compared it to a comet. Georgette nicknamed it Timbo's Turd.)" (357). Nonetheless, as McMorran suggests, "Cavendish's criticism operates according to [Umberto] Eco's model of the postmodern attitude. Following Eco, we may say that Mitchell avoids 'false innocence' by admitting the artifice of his birthmark, and the interconnectedness it represents,

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<sup>49</sup> The movement of the soul/cloud described in Zachry's passage is embodied pictorially as well. An image of a cloud is located on the top of each page: as the novel progresses, the cloud moves inward from its starting position at the outer edges, reaching the centre of the book by the time of "Sloosha's Crossin'." After Zachry's tale is completed, the cloud moves outward again, and returns to its starting point with the close of "The Pacific Journal" and the end of the novel.

but, having done so, writes the novel he wants to write” (168). Indeed, there is ample textual evidence to support such a reading, and the characters are linked through repeated actions: “A swarm of *déjà vu* haunts Luisa” as, like Frobisher, she flees from her hotel (CA 139); Sonmi helplessly watches as a fabricant is tossed off a bridge, much as Cavendish helplessly watches his client toss a smug literary critic off a twelfth-story balcony (334-35); and Zachry’s climb up Mauna Kea (and subsequent encounter with Old Georgie) is a repetition of Frobisher’s climb up the clock tower in Bruges, which is itself a repetition of Ewing’s climb up Conical Tor and his ghostly visions among the dendroglyphs (268-82; 449-452; 18-21).

Thus far, I have been focusing on the cyclical nature of reincarnation: *rebirth*, the recurrence of events. However, this cycle also has a linear dimension: after all, the ultimate goal of reincarnation is finally to transcend the cycle of rebirth and reach Nirvana. This point is driven home when Sonmi encounters a statue of Siddhartha: according to Hae-Joo, he is “a deity that offered salvation from a meaningless cycle of birth and rebirth” (CA 329).<sup>50</sup> Hae-Joo’s phrase, the “*meaningless* cycle of birth and rebirth,” calls to mind the futility of cyclic models of time such as Frobisher’s vision of “Nietzsche’s gramophone record.” Rather, while acknowledging the cyclic nature of existence, this conception of reincarnation also allows for the possibility of meaningful change via “influencing one’s future incarnations” (CA 332). This notion creates a complicated system of individual agency: on the one hand, each particular incarnation is powerless to change the karmic “baggage” that people are born with; on the other hand, individuals do have the ability to affect the karma of their future incarnations through their actions in this lifetime. In many ways, this image of reincarnation is an apt metaphor for the model of individual agency described more generally in *Cloud Atlas*. Each protagonist is oppressed by systemic forces beyond their personal control, whether it be the colonial ideology encountered by Ewing, the repressive social mores that Frobisher chafes against, or the corporatic tyranny that enslaves Sonmi. However, through their personal actions, each individual can effect changes at the microlevel, which may eventually result in significant structural change: Ewing joins the Abolitionist cause, Frobisher refuses to capitulate to Ayr’s blackmail, and Sonmi writes her *Declarations*. As Luisa explains to her friend Javi, using Sixteenth Street as a metaphor for the future, “What’s at the end of Sixteenth Street isn’t made by what *you* do. It’s pretty much fixed, by planners, architects, designers, unless you go and blow a building up or something. What happens in a minute’s time *is* made by what you do” (401). Because of this, it makes sense to picture the process of reincarnation—and by extension, the structure of the novel—as a gyre: there is the inherently cyclic nature of birth and rebirth, but it is twinned with a progression through historical time.

However, I would like to suggest one final complication of this model. While I have been talking about the process of reincarnation in fairly generalized terms up to this point, I would now like to focus on one particular aspect of reincarnation—*déjà vu*—paying special attention to how this term is defined in the novel. Specifically, I argue that the unique nature and description of the moments of *déjà vu* in *Cloud Atlas* suggest not only the repetition of events across time,

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<sup>50</sup> However, as Zachry reminds us, this salvation is in no way guaranteed: “If you b’haved savage-like an’ selfy an’ spurned the civ’lize, or if Georgie tempted you into barb’rism an’ all, then your soul got heavy’n’jagged an’ weighed with stones. Sonmi cudn’t fit you into no womb then” (CA 244-45).

but also a collapse of time: *Cloud Atlas* contains moments of synchronicity that cut across its diachronic structure. “Déjà vu” means, of course, “already seen.” As Adam Zeman defines it, déjà vu “describes the disconcerting sense that our current experience echoes some ill-defined, elusive, past experience”; alternatively, we could turn to Vernon Neppe’s oft-quoted definition of déjà vu in *The Psychology of Déjà Vu* (1983) as “any subjectively inappropriate impression of familiarity of a present experience with an undefined past” (3; original italics). As these definitions suggest, déjà vu has two primary characteristics: the impression or feeling is “ill-defined, elusive” or “undefined,” and is somehow related to a *past* experience. As we shall see, the moments of déjà vu in *Cloud Atlas* can deviate quite dramatically from these characteristics. Take, for example, Frobisher’s experience. Leaning over the sleeping Ayr’s, Frobisher is overcome by a feeling of déjà vu: “A blue vein throbbed over Ayr’s Adam’s apple, and I fought off an unaccountably strong urge to open it up with my penknife. Most uncanny. Not quite déjà vu, more jamais vu” (CA 458). At this point in the novel, the reader already knows why Frobisher’s experience isn’t “quite déjà vu,” although strictly speaking it isn’t jamais vu (the “erroneous belief of having never before seen or experienced something that one has in reality encountered before”<sup>51</sup>) either. Frobisher is experiencing a vision of the future. As the similarity between the two descriptions implies, Frobisher’s urge to slit Ayr’s throat echoes Zachry’s act of slitting the throat of a sleeping Kona slaver: “A vein pulsed in his Adam’s apple what was left white b’tween two lizardy tattoos. [...] I stroked my blade thru his throat” (300-01). Frobisher’s déjà vu *anticipates*, rather than follows, the event it refers to: Frobisher is overcome by a feeling that “he” will not experience for several hundred more years.<sup>52</sup> However, these moments of synchronicity are best illustrated by Luisa’s reaction as she passes by the *Prophetess*: “Despite their mission, Luisa is distracted by a strange gravity that makes her pause for a moment and look at its rigging, listen to its wooden bones creaking. [...] Luisa’s birthmark throbs. She grasps for the ends of this elastic moment, but they disappear into the past and the future” (430). In this brief “elastic moment,” the past, present, and future collapse into one another before springing back apart: it is these moments that produce the uncanny sense of knowing and the unexpected sense of connection that both startle and comfort the characters, creating a sort of contiguity across space and time.

Thus, like Edwards, I feel that “Mitchell’s thematic preoccupation with networking between globally and historically dispersed characters *becomes* the aesthetic form he uses to structure his narratives” (197; original emphasis) and that the act of reincarnation is a key way that he accomplishes this in *Cloud Atlas*. However, by drawing attention to the unique manner in which Mitchell reconfigures the notion of déjà vu, I hope to provide a more nuanced conception of the networked structure that undergirds *Cloud Atlas*’s narrative and thematic concerns, a network that allows us to “cross, crisscross, and recross our old tracks like figure skaters” (CA 163), enmeshed in a network of causality and happenstance.

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<sup>51</sup> The definition is from Andrew M. Colman’s *A Dictionary of Psychology* (2008).

<sup>52</sup> This interpretation is problematized by the fact that it is Meronym, not Zachry, who bears the birthmark in “Sloosha’s Crossin’”; however, Mitchell’s labeling of the event as déjà vu/jamais vu and the deliberate parallels between the description of the two events (“A blue vein throbbed over Ayr’s Adam’s apple”; “A vein pulsed in his Adam’s apple”) points to some kind of connection between the two men.

#### 4.4 The Role of Music in *Cloud Atlas*

All art constantly aspires towards the condition of music.

—Walter Pater

Although Mitchell characteristically downplays his musical knowledge—he claims that his “fictitious composer’s knowledge had been cribbed from essays in CD booklets” (“David Mitchell: Adventures”)—his depiction of music in *Cloud Atlas* is convincing enough that he fielded not one but two requests to compose a libretto after the novel’s publication: Klaas de Vries’s *Wake* premiered in 2010 while Michel van der Aa’s *Sunken Garden* followed in 2013. Indeed, after reading “Letters from Zedelghem,” one is inclined to agree with Klaas de Vries’s assumption that “Mitchell knew his musicological stuff” (Stuart). The narrator of “Zedelghem” comprehends the world in aural, not visual terms: “downtrodden scribes hurtl[e] by like demisemiquavers in a Beethovenian *allegro*” (44); a “locomotive’s whistle blasted forth a swarm of piccolo Furies” (45); the “van de Veldes are six never-ending, ill-tuned harpsichord *allegretti*” (450). I propose to approach Mitchell’s use of music in *Cloud Atlas* through William E. Grim’s model of musical influence as outlined in “Musical Form as a Problem in Literary Criticism.” In this essay, Grim outlines three ways that music can influence literature: the inspirational, the metaphorical, and the formal.

##### The Inspirational

Grim begins his essay by describing music’s influence on literature at the inspirational level: “A writer of fiction or poetry may simply be inspired by a particular piece of music in the act of creating a work of literature. This is a case of music being the writer’s muse. At this level of influence the work of music is not utilized as subject matter or thematic material for the work of literature which it inspires” (237). Although this type of influence is not a significant force in *Cloud Atlas*, we can see this impulse at work in Mitchell’s second novel *number9dream*, which, as its title suggests, is partially inspired by John Lennon’s song.

##### The Metaphorical

Music can also influence literature at the level of metaphor: “At this level, music serves as the subject matter, point of departure, or intertextual reference within the work of literature” (Grim 237). As we can see from Grim’s definition, the term “metaphorical” is used in a fairly loose sense to cover those instances where music is used to gesture to something beyond itself. There are several instances of music functioning at the metaphorical level in *Cloud Atlas*: Frobisher’s dream sequence is one of the more striking examples. “Letters from Zedelghem” opens with Frobisher’s dream of standing

in a china shop so crowded from floor to faroff ceiling with shelves of porcelain antiquities etc. that moving a muscle would cause several to fall and smash to bits. Exactly what happened, but instead of a crashing noise, an august chord rang out, half-cello, half-celeste, D major (?), held for four beats. My wrist knocked a Ming vase affair off its pedestal—E-flat, whole string section, glorious, transcendent, angels wept. Deliberately now, smashed a figurine of an ox for the next note, then



a milkmaid, then Saturday's Child—orgy of shrapnel filled the air, divine harmonies my head. And, such music! Glimpsed my father totting up the smashed items' value, nib flashing, but *had* to keep the music coming. (43; original emphasis)

In this instance, Mitchell uses Frobisher's dream music to comment on the nature of the artistic process, casting it as a profoundly destructive force. In this dream, the artistic impulse is cast as a compulsion ("*had* to keep the music coming"), a force that compels the artist to destroy the past ("antiquities") in order to create something new. This is a compulsion that sits ill with the more materialistic and "respectable" elements of society who are more invested in the status quo, and who are represented by Frobisher's father, "totting up the smashed items' value." This use of music as a metaphor for the destructive creativity of the artistic process is developed throughout "Zedelghem," with Frobisher's attempts to break through the conventional in his art being mirrored in his frequent breaches of social proprieties: as he confides to Sixsmith, "Boundaries between noise and sound are conventions, I see now. All boundaries are conventions, national ones too. One may transcend any convention, if only one can first conceive of doing so" (460).

Although too self-aware to completely fit into the cliché of the tortured, solitary genius, Frobisher's character and his fictional musical output are primarily used to explore the private and personal aspects of the creative act. It is no coincidence that Frobisher dies before his music is published, let alone performed. With Ayrs's music, however, the reader is given a glimpse into the more public side of the artistic process.<sup>53</sup> With Ayrs's *Der Todtenvogel*, we witness first-hand the problematics of interpretation and reception. Frobisher describes the genesis of *Der Todtenvogel* thus:

It was a tame arrangement of an old Teutonic anthem, left high and very dry by Ayrs's retreating eyesight. Our new version is an intriguing animal. It borrows resonances from Wagner's *Ring*, then disintegrates the theme into a Stravinskyesque nightmare policed by Sibelian wraiths. Horrible, delectable, wish you could hear it. Ends in a flute solo, no flutterbying flautism this, but the death-bird of the title, cursing the first-born and last-born alike. (65)

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<sup>53</sup> Interestingly, literature, not music, is used to explore the more commercial aspects of the artistic process—although Mitchell's mention of an aborted chapter told from the point of view of a Korean rapper is very suggestive in this regard ("Week Three"). In "The Ghastly Ordeal" literary publisher and editor Timothy Cavendish acts as our guide to the greedy, grasping, and self-serving aspects of the artistic world, from "the celebrity chefs" (147), to the "packs of hacks and photographers" (147) and "[t]hat aviary of vultures and tits, 'the columnists'" (146). Sarcastic, sardonic, and cynical, Cavendish is our guide to the commercial side of the culture industry—after all, no one knows it better than him: his first thought after the arrest of his client is of the "ninety-five unsold shrinkwraps of Dermot Hoggins's *Knuckle Sandwich*, impassioned memoir of Britain's soon to be most famous murderer. [...] Hardcover, ladies and gentlemen. Fourteen pounds ninety-nine pence a shot. A taste of honey!" (150). One might speculate that Mitchell's decision to focus on music, not literature, in his more earnest assessment of the creative process stems from a place of self-deprecation as much as anything else: "'I don't want to project myself as this great experimenter – I'm not. In any case, the words 'experimental novelist' must make your heart sink as much as the words 'British magical realism'" (Jeffries). One could see how using the novel as a vehicle to earnestly discuss the Novel as Art could prove unappealing to him. However, that said, Mitchell's focus on music does enable layers of meaning that would be otherwise inaccessible in *Cloud Atlas*.

Frobisher's description of *Der Todtenvogel* highlights the composition's form and musical influences, as well as detailing Frobisher's emotional response to the song. The listening public, however, isn't interested in *Der Todtenvogel*'s formal complexity or in cataloguing its various influences but in what they perceive to be the song's political message: as Frobisher explains, So far as we can see, the critics interpreted its disintegration of the Wagnerian themes as a frontal assault on the German Republic. A band of nationalist parliamentarians strong-armed the festival authorities into a fifth performance. The theatre, eyeing receipts, complied with pleasure. The German ambassador made an official complaint, so a sixth was sold out within another twenty-four hours. The effect of all this is to raise the value of Ayr's stock through the roof everywhere but Germany, where apparently, he is denounced as a Jewish devil. (71)

Here, music functions as a metaphor for the politicization of art and what Gerry Smyth refers to as the "process of consumption and the dynamics of performance" (2).

Mitchell also uses music to gesture towards the novel's influences. Take Ayr's dream music, for example. Ayr's sonata came to him in a dream of a "nightmarish café, brilliantly lit, but underground, with no way out. I'd been dead a long, long time. The waitresses all had the same face. The food was soap, the only drink was cups of lather" (79). Forming the backbone of Ayr's proposed symphony *Eternal Recurrence*, the dream music—a "seesawing, cyclical, crystalline thing" (79)—alludes to the influence of Nietzsche's theories in "Zedelghem" specifically and in *Cloud Atlas* more generally, in addition, of course, to foreshadowing the events in "An Orison."

### The Formal

The final level of influence that Grim lists is the formal. "At this level," he argues, "the work of literature utilizes or attempts to imitate musical forms and/or compositional procedures within a literary context" (238): the obvious example of this in *Cloud Atlas* is Frobisher's *Cloud Atlas Sextet*.<sup>54</sup> As noted earlier, Frobisher describes his composition as a "'sextet for overlapping soloists': piano, clarinet, 'cello, flute, oboe, and violin, each in its own language of key, scale, and color. In the first set, each solo is interrupted by its successor: in the second, each interruption is recontinued, in order" (445). Frobisher emphasizes the *Sextet*'s "spectral and structural peculiarities" (468) and its transgression of boundaries (460). At this level, the *Cloud Atlas Sextet* is a clear stand-in for the novel itself: its structure is the novel's structure, its transgressions of musical conventions *Cloud Atlas*'s transgressions of the novel's conventional form.

Frobisher's description of the *Sextet*'s influences—"Echoes of Scriabin's *White Mass*, Stravinsky's lost footprints, chromatics of the more lunar Debussy" (470)—further points to

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<sup>54</sup> Ayr's dream music—a sonata—offers an early possible model for *Cloud Atlas*'s narrative structure as well. Smyth's description of the sonata's "willed closure of the recapitulation, in which the various temporal, tonal, instrumental and melodic discourses are reconciled" (45) could certainly be applied to the closing resolution of *Cloud Atlas*'s narrative strands.

Mitchell's use of music at the formal level. Like Frobisher's earlier reference to "Noyes's *Contrapuntals*" (46), Scriabin, Stravinsky, and Debussy were all noted for their innovative use of the contrapuntal form. Defined as "the coherent combination of distinct melodic lines in music, and the quality that best fulfils the aesthetic principle of unity in diversity" (Whittall), counterpoint is often characterized by "mirror symmetry" and in general usage is closely associated with polyphony (Kennedy). In light of this information the parallels between counterpoint and *Cloud Atlas*'s narrative structure become clear: the novel's coherent combination of six distinct novellas into a whole that transcends the sum of its parts, the symmetrical division of the text, with "Sloosha's Crossin'" acting as a central mirror, and the polyphonic nature of the novel all point to its contrapuntal influences.

However, Frobisher's music functions on more than one level. On the one hand, the *Sextet*, with its six distinct parts, provides a narratological model of the novel; on the other hand, the *Sextet* looks at music as *music* and thus capable of effects that are beyond the power of words to represent. The assessment of the *Sextet* in Mitchell's subsequent novel *Black Swan Green* points towards this second level of interpretation: the youthful Eva from "Zedelghem" reappears as the elderly Madame Crommelynck and plays the *Sextet* for protagonist Jason Taylor. Taylor describes Frobisher's composition thus: "Jealous *and* sweet, this music was, sobbing *and* gorgeous, muddy *and* crystal. But if the right words existed the music wouldn't need to" (*Black Swan* 152). Taylor's description of the *Sextet* brings to mind an alternate definition of counterpoint, in which contrapuntal music possesses "the ability, unique to music, to say two or more things at once comprehensibly" (Kennedy). Unlike a novel, the *Sextet* can have its different "voices" play simultaneously, interacting with one another in a manner that the novelist can't reproduce.<sup>55</sup> Cavendish's conception of "time, no arrow, no boomerang, but a concertina" (354) suggests one level on which music may be a better representational choice than language.

Simultaneity, as William Freedman suggests, is the province of the aural, not the narrative:

Simultaneity, the impingement of past and future on present and vice versa, the interrelationship, repetition, and overlapping of ideas, the intricate and mysterious associations of those ideas, and the sudden or prepared transitions between thoughts, attitudes, and emotions—all are characteristic of the processes of interior experience, all are characteristic of the processes of musical development. (qtd in. Smyth 54)

As previously discussed, *Cloud Atlas*'s networked narrative structure produces complex temporal dislocations in the text—the ability, in effect, for Mitchell's narratives to "look back on the future as well as the past" (McMorran 165). These temporal dislocations and moments of synchronicity are key to understanding *Cloud Atlas*'s formal and thematic effects: in his attempt to conceive of a model of history and time that balances the overdetermined with human agency and hope, Mitchell's narrative structure privileges moments where the past, present, and future collapse into one another, producing moments of synchronicity that cut across the novel's diachronic narrative structure. This contiguity across time and space connects characters with their past and their future, networking moments of resistance into a larger whole and giving hope and meaning to the possibility of significant individual action. Through music, Mitchell has found yet another way to figure these connections, and in doing so, moves ever closer to

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<sup>55</sup> However, that doesn't stop writers from trying—see the excerpt from Brunner's novel on pp. 43-44.

dissolving the line between *Cloud Atlas*'s subject matter and its form, reinforcing the fitness of Pater's maxim, as noted in the epigraph to this section.

#### 4.5 “Quivering Like Utopia in a Noon Mirage”: Counterfeit Utopias and the Commodification of Utopian Desire

Mitchell interrogates the idea of utopia in *Cloud Atlas*, depicting multiple stages of utopian thought and longing. Mitchell's interest in utopia manifests in several different forms, including a questioning of the prelapsarian paradise of innocence and plenty, an investigation of the commodification of utopian desire, and the depiction of contested utopian pockets. We are introduced to the idea of utopia early on in *Cloud Atlas*: in the very first page Dr. Goose refers to the Chatham Islands as an “Arcadian strand” (3), although he immediately complicates this utopian vision by commenting on the bloody history that underlies it. As he remarks to Ewing, “In days gone by this Arcadian strand was a cannibals' banqueting hall, yes, where the strong engorged themselves on the weak” (3). Goose is referring to the slaughter of the Moriori by the Maori, an event which is related more fully by the island's resident preacher, Mr D'Arnoq. Before the European settlers and the Maori “discovered” it, the Chatham Islands were called Old Rēkohu. Here, according to D'Arnoq,

Two thousand savages [...] enshrine “Thou Shalt Not Kill” in word & *in deed* & frame an oral “Magna Carta” to create a harmony unknown elsewhere for the sixty centuries since Adam tasted the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge. War was as alien a concept to the Moriori as the telescope is to the Pygmy. *Peace*, not a hiatus betwixt wars but millennia of imperishable peace, rules these far-flung islands. Who can deny Old Rēkohu lay closer to More's Utopia than our States of Progress governed by war-hungry princelings in Versailles & Vienna, Washington & Westminster? (12; original emphasis)

Old Rēkohu is described by D'Arnoq as a prelapsarian paradise of innocence and plenty. The biblical comparisons are obvious and deliberate: Old Rēkohu is a “Polynesian Eden” (*CA* 32) untainted by original sin. The Moriori are presented as untutored and unlettered—“the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge” is unknown to them. They live in a condition of primal innocence, blessed with an innate state of grace: war is an “alien [...] concept” to the Moriori. Like Eden, this tropical paradise emerges fully formed: Old Rēkohu is presented as a static utopia characterized by “millennia of imperishable peace.”

D'Arnoq contrasts the natural paradise of Old Rēkohu with the “civilized” Western world, much to Old Rēkohu's advantage. By framing the Moriori's achievements in terms of the Bible and the Magna Carta, D'Arnoq creates a basis of comparison between the two disparate societies, a comparison which quickly casts the so-called “civilized” societies in a negative light: unlike the “States of Progress governed by war-hungry princelings in Versailles & Vienna, Washington & Westminster” who give lip service to the ideals of peace and harmony but whose actions promote war and strife, the Moriori live up to their ideals “in word & *in deed*” (original emphasis). Tellingly, D'Arnoq goes on to say that “here only, were those elusive phantasms, the noble savages, framed in flesh & blood!” (12). It appears that in D'Arnoq's estimation, Old Rēkohu is superior to the modern “States of Progress,” just as the noble savage surpasses the

debauched modern man.

This same notion of Old Rēkohu as utopia appears in Caroline Edwards's "Strange Transactions." In this essay, Edwards distinguishes between post-traditional utopias, such as the ones found in Mitchell's novels, and the traditional utopias that, in the aftermath of the Second World War, have become associated with repressive collectivist ideologies. According to Edwards, traditional (or systemic) utopias are "programmatic blueprints expounding a monotheistic and static perfectionism" (178), whereas post-traditional (or processual) utopias "introduce a mode of utopian thinking that is flexible, pluralized, heterogeneous and dialectical" (178). Edwards focuses on Old Rēkohu as an example of a post-traditional utopia in *Cloud Atlas*; for her, it is an episode "of social fulfillment within small-scale alternative political communities" (185). Using D'Arnoq's assessment of the Moriori as the basis for her analysis of Old Rēkohu, Edwards argues that "the peaceful coexistence with nature practiced by the Moriori" "embodies utopian principles" (184); Old Rēkohu and the Moriori represent "a pacifist, utopian way of life that acts as a foil to our current predicament" (184).

However, I would like to complicate Edwards's assessment of Old Rēkohu as a microtopian community. This vision of Old Rēkohu as utopia is D'Arnoq's, and, as D'Arnoq is one of the European colonists inhabiting the Chatham Islands, it is a vision that needs to be questioned: whose version of utopia does this vision of Old Rēkohu represent?

Indeed, amidst D'Arnoq's apparent praise of the Moriori lies a subtle undercurrent of condescension. To begin with, the Moriori, while noble, are still savages in the preacher's eyes. As well, framing the Moriori's achievements in terms of European texts undermines the validity of the Moriori's own culture—and of course, D'Arnoq is quick to point out that the Moriori's version of the Magna Carta is oral, not written (*CA* 12). Additionally, D'Arnoq's decision to compare the Moriori's ignorance of war to the Pygmies' ignorance of the telescope is a telling one: the terms of the comparison cast war as another type of technology, a technology that the "savages" are ignorant of and which has resulted in their enslavement. Finally, by comparing Old Rēkohu to More's *Utopia*, D'Arnoq is paying Old Rēkohu a compliment, but he is also implying that Old Rēkohu is untenable in the "real" world: like More's utopian community, it is a good place (*eutopia*) but also no place (*outopia*).

Indeed, in the novel's present, Old Rēkohu is little more than a phantasm. This "Polynesian Eden" was lost once it was exposed to imperial and colonial forces, first European, but then native as well (*CA* 13). The peaceful Moriori were overrun by European sailors and colonists and then enslaved by the Maori; the islands were no longer called Old Rēkohu, but renamed the Chatham Islands. Viewed through the lens of Social Darwinism—one of the main themes of "The Pacific Journal"<sup>56</sup>—it would seem that Western civilization, or the "States of Progress," is the fittest society, if not the most ideal. Unlike the Maori, who "proved themselves apt pupils of the English in 'the dark arts of colonization'" (*CA* 14), the Moriori were unable or unwilling to change their ways and as a result were enslaved and destroyed.

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<sup>56</sup> If Dr. Goose's opening words introduce the theme of utopia, they also introduce the concept of the survival of the fittest, or as he later formulates it, "The weak are meat, the strong do eat" (*CA* 495).

Ultimately, D'Arnoq's portrayal of Old Rēkohu sets it up as the "other" of the civilized world: peace versus war, naivety versus cunning, stasis versus progress, savage versus citizen, and, as I will argue, myth versus reality. It is significant that a European settler, not a Moriori, tells the history of Old Rēkohu. Like the concept of the noble savage, the image of Old Rēkohu as a "Polynesian Eden" is an idealized, romanticized, and nostalgic vision imposed by the colonial settlers upon the Moriori; by doing so, the settlers overwrite the Moriori's own version(s) of their history and, by turning them into the stuff of legend, deny their subjectivity. Indeed, Mitchell pointedly undermines the concepts of the noble savage and the prelapsarian paradise in "Sloosha's Crossin'." Zachry's life among the Valleysmen in Hawaii is a deliberate parallel of Autua and the Moriori. Like the Moriori, Zachry and his people live in an island paradise in small interconnected communities; group decisions are made communally and arguments are settled through compromises and negotiations (CA 14-15; 250). Likewise, murder is strictly forbidden in both communities: as Zachry explains, "See, murderin' was forbidden by Valleysmen law, yay, if you stole another's life no un'd barter nothin' with you nor see you nor nothin' 'cos your soul was so poisoned you may give 'em a sickness" (300-01). In "Sloosha's Crossin'," the Polynesian paradise of Old Rēkohu seems to live again. However, this time Mitchell lets us view the island paradise through its inhabitants' eyes,<sup>57</sup> and they reveal that this life is no bucolic paradise. Indeed, Zachry's own vision of utopia indirectly comments on the hardships and deprivations that his people face: in his Cockaigne, there would be "Smart boxes what make delish grinds more'n anyun can eat, Smart pipes what gush more brew'n anyun can drink, places where it's always spring an' no sick, no knucklyin' an' no slav'in'. Places where ev'ryun's a beautisome purebirth who lives to be one hun'erd'n' fifty years" (271). Life on these islands may seem paradisaical to outside viewers, but in reality, the residents must struggle with hunger, sickness, and violence, the same as anywhere else.

Tellingly, historical accounts of the Moriori more closely resemble Zachry's account of the Valleysmen's lives than they do D'Arnoq's Polynesian Eden. As social historian Michael King details in *Moriori: A People Rediscovered* (1989), the Chatham Islands (located in the so-called "Roaring Forties") are characterized by "almost incessant wind [...], near-constant cloud cover, low sunshine hours, wet winters and humid summers" (17). The ocean provided most of the Moriori's food: the Chatham Islands have no native land mammals and only two types of plants were collected and consumed by the Moriori with any regularity. Life expectancy for the Moriori was low, averaging around twenty-two years. As King comments, "Life for the Moriori may not have been nasty and brutish, but it was busy and harsh at times; and it was made more harsh by a combination of excessively damp weather in winter and sparse Moriori clothing" (34-35). However, in response to an environment characterized by scarcity and a confined habitable area, the Moriori developed a culture that minimized murder and bloodshed. Anger and conflict were channeled into highly ritualized forms of aggression, such as the one described in an early Moriori myth: the ancestor Nunuku-Whenva chastises the warring Moriori, saying,

Listen all! From now and forever, never again let there be war as this day has been! From today on forget the taste of human flesh! Are you fish that eat their

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<sup>57</sup> This seems to be a deliberate decision: like Frobisher, Rey, Cavendish, and Sonmi, Meronym also bears the comet-birthmark, but it is Zachry, not she, who narrates this section.

young?

So it was there agreed that because men get angry and during such anger feel the will to strike, that so they may, but only with a rod the thickness of a thumb, and one stretch of the arms in length, and thrash away but that on an abrasion of the hide, or first sign of blood, all should consider honour satisfied.  
(King 28)

The Moriori's practice of castrating a certain number of male infants also helped to ease tensions within the communities by avoiding the conflicts that inevitably accompany overpopulation. King's research offers a complicated and nuanced picture of the Moriori: while many aspects of their society may strike one as utopian—the taboo against murder and bloodshed, the egalitarian nature of their communities and ability to live in harmony with their environment—the forced castration of newborns, acceptance of ritualized forms of violence, and high mortality rates might strike some as being less than ideal.

Thus, we see that the notion of the prelapsarian paradise is a myth; the Old Rēkohu of D'Arnoq's tale is nostalgia for the innocence and naivety that has been sacrificed in the name of Progress and Civilization. The afterimage of Old Rēkohu may still cling to the Chatham Islands, but closer inspection reveals it to be nothing but a mirage. In *Cloud Atlas* Old Rēkohu represents the unobtainable utopia, as perfect as it is inaccessible; it is a legend, the modern world's nostalgia for a mythical time of unity and wholeness.

This perceived loss of the originary utopian paradise creates a sense of longing that resonates throughout Mitchell's novel; in "Half-Lives" and "An Orison of Sonmi~451" the dominant powers manufacture counterfeit utopias in order to use the force of this utopian longing to their own advantage. The mocking, debased echoes of the originary utopia reverberate throughout "Half-Lives," as we see in the ironically named "Pacific Eden Apartments" (120), Luisa's cramped, concrete dwelling. The epicentre of these counterfeit utopian images, however, is Swanekke Island. Except for a small parcel of land, Swanekke Island is owned by Seaboard Corporation and is the site of the HYDRA nuclear reactors and the service community that has sprung up around them. Our first view of Swanekke is ambiguous: Rey describes it as "quivering like utopia in a noon mirage" (122). However, Seaboard's PR agent is much less ambivalent: "Swanekke? It's paradise! [...] Subsidized stores and utilities, free clinics, clean air, zero crime, sea views. Even the men [...] come ready-vetted—in fact I can access their personnel files—so you know there won't be any total freaks in the dating pool" (130). Already, there is a noticeable shift in the language used to describe utopia. Descriptions of Old Rēkohu highlight the utopian *community*, the "imperishable peace" that rules the islands, the "harmony" between its peoples. Conversely, descriptions of Swanekke highlight the utopian *commodities*: "subsidized stores," "clean air," and "sea views" (witness the commodification of the natural world). In this utopia, even the inhabitants are potential commodities, prescreened for any defects or flaws: "the men [...] come ready-vetted." However, as we soon find out, Swanekke Island is the polar opposite of a utopia, a hotbed of greed, selfishness, duplicity, and in extreme cases, murder. It appears that the paradisaal Swanekke is a façade, constructed in order to conceal its dystopian inner workings: by highlighting Swanekke's wealth of commodities, its architects hope to deflect attention from its dysfunctional community.

Lest we think that Swanekke is an isolated example, Mitchell uses the character of Richard (and his guru) to examine the commodification of utopia in the form of sham spirituality. Richard—a self-absorbed, self-important “minor-league rock musician” (CA 91)—only merits a single page in Mitchell’s novel, but a page is enough to know that Richard is not actively seeking out Enlightenment. Rather, he is a passive consumer of the superficial symbols of Buddhism and the status that comes with it:

“I’m trying on the name Ganja at the moment. Maharaj Aja says Richard is outa sync with my Iovedic Self.”

“Who?”

“My guru, Luisaaa, my guru! He’s on his last reincarnation before—” Richard’s fingers go *puff!* Nirvanawards. “Come to an audience. His waiting list normally takes, like, *forever*, but jade-ankh disciples get personal audiences on the same afternoon.” (90)

With the affected title, jargon, and name-dropping, “Ganja” is at pains to broadcast his membership in the exclusive club of “jade-ankh disciples” and to reap the benefits that come with it. Indeed, Richard’s bragging about being one of the select few who is able to skip to the head of Maharaj Aja’s long waiting list implies that he is likely paying for this privilege: it certainly is not due to his upstanding morals or advanced wisdom. In this crass commercialization of Buddhism, the utopian impulse behind the religion is debased, and Nirvana is rendered as merely another commodity for sale, a pre-packaged product that can be passively imbibed by the masses.

This commodification of the utopian desire is carried to its logical extreme in “An Orison,” but in this near-future dystopia the utopian impulse is also used as a powerful tool of suppression and control. The Juche corpocracy uses the promise of a paradisaic Hawaii and “Xultation” to placate and motivate the clones who provide the slave labour that keeps the hyper-capitalistic society afloat. Sonmi describes the yearly Xultation ceremony and the effect it has on her fellow fabricant servers:

After Matins on First Day, Seer Rhee would pin a star on every server’s collar. The elevator then took those lucky Twelvestarred sisters for conveyance to Papa Song’s Ark. For the xiters, it is a momentous occasion: for the remainder, one of acute envy. Later, we saw smiling Sonmis, Yoonas, Ma-Leu-Das, and Hwa-Soons on 3-D as they embarked for Hawaii, arrived at Xultation, and finally were transformed into consumers with Soultrings. Our x-sisters praised Papa Song’s kindness and xhorted us to repay our Investment diligently. We marveled at their boutiques, malls, dinerias; jade seas, rose skies, wildflowers; lace, cottages, butterflies; though we could not name these marvels. (187)

Papa Song has appropriated the traditional imagery of paradise and the biblical language and imagery that accompanies it in order to ground and legitimize the company’s fabricated utopia: after their “Matins” in praise of Papa Song, the fabricants will be transported to the promised land aboard “Papa Song’s Ark,” where they will finally gain a “Soultring” (a combination ID and electronic debiting device). The conflation of community with commodity is even more apparent here: this Utopia is described primarily in terms of physical objects and rewards, such as “boutiques, malls, dinerias [...] lace, cottages” (187). The ascension into this utopian paradise is



marked by the transformation of the so-called “fabricants” into consumers: they are transformed from corporate products to corporate subjects. Tellingly, this counterfeit utopia provokes feelings of “acute envy” (187) among the fabricants, subverting any germs of solidarity the fabricants might feel and directing their energy futurewards in idle speculation about their promised consumer paradise. Of course, this vision of utopia turns out to be a monstrous lie: instead of becoming consumers, the fabricants are literally consumed. The twelvestarred clones are slaughtered onboard Papa Song’s Ark and their reclaimed proteins are used to produce the “Soap” that feeds the clones as well as the food products served at Papa Song’s (CA 343). The fabricants never transcend their status as commodity, and their utopia is no more than a hologram and a fabricated, insubstantial myth.

However, genuine utopian pockets exist alongside these façades. These utopian pockets are contested and marginal sites and are often fraught with internal tensions and beset by outside difficulties; however, they are also sites of resistance and change, sites of respect for alternative ideologies and modes of living, and sites that value the connections between individuals and between individuals and the community. The Abbey in “An Orison” is one such utopian pocket. The Abbey exists outside the legitimized modes of living approved by the corpocratic Juche, and offers a way out of the consumer cycle. Physically as well as ideologically marginal, the Abbey is located on the fringe of society, situated a full day’s drive from the nearest major centre, tucked into mountainside caves. It is peopled by the poor, the outcast, and the discontent; by “unemployable deviants, [and] those undollared by mental illness” (CA 330). Life in the Abbey provides an escape from the all-encompassing consumerism of the city, but at a hefty material price. As Sonmi explains to the Archivist,

Their food came from the forest and gardens, water from the cataract. Scavenge trips to landfills yielded plastics and metals for tools. Their “school” sony was powered by a water turbine. Solar nitelamps recharged during daylight hours. Their entertainment was themselves; consumers cannot exist without a 3-D and AdV, but humans once did and still can. Enforcement? Problems arose, no doubt, even crises from time to time. But no crisis is insuperable if people cooperate. [...] Oh, such a life is no bucolic Utopia. Yes, winters are severe; rainy seasons are relentless; crops fall prey to disease; their medicine is sorely limited. (330-31)

Despite these problems, by disconnecting from the endless consumer cycle, the inhabitants of the Abbey are free to make new connections with the natural world and with each other. The utopian moment is contained in the community rather than in commodities: the colonists “bicker, blame, and grieve as people will, but at least they do it in a community, and companionship is a fine medicine in itself” (331). It is this community and companionship that give the Abbey its utopian aspect. Indeed, the Abbey is the only place in “An Orison” where we see people interacting with genuine warmth and affection: the Abbess “hugged Hae-Joo affectionately as a mother” (329) and embraces Sonmi (333), both extremely unusual acts in this dystopian world. It is implied that although life is difficult in the Abbey, those who live there possess a level of meaningful fulfillment that is unobtainable in the city: indeed, the Abbess suggests that fulfillment is inimical to the continued success of a consumer society (332).

The Abbey offers an alternative to the ideology and ethos of the corpocratic society:

instead of focusing on commodities, it nurtures the connections between people and provides a space for alternative ideological viewpoints. By simply existing, it challenges corpocracy's self-declared hegemony and inevitability. However, this also makes the Abbey's continued existence extremely precarious: "The Abbess feared that should the day ever come when the Board decided they were a viable alternative to corpocratic ideology, the 'tapeworms' will be renamed 'terrorists,' 'smart bombs' will rain, and our tunnels flood with fire" (CA 332). This means that the inhabitants of the Abbey are far more canny than their conventional utopian counterparts, even if it means that compromises must be made: as Sonmi relates, "My host informed me that experience had taught the colonists to keep a friendly eye on their guests, even Unionmen. The Abbess herself disliked such a violation of the old abbey's hospitality codes, but the younger colonists were adamant that close surveillance be maintained" (333).

Like the Abbey, the protestors' camp in "Half-Lives" is another example of a modern utopian pocket. Located on land owned by Margo Roker (land which developers are anxious to buy), the protestors' camp is literally on the margin of society, located "between a beach and a marshy lagoon" (CA 122) and overshadowed by Swanekke A. Like the Abbey, the protestors' camp is no consumer's paradise: it is built of "tatty tents, rainbow-sprayed camper vans, and trailer homes [that] look like unwanted gifts the Pacific dumped here" (122). However, as Rey approaches, "white toddlers tanned brown as leather paddle in the lazy shallows; a bearded apostle washes clothes in a tub; a couple of snaky teenagers kiss in the dune grass" (122). Here we have a picture of people at home in the natural world, with an emphasis placed on the relationships between people: kids bask in the sunshine, lovers kiss in the grass. However, despite appearances, this is not the innocent trusting utopia of Old Rēkohu: Rey's idyll abruptly comes to an end when she approaches the camp. "Several inhabitants approach but not in a friendly manner" (122) and Luisa is about to be forced out when Hester van Zandt steps in. As she explains to Rey, "Nineteen seventy-five is nowhere *near* 1968. Seaboard has informers in our network. Last weekend the authorities wanted to clear the site for VIPs, and blood was spilled. That gave the cops an excuse for a round of arrests. I'm afraid paranoia pays" (123; original emphasis). Van Zandt recognizes the challenges that her group faces (she is aware Luisa could easily choose to "write a satire about GreenFront New Waldenites in their mini-Woodstock..." [124]) but she remains adamant about the possibility of resistance and change. As she exhorts:

The conflict between corporations and activists is that of narcolepsy versus remembrance. The corporations have money, power, and influence. Our sole weapon is public outrage. [...] But outrage is unwieldy to manufacture and handle. First, you need scrutiny; second, widespread awareness; only when this reaches a critical mass does public outrage explode into being. (123-24)

This is not a passive utopia: as Van Zandt emphasizes, creating a better future is a long and uncertain process. Utopia must be actively sought for, actively fought for. She petitions Luisa to write the truth, and by so doing, "raise the temperature of public awareness, fractionally, toward its ignition point" (CA 124). Crucially, Van Zandt is looking ahead to the new world she and her fellow protestors can create, *not* pining for or trying to recreate a mythical utopian past. This is a precarious community, but one that is incubating the utopian impulse: this is not a static, homogeneous utopia, but a utopia in

progress, a marginal space to be sure, but still a site of protest and resistance, of critical thinking, and a place where alternative ideologies can exist.

The utopian enclaves of the protesters' camp and the Abbey are united through their shared struggle to imagine and create a better future. Unlike the counterfeit, commercialized utopias which try to reproduce a lost utopian past, these two utopian pockets actively struggle to create a better world, and in doing so, are sustained by—and give rise to—that most utopian of emotions, hope. Thus, in *Cloud Atlas*, Mitchell dismisses the notion of the ordinary utopia: rather, through his various visions, he stresses that utopia is a process, not a place already formed or a static destination.

However, it is easy to feel that the utopian moments that occur in *Cloud Atlas* all too often give way: Old Rēkohu falls to the Europeans and the Maori, the Valleysmen to the Kona; there are informers in the Abbey and in Van Zandt's camp. Yet these singular utopian moments are, through Mitchell's networked narrative structure, linked to form a whole greater than the sum of its parts. As Edwards suggests in "Strange Transactions,"

Mitchell's utopian "moments of possibility" reveal a narrative strategy in which politicized demands for something better are being *articulated in common* by globally dispersed characters, networked together through transmigratory temporalities that encompass unknown, speculated futures as well as contested pasts. (195; original emphasis)

As previously discussed, the concept of reincarnation functions as a metonymic device that links disparate individuals together across vast expanses of time and space: combining this device with an interlinking narrative structure allows *Cloud Atlas* to mitigate the transitory and isolated nature of Mitchell's utopian pockets by uniting them into a heterogeneous but connected whole. Thus, the formal properties of the narrative reflect and enable the utopian strategies depicted within the novel: as opposed to traditional totalizing utopias (which are characterized by homogeneity, fixed centres, rigid hierarchies, and static relationships), the novel's networked utopian pockets promote heterogeneous, flexible, non-hierarchical, and evolving communities.

#### **4.6 Archetypes and Icons: Life Stories, Narrative Frames, and the Problem of Authenticity**

In *Cloud Atlas*, narratives proliferate like the many-headed hydra: attempt to isolate any one story and it will branch out exponentially. Characters deliberately frame their lived experiences in terms of preexisting narrative structures as a way of asserting autonomy and control. The act of envisioning oneself as a character in a story or play can function as a coping mechanism, creating a refuge for an otherwise powerless individual. This is Eva van Outryve de Crommelynck's strategy in "Zedelghem." A proud and sensitive girl, Eva is sent to board with the van de Veldes, a vulgar "family of porkers" who "possess a thoroughly unjustified self-confidence" (CA 448). Estranged from her mother, ignored by her father, and resented by Frobisher, Eva has no allies to turn to for help, and as a young woman, little power to change the situation herself. Eva comes to terms with her disagreeable situation by appropriating Scheherazade's fantasies: "I've thought of this balcony as my own belvedere, from *A Thousand and One Nights*. I often come up here at this hour, after school. I'm the empress of Bruges, you

see. Its citizens are my subjects. The van de Veldes are my jesters. I shall chop off their heads” (451). Like Scheherazade, Eva spins out her tales: no longer is she a powerless girl, but “the empress of Bruges” with the power of life and death over her subjects. Here, she is able to take out her aggression on the van de Veldes and “chop off their heads.” This situation is far from ideal, of course: Eva, like Scheherazade, only turns to this strategy under duress. Being able to impose her will and effect actual change is obviously much more desirable, but until she is able to do so, Eva’s stories provide a much needed refuge where she is able to express her values and point of view.

However, as Cavendish proves, reframing one’s experiences in light of preexisting narrative structures can, in fact, enable more concrete forms of resistance. In “The Ghastly Ordeal” Cavendish’s cuckolded brother enacts his revenge by having Cavendish involuntarily committed to a nursing home. To his great dismay, Cavendish finds that his customary approach to solving problems—a mix of belligerence and self-righteous indignation—is completely ineffective there. Cavendish is left completely flummoxed until one day he has a revelation: “I was a man in a horror B-movie asylum. The more I ranted and raged, the more I proved that I was exactly where I should be” (179). By reframing himself as “a man in a horror B-movie asylum,” Cavendish enacts a paradigm shift: no longer is he the powerful and important editor who can bend situations to his will, but merely another insignificant inmate. This is a sobering realization for Cavendish, but it does enable him to tap into alternate stores of knowledge and come up with an appropriate escape plan:

My strategy had been wrong from square one. I had tried to shout my way out of this absurdity, but the institutionalized cannot do this. Slavers welcome the odd rebel to dress down before the others. In all the prison literature I’ve read, from *The Gulag Archipelago* to *An Evil Cradling* to *Knuckle Sandwich*, rights must be horse-traded and accrued with cunning. Prisoner resistance merely justifies an ever-fiercer imprisonment in the minds of the imprisoners. Now was the season for subterfuge. (181)

By stepping into the role of prisoner, Cavendish is able to apply others’ insights to his own situation and to direct his energy towards more appropriate methods of resistance: he is able to find meaning in what has previously been an absurd and incomprehensible chain of events.<sup>58</sup> Joe Napier employs a similar strategy when he finds himself ousted from his position at Seaboard Corp. As head of security, Napier has incriminating evidence about the Sixsmith report and Seaboard’s involvement in Sixsmith’s death and Margo Roker’s assault: now that he no longer works for Seaboard, this knowledge could easily lead to his own death. Joe is blindsided by Wiley’s “offer” of early retirement: outmaneuvered and out of the loop, Napier realizes that he must convince Wiley of his harmlessness if he wants to remain safe. In order to do this, he envisions himself in the role of the faithful retainer: “Napier has decided by the time Wiley hangs up. *A golden chance to exit a bloodstained stage*. He plays an old retainer speechless with gratitude” (408; original italics). By stepping into this role, Napier is able to disguise his alarm and suspicion and present a convincing façade to the other people in the room. Napier’s act is so

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<sup>58</sup> The opposite holds true as well: framing one’s experience in terms of the wrong narrative can lead to an inappropriate response. Witness Rey when she is stuck in an elevator: “ ‘Got to be an access hatch...’ There isn’t. She peels up the carpet—a steel floor. ‘Only in the movies, I guess’ ” (CA 92).

successful, in fact, that he catches everyone by surprise when he saves Rey and helps her obtain the Sixsmith report.

However, it is not only the disenfranchised who use familiar stories and archetypes to reframe reality: the powerful do too. The most extreme instance of this occurs in “An Orison.” The bulk of this novella is given over to Sonmi’s account about her ascent from mindless fabricant to ruthless revolutionary. However, towards the end of the novella, Sonmi reveals that her ascension—the entire story we have just been reading—is, in effect, a “theatrical production, set up while [she] was still a server in Papa Song’s” (CA 348), staged in order to “generate the show trial of the decade. To make every last pureblood in Nea So Copros mistrustful of every last fabricant. To manufacture downstrata consent for the Juche’s new Fabricant Xpiry Act. To discredit Abolitionism” (348-49). By forcing her into the role of heretic and terrorist and by “authoring” Sonmi’s lived experiences, the Juche is clearly exerting their power over her (although, as discussed earlier, Sonmi is not without means of resistance). However, as Sonmi suggests, the Juche’s narrative is working on another level as well: by casting Sonmi (and fabricants more generally) as a heretic and terrorist, the Juche is also manipulating its citizens into occupying the role of faithful patriots, and in effect, demonstrating their power over them.

At the individual level, Ayr’s blackmailing of Frobisher shows how individuals in positions of power can reframe reality to suit their purposes. When Frobisher objects to Ayr’s plagiarism of his work, Ayr threatens to destroy Frobisher’s reputation: “Leave without my consent and all musical society west of the Urals, east of Lisbon, north of Naples, and south of Helsinki will know a scoundrel named Robert Frobisher forced himself upon purblind Vyvyan Ayr’s wife [...]. She will not deny it. Imagine the scandal!” (456). Ayr frames his version of events according to the well-known trope of the trusting but “purblind” husband, his lusty wife, and his louche employee. This version of events, however, contradicts what we already know and what Ayr himself admits, that “Jocasta had my blessing when she seduced [Frobisher]” (456). However, as Frobisher soon realizes, Ayr’s story is much more compelling than his own. Part of this obviously derives from the inequalities in the two men’s positions: Ayr is a wealthy and respected composer, while Frobisher is a disinherited rake. In addition to this, though, is the fact that Ayr’s story has a narrative momentum all of its own: it draws on an established narrative structure and conventions, replete with stock characters and motivations—it is familiar, it is comfortable, and it makes sense. Frobisher’s story—that a world-renowned composer and his rich, beautiful wife have conspired to entrap a penniless, unknown musician so as to plagiarize his work—seems ludicrous beside it. Further confirming the power of Ayr’s narrative is the fact that Frobisher himself fully buys into it, not realizing the truth until too late: an early letter finds Frobisher “gloat[ing] a little over my employer’s cuckold’s horns” (70).

Of course, the most obvious examples of individuals using established narrative forms to mediate and reshape their experiences are the novellas’ protagonists themselves. With the exception of Rey, the protagonists are all actively involved in “scripting” their own lives, self-consciously using narrative techniques and conventions in order to influence certain readings and responses. Cavendish, for example, casts his recovery from his stroke as a heroic (as opposed to a humiliating or humbling) endeavour: “When *The Ghastly Ordeal of Timothy Cavendish* is

turned into a film, I advise thee, Director dearest, [...] to render that November as a boxer-in-training-for-the-big-fight montage” (335). However, the less self-reflexive characters also consciously employ such narrative devices: even the terminally naïve Ewing is aware of the narrative conventions he is using to shape his story, exclaiming, “The temptation to begin at the perfidious end is strong, but this diarist shall remain true to chronology” (501). In so doing, Ewing and the others are asserting their control over their lived experiences: they are the authors of their own stories. Indeed, as Hicks suggests, Mitchell’s

deployment of literary/cultural archetypes and invocation of literary icons suggests that [...] literary genres provide us archetypes to resist the “terror of history.” [...] While an historicist perspective suggests that by conforming to preexisting archetypes, we compromise our individuality, autonomy, and freedom, Mitchell’s novel, in terms that resonate with Eliade’s thought, suggests that we might do well to invest ourselves in older, larger stories.

However, the characters’ use of preexisting narrative structures to validate and empower their lived experiences is complicated by *Cloud Atlas*’s constant narrative interruptions: as Cavendish reflects, “Odd how the wrong stories pop into one’s head at my age. It’s not odd, no, it’s ruddy scary” (*CA* 145). Ewing’s diary, for example, is interrupted and challenged by both D’Arnoq’s history of the Moriori and by Autua’s tale. Despite imposing his own voice on Autua’s tale—“His pidgin delivered his tale brokenly, so its substance only shall I endeavor to set down here” (29)—Ewing must constantly reassert his narratorial presence and authority through his frequent parenthetical comments and observations (29-30). At moments, Autua’s narrative threatens to overtake Ewing’s, setting up a story that is often at odds, and at times in direct conflict, with Ewing’s own. Likewise, Zachry’s tale is intersected by the history of Truman Napes (259-61) and Meronym’s myth (284-85), while Sonmi’s story, as previously discussed, is hijacked by the Juche.

There is another way in which narrative autonomy and control are challenged in *Cloud Atlas*: in addition to the narrative interruptions, the characters’ life stories are called into question by the presence of narrative frames. Ewing’s journal, for instance, is recontextualized through his son’s footnotes. In the first footnote the son comments that “My father never spoke to me of the dendroglyphs and I learnt of them only in the manner described in the Introduction. Now that the Moriori of Chatham Island are a race over extinction’s brink, I hold them to be beyond betrayal” (*CA* 21). This is the first point where the reader realizes that they are not reading Ewing’s “original” text: someone else has edited and assembled the document that became “The Pacific Journal.” The mediated nature of “The Pacific Journal” is highlighted once again in another footnote where Ewing’s son comments that, “Here my father’s handwriting slips into spasmodic illegibility” (501): we do not have access to the original text, and so must trust to the editor’s honesty. However, these same footnotes reveal that Ewing’s son has an agenda that does not always align with Ewing’s own: in his journal, Ewing express his determination to keep the dendroglyphs a secret (121), but by publishing the diary and leaving the episode intact, his son has gone against this express wish.

Just as Ewing’s narrative is framed by his son’s commentary, so is Zachry’s. After Zachry

finishes his story, there is a line break and a new voice begins:

Zachry my pa was a wyrd buggah, I won't naysay it now he's died. Oh, most o' Pa's yarnin's was just musey duck fartin' an' in his loonsome old age he even b'liefed Meronym the Prescient was his presh b'loved Sonmi, yay, he 'sisted it, he said he knowed it all by birthmarks an' comets'n'all. (309)

This epilogue raises several questions. If Zachry is dead, who has just told his story? Has his son been repeating his father's tales? If so, how true is this repetition to the original? Indeed, speaking of reliability, his son's epilogue calls Zachry's reliability as a narrator into question: we are told that Zachry's "yarnin's was jus' musey duck fartin'." As well, Zachry's son specifically rejects Zachry's assertion that Meronym is Sonmi reincarnated. The effect of this epilogue is to make readers question their original assessment of Zachry's story: have they been reading "Sloosha's Crossin'" as an autobiography when they should have been reading it as a tall tale? How might this reframing of Zachry's story affect our interpretation of it? Which speaker do we trust—Zachry or his son?

The epilogue to "Sloosha's Crossin'" and the footnotes in "The Pacific Journal" clearly demonstrate how Mitchell uses narrative frames to raise questions about narrative autonomy and authenticity. These frames can be inserted within the structure of the individual novellas, as in Ewing and Zachry's case. However, this framing effect is also created through *Cloud Atlas's* intercalatory narrative structure: each novella, by virtue of appearing in the next as a historical document, is then (re)framed by it. A commonly cited example of this is Frobisher's critique of Ewing's journal as being "too structured for a genuine diary, and its language doesn't ring quite true" (64). As Hicks suggests, the "very authenticity of each section is exploded by its proximity to another equally authentic piece performing another time period. We are not permitted the sense of immersion typical of the historical novel. Instead, we are jarringly shuttled from one period to another." In this example, we see that the frame narrative—Frobisher's story—casts Ewing's journal in a completely new light: as readers, we are encouraged to go back and scrutinize the structure and diction of "The Pacific Journal." Is Frobisher right? Should we have been reading the journal as a fake all along? If the journal is a forgery, what is its purpose?

Another prominent case of a narrative frame recontextualizing a previous story is found in Cavendish's assessment of "Half-Lives." Cavendish is extremely verbose about the story's shortcomings: he grumbles about receiving "a MS titled *Half-Lives*—lousy name for a work of fiction—and subtitled *The First Luisa Rey Mystery*. Lousier and lousier" (156). He is leery of its "lady author, one dubiously named Hilary V. Hush" (156) and gripes that it "would be a better book if Hilary V. Hush weren't so artsily-fartsily Clever" (162).<sup>59</sup> Like Frobisher, Cavendish challenges the reader to reassess the narrative's worth: Cavendish complains that the idea of reincarnation is ridiculous, grouses that the artist is trying too hard, and highlights the story's

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<sup>59</sup> These criticisms obviously function on another level as part of Mitchell's self-reflexive commentary on *Cloud Atlas's* use of genre conventions and techniques, and resonate with William Empson's concept of "pseudo-parody to disarm criticism," where two characters sharing similar beliefs are divided between heroic and pastoral narrative arcs. The character in the pastoral plot attracts the brunt of the audience's criticism and disbelief, creating space for a more earnest exploration of the shared theme in the heroic arc.

generic affiliations. Like Frobisher, he also questions the document's authenticity, although in this case, Cavendish is leery about the true identity of the author, "one dubiously named Hilary V. Hush," not the authenticity of the document in and of itself. This, of course, is because "Half-Lives" is unambiguously revealed to be a work of fiction within the world of *Cloud Atlas*: unlike the other five novellas, which assume the pretense of being "authentic" first-person accounts, *Half-Lives* (the in-world novel) appears in Cavendish's story as a manuscript sent to him for publication, a manuscript whose subtitle ("*The First Luisa Rey Mystery*") and attribution to Hilary V. Hush leave no doubt as to its fictional status. While this reframing has obvious implications for our interpretation of "Half-Lives," it has wider-reaching consequences as well. If, within the world of *Cloud Atlas*, "Half-Lives" is clearly presented as a fictional novel, then what of the narratives that it frames? Are we to retroactively read "Zedelghem" and "The Pacific Journal" as fictions within a fiction (within, of course, the encompassing fiction of *Cloud Atlas*)?

These questions of narrative authenticity are not incidental: they form one of the main concerns of *Cloud Atlas*. Indeed, *Cloud Atlas*'s intercalatory narrative structure brings these questions to the forefront: how do we judge a narrative's authenticity? What textual markers do we look for? How can we be persuaded to interpret a narrative as authentic or inauthentic? How are we (or are we) able to separate fiction from fact, narrative from reality? How does the claim to experiential authority affect our interpretation of a story? We have already encountered a good example of this preoccupation in "An Orison" after Sonmi reveals that her ascension was orchestrated by the Juche. As the naïve Archivist finally realizes,

Wait, wait, wait. What about... everything? Are you saying your whole confession is composed of ... scripted events?

Its key events, yes. Some actors were unwitting. Boom-Sook and the Abbess, for example, but the major players were all provocateurs. Hae-Joo Im and Boardman Mephi certainly were. Did you not detect the hairline cracks in the plot?

Such as?

Wing-027 was as stable an ascendant as I: was I really so unique? You yourself suggested, would Union truly risk their secret weapon on a dash across Korea? Did Seer Kwon's murder of the Zizzi Hikaru fabricant on the suspension bridge not underline pureblood brutality a little too neatly? Was its timing not a little too pat? (348)

This is not just a challenge to the Archivist, but to us as well: have we not noticed the hairline cracks in the plot? Have we been critical readers? Or, because a story is presented with narrative markers that signal its "truthfulness" (whether this truthfulness is "in-world" or out), do we unquestioningly accept its claims? How can we tell what is supposedly true and what is fabricated and false? By inserting these framing narratives and by emphasizing the process by which lived experiences are articulated in narrative form and then further transformed into physical, historical artifacts, Mitchell asks us to consider history as yet another narrative, and demands that we become critical readers.



#### 4.7 “He Who Pays the Historian Calls the Tune”: Agency, History and Narrative in *Cloud Atlas*

Up to this point, I have been arguing that narrative is depicted as a potent and powerful force within *Cloud Atlas*, one that can be used to mediate and reshape individual experiences and which can influence future events and happenings. However, these personal narratives are inextricably entangled within a larger historical context: in *Cloud Atlas*, Mitchell frames history as yet another narrative, a compelling one to be sure, but one which is also open to change. As Childs and Green point out, this is a recurring theme in Mitchell’s work: “Mitchell’s fiction constantly returns to such fundamental concerns: how our individual narratives are composed and re-composed; how these stories are interwoven and feed into the larger movements of human history that always threaten to consume them” (28). Arguably, Mitchell’s most detailed and thorough exposition upon the historical process occurs in “Half-Lives.” In it, the minor character Isaac Sachs meditates on the relationship between the past, the present, and the future and on the possibility of locating human agency within the historical process:

- Exposition: the workings of the actual past + the virtual past may be illustrated by an event well known to collective history, such as the sinking of the Titanic. The disaster as it actually occurred descends into obscurity as its eyewitnesses die off, documents perish + the wreck of the ship dissolves in its Atlantic grave. Yet a virtual sinking of the Titanic, created from reworked memories, papers, hearsay, fiction—in short, belief—grows ever “truer.” The actual past is brittle, ever-dimming + ever more problematic to access + reconstruct: in contrast, the virtual past is malleable, ever-brightening + ever more difficult to circumvent/expose as fraudulent. (CA 392; original italics)

In this passage in his notebook, Sachs begins by making a distinction between what he terms the “actual past” and the “virtual past.” In this equation the actual past corresponds to the notion of an objective reality: it is physical, tangible, and experiential. In the *Titanic* example, the actual past is linked to “eyewitnesses,” “documents,” and “the wreck of the ship”: these are the material realities that persist into the present and that physically attest to the past’s existence. However, these artifacts inevitably decay. The actual past is obscured: it “is brittle, ever-dimming + ever more problematic to access.” Thus, as the section’s title neatly suggests, the past too has a “half-life” and is likewise subject to the same slow decay.

Continuing the conceit, if the actual past is the original radioactive element, then the virtual past is the element which replaces it. The virtual past exists in an inverse relationship to the actual past: as the actual past is “ever-dimming,” the virtual past is “ever-brightening.” The material physicality and experiential authority of the actual past are replaced by narratives that, ivy-like, grow up around it. The virtual past is an intangible past: it is composed of “reworked memories,” “hearsay,” “fiction,” and “belief.” Additionally, as opposed to the “brittle” actual past, the virtual past is flexible and resilient. Thus, as time goes on, the virtual past takes on a life of its own, becoming increasingly independent of the actual past and becoming “ever more difficult to circumvent/expose as fraudulent” as the actual past decays.

Therefore, while Sachs’s concept of the actual past suggests that there is a fundamental

bedrock of truth or historical authenticity, as time passes this “Truth” becomes increasingly harder, and eventually well-nigh impossible, to access. This opinion is echoed by Ewing in “The Pacific Journal”: musing to himself, he reflects that there are “as many truths as men. Occasionally, I glimpse a truer Truth, hiding in imperfect simulacrum of itself, but as I approach, it bestirs itself and moves deeper into the thorny swamp of dissent” (17). The actual past, like Ewing’s Truth, remains tantalizingly out of reach: as Sachs comments, “*Like Utopia, the actual future + the actual past exist only in the hazy distance, where they are no good to anyone*” (393; original italics). Instead, we are left with the “imperfect simulacrum” of the virtual past.

Sachs goes on to suggest that the actual and virtual past are paired with an actual and virtual future. The virtual future, like the virtual past, is largely intangible: it is composed of “*wishes, prophecies, + daydreams*” (393). It also exists in an inverse relationship with its counterpart, but in this case, it is the virtual future that grows ever-fainter as the actual future draws nearer. Interestingly, in a similar way that the actual past exists in the virtual past by “hiding in imperfect simulacrum of itself,” traces of the virtual future persist into the actual future via “*self-fulfilling prophecies*” (393): the virtual future *can* “influence the actual future” (393), although the reality of the actual future always exceeds it.

This conception of the historical process is a key component of *Cloud Atlas*, one which undermines the conclusion Edwards reaches in “Strange Transactions.” Edwards praises *Cloud Atlas* for its capacity “to move beyond literary postmodernism’s inability to reflect on any historical representation that is not spatialized, flattened out, pastiched and shorn of original context” (192). In this statement, Edwards seems to be praising *Cloud Atlas* for its ability to portray some more “authentic” historical reality; she implies that in *Cloud Atlas* Mitchell has created an historical representation that has managed to retain its “original context.” This is a curious conclusion to reach, especially as Edwards herself has highlighted the pastiched nature of *Cloud Atlas* earlier in her essay:

Mitchell’s narrative experimentation with dystopian and apocalyptic futures, his borrowings from “genre” elements [...] thus creates an ambitiously conceived aesthetic world in which not only are the various protagonists connected at the level of *content* but, moreover, the various pastiched, stylistic vocabularies are networked together at the level of *form* into a many-voiced, contradictory and heterogeneous whole. (196-97; original emphasis)

Indeed, one would think that it is precisely “at the level of *form*” that *Cloud Atlas* gives the lie to the notion of an original historical context: *Cloud Atlas*’s procession of embedded, fragmented narratives explode the novellas’ pretenses to historical authenticity and highlights their status as fictional narrative. As Hicks suggests, “More than historicizing literature, then, the constructedness of the stories complicates a historicist understanding of the novel as a whole. The events that take place in the various narratives are not ‘real’ events—they are stories, encountered by characters in other stories” (Hicks). It is this understanding, in fact, which leads Hicks to interpret Sachs’s vision of the historical process as a profoundly negative one: she argues that this

section allows for a Baudrillardian interpretation of the book, in which Mitchell,

despite attempting a serious meditation on our trajectory toward apocalypse, becomes caught in an unreal vertigo of literary conventions. In this reading, any “real” vision of our problems or their potential solutions is obscured by a wall of pre-existing cultural images—what Baudrillard calls simulacra, and what here take the form of literary genres and conventions that determine their own content.

However, I would like to propose an alternative reading of this passage: instead of viewing the “simulacra” of the virtual past and virtual future as obstructions or obfuscations of a “real” vision, I would like to suggest that it is exactly these “*wishes, prophecies + daydreams*” (CA 393; original italics) that allow for the possibility of engaging with the larger historical metanarratives that encompass our individual lives.

Indeed, *Cloud Atlas's* emphasis on history as another type of narrative is yet another variation on Mitchell's interest in the transmission of stories between people and over time, and it resonates with his interest in the possibility of human agency within these larger historical narratives. In Mitchell's fictional universe, characters must constantly negotiate their position relative to the larger social and historical currents that swirl and eddy around them: in order to do so, they turn to narrative in order to try and mediate and make sense of their experiences. Indeed, all six novellas—“The Pacific Journal,” “Zedelghem,” “Half-Lives,” “The Ghastly Ordeal,” “An Orison,” and “Sloosha's Crossin'”—represent the characters' ongoing attempts to situate their personal narratives within their historical moment. However, as I've previously discussed, these personal narratives are not objective, neutral, or natural: from the naïve Ewing to the conniving Cavendish, all of the narrators are actively crafting their stories in order to propagate their versions of events. Furthermore, as Frobisher and Ayr's conflicting narratives neatly illustrate, individuals must not only grapple with the larger historical forces that surround them, but must also negotiate with competing and conflicting narratives at the microlevel: there will always be different versions of events and different personal agendas. As the clash between Frobisher and Ayr makes clear, power is at the core of the narrative enterprise: there will be different assessments and different agendas, whether it is Frobisher and Ayr's competing narratives or Zachry and his son's. The competing individual narratives in *Cloud Atlas* speak to the imbrication of narrative and power: whose story will be heard?

As time passes, the interplay between the various narratives calcifies: the most dominant narratives and their mutually reinforcing networks solidify into the “virtual past” that Sachs discusses. These narratives solidify to the extent that they are mistaken for the “actual past”—witness D'Arnoq's history of Old Rēkohu, or the Juche's historical “facts” in “An Orison.” Once again, the imbrication of narrative and power is displayed: as Sachs reminds us, “*The present presses the virtual past into its own service, to lend credence to its mythologies + legitimacy to the imposition of will. Power seeks + is the right to “landscape” the virtual past. (He who pays the historian calls the tune.)*” (CA 393; original italics). However, the present does not just press the virtual past into its service, but puts the virtual future to work as well: we especially see this in the counterfeit utopian visions propagated by the ruling powers in *Cloud Atlas*. By directing individuals' attention towards the future, the powers-that-be deflect their audience's attention from that most dangerous of moments, the present. By fabricating these static utopias of

unchanging ease, prosperity, and harmony, and by couching these visions in the imagery and language of the distant past, the ruling powers make sure that any notions of change or progress are effectively neutered. By emphasizing commodities, not community, they head off any feelings of group solidarity.

Where then, Mitchell asks, is the space for individual agency within these overdetermined structures? Our current historical narratives—the linear notion of Progress and the cyclical vision of the eternal return—leave no room for individual agency. The linear notion of Progress or the idea of the survival of the fittest paradoxically reinforce the status quo (the current situation is always better, more desirable, and further advanced than anything that preceded it), while a cyclical view of history renders individual action meaningless and futile: no matter what one does, things will never significantly change. In these narratives, history is envisioned as an inescapable, impersonal force, one that invites the abdication of personal responsibility: as the hitman Bill Smoke muses to himself in “Half-Lives,” “*I’m just the instrument of my clients’ will. If it wasn’t me it’d be the next fixer in the Yellow Pages. Blame its user, blame its maker, but don’t blame the gun*” (CA 112; original italics). Even Sonmi initially reacts this way, stating that she “was not genomed to alter history” (CA 327).

However, this view of history—and of narrative—is one that fails to take into account narrative’s disruptive potential. If *Cloud Atlas* is a case study in the manner in which narrative can be used as a method and means of control, it is also very much about the ways in which narrative can undermine this control. Sonmi’s predicament is probably the best example of this. On the surface, Sonmi’s revelation that the Juche has engineered the entire spectacle of her ascension and subsequent rebellion seems to support Isaac Sachs’s earlier assessment that “*he who pays the historian calls the tune*” (393). However, Sonmi frames the situation differently: she reveals that she knowingly participated in the Juche’s charade (although they were not aware of this). Her voluntary assumption of the role of the “clueless pawn” in order to use the Juche’s story for her own ends complicates “An Orison” even further:

Why does any martyr cooperate with his judases? [...] We see a game beyond the endgame. I refer to my *Declarations*, Archivist. Media has flooded Nea So Copros with my Catechisms. Every schoolchild in corpocracy knows my twelve “blasphemies” now. My guards tell me there is even talk of a statewide “Vigilance Day” against fabricants who show signs of the *Declarations*. My ideas have been reproduced a billionfold. [...] As Seneca warned Nero: No matter how many of us you kill, you will never kill your successor. (349)

As her allusions to Seneca and Jesus suggest, Sonmi is confident that her works and her story will survive her and contribute to the development of a new world. Furthermore, due to *Cloud Atlas*’s unusual narrative structure, the reader knows that Sonmi’s confidence is justified: in “Sloosha’s Crossin’” Sonmi has attained the status of a god (244) and the memory of her, however distorted, is one of the few surviving things from the pre-catastrophe days. It transpires that Sonmi’s *Declarations* did take on a life of their own, contributing to the Juche’s downfall: as Meronym explains to Zachry, “*She [Sonmi] was borned’n’died hun’erds o’ years ago ’cross the ocean west-nor’westly [...] on a pen’sula all deadlanded now but its old-time name was Nea So Copros an’ its ancient one Korea. A short’n’judased life Sonmi had, an’ only after she’d died did*

*she find say-so over purebloods 'n' freakbirths' thinkin's"* (277; original italics). Here we see an affirmation of the potential for individual agency in the face of overwhelming odds, albeit at a great personal cost. Nonetheless, Sonmi's story and the influence of her story on the Valleysmen illustrate the power and disruptive potential of narrative, its ability to take on a life of its own. This narrative fecundity is at the heart of *Cloud Atlas*'s networked narrative structure: its complex interconnections subvert simple cause and effect and transcend purely linear connections, while its moments of reincarnation and déjà vu disrupt the one-way temporal flow and offer a metaphor for conceptualizing history differently. While the actual past and the actual future are beyond our direct individual influence, the virtual past and the virtual future are not: as Sachs suggests, the virtual past and future are founded on belief, and as Ewing stresses at the novel's close: "Belief is both prize & battlefield within the mind & in the mind's mirror, the world" (507). It is specifically the "*wishes, prophecies, + daydreams*" (CA 393) of the virtual past and future that mark the intersection of the personal and the public, the individual and the historic.

## 5. CONCLUSION

As the previous chapters have made clear, the utopian impulse is alive and well in *Stand on Zanzibar*, *Always Coming Home*, and *Cloud Atlas*. Their interest in the literary and social legacy of utopian thought manifests in a variety of ways: in *Always Coming Home*, Le Guin exposes the biases of the western utopian tradition, critiquing the classical literary utopia's static homogeneous society and masculine, Eurocentric worldview. In *Cloud Atlas*, Mitchell explores the commodification of utopia and the ways in which the utopian impulse is co-opted by oppressive regimes and grasping corporations. The specter of the prelapsarian paradise and the myth of the noble savage are also critiqued by Mitchell and by Brunner as well: consider Mitchell's treatment of Old Rēkohu in *Cloud Atlas* or Brunner's portrayal of the advertising campaign commissioned by General Technics in order to entice western workers to Beninia.

Through their depictions of alternate utopian societies, Brunner, Le Guin, and Mitchell also offer a more positive contribution to the tradition of utopian thought. While the Beninians, the Kesh, and the Valleysmen each offer their own distinct take on the utopian society, they are united by their modest standards of living and relatively stable populations; by a general lack of interest in individual material possessions, with emphasis on the activity (rather than the product) of labour; and by their general rejection of violence as a means to solve problems. Le Guin and Mitchell's utopian communities are also defined by a politics of consent: matters that affect the whole community are decided by debates in which all members are afforded a voice. Indeed, the polyphonic nature of Brunner's, Le Guin's, and Mitchell's texts is part of these books' larger valuation of diversity and tolerance: one of *Zanzibar's* central insights is that the way to salvation lies in the judicious and respectful cross-fertilization of cultures.

*Zanzibar's* other insight is that people must accept "their responsibilities as thinking individuals" (Brunner 495): this emphasis on personal responsibility, with its concomitant insistence on the possibility of individual agency, is shared by *Always Coming Home* and *Cloud Atlas*. Brunner, Le Guin, and Mitchell offer a nuanced portrayal of individual agency, recognizing that one's choices are often severely limited by outside forces (witness Sonmi's predicament). Likewise, they also acknowledge that individuals can choose to exert their agency in destructive or violent ways, as Zachry does when he decides to murder the sleeping Kona warrior. However, this recognition of personal agency and choice plays a key part in making these utopias contingent and open-ended. By illustrating how individual actions accumulate and solidify into social totalities, Brunner, Le Guin, and Mitchell illustrate the play between overdetermined social structures and individual choice, creating utopias that are founded on and maintained by individuals and are thus capable of changing for the better or for the worse.

The contingency of Brunner's, Le Guin's, and Mitchell's utopian communities is further emphasized by the authors' decisions to integrate their utopian societies into the larger world, departing from the classical utopia's emphasis on physical and cultural isolation. In *Zanzibar*, Brunner explores how refugees have impacted the language, culture, and genetic makeup of the Beninian people and alludes to the massive structural changes that will result from GT's Beninia project; the main narrative strand of *Always Coming Home* centres upon the relationship between a Condor man, a Kesh woman, and their child; and in *Cloud Atlas* Mitchell chronicles both the Valleysmen's trade with the Prescients and their yearly trek to the Honokaa Barter to celebrate and trade goods with the other island tribes. This cultural contact serves to acknowledge and reinforce the inescapable interdependence of nations and people and illustrate how contact with the Other changes us, willingly or not.

Indeed, this fact goes a long way in explaining why all three writers focus on their utopian community's interactions with a hostile, martial Other: the Beninians are caught between the aggressive Dahomaliens and the hostile members of RUNG (the Republican Union of Nigeria with Ghana), the Kesh are threatened by the Condor,<sup>60</sup> and the Valleysmen are attacked and enslaved by the Kona. By introducing a source of conflict the authors insert a source of narrative tension and suspense (a move that is in line with the more general novelization of the utopian genre) and the introduction of a contrasting society helps to highlight the utopian community's strengths; however, I would also argue that by depicting their utopian communities as precarious and contingent, Brunner, Le Guin, and Mitchell sidestep the charges of rigidity, stasis, and inevitability that often attach to the concept of utopia. Having their utopian communities confront their ideological others helps dramatize the dynamic nature of these utopias: in order to avoid being invaded by the Dahomaliens and RUNG, Beninia forms an alliance with General Technics and in doing so, opens itself up to massive cultural change (and, it is implied, the full realization of its utopian potential); the new cults of the Warrior and the Lamb emerge in Kesh society as a result of the Condor's influence; and the lives of the Valleysmen are irrevocably changed by the Kona. By depicting their utopian societies in moments of crisis, Brunner, Le Guin, and Mitchell emphasize that utopia is no teleological certainty, but an ongoing and dynamic process.

These authors are part of the larger cultural interrogation of utopia that came to prominence in the 1970s with the critical utopia and whose latest manifestation is the critical dystopia. What distinguishes *Zanzibar*, *Always Coming Home*, and *Cloud Atlas* from other works gathered under these categories is their realization that the utopian impulse needs to be embodied in both content and form. *Zanzibar*, *Always Coming Home*, and *Cloud Atlas* do not simply depict dialogic and contingent practices but *enact* them. Key to this enactment are the three texts' fractured narratives: Hogan and House's story is interleaved with expository material and the competing narratives of other point-of-view characters, as is Stone Telling's autobiography in

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<sup>60</sup> The trope of a utopian community confronted and changed by its ideological Other is a common theme in Le Guin's work: in *The Dispossessed* the anarchist Annaresti define themselves against the "archist" Urrasti and in *The Word for World Is Forest* the peaceful Athsheans are transformed by their discovery of war, a discovery prompted by their encounter with the Terrans.

*Always Coming Home*, and the success of *Cloud Atlas* is largely predicated on the networked connections enabled by its fractured narrative scheme. While the most obvious effect of these interrupted stories is the creation of narrative suspense and momentum, they function on other levels as well. The interrupted narratives shift the focus away from individuals to their larger social and historical setting. In *Zanzibar* and *Always Coming Home* individual narratives are intercut with expository material relating to the larger cultural, historical, and material contexts, while in *Cloud Atlas* the narratives' progression through historical time, coupled with the implied lines of causality, links them together and encourages the reader to examine the underlying social and historical processes. The narrative interruptions also encourage the reader to engage in a more reflexive reading process: they disrupt immersion in the story and hinder an uncritical identification with the central point-of-view character. By interleaving the narratives with expository material, by juxtaposing different generic forms, and by rapidly moving through different historical settings, the authors foreground the mediated nature of the novel. These books highlight how genre and narrative structure our reading experience and they work to expose the unconscious biases we bring to our reading practices.

These interrupted narratives are then gathered into a larger networked narrative structure, creating, to use Marshall McLuhan's phrase, a "galaxy for insight." In these constellations, the texts' form embodies their thematic emphasis on agency and contingency and enacts the works' dynamic tension between the individual and the larger social totality. However, as far as formal strategies go, there is a divide between Brunner and Le Guin's approach, on the one hand, and Mitchell's, on the other. Le Guin and Brunner both favour a mosaic approach: unlike the structure of the traditional novel, with its linear progression and predetermined narrative form, *Zanzibar* and *Always Coming Home* offer multiple ways of approaching their content. Both texts are episodic in form and the majority of the episodes are comprehensible on their own terms, giving the reader a variety of options when considering how to proceed with the text. One might, for example, decide to consult *Always Coming Home*'s glossary before venturing into the rest of the text or first listen to the cassette that accompanies Le Guin's book; one might decide to read all of *Zanzibar*'s "continuity" sections in one go before turning to the world-building details provided in the "contexts" or vice-versa. These reading practices are facilitated by an extensive table of contents, the categorization of different episodes ("Front of the Book" and "Back of the Book"; histories, poetry, romances; "continuities," "contexts," "the happening world," and "tracking with closeups"), and in Le Guin's case, by the provision of the page number on which Stone Telling's interrupted narrative resumes so that readers can choose whether to finish her story or to intersperse it with expository material and other characters' tales.<sup>61</sup>

Mitchell takes a different approach. With no table of contents and no indication of its abrupt narrative transitions, *Cloud Atlas* is less conducive to the reading strategies facilitated by *Zanzibar* and *Always Coming Home*'s episodic format: in *Cloud Atlas* readers have less

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<sup>61</sup> The anecdotal evidence I've amassed supports this: I've participated in two classes where *Always Coming Home* has been taught, and there seems to be a 50/50 split between those who choose to read Stone Telling's story as an uninterrupted narrative and those who do not. Likewise, when I've taught *Stand on Zanzibar*, about half of the students reported reading it "out of order," either focusing on the narrative-based "continuity" sections or flipping through and reading individual episodes that caught their interest.



opportunity to choose the order in which they will peruse the novel. That said, *Cloud Atlas*'s "cliffhanger" structure certainly provides motivation for readers to skip ahead and read the novellas as intact wholes rather than waiting to find out their endings. Agency and choice further enter Mitchell's narrative world through his deliberate omission of an encompassing narrative frame that situates, explains, and contextualizes the various narratives and their relationship to one another, as is the case for *Cloud Atlas*'s inspiration, Italo Calvino's *If on a Winter's Night a Traveler*. Instead of providing an exhaustive description of his fictional world(s), Mitchell tends towards the suggestive. In *Cloud Atlas*, Mitchell offers a partial picture of numerous worlds, with hints and clues, true, of how they might be connected, but he leaves it largely open to readers to draw their own conclusions on how the various narratives and their imagined worlds relate to one another. This sense of indeterminacy is heightened by the revelation that "Half-Lives" is an in-world work of fiction, unlike the ostensibly "real" stories that comprise the other narrative strands: the revelation of "Half-Lives" as an in-world work of fiction then casts doubt on the ontological status of "Letters from Zedelghem," and on its enclosed narrative, "The Pacific Journal." This type of ambiguity is noticeably lacking in Le Guin's book: *Always Coming Home*'s prefaces, copious explanatory notes, extensive textual apparatus, and exhaustive detailing of Kesh culture leave little to the imagination. Indeed, in this respect, Brunner might have hit upon the narrative form most conducive to the embodiment of a contingent, dialogic, and open-ended reading practice<sup>62</sup>: while not as sophisticated a writer as Le Guin or Mitchell, Brunner—in *Zanzibar*, at least—has used a narrative form that enacts the novel's thematic concerns, preserves narrative momentum, and provides the lacunae necessary for reader participation in his imaginary world, finding the balance between narrative and exposition, choice and compulsion.

The formal organization of *Stand on Zanzibar*, *Always Coming Home*, and *Cloud Atlas* is crucial to the full realization of their messages. However, the time has come for me to be more specific: it is not simply the texts' forms, but their spatialized narrative structures that give them their impact. Juxtaposition, collage, and discontinuity: these formal strategies define the three books in this study. Indeed, these narrative strategies—especially collage—have been singled out as being uniquely suited to the narrative demands of SF: recall Stanislaw Lem's charge that "what is needed [in SF] is an entirely new narrative structure, one that might be modeled on historiography, the biographies of scientists, or perhaps a collage of excerpts from scientific texts, press clippings, the addresses of Nobel laureates, or other facsimiles" ("Metafantasia" 58).

However, the fact remains that collage and juxtaposition are not "an entirely new narrative structure": the spatialized techniques of juxtaposition, discontinuity, and collage were brought to prominence by (and are primarily associated with) the modernists. Indeed, the thesis of Joseph Frank's influential essay "Spatial Form in Modern Literature" is that the formal dominance of the spatial dimension is the hallmark of modernist art. In literature, this emphasis on spatial form is obtained by what Frank terms "reflexive reference": it is the process by which "readers are required to suspend the process of denotational reference temporarily until the entire pattern of *internal* references can be apprehended as a unity" ("Spatial Form: Answer" 75;

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<sup>62</sup> As previously mentioned, the inescapable presence of Chad Mulligan does diminish the effect of *Zanzibar*'s formal open-endedness.

original emphasis). Favouring the “space-logic of synchronicity” (76), the process of reflexive reference allows writers to work against literature’s linear-temporal bias and to undermine “the inherent consecutiveness of language, frustrating the reader’s normal expectation of sequence and forcing him to perceive the elements of the poem [or, as Frank later asserts, the novel] as juxtaposed in space rather than unrolling in time” (“Spatial Form...Modern” 12). This state of events would seem to reinforce the charge that SF is, at least as far as formal and stylistic innovations go, parasitic upon the modernist texts that preceded it. However, I believe the truth of the matter is a bit more complicated. There is no denying that formal experimentation in SF is heavily influenced by the modernists. However, as my readings of *Stand on Zanzibar*, *Cloud Atlas*, and *Always Coming Home* make clear, in the hands of SF writers these spatialized narrative structures are used to very different ends. As Frank suggests, in modernist literature spatialized narrative forms often result in the loss of history; however, in the specific works I’ve studied, these same forms are used in the service of the contingent and the historic.

In his discussion of modernist literature, Frank posits that by using a spatialized narrative form that juxtaposes the past and present, modernist works are affected by a loss of history:

Time is no longer felt as an objective, causal progression with clearly marked-out differences between periods; now it has become a continuum in which distinctions between past and present are wiped out. And here we have a striking parallel with the plastic arts. Just as the dimension of depth has vanished from the sphere of visual creation, so the dimension of historical depth has vanished from the content of the major works of modern literature. Past and present are apprehended spatially, locked in a timeless unity that, while it may accentuate surface differences, eliminates any feeling of sequence by the very act of juxtaposition. (“Spatial Form...Modern” 63)

Here, Frank argues that causality is a linear, time-based process, one that is annihilated in the space-logic of modernist art: the constant juxtaposition of different historical time periods places their events upon the same spatial plane and in so doing, establishes their fundamental similarity, not their differences. In short, in these spatialized modernist works, history is transformed into myth, a type of “imagination for which historical time does not exist and which sees the actions and event [sic] of a particular time only as the bodying forth of eternal prototypes” (63-64). Set up in opposition to linear historical time, the cyclic time of myth emphasizes the predetermined: this is the time of Nietzsche’s eternal return. In this cyclic view of world events, there is no room for personal agency or for the autonomous self: as Frank reminds us,

“the loss of the self” is one of the dominant tendencies of both modernism and postmodernism; and such loss is of course another symptom of what I called “the transmutation of the time-world of history into the timeless world of myth.” The self no longer feels itself to be an active, individual force operating in the real world of history and time; it exists, if at all, only through its assimilation into a mythical world of eternal prototypes. (“Spatial Form: Further” 110)

We see this position echoed, appropriately enough, by Robert Frobisher in *Cloud Atlas* when he suggests that all events—whether the decline and fall of Rome or his time spent with Sixsmith in Corsica—are predetermined and inevitable: “Nietzsche’s gramophone record. When it ends, the Old One plays it again, for an eternity of eternities” (Mitchell

471). However, while this fatalistic acquiescence represents Frobisher's world-view, it does not exhaust Mitchell's. Rather, *Cloud Atlas*'s spatialized narrative form actively deconstructs the binary of linear-historical/cyclic-mythical: the ultimate effect of its interlocking novellas is not the annihilation of causality or the erasure of history but, I would argue, a reaffirmation of the contingent and mutable nature of our social structures and an exhortation to acknowledge our individual agency, no matter how limited this agency may appear. Indeed, by utilizing a spatialized narrative form to embody a contingent practice, Brunner, Le Guin, and Mitchell cast the future—and the present—as historical, as something that can be acted upon and changed. Thus, to Frank's charge that the "timeless world of myth, forming the content of so much modern literature, [...] finds its appropriate aesthetic expression in spatial form" ("Spatial Form...Modern" 64), I would counter, "Not in SF." Once again, genre matters.

Before discussing the historicity of SF as a genre, however, it would be prudent to discuss if Frank's ideas about spatialized narrative form and modernist literature are applicable to postmodernist texts. Frank's earlier comment that "'the loss of the self' is one of the dominant tendencies of both modernism and postmodernism" ("Spatial Form: Further" 110) suggests that he views postmodernism as a continuation of modernism rather than a radical break from it. In this view, modernist literature's preference for complex and difficult forms—non-chronological narration, juxtaposition, collage, multiple points of view—is taken to the extreme in postmodernism's "superabundance of disconnected images and styles" (Baldick). In this case, postmodernist literature would be just as (if not more) susceptible to the loss of history that Frank attributes to modernist writings. A similar point of view is evident in Fredric Jameson's discussion of postmodernity:

The sense that this determinate moment of history is, of organic necessity, precursor to the present has vanished into the pluralism of the Imaginary Museum [...]. In its (post-) contemporary form, this replacement of the historical by the nostalgic, this volatilization of what was once a *national* past, in the moment of emergence of the nation-states and of nationalism itself, is of course at one with the disappearance of historicity from consumer society today, with its rapid media exhaustion of yesterday's events and of the day-before-yesterday's star players. ("Progress" 285)

This rapid turnover of information, valuation of image over content, and undifferentiated nostalgia serves to strip historical content of its meaning and render its distinct forms "rigorously equivalent" (285). In a similar sense, postmodern literature's reliance on pastiche and simulacra also exacerbates its ahistorical tendencies.

This point of view is contested by those who foreground the differences between modernism and postmodernism. Linda Hutcheon, for example, views postmodernism as a paradoxical combination of "complicity and critique, of reflexivity and historicity, that at once inscribes and subverts the conventions and ideologies of the dominant cultural and social forces of the twentieth-century western world" (11). Hutcheon views postmodern literature as deeply interested in the question of history and historicity: as she suggests,

The past is not something to be escaped, avoided, or controlled—as various forms

of modernist art suggest through their implicit view of the ‘nightmare’ of history. The past is something with which we must come to terms and such a confrontation involves an acknowledgement of limitation as well as power. [...] Postmodern art acknowledges and accepts the challenge of tradition: the history of representation cannot be escaped but it can be both exploited and commented on critically through irony and parody. (58)

In this formulation, postmodern literature’s formal techniques (such as pastiche) are used to both acknowledge and subvert the historicity of the past. In this scenario, Frank’s insights on spatial form are not as applicable to postmodern literature, and one could argue that the historicity of *Always Coming Home* and *Cloud Atlas* are due to their use of postmodern strategies, not science fictional ones.

However, in *Postmodernist Fiction* Brian McHale complicates this view. For McHale, postmodernism is characterized by its ontological dominant and poses questions such as: “What is a world?; What kinds of world [sic] are there, how are they constituted, and how do they differ?; What happens when different kinds of world [sic] are placed in confrontation, or when boundaries between worlds are violated?” (10). This definition of postmodernism, with its emphasis on imagined worlds, naturally calls to mind SF’s preoccupation with different worlds in space and time. This similarity does not go unnoticed by McHale. He argues that “science fiction, by staging ‘close encounters’ between different worlds, placing them in confrontation, foregrounds their respective structures and the disparities between them. It thus obeys the same underlying principles of ontological poetics as postmodernist fiction” (60), and goes so far as to suggest that SF “is perhaps *the* ontological genre *par excellence*” (59; original emphasis). However, unlike the unequal relationship between SF and modernist literature, McHale believes that SF has had an equal influence on postmodernist texts. He notes that SF has served as a source for writers as various as William Burroughs, Italo Calvino, Thomas Pynchon, and Samuel Beckett and remarks on the “tendency for postmodernist writing to absorb motifs and *topoi* from science fiction writing, mining science fiction for its raw materials” (65). This influence goes in both directions, of course: while postmodern literature has made use of SF’s conventions and themes, SF has adopted many of postmodernism’s formal strategies (juxtaposition, interpolation, discontinuity, etc.).

The point is to suggest that whether one conceives of postmodern literature as being a continuation of modern literature, or alternatively, as a break from it, the generic demands of SF still exert an important influence on narrative form. If one accepts the proposition that postmodern literature is deeply invested in the representation of history and historicity then one will place a lesser emphasis on SF’s historicity as a genre; alternatively, if one accepts the assertion that postmodern writing is ahistorical and depthless, one will place greater emphasis on SF’s historical tendencies. In either case, the contingent and historical nature of SF as a genre remains important.

To understand what makes SF a historical genre, we will have to look back at what distinguishes SF from other literary genres. What truly sets SF apart is the presence of a novum validated by cognitive logic, and it is the novum that establishes the historicity of SF as a genre.

An idea, invention, or event can only be truly new once: in this way, the novum is inextricably tied to a particular historical moment. Likewise, the novelty of the fictional societies portrayed in SF can only be understood as such by means of the (explicit or implicit) comparison between the imagined society and the author and implied audience's own historical moment. It is this intrinsic historicity of the novum that helps give SF its distinct character, not only shaping the thematic content of SF, but exerting an influence on its plot structures and form. Take, for example, Suvin's assertion that an epic structure is more suited to the specific demands of SF than a mythic structure: "Epic events must be presented as historically contingent and unforeseeable" whereas "mythological events are cyclical and predetermined, foreseeable descents from the timeless into the temporal realm" ("SF Novel" 80). The argument is that the novum's historicity conditions its contingent and hence epic nature. The historicity of SF is also linked to its ability to imagine the present as past: we can think back to Carl Freedman's claim that "the science-fictional world is not only one different in time or place from our own, but one whose chief interest is precisely the difference that such difference makes" (43) and his contention that, as a genre, SF is deeply invested in establishing the historicity of the present and representing society as a contingent historical totality.

However, all of this is not to say that a SF text is inevitably historic, contingent, and open-ended, only that the genre contains within it powerful motivators to be so, and that any appraisal of a SF text must contend with the effects of what Suvin terms the "*novum as plot generator*" ("SF Novel" 76; original emphasis). Thus, the contingent and historic nature of SF as a genre modifies the context that a spatialized narrative form functions in and, changing the context, changes its effects.

Ultimately, I hope that my discussion of *Stand on Zanzibar*, *Always Coming Home*, and *Cloud Atlas* gives pause to those who would claim that "sf is quite happy to extract its plot structures from any available genre, and thus each individual book could potentially be identified with one of these genres rather than with sf" (Mendlesohn 3) or that only ideas are important in SF, not form. A proper consideration of narrative form is crucial to the development of thoughtful, thought-provoking, and significant SF and to the development and depiction of alternative social structures and communities.

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