

Abigail Dunn

Professor Erin James

English 310

3 May 2017

Hybridity and the Manichean Binary:

A Postcolonial Reading of David Mitchell's *Cloud Atlas*

In a seminal moment near the end of David Mitchell's *Cloud Atlas*, Adam Ewing, a lawyer who has recently returned to San Francisco after sailing in the South Pacific, joins the abolition movement. After hearing Ewing proclaim his goals, Ewing's father-in-law scoffs, "Ride to Tennessee on an ass & convince the rednecks that they are merely white-washed negroes & their negroes are black-washed Whites! Sail to the Old World, tell 'em their imperial slaves' rights are as inalienable as the Queen of Belgium's!" (Mitchell 508). This passage hints at some of the ultimate questions regarding racism and colonization: Underneath our different skin colors, are we the same, are we just "white-washed" and "black-washed" version of each other (508)? And do people of differed races deserve the same treatment? Are the "imperial slaves' rights... inalienable" (508)? Mitchell, in his 2004 novel *Cloud Atlas*, is interested in exploring these questions and others related to the history and legacy of colonization; his novel's unique structure—a series of six overlapping and interlocking stories, each interrupting its predecessor—allows for the exploration of multiple possible solutions to the problems colonization has created. In this paper, I will argue that Mitchell's novel, ultimately, is pessimistic about ending colonialism.

There are two relevant trends in scholarship on *Cloud Atlas* that I wish to discuss, the first concerning structuralist readings of the text and the second concerning postcolonial readings.

Many critics examine the text's unusual structure and make arguments based on the recursive, non-linear timeline about the text's understanding of and presentation of time.¹ In her article, "This Time Round," Heather J. Hicks writes that Mitchell intertwines a linear timeline with a nonlinear one. She examines the areas in which each understanding of time is used to conclude that "*Cloud Atlas* depicts the risks associated with linear and cyclical approaches to temporality" (Hicks). Likewise, Jason Howard Mezey discusses the structure of *Cloud Atlas* in his article, "A Multitude of Drops." He argues—largely from a formalist's perspective—that the novel's nonlinear timescale, a "time scheme that moves forward across millennia and then doubles back on itself," suggests that Mitchell is interested in the way individuals understand their place in the world and in history (Mezey 11).

Furthermore, for scholars interesting in approaching *Cloud Atlas* from a postcolonial perspective, it seems that most are interested in *Cloud Atlas*'s depiction of cannibalism and analyzing it in relation to the way cannibalism is portrayed in Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*.² Paul Ferguson, in "Me Eatee Him Up': Cannibal Appetites in *Cloud Atlas* and *Robinson Crusoe*" compares cannibalism—"as both a literal practice and a metaphor for consumer capitalism"—to conclude that *Cloud Atlas* is a commentary on the effects of colonialism. He writes, "*Cloud Atlas* can be read as a minatory novel which attempts to work as a corrective to the consequences of a colonial adventure predicated not simply upon 'otherness' amongst humans but also between humans and the wider environment" (Ferguson 144). Likewise, Gerd

¹ See also Jay Clayton's article "Genome Time."

² See also Casey Shopp and Dermon Ryan's article, "Gravid with the Ancient Future," and Julie Morère's article, "Cloud Atlas, a Novel Questioning Mitchell's Avowed Lack of Commitment to the Real World."

Bayer, in his essay “Perpetual Apocalypses,” writes of *Cloud Atlas* as a post-apocalyptic novel. His main argument is that “*Cloud Atlas* forcefully insists that catastrophic moments have been part of human existence from the beginning, and that a truly utopian response needs to acknowledge this reality” (Bayer 353). To make this argument, Bayer examines the text’s references to cannibalism and concludes that the novel challenges colonialism’s reliance on a hierarchical racial binary. He writes, “what separates enlightened from so-called primitive people is not so much a certain set of skills or a body of knowledge, but their human qualities: honesty, compassion, and the bravery to stand up for principles” (Bayer 352).

While the structural elements of the text certainly cannot be ignored (in fact, I will discuss structure later in this essay), scholars examining form alone miss the important social commentary of the text. Furthermore, although I agree with the premise of scholars approaching *Cloud Atlas* from a postcolonial perspective, their focus on the text’s references to cannibalism and inter-textual connections to *Robinson Crusoe* blinds them to the value of reading the text in light of postcolonial theorists like Edward Said and Homi K. Bhabha. Through an analysis of Ewing’s sections and Zachry’s section, I will demonstrate that *Cloud Atlas* presents two competing perspectives on how to deal with colonialism: a reversal of the Manichean binary and hybridity. Reading the novel according to its fabula offers an optimistic outlook, for hybridity seems to be at work in Zachry’s section; however, the structure of the novel betrays that optimism, for reading the text according to its syuzhet suggests that the novel is pessimistic about the subversive potential of hybridity. Failing to recognize the text’s interest in Said’s ideas of the Manichean Binary and Orientalism and Bhabha’s ideas of subversion and hybridity, previous postcolonial scholars have missed the novel’s pessimism about the future of colonialism.

In an analysis of Ewing's first section, I will demonstrate the presence of the Manichean binary and analyze the ways that whites view themselves versus those they are colonizing. According to Said, "We should try to discern instead a counterpoint between overt patterns in British writing about Britain and representation of the world beyond the British Isles" ("Jane Austen" 1113). In other words, we should aim to recognize the difference between how whites view themselves and others. Ewing's first section establishes a Manichean binary of white superiority and black inferiority. Adam Ewing, a white man traveling to the colonized islands of the South Pacific in the mid-1800s, lives fully within the hegemonic, colonial system of racism and white dominance. Said argues that European writing supports the colonial ideal. He writes of colonial texts "that European culture often, if not always, characterizes itself in such a way as simultaneously to validate its own preferences while also advocating those preferences in conjunction with distant imperial rule" (1113). Ewing's writing demonstrates that he has bought into the notions of white superiority perpetuated by the system of colonization. He repeatedly calls the natives he encounters "savages" and "primitive," implying that the natives are closer to animals than to white people (Mitchell 6, 11). He says that having "a tinge of black blood" implies that one "is not far removed from the jungle breed" (6). Ewing looks down at the natives for being an "unlettered race," illiterate and "still unschooled by the White Man" (13, 12). In this way, we can read Ewing's diary as a colonial text.

Furthermore, in perpetuating stereotypes about colonized peoples in his diary, Ewing is engaging in Orientalism, which Said, in *Orientalism*, defines as "a Western style of dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient" (*Orientalism* 3). Though this definition applies explicitly to the Orient, the Middle East, it can likewise be applied to the South Pacific.

Ewing's diary preserves stereotypes of the colonized people.³ Similarly, Ewing's diary can be classified under a category of European texts that Bhabha terms "texts of the civilizing mission" (Bhabha 1169). According to Bhabha, "these texts of the civilizing mission immediately suggest the triumph of the colonialist moment in early English Evangelism and modern English literature," reiterating the ideas of white superiority and the need for white people to "civilize" people of color (1169). In this way, Ewing believes that "to civilize the Black races by conversion should be our mission," which suggests that the western way is superior to the natives' customs (Mitchell 16).

Not only does Adam buy into racial supremacy, but we also see that he, as a white man, has power over people of color. Autua, a native and an escaped slave, relies on Ewing to protect him. Autua tells the reader just how much power Ewing has over him when he said to Ewing, "You no help I, you kill I, just same" (27). Ewing's power over Autua, his ability to help or turn him in as a runaway slave, reinforces the racial hierarchy.

Moreover, a radical shift occurs in the second Adam Ewing section in which the Manichean binary is reversed. 'White' being superior to 'black' switches to 'black' being superior to 'white.' Goose challenges that idea that God made white men superior when he suggests, "that White races rule the globe not by divine grace but by the musket" (489). In contemplating why whites are the ones conquering the darker races as opposed to the reverse, Goose asks, "But why us Aryans?" which suggests that white dominance is not innate or God-

³ The broader implications of Ewing's engaging in Orientalism become clear when reading Frobisher's section, "Letters from Zedelghem." Almost a century later, in 1931, Robert Frobisher finds and reads Ewing's diary, which passes along Ewing's prejudiced, stereotypical ideas of the colonized peoples to Frobisher.

given (489). He then answers his own question: “Of all the world’s races, our love—or rather our rapacity—for treasure, gold, spices & domination, oh, most of all sweet domination, is the keenest, the hungriest, the most unscrupulous” (489). The juxtaposition between “love” and “rapacity” is striking, for it suggests that greed has overpowered the morals of the conquering white men (489). Goose’s language is blunt, and this is the first time Ewing has heard someone suggests that white “domination” (a word that stands in stark contrast to Ewing’s former ideas of the white men “civilizing” and educating the savages) might not be good (489, 16). To dominate is to have mastery over, to control and command. Indicative of the strong hierarchical nature of the Manichean binary that supports and perpetuates colonization, Goose’s discussion of white “domination” opens Ewing to the idea that whites are doing terrible things to their darker brethren. And thus, as Ewing begins to realize “that we’ve made slaves out of free peoples,” that the natives were much better off before white people arrived, the binary begins to reverse (491). Over time, Ewing comes to recognize the brutality and savagery that white men show the natives. Goose says that “the plain truth [is] that we hurry the darker races to their graves in order to take their land & its riches” (490). Ewing begins to think about his race differently, as the “white predator, with our deadly duet of disease dust & firearms” (490). Whites have become the “predator;” no longer does Ewing think of his race as being civilizers, saviors, or otherwise helping those they are colonizing (490).

Furthermore, the second Ewing section involves a complete role reversal between the previously good whites and subordinate blacks. We learn that Goose has been trying to kill Ewing.⁴ Ewing writes, “To wit, the doctor was a poisoner & I his prey. Since the

⁴ It is interesting to note that Frobisher is the first character to recognize that Goose is a predator. While reading Ewing’s Diary, Frobisher comments that Ewing “hasn’t spotted his trusty Dr.

commencement of my ‘Treatment,’ the doctor had been killing me by degrees with his ‘cure’” (503). Goose is evil; he is the “white predator” who indeed is trying to kill Adam (490). Autua, the black man who previously relied on Ewing to save him, now becomes the hero and saves Ewing. Ewing writes, “I owe my life to a self-freed slave” (508). Autua, the black man, has now become the savior. Thus, in Ewing’s second section, we see a complete reversal of the Manichean binary. No longer is white good and black bad; now, black is good and white is bad.

I will now transition from discussing Ewing’s sections to discussing Zachry’s section. His section, entitled “Sloosha’s Corssin’ an’ Ev’rythin’ After,” presents a different perspective on dealing with colonialism and racism, a perspective that parallels that of Homi Bhabha. Bhabha, unlike Said, does not see colonization ending through a reversal of the Manichean binary. Instead, he believes that flaws innate to the system of colonization will lead to its demise through the creation of a third, hybrid option, an alternative to the two options that the Manichean binary offers. According to Said, it is the one-sided nature of colonization that maintains the binary: “isolated, venerated, or formalized experience that excludes and forbids the hybridizing intrusions of human history” (“Jane Austen” 1124). Bhabha believes that hybridity will come through a change in this perspective, when people come to realize that the hierarchical, binary understanding of people is arbitrary. He writes, “Hybridity is the revaluation of the assumption of colonial identity through the repetition of discriminatory identity effects”

Henry Goose [*sic*] is a vampire, fueling his hypochondria in order to poison him, slowly, for his money” (64 emphasis in original). Frobisher recognizes the role-reversal between Goose and Autua that flips the Manichean Binary, which demonstrates the power that Ewing’s diary has in perpetuating Orientalism and ideas about reversing the binary that supports colonialism.

(Bhabha 1175). Instead of ending through reversing the binary, Bhabha believes that colonization will end through the creation of this hybrid identity that will dismantle the binary.

Furthermore, a conversation between Zachry and Meronym illustrates the presence of this third, hybrid option. Meronym says, “Savages an’ Civ’lizeds ain’t divided...ev’ry human is both” (Mitchell 303). Meronym’s notion of savagery and civilization is not binary; it is vastly different from the one that Ewing presents, one in which there is no grey area between the two labels of black and white. Furthermore, Meronym does not believe that how one acts is rooted in race at all. She says, “some savages what I knowed got a beaustome Civ’lized heart beatin’ in their ribs,” implying that civility is something within, based on one’s character and not on one’s race or upbringing (303). We see the realization of Bhabha’s idea that “colonial specularity...does not produce a mirror where the self apprehends itself; it is always the split screen of the self and its doubling, the hybrid” (Bhabha 1176). For the creation of the hybrid option destroys the binary division upon which colonization relies.

Moreover, Zachry asks, “So is it better to be savage’n to be Civ’lized?” (Mitchell 303). Meronym answers Zachry’s questions indirectly, by explaining the difference between ‘savage’ and ‘civilized.’ She says, “The savage sat’fies his needs now. He’s hungry, he’ll eat. He’s angry, he’ll knuckly. He’s swellin’, he’ll shoot up a woman. His master is his will, an’ if his will says-woes, ‘Don’t’ he won’t, nay” (303). The main difference between savage people and civilized people, according to Meronym, is the idea of immediate versus delayed satisfaction. However, this is an observation and not a value judgement; Meronym identifies this difference but does not say whether it is better to be savage or civilized. I see this as an example of what Bhabha defines as resistance, “the effect of an ambivalence produced within the rules of recognition and dominating discourses as they articulate the signs of cultural difference and

replicate them within the deferential relations of colonial power – hierarchy, normalization, marginalization, and so forth” (Bhabha 1174). Bhabha argues that resisting the dominant ideology of a colonizer is the process of realizing that what the colonizer defines as “normal” and therefore “superior” is no better or worse than the ways of the colonized. Meronym argues that the difference between the “civilized” colonizer and the “savage” colonized is not proof of one’s superiority to the other. The differences are simply that, observed differences.

A structuralist reading of the novel helps make sense of the implications of Mitchell presenting these two options—a reversal of the Manichean binary and hybridity—for dealing with colonialism. When we read the novel according to its fabula—the timeline of the novel—we end at Zachry’s time. And here, we see an optimistic outlook on the state of colonialism. Bhabha’s ideas of the hybrid are being realized and, consequently, colonization seems to be ending. However, the structure of the novel betrays this optimism, for, when we read the novel according to its syuzhet, the order of the book, we end with Ewing’s second section, the section in which the binary is reversed. Ewing, at the end of the novel resolves to “pledge myself to the Abolitionist cause” (Mitchell 508). He wants to end slavery, end the subordination of one race for the benefit of another. Though his goal is laudable, we know that, ultimately, he will fail. The divisions between Zachry’s and Meronym’s cultures prove as much. It is not that no progress is made, for Ewing (the colonizer) tells the earlier story and Zachry (the colonized) tells that later one, but according to the novel’s syuzhet, the novel ends pessimistically, for we know that Ewing’s fight for abolition will fail. Colonization and imperialism will continue, for both practices are alive in Zachry’s futuristic time.

Furthermore, on a more theoretical level, reversing the binary is dangerous in that it maintains the existence of a hierarchical binary and, therefore, makes it impossible for a third,

hybrid option to emerge. In reversing the Manichean binary, Ewing's second section maintains the binary divisions upon which colonization relies instead of breaking them down. Reversing the binary leaves no space for the third option to emerge. Bhabha believes that hybridity will destabilize the colonial binary, for melding the two cultures of the binary into a third, hybrid one challenges the existence of the binary, and colonization is built on the existence of the Manichean binary and the idea of black and white being innately different. The novel's pessimism is evident by the fact that, in the final section of the book, the Manichean binary is reversed, for reversing the binary eliminates the potential for hybridity to happen.

Reading *Cloud Atlas* with the postcolonial ideas of Edward Said and Homi Bhabha in mind illuminates the ways in which Mitchell's novel is interested in issues of colonization, subversion, and hybridity. The unique structure of his novel allows Mitchell to present two options for how people might deal with colonialism: through reversing the binary or through hybridity. Reading the novel according to its fabula offers an optimistic outlook, for hybridity seems to be at work in Zachry's section. Progress has been made, as Ewing, the colonizer, told the earlier section and now Zachry, the colonized, tells his own story. And yet the structure of the novel betrays this optimism. After progressing through time from Ewing to Zachry, the novel takes us back in time. We end at Ewing's second section in which the Manichean Binary is reversed. Reversing a binary still maintains the binary, which leaves no space for hybridity to happen, no room in which people can consider Bhabha's idea of a third option emerging out of the binary. Thus, reading the text according to its syuzhet suggests that the novel is pessimistic about the subversive potential of hybridity and, therefore, about the future of colonialism.

Works Cited

- Bayer, Gerd. "Perpetual Apocalypses: David Mitchell's *Cloud Atlas* and the Absence of Time." *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, vol. 56, no. 4, pp. 345-354.
- Bhabha, Homi K. "Signs Taken for Wonders." *Literary Theory: An Anthology*, edited by Rivkin, Julie and Ryan, Michael, Second ed., Blackwell, 2004, pp. 1167-1184.
- Clayton, Jay. "Genome time: Post-Darwinism Then and Now." *Critical Quart*, vol. 55, no. 1, 2013, pp. 57-74.
- Ferguson, Paul. "'Me Eatee Him Up': Cannibal Appetites in *Cloud Atlas* and *Robinson Crusoe*." *Green Letters*, vol. 19, no. 2, pp. 144-156.
- Hicks, Heather J. "This Time Round": David Mitchell's *Cloud Atlas* and the Apocalyptic Problem of Historicism." *Postmodern Culture*, vol. 20, no. 3, 2010. *Project MUSE*, <http://muse.jhu.edu/article/444704>. Accessed 14 March 2017.
- Mezey, Jason Howard. "'A Multitude of Drops': Recursion and Globalization in David Mitchell's *Cloud Atlas*." *Modern Language Studies*, vol. 40, no. 2, 2011, pp. 10-37.
- Mitchell, David. *Cloud Atlas*. Random House, 2004.
- Morère, Julie. "Cloud Atlas, a Novel Questioning Mitchell's Avowed Lack of Commitment to the Real World." *Autonomy and Commitment in Twentieth-Century British Literature*, Reynier, Christine and Ganteau, Jean-Michel, PU de la Méditerranée, 2010, pp. 285-296.
- Rivkin, Julie, and Ryan, Michael. "Introduction: English Without shadows: Literature on a World Scale." *Literary Theory: An Anthology*, edited by Rivkin, Julie and Ryan, Michael, Blackwell, Second ed., 2004, pp. 1071-1074.
- Said, Edward. "Jane Austen and Empire." *Literary Theory: An Anthology*, edited by Rivkin, Julie and Ryan, Michael, Second ed., Blackwell, 2004, pp. 1112-1125.

———. *Orientalism*. Penguin, 2003.

Shoop, Casey and Ryan, Dermot. “‘Gravid with the Ancient Future’: *Cloud Atlas* and the Politics of Big History.” *Substance: A Review of Theory and Literary Criticism*, vol. 44, no. 1, pp. 92-106.