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"A Multitude of Drops." David Mitchell's *Cloud Atlas* and the Subject between Space and Time

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Abstract. David Mitchell's *Cloud Atlas* (2004) presents its readers with a "borderless world." This borderlessness concerns space and time, with complex and interweaving spatiotemporal planes. In this fictional world, the subject will serve as an entity that brings together disparate spatialities and temporalities through an intricate symbolic web that connects the subject's body to the world it inhabits. Numerous versions of past, present, and future run in parallel, the actual and the virtual coexist, and the text folds upon itself. The novel operates a constant state of liminality, a state that will be embodied by the subject. Seemingly in a paradoxical way, the multiple liminal states identifiable in the novel convey the ultimate sense of borderlessness. It is exactly the work's heterogeneity, its jumps through time and space, its interrupted chapter structure that lend it a special unity and coherence that erases both geographical and temporal borders. The novel's structure goes into thematic depths and creates a bridge, a constant interplay between form and content, captured in the metaphor of the concertina. Consequently, *Cloud Atlas* creates a constantly shifting world where the only fixed entity is the subject and its comet-shaped birthmark.

Keywords: subject, borderlessness, liminality, concertina, birthmark

Introduction

David Mitchell's *Cloud Atlas* (2004) operates with a constant state of liminality, which seemingly in a paradoxical way conveys the ultimate sense of borderlessness. It is exactly the work's heterogeneity, its jumps through time and space, its interrupted chapter structure that lend it a unity and coherence which erases both geographical and temporal borders. The novel spans through several centuries (starting from the 18th to the 22nd century, and a post-apocalyptic

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world), guides the readers to disparate parts of the planet (either through jumps or through the characters' strolls), and creates a fictional world that thwarts any considerations of a clear beginning and an end.

The current enterprise proposes to outline the way through which the subject becomes the central entity in Mitchell's novel, one that brings together multiple spatialities and temporalities. The subject accomplishes this, paradoxically, through never being centralized: the entire novel rejects the idea of a single focus through its numerous characters, with no one protagonist, through its structure, through the different temporal and spatial scenes it chooses for the six disparate (and interrupted) chapters. There is no linear narrative, no true beginning and no end, the apocalyptic moment from the book's centre is resolved by a counter-movement in time. Nevertheless, the subject, through the multiple selves comprising it, becomes the titular cloud atlas: a means through which the interconnections can be charted. The selves will show rhizomic connections through an intricate symbolic web, one that connects their bodies, spanning time and space, and creates a link through the comet-shaped birthmark.

The novel's structure goes into thematic depths and creates a bridge, a constant interplay between form and content. This interplay is reflected in the numerous interpretations circling around the structure of six stories. One gradually notices that all interpretations are guided by the very text. The terms applied come from the novel itself, and this way the novel presents us with a double and contradictory gesture: it interprets itself, shows a great amount of metafictionality, and at the same time mocks itself, and ironizes each attempt at deciphering it.

One way to capture the structure and time conception of *Cloud Atlas* would be through the object of the Russian doll, one that appears in two distinct scenes in the novel. In its first appearance, the image of this artefact is in the name of a musical composition created by Vyvyan Ayrs, the reclusive English composer living "in the Belgian backwaters" (Mitchell 2004, 45). His *Matryoshka Doll Variations* alludes to the structure of the entire novel, where the reverse effect is achieved by the stories being embedded in the one following them. Later on, the image of the doll appears in the Luisa Rey-chapter as a clearly formulated theory of time:

> One model of time: an infinite matryoshka doll of painted moments, each "shell" (the present) encased inside a nest of "shells" (previous presents) I call the actual past but which we perceive as the virtual past. The doll of "now" likewise encases a nest of presents yet to be, which I call the actual future but which we perceive as the virtual future. (Mitchell 2004, 409)

Isaac Sachs proposes a theory that builds on the dichotomy of actual versus virtual time, shedding light on the paramount importance of memories in shaping one's past. As he writes in his notebook, the actual past event gradually falls

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into oblivion; however, the virtual past event, "created from reworked memories, papers, hearsay, fiction – in short, belief – grows ever 'truer'" (Mitchell 2004, 408). The virtual past indubitably takes over the actual past, and, according to Sachs, it has its influence on one's present and future. The result is that chance is a constant element in one's fate, and the multitude of virtual pasts creates a row of possible futures that run side by side.

A further interpretation approaches time as a musical composition: an artwork, a creation that is free, unbridled, and unforeseen. The novel's central metaphor also appears in the name of Robert Frobisher's greatest musical composition (*Cloud Atlas Sextet*). This title points both towards temporality (conceived as an atlas of clouds: attempting to chart the fortuitous movement of the clouds) and structure (the sextet reflecting on the six stories that comprise the narrative). Frobisher describes his composition as a "'sextet for overlapping soloists': […] 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" (Mitchell 2004, 463). This conception about the musical piece harmonizes with the way the six consecutive narrators of Mitchell's novel take turns to inhabit totally disparate worlds, embodying different personas.

I agree with the interpretation put forth by Peter Childs and James Green that "the image of Mitchell's novel as a musical composition suggests that each of its narratives should be understood as symphonic movements of a larger whole" (2013, 150). This is visible in the "cacophony of voices" (McCulloch 2012, 16), in the numerous genres, styles, and media through which the different chapters are rendered. This mixture of voices and registers may be understood as "erasing literary and cultural boundaries," through which we are presented with the "nomadic journey of six interconnected or intratextual narratives," as Fiona McCulloch remarks (2012, 15). My investigation proposes to outline the novel's aspiration towards encompassing totally disparate elements, thus creating an amalgam of voices, temporalities and spatialities, which will result in a borderlessness that is both liberating and seemingly chaotic.

Time as a Concertina

In *Cloud Atlas*, everything is interconnected, and thus the novel, through its intricate structure, reflects on the multitude of temporalities and spatialities. Past, present, and future, with both their virtual and actual manifestations, continuously invade each other's planes, and they comprise a distinct way of understanding the passing of time: they create a fluidity that allows conflicting conceptions of time to exist side by side, gradually revealing the concept of time itself to be a quasi-protagonist to the novel.

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Through Timothy Cavendish's story, one can easily follow the stages of different time conceptions as they gradually gain focus in the novel. For instance, the cyclical understanding of time appears to be proposed as a solution to linear time, and hence to history itself. Nevertheless, in "The Ghastly Ordeal of Timothy Cavendish," one can find a rather ironic take on cyclicality. When Cavendish arrives at Aurora House (a nursing home he believes to be a hotel), he is certain that "[i]n the morning life would begin afresh, afresh, afresh. This time round I would do everything right" (Mitchell 2004, 175). But, to use Heather J. Hicks's words, "[i]n a parody of rebirth, when Cavendish awakes, he discovers that he will now be treated as a helpless baby," and his "body becomes a palimpsest of linear and cyclical narratives, both of which can be deployed by the institutional apparatus of the nursing home to deny him agency and to strip his life of meaning" (2016, 65).

Consequently, both linearity and cyclicality are surpassed, and a novel understanding of time is required. For this purpose, I will borrow Fiona McCulloch's term of "space-time compression" (2012, 152) in order to capture time's movement inside the story. Cavendish's story shows how both approaches to time prove deficient, when, upon entering Aurora House, he remarks: "My watch was stuck in the middle of last night" (Mitchell 2004, 171). The measuring of time itself is doomed to failure inside this bubble, and Cavendish realizes: "I was stuck in Aurora House all right. A clock with no hands" (Mitchell 2004, 372), words through which he re-enforces the metaphor of the clock as representative of a new understanding of time.

Cavendish, who starts off from the remark that "Time's Arrow became Time's Boomerang" (Mitchell 2004, 149), after a stroke suffered in a nursing home, revises his theory, claiming: "Time, no arrow, no boomerang, but a concertina" (Mitchell 2004, 369). With both the arrow and the boomerang proving deficient, Cavendish's imagery of the concertina starts to fascinate some of the critics (O'Donnell 2015, 95; De Cristofaro 2018, 247).

The concertina as a metaphor for time requires our closer investigation of the instrument itself. It is made up of "two hexagonal or square wooden end pieces, which carry the reeds and the buttons that control them, […] linked by folded cardboard bellows" (Montagu 2002, qtd. in De Cristofaro 2018, 249). Time, envisioned as this musical instrument, becomes malleable: at once linear and cyclical, or something completely different from both of these, but it will never be exactly the same as before. As time's boomerang fails to return to the exact starting point, the novel reveals the changes, the mutability of time as its central interest. I agree with Diletta De Cristofaro, who claims that "the concertina as a model of the novel's structure suggests that what goes on between [the beginning and the conclusion] is not the repetition of the same, as in eternal recurrence, but repetition with difference" (2018, 250). With the help of this metaphor, the novel's intricate symbolic web can also be positioned in the new time conception.

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Furthermore, De Cristofaro also reflects upon the novel's claims regarding the apocalyptic narrative:

> The concertina-like structure articulates a critical temporality as it resists a telic closure, warps the deterministic linearity of apocalyptic history and of traditional plots, and links the various recurrences of the will to power in the novel, foregrounding the dystopian implications of apocalypticism, from colonialism to the future neo-colonial biopower of corporations and anthropogenic environmental crises. (2018, 247)

She articulates throughout her interpretation the anti-apocalyptic structure of the novel, an observation that might seem paradoxical at first glance, but it is exactly the novel's structure that allows us this realization. Although the apocalypse as catastrophe is definitely featured in *Cloud Atlas*, it does not signify any kind of ending or closure whatsoever. Despite the post-apocalyptic story of Ha-why (future Hawaii), the structure of the novel thwarts all attempts at closure: the chapters start to gradually unfold again. Furthermore, the existence of each story is facilitated and preserved through characters encountered in the following chapter. Hence the novel transcends the apocalyptic theme and ultimately unravels a different kind of temporality.

Oceans and Clouds

This new compressed time the novel operates with sheds light on identity as a central concept for *Cloud Atlas*. Consequently, the main question around which the present enterprise builds is how the subject is explored by the novel as creating a bridge between disparate spatiotemporal planes. At the end of Adam Ewing's story, we read the following:

> 'He who would do battle with the many-headed hydra of human nature must pay a world of pain & his family must pay it along with him! & only as you gasp your dying breath shall you understand, your life amounted to no more than one drop in a limitless ocean!'
> Yet what is any ocean but a multitude of drops? (Mitchell 2004, 529)

The following unit purports to analyse this concept of identity in its numerous manifestations in *Cloud Atlas*. The above quote, which introduces the issue of identity, is a representative one: at first glance, the choice might seem paradoxical since the passage can be found at the very end of the novel, and thus it functions as a conclusion; however, *Cloud Atlas* abandons the linear narrative, and the text

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opens up to numerous possibilities in tracing its interconnections. Adam Ewing's chapter is both the first and the last one, a starting point and a return but never really an ending. These final words are tightly connected to the entirety of the novel, and through them one circles back to previously voiced definitions of identity.

The symbol of the ocean is linked to another nature metaphor, namely that of the cloud, which is central to the novel. The image of the cloud atlas highlights the mutability, incomprehensibility, just as Cavendish's lament voices it: "What wouldn't I give now for a never-changing map of the ever-constant ineffable? To possess, as it were, an atlas of clouds" (Mitchell 2004, 389). This metaphor captures and preserves more the individuality inherent in the hectic movement of the clouds. And what further emphasizes the uniqueness pertaining to the phenomenon is an artwork, a musical composition bearing the title *Cloud Atlas Sextet*. The instruments, the sounds stand for the individual characters, leading separate lives in the distinct chapters but also interlinked through a symbolic web.

In a representative scene, Zachry, the main character of "Sloosha's Crossin'," interprets the clouds as the metaphors for souls, while he witnesses his native tribe being slain by the enemy:

> I watched clouds awobbly from the floor o' that kayak. 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? Only Sonmi the east an' the west an' the compass an' the atlas, yay, only the atlas o' clouds. (Mitchell 2004, 324)

His wish echoes that of Timothy Cavendish, and at the same time it reinforces the realization that fate is unknowable, an eternal mystery, but this is ultimately what prompts actions, fights. In an interview, Mitchell himself explains the novel's title, and through it a central motif: "the 'cloud' refers to the ever-changing manifestations of the 'atlas,' which is that fixed human nature, which was always thus and ever shall be" (2007, n.p.). Furthermore, Hywel Dix recognizes in this quote the implication that "islands and civilizations, like people, have life cycles that arise, mature and become obsolescent" (2010, 119), a remark that ties this central symbol back to time as rendered in the novel. However, while Dix emphasizes the finality that lurks in the scene, in the nature of clouds one may recognize the possible futures, too. Clouds reflect souls and their infinite mutability, and thus we can interpret the entire novel as building around the transmigration of souls; however, I agree with Patrick O'Donnell, who claims that this "is to be distinguished […] from any simple […] concept of the reincarnation of a singular identity across centuries since the 'migration' inevitably takes place intermittently, sporadically, as the consequence of chance contact or circumstance across multiple identities" (2015, 80).

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The text presents several instances when some fragment of consciousness is shared by two very distinct characters. In a first instance, Frobisher, while lying in bed with his lover "[…] dreamt 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. The music in the café was'—he wagged an exhausted finger at the MS—'this'" (Mitchell 2004, 80). This dream represents a milieu where two distant spatiotemporal planes are united through music: through that composition that encompasses the creation of the novel's world (*Cloud Atlas Sextet*). Frobisher unwittingly dreams about Papa Song's, the futuristic fast food restaurant, where Sonmi~451 works and imbibes Soap with the other fabricants of Nea So Copros.

In the following chapter, Luisa Rey, who reads Frobisher's letters written to Rufus Sixmith, cannot help but feel that there is a deep connection between her and Frobisher: "Luisa has reread Sixsmith's letters a dozen times or more in the last day and a half. They disturb her. […] It is […] the dizzying vividness of the images of places and people that the letters have unlocked. Images so vivid she can only call them memories" (Mitchell 2004, 121). Her sense of connection is further re-enforced when she reads about Frobisher's birthmark: the same shape as hers. Furthermore, although she only wants to get *Cloud Atlas Sextet* for investigative reasons, when she unwittingly hears the music in the shop, she describes it as "pristine, riverlike, spectral, hypnotic… *intimately familiar*," and she is convinced that she *knows* that music (Mitchell 2004, 425; emphasis in original). Luisa's connection to Frobisher is palpable. A final example would be the moment when she receives the last letters of the exchange between Frobisher and Sixmith, a moment when she asks: "*Are molecules of Zedelghem Chateau, of Robert Frobisher's hand, dormant in this paper for forty-four years, now swirling in my lungs, in my blood?* Who is to say?" (Mitchell 2004, 453; emphasis in original). All these characters, belonging to very different fictional worlds, are connected, and they share visions and sensations that travel across disparate spatiotemporal planes.

Art, human creation, is the bridge that brings together not only past, present, and future but disparate temporalities and spatialities together with very different identities. As Gerd Bayer remarks, "the novel resorts to music, film, literature, and biography to explain how humanity manages to bridge time through the creation of timeless values" (2015, 348). The different chapters all present us with several artistic manifestations, such as Ewing's diary, Frobisher's music, Luisa's thriller, or Cavendish's movie, and all these comprise a link through which one artistic expression helps the succeeding character, at times bridging several chapters and worlds. Consequently, I cannot agree with Shanahan's following remark:

> Zachry's carved icons, the dendroglyphs Adam Ewing stumbles upon, and the people, religions, ideas, technologies, and media forms that repeatedly

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> go up in flames over centuries in *Cloud Atlas*, even Frobisher's ethereal music, all stand in the end as mere proxies to be seen through on the way to apprehending more permanent because disembodied glimpses of souls as clouds in time. (2016, 139)

Contrary to this view, it seems that these artistic products are the only ones that can really form a strong enough link capable of bridging both actual and virtual temporalities, of bringing together fiction inside the fiction with "mere" fiction, and ultimately creating something lasting. As Bayer claims, "*Cloud Atlas* presents art as existing outside of time, in the very realm traditionally reserved for religion and, later, enlightened science" (2015, 348). Its power and timelessness comes from the fact that "it touches some aspect of [the characters'] humanity" (Brown 2016, 88). The *Cloud Atlas Sextet*, as the central artistic manifestation, is echoed throughout the novel, through several centuries and lives, bringing characters and readers alike to the reassuring rhetorical question: "Yet what is any ocean but a multitude of drops?" (Mitchell 2004, 529).

Comet-Shaped Birthmarks

After detailed considerations of the symbolic web in the novel, I will turn to the most embedded symbol: the comet-shaped birthmark. It is a minor sign that can be found on the body of one particular character from each story. It is first mentioned in Frobisher's letters, who writes to Rufus Sixmith about his new lover playing with the birthmark (Mitchell 2004, 85). Conversely, Luisa, while reading the correspondence, recognizes the mentioned naevus and tries "to get a clearer view of a birthmark between her shoulder blade and collarbone. […] it is undeniably shaped like a comet" (Mitchell 2004, 124). Besides these two, the reader will learn about a similarly shaped distinctive mark being on the bodies of Timothy Cavendish, Sonmi~451 and Meronym, the Prescient visitor living in Zachry's home.

This birthmark works together with the novel's temporal conception to bridge characters that otherwise could not have a palpable connection among them. As De Cristofaro claims: "[t]he birthmark engenders a sense of spatiotemporal compression and extension that can be pictured through the contraction and expansion of concertina folds and encapsulates the way in which the teleology of apocalyptic/narrative logic is warped and subverted in the book" (2018, 249). This claim leads to the realization that the novel is constantly open for both contraction and expansion: it is like an ever-changing organism. Consequently, what the birthmark expresses is this ineffable thing that is the world (past, present, future, particular and universal, etc.). Possibly the most accurate grasp of this

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duality and fluidity is O'Donnell's kōan: "everything is always the same; nothing is ever the same" (2015, 70) since, as Berthold Schoene remarks, "humanity is invariably the same, but different" (2009, 119), and the novel represents the whole of humanity. Although the birthmark bears a unifying power on the characters, it also emphasizes their differences and spatiotemporal distances. No homogenizing or centralizing tendencies can be recognized in this concertina-world Mitchell's novel evokes. I agree with Fiona McCulloch, who claims that the novel rejects the Cartesian identification with a central character, and thus it decentres "the subject in a Braidottian non-linear nomadic resistance to unified self, time or place" (2012, 147). The birthmark ultimately comprises the identity as situated temporally and spatially, at the same time opening up towards and resisting universality.

Cloud Atlas's comet-shaped birthmark brings together the individual and the universal and reinforces the concertina-like conception of time and space. However, the birthmark's corporeal significance should not be sidestepped since ultimately the body housing the birthmark will comprise the link between self and world. O'Donnell terms the mark "a vestige or remnant that suggests how the past corporally resurfaces in the present and the future" (2015, 70). Possibly the most evocative instance may be found in Sonmi's story since she, despite being a fabricated clone, has the same sign as the novel's other characters. In this case, the sign points towards her inclusion not only in a universal pattern, in the ocean where she is one of the multitude of drops, but in the context of the world she inhabits; the birthmark adorns her with uniqueness, with difference: another clone calls it "Sonmi~451's stain" (Mitchell 2004, 205). Through this character, the relationship between mind and body is polarized in the novel since the birthmark in the end proves to symbolize her ascension and, through it, a clash between her cloned body and "human"-like intellect: it functions – to use McCulloch's term – as a "genetic tattoo" (2012, 153) that helps her surpass her clone self and be part of humanity. Nevertheless, to her, the clash is solvable. When at university, a pair of students marvels at her communicative skills:

> "It must be hell," said the second, "to have an intelligent mind trapped in a body genomed for service."
> I had grown as attached to my body as he had to his, I responded. (Mitchell 2004, 232)

The birthmark can function at once as a bridge and divider between body and mind, between the particular and the universal. Sonmi becomes a unique being who is an integral part of the constant mutability of the novel's world. To cite McCulloch: "Linked by a birthmark, each character charts a journey across time and space," through which the novel "epitomises this transpositional mobility

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through nomadic subjects who interweave the past, present and future of humanity's influence on Earth" (2012, 149).

Bodies, their states, their existences occupy a significant place throughout the novel even if they do not have the symbolic birthmark. To start with, we first get acquainted with Adam Ewing as he catches a man gathering teeth on the beach. The new acquaintance is Henry Goose, who claims: "In days gone by this Arcadian strand was a cannibals' banqueting hall, yes, where the strong engorged themselves on the weak" (Mitchell 2004, 3). This remark perpetuates a powerful principle throughout the novel, namely: "The weak are meat the strong do eat" (Mitchell 2004, 508). Cannibalism, although usually relegated to the distant past and to uncivilized tribes (starting in a similar way through the presentation of the Maori and Moriori tribes), in Mitchell's work gains both actual and symbolic meanings that pervade the entire world of the novel.

The same motif reappears in an accentuated way in the 22nd-century state of Nea So Copros, whose very mechanism requires constant consumption. This is the ultimate capitalist society where Catechism Seven states that "[a] Soul's value is the dollars therein" (Mitchell 2004, 341), and "[u]nder the enrichment laws, consumers have to spend a fixed quota of dollars each month, depending on their strata. Hoarding is an anticorpocratic crime" (Mitchell 2004, 237). So, body and soul in this future world are reduced to mere physicality, and finally they are robbed of this as well. A great part of the society is dying: they inhabit cities and spaces that "reek of waste and sewage" (Mitchell 2004, 331), people there have "skin enflamed by prolonged exposure to the city's scalding rain" (Mitchell 2004, 331), or they are "migrants with enceph or leadlung" (Mitchell 2004, 332). These migrants are in constant search of a liveable land, all in vain. The terrain is poisoned beyond repair: "malaria, flooding, drought, rogue crop genomes, parasites, encroaching deadlands" (Mitchell 2004, 332) paint a picture of a world unstoppably approaching utter destruction. This is the ultimate *Untermensch*, destined for death: "Every conurb […] has a chemical toilet where the city's unwanted human waste disintegrates quietly, but not quite invisibly" (Mitchell 2004, 332). This world represents the epitome of liminal existence, where people are rather dead than alive, where the land is hostile, where the majority of the population lives under abominable circumstances. Hence, consumption, the destruction of the weak is complete through this symbolic representation. However, it is this very same chapter that tackles the issue of actual cannibalism as well, through processing fabricants for food and recycling them for future fabricants and *purebloods* alike.

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Liminal Spaces

The birthmark becomes the symbol of the disparateness of the characters but also of their connection. As McCulloch formulates it, "Mitchell's multi-layered narrative […] level[s] and equalise[s] the space between through the umbilical birthmark of panhuman relations" (2012, 149). This panhumanism is a powerful motif running through the artwork; however, I cannot agree with McCulloch's further claim that this gesture would reject "unified individualism" (2012, 149). It is exactly the duality of individualism and universality that is celebrated by the novel, through a birthmark that ultimately does not assume any sort of actual soul crossing but the intricate web of connections among different identities scattered across time and space.

The temporal vistas and intricacies have already been touched upon, but how does space interact with the individual and, more importantly, how does it affect the identity? It is Sonmi~451 who remarks: "I understood one's environment is a key to one's identity, but that my environment, Papa Song's, was a key I had lost" (Mitchell 2004, 238). This quote, beyond signifying the ascension of a clone into knowledge and into the world, with its attendant dangers and her fears, seems to focus on a state gradually gaining more and more ground in Western societies. The place we call home is often lost, supplanted by transitional places, more and more time spent in those *non-places* Marc Augé defines, in a state of nomadism. McCulloch's remark accurately captures the novel's gesture when she states: "[b]y transpositioning each section that spans from the 1850s to a post-apocalyptic future, Mitchell resists the territorial fixity of Western hegemony and presents a philosophically nomadic text of border crossings" (2012, 142).

The world as mapped out in Mitchell's novel could very well be grasped through psychogeography, defined by Guy Debord as "the study of the precise laws and specific effects of the geographical environment, whether consciously organised or not, on the emotions and behaviour of individuals" (2006a, 8). According to this definition, psychogeography captures the effect the environment has on the psyche. Mitchell's novel consciously employs settings that further deepen the text's complexity. For instance, the places the characters inhabit serve, on the one hand, as a distinct type of characterization; on the other hand, they themselves get to be characterized by the people through whom we encounter them. What the reader witnesses in the novel is the mutual effect the environment and the subject exert upon each other. Another aspect of their complexity lies in the interconnections the novel abounds in: it seems that although we are dealing with six disparate stories with their own protagonists, all of them scattered across a large spectrum (further sliced by the chapter interruptions), there is nevertheless a pattern discernible, with some repetitive schemas that further

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highlight the dualism inherent in *Cloud Atlas*: the dichotomy of the individual and the universal, spiced with a cyclical design.

Possibly one of the most striking examples of such a play can be captured through the island chain of Hawaii, situated in the Pacific Ocean. I believe it cannot be accidental that, although the novel purports to focus on the entire planet, it still resorts to a repetitive pattern in its setting. Hawaii appears in three of the novel's chapters. Chronologically speaking, the first instance would be "The Pacific Journal of Adam Ewing," in which the *Prophetess* transports Adam to Honolulu, where, with the help of Autua, his life is saved from the progressive poisoning by Henry Goose. For him, the island of Oahu serves as a haven, and also as a quasi-resolution to Adam's story and journal. The second instance is presented in the world of 22nd-century Korea, where (and when) clones working in Papa Song's after twelve years of service are promised to be taken to the paradisiacal island of Hawaii. However, as Sonmi~451 realizes, the ship meant to transport the fabricants is nothing more than an abattoir recycling the clones. Finally, the post-apocalyptic tribe of the Valleysmen (Zachry's people) lives on Hawaii, the island that becomes one of the few still inhabited places on Earth, housing peoples reverted to a primordial lifestyle: the result of losing knowledge and memory of essential skills. It seems thus that this particular island is meant to re-enforce hope, to stand for a place that can still function as a haven in a world filled with people with murderous intent, a society that inhabits a rapidly dying world: "Nea So Copros is poisoning itself to death. Its soil is polluted, its rivers lifeless, its air toxloaded, its food supplies riddled with rogue genes" (Mitchell 2004, 341).

Beyond or despite discernible repetitive symbolic patterns enmeshing this fictional world, and seemingly reducing it, it is still borderlessness that characterizes this world. To return to psychogeography, Debord captures in one of its principles the people who just let "themselves be drawn by the attractions of the terrain and the encounters they find there" (2006b, 62). I agree with O'Donnell's observation that the journeys taken by the novel's characters are rhizomic (2015, 6). Beyond the patterns that can be charted subsequent to the novel's ending, there is great emphasis laid on chance and, conversely, on no one paramount centre. The symbolic charge of the title is meant to further emphasize this aspect. Furthermore, we cannot forget about Isaac Sachs's theory concerning virtual and actual temporal planes, whose very existence testifies to the randomness that must be inherent to the world of *Cloud Atlas*. The future each character gets is one of the numerous possible futures laid in store for them. Consequently, this novel proves to be akin to a living organism that constantly shifts and changes, just like the clouds in the sky.

In light of these considerations, Sonmi's previously analysed imagery of the key that she lost, beyond the denotative meaning, also possesses the prospect of

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a new world, new sites opening up to her. As McCulloch remarks, "she realises the benefits of nomadically crossing intellectual and physical thresholds in transposing subjectivity beyond the familiar so that she no longer recognises that naive self" (2012, 152). As a result, a constant rapport is created between the self and the surrounding world, this requiring the self to capture "the outside world by making itself receptive to the totality of an assemblage of elements, in an almost geographical or cartographic manner" (Braidotti 2008, 145). Just as Rosi Braidotti's cartographic approach, the novel's cloud atlas invites readers to chart and map the complex web interspersing the novel (characters, places, symbols, etc.), but it also reflects upon identity as the ineffable that, nevertheless, one constantly attempts to capture. McCulloch aptly interprets Braidotti's conception of identity when she claims: "Rather than traditional notions of unified identities, transpositional philosophical nomadism offers resistant subjectivities that are multiple, mutable and decentred, yet simultaneously coherently patterned" (2012, 141).

The comet-shaped birthmark brings not only disparate characters together, creating invisible links among them, but it also enhances the connection between self and the space it inhabits. The distinct selves come together to highlight the interplay between the individual and the entire cosmos, just as it is embodied by Meronym, Zachry's Prescient visitor: her name denotes "part of something but which is used to refer to the whole of it" (*Oxford Dictionaries*, n.p.). This character, together with the others, contains in miniature the entire world she inhabits; she stands for the environment that is filtered through her body, through her birthmark. She, together with other selves inhabiting different spatiotemporal planes, is both the part and the whole, the individual and the universe.

Conclusions

In lieu of a conclusion, let me return to Adam Ewing's final words: "Yet what is any ocean but a multitude of drops?" (Mitchell 2004, 529). This question reinforces the formal and thematic complexity of David Mitchell's *Cloud Atlas*. The novel's structure, with the interrupted narratives folding upon each other, is closely aligned with the intricate symbols enmeshing these chapters. To use Berthold Schoene's words, this novel materializes "our consciousness of humanity's global being-in-common by writing onto the body of his protagonists the mysterious actuality and endurance of history" (2009, 116). It accomplishes this by a constant in-betweenness: emanating both insecurity and a different kind of assurance. The multitude of drops paints the picture of endless stories running in parallel, sometimes overlapping, always coexisting. *Cloud Atlas* paints a world where the virtual takes over the actual, where pasts overwrite each other and several futures coexist, but this world is never chaotic. Through the symbolic

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web, with the comet-shaped birthmark in its centre, all possible pasts and futures are filtered through the self. The subject, through the multiple selves, unites all the threads and creates a web where spaces and times can meet.

The subject of *Cloud Atlas* is not one unified entity: it is the multitude of subjectivities, shattered identities that maintain their singularity and also unite in this borderless, endless world. Actual and virtual are interchangeable in this fictional realm, pasts and futures fold upon each other and reveal ever-new narrative threads. The novel consciously does away with all sorts of finality: there is no beginning and no ending, the apocalypse is not the end but a moment, one fold on the concertina. The subject, exactly through the multitude of subjectivities appearing in the novel, unites these spatiotemporal planes, celebrating the coexistence of singularity and multiplicity.

Despite signs of a cyclical conception of time working as a determining mechanism, it is more accurate to build our reading of the novel around the concept of the concertina. This musical instrument opens up the fictional space: it enables the text to juggle several spatiotemporal planes, so much so that the omnipresent comet-shaped birthmark (meant to symbolize a sort of transcendence) can appear on two separate characters with crossing timelines and, going one step further, characters inhabiting different fictional worlds. Furthermore, the concertina gradually becomes a symbol of music and, on a more encompassing level: art itself. Starting from musical compositions as "Eternal Recurrence" (by Vyvyan Ayrs) and, more importantly, Frobisher's *Cloud Atlas Sextet*, music not only reflects on the novel, but it enriches it, complements it, and finally soothes it. With the unavoidable ephemerality, there is also the promise of something surviving: in the music, in the birthmark, in the self.

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