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**'Me Eatee Him Up': Cannibal Appetites in *Cloud Atlas* and *Robinson Crusoe***

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## **‘Me Eatee Him Up’: Cannibal Appetites in *Cloud Atlas* and *Robinson Crusoe***

This article considers the anthropocentric construction of the human subject in Defoe’s novel *Robinson Crusoe*, paying close attention to formal structure and the novel’s thematic concern with, and confusion of, both eating animals and cannibalism. By connecting *Crusoe*’s formal structure and thematic concerns with Mitchell’s *Cloud Atlas*, which opens with *Crusoe*’s central motif, I will go on to show that this novel attempts to imagine, and indeed formally enacts, a likely conclusion to the anthropocentric colonial expedition *Robinson Crusoe* is often said to represent. In this context cannibalism, as both a literal practice and as a metaphor for consumer capitalism, is considered as part and parcel of a potentially catastrophic abstraction of the human from the ecosystem. As such *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.

Keywords: cannibalism; parasitism; carnivory; anthropocentrism; post-apocalypse; Crusoe; David Mitchell; Defoe

### **Introduction**

‘There is more barbarity in eating a man alive, than when he is dead’ (Michel de Montaigne)

Nicholas Dunlop, in his essay ‘Speculative Fiction as Postcolonial Critique’, argues that whilst David Mitchell’s ‘undoubted technical achievements’ in the course of his career as a novelist should make up a central part of any discussion of his work:

[s]uch a unilateral perspective runs the risk of sidelining Mitchell's imaginative dialogue with the politics of postcoloniality by overlooking the oppositional politicized engagement that his technique enables (Dunlop, 2011, 202).

Indeed, it can be difficult in the face of Mitchell's self-conscious use of 'tricksy devices' which, according to one of his more memorable characters, Timothy Cavendish, belong in 'the 1980s with MAs in Postmodernism', to be anything other than blinded by his technical virtuosity (Mitchell, 2004, 152). However, as Dunlop suggests, Mitchell's technique, including his use of multiple formal devices, does in fact enable a highly politicised engagement, not simply with the 'politics of postcoloniality' but also in a way that is suggestive of the complex intersections between postcolonialism and ecocriticism explored in works such as Huggan and Tiffin's *Postcolonial Ecocriticism* (Huggan and Tiffin, 2010). Indeed, Astrid Bracke, in her recent essay, 'The Contemporary English Novel and its Challenges to Ecocriticism', goes further than Dunlop's suggestion in stating that 'the complex recursive structure' of *Cloud Atlas* 'does not lead attention *away* from its environmental dimension but *foregrounds* and *emphasizes* it [original emphasis]' (Bracke, 2014, 431). This is an important point because although, as she points out, the traditionally anthropocentric focus of novels has often been considered an 'impediment to ecocritical analysis' the epic scale and complex structure of Mitchell's novel in decentring the human actually invites such an analysis (424).

Whilst Huggan and Tiffin outline a 'morass' of conflicting perspectives contributed by both ecocritical and postcolonial approaches, they do suggest that one way out is to look 'for the colonial and imperial underpinnings of environmental practices in both 'colonising' and 'colonised' societies' (Huggan and Tiffin, 2010, 3). The scope of Mitchell's third novel, *Cloud Atlas*, which spans a period between the

complexities of the nineteenth century colonial conquest of the Chatham Islands and an unspecified future genocide of a post-apocalyptic tribe in the Hawaiian Islands, effectively puts this into practice, and is thereby suggestive of a combination of a theoretical and implicitly political approach with a creative narrative. This combination has particular resonance with what Huggan and Tiffin call the 'postcolonial/ecocritical alliance'. Here they suggest the 'continuing centrality of the imagination, and more specifically, imaginative *literature* to the task of postcolonial ecocriticism and the mediating function of social and environmental *advocacy*' which they believe 'might turn imaginative literature into a catalyst for social action' (12). However, as they go on to explain, such a view of literature is not without its pitfalls: one take on this, for example, sees literature reduced to mere propaganda, or as a 'blueprint for liberating the repressed' (14). This is a problem alluded to in Sam Solnick's recent article for *The Independent* in which he cites Adeline Johns-Putra's encapsulation of the problems of addressing ecological issues through literature:

It's fair to say that literature that tells people what to do is often not very good literature at all (some might say it is propaganda). So the literature of climate change has to tread that line between hectoring and inspiring (*The Independent*, 11 June, 2014).

These are problems that have been extensively discussed elsewhere, in particular in relation to the mid-twentieth century backlash against existentialist *literature engagé* (see for instance Raymond Williams 1980 essay 'The Writer: Commitment and Alignment' [Williams, 1989, 77-88]), and in many ways they are problems that emerge as soon as literature begins to see itself as high art. In the case of the novel, however,

treading 'that line', as Johns-Putra has it, is something that has been evident from the outset.

Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* is widely recognised as being one of the first novels in the English language. However, as well as owing a debt to accounts of 'voyagers who had done so much in the sixteenth century to assist the development of capitalism' it is also a work which, in Defoe's words is 'design'd to both divert and instruct' (Watt, 1987, 67; Defoe, [1719] 1994, 246). J. Paul Hunter, placing *Crusoe* firmly within the 'protestant guide tradition', explains that whilst 'complete as a story ... the emphasis is placed upon the lesson it teaches, rather like an extended *exemplum*' (Hunter, 1994, 246). For Hunter, reading *Crusoe* through 'the guide tradition' allows us 'to ask larger questions about the relationship between didacticism and the literary form' (246), and though Hunter doesn't go on to outline the 'larger questions', in what follows I want to trace something of the intertextual relationship between *Robinson Crusoe* and *Cloud Atlas* by reading them against each other in a way that, following Huggan and Tiffin, 'preserves the aesthetic function of the literary text, whilst drawing attention to its social and political usefulness [and] its capacity to set out symbolic guidelines for the material transformation of the world' (Huggan and Tiffin, 2010, 14). In order to do this, I want to concentrate upon the construction of the human subject in Defoe's novel paying close attention to the formal structure of *Robinson Crusoe* and the novel's thematic concern with, and confusion of, both the eating of animals and cannibalism. By connecting *Crusoe*'s formal structure and thematic concerns with *Cloud Atlas*, and by considering both novels' preoccupation with questions of anthropophagy, I will go on to show that Mitchell's novel attempts to imagine, and indeed formally enacts, a likely conclusion to the anthropocentric colonial expedition *Robinson Crusoe* represents. In this context cannibalism, according to Simon Estok 'an unambiguously ecocritical issue'

(Estok, 2013, 4), and its concomitant contradictions when situated alongside meat eating as a whole, is considered as part and parcel of a potentially catastrophic abstraction of the human from the ecosystem, an abstraction which ecocritics such as Stacy Alamo seek to reverse (see Kerridge, 2014, 363). As such, *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. But more than this, I want to argue that Mitchell's novel also works as an attempt to reframe humanity's position on the planet, no longer as a central, exceptional species, but rather, as a small component in a much larger system which remains now, as ever, far beyond our control.

### **Formal Cannibalism**

In an interview for the *Washington Post* in 2004 Mitchell said of *Cloud Atlas* that each chapter 'is subsumed by the next, like a row of ever-bigger fish eating the one in front' (*Washington Post*, August 19, 2004). This zoomorphic and indeed cannibalistic simile goes some way towards giving an account of the complex formal structure realised in his novel. *Cloud Atlas* presents six ostensibly disparate short stories, each utilising a distinct narrative mode and drawing upon different genres and literary periods – the diary, the epistolary, the third person, the first person, an interview and an oral narrative. The first five stories are split in two, with the first half of each given in chronological order. Each of the stories, with the exception of the first (which nevertheless contains prescient traces of its successors), contains its predecessor in one form or another – the diary from the first story is uncovered in the second, the first person account of the fourth section is revisited as a film in the fifth et cetera. This

schematic progression culminates in a *central* sixth chapter which is given its entirety before returning to the first five stories which are now completed in reverse chronology.

Several critics (see, e.g., Hopf, [2011, 109]; Childs and Green [2011, 35]), citing evidence from the novel itself, which has a character in the third section imagining time as a 'matrioshka doll', have highlighted the aptness of the matrioshka model in conceptualising Mitchell's complex structuring (Mitchell, 2004, 409). Will McMoran, however, disagrees, suggesting that each succeeding chapter is more akin to 'the child of the one that follows it, rather than the mother (McMoran, 2011, 163)'. Indeed, returning to Mitchell's image of the fishes McMoran states that, rather than the model of the doll, '[a] metaphor of narratological consumption and predacity' fits both the themes and the structure of *Cloud Atlas* (164-165). Indeed, the extent to which each section seems to feed not only upon its predecessor, but also upon literary forbears – the sheer number of which precludes their mention here – means that one is more than inclined to agree. However, what McMoran fails to mention is that whilst the metaphors of consumption and predacity do indeed fit the bill, analogous metaphors of parasitism and, further, cannibalism extend the scope of the imagery.

Although, on Mitchell's own admission, the first section of *Cloud Atlas*, 'The Diary of Adam Ewing', is dependent upon the works of Melville (whether as predator or parasite is something to be considered elsewhere), his opening line – 'Beyond the Indian hamlet, upon a forlorn strand, I happened upon a trail of recent footprints' (Mitchell, 2004, 5) - clearly evokes Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*. That *Crusoe's* central motif should appear here in the opening sentence is, as I will explain, of no small significance. However, on this occasion, rather than a willing Friday, the footprints turn out to be those of Dr Henry Goose, an Englishman, prompting the diarist Ewing to remark, 'if there be any eyrie so desolate, or isle so remote that one may there resort



unchallenged by an Englishman, 'tis not down on any map I ever saw' (3). The intertextual gestures here towards a novel Edward Said described as being 'not accidentally about a European who creates a fiefdom on a distant non-European Island' (Said, 1993, xiii), as well as to the wider British imperial expansion across the globe in the nineteenth century should not go unnoticed. Indeed, it is here in the opening pages of *Cloud Atlas* that Mitchell signals his early commitment to a critical exploration of distinctively postcolonial themes.

'Blackballed' from decent European society, Goose's travels have brought him to the beach on the Chatham Islands in the South Pacific where he reveals he is collecting teeth. 'Teeth sir', he tells Ewing:

[A]re the enamelled grails of the quest in hand. In days gone by this Arcadian strand was a cannibals' banqueting hall, yes, where the strong engorged themselves on the weak. The teeth they spat out, as you or I would expel cherry stones (Mitchell, 2004, 3).

Goose here alludes to his Nietzschean 'law of survival', one which he gives explicitly in the closing section of the novel: 'the Weak are meat and the strong do eat' (508). Whilst Goose's law is only made explicit in the 'Diaries' section, the leitmotifs of predacity, cannibalism, and parasitism, embedded within it (both structurally and thematically) are ones to which the novel repeatedly returns. It is perhaps unsurprising therefore, though no less significant, that the reference to *Crusoe* – a novel Alex Mackintosh describes as being 'the novel about cannibalism' but which he maintains should also be understood as being 'about the slaughter of animals' (Mackintosh, 2011, 24) - should come in the novel's first line.

### **The Anthropocentric Appetite**

*Robinson Crusoe* is one of those novels that everyone knows but which, outside academia, very few people have read. Like Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* (with which it also shares similar thematic concerns) it has suffered the ignominious fate of cannibalisation for various abridged versions which for the most part remove the teeth from the original narrative. Defoe himself railed against such actions in the introduction to his second volume of Crusoe's adventures, maintaining that for the 'ingenious reader' this volume was 'in every way as profitable and diverting [as the first]', going on to say that 'this makes abridging the work as scandalous as it is knavish' reducing the 'value' of the novel by stripping it of 'those reflections, as well religious as moral' which he proposes are 'calculated for the infinite advantage of the reader' (Defoe, 1994, 239).

What, one might ask, has Defoe calculated for the infinite advantage of the reader? In order to illustrate something of this we need first to consider the opening of *Crusoe* which, after a general preamble relating Crusoe's origins, quickly moves into a lengthy and comical disquisition by Crusoe's gout-ridden father on the advantages of the 'middle state' in life, a state in which one might 'slide gently through the world sensibly tasting the Sweets of living' (Defoe, 1994, 5). The middle it seems, in what can be seen as an emergent humanist move placing humankind at the centre of the cosmos, is the location proper to man, and it is a location where appetite is marked by a 'sensible taste for the Sweets of living', one 'calculated for all kinds of Vertues and all kinds of enjoyment' (Defoe, 1994, 5).

This foregrounding of the middle state in the first pages of the novel alludes to something Douglas Brooks identifies in his 1973 study, *Number and Pattern in the Eighteenth Century Novel*, namely the construction of an elaborate chiasmic structure – chiasmus being a structural device which creates a symmetry from a central point

(Brooks, 1973, 19). Brooks, outlining this structure, notes that the central point in the novel comes with Crusoe's celebrated discovery of the 'naked footprint' in the sand – a point from which Mitchell, as we have seen, takes his departure (Defoe, 1994, 112). Whilst Brooks indicates that the footprint is structurally central 'in any edition', he explains that 'the reader does not have to indulge in any arithmetical calculation' to discover this, and goes on to identify a series of clues in the text itself that direct Defoe's 'ingenious reader' towards the significance of this central moment (Brooks, 1973, 21). He notes that the event occurs, 'about half way' between Crusoe's usual habitation and where he keeps his boat. It also takes place 'around noon', and upon the discovery Crusoe climbs a 'rising ground' (Defoe, 1994, 111). The significance of the centrality of the footprint has often been remarked upon, particularly in relation to ascension, sovereignty and the iconography of cosmic kingship (we might also choose to include anthropocentrism in this list), though few have gone on to consider the extensive symmetrical patterning that Defoe carefully constructs on either side of this central point, the complexity of which, according to Brooks, leaves no doubt as to its being deliberate (Brooks, 1973, 25).

This chiasmic symmetry is in part constructed around Crusoe's various relations with human and with non-human animals, and it should be noted at this point that Crusoe's discovery of the footprint is preceded by a rather peculiar scene in which, sitting down to dinner with his 'family' and, with a precursory gesture towards the centrality of the human, centrally seated, he proclaims himself 'Majesty, Prince and Lord of the whole Island'. In a sudden transformation, one we can now recognise as being as suggestive of gender politics as it is those of sovereignty, his 'family' become 'subjects' at his 'absolute command'. His transformed subjects, amongst them a parrot, Poll, a dog and two cats, flank him like disciples at the table 'expecting now and then a

bit from my hand' (Defoe, 1994, 108), clearly evoking images of the last supper and the often remarked cannibalistic exhortation of Jesus to eat of the bread that is 'my body' (Luke 22: 19-20). Crusoe's civilised table, at which he partakes both with and *of* his subjects – chief amongst them the goats, though he also shows himself not averse to shooting parrots and cats - is mirrored a few pages after the discovery of the footprint by his coming, to the 'horror of [his] mind', upon a shore 'spread with Skulls, hands, Feet and other bones of humane Bodies', a place he supposes 'savage wretches had sat down to their inhumane Feastings upon the bodies of their fellow creatures' (Defoe, 1994, 119-120). In one sense the chiasmic opposition here seems perfectly clear: Crusoe's civilised table is set against the barbaric 'inhuman' practises of uncivilised savages. However, on further consideration, the anthropomorphic qualities given to Crusoe's table companions and the bestial qualities imposed upon the cannibals, thereby rendering animals as humans and humans as animals, suggests that things are not quite as clear as they might seem.

Mitchell, as we have seen, reprises this scene of savage feasting in the opening of *Cloud Atlas* with Goose's description of the 'cannibals' banqueting hall' (Mitchell, 2004, 3). But rather than leaving the allusion at that, he extends the ambiguity found in *Crusoe's* treatment of cannibalism to include an oblique and ultimately comical commentary on the use of prosthetics and the technological enhancement of the human body, themes to which *Cloud Atlas* repeatedly returns, most notably in the 'Sonmi-451' section. Goose, it is revealed, is collecting the inedible teeth, here symbolising consumption in both a passive and an active sense, of the cannibals' victims. These teeth, he recounts, he intends to pass on to a Doctor in England who 'fashions denture-sets' from human teeth, a set of which he wishes to have supplied to a London Marchioness in order to furnish her social humiliation by declaring 'to one & all that

our hostess masticates with cannibals' gnashers' (3-4). The civilised outrage of London society predicted by Goose is based not simply upon the fact that the Marchioness is eating with the teeth of another but also with teeth which have in turn potentially partaken of 'others'. As well as prefiguring something of the novel's structural organisation, this sets us up for the uneasy moral terrain the novel seeks to traverse. Set against Crusoe's horror at the *inhuman* consumption of human flesh, Mitchell here extends the instabilities inherent in the predication of the animal/human, savage/civilised binaries upon a civilised appetite by questioning the location of the supposed inhuman savagery. This is something he returns to in the concluding section of the 'Pacific Journal' when Ewing relates that 'the more superstitious sailors spurned the treat' of a shark, reasoning that 'sharks are known to eat men, thus to eat shark-flesh is cannibalism by proxy' (514).

The instabilities suggested by Crusoe's discovery of the cannibals' inhuman feasting ground, something Robert Folkenflick calls an 'anxiety of interpretation', have their antecedents at a much earlier point in the text (Folkenflick, 2009, 99). John Williams highlights two episodes during Crusoe's adventures with Xury involving encounters with 'creatures' – mirroring his later adventures with Friday – where the human/animal dichotomy appears to break down (J. Williams, 2005, 337-348). Whilst sailing down the coast of Africa, Xury and Crusoe encounter a sleeping 'lyon' on the shore and, at Crusoe's behest, subsequently kill it (Defoe, 1994, 22). For Williams, Crusoe's description of the 'Lyon' using words such as 'head', 'nose', 'leg' and 'knee' rather than snout, paws and claws introduces a sense of ambiguity which on his reading seem 'hauntingly human' (J. Williams, 2005, 340). This sense of collapsing distinctions between human and non-human is only intensified a few pages later when they encounter some 'people' on a beach who in offering 'meat' (animal) go on to provide

'flesh' (human) leaving Crusoe unable to decide 'what the one or other is' (Defoe, 1994, 23). The indecision here becomes animated as 'creatures' descend upon the beach unleashing what Williams identifies as 'a series of confusing pronouns', the result of which is that 'one cannot explicitly gauge the traditional dichotomy between human and beast' (Williams, 2005, 342). Prefiguring Goose's 'imaginary musket' which he uses to demystify the 'mystery of white man's dominion over the world' (Mitchell, 2004, 508), Crusoe reasserts order from out of this chaos with his musket, killing the 'creatures' assumed animals, and rendering the 'poor creatures' assumed human in a state of 'astonishment' and 'terror'. Significantly, it is at the moment when Crusoe claims his authority that the creatures on the shore once again become '*Negroes*' and that the indeterminate creature becomes 'a most curious leopard' (Defoe, 1994, 24). Crusoe, in reinstating the 'Great Chain of Being', in defending *natural* order from the dissolution that here beyond the frontiers of civilisation threatens at all times, seems intended to be read, not only as a servant but also as an agent of God. Indeed, to push this further, later in the text, again as a consequence of superior technology, he rescues some Europeans, one of whom exclaims: '*Am I talking to a God, or a man! Is it a real man or an Angel!*' [sic] 'I am a man', replies Crusoe (183). However, despite the certainty of Crusoe's reply, 'I am a man', the central moment of Defoe's text which is occasioned by man's encounter with a sign of man, or in other words by man's encounter with a sign of himself, is characterised by uncertainty. It is instructive to note, therefore, that at this central moment of indecision over the meaning of the sign, devil 'in humane form', or in its nakedness both human and inhuman savage, Crusoe is himself bestialised, fleeing 'like a frightened hare' and 'fox to cover' (112). In his encounter with man, Crusoe, for a moment, loses his place in the Great Chain.

Crusoe's certainty in his reply, 'I am a man', signals his success in the struggle to wrest right meaning from and to impose order upon an island which seems to pose a threat not only to his life, but also to his humanity. Humanity here takes on a performative aspect, not something that one is, but something that one does, not something inalienable but rather something performed and interpreted. This is seen in part when Crusoe reflects upon the providence of God in allowing him to salvage items from the shipwreck without which he relates he would have had 'no way to part the flesh from the skin, and the bowels, or to cut it up, but must gnaw it with my teeth and pull it up with my claws like a beast' (Defoe, 1994, 95). However, whilst the mode of eating has the threatening capacity to render the human 'like' a beast, the performative aspect of Crusoe's idea of humanity is seen most clearly with the eating of human flesh which consistently renders human beings as beasts. It is against these 'beasts' that Crusoe finally finds the certainty with which he can say, 'I am a man', in a negative relation that sees him giving thanks 'to God ... that had cast my lot in a part of the world where I was distinguished from such dreadful creatures as this' (120).

Throughout his adventures Crusoe's continuing lesson is to interpret correctly the signs of providence, to read the word of God in the world about him. And this too has been Defoe's intention for the reader, for, as he has it in his preface, *Crusoe* is intended to 'instruct' us 'in the wisdom of providence' (3). The wisdom of providence here suggests that it is the existence of the inhuman cannibal 'other' which allows the reader to become human in order that we may cultivate a 'sensible taste for the Sweets of living' (Defoe, 1994, 5).

Cultivation is exactly the task to which Crusoe applies himself on the island. However, as well as cultivating his crops and practising 'good husbandry' with his animals, he also turns his attention to the cultivation of the 'savage' Friday. When he

finally 'rescues' Friday only to make him his servant, chief amongst Crusoe's concerns is how to render the cannibal-savage human by means of the governance of his *unnatural* appetite. Anthropophagy in this instance, whilst being a trait that ironically necessitates being human (see Estok, 2013, 2), is paradoxically constructed as inhuman, bestial and ultimately unnatural; in a further twist, Friday's 'unnatural' appetite for human flesh is something that is apparently 'natural' to him in as much as Crusoe has to deliver disciplinary lessons in a taste for the flesh of dead animals. However, whilst the presence of the Cannibal appetite threatens to undo the 'natural' distinction between the animal and the human in rendering human flesh as meat, the distinctly 'cannibalistic overtones' found in many of *Crusoe's* animal slaughter scenes threaten a similar disruption (see Mackintosh, 2011, 34). By the same token Crusoe's objections to eating humans on the grounds that anthropophagy bestialises both eater and eaten are replicated in the case of animals when the absence of implements similarly collapses the distinctions between man and beast. In Crusoe's economy of flesh, the meat which makes us human can only be obtained and consumed by two means: firstly with the distinction between self and other, which is here reproduced as human and non-human, an operation which, with its necessarily slippery boundaries nevertheless entails a distinction that abstracts the human subject from the rest of the ecosystem. Secondly, flesh can only be consumed by the maintenance of a technological distance with the use of instruments to kill and implements to butcher and consume.

For Huggan and Tiffin 'the construction of ourselves *against* nature – with the hierarchisation of life forms that construction implies – has been and remains complicit in colonialist and racist exploitation from the time of imperial conquest to the present day' (Huggan and Tiffin, 2010, 6). Just as Crusoe's island project – and it worth here recalling Greg Garrard's remark that 'islands have been ecological crime scenes for



millennia' (Garrard, 2007, 11) - reveals something of an instrumental approach to nature, we can see shades of Huggan and Tiffin's complicity in a curious incident towards the close of the novel. Here Friday and Crusoe, having escaped the island, have a final encounter with an anthropomorphised animal whilst crossing the Pyrenees. The 'nice gentleman' bear who stumbles across their party is humanised by both Crusoe and Friday, who, after luring the bear onto a tree branch speaks with him 'as if he suppos'd the bear could speak English' and prompting a response 'as if he understood what he said' (Defoe, 1994, 213). Friday's baiting of the bear and subsequent execution - discharging 'the muzzle of his piece' in his ear - has often been commented upon, especially in terms of his having successfully learnt, under the tutelage of Crusoe, how to exercise the disciplinary colonialist techniques of his master (see J. Williams, 2005, 346). However, having demanded of his audience that: '*You give me te Leave! Me shakee te hand with him: me make you good laugh, me eatee him up: me make you good laugh* [original emphasis]' (Defoe, 1994, 212), Friday, whilst giving his audience a 'good laugh' and killing the bear, fails to 'eatee him up'. Indeed, in a further twist, on the conclusion of his entertainment, a laughing Friday confides, '*so we kill Bear in my Country* [original emphasis]'. 'So you kill them', replies Crusoe 'Why you have no guns'. 'No', replies Friday '*no gun, but shoot great much long arrow* [original emphasis]' (214). The difference here is not one of kind, but rather of degree.

Disregarding the unlikelihood of there being bears in Friday's country, there is much ambiguity in this scene. Is Defoe suggesting that Friday, in failing to eat the 'gentleman' bear, has learned from his colonial master how to discipline his appetite; or is it that in the indication of a correspondence with Crusoe's mode of domination, command and slaughter, which seem to precede Crusoe's teachings, Friday represents a universal anthropocentric world-view? Whichever way it is, the sense that Friday is now

complicit in Crusoe's project, and in fact, following Huggan above, may always have been, is something Mitchell takes up in *Cloud Atlas*.

In 'The Pacific Journal of Adam Ewing', Mitchell, drawing on Jared Diamond's remarkable multidisciplinary study of the uneven evolution of human societies, *Guns, Germs and Steel* (Diamond, 1998), outlines the nineteenth century conquest of the Chatham Islands and the genocide of the indigenous Moriori people by the Maori who, in victory, bake the bodies of the dead Moriori 'in a giant earth oven with yams & sweet potatoes' (Mitchell, 2004, 15). Savages, no doubt; and yet Mitchell intimates a deeper implication in relating that the 'Maori proved themselves apt pupils of the English in "the dark arts of colonisation"' (14). These dark arts rest upon a world view which Val Plumwood argues depends upon 'the presence of the not-human: the uncivilised, the animal and the animalistic' (Plumwood, 2003, 53), and whilst the Maori feast upon the flesh of the vanquished dead, the animalising of the other in Western colonial discourse sees the emergence of a more insidious appetite for the lives of the living.

Crusoe's proto-imperialist colonial mission which begins with the trafficking of livestock (slaves) for his plantation, concludes with the extension of the 'good husbandry' he has practised on the island with both humans and non-humans alike. After leaving the island Crusoe sends on from Brazil a barque with 'people' on it, as well as supplies amongst which are 'women, being such as [he finds] proper for service or as wives'. However, these are just ordinary women; for the '*English Men*', he promises to send 'some Women from *England*, with a good cargo of necessaries, if they would apply themselves to planting' (Defoe, 1994, 220, emphases in original). Indeed. What we see here is the emergence of something Plumwood calls 'hegemonic centrism' – 'the self-privileging view that [underlies] racism, sexism and colonialism alike' (Plumwood, 2001, 4). To this list we might also add nationalism – though in view of

Defoe's own critical stance towards nationalism we might do well to suspect an ironic cast to Defoe's italics. This then is the point of departure for Mitchell's novel; the hegemonic centrism which expresses itself most clearly in the structure of *Crusoe* is the very structure that *Cloud Atlas* seeks to interrogate and this is nowhere more evident than with the inclusion of *Crusoe's central* motif in its opening line. In constructing a series of split narratives delivered with a plurality of voices, the novel decentres the idea of a centre which *Crusoe* insistently posits. And yet, rather than demanding that the centre be obliterated, this is a novel which, in its construction, proposes a series of centres each seemingly as dependent upon the other as it is upon itself. This is something to which *Crusoe* can never openly admit.

### **Eating Ourselves**

In a formal sense the structure of *Cloud Atlas* is also, like *Crusoe*, chiasmic. However, here the central point, which, mirror-like, works to reflect past, present and future, occurs at the top of Hawaii's Mauna Kea - from top to bottom earth's tallest mountain (there are clear gestures here towards ascension which figures as a *leitmotif* throughout the novel). The post-apocalyptic central narrative, which takes its formal sustenance from Russell Hoban's *Riddley Walker* (1980), sees the narrator, Zachry, a member of one of the last tribes of humans left on earth, reach the summit's ruined observatory in the company of a genetically engineered 'prescient', Meronym. Together, rather than a footprint, they discover the mummified corpse of an 'old un', a trace of an old lost world, who they believe died after an indeterminate global catastrophe they call 'the fall' (Mitchell, 2004, 293). Upon descending the mountain they witness the demise of both their tribes - Meronym's from a plague and Zachry's after being slaughtered by a mutant tribe known as the Kona. Whereas *Crusoe's* centre-

point presents a moment not only of spiritual but also of anthropocentric crisis from which Crusoe must recover, the central point in *Cloud Atlas* bears witness to the potentially apocalyptic terminus of the anthropocentric journey. In a sense then, this central moment also proposes its own undoing. The section closes with only the smallest of hopes for the future of humanity: Zachry, as becomes clear, is recounting his story to two children. It is worth noting here that recent post-apocalyptic narratives have tended to follow a similar trajectory with both Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* (2006) and Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake* (2009) closing with the discovery of fellow survivors which provides an intimation that the apocalypse is not quite complete. Mitchell, however, takes things a step further. As well as refusing to allow the end of human history with a representation of the endurance of narrative, Childs and Green point out that 'a reversal of [the] forward momentum' evident in the preceding chapters with their resumption in reverse order 'opens up an alternative perspective' (Childs and Green, 2011, 35). On this point Astrid Bracke suggests that Mitchell's novel posits a future which is far from inevitable and instead poses a question which asks 'whether the harm humanity has done can still be reversed, or whether in harming its natural environment it is effectively killing itself' (Bracke, 2014, 430).

Mitchell obliquely traces the causes of his coming apocalypse all the way back to Ewing's nineteenth century colonial account where we finally encounter Goose's doctrine that 'the strong do eat and the weak are meat' (Mitchell, 2004, 508). But whilst Goose's 'Law of Survival' seems shocking, and indeed in its Nietzschean sensibilities, decidedly anti-Christian, it is Goose himself who reads out Psalm the Eighth in the novel's opening pages – '*Thou madest him to have dominion over the works of thy hands ... the sheep & oxen, yea the beasts of the field*' (Mitchell, 2004, 8, emphasis in original) – harking back to Crusoe's theological justifications for his dominion over the

island Whilst theologians have wrestled for centuries with man's relationship to animals, it is clear from Mitchell's story that man's rightful dominion over 'the beasts of the field', does not and was never limited by anything other than a relativist distinction which 'rationalises the exploitation of animal (*and animalised human*) "others" in the name of a human and reason centred culture' (Plumwood, 2001, 8, emphasis mine).

Mitchell turns his attentions to the gradations of the human being on multiple occasions, not least in the 'Sonmi -451' section. However, he gives such categorisations a theological bent in the closing section of Ewing's diaries where Preacher Horrox outlines 'Civilisation's Ladder', a hierarchy of humankind which ascends from the 'irreclaimable races', amongst whom he numbers the 'Australian Aboriginals', all the way to the Europeans and, with a gesture back to Crusoe's '*English men*', at whose apex sits the 'Anglo-saxon' (Mitchell, 2004, 506-507). This then, is 'hegemonic centrism' taken to its (il)logical extreme, and, as Horrox continues, we can see where this *horror* is going to lead: 'The superior shall relegate the overpopulous savages to their natural numbers. Unpleasant scenes may ensue' (507).

Unpleasant scenes indeed. In terms of the narrative *sjuzhet* we have already encountered Horrox's horror, but in the *fabula*, in the novel's 'real time' the horror is yet to come. It comes in the novel's penultimate section, 'An Orison of Sonmi -451', where, with an obvious nod to Huxley's *Brave New World* (and by extension his brother Leonard's involvement in the Galton Society), human intervention now extends far beyond Crusoe's 'gentleman husbandry' with a whole range of humans 'genomed' for specific tasks. In Nea So Copros, the setting for this section of the novel, human beings are created as commodities, as non-human others who stand in contradistinction to the 'true bloods'. It is from the testimony of one of these genomed slaves, Somni -451, who

works in a 'dinary' not unlike a MacDonald's where she works to feed hungry 'consumers', that we learn of the projected price of human consumption.

In a scene recalling the aptly named Richard Fleischer's 1973 film *Soylent Green* ("Soylent Green is people" – a cry which seems aimed peculiarly at vegetarian food and which Cavendish calls out to uncomprehending pensioners in the 'Ghastly Ordeal' [Mitchell, 2004, 179]), Somni discovers that the 'soap' the cloned slave fabricants eat is actually made from *retired* versions of themselves and further that 'leftover "reclaimed proteins" are used to produce Papa Song food products eaten by consumers in the corp's dinaries all over Nea So Copros'. Her revelation occurs as she is taken on board a vast ship which serves as a slaughterhouse for the fabricants and where she is shown 'figures wielding scissors, swordsaws, tools I don't know the names of ... blood-soaked, from head to toe' (359-360). The imagery here evokes the horror of the animal slaughterhouse, but, as with Michael Faber's *Under the Skin* (2000), Mitchell defamiliarises the scene by making human animals the victims of the slaughter. We might at this point recall the disturbing practises already carried out in the livestock industry whereby animals are routinely fed upon the waste products of their own dead. If cannibalism is at the base of the Nea So Copros economy of consumption, so too, Mitchell's novel suggests, is it in our own.

Whilst cannibalism offers a tempting metaphor for the unbridled appetites of late-capitalism with its incessant repackaging and reselling which effectively commodifies everything for consumption, Crystal Bartelovich indicates that this is missing the point: capitalism, rather than feeding upon the flesh of the dead must instead feed upon the living flesh of a host. Capitalism, she states, 'must be parasitic rather than cannibalistic' (Bartelovich, 1998, 214). Cannibalism alone has never been a model for self-sufficiency, as logically any system which consumes itself cannot endure

for any length of time. However, a successful parasite cannot function if it consumes its hosts to the point of extinction, and in the case of global capitalism, where the luxury of a plural has not been afforded, a successful system cannot exceed the capacities of the system upon which it depends. Ultimately a system such as this can have no resort but to conclude by consuming itself.

That the first literal parasite we encounter in *Cloud Atlas* should be a work of fiction, the 'Gusano Coco Cervello', a brain-eating worm Goose suggests has taken up residence in Ewing's skull, merely serves to foreground the multiple tropes of parasitism in evidence throughout the novel (Mitchell, 2004, 36). Cavendish, for instance, as a publisher, lives off the writing of others; likewise the critics, one of whom is comically propelled to his death from a roof by an angry author (151-152). Vyvyan Ayrs sustains his musical output by feeding on the creativity of amanuensis Robert Frobisher, who is himself in turn sustaining himself on both the material wealth and relative celebrity of his host, and this is to say nothing of the debt each of Mitchell's chapters owes to pre-existing novelists. However, whilst these examples of cultural parasitism offer a vision of an admittedly imperfect symbiosis they also offer an aesthetic reproduction of cannibalism, and it is the idea of cannibalism which in *Cloud Atlas* both underpins and concludes modern civilisation. Just as Defoe sought to produce a book whose formal structure attempted to mirror the workings of a providential nature, of man's central place as lord and master, whose 'sweets of living' are defined by the act of not eating one's kind, Mitchell's novel provides a formal structure which attempts to replicate the very appetites it seeks to redress.

## **Conclusion**

Mitchell's message, the unfashionably didactic lesson he wants to give to his readers, comes in the final pages of Ewing's diary: 'one fine day' he writes, 'a purely predatory world shall consume itself. Yes, the devil shall take the hindmost until the foremost is the hindmost' (Mitchell, 2004, 528). With imagery recalling the ancient myth of the Ouroboros, the serpent that eats its own tail, Mitchell critiques an economy based upon unbridled consumption which his vision suggests can only lead to a metaphorical, and ultimately literal, self-consumption. But more than this, in attempting to imagine modernity on a truly cosmic scale, he also offers a vision of humanity that sees us not at the centre, not as the exception, but as a small part of a greater whole. We get a glimpse of this vision from the modified 'disasterman' Wing -D27 who, with a description that replicates and intensifies the blasted landscape of Flanders following WWI which we see in the Frobisher chapter, tells Sonmi of 'disasterlands so infected or radioactive that purebloods perish there like bacteria in bleach' (215). Displacing *Crusoe's* anthropocentric vision of man at the centre of creation, the economic man, the good husband, Mitchell's novel takes an entirely different perspective, gesturing in terms of both its geographical compass and its extended chronology to a vision which sees our species' relationship with the ecosystem as one which, in global terms, is at root parasitic. However, since the advent of 'ecological overshoot' in the mid-1970s, our symbiotic relationship with the host has become dangerously unbalanced (Dietz and O'Neil, 2013, 21). Mitchell traces this unbalancing back to the emergence of imperial colonialism; however, rather than attempting to make the ultimately false distinction between meat and flesh, which in *Crusoe* serves as one of the founding principles for modernity's conception of human exceptionalism, Mitchell's novel insists that we are indeed all meat. This is made nowhere more clear than, perhaps significantly, on page



451 when an anti-nuclear campaigner reads Ralph Waldo Emerson's 'Brahma' almost in its entirety to her dying friend:

If the red slayer think he slays,  
Or if the slain think he is slain,  
They know not well the subtle ways  
I keep, and pass, and turn again.

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