



Against the Will to Power: Humanism, Violence, and Resistance in *Cloud Atlas*

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Abstract

This article examines David Mitchell's *Cloud Atlas* (2004) as a reflection on the persistence of violence across historical time and the tenuous possibility of ethical resistance. Spanning multiple eras, from 19th century imperial expansion to a distant post-apocalyptic future, the novel reveals how systems of domination reappear in shifting forms, suggesting that neither technological progress nor historical change guarantees moral advancement. By arranging its six narratives within a recursive, interlocking structure, Mitchell unsettles linear models of history and instead foregrounds patterns of repetition, echo, and return. At the same time, *Cloud Atlas* resists a purely fatalistic account of human existence. Across its disparate narratives, the text repeatedly stages moments of ethical recognition in which individuals confront the suffering of others and act, however modestly, against prevailing systems of power. These acts, often small and uncertain in outcome, accumulate into a broader vision of human responsibility grounded in relationality rather than abstraction. The novel's emphasis on storytelling, its embedding of texts within texts, further suggests that ethical insight is transmitted across time through acts of reading, remembering, and reinterpretation. Situating *Cloud Atlas* within contemporary debates on post-postmodernism and metamodernism, this article argues that the novel moves beyond postmodern scepticism toward a renewed engagement with sincerity, historical consciousness, and moral accountability. Without offering resolution or utopian closure, Mitchell's work nonetheless affirms that human agency remains meaningful within even the most constrained conditions. In doing so, *Cloud Atlas* presents a nuanced exploration of the ongoing tension between power and resistance, and of the role of narrative in shaping ethical awareness.

Keywords: humanism, violence, temporality, narrative ethics, post-apocalyptic fiction, metamodernism.

David Mitchell's *Cloud Atlas* intervenes philosophically into the nature of power and the ethical responsibilities of human agency. The novel's structural ingenuity performs a critique of historical determinism. In doing so, it interrogates a transhistorical logic of domination, one that operates under shifting ideological guises but retains a consistent underlying structure.

The formulation "the weak are meat the strong do eat" (Mitchell 508) crystallises this logic with unsettling clarity. Rather than presenting violence as aberrational, Mitchell frames it as systemic, a principle that governs social organisation across temporal and cultural contexts. This principle resonates with what Friedrich Nietzsche conceptualises as the *will to power*.

Friedrich Nietzsche's concept of the "will to power" refers to a fundamental driving force in human life, understood not merely as a desire for political dominance, but as a broader impulse toward expansion, self-assertion, and the enhancement of one's capacities. For Nietzsche, human behavior cannot be adequately explained by simple motivations such as survival or pleasure; rather, it is shaped by an underlying tendency to overcome resistance, impose form, and affirm one's strength. In *Beyond Good and Evil*, Nietzsche suggests that life itself is structured by this dynamic of force and striving: "life itself is will to power" (Nietzsche 13). He further argues that what appears as moral systems or rational conduct often masks deeper struggles for influence and control, noting that "a living thing seeks above all to discharge its strength – life itself is will to power; self-preservation is only one of the indirect and most frequent results" (Nietzsche 21). Nietzsche does not treat the will to power as purely negative or destructive. It can manifest creatively, in art, thought, and self-

overcoming, as well as destructively in domination over others. The concept thus functions as a diagnostic tool, revealing the underlying dynamics of both individual psychology and social organisation. However, while Nietzsche identifies power as an ontological force, Mitchell historicises it, exposing its material manifestations in colonial exploitation, capitalist accumulation, and technocratic control. Patrick O'Donnell observes that Mitchell's fiction explores "the construction of the future in its relation to a human past replete with cultural and political violence" (7). Rather than positing a teleological progression, *Cloud Atlas* presents history as a recursive field in which patterns of domination re-emerge under new configurations. This recursive model complicates both Enlightenment narratives of progress and postmodern assertions of fragmentation. At the same time, the novel refuses to capitulate to fatalism. Adam Ewing's concluding meditation, "Yet what is any ocean but a multitude of drops?" (Mitchell 509), introduces a countervailing ethical framework grounded in increasing resistance. The tension between systemic violence and individual agency thus becomes the central dialectic of the text.

Critically, this dialectic aligns *Cloud Atlas* with what has been termed the metamodern condition. As van den Akker and Vermeulen suggest, contemporary cultural production oscillates between irony and sincerity, despair and hope, without resolving these tensions into stable positions (5). Mitchell's novel exemplifies this oscillation: it neither denies the persistence of violence nor relinquishes the possibility of ethical action.

Diletta De Cristofaro's analysis of contemporary post-apocalyptic fiction provides a useful framework for understanding Mitchell's temporal strategy. She argues that

such narratives reject the “utopian teleology active in history,” instead presenting dystopian aftermaths that challenge apocalyptic logic (243-44). *Cloud Atlas* extends this critique by refusing both apocalyptic closure and progressive resolution. The future does not represent a culmination of historical development, but rather a repetition of its failures. The post-apocalyptic world of “Sloosha’s Crossin’” is not a radical break from the past, but it is its distorted echo. Maria Beville asserts that Mitchell’s fiction engages with “the materiality of time and history” (1). Time in *Cloud Atlas* is not an abstract dimension but a lived experience shaped by power relations. The recurrence of violence across temporal contexts suggests that history is less a linear progression than a series of overlapping cycles.

The novel’s structure is not merely aesthetic but ethical. By linking disparate narratives, Mitchell constructs a network of interdependence that mirrors the interconnectedness of human actions. Each story influences and is influenced by others, suggesting that ethical choices reverberate across time. This interconnectedness aligns with Shanahan’s notion of “self-evolving circles,” in which individual actions contribute to expanding networks of meaning (115). The circularity of Mitchell’s structure thus becomes a formal enactment of ethical responsibility.

“The Pacific Journal of Adam Ewing” is presented as a 19th century diary, invoking the authority of colonial documentation. Yet this authority is immediately destabilised. Ewing’s narrative reveals not only external events but also his own complicity in systems of domination.

The figure of Dr. Henry Goose exemplifies the grotesque logic of colonial capitalism. His collection of human teeth, intended for resale in European markets, literalises the transformation of human bodies into commodities. As Goose proudly explains, these “gnashers” will be “transmuted to gold”

(Mitchell 9). The language of alchemy underscores the perverse value system in which human remains are converted into economic profit. This episode resonates with postcolonial critiques of imperialism as a system predicated on extraction and dehumanisation. The colonial subject is reduced to a resource, stripped of agency and identity.

The narrative also exposes the ideological mechanisms that sustain colonial domination. Ewing’s initial descriptions of indigenous peoples reflect the racial hierarchies embedded in imperial discourse. The language of “savages” and “civilisation” functions to legitimise exploitation. Early in the narrative, Ewing describes the Moriori and Maori through a vocabulary that folds difference into hierarchy. The Moriori, he records, have been reduced to “a remnant” after conquest, their dispossession narrated with a tone that is observational rather than indignant, as though such outcomes were the expected result of a “stronger” people prevailing (Mitchell 11-13). The Maori, in turn, are characterised through images of physicality and violence, “tattoo’d” bodies, “war canoes,” and ritual practices that Ewing renders as signs of a more primitive stage of culture (12-14). What is striking is not simply the content of these descriptions but their framing: Ewing presents them as empirical facts, implicitly organised along a civilisational scale in which European norms occupy the apex.

This classificatory impulse is reinforced in his encounters with enslaved islanders. When he first observes Autua, the stowaway slave, Ewing’s language registers distance and suspicion. Autua appears as an object of curiosity rather than a subject with agency. Even as Autua later saves Ewing’s life, the narrative initially filters him through the same discourse that marks indigenous figures as inferior or suspect. The shift in Ewing’s perception, his gradual recognition of Autua’s courage and humanity, thus exposes the ideological scaffolding of his earlier assumptions (Mitchell 27-30).

Ewing's first encounter with Autua occurs under conditions that immediately cast the latter as an object of suspicion rather than a moral equal. Autua is discovered as a stowaway aboard the *Prophetess*, having fled enslavement among the Moriori. Ewing records the incident in a tone that reflects both curiosity and unease. Autua is initially described through physical markers and circumstance, his status as a fugitive, his bodily presence, and his silence, rather than as a speaking subject with intention. When Autua pleads for protection, Ewing hesitates, weighing the risks of aiding him against the expectations of shipboard authority. His hesitation underscores the extent to which racial hierarchy has been internalised. Autua's claim to freedom does not immediately register as self-evidently legitimate (Mitchell 27-28).

The turning point comes during the violent episode involving Dr. Goose's attempted murder of Ewing. Having secretly poisoned Ewing under the guise of medical treatment, Goose plans to dispose of him once he is sufficiently weakened. At this critical moment, Autua intervenes. He attacks Goose and prevents Ewing's death, thereby reversing the assumed hierarchy between European master and indigenous subordinate. The scene is narrated with sudden intensity, emphasising Autua's physical courage and decisive action (Mitchell 29-30).

In the aftermath, Ewing's perception shifts markedly. He no longer frames Autua as a suspicious outsider but as a moral agent whose actions demand recognition. Ewing acknowledges both his debt and the injustice of the system that had rendered Autua a slave. What had seemed like natural distinctions between "civilised" and "savage" collapses in the face of lived experience, revealing those distinctions to be contingent and ethically untenable.

Similarly, Dr. Goose's discourse provides a more explicit articulation of colonial logic. His account of the "cannibals' banqueting hall,"

where the "strong engorged themselves on the weak," naturalises predation as a universal principle (Mitchell 9). It resonates with the broader imperial ideology that casts domination as both inevitable and justified. The language of "savages" and "civilisation" operates implicitly throughout these exchanges, organising perception and legitimising exploitation. Through these examples, Mitchell implies that colonial domination is sustained not only through economic or military force, but through everyday habits of description. Ewing's journal, with its measured tone and empirical posture, becomes a site where ideology is both reproduced and, eventually, unsettled. However, Mitchell complicates this perspective by revealing its contradictions. The supposed "civilised" characters, Goose and the slave traders, engage in acts of extreme brutality, undermining the moral superiority they claim.

Ewing's transformation constitutes a crucial moment in the novel's ethical trajectory. His decision to reject slavery is framed not as a heroic gesture but as a recognition of complicity. He acknowledges that inaction perpetuates injustice, stating that the world's "natural order" is not immutable but constructed (Mitchell 508). This recognition aligns with Emmanuel Levinas's conception of ethics as responsibility to the Other. Ewing's awakening is not grounded in abstract principles but in an encounter with suffering that demands response.

For Levinas, ethics is not derived from abstract rules or universal laws, but emerges in a face-to-face relation that calls the self into responsibility. As he puts it, "the face of the Other at each moment destroys and overflows the plastic image it leaves me" (Levinas 50). The Other's vulnerability makes an immediate demand that precedes rational calculation or self-interest. Responsibility, in this sense, is asymmetrical and inescapable (Levinas 197).

Ewing's transformation follows this pattern. His change of outlook does not

originate in a theoretical rejection of slavery, but in a lived encounter with Autua's suffering and with his act of saving Ewing's life. The experience disrupts Ewing's inherited assumptions about racial hierarchy and forces a reorientation of his moral perspective. Autua is no longer apprehended as an object within a colonial taxonomy but as a subject whose vulnerability and agency compel recognition. In Levinasian terms, the encounter exposes Ewing to an ethical demand that cannot be assimilated into the logic of domination.

Thus, Ewing's awakening exemplifies Levinas's claim that ethics begins in responsibility to the Other rather than in abstract moral reasoning. It is because the encounter is concrete, marked by risk, dependence, and mutual exposure, that it acquires ethical force, prompting Ewing to reconsider his complicity in systems of violence.

Set in the 1970s, "Half-Lives: The First Luisa Rey Mystery" situates its critique within the context of late capitalism. The nuclear conspiracy at the centre of the narrative reveals the extent to which corporate interests override public safety. Jennifer Rickel characterises the novel as a "warning text" by arguing that contemporary readers are encouraged to "inhabit the subject position of the Other," yet this process is complicated by the commodification of literature itself (160). The Luisa Rey narrative dramatises this tension: knowledge becomes both a tool of resistance and a commodity subject to manipulation. The narrative's emphasis on journalism foregrounds the role of information in contemporary power structures. Luisa's investigation exposes the fragility of truth in a system where knowledge is controlled by corporate and political interests. This aligns with Michel Foucault's concept of power/knowledge, wherein power operates through the production and regulation of discourse (27). The suppression of information becomes a form of violence, as it prevents collective awareness and resistance.

The dystopian future of Neo Seoul represents the culmination of these tendencies. Here, power operates not only through economic and informational control but through direct regulation of biological life. Sonmi 451's narrative reveals a society in which human clones are engineered, exploited, and ultimately consumed. The revelation that fabricants are recycled into food products constitutes one of the novel's most disturbing moments, exposing the extreme endpoint of capitalist rationality. Sonmi's declaration, "To enslave an individual is to enslave a nation" (Mitchell 344), articulates a collective ethics that challenges the fragmentation of neoliberal subjectivity. Her testimony transforms individual suffering into a universal indictment of systemic violence.

John Shanahan's concept of "digital transcendentalism" provides a useful lens for interpreting Sonmi's narrative. He suggests that Mitchell envisions a form of interconnected consciousness that transcends individual embodiment (116). Sonmi's orison, a recorded testimony, ensures that her voice persists beyond her physical existence. This persistence challenges the finality of death and introduces the possibility of ethical continuity across time.

At the structural and thematic center of *Cloud Atlas* lies "Sloosha's Crossin' an' Ev'rythin' After," a narrative set in a post-apocalyptic future in which technological civilisation has collapsed. This section is frequently read as a speculative endpoint, yet its deeper significance lies in its refusal to present apocalypse as rupture. Instead, Mitchell renders it as continuity through degeneration, a historical condition in which the forms of power have changed, but their underlying logic persists.

The language of the narrative itself marks this transformation. The fractured dialect, shaped by oral transmission and cultural decay, registers the erosion of institutional memory. Yet even in this linguistic fragmentation, traces of the past remain embedded. As Zachry

recounts his world, remnants of earlier systems, like technology, religion and governance, reappear as mythic residues. This suggests that history, though distorted, is never entirely erased.

Heather Hicks argues that contemporary post-apocalyptic fiction often “interrogates modernity beyond salvage,” revealing how structures of inequality endure even after systemic collapse (6). Mitchell’s narrative exemplifies this insight. The collapse of advanced civilisation does not produce egalitarian renewal; rather, it reconstitutes hierarchy in more primitive forms. The society depicted in Zachry’s world is organised around rigid hierarchies and pervasive violence. The Kona tribe’s predatory raids against the Valleysmen echo earlier forms of imperial aggression, suggesting that domination is not historically contingent but structurally recurrent.

This recurrence complicates any notion of historical progress. If the advanced technological society of Neo Seoul ultimately gives way to tribal warfare, then progress itself appears illusory. The novel thus dismantles Enlightenment narratives of linear development, replacing them with a cyclical model in which violence re-emerges in different guises. Diletta De Cristofaro’s claim that contemporary post-apocalyptic narratives challenge “traditional apocalyptic discourse” by rejecting teleological closure is particularly relevant here (244). *Cloud Atlas* does not present apocalypse as an endpoint, but as another iteration within a broader historical continuum.

One of the most striking aspects of Zachry’s narrative is the internalisation of power through fear. The figure of “Old Georgie,” a hallucinatory embodiment of temptation and violence, operates as a psychological mechanism that reinforces social control. Unlike the overt institutions of power in earlier narratives, domination here is internalised, functioning through belief and

superstition. This shift recalls Michel Foucault’s analysis of disciplinary power, in which control operates not only through external coercion but through the internal regulation of subjects (201). Zachry’s fear of Old Georgie shapes his actions, limiting his capacity for resistance. Yet this internalisation is not absolute. Zachry’s eventual decision to assist Meronym represents a break in the cycle of fear, suggesting that even deeply ingrained structures of domination can be disrupted.

Zachry’s fear of “Old Georgie” functions as a powerful mechanism of internalised control throughout “Sloosha’s Crossin’.” Old Georgie appears to him as a devilish, whispering presence, part hallucination and part inherited belief, who urges him toward cowardice, betrayal, or violence. At moments of moral decision, this voice reinforces submission to fear. For instance, when Meronym first seeks his help, Zachry hesitates, hearing Old Georgie’s taunts that assisting an outsider will bring ruin. The voice repeatedly frames self-preservation as the only rational course, discouraging any action that might challenge existing hierarchies or expose him to danger (Mitchell 253–55).

This internalisation of power is most evident in Zachry’s inaction during moments of crisis. When violence threatens his community, Old Georgie’s presence intensifies, urging him to prioritise survival over solidarity. In this sense, domination no longer operates through formal institutions, but through psychological conditioning, where fear regulates behaviour from within.

However, this control is not total. Zachry’s decision to assist Meronym marks a decisive rupture in this cycle. Despite Old Georgie’s warnings, he ultimately chooses to guide her to the mountain observatory, an act that requires both trust and courage (Mitchell 284–86). This moment is significant because it is not driven by certainty or heroism but by a fragile ethical impulse that overrides fear.

The culmination of this shift occurs during the Kona attack, when Zachry actively resists rather than retreating into passivity. His actions demonstrate that the internalised voice of domination can be confronted and, at least temporarily, overcome. The narrative thus suggests that even deeply ingrained structures of fear and subjection are not immutable. They can be disrupted through acts of ethical decision-making.

Despite the pervasive violence of the post-apocalyptic world, the narrative retains traces of ethical possibility. Meronym, as a representative of a more advanced civilisation, embodies an alternative model of knowledge and responsibility. Her willingness to aid Zachry's community contrasts sharply with the predatory logic of the Kona. Zachry's transformation, from fearful compliance to ethical action, constitute moments of awakening in the novel. His decision to help Meronym, even at great personal risk, echoes Ewing's abolitionist commitment and Sonmi's revolutionary testimony.

One of the most distinctive features of *Cloud Atlas* is its emphasis on micro-resistance, small, localised acts of defiance that challenge larger systems of domination. Rather than foregrounding revolutionary upheaval, Mitchell focuses on incremental ethical decisions. Adam Ewing's metaphor of the "multitude of drops" (Mitchell 509) encapsulates this perspective. The image suggests that collective transformation emerges not from singular heroic acts but from the accumulation of individual choices. Jason Mezey interprets this as an assertion of "individual agency and collective identity" within global systems (13). This formulation aligns with contemporary critiques of neoliberal individualism, which often isolates agency from collective structures.

Emmanuel Levinas's philosophy provides a compelling framework for understanding the ethical dimension of these acts. For Levinas, ethics arises from the

encounter with the Other, which imposes an infinite responsibility that precedes rational calculation (197). In *Cloud Atlas*, such encounters recur across narratives: Ewing's recognition of the humanity of enslaved individuals, Luisa Rey's commitment to exposing corporate wrongdoing, Sonmi's awakening to the suffering of fellow fabricants, and Zachry's decision to trust Meronym. Each of these moments involves a confrontation with alterity that disrupts self-interest. The ethical response is not predetermined but emerges from the recognition of shared vulnerability.

Hannah Arendt's analysis of the "banality of evil" illuminates the novel's critique of systemic violence. Arendt argues that atrocities are often perpetrated not by monstrous individuals but by ordinary people who fail to think critically about their actions (287). This insight resonates throughout *Cloud Atlas*. Many of the novel's agents of violence, corporate executives, bureaucrats, and guards, are not portrayed as inherently evil but as participants in systems that normalise exploitation.

Sonmi's narrative is particularly instructive. The functionaries who oversee the fabricant system operate within a framework that renders their actions acceptable. Their failure lies not in malicious intent but in ethical disengagement.

Against this backdrop, acts of resistance acquire heightened significance. They represent moments of critical reflection that interrupt the banality of violence.

Mitchell's humanism is not universalist. It does not assume an inherent goodness in human nature; rather, it recognises the persistence of violence while insisting on the possibility of ethical choice. This position aligns with critical humanism, a framework that acknowledges historical injustice while affirming the value of human agency. In *Cloud Atlas*, humanism is not an abstract ideal, but a practice enacted through concrete decisions.

One of the most striking features of *Cloud Atlas* is the manner in which each narrative is embedded within another. This structure foregrounds the transmission of stories across time, suggesting that narrative itself is a medium of ethical continuity. Patrick O'Donnell emphasises that Mitchell's fiction is deeply invested in the idea that storytelling is "a key to the survival of the species" (7). Stories preserve not only events but values, enabling ethical insights to persist beyond individual lifespans.

Each narrative in *Cloud Atlas* is mediated through a specific form, journal, letters, manuscript, film, orison, and oral history. This mediation highlights the interpretive nature of storytelling. No narrative is presented as unmediated truth. Each is shaped by its form and context. By foregrounding the constructed nature of narratives, the novel invites critical engagement rather than passive consumption.

The interconnections between narratives create a network of ethical resonance. Characters encounter the stories of others, drawing inspiration or insight from them. For example, Sonmi's engagement with earlier texts informs her own understanding of resistance.

Initially, Sonmi is an obedient fabricant, trained to accept her role within the consumerist hierarchy of Neo Seoul. Her transformation begins when she is taken to Papa Song's diner after hours and introduced, illicitly, to reading and viewing prohibited materials. Among these is a recording of *The Ghastly Ordeal of Timothy Cavendish*, which she watches repeatedly. The film's depiction of confinement, coercion, and eventual escape becomes a lens through which she begins to interpret her own condition, recognising parallels between Cavendish's institutional imprisonment and the systemic control exercised over fabricants (Mitchell 230-32).

As her education continues under Hae-Joo Im, Sonmi gains access to a wider archive of forbidden knowledge in the form of philosophical texts, historical accounts, and

political documents. These materials deepen her awareness of exploitation and allow her to conceptualise her experience not as an individual anomaly but as part of a broader system of domination. Her language shifts accordingly. She moves from the programmed idiom of consumer servitude to a more reflective and critical discourse, culminating in her formulation that "to enslave an individual is to enslave a nation" (Mitchell 344).

Sonmi's own testimony, recorded as an orison, becomes itself a text for future readers, embedding her resistance within the novel's larger chain of narrative transmission. Her engagement with earlier texts thus operates in two directions: it shapes her ethical awakening, and it ensures that her experience will, in turn, inform others. In this way, Mitchell presents reading not as passive consumption but as an active, transformative practice that enables recognition, critique, and resistance.

This intertextuality reinforces the idea that ethical action is not isolated but relational. Each narrative contributes to a broader ethical discourse, shaping the possibilities available to subsequent characters. While *Cloud Atlas* employs many postmodern techniques, like fragmentation, intertextuality, and metafiction, it ultimately moves beyond postmodern skepticism. The novel does not simply deconstruct meaning, but it seeks to reconstruct ethical frameworks.

The concept of metamodernism provides a useful framework for understanding this shift. As articulated by van den Akker and Vermeulen, metamodernism involves an oscillation between opposing tendencies, like hope and despair, and sincerity and irony (5). *Cloud Atlas* exemplifies this oscillation. It acknowledges the persistence of violence, yet affirms the possibility of resistance. It employs irony, yet ultimately embraces ethical sincerity. This oscillation allows the novel to avoid the pitfalls of both cynicism and naive optimism.

The metamodern framework has significant ethical implications. By refusing to resolve tensions between hope and despair, the novel maintains a space for agency within uncertainty. Ethical action becomes a matter of navigation rather than certainty. In *Cloud Atlas*, ethics is not grounded in universal principles but in the ongoing negotiation of complex social realities.

Thus, *Cloud Atlas* offers a profound meditation on the persistence of violence and the possibility of resistance. By tracing the recurrence of domination across historical contexts, the novel exposes the limitations of narratives that posit progress as inevitable. At the same time, it resists the temptation to embrace nihilism. Instead, Mitchell articulates a vision of ethical agency grounded in relationality and incremental action. The metaphor of the "multitude of drops" encapsulates this vision, suggesting that meaningful change emerges from the accumulation of individual choices.

The novel's formal structure reinforces this argument. By linking disparate narratives, it demonstrates the interconnectedness of human actions and the enduring relevance of ethical decisions. Storytelling becomes not merely a mode of representation, but a practice of resistance.

Ultimately, *Cloud Atlas* challenges readers to reconsider their own position within systems of power. It suggests that while domination may be pervasive, it is not inevitable. Ethical action, however small, has the potential to disrupt even the most entrenched structures. In this sense, the novel's closing gesture is not one of resolution but of invitation. It calls upon readers to recognise their role in shaping the future, to act against the logic of power, and to contribute their own "drop" to the ocean of human history.

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