SCENE STIR: How we begin to see the biosphere in David Mitchell’s *Cloud Atlas*
Abstract

This essay marks the degrading biosphere in David Mitchell’s *Cloud Atlas* and argues that its narrative disclosure is meaningfully explored using the idea of a growing ecological awareness. The book depicts agentive nonhumans that are unseen or under-attended by the novel’s humans. I suggest this literary presentation of the biosphere is best understood as *after* the discovery of global warming when matters of ecological concern “intruded,” to use Timothy Morton’s word, on a human-only society with underequipped modes of historical thought. To construct my reading, I motivate recent work in object-oriented philosophies that would eschew anthropocentric metaphysics. I unpack *Cloud Atlas’* ecological vision using Morton’s philosophy in which he explores the conceptual and aesthetic consequences of the *hyperobject* – a thing that is massively distributed in time and space relative to humans.

My analysis will examine passages and techniques that construct *Cloud Atlas’* “scenery,” and I argue that they evoke a degrading biosphere that interacts substantially with the human-only personal dramas. Features of the book’s formal construction allow for the animation of this scenery in the reader’s cross-novel interpretation. I look at how characters narrate this scenery to build my argument that the novel’s ecological vision makes claims on its storytelling characters. But as those characters still miss the long-view historical perspectives afforded the reader, they are shown to want community. I end by ruminating on how *Cloud Atlas*, which would “stretch” the literary novel, questions what the novel is at this ecological moment.

**Keywords:** *Cloud Atlas*; nonhumans; Anthropocene; Timothy Morton; Bruno Latour; object oriented ontology
# Table of Contents

Introduction .......................... 2

1: Environmental Parallax and the Mystery of the Novel ........... 11

2: Animating the Holo-scenery: The Planet in Time ............... 20

3: Gold in Muddy Torrents: The People on the Planet in Time ....... 33

Conclusion ................................ 43

Works Cited ............................... 48
Introduction

Qua story, it can only have one merit: that of making the audience want to know what happens next. And conversely it can only have one fault: that of making the audience not want to know what happens next…. It is the lowest and simplest of literary organisms. Yet it is the highest factor common to all the very complicated organisms known as novels.

-E. M. Forster, *Aspects of the Novel*

The epigraph comes from the 1927 compilation of Forster’s Trinity College lectures. In Chapter 2 he observes that “…the actors in a story are usually human…” and speculates that while “…science may enlarge the novel, by giving it fresh subject-matter…. the help has not been given yet…” (Forster 54). Forster’s notion of a novelistic actor is an interesting touchstone for this essay in two ways: first, a novel’s actors are typically read to be its individual human characters, and second, Science\(^1\)—if it is thought as an objective authority producing discoveries from a “unified nature” (*Politics of Nature* 249)—should “help” novels to do otherwise. That “help,” if we dare call it that, may have been given, but not in any way Forster may have meant. This essay will use the idea that a growing ecological awareness, particularly as described by literary-scholar-turned-ecological-philosopher Timothy Morton, marks a conceptual shift that challenges a default notion of what counts for an actor in a literary novel. David Mitchell’s *Cloud Atlas* is a novel in which one might have trouble reading its human characters are lone actors, and this essay will argue that they are rather implicated in a novelistic biosphere whose own degradation is

\(^1\) I will capitalize Science following Bruno Latour in *Politics of Nature* who distinguishes it from “the sciences.” He explains, “I contrast Science, defined as the politicization of the sciences… in order to make public life impotent by bringing to bear on it the threat of salvation by an already unified nature, with the sciences, in the plural and lower case; their practice is defined as one of the five essential skills of the collective in search of propositions with which it is to constitute the common world and take responsibility for maintaining the plurality of external realities.” (249).
dramatized. If the literary novel as a genre has been read to typically make humans the key actors – an important genome in Forster’s “lowest of literary organisms” from the epigraph – this essay is interested in how *Cloud Atlas* dramatizes and makes a key actor of an immense nonhuman, the biosphere. More generally, the essay would suggest how an ecological awareness makes it look arbitrary to read human characters as sole agents in a static setting or background. *Cloud Atlas* is such a novel where the background cannot be read as inanimate and eventually cannot be read as “background.”

The novel tells six stories of roughly equal length. It begins a story set in *circa* 1850 and ends it abruptly at a midway point, then begins another set at a later date and in a new location that is also interrupted halfway through. There are five stories begun and interrupted. Then the sixth story, set in a post-apocalyptic future, is told from start to finish and followed by the second half of the fifth to its end, the second half of the fourth to its end, backwards in time until we read the first story to its end in *circa* 1850. The halves are roughly equal in length (about 40 pages in the Scepter edition), so that the novel’s structural symmetry makes it like a Russian nesting doll, that analogy suggested in *Cloud Atlas* itself, although the matryoshka on each shell wears a different costume. The first story, *The Pacific Journal of Adam Ewing*, is told by an American notary named Adam Ewing on a South Pacific island. The American makes the acquaintance of a British physician Dr. Henry Goose who chooses to follow Ewing on a journey by ship back to the States. Ewing, witness to a British colonial heyday, is convinced by Goose that he is afflicted by a parasite and is slowly poisoned by the sociopathic doctor on the claustrophobic sea voyage. The second story, *Letters from Zedelgem*, follows a young, wayward musical prodigy, Robert Frobisher, in 1931 who – broke and unemployed – leaves his native England to seek patronage with a once-great composer living in the Belgian countryside. There in residence Frobisher’s work gains some attention, although only through the established reputation of his vain, credit-taking patron, Vyvyan Ayrs. And the petulant youth jeopardizes his limited success by beginning an affair with his patron’s wife. The third story, *Half-Lives – The First Luisa Rey Mystery*, set in 1975 and composed in the style of an “airport thriller,” stages a corporate intrigue about nuclear energy in the Californian city of Buenas Yerbas (a play on Yerba Buena, the name of the 19th century settlement that would become San Francisco). A plucky journalist, Luisa Rey, faces conniving corporate bigwigs and a sociopathic henchman in trying to locate and
publicize a report that declares a new nuclear reactor unstable. In the fourth story, *The Ghastly Ordeal of Timothy Cavendish*, a crotchety book publisher fleeing thugs in a roughly present-day (or 2004) London is hoodwinked by his cuckolded brother into voluntarily admitting himself to a retirement home in Northern England. Only, the home is operated by a despotic, compliancy-demanding Nurse Noakes setting the stage for a quirky prison break. Story five puts the reader in a not-too-distant-future\(^2\) Korea. *An Orison of Sonmi—451* recounts the “ascension” of Sonmi, a clone/slave food server, who escapes from her subterranean restaurant seemingly with the help of an underground revolutionary group that operates in hopeless opposition to a 1984-like corpocratic hegemony. Sonmi is permitted an education in a PR effort for clone abolition. She recounts her story after she has been captured and sentenced to death. The sixth story *Sloosha’s Crossin’ an’ Ev’rythin’ After* takes place in a future with an undisclosed temporal distance from Sonmi’s story. The planet has suffered “the Fall,” a calamitous mass death of humans and the loss of civilization and culture. Zachry, an illiterate shepherd on a tribe of Hawaii Island, is visited by Meronym, an anthropologist of sorts, from a more technological, seafaring people who are facing extinction by pathogen. At the climax, Zachry’s group and family are slaughtered by a belligerent island tribe, and Meronym helps him leave home.

The collection of stories with roughly equal dramatic weights\(^3\) takes an inspiration from Italo Calvino’s *If on a Winter’s Night a Traveler*, which also interrupts narratives that make familiar literary allusions\(^4\). Mitchell uses a fragmented narrative structure in his first novel *Ghostwritten* (1999) and his most recent novel *The Bone Clocks* (2014) (“Soul Cycle”). But one thing that distinguishes *Cloud Atlas* from these other novels is that the reader may identify a geo-logic across its sections. There are clear evocations of a biosphere whose condition informs the place and possibilities of subsequent narratives as they progress in the historical scheme. This essay pursues a reading of the book along those lines, looking at how a biospheric degradation that is partly hidden to the sectional characters is evoked for the reader,

---

\(^2\) In the section Sonmi tells her interviewer that the previous Cavendish story happened when “your grandfather’s grandfather… was kicking inside his mother’s womb” (*Cloud Atlas* 244). We might guess 150 to 200 years from present.

\(^3\) By which I mean that in some respects the reader is not to privilege one over another either by thinking it is more important to the development of the novel or by wanting to reach its conclusion (feeling that its interruption is more suspenseful than another). That is not to say one might like the stories more or less.

\(^4\) See McMorran for a comparison of these two novels.
how the characters are implicated in its degradation, and how the evocations of biosphere are presented with stylistic parameters that influence how one reads the novel’s characters.

Many critics have indicated already that Mitchell’s 2004 publication is a noteworthy achievement for the literary novel. Fredric Jameson in *The Antinomies of Realism* considers *Cloud Atlas* a milestone showing a way for the historical novel that will “necessarily be Science-Fictional inasmuch as it will have to include questions about the fate of our social system” (Jameson 298). Book critic David Wood calls it “a brilliant postmodern suite,” (“Soul Cycle”), and he lauds Mitchell’s ability as a storyteller and uses his work to discuss new currents for the literary novel industry (“The Floating Library”). Berthold Schoene, in *Cosmopolitan Novel*, finds that *Cloud Atlas* and *Ghostwritten* are well-suited literary performances of an increasingly globalized world whose “divergent perspectives” “span and unify the globe” (Schoene 97). In a 2011 collection of essays about Mitchell’s work to that date, *Cloud Atlas* stands out as the most cited indicating its ambitious scope and the great distance between its thematic harbors. It has been read for its transcendence of postmodernist techniques in framing posthumanist themes (Machinal 127), its imaginative uses of discursive techniques in reflecting on the narrative structure of identity (Hopf 105), its utopian impulses (Edwards 177) and for a postcolonial critique considered as a work of speculative fiction (Dunlop 201).

But while several interpreters point out significant ecological themes, they do not fully account for the scope and agency of the novel’s biospheric degradation and possibly because, as this essay argues, it appears at first to unfold offstage. *Cloud Atlas* may be included in what Heather Hicks generally categorizes as a wave of “serious eschatological fiction” (Hicks, no page), and what can more specifically be characterized as works from established novelists that coincided with or responded to a growing public knowledge about global warming and subsequent inaction and denial. Just as there have been scores of theoretical meditations on the conceptual shifts occasioned by global warming, one can discern a number of literary responses in novels. For example, in Jonathan Franzen’s *Freedom* (2010) a brand of global environmentalism, as it informs the notion of humans living aberrantly, affects

---

5 For example, the book has been connected with a post-natural ecological perspective (Economides 615), an interrogation of historical thought during a time of global crisis (Hicks no page), a momentary glimpse of Marx’s ‘naturalization of man and humanization of nature’ (quoted in Edwards 185), and its deployment of speculative fiction as a Postcolonial writing of a nonhuman Other (Dunlop 215).
Cavalier  6

psychic and social spaces in a domestic drama. Or, in Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road* (2006) a nuclear catastrophe that makes food and other resources scarce also makes mutual human respect look fragile. *Cloud Atlas* can be read to do both of these things – evoke an apocalyptic menace that can be read to weigh on its characters and consider the social conceits of civilization as contingent on stable environmental conditions. But the novel also establishes the ontological heft of a degrading biosphere\(^6\) by making it shape the possibilities for its sectional stories. That ontology is evinced, in the first place, because the novel spans centuries in which it is historically understood (or anticipated) that the biosphere will degrade because of a growing total number of humans and prolific use of their technologies. Taken by itself, this may not seem a remarkable dramatization, which is effected by contrasting two temporal scales – the short time of an individual section and the long time implied in the historical scheme. But this essay will argue that the book bears another ecological distinction in that it can be read to *reveal* extra-human historical agency. And by this recognition the reader may reappraise an understanding of the sectional characters as implicated in the degradation of the biosphere. This revelation in the narrative is meaningfully explored using Morton’s scholarship in which he argues that the human conception of “background” is subverted by a growing ecological awareness in which it is replaced by one or multiple “objects” and sometimes very large ones like the biosphere, which he calls a “hyperobject.” This is the mechanism of revelation in *Cloud Atlas*. What we have read as “background” to the sections, or what I will call “scenery” in this essay, is (conceptually) only the local manifestation of a large object and is (in the novel) historically agentive across the sections.

Before introducing some of Morton’s philosophical ideas, I should explain how I mean to use the word “biosphere” in this essay. I will not and could not use it to treat David Mitchell as either a scientist or as a historian or to examine how exactly it

\(^6\) That is, a certain conception of how and how quickly the biosphere can degrade. Understandings of the seriousness and immediacy of certain global ecological problems may have changed since 2004, but it will not be the aim of this essay to analyze these changes in detail. But just for example, in his 2010 book *Eaarth* environmentalist Bill McKibben describes some of the more recently anticipated discomforts of global warming: Mosquitoes carrying waterborne diseases like dengue fever and malaria will thrive and move north (74); a shortage of food, water, and resources in certain parts of the world will cause mass migrations for the planet’s poorest (83) and make armed conflict more tempting for developing nations (85); larger and more frequent storms will overflow inadequate sewage infrastructure, polluting lakes and oceans (61); and the constant threat of weather disaster will cause mass psychoses (75). Even the angle of McKibben’s polemic marks a change in the way we think about global ecology. The Earth has *already* been transformed, and we may be experiencing these discomforts in the present.
is represented in the text as accurate or fallible. I proceed, admittedly, with a loose definition as an understanding of the total of interdependent biological, geological, and chemical systems that make the planet habitable to humans. What is represented in the text is more a “biosphere” than a (poetic sounding) “planet” or “Earth,” which might include deep rock layers that do not seem to be of concern in the novel. But perhaps the most important way to characterize how this essay will think of “biosphere,” and ask the reader to think about it in Mitchell’s book, is to say that it is not a place. That is, the novel does not portray a place, the biosphere, that one might visit and get the feel and sense of like New York (and then the novelist moves to Paris and thinks about New York and writes a book about “New York”). Biosphere is what makes the existence of human characters possible, and is the human characters themselves (and their choices, actions, and histories). An interesting feature of Morton’s ecology is that to think a very large thing like biosphere is still to think something bounded (not something infinite). Cloud Atlas’ biosphere is one between the start date of circa 1850 and an end date of, perhaps, 2450 (for a reason I will explain below). And this span of time means it is a biosphere intimately tied with the behaviors of humans in their greatest numbers, much as described by geologist Paul Crutzen’s Anthropocene proposal. Humans have gained “dominance of biological, chemical and geological processes on Earth” (Crutzen and Schwägerl no page).

For that reason the degradation of the biosphere as informed by ideas from the sciences is intimately connected with what we have thought of as human history as Dipesh Chakrabarty argues in his now widely noted “The Climate of History: Four Theses” (221). And one of Morton’s ideas about a new “ecological awareness” is that it is a growing thought that present-day humans are interconnected with one another and with humans of the past and future, not only through our human histories, but

---

7 I refer here and later to Crutzen’s Anthropocene proposal, which would rewrite the latest chapter of a geological story to include the human species (Szerszynski 166). The Holocene period marked the end of the ice ages when the climate warmed enough for an upright hominid to begin systematically planting and harvesting grasses and grains (168). The species sustained more offspring and developed technologies with permanent biological, chemical, and geological consequence. Just an epochal instant ago, the hominid species developed fossil fuel burning technologies that exponentially accelerated its multiplication (171). Many of this new multitude of individual organisms developed behaviors that result in the continued use of these fossil fuels, which, among other things, rapidly adds carbon dioxide to the air. That invisible gas traps more solar heat, and the heat accelerates the average warming of the planet’s biosphere. A hotter planet extinguishes great numbers of other species at a rate on par with previous “extinction events” (Wagler 80). This is just one of many bio-geo-chemically transformative behaviors that this species’ members repeatedly reenact, now so ubiquitously that it is said to have “dominance of biological, chemical and geological processes on Earth” (Crutzen and Schwägerl no page).
along avenues once cordoned in a conceptual space called Nature\(^8\) or else as described by the natural sciences (See *The Ecological Thought* 18-19). By this route historical concern is extended beyond the human, and I will use this idea to explore the scenery of the novel. As mentioned, the novel reveals this extra-human agency: The reader slowly refocuses on objects of the “scenery” acknowledging them as historically significant and multiplying the field of narrative actors. Because this agency is only attended to after the reader understands that the scenery stirs we might think of this effect as a sort of environmental parallax\(^9\). That is, the reader understands that the “environment” or “background” – thought of as distant or as empty containers, and that Morton would replace with the “hyperobject” – is shown to change in the transit of the sectional stories. But when the reader has understood that what is evoked in the scenery also performs in a historical context in the novel, the reader may re-attend to the sectional narratives and find textual evidence that what was thought as background – especially in lines only briefly acknowledged by the narrator or mentioned as an aside to human action in the section – is connecting the otherwise autonomous sections and implicating the characters intimately. And so as read for its ecology, *Cloud Atlas* effects what we might think of as a narrative deep field focus. The reader re-attends to objects referred to in passing because they provide avenues of thinking novelistic agency.

Schoene and others have praised the plurality of narrative perspectives for rendering something like a performance of “human existence” or the “globe”\(^{10}\). For example, Schoene says this plurality “captur[es] its existential exposure and finitude… summoning humanity’s world creative potential as well as its tragic (self)

---

\(^8\) And here I will capitalize the N as Morton does in *Ecology Without Nature* to designate a reified concept which when invoked in narrative Morton finds to be empty and harmful to ecology.

\(^9\) To give credit where it is due, I thought of this idea reading about architectural parallax in Slavoj Žižek’s *Living in the End Times*, though his interesting philosophical explorations using the “parallax view” are, admittedly, at odds with the philosophers referred to in this essay.

\(^{10}\) Says Schoene, “Mitchell’s ambition is to imagine globality by depicting worldwide human living in multifaceted, delicately entwined, serialised snapshots of the human condition, marked by global connectivity and virtual proximity as much as psycho-geographical detachment and xenophobic segregation” (98). Schoene, like some other interpreters, treats *Cloud Atlas* with *Ghostwritten*, and I believe that closes some doors on interesting discussions about historicity raised in *Cloud Atlas* one of which is the idea of a species boundary (an idea explored at length by Morton in *The Ecological Thought*). Here in the footnote I must admit that I use “humans” in this essay without having the space to explore why *Cloud Atlas*, through references to cloning and genetic design, might have us question if Zachry from the far-flung future should be called “human” with Adam Ewing in the first section. The catch-all conceptions of “humans” or the “we” referred to in ecological discourses (like, for example, the Anthropocene narrative) have been interrogated by Chakrabarty and by two scholars in a convincing Marxist-flavored intervention about the Anthropocene proposal (see Malm and Hornborg).
destructiveness into a kind of literary communality which his readers are not only invited to relate to, but must partake of as inhabitants of one and the same world” (Schoene 98). This is only the start, I argue. On revisiting the narrative, the human characters as foci are dimmed in the vast field of geo-historical objects that come into view inside of and as intimated across the novel’s individual sections. These objects are spatially and temporally vast and make the sectional narratives appear as stray flotsam in a heaving ocean. If the singular narrative perspectives are constitutional parts of a created “world,” they are shown to be meager and myopic notions of the novelistic planet that is apprehensible only to the reader. This is, in a sense, a grand dramatic irony, but it is so large that it implicates even the reader’s inattention to the scenery in the degradation of the novelistic biosphere.

To explore the evocation of a degrading biosphere, which however vast and agentive is partly offstage, I will use the work of Morton who has published several books and a number of articles in recent years to explore the emptiness of Nature (in *Ecology Without Nature*), the interconnectivity of ecological thinking (in *The Ecological Thought*), and most recently the philosophical and aesthetic ramifications of acknowledging objects that are massively distributed in space and time relative to humans (in *Hyperobjects*). Morton’s recent work, especially in *Hyperobjects*, draws on a philosophical movement named objected oriented ontology (OOO), associated with the so-called speculative realists. Speculative realism is an umbrella term for a number of thinkers who would remedy a sort of philosophical sticking point in which aspects of reality cannot be discussed without problematic “correlations” to human thought (*Hyperobjects* 9). But what of unobservable stars, the speculative realist might ask, whose existence is statistically likely? Or is the Big Bang as real as a sofa cushion? In *Hyperobjects* Morton argues that massive objects – like global warming, black holes, or the total amount of Styrofoam on Earth – are apprehended in partial ways, only non-locally or in non-total temporalities (*Hyperobjects* 45, 77). Their massiveness, complexity, incomprehensibility, and realness humiliates and relativizes human subjectivity and spotlights its biases and limitations in knowing the whole story, so to speak. But Morton argues, especially in *The Ecological Thought*, that refusing to think the bounded-ness of Goliathan objects like the biosphere (and thinking instead of an unbounded Nature or a pristine environment) is inimical to global ecology (*The Ecological Thought* 40).
In the first section of this analysis I will describe *Cloud Atlas*’ construction to explain how the novel orchestrates a revealing of extra-human agency. It does this, I argue, by coaxing the reader to locate a novelistic coherence. In section two, I will look at textual evocations of the scenery and examine some of the different ways that the novel implicates its characters in the drama of the degrading biosphere. The conceptual shift that undergirds this section will be that the reader begins to see humans and human action not as contained by a background environment but as component in a biosphere11. In the third section, I will discuss the requisites established for the narrators (or for the characters through whom the narrators observe) for presenting the seemingly ancillary material with which the novel evokes cross-sectional historical significances. That is to say, in order to provide the sectional narrative with material that the reader can connect across sections and within the parameters set by its pastiche, the character through which the story is told needs to think a certain way and do certain things. This makes them similar in some respects.

I must mention an important methodological assumption that will factor into my reading. I do not deny the novel a historical ontology that is denied or understated in other readings12. The book retroactively in-authenticates or doubly fictionalizes all five stories except the sixth (for example, Frobisher in his own second section discovers and reads the journal of Adam Ewing, and fictional Frobisher questions its authenticity). But while I may comment on the constructedness of history and these instances of metafiction, I read that the orchestration of literary amalgams (from *circa* 1850 to a far-flung future) proceeds from a particular historical vision. This is all to say that for this ecological reading I do not treat this orchestration as fantastic or ahistorical in any way. I will not use that assumption to treat Mitchell as a historian and not either a scientist, but to say if there is something like an “actor” that is the biosphere, it is arbitrary not to read it as biosphere in between those implied dates (and not, for example, of the Pleistocene epoch).

---

11 These italicized terms are used at length by Morton and Graham Harman, respectively.
12 See for example Childs and Green (41) or Hopf (118 and 119).
1: Environmental parallax and the mystery of the novel

*Cloud Atlas* employs a narrative effect that we could describe as an “environmental parallax” by which I mean that the reader understands that the background environment of the novel’s stories moves in relation to the six human dramas. Quite simply, the reader observes the global environment degrade as the novel proceeds through time. But that will not be our stopping point because the notion of an environmental background dissolves with close inspection of the sectional narratives. Visual parallax, as Žižek explains it in *Living in the End Times*, produces an “apparent displacement” of a foregrounded object caused by two different points of view of a subject (*Living in the End Times* 244). The two points of view, then, produce two images of the object with no change to the object itself, only to the subject viewpoint. Žižek adds the twist that the visual effect cannot be separated from the time taken to shift subject viewpoints so that “[t]he parallax gap is the inscription of our changing temporal experience…” (245). So too the parallax of *Cloud Atlas*’ planetary environment, which becomes increasingly inhospitable as the book progresses through time with each of the first sectional halves. That is, the sectional story is seen to move in relation to a backdrop of a distant human environment, which partly contains its dramatic “setting.” The parallax is produced in the temporal progression to a post-apocalyptic future. But having seen the environment degrade the reader may re-attend to the text and find evidence for a massive and complex biosphere that is intimately intertwined with the human dramas. It is not simply background. The objects of the scenery are intimately near to the human characters, acting upon and acted upon in ways meaningful across the novel’s sections. The novel both sets up and disperses with the supra-sectional subject position that discerns an environmental parallax by coaxing the reader to locate a novelistic coherence and a historical causality that remains phantasmal if the reader wears human-only blinders. Evoking biosphere means imagining historical interconnectivity in both human-historical and scientific modes of thought. And in the way this essay will construct an ecological reading of the novel, it puts one car driving

---

13 I want to note that this could not be an interpretation that essentializes the environmental concerns in the novel. The novel resists a dogmatic global environmentalism if simply because the finales of the geologically nanoscale human dramas are important to the reader. Ecology could not trump the human characters. It is by them and for them.
on the same interpretive level as all the cars on Earth driving. One car might be significant to the humans in the sectional story, but all the cars on Earth are significant to all stories in the future because they emit greenhouse gases. One car driving as a meronymy, a part that evokes the whole of all cars driving, is relevant for why the sectional stories belong in one novel.

But before the reader has that ecological perspective of interconnectivity, the novel encourages the reader to see its stories as “set” in a surrounding environment that degrades despite the story action. The book explicitly refers to a great number of environmental misdeeds and then a number of anticipated environmental effects on human society. Framing a split that way is a simplification for two reasons: (1) the book does not neatly separate “environmental” misdeeds from the effects on the human characters and not from matters connected with globalization; and (2) as Morton suggests “environmental” matters in a time of globalization are only a prelude to the radical granting of historical concern to all things (Hyperobjects 9, 22). Along what span of time does Cloud Atlas’ historical vision unfold? While the novel indicates that the first story begins in 1849 or 1850, there are no explicit indications of when the futural narratives take place. There is, however, a suggestion that the historical scheme might coincide with the life of an oak tree, or 600 years as indicated in the text, which can match up with other clues in the book. At the place in the text of this suggestion there is one of many implied, self-referential rubrics: “Two hundred to grow, two hundred to live, two hundred to die” (Cloud Atlas 418). One could do worse than use this to guide our ecological portrayal. The novel tracks a growth, a life, and a death.

The environmental matters mentioned explicitly are invasive species and resource depletion (12-13), peak oil (104), proliferation of nuclear energy and radiation levels (126), the exponential multiplication of consumer products (123/4), air and ocean pollution (93), deforestation (150), agricultural pests (159), cloning (170), untreated sewage discharge (93), atmospheric carbon buildup (210, 236), urban

---

14 I am eliding a statistical negotiation (i.e. if there were only eleven greenhouse gas emitters on Earth, there would not be global warming) that affects conceptions about individual ecological agency and historiography some of whose issues Chakrabarty raises. The history of driving provides a quick example of the problem: It cannot be thought as a history that runs parallel to its present-day CO2 contribution to global warming. That is, the material contribution of driving in 1920 is not meaningfully invoked in thinking about present-day global warming, while present-day driving (with 1 billion drivers) is meaningfully invoked. One might talk about driving in 1920 because it presages the global material impact as a cultural and social phenomenon that spread.
sprawl (216), fertilizer use (344), genetically modified plant life (344), insecticide use (344), factory farming (359), and unexploded landmines (458). In the novel one understands that the effects of these behaviors accumulate. The aesthetic is of a sort of terraforming, a degradation of the biosphere much as in the Anthropocene proposal. On Cloud Atlas’ planet there are “deadlands” where humans “perish… like bacteria in bleach” (215). Deadlands “encroach” on civilization.

This encroaching inhospitality is a reason to believe that “setting” the final story on Hawaii Island is more preordained or restricted than the notion of a story “setting” might otherwise imply if it is thought of as background for the human stories. Here I stand against reading that Mitchell’s selection of diverse locales would do something like perform globality by which one might mean the interconnectedness of a human-only (or economic interdependence only) world, society, or culture. I do not contradict this reading on the grounds that there are not enough settings to evoke a globe. On the contrary, as Cloud Atlas has figured the logic of its biosphere, there is nowhere else to “set” the sixth story. The novel implies Hawaii Island is one of few places where humans are able to live although not without problems. The environmental misdeeds mentioned in the previous list have consequences that affect the characters and actions in the two central stories. These include flooding (154), cancer (112), crop-wilting drought (344), general toxicity (215), record-setting weather (230), swollen and nonnegotiable rivers caused by frequent, powerful storms (249, 300), the need to eat a “gammy dog” (249), species extinction (212), lots of dust (344), more clouds, a common respiratory affliction called “mukelung” (252), a skin disease called “redscab sickness” (264), acid rain that burns the skin (331), plague ravaged slums (331), rogue crop-genomes (332), parasites (332), mass migrations and exploitation by traffickers (332), slum squalor and organ harvesting (332), regions referred to as “melanoma and malaria belts” (341), polluted soil (341), and lifeless rivers (341). To read Cloud Atlas as engaging with History and to imply

---

15 Where “terraforming” would usually refer to humans altering another planet, like Mars, to make it habitable, Morton cleverly uses this word to describe the accumulative geological changes that humans make on Earth (Hyperobjects 4).

16 And with this aesthetic rendering the book offers a key to thinking about how the matryoshka shells become smaller.

17 For a short, layman’s presentation of the debate about cloud feedback and the types of clouds that will multiply on a warmer Earth see “What is the net feedback from clouds?” with a link in the bibliography. Clipped readings of “Souls cross ages like clouds cross skies” (Cloud Atlas 324) exemplify oversight of the geo-historical ontology intrinsic to this novel. There will be more clouds as there will be more souls in the near future, and I find a number of indications in the novel that Mitchell meant clouds to be a more complex symbol than could be accounted for as a metaphor for human souls.
human events, actions, decisions, and thoughts by themselves is myopic. The biosphere is perhaps its most significant historical object. In Zachry’s section one reads that humans “rip out the skies an’ boil up the seas an’ poison soil with crazed atoms an’ donkey ‘bout with rotted seeds so new plagues was borned an’ babbits [i.e. babies] was freakbirthed. Fin’ly, bit’ly, then quicksharp, states busted into bar’bric tribes an’ the Civ’lize Days ended, ’cept for a few fold’n’pockets here’n’t here, where its last embers glimmer” (286). Zachry’s people do not frequently live past age 40. At age twelve he fathers a child, but the baby is deformed. Zachry does not understand and blames himself. Obviously, these are not the same conditions for character as in the 2004 London of the fourth section or the 1931 Belgium of the second.

If we read that the novel carries the illusion of a background “environment,” whose status as background is eroded by recognizing that Zachry’s character and story are partly preordained by the “environments” of the previous stories, how is it that we could replace “environment” with biosphere, an ecological conception that would implicate all the actions, circumstances, and surroundings of previous characters? The novel has tricked the reader, in a way, into looking carefully at certain human things, through which historical interconnection is phantasmal, and not at the sectional scenery. Re-attending to the scenery means recognizing that background things referred to in the text are local manifestations (Hyperobjects 39) of historical objects that are spatially and temporally huge. Before speaking about the “huge” things and how they are manifested locally in the text, I will describe how the text fools the reader.

Part of the fun of reading the novel is seeing the way that it sets up and resolves the mystery of why it should be called a novel and not a book of cleverly linked short stories. As it is read in time Cloud Atlas’ sectional “worlds” seem conspicuously produced by previous “worlds” but not in ways that can be immediately traced to individual choice or event. Beginning each new section prompts questions about connection between the characters and plots but not immediately the “setting” because the new section is set in a new place and time. After reading about Adam Ewing the reader may wonder how his story connects to Letters from Zedelghem. A provisional but only partial answer comes when Robert Frobisher, in his own fictional world of 1931, finds and reads the Adam Ewing journal in his narrative. The Frobisher story leaves off after roughly 40 pages without giving more of an answer. The reader may expect causality because the character
voices are neatly demarcated and their stories are plotted and employ causal logic. But
if the reader asks “What is the connection?” the novel never answers with plot.

Each subsequent protagonist encounters the previous character’s story, in
various media, in their own sections, but these narrative encounters do not
significantly affect the individual plotlines (Hicks no pg.). Heather Hicks, in a
compelling reading of Cloud Atlas that explores the tensions between linear and
cyclical perspectives of temporality argues that the embedding of these narrative
encounters in each section also serves to solicit a historical interpretation that would
connect the plotlines in a causal manner, but she observes:

…the superficial fragmentation of the novel may belie a deeper,
coherent structure, and, at least to its midpoint, it could be argued that
the novel has a linear and historical perspective. Yet such causality
remains hypothetical, and the reader is left to contemplate how each
story or set of circumstances may relate to the others. In this respect the
novel rejects the more direct forms of cause and effect that are
associated with linear history. (Hicks no pg.)

This can be read as slight misdirection. The reader is repeatedly tempted to look for
direct/causal connections between the narratives, as for example, the novel reveals
relatively superficial ways to connect the protagonists: they each bear a comet-shaped
birthmark and have moments of déjà vu. Why call the connections “superficial” and
not the fragmentation as Hicks does in the passage? It is perhaps because causality as
delimited to human histories is a commonplace of the literary novel. Causality
restricted to the humans between the sections is spectral in Cloud Atlas, vanishing at
the moment of chasing it. Cloud Atlas strategically exploits the reader’s expectations
of novelistic coherence to illuminate unexpected areas of historical interconnection.
Jameson suggests that the search for connection, not necessarily the connections
themselves, is foregrounded (The Antinomies of Realism 303); the book solicits the
hunt for a hidden unity, and by teaching the reader to look for connection can be
thought, in a limited sense, as performative.\textsuperscript{18}

But the repeated metafictional encounter is only one of a handful of ways that
the stories are either made to intimate iteration (by which they might ask to be
connected) or to intimate autonomy (by which they might merit separate interpretive

\textsuperscript{18} Morton’s The Ecological Thought could also be called performative as indicated by one reviewer
(Keoni 59). In the space of a page the prose hops from glosses of the Cantor set and the Menger
Sponge to Deleuze to time-lapses of the Amazon Basin in order to explain why there is not and never
was a “lifeworld” (The Ecological Thought 55-56). Morton charts how when thoughts become
progressively more complex, it is often entails a subtraction (56), and the hop-along argument is made
in the spirit of thinking the interconnection of reality.
treatment). The stories are repeatedly explained as dramatically autonomous as a starting point for many interpretations\(^\text{19}\). But why? They are, obviously, set off typographically, with page breaks and separate titles. Why then do we call the book a novel and not a book of cleverly linked short stories? There are gestures\(^\text{20}\) that signal narrative modification, inconsequential and yet so uniform as to call attention to their deployment, like controlled variables in a chemistry experiment. First, as mentioned, each section has a different bag of familiar literary allusions, but there is a parameter for that literature: it is Anglophone, canonical and/or Western popular\(^\text{21}\). Each section seems to be an amalgam of book influences that a Western novel reader is meant to find vaguely familiar. Second, the contrast in styles is made uniform. For example, each section deploys distinct typographical markers (ampersands indicate “and” in Adam Ewing section; “half” is indicated numerically in Frobisher’s), and each section has a distinct vocabulary seemingly culled from its evoked literary sources. Third, the time-span of the stories in each section is relatively short, not longer than a year, contrasted with the several-centuries-long span of the historical scheme. The evocation is of a historical step, and the progression in years occurs in steps not too far but far enough apart (80 years between first and second section, 30 years between third and fourth) that they tantalize the reader with linear historical significance. Fourth, there are different characters in each section, though again the reader is tempted because one character recurs. Rufus Sixsmith features as a young lover in the second section and an elderly physicist in the third section. Nevertheless, the stories are far enough apart so that the front-stage action in each section’s relatively short personal dramas does not appear to affect the personal dramas in subsequent stories. The rendering of “steps” in the book’s historical scheme is done with certain rules on display.

If the novel gestures at uniformly autonomous narratives, it also connects them explicitly, though in ways that may be read as superficial or contrived. A protagonist in each section bears a comet-shaped birthmark. As mentioned, each
protagonist encounters the previous story in various media. And occasionally an object from previous stories appears as an aura-emitting relic (Luisa Rey visits a marina where the Prophetess – Adam Ewing’s boat from the first section – is harbored more than a century later). But when the narratives connect explicitly it happens in ways so coincidental and peripheral to the personal dramas that it is difficult to say they connect the stories in a human-historical, causal sense. I find these easy connections act as lures indicating there are more substantial intersections to be found. A consequence is that the novel’s thematic notes are amplified. If the Luisa Rey section explicitly engages with energy use, public relations obfuscation, and sexism then one reads for these “whack-a-moles,” as Mitchell calls regular literary themes (qtd. in Dillon 10), in the other sections.

But the uniformity of these sectional markers does not make for a completely symmetrical nested doll. For starters, there is clearly a start and finish. As I mentioned earlier, the novel can be thought of as a historical mystery. One might describe its novelistic arc as, in some ways, presenting the riddle of how it should be read as one work. Second, there are objects, motifs, themes, and patterns repeated and slightly altered in a variety of ways. Echoes, repetitions, permutations abound. For example, Timothy Cavendish – a book publisher in a story about an escape from a nursing home – notices as an aside that has little to do with the plot of his personal drama, “Cambridge outskirts are all science parks now. Ursula and I went punting beneath that quaint bridge, where those Biotech Space Age cuboids now sit cloning humans for shady Koreans” (Cloud Atlas 170). This incidental observation precedes Somni’s story in which cloning is widespread. Structurally, reading the co-incidence of autonomous narratives that entice the reader to connect them tends to make all things in those individual texts signify and then co-signify in unexpected ways. When re-reading one rediscovers and multiplies cross-sectional significations. It is sometimes difficult to draw a line between connections that are intrinsic to the novel’s historical vision or a product of the reader’s interpretive imagination. But it seems safe to say that the novel would raise a historical, interconnective floodgate, and that gate is raised in the time it takes to read the novel.

To help lift that gate Mitchell makes inventive use of the short-story form. On second readings one sees that a number of narrative moments, often incidental to the sectional plotlines, help the novel echo themes and motifs. Mitchell tellingly calls attention to these connective insertions in a 2006 interview:
I think all novels are actually compounded short stories. It’s just the borders get so porous and so squished up that you no longer see them… And I do structure my novels in that way… Short stories have a background white noise that creates the illusion that the world is much bigger than the mere 10 or 15 pages, and I wanted to see if I could sync up the white noise of the background of short stories. (qtd. in Childs and Green 41)

This “sync up” is a good reason to read with confidence that there is a coherent historical vision, however unattended in the sectional narratives, of biospheric degradation. As the reader apprehends *Cloud Atlas*’ planetary “white noise,” revealed piecemeal in the relatively short sectional dramas, its change constricts the possibilities for the short stories. Luisa Rey escapes from the heat of her world in an air-conditioned diner; Zachry in the central section must contend with raging rivers without modern technology.

Speaking of this background “sync-up” Sarah Dillon smartly conjectures that “Mitchell employs the method in order to take advantage of the condensed intensity of the short story form, but at a novelistic level, in order to suggest a larger fictional world around and beyond that of the specific story he is at that point telling” (Dillon 4-5). The reader attends to two types of story-telling arcs in the novel – that of the individual sections and that of their serial progression, the material for discerning a novelistic arc or cross-sectional “world.” I would assert that this second arc, the mystery of why *Cloud Atlas* is a novel, can also be read as possessing a story logic of “condensed intensity.” The reader attends to the action in the sectional dramas, only intermittently wondering what vital information makes them cohere. From Adam Ewing’s story to Robert Frobisher’s the reader understands provisionally that there is no causal link and must suspend the question “what is the connection?” But partway into Frobisher’s section, the character finds and reads the first half of Adam Ewing’s journal. It is like a clue in the mystery. These incidental metafictional clues accumulate and become more consequential. Frobisher questions the authenticity of Ewing’s journal, but all the previous texts are marked as fictional two sections later when it is revealed that the Luisa Rey story is merely a manuscript submitted to a publisher. This revelation surprises by retroactively in-authenticating the previous three sections and by indicating to the reader that it will be repeated, that there has been a pattern all along. The novel sets up expectations of linear causality and scrambles them, but metafictional moments are revealed tactically in the novel’s arc.
There is a concept from communications theory that helps explain a technique that can give stories a “condensed intensity.” David Foster Wallace uses it to describe the magic of jokes and the “alchemy” of a Franz Kafka parable:

…a certain quantity of vital information removed from but evoked by a communication in such a way as to cause a kind of explosion of associative connections within the recipient. This is probably why the effect of both short stories and jokes often feels sudden and percussive, like the venting of a long-stuck valve. It’s not for nothing that Kafka spoke of literature as ‘a hatchet with which we chop at the frozen seas inside us.’ Nor is it an accident that the technical achievement of great short stories is often called compression—for both the pressure and the release are already inside the reader. (Wallace 61).

After Cloud Atlas’ sixth, central section – the story of Zachry in a post-apocalyptic future – the novel moves through five more endings, keeping the question of historical grand narrative suspended. But there is, I argue, a sort of novelistic “percussive moment,” albeit a conceptual one. We find it in the final paragraphs, in the second half of Adam Ewing’s section:

‘… 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 a drop in a limitless ocean!’

Yet what is any ocean but a multitude of drops? (Cloud Atlas 529)

This percussive moment cannot be explained adequately by the unbounded abstractions of “human nature” or “world,” which are like the “limitless ocean.” Ewing has just declared “I shall pledge myself to the Abolitionist cause” (528), and he is imagining his father-in-law’s response to a newfound activism. His father-in-law’s ocean is “limitless,” but Ewing markedly bounds the concept “ocean,” which might seem methodologically unsound. Where are an ocean’s boundaries anyway? But an abstract infinity, as Morton suggests, is easier to think than a bounded immensity (The Ecological Thought 5), and refusing to think this bounded immensity squashes agency. This self-referential rubric suggests that the novel would show us how it thinks its drops with its conspicuous markers of uniform modulation. But this answer to the mystery only leaves the reader with a larger question: What is the ocean? In the next section I will suggest it is the biosphere, and that the ocean’s drops need not only be imagined with the novel’s individual human characters.
2: Animating the Holo-scenery: The planet in time

What I am calling the sectional “scenery” can be read as agentive in the novel’s historical vision because its evocation in a section is often echoed in ways that magnify its narrative significance. A joke about clones in one section becomes a globe-spanning reality in a future section. This long-historical agency is unrecognized by the sectional protagonists who are preoccupied with the short dramas of their sectional stories. This is a grand dramatic irony: The characters act in their sections without recognizing the larger story unfolding in the things around them. But this is essentially the effect of the environmental parallax, that there is a background story unrecognized by the characters. Because a growing ecological awareness will begin to see the characters as component in the novelistic biosphere we will need to describe and show why the scenery is no longer background.

I have referred to “scenery” thus far without describing how I use the term for this essay. I mean at the narrative level in Cloud Atlas those things referred to in the text that seem to situate or color – spatially, temporally, or otherwise – a seemingly focal dramatic episode in the sectional story. The irony is that the narrative artifacts that “situate” a sectional scene – whether they are about the humans, their words and thoughts and actions, or the material things that surround them and are referred to in passing – also mark a symptom or directly implicate the scene in the historical vision of the novel. The irony hinges on the protagonists’ (and sometimes the reader’s) inability to recognize this “scenery” as historically significant.

The matter of recognition in an ecological context finds meaningful resonances in a number of philosophical approaches that would expand a historical concern beyond the human. Morton’s work represents a clever effort to reorient ecological thinking in this respect. Before discussing concepts from his work, we must first introduce a philosophical movement with roots in Latour’s metaphysics as Graham Harman interprets them in his book Prince of Networks. That movement, object oriented ontology (OOO), would, according to Harman who is a leading practitioner, democratize the ontological status of “children, raindrops, bullet trains, politicians, and numerals” (Prince of Networks 14). An object, Harman explains, is a “unified reality,” physical or otherwise” (“Graham Harman: Objects and the Arts”). It
cannot be fully reduced either downwards to its processes or upwards to its effects; it has a “robust reality” (“Art Without Relations”). “An object is emergent beyond its subcomponents and cannot be explained exhaustively by its pieces alone” (“Art Without Relations”). “Object” has a specific philosophical application here, and OOO does not stop with material things of the human world, an important reason for the attractiveness of the movement to ecologists like Morton. A black hole on the other side of the universe is an object even if unknowable to any human. The black hole is no less a thing than a gumdrop, anthropology, or a mental grocery list. The philosophical groundings for object philosophies were birthed, Harman claims, with Latour’s philosophical epitome: ‘Nothing can be reduced to anything else, nothing can be deduced from anything else, everything may be allied to everything else.”’ (qtd. in Prince of Networks 13). Harman writes “An entire philosophy is foreshadowed…. Every human and nonhuman object now stands by itself as a force to reckon with. No actor, however trivial, will be dismissed as mere noise in comparison with its essence, its context, its physical body, or its conditions of possibility” (13). He continues “[t]he world is a series of negotiations between a motley armada of forces, humans among them, and such a world cannot be divided cleanly between two pre-existent poles called ‘nature’ and ‘society’ (13).

If no one is around to hear it, a falling tree does make a sound in the forest. A result of this ontological democratization is that the relationships between objects — inter-objective relationships — are of the same agential caliber as relationships between humans or a human and object. A result is that the thinking of background is illusory, an anthropocentrism that can be thought beyond. Morton explains:

Relationships between objects are sincere in this respect: they are sincerities. Sincerities are fundamentally open, because we can never get to the bottom of them. Who knows exactly what a human way of walking is? Yet there you are, a human, walking. “Middle objects” such as background, world, environment, place, space, and horizon are non-objects, phantoms that we (and maybe some other sentient beings) employ to domesticate this wild and uncompromising state of affairs. In truth, objects are both more real and more illusory than we want to know. Elsewhere I argue that ecological awareness consists precisely in concepts such as world and place evaporating, leaving behind real entities that are far closer than they appear in the mirror of human conceptuality. So that, in general, human beings are now living through an extended and urgent introduction to ooo, whether they like it or not, whenever they confront phenomena such as global warming and the uncanny resemblances between lifeforms. (Realist Magic 67-68)
The “middle objects” such as background dissolve with ecological thinking because all objects are considered inter-agentive and hence historical. There is no longer a categorical “there.” We can no longer point to our “surroundings” because they are instead the room with its history, or else the desk with its history, or the lamp with its history, or the carbon in the plastic in the lamp, or all carbon in the universe including that in the lamp.

There are two main features of OOO: (1) the categorical “thing-ness” of things and their accompanying agency (and inter-agency) does not depend on human acknowledgement; (2) the democratic move of OOO is to recognize an irreducible ontology in even these unknowable things. These two aspects alone may show why Morton finds OOO a promising philosophical platform for thinking about, for example, global warming, which in the last two decades has either not been acknowledged or not acknowledged enough (Hyperobjects 2). It has nevertheless begun to change our climate and Earth. Morton’s work in Ecology Without Nature was to show that ecology suffered from a nostalgic clinging to the empty formation of an ambient background with certain unacknowledged rules; capital-N Nature is trees and hillsides and not Ebola or steak dinners. By calling global warming an “object” and putting it in the same ontological category as your toaster or mud one considers it differently. It is not “less real” than the toaster or mud for starters (Hyperobjects 19). There is an eco-political appeal to this line of thinking; there is no distance from global warming simply because we are a component (19). But there is a descriptive appeal as well. Morton argues that the metaphysical groundings of OOO are demanded by the large objects like climate that he repeatedly describes as “intruding” on our notions of privileged human subjectivities22 (127-8). Global warming loses no object-ness if it is not acknowledged23 by human thought (129) (This seems to be the case in Cloud Atlas). The Earth, in its way, perceives global warming and so do polar bears in their way (Hyperobjects 18). Global warming has a “robust” reality. Humans are not an accessory to a crime or an extractable machine part; they are a component to this reality and are inside of it. Morton says that “ecological thought must…

22 McKibben provocatively claimed that global warming upended notions of inside and outside. What we do inside our homes affects what we thought as the outside Nature (See The End of Nature).
23 And even if we could imagine a total of the global human comprehensions and representations, there is still an irreducible reality to global warming which would dwarf these notions.
unground the human by forcing it back onto the ground, which is to say, standing on a gigantic object called Earth inside a gigantic entity called biosphere” (18).

This is an ecological dimension of Cloud Atlas. No reading should deny the massive presence and implications of the novel’s biosphere. But, as befits a contemporary half-acknowledgement of global warming, geo-trajectories like the degrading biosphere are not fully attended to by Cloud Atlas’ sectional protagonists in their own dramas. This is most evidently seen in the Luisa Rey section whose drama explicitly alights upon topics of local environmentalism while the scenery evokes a global ecological drama. We could read Cloud Atlas’ multiple narratives as a prismatic exposé of a present “world,” the fragmentation of an authorial world-view, but this reading would need to understate or deny a global object ontology and play into the book’s dramatic irony that its characters cannot imagine ecological interconnectivity because they do not have the avenues for thinking it. The objects of ecological concern are realistic actors across the sections. The Earth does not symbolically grow tentacles and fangs. Rather, inhospitability slowly crowds out human life on the planet. Human behaviors have bio-geo-chemical impacts that constrict the possibilities for future human behaviors. Reading the scenic echo is a realization that something has expanded, multiplied, or accumulated and returned to haunt the text. Human action in the novel is both what we think of as psycho-social-cultural (having to do with the humanities) and ecological (having to do with the Earth sciences). It does not sound profound, but it is not done cheaply, not told but shown.

Our object of interest in Cloud Atlas is a big one – the conception of a degrading biosphere. The secreting away of this biosphere, a vast and yet intimately near character in the novel, makes the novel an artistic statement that responds to Morton’s explication of the hyperobject. Hyperobjects are “things that are massively distributed in time and space relative to humans” (Hyperobjects 1). Part of Morton’s ecological program is constructing a framework by which we can begin to acknowledge objects beyond our sensorium, which are even only indicated theoretically (Supercomputers, Morton reminds us, have trouble modelling the climate (47)). But he would invest these things with ontological gravity. “The object is already there. Before we look at it…. there it is, raining on us, burning down on us, quaking the Earth, spawning gigantic hurricanes. Global warming is an object of
which many things are distributed pieces…. it involves a massive, counterintuitive perspective shift to see it” (49). “Hyperobjects are agents…. they appear to straddle worlds and times, like fiber optic cables or electromagnetic fields” (29). Global warming is a not an item on our environmental to-do list. It is too big for that formulation. It is, rather, a massive and real object. It will not disappear if it is not recognized, because humans are inside it.

Certain of the rendered geological changes in *Cloud Atlas* appear at first so far removed from the focuses of the individual sections, that they could be characterized as “hidden” behind the human dramas. In the first section of the novel, Adam Ewing tells of Te Whanga, a giant lagoon on Chatham Island that floods at high tide creating an inland sea (*Cloud Atlas* 14). The Moriori people held parliament there to discuss if they should fight with the invading Maori and break their religious and societal law (15). The references to the Moriori’s society as utopian and Edenic – of people who “dreamt not” “[t]hat the terraqueous globe held other lands, trod by other feet” (11) – are echoed and repeated in the novel’s sixth section, set in another primitive society on a South Pacific island, Hawaii Island. The book can be read to have made a return to the South Pacific, but what return we read depends on how much we recognize the planetary changes implied in the novel. In the preceding fifth section a taxi driver tells the protagonist Sonmi that the city of his youth, Mumbai, is underwater 24 (236). He guesses incorrectly that it is flooded because the moon is always full, but the moon only looks full because a giant projector lights it with advertisements (236). We understand that the knowledge of anthropogenic global warming is lost to these characters. That line is the only historical context by which the reader may make some sense of Zachry’s “setting” in the next section when he says “Honokaa was the bustlin’est town o’ nor-east Windward, see, Old’un’s’d builded it high ’nuff to s’vive the risin’ ocean, not like half o’ Hilo nor Kona neither what was flooded most moons” (299). Mitchell has explicitly observed that *Cloud Atlas* took inspiration from Jared Diamond’s *Guns, Germs, and Steel* 25. And we see here especially that *Cloud Atlas* suggests that the very societal makeup of Zachry’s Hawaii Island is influenced by a global environmental history, that which has raised the seas. The Kona, referred to in the excerpt, are the aggressive tribe that raids and kills Zachry’s people. This is one

---

24 A “flooded” Mumbai was changed to a “deadlanded” Mumbai in at least one paperback edition for a United States publisher.

25 See Mitchell, David. “Genesis.” Thanks to Professor Bo Ekelund for this citation.
way that the notion of return or resemblance is being archly ironized. The Moriori parliament to discuss the plight of their souls needed both the “sacred ground” that might one day be covered by water and the Moriori people who developed in the more predictable weather of the Holocene. Taken together, their story needed the planet as it was in the first section.

Details in the stylistic performance in each section that at first seem ancillary grow iridescent as the novel’s geo-historical vision comes into view. The sectional scenery indicates geo-historical objects that exhibit a novelistic agency and play out their own slow-moving dramas. The Luisa Rey section dramatizes a conspiracy to create dangerous nuclear reactors, but taken alone this is a historical red herring. At the start of that section, having jumped forward four decades, nuclear physicist Rufus Sixsmith leans over a balcony and gazes at the city where the story is set:

“Smog obscures the stars, but north and south along the coastal strip, Buenas Yerbas’ billion lights simmer” (89). The hyperbole works as a scene setting in the melodramatic style of an “airport thriller.” The menace of “smog” that “obscures the stars” and of “simmer” may augur darkness and evil in this mimed style. But in the cross-century scheme of the novel, historical currents in mind at the start of a new section, “simmer” precedes a planetary boil. This is a (to use the name of one central character) meronym, the use of a part to describe the whole. Of course, in the central section Meronym tells Zachry that humans “boil up the seas” (286). The Buenas Yerbas lights are part of a ubiquitous energy use that will in fact heat the planet’s waters. Many setting details in the Luisa Rey section perform these double significations. When Luisa Rey approaches a camp of protestors who are fighting the construction of a new nuclear reactor we read: “Seagulls float in the joyless heat. Agricultural machinery drones in the far-off distance.” These set Luisa’s scene before she meets with environmental activists, but Californian “agricultural machinery” has also been found to be a culprit in global warming. Later on we read: “Wednesday morning is smog scorched and heat hammered, like the last hundred mornings and the next fifty. Luisa Rey drinks black coffee in the steamy cool of the Snow White Diner…” (114). “[T]he next fifty,” hyperbolic in this mimed style, seems an understatement when thinking about the duration of global warming. Where does her

26 This setting detail precedes a brownout that will last seven hours and that will mean Sixsmith meets the protagonist Luisa Rey in a stopped elevator. When the two finally leave the elevator their “building reverberates with reanimated appliances” (97).
coffee come from and how did it get to her? The section is topically invested in energy use but ironically only in nuclear power. Sixsmith the scientist on his balcony is looking at a sort of culprit – billions of lights – but he is preoccupied with others from his human drama. He has written a report that finds a new nuclear reactor unstable, thus defying the dangerous executives of a mega-corporation. But he is implicated in an energy drama as well. Are not his lights among the billion? More interestingly are not the reader’s? Do the protesters eat industrially produced food? Does Luisa Rey enjoy the AC? Or more strangely does the AC make her scene possible where she might otherwise be trying to escape the heat? Would she be the same character without the coffee? The experience for the reader noting the stylistic cues and later realizing the historical resonances is akin to Morton’s explication of a dark ecology – an aesthetic for “a more honest ecological art” that he compares to a common device in noir film in which the “narrator begins investigating a supposedly external situation, from a supposedly neutral point of view, only to discover that she or he is implicated” (The Ecological Thought 16-17). So the environmental parallax provides a reason to re-attend to the scenery, to extend a historical concern to that which evokes a bigger whole. The objects of ecological concern are always just in front of the characters, affecting them and being affected by them. There are no distant multitudes of environmentally-wayward humans transgressing against a natural background. The characters that you like and want to follow to the ends of their stories are implicated in the degrading biosphere. Every character is.

Jameson refers to “the whale-like bulk of History” (Antinomies of Realism 306) that comes into view in this novel. I want to emphasize here that this History is pointedly including the motions of civilization with those of the natural sciences. Humans in their great numbers gain a collective geologic agency. For example, by variously echoing and permuting motifs, themes, language, and metaphors the book intimates an unsettling historical assumption implied in Paul Crutzen’s Anthropocene proposal: Human behaviors are repeated. In the first version of this proposal, after a summary list of human behaviors with bio-geo-chemical consequences, we read that “So far, these effects have largely been caused by only 25% of the world population.” (Crutzen 23). The intricate variety in the ways the novel makes echoes effects a similar historical assumption. In Cloud Atlas the hyper-literate Robert Frobisher glibly calls himself “terra incognita” in his section. This throwaway characterization in the second half of Frobisher’s story precedes the second half of Adam Ewing’s
mid-19th century sea journey, so that it takes a thematic resonance. Frobisher as “terra incognita” comes to mind when we read that Ewing’s boat crosses the path of Captain Cook’s HMS Endeavour, a historical symbol of intrepid exploration that would make unknown lands known. But this does not simply thematize exploration and the spread of Western civilization. The triangulation of Frobisher’s language, Ewing’s sea voyage, and Captain Cook’s non-fictional historical referent communicates the exponential growth of human endeavour and historical report. A simple crossing of boat paths puts into mind many other boats, explorations, intrusions, resource exploitations, and the histories of the endeavours that inspire others to repeat and that can seep into language decades later. Not only is a multiplicity rendered, but a multiplication. The boat journeys take different narrative manifestations as historical referent, fictional event, and language. Perhaps Frobisher’s glibness could be read to presage Sonmi the clone’s enslavement. The novelistic world then rendered is “sinister” and “unsettling,” as Morton builds on the Freudian “uncanny” in marking human repetition (The Ecological Thought 53). All human action is potentially geo-historically relevant because it is repeatable.

Those repetitions are shown in the transit of the sectional dramas, in a number of passages that communicate distinct types of ubiquitousness. When these passages are coupled we may read aesthetic patterning of metastasis and chaos. In the Luisa Rey section we read: “Dom Grelsch’s office is a study in ordered chaos. The view across 3rd Avenue shows a wall of offices much like his own” (Cloud Atlas 99). The book has several double-entendre nods to its aesthetic of chaos (a mathematics historically connected with weather modeling, coincidentally (Weart, no pg.)). The multiplicity of the Dom Grelsch’s office grows, changes, and moves when we pair it with another passage of ubiquitousness. In Sonmi’s section we read an indictment of modern consumerism:

**Which galleria did you go to?**

Wangshimni Orchard. The galleria made me think of an encyclopedia, constructed not of words but objects. For hours, I pointed at items, and Hae-Joo answered: bronze masks, instant birds’ nest soup, fabricant servants, golden suzukis, air-filters, acid-proof skeins, oracular models of the Beloved Chairman and statuettes of the Immanent Prime Chairman, jewel-powder perfumes, pearlsilk scarves, realtime maps, deadland artefacts, programmable violins. Hae-Joo showed me a pharmacy: its packets of pills for cancer, aids, alzheimer’s lead-tox; for corpulence, anorexia, baldness, hairiness,
xuberance, glumness, dewdrugs for aging; drugs for overindulgence in dewdrugs.

Hour twenty-one chimed, yet we had covered less than a tenth of a single precinct. How the consumers seethed to buy, buy, buy; a many-celled sponge of demand that sucked goods and services from every vendor, dinery, shop and nook as it spilled dollars. (Cloud Atlas 236)

Sonmi describes a confluence of human desire and production. In Ecology Without Nature Morton argues that “[S]eeing production and consumption as not just intertwined but in some sense identical abolishes at a stroke the ontology of nature versus humanity” (Ecology without Nature 181). Some items for sale in this passage simply help people cope with planetary conditions that consumerism helps create (air-filters, acid-proof skeins). In her section the productive effort that creates this panoply is celebrated by the Nea So Corpros society where it is a sin to hoard dollars, i.e. to save money. It is not an indictment of the market; there is another far more modest market scene in the Sloosha’s section, a once-a-year celebratory affair. Nothing explicitly connects Grelsch’s offices in the Luisa Rey section with Sonmi’s description of the mall, but of course it is difficult not to read them together. Each item in the mall scene is granted a life of production, development, marketing, repetition. They suggest two images of a historical kaleidoscope with infinitely tiny, untraceable movements like Grelsch’s non-conscious participation in a blossoming corporate culture. The novel in its sixth section then dares to imagine a future in which the planet has suffered “The Fall” – a mass-death and with uninhabitable “deadlanded” swaths of continent – as a result of Sonmi’s world of hyper-consumption. The passages of scenery frequently show us unique depictions of human ubiquitousness. They shift in its nature from office spaces, to glutted literary industry in Timothy Cavendish’s fourth section, to hyper-consumption. If we were to think of them as tips of icebergs, one marks the propensity for bergs to form, a rendering of human historical accretion. Humans and their cultures in the novel appear as clots in time with bio-geo-chemical consequence. The unacknowledged repetition is as much as an inattention to the scenery, what makes it background. The icebergs are greater and smaller and possess different grades of hardness. In the Sonmi section “less than a tenth of a single precinct” communicates a larger and more adamantine culture than does Grelsch’s street of offices in a place where public protest is still allowed. The trajectory of Sonmi’s planet seems un-nudgeable, and the only imagined easing is a holocaust by “The Fall” in the central section.
I have been emphasizing the implicit irony of the unacknowledged scenery, but I would like to show one way that the novel resists an easy environmental dogmatism. Because the echo becomes so pronounced, the reader’s expectation of permutation can influence how the scenery is read. The reader may project a thematic meaning. The reader hears an echo when Frobisher approaches Château Zedelghem where he will reside in his narrative: “Zedelghem is grander than our rectory… but it couldn’t hold a candle to Audley End or Capon Trench’s country seat” (49). When later leaving the manor Frobisher reports “Morty Dhondt collected me bang on time and off we hurtled back towards civilization, ha” (460). Ewing of the first section has also traveled far from home and family, from “civilization.” If one reads the echo “being far from home or outside civilization,” one looks for it again. But Rey is a native of her story’s Buenas Yerbas. When she leaves civilization, it is only to the Swanneke Island just an hour’s drive from town, the location of a new nuclear reactor. Having read Ewing’s and Frobisher’s exiles in which the men are separated from their homelands by oceans, the reader may inflate, perhaps distort, the quality of Rey’s exile. Or else reassess the previous exiles: Ewing was on an island, and Frobisher was perhaps psychologically on an island of sorts. But in the fourth section, Timothy Cavendish’s drama plays out start to finish on the same island as it were, Great Britain, though he is also clearly exiled when he leaves his native London for a horror-story nursing home in northern England. However, these are four undesired exiles as one may read them, but that could not be the case for Somni who would flee “civilization” where she is a slave. But the “civilization” has become the island, in a way, because much of the planet has become inhospitable. One would need to transmute “exile” again when reading the sixth and central section. If Zachry of the post-apocalyptic Hawaii Island is “exiled” it is only from a civilization that exists as a cultural memory; Meronym, the visiting explorer (who bears the birthmark of the previous narrator-protagonists), is a willing exile here. She is separated from her dying people who spend their lives on boats. Mitchell works *Robinson Crusoe* through diverse permutations (Hicks no page) so that if one would connect one must pare the thread down to “being away.” But this kernel is not necessarily meaningful in interpreting any single personal drama. As we are reading the novel for its ecological vision, one might be tempted to say the deconstructive effect brackets an understanding of “home,” perhaps as an environmentally unfriendly anthropocentrism. Home is not “away” where we can put our nuclear waste. In the
next section I will argue that travelling away from home, which is familiar, which can have background, is an interesting way that the protagonists are shown to provide the novel with scenery that the reader can interpret across sections. But this permuted spotlight on “home” and “away” should not be read to indict humans for being ecologically aberrant. The novel refuses this moralizing. It is a dead-end because the protagonist’s conceptions of home and exile are significant in their stories. Without the stories there is no planet between the title pages, no history in the spaces as Morton puts it (*The Ecological Thought* 104). In one way this cross-novel mutation can appear a provocative historical rendering, in a similar way that Morton discusses the difficulties of comparing lungs with their ancestral swim bladders (65). The conceptions of home and background may be dependent on a stable biosphere.

A powerful tool of OOO is allowing human conceptions of the planet to have their own agency. That is, describing reality also always changes it. Morton shows this at a very small scale: “Quantum-scale measurements” are always also “an alteration” (*Hyperobjects* 37). Latour claims it on a much larger one: “human action is visible everywhere—in the construction of knowledge as well as in the production of phenomena those sciences are called to register” (“Agency at the time of the Anthropocene” 128). We will see in *Cloud Atlas* that even the metaphors used to describe the “scenery” become the real events of later sections. In his section Frobisher writes about how his patron Vyvyan Ayrs shows a picture of a Siamese temple where a disciple of Budha preached, and where “every bandit king, tyrant and monarch of that kingdom has enhanced it with marble towers, scented arboretums, gold-leafed domes…” (*Cloud Atlas* 81). He continues, “When the temple finally equals its counterpart in the Pure Land, so the story goes, that day humanity shall have fulfilled its purpose, and Time itself shall come to an end” (81-82). He writes:

To men like Ayrs, it occurs to me, this temple is civilization. The masses, slaves, peasants and foot-soldiers exist in the cracks of its flagstones, ignorant even of their ignorance. Not so the great statesmen, scientists, artists and, most of all, the composers of the age, any age, who are civilization’s architects, masons and priests… My employer’s profoundest, or only, wish is to create a minaret that inheritors of Progress a thousand years from now will point to….

How vulgar, this hankering after immortality, how vain, how false. Composers are merely scribblers of cave paintings. (82)

This inserted passage is particularly suited to read connectivity in the novel. The last line recalls the Ewing section where he has fallen into a hole and finds hidden tree
carvings of the Moriori. There he says “Only the inanimate may be so alive” (20). The Budha that Frobisher mentions is repeated in the Sonmi section. Frobisher’s Budha, in an aquatint, becomes Sonmi’s world. Marveling at the worn statue she repeats Ewing’s impression of the tree carvings, “Only the inanimate may be so alive” (345). After Luisa Rey reads Frobisher’s letters she is struck by a detail – the author bears the same comet-shaped birthmark as she has. The shock from this revelation is followed by a seemingly inconsequential (non-sequitur) scene detail: “Builders are remodeling the lobby of Pacific Eden Apartments. Sheets are on the floor, an electrician is prodding a light fitting, an unseen hammer hammers” (122). “Pacific Eden Apartments” both recalls a line Ewing uses to describe the Chatham Islands of the Moriori and anticipates the Hawaii of Sloosha’s Crossin’. The remodelers could be said to be enhancing a temple of civilization and are either, as in Frobisher’s metaphor, engaged in the project of “hankering after immortality” or scribbling cave paintings. The planet is being changed nevertheless.

One imagines Mitchell in outline or in edits inserting these scene details and elaborations in order to achieve this dense network of signification, that which makes the novel as a whole begin to feel like the Menger sponge, “infinitely porous, spongy or cavernous” (The Ecological Thought 55). What is remarkable is that we still perceive individual stories though they begin to feel less whole. They are connected in ways unintended or unanticipated by the characters, by ways of disparate and untraceable agencies, but we read, nevertheless, that there are Harman’s “robust realities,” cores in the stories that resist reduction. While, Cloud Atlas’ hyper-connectivity might remind us of Morton’s discussion of lists of ambience (Ecology Without Nature 61) – as soon as we cannot track the referents we are to be impressed by the ambient mystery of something beyond (Morton calls it “ecorhapsody”) – there is no Nature here. There is no pristine wilderness being evoked. Rather, the evocation is of a historical interconnectivity that is not fully fathomable for the characters because they do not consider objects of their scenery on the same onto-historical level as that which is most animated in their sectional narratives.

But the attentive reader sees what is happening. The blindness of the characters is reminiscent of Latour’s description of the modernist bifurcation of Nature (adopting Alfred North Whitehead’s idea). Latour says the modern “expects from Science the revelation that Nature will finally be visible through the veils of
subjectivity—and subjection—that had hidden it to our ancestors” (“It’s Development Stupid” no page). But the object philosophers refuse the bifurcation by considering all objects (in the philosophical sense) on the same historical playing field, so to speak. In the object philosopher’s reality the climatological cloud is considered with the human-historical atlas. I read a similar historical concern in Cloud Atlas. The metaphors are on trial, not the reality. I find it significant that the book begins with a scene of pathological digging, the fiendish Henry Goose looking for indigene teeth:

Beyond the Indian hamlet, upon a forlorn strand, I happened on a trail of recent footprints. Through rotting kelp, sea cocoanuts & bamboo, the tracks led me to their maker, a white man, his trowsers & Pea-jacket rolled up, sporting a kempt beard & an outsized Beaver, shovelling & sifting the cindery sand with a tea-spoon so intently that he noticed me only after I had hailed him from ten yards away. Thus it was, I made the acquaintance of Dr Henry Goose, surgeon to the London nobility. His nationality was no surprise. If there be an 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)

In this obvious reference to Robinson Crusoe, on a first reading, Henry’s Goose’s manic behavior and the colonial omnipresence of England set undertones for historical significance. On a second reading, the reader may re-attend to his moving of the earth. Ewing’s certainty becomes ironic: England in the novel’s future is “deadlanded” – made uninhabitable by numerous environmental assaults.

I want to come back to something I said earlier to make a final point about the life of the scene settings: Cloud Atlas exploits the reader's expectations of the novel in order to elucidate unexpected areas of historical interconnection. Not only do physical occurrences expand to envelop subsequent fictional worlds. One-liners as seemingly inconsequential as Cavendish’s quip become Sonmi’s nightmarish world. So that these lines on rereading are not only humorous – they voice a menacing irony of which their characters can have no comprehension. Their narrative worlds are like fields of land mines peppered with hidden historical significances. We can divine this menace, this long-historical signification, as terrorizing future characters unknown and invisible to those in the present personal drama. Part of what is claimed about the Anthropocene (by Chakrabarty and others like Morton and Latour) is that the radical animation of objects once considered historical background must now be considered as agentive – both affecting and affected by human action. We may then say that “setting” is a wholly inadequate word from stratospheric heights. It is like Newtonian gravity when discussing planets. Over a long enough time nothing in the scene is set.
3: Gold in muddy torrents: People on the planet in time

In a sense, we have discussed the ending of *Cloud Atlas* in its percussive conceptual finale and the middle of its evoked biospheric degradation. Now I would like to discuss a sort of beginning, a way that we reread the novel with an expanded historical view of scenic objects. In *Realist Magic: Objects, Ontology, Causality* Morton provocatively calls the beginning of a story an “aperture”:

Stories begin with flickers of uncertainty. As the reader you have no idea who the main character is. You have no idea what counts as a big or small event. You have no idea whether the persistent focus of the opening chapter on a living room in suburban London in the late Victorian period will become significant. Every detail seems weird, floating in a bath of potential significance. (123)

I have built a case for the complexity evoked in the sectional scenery of grander geological objects and historical trajectories than can be seen in the individual sections. The characters in their engagement with the scenery, in their sectional present times, never fully comprehend the “common geostory” as Latour might call it (“Agency at the Time of the Anthropocene” 6). For example, I have noted that global warming is clearly influential – a dramatic actor – in the novel, but significantly no character talks about “climate” though they each, in a particular way, make some mention of the weather. Jameson suggests that the protagonists are imprisoned in both a material sense (*Antinomies of Realism* 311-12) and also, possibly, within the ideological limits of cultural expression (308). But we can add in this ecological reading that the characters are additionally imprisoned by their insufficient apprehensions of planet much as the insular Moriori were neither able to conceive of peoples beyond their shores nor the predatory nature of the intruding Maori. Had the protagonists’ worlds been seen together – a view exclusive to the reader – they might have made better sense of their novelistic planet. But as it stands the protagonists are missing the grander stories told in their sectional scenery. The incomplete or lacking worldview – that which wants community – is thematized, for example, in a waning scholarship in Sonmi’s section. In the Luisa Rey section it is the bifurcation of nature – the enduring division between “appearances and reality, subjectivity and objectivity, history and immutability” (“An Attempt at a ‘Compositionist Manifesto’” 176). In *Cloud Atlas* physicist Isaac Sachs tells the journalist Luisa Rey, “I became a scientist because… it’s like panning for gold in a muddy torrent. Truth is the gold”; Rey answers, “Journalists work in torrents just as muddy” (135). In order to provide the
reader with the seemingly ancillary material with which to make cross-sectional connections, the protagonists repeatedly encounter and negotiate their “background” in motive ways: They seek vantage, search out conceptual stepping stones for confronting immensity, anthropomorphize with abandon, acknowledge staggered temporalities of narrative objects, and animate the inanimate. This is how they find gold in muddy torrents.

The Hubble telescope metaphor of the deep field focus, for what might otherwise be described stylistically as a synaesthetic effect, resonates with Morton’s aperture and Walter Benjamin’s notion of historical constellations. In the present-time of the sectional narrative there is a multiplicity of disparate objects, but the reader understands the multiplicity to be meaningful in a historical context. Analogously, the powerful telescope pointed at a section of the sky with fewer and dimmer stars sees fields of galaxies beyond. The deeper in the field an object is, the further back in time one is looking. Images of the Hubble Ultra Deep Field are of an astounding multiplicity as seen from one focal point in space-time, the telescope. But when one reads how the images are used by astronomers – to make statistical claims based on relative brightness, speculating by making “state-of-the-art white dwarf models” (Kilic 1) – the visible negotiations, assumptions, and interpretations as Latour’s work helps illuminate (see “An Attempt at a ‘Compositionist Manifesto’” 181) – one sees quickly what a complex social dynamic animates and interconnects the tiny lights so that there is any astronomical history. As a non-specialist one sees the historical images of less developed galaxies side by side with closer galaxies with an image closer to the viewer’s present space-time. But as they might inform a history these images are not resolvable in the two dimensions. Similarly, the proclivities of Cloud Atlas’ storytelling protagonists allow two-dimensional glimpses of various historical galaxies in their narratives. But ultimately, it is their inability to congress with other characters – their insularity or imprisonment – that makes them unable to get the historical perspective afforded the observant reader.

I chose the Hubble deep field metaphor, in part, because in the central section Meronym – the seafaring anthropologist from a technically advanced people who live on boats – and Zachry – a member of the indigenous herder-agrarian group on Hawaii’s Big Island with whom Meronym stays and studies – ascend Mauna Kea to

27 Thanks again to Professor Ekelund for directing me to Benjamin’s Theses on the Philosophy of History.
investigate the abandoned cluster of astronomical observatories “with telescopes operated by astronomers from eleven countries” (“About Mauna Kea Observatories”). Zachry believes they are religious temples, but Meronym corrects him: “…they wasn’t temples, nay, but *observ’trees* what Old’uns used to study the planets’n’moon’n’stars, an’ the space b’tween, to und’stand where ev’rythin’ begins an’ where ev’rythin’ ends” (*Cloud Atlas* 289). The implication is that the explorer Meronym would decipher the knowledges produced by the scientific instruments, but they are lost with the scientific community that sustained them including the long-dead Rufus Sixsmith’s niece Megan who he reports in the Luisa Rey section is a researcher at Mauna Kea. Mauna Kea is the stage for this small drama and not the nearby Mauna Loa, the shorter volcano on Hawaii Island with a lone observatory that tracks the Keeling Curve, the steady rise in atmospheric CO2 since 1958. How lost the knowledge of anthropogenic global warming looks again. On their trek up Mauna Kea Zachry and Meronym spy the horsemen from the raiding Kona tribe on the distant Mauna Loa, and one thinks of the debate around the Earth sciences in 2004 and the name of Zachry’s doppelgänger devil, Georgie.

The novel’s choice in Maunas – that with 13 internationally operated telescopes, not the lone atmospheric observatory – is that of the distant Science of observation or remote “background” apart from the politics implied in climatology. We may remember the courageous decision of Isaach Sachs the physicist from the Luisa Rey section who finds himself embroiled in a corporate-political intrigue:

Sachs tries to remember how it felt not to walk around with this knot in his gut. He longs for his old lab in Connecticut, where the world was made of mathematics, energy and atomic cascades, and he was its explorer. He has no business in these political orders of magnitude, where erroneous loyalties can get your brain spattered over hotel bedrooms. *You’ll shred that report, Sachs, page by goddamn page.*

Then his thoughts slide to a hydrogen build-up, an explosion, packed hospitals, the first deaths by radiation poisoning. The official inquiry. The scapegoats. Sachs bangs his knuckles together. So far, his betrayal of Seaboard is a thought-crime, not one of action. *Dare I cross that line?* He rubs his tired eyes. (230)

Latour has defined the line that Sachs would cross. “Nature” – the imagined place “over there” or of backgrounds – is the way moderns have “organized” the Bifurcation (“It’s Development Stupid” no page). Latour contrasts in “An Attempt at a ‘Compositionist Manifesto’” modes of thought founded on critique and those of
composition, arguing that the first was built upon a notion of inevitable progress that needed the static background of Nature (172). This is a recurring motif in the book, that truth is accessed through many avenues, but that word “truth” is not cheaply thrown in as a shortcut. “As many truths as men,” writes Ewing. “Occasionally, I glimpse a truer Truth, hiding in imperfect simulacrum of itself, but as I approach, it bestirs itself & moves deeper into the thorny swamp of dissent” (Cloud Atlas 17). Storytellers, those attuned to “semiosis of human and nonhuman” characters are well equipped for the task of the “redistribution of agencies” as Latour indicates (“An Attempt at a ‘Compositionist Manifesto’” 189 n. 25). The novel shows this proclivity to grant life to the scenery life in the protagonists.

We see this in Adam Ewing as contrasted with his section’s protagonist, Dr. Henry Goose. They reveal separate modes of storytelling in one scene where the two participate in a makeshift mass:

…. Mindful of my own salvation from last week’s tempest, I nominated Luke ch. 8. And they came to him, & awoke him, saying, Master, master, we perish. Then he arose, & rebuked the wind & the raging of the water: & they ceased, & there was a calm.

Henry recited Psalm the Eighth, in a voice as sonorous as any schooled dramatist, Thou madest him to have dominion over the works of thy hands; thou has put all things under his feet: all sheep & oxen, yea, & the beasts of the field; The fowl of the air, & the fish of the sea, & whatsoever passeth through the paths of the seas. (Cloud Atlas 8)

Here is an ecological debate from the Bible! There are two different divinities. In Ewing’s passage the supplicants are passive, seeking recourse in the present time to a “Master”; in Goose’s passage the “Thou” is removed and past tense, inaugural and justificatory as a seminal authority for total dominion. I read Goose’s passage of certainty and forward progress as symptomatic of Latour’s modern. Not only Goose’s background, his entire reality is static, decided, and nonnegotiable. The works of the Thou’s hands are inanimate, and the he may pick and choose as he pleases. But Ewing’s passage is much more uncertain and marks a cowering retreat from the wind and water. It is humble and marks a fallible apprehension of environment or, as Latour might have it, a composition that has failed (“An Attempt at a ‘Compositionist Manifesto’” 174).

We can read Ewing’s passage another way, that recourse to a removed master is a search for vantage. The storytellers are often shown to encounter or seek vantage (on journeys in all of the sections, from mountains in Sonmi’s and Zachry’s sections,
from a clock tower in Frobisher’s, from a balcony in Luisa Rey’s). Sonmi, newly liberated from a slave life underground, takes in a city view from a rooftop and is overcome with its size and complexity. But Sonmi is told by her chaperone: “‘Held against the whole world, Sonmi~451, all you see here is this chip of stone.’ / My mind fumbled with this enormity and dropped it; I didn’t even know what I needed in order to understand such a limitless place” (Cloud Atlas 216). This repeated motif is literally seeking a perspective from which to “take in the scenery.” But Sonmi, telling the story in retrospect, also shapes a pragmatic problem, what was “needed” to understand the panorama and what it represented. She has just been told by another liberated clone that “to survive” she “must create Catechisms of [her] own” (215). Sonmi’s view was not, her narrating self must know, “limitless.” She seems to search for a hinge concept like one might use to make sense of the vastness of the observable universe (which is not either limitless) by wondering what analogies are most instrumental. An astronomer in the popular science program How the Universe Works says there are “100 billion stars” in our galaxy and then “100 billion galaxies in the observable universe” (“Alien Galaxies”). He is taking an abstractly large number and squaring it, a comprehensible mathematical operation. When he continues: “there are more stars than there are specks of sand on Earth” we are given another immensity with which to compare, one that may have visual-cognitive traction with laypeople (“Alien Galaxies”). Morton, similarly, devotes a section of his book The Ecological Thought to “Thinking Big” in which he argues that ecological thinking must confront the immensities and humiliations for human consciousness that scientific knowledges posit for reality. He says, “Very large finitude is harder to deal with than abstract, ideal infinity” (The Ecological Thought 40). “Think big, then bigger still—beyond containment, beyond the panoramic spectacle that dissolves everything within itself” (40). Part of the dissolution of background, Morton explains, is that “[w]e know where our shit goes” (32). There is no “over there,” he says. Global warming subverts the idea of “far” things, making us confront the prospect of a large totality (40). “[T]he half-life of plutonium-239 is 24,100 years. That’s almost as long into the future as the Chauvet paintings are in our past” (Hyperobjects 120). “There is no away to which we can meaningfully sweep the radioactive dust. Nowhere is far enough or long-lasting enough” (120). The search for conceptual stepping stones for apprehending an ecological totality is given a new urgency in Cloud Atlas, akin to the image levels needed to create the illusion of “zooming out” in Google Maps that are
needed to see a street as part of the Earth. Zachry in the section after Sonmi’s has lost some ability to use numbers meaningfully. He describes the size of a boat like a child: “…it carried two-three-four hundred people, a mil’yun maybe” (*Cloud Atlas* 258).

Another way the protagonists describe the scenery is by animating and anthropomorphizing with abandon, making objects interact on the same ontological playing field as the humans. This might otherwise be described as a synaesthetic effect or a way that the characters become the storytellers in the way Mitchell wants them to be. Again from the Adam Ewing’s section:

I resolved to scale a high hill to the north of Ocean Bay, known as Conical Tor, whose lofty elevation promises the best aspect of Chatham Isle’s ‘back-country.’ (Henry, a man of maturer years, has too much sense to tramp unsurveyed islands peopled by cannibals.) The tired creek who waters Ocean Bay guided me upstream through marshy pastures, stump-pocked slopes, into virgin forest so rotted, knotted & tangled, I was obliged to clamber aloft like an orang-utan! A volley of hailstones began abruptly, filled the woods with a frenzied percussion & ended on the sudden. I spied a ‘Robin Black-Breast’ whose plumage was tarry as night & whose tameness bordered on contempt. An unseen tui took to song, but my inflamed fancy awarded it powers of human speech: – ‘Eye for an eye!’ it called ahead, flitting through its labyrinth of buds, twigs & thorns. ‘Eye for an eye!’ After a grueling climb, I conquered the summit grievously torn & scratched at I know not What o’Clock, for I neglected to wind my pocket-watch last night. The opaque mists that haunt these isles (the aboriginal name ‘Rekohu’, Mr D’Arnoq informs us, signifies ‘Sun of Mists’) had descended as I ascended, so my cherished panorama was naught but tree-tops disappearing into drizzle. A miserly reward for my exertions, indeed. (18)

Henry Goose, the sociopathic antagonist, declines this quest for a panoramic vantage. When Ewing has finally ascended the hill he finds the view is obstructed by the mist, but he has already given us some picture of the hillside. How does he construct the scene? He anthropomorphizes: the creek is his guide; he is an orangutan; the call of the bird speaks words (an effect repeated in other sections). Though skillfully deployed, these may be unremarkable as stylistic techniques in the sectional narrative taken alone. But a similar scenic cacophony is a repeated motif. And we have indicated that the scenery is much more agentive than we might read in just one story. Ewing’s “inflamed fancy” is the prelude to the reader’s cross-sectional intuitions. The Robin’s “tameness bordered on contempt,” he says; Ewing is assaulted with hail as if he were an advancing enemy. The reader who has the dismal future of the novel in mind may think that the scenery would have cause to be angry. If any object can be
potently read as agentive, then Ewing’s proclivity to place them before us is admirable. If connection is foregrounded, as Jameson says, one must have objects to connect. The Henry Gooses of the novel give us no such material. From the Luisa Rey section: “Who dreamt this sick joke? The city?” (137). Joe Napier, the security officer who works for the nuclear power corporation asks this queer question after he is reacquainted with Luisa who is the daughter of an old buddy-veteran. Napier feels he owes Luisa’s father a life debt and so is drawn into her dangerous confrontation with the Seaboard Corporation, his employer, decades after he last met her and just months before he will retire. Napier’s calling the coincidence a “sick joke” is both the bandage for an over-convenient plot device in the style of the airport thriller and a metafictional wink to the reader (The author dreamt it of course). But the sprawling Californian city, which was planned for and built with fossil-fuel driven vehicles, did also, in a way, make a sick joke. It may be strange to think it, but a fictional Californian city accounts in no small way for the James Ellroy-esque style and plot – hard-boiled and quick as that which needs American culture and cars (an American’s “extended phenotype” Morton might say using Richard Dawkins) – or all the miniscule historical possibilities that could make corporate nuclear malfeasance a realistic thriller plot. The “inanimate” have much more to say than at first glance. But it is the impetus to ask Napier’s strange question that makes us listen.

Morton also says that our personal investments have much more to do with any ecology than deferrals to any reified Nature. Google Earth may facilitate the imagining of a global ecological connectedness, but we end up using it to look at our “mother’s fishpond in her garden in Wimbledon, London” (The Ecological Thought 96). “What I see is what I wish to see: I can’t subtract my own desire to see from the parts of Earth I’m seeing” (96). This is also shown in the protagonist’s descriptions of their “scenery.” In Cavendish’s section, as he flees London on a train:

Still. I felt the exhilaration of a journey begun, and I let my guard drop. A volume I once published, True Recollections of a Northern Territories Magistrate, claims that shark victims experience an anaesthetic vision of floating away, all danger gone, into the Pacific blue, at the very moment they are being minced in that funnel of teeth. I, Timothy Cavendish, was that swimmer, watching London roll away, yes, you, you sly, toupee’d quizmaster of a city, you and your tenements of Somalians; viaducts of Kingdom Brunel; malls of casualized labor; strata of soot-blitzed bricks and muddy bones of doctor Dee, Crippen et al.; hot glass office buildings where the blooms of youth harden into aged cacti like my pennypinching brother.
Essex raised its ugly head. When I was a scholarship boy at the local grammar, son of a city-hall toiler on the make, this county was synonymous with liberty, success and Cambridge. Now look at it. Shopping malls and housing estates pursue their creeping invasion of our ancient land. A North Sea wind snatched frilly clouds in its teeth and scarpered off to the Midlands. The countryside proper began at last. My mother had a cousin out here, her family had a big house, I think they moved to Winnipeg for a better life. There! There, in the shadow of that DIY warehouse, once stood a row of walnut trees where me and Pip Oakes – a childhood chum who died aged thirteen under the wheels of an oil tanker – varnished a canoe one summer and sailed it along the Say. Sticklebacks in jars. There, right there, around that bend we lit a fire and cooked beans and potatoes wrapped in silver foil! Come back, oh, come back! Is one glimpse all I get? Hedgeless, featureless fields. Essex is Winnipeg, now. Stubble was burnt and the air tasted of crisp bacon sarnies. My thoughts flew off with other fairies, and we were past Saffron Walden when the train juddered to a halt. (163)

As Cavendish leaves one personalized locale, the “toupéed quizmaster,” he enters another, the suburbs, bugbear of environmental causes, a place of upper-middle class consumerism and inefficient planning and energy waste. Cavendish animates the shopping malls and housing estates, as well as the North Sea Wind, and the quick effect of these two lines is that the older Cavendish sets his gaze among wanting, contending, jostling scenery. These lines are overture to a reverie, as we imagine the train moving on to the countryside of his youthful memories. In the shade of a warehouse store he remembers playing among long-gone trees, the Nature-wholesome activities of shellacking a canoe and catching fish, camping and cooking with a friend who was meaningfully (or heavy-handedly) run over by an oil truck. Cavendish interlaces his anxieties about aging and his nostalgic memories of childhood with the development of civilization and makes an astonishing free association: Essex is Winnipeg. What does he mean? Is it that they both have featureless flora and homogeneous construction? His reverie is contrasted with the city with its characteristic raised brick train tracks, a sort of monument at which Cavendish continues to rue the abysmal service of England’s once-great, now-privatized train system as a symbol for the fall from greatness of Britain. Cavendish, a book man, recalls the panoply and grants it a story. But we are given global ecology here from the character we might least expect it, a selfish and lonely pensioner. It is not essentialized with indignation for lost Nature. Rather the impetus for Cavendish’s observations is a personal nostalgia and aesthetic distaste. He is open to the agencies
of diverse objects simply as a way to animate the train ride for his story, but Cavendish’s personal investment gives this eco-historical material a certain gravity for the reader.

The objects in Cavendish’s excerpt are markedly not background. The panoply is presented as the hopscotch by which Cavendish accesses his memories, but this “causality floats in front” (Realist Magic 19) of the objects he sees, an effect plainly evidenced by the narrator composing his way through the train ride. His “thoughts flew away with the fairies.” This is also the entire novel’s project: facilitating associations between its stories of a complexity on the order of fractals. Ecology is always ecology-for humans, to use the linguistic construction (an object with a suffixed “-for”) that Morton uses to designate “sensual objects,” the idea that an object as apprehended by any other object is always a translation (Hyperobjects 91). When Morton talks about this, he is also coincidentally speaking of London. “Just as a hard drive is a surface on which data is inscribed, so London is a series of surfaces on which causality has been inscribed. There is no difference between causality and aesthetic appearance (aisthēsis)” (91). We might read Cavendish’s rendition of a train ride as showing a particularly human subjectivity flying out into the scenery and showing itself to be human. In which case Essex-for him is like Winnipeg-for someone else. As characters describe the objects of their stories with agency we see their human apprehensions amidst a jumble of nonhumans. The clone, Sonmi, says in her section, “I felt reborn into another element as alien to fabricant servers as Alpine meadows are unknown to the nautilus” (Cloud Atlas 345).

In the Luisa Rey section the environmental cause is often parodied as small-bore, like talking about how only the trunk of an elephant makes the room feel crowded. As Rey approaches protestors in that section she sees they have made a sign, “PLANET AGAINST SEABOARD.” The reader may think, if only they knew the half of it (or only the two sixths of it); Cloud Atlas’ planet will be ravaged by nuclear radiation. Rey interviews the protest group’s leader, Hester Van Zandt, who gives her an admirable speech about raising “public awareness” (126). But just before this interview Rey takes a shower and we read: “Her bathroom mirror is half hidden by a shelf of shampoos, conditioners, a box of sanitary towels, skin creams and gift-soaps. Luisa shunts these aside to get a clearer view of a birthmark…” (123-4). In contrast to many positive takes on the birthmark that a character in each story has, I think that
Mitchell wanted to say something here about what Morton calls intersubjectivity, the “local, anthropocentric instance of a much more widespread phenomenon” (*Hyperobjects* 81); it “is really human interobjectivity with lines drawn around it to exclude nonhumans” (81-82). Mitchell is playing with the idea of a novel as rooted in the realm of the “thick” experience of a human self, blinded to concepts from the sciences that would transcend it (Jasanoff 234) and inform our planetary perspectives and then our choices. We readers want to come into the text and point out to the well-meaning Rey that she is shunting aside her ecology – a way that she is intimately connected to the other characters in the book. But, then again, what would the journalist do? Would she write a series about conditioners? Rey’s coworker Dom Grelsch warns her “‘every scientific term you use represents two thousand readers putting down the magazine and turning on a rerun of *I Love Lucy*’” (*Cloud Atlas* 101).

The limited ability of characters to congress frustrates any apprehensions of planet, of the vast totality that must be confronted to make choice in the “era of the hyperobject.” In this novel the degrading biosphere looms over the sections. The characters must do certain things and think certain ways to apprehend its local manifestations, but it is left to the reader to provide the historical connection.
Conclusion

I have argued that there is an ontology of the biosphere to account for in Cloud Atlas, and the narrative procedure by which it is revealed calls to account the reader’s expectations of literary-novelistic background as having little to do with ecological awareness – a way that we imagine historical interconnection along avenues described by both human histories and the natural sciences. In the novel’s game of inhabiting distinct novelistic styles and shaping historical steps, I have argued that in order to provide the material by which we make cross-sectional connections, the characters must do certain things and think certain ways. It may seem strange to make such a strong claim to a material historical vision for a novel with so much (what I will call while realizing the difficulties with pegging the term) postmodern accouterment. In light of this ecological reading, I will end by suggesting two ways we might contextualize Cloud Atlas thinking of both its status as a literary novel and its heritage in aesthetic concerns associated with (the problematic category of) postmodernism.

Despite explicit references to the literary postmodern, the book makes its ecological distinction with a structural choice – a simple but elegant experiment. Wood (the notoriously fastidious New Yorker novel reviewer) calls “Mitchell’s postmodernism” “gestural” (“The Floating Library”). He says “You could remove all the literary self-consciousness without smothering the novel’s ontology, or coarsening its intricacy.” In one way we might extend our claim that Cloud Atlas plays on the reader’s expectation of a novelistic coherence and say that it also invites a suspicion that the novel will let us down, will not finish its stories as might befit a certain notion of the postmodern. Mitchell’s inhabitation of diverse stylistic genres, however, is done in a much different spirit, with a sincerity that searches for meaning in literary story (for providing, as Schoene has it, a “communality”), that offers a historical glimpse – however fuzzy in its outline – of the biosphere. This is also, in a sense, revealed to the reader.

Jameson in his classic Postmodernism or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism describes an aesthetic “whack-a-mole,” often attached to the postmodern,
concerning the adequacy of language. In Chapter 5, “Reading and the Division of Labor,” Jameson discusses a *nouveau roman* by Claude Simon, *Conducting Bodies*, a transitional work that employed both vestiges of a personal/representational style characterizing Simon’s earlier works and more of an impersonal/“textual”/“linguistic” style evident in his later works and characterizing the “new novel” (132-3). Jameson suggests:

…that his relationship to both is pastiche, a bravura imitation so exact as to include well-nigh undetectable reproduction of stylistic authenticity itself, of a thoroughgoing commitment of the authorial subject to the phenomenological preconditions of the stylistic practices in question. This is, then, in the largest sense what is postmodern about Simon: the evident emptiness of that subject beyond all phenomenology, its capacity to embrace another style as though it were another world. (133)

A similar commitment in *Cloud Atlas* is, contrastingly, made detectable. As I indicated, the gestures (typography, style change) that mark the pastiche are so uniformly deployed that they become the aesthetic, like an homage to the literary postmodern. In a contemporary ecological context of global warming doubt, Mitchell gives us something like pastiche *after* global warming (post-climate pastiche?), that which seems to want language/storytelling/literature to be adequate after all.

If we return to the scene of Meronym and Zachry ascending Mauna Kea, we can read the book struggling to “stretch” conventional literary drama to the large spatial and temporal scales of the sciences. Symbolically, the action of the novel must have characters struggling up a mountain, where the air is thin, to even get there (and it might be the wrong mountain, as I indicated). Or else, scientists like Rufus Sixsmith come close to the novel’s center-stage. He even straddles two sections, but alas the protagonist baton is handed off at each step to laypeople, none of whom (except perhaps Meronym) has or announces a conceptualization of global ecology that might be instrumental in apprehending the drama of the unattended scenery. These protagonists are, nevertheless, interesting actors in a novel. So, in one sense, I read that *Cloud Atlas* also marks an ecological inadequacy of the novel, though not of its form. In *Postmodernism* Jameson describes the rendered “palpable struggle to get

---

28 Coincidentally Wood also says “Never, when reading Mitchell, does the reader worry that language may not be adequate to the task, and this seems to me both a fabulous fortune and a metaphysical deficiency.” (“The Floating Library”)
sense data into sentences,” that which “leaves a residue in its failure, lets you sense the presence of the referent outside the closed door…” (*Postmodernism* 150). He continues, “…for better or worse, art does not seem in our society to offer any direct access to reality, any possibility of unmediated representation of what used to be called realism” (150). But the binary determination of a failure seems absent in *Cloud Atlas*. A word cannot show the color red, but neither can our eyes see a quark. Art, as Jameson says, offers no direct access to reality, but the OOO thinkers say there is no “direct access” to objects in general. Objects withdraw even from themselves (*Hyperobjects* 44). And so *Cloud Atlas*’ markers of its fictionality, which might otherwise be lumped with problematic connotations of the postmodern, may show, as Harman says, “aesthetics is always aware of this inaccessibility of the real, it’s always aware of this need to encounter the real obliquely or indirectly” (“Graham Harman: Objects and the Arts”). Obviously *Cloud Atlas* does not reproduce a biosphere in its totality and complexity, but it does offer a translation into its intimation of History and makes the provisionality of that intimation explicit for the reader.

In discussing Mitchell’s first novel *Ghostwritten* Pieter Vermeulen argues that “the organization of [*Ghostwritten*] openly recognizes the genre’s complicity with processes of globalization” (Vermeulen 383). Following Franco Moretti, he states, “The novel penetrates the life of the individual most efficiently by disguising its implicit normativity as mere reality, instead of making these norms more explicit” (384). This is also the game in *Cloud Atlas*, only, with a wide sense of what counts as normativity. Apprehensions of “reality,” the object philosophers might say, are normative insofar as they are apprehended by the human. “Intelligence,” says Morton, “need not be thought of as having a picture of reality in the mind, but as an interaction between all kinds of entities that is somewhat ‘in the eye of the beholder’” (*Hyperobjects* 85). The beholder’s consciousness is only “an aesthetic effect” (84); or as Morton says in *The Ecological Thought* the mind is a kluge, an evolutionary workaround (115); “Cognizing is fundamentally environmental. You wouldn’t need to do it if you weren’t in an environment” (115). “My thinking is thus a mental translation of the hyperobject—of climate, biosphere, evolution—not just figuratively, but literally” (*Hyperobject* 85).

---

29 My thanks to Professor Vermeulen who as my first supervisor for this essay gave me the idea to write about *Cloud Atlas* and the Anthropocene.
Cloud Atlas can be read productively without apprehending its totality. The biosphere is present and bounded, nevertheless, and not a limitless, ethereal background. It is an object acted upon and that acts upon. The novel implicates the reader’s own inattention to the scenery in the tougher worlds of the characters in the two central sections. We want to finish the novel’s stories if only to find evidence of the human causalities, the historical superstructure underneath. But there it was all along, the biosphere, right there up close in the stories. We must see it stir to acknowledge its presence in a literary novel, and this is similarly a problem with global warming. Scientists see only indications that climate, which is not visible in its totality, is changing. They tell us it has to do with a collective “we,” but that “we” is inaccessible with the protocols given us by our modernity as Chakrabarty partly demonstrates. How does the novel as a place of Forster’s story make us understand that our wanting to turn the page to see “what happens next” to the humans, and in the process ignoring the nonhumans, may be at odds with something else we want, the continuation of story?

To search for a biospheric continuity in the novel at this ecological moment, might be to ask, in another formulation, “What is the novel in the Anthropocene?” I like Chakrabarty’s question about species membership, “Who is the we?” (The Climate of History 220), because I believe ecology in this stage of globalization must pose the question “Who is the we?” again and again. Is the “we” Latour’s modern? Is it a member of Homo sapiens sapiens or just any member of Homo? Is it a wealthy Westerner? Is it an English speaker? Is it a storyteller? Global warming does not seem to be meaningfully thought of as that which needs a retroactive villain, an abstention of singular behaviors, or repudiation of cultural norms in a purely humanistic cast. Global warming has – ironically authoritative as a pronouncement from the mouth of Science – simply confirmed something that was always claimed by ecologists; the bio-geo-chemical consequences of certain of our human behaviors can accumulate and come back to haunt us in a future totality. What will be the next global warming? If the rise of the novel form is rooted in realism, could we claim that a merit is its ability to pull the cover off its act of “disguising” objects or to help the reader see how it, as well as the reader, make background?

Cloud Atlas considers the conditions of its own existence, a self-consciousness of its literariness that far exceeds marking fictionality. The commonalities of the storytellers comment on a way the novel searches out literary meaning at this geo-
historical moment. Though certain of the geostories are offstage, inaccessible to the protagonists in their fictional present, the story has offered us meaningful avenues of thinking historical interconnection with its “flutterby thinkings.” Big-picture views of history may favor the non-specialists, composers, combiners, connectors, philosophical gamblers, methodological subversives, and critical fictionalists. “Meticulous brains often overlook the simple” (Cloud Atlas 338), and our big picture views of ecology may re-focus the finer-tuned inquiries of the future.
Works Cited

“About Mauna Kea Observatories” Institute for Astronomy: University of Hawaii. 


Edwards, Caroline. ““Strange Transactions’: Utopia, Transmigration, and Time in *Ghostwritten* and *Cloud Atlas*.” *Dillon* 177-200.


Malm, Andreas and Alf Hornborg. “The geology of mankind? A critique of the
Web. 18 March 2014.
McMorran, Will. “Cloud Atlas and If on a Winter’s Night a Traveler.” Dillon 155-
175.
---. Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World. London: U of
Dec. 2014.
Ronda, Margaret. “Mourning and Melancholia in the Anthropocene.” Post45. n.p. 10


