

Taking the Future into Account: Today's Novels for Tomorrow's Readers

MICHAELA BRONSTEIN

IN 2014, SUPPORTED BY THE CITY OF OSLO, THE ARTIST KATIE PATERSON set up a public artwork entitled *Future Library*. “A forest in Norway is growing,” a video introducing the project states, describing trees planted in 2014. “In 100 years it will become an anthology of books” (Paterson, Introductory video). Every year beginning in 2014, the project has invited one writer to donate a manuscript that will not be read until 2114, a process that will continue until the century is over and the trees of the forest can provide the paper on which the works will be printed. “Tending the forest,” Paterson writes, “and ensuring its preservation for the one hundred year duration of the artwork finds a conceptual counterpoint in the invitation extended to each writer: to conceive and produce a work in the hopes of finding a receptive reader in an unknown future” (“Artwork”).

Paterson makes explicit a point rarely acknowledged in literary studies: that writing for the future, writing *away* from history, can be a progressive and even utopian act. Usually, the word *transhistorical* conjures visions of an ossified canon, of New Critical resistance to politics, and of paeans to the universality of classic texts. From critiques of modernist authors’ desire to transcend history to Lee Edelman’s call for “no future,” critics have learned to question both aesthetic and political appeals to the future. Such appeals risk becoming a justification for neglecting the present (austerity today for the sake of our children!) or a nasty joke played on the young today (work hard now and capitalism will reward you!). But as *Future Library* suggests, amid the slow catastrophe of climate change, writing for the future has less invidious associations. We may not know who future readers will be or what world they will inhabit, but the artwork demands that we take them into account—and it shows how doing so may change what we do in the present.

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The problem of climate change makes the future immediate, already inscribed in our present by our past. It also can help us conceive of literary futurity as something other than a flight from responsibility—as, instead, a call to ethical action. In *Future Library*, to address an unspecified future audience is not to write with a “universal” reader in mind but to spur a local, civic project of ecological responsibility. (The hidden texts of the works will be held in trust by the Oslo Public Library; the forest is on public land.) The double commitment to ecological and literary futurity does not reproduce present conventions in the future but rather declares a commitment to future generations whose perspectives will not be our own.

Conversely, future readers, and a conception of literature shaped by them, provide a model of thinking about the relation between present and future, one that illuminates the ethical demands of climate change. The second author selected for *Future Library* was David Mitchell, whose text was deposited in the archive in the summer of 2016. (The first was Margaret Atwood.) Mitchell was an apt selection. His novels *Cloud Atlas* (2004) and *The Bone Clocks* (2014)—which will appear as central examples here—span both the globe and long stretches of time, both before and after our present moment. The novels examine how texts travel through time, are taken up by future readers—how texts are altered by the future.

They also happen to be among my favorite contemporary novels. There is now another Mitchell work out there, and I will only ever read its title. In an ordinary, trivial way, this is the demand of the *Future Library* project: the present sacrifices a little for the future. We are stayed from consuming something we desire. Paterson says she hopes future readers find the texts a “gift from the past” (Interview): the project constructs a relation of generosity between present and future. This essay is a reading of a novel that virtually no one now alive will ever read—a speculative exercise using

Future Library and Mitchell's other published work not just to triangulate what the meaning of his hidden novel might be but also to examine what its existence is already doing.¹

Action on climate change is a problem about futurity: how to see other times as requiring something of us today. This is the inverse of a familiar problem in literary studies: what claim do the texts of the past have on us? Their future, after all, is our present. Literary futurity, I will argue here, offers a vision of negotiation between the present and the future, in which anticipating a future audience calls the present to account on behalf of the future as something new and other. Novels require a confrontation with what it means to take what is next into account—both within the course of a single work and across the broad history of reception over time.

Mitchell's writing, like *Future Library*, is an effort to develop a benign form of trans-temporal relations—a way to cross from one time to the next that does not require the sacrifice of others. He most directly addresses the problem of climate change in *The Bone Clocks*. Over the course of the novel, the reader encounters a villainous cult that obtains immortality by consuming the life-force of children: a literal embodiment of climate change, in which an energy-hungry past drains all possibility of a future. The novel is a meditation on the ethical ramifications of seeking immortality—not only physical, but also literary. Near the end of the novel, the protagonist, Holly Sykes, whose life we have been following since she was a teenager in 1984, is living in County Cork in 2043. Her future is in the midst of “the Endarkenment”: a global energy shortage that has apparently resulted in the downfall of nations and laws. Youthful raiders, led by a man named Hood, show up planning to steal her solar panels. Her neighbor asks them, “Would you treat *your* elderly relatives like this?”

“Number one is to survive,” answers Hood, watching the men on the roof. “They're all

dead, like my parents. They had a better life than I did, mind. So did you. Your power stations, your cars, your creature comforts. Well, you lived too long. The bill's due. Today," up on the roof the bolt is cut on the first panel, "you start to pay." (599)

That cut bolt is a trap sprung on the reader. We have spent *The Bone Clocks* feeling sympathy for the victims of the cult, experiencing the villainy of those who sacrifice others' futures for their own. Suddenly we see it: that is precisely what Holly herself, and all who grew up with her, have been doing all along, stealing the future of the world for the comfort of their own society. *You lived too long*: to be elderly, here, is to have participated in the same devil's bargain as that of the child-killers.

The Bone Clocks, in other words, addresses climate change less through its last chapter's representation of societal breakdown in a postapocalyptic landscape than through its broader examination of antagonistic, predatory relationships between present and future: when we consume today, what we consume is the future. *Future Library* links the consumption of texts through reading with the consumption of resources that go into producing texts; in Mitchell's novels, consumption is recurrently figured as cannibalism, literally and metaphorically—from the soul-devouring cabals of *Slade House* (2015), *The Bone Clocks*, and *The Thousand Autumns of Jacob de Zoet* (2010) to the mantra of *Cloud Atlas*'s villain, "The weak are meat, the strong do eat." In his most recent writing, the form of cannibalism that most interests Mitchell is a cannibalism of time—the theft of life from one generation by another—represented equally by Hood's brigands, the psychic cults, and ordinary energy-consuming human beings.²

Yet, as Mitchell's novels and *Future Library* point out, it is not always easy to discern whether a particular action in the present is theft from the future or provision for it. Novels negotiate this problem through

two forms of futurity. Most immediately, texts have an internal futurity: they make us look toward the next clause, paragraph, and chapter or section, and the ways they do so affect our understanding of the political intervention literature can make. After all, we both consume novels and are consumed by them: they are hungry for our time. But texts also have an external futurity in their potentially lengthy history of reception, circulation, and repurposing across time. How do texts, as they cross historical boundaries, constitute resources given to, or taken from, the future?

Reading in the Future

When I describe *Future Library* to academic colleagues in literary studies and beyond, one of the most common reactions is suspicion: they attribute to the participating writers the most self-aggrandizing reasons for addressing the future. The writers, my colleagues suggest, are claiming an unearned shortcut to classic status. To those who react negatively, *Future Library* looks like the present preying on the future. In withholding their work from present-day audiences, its writers also implicitly make claims on the future: they will consume its forest and demand its attention for the past. Is *Future Library* a gift to the future or another way in which we are consuming it?

Norway, as it happens, gets most of its energy from hydropower, but it also exports a lot of oil and natural gas. Are public art and public libraries a cultural carbon offset, encouraging their audiences to think beyond their own lives, or are they one more luxury purchased by the burning of fossil fuels? Do we view *Future Library*'s proximity to the oil-extraction business as a deflating irony or as precisely what makes the art important: that it has a prospect of intervening in the choices of those who will decide how to use one of the world's most significant reserves of fossil fuels?

The project asks the selection-committee members to judge whose art might be most

useful to the future—they have to risk complicity, take sides, make commitments. But they also set the artists they select at the mercy of the future. Those who are skeptical of the project, or of the authors' motives, seem to view it as a process of canon formation, as if the authors' involvement is a prize rather than a contribution. But people a century ago wanted different things from the literary past than we do today; a century from now, those desires may have changed yet again. If this artwork is to be meaningful across its duration, its acts of conservation must also be acts of dislocation and change.

Writing for the future is not inherently more egotistical than writing for the present, and perhaps it is less so—after all, today's authors will not be around to see their works published, they will little benefit from the publication, and their books may, in fact, never even be read. They give up some of their own chance to profit, just as they deny their readers' desire to consume. In discussing his choice to participate in *Future Library*, Mitchell refers to “the project's cocktail of vanity and humility” (“Ayes”). He likes that writing for the future can look either selfish or selfless depending on context.³ On the selfless side, he offers the character Ed Brubeck in *The Bone Clocks*, a war journalist who denies the present-day value of his own work.⁴ Asked if he writes “to bring the world's attention to the vulnerable,” Brubeck declares the idea absurd: “The world's default mode is basic indifference. It'd like to care, but it's just got too much on at the moment.” Nevertheless, he goes on, “if an atrocity isn't written about, it stops existing when the last witnesses die. That's what I can't stand. If a mass shooting, a bomb, a whatever, is written about, then at least it's made a tiny dent in the world's memory. Someone, somewhere, some time, has a chance of learning what happened. And, just maybe, acting on it. Or not. But it's there” (210). Writing is the means by which the sacrifices of the present become useful for the fu-

ture. It might lead not just to “memory” but to “learning” and “acting.” What matters is not the transformation of the real into the textual representation of it but the unpredictable things that the resulting artifact might do.

Future Library archives texts that are unread in their own time; Brubeck provides the future with a memory of an event that, perhaps, can be more powerful in a time other than its own. The status of these texts' future readers as unknown does not make them any less specific than present-day readers. The artwork does not stand outside time; rather, it aims at a predetermined yet essentially unknown future: 2114 in Norway. “Imagine someone handing you a unique anthology that was put aside a century ago, for your eyes only,” says Paterson (Interview): these texts are defined not by vague universality but by the audience they exclude (the intervening century of readers). No one knows precisely what the effects of climate change will be in the next century; no one knows if we will still be reading paper books. Perhaps all pages will be electronic; or, if the energy-starved futures of *The Bone Clocks* and its postapocalyptic kin come to pass, paper will triumph. These not-yet-known readers and ways of reading are still historically specific.

This built-in distance and uncertainty formalize what has long been an unnerving fact about reception: books estrange cause and effect across history. One of the recurring metaphors is already ecological: books as seeds. In seventeenth-century political polemics, both John Milton and Andrew Marvell rewrite the myth of Cadmus, connecting his status as the inventor of writing to the story of his sowing dragon's teeth in order to produce an army. Milton writes, “I know they [books] are as lively, and as vigorously productive, as those fabulous Dragons teeth; and being sown up and down, may chance to spring up armed men” (492). Books are the source of unpredictable violence—but they are also seeds; they produce equally unpre-

dictable growth. They “may chance” to produce an army—who knows when or where? When Marvell picks up the analogy, he highlights the interpretive dilemma: “There was a mistake sure in the Story of Cadmus, and the Serpents Teeth which he sowed, were nothing else but the Letters which he invented” (46). Marvell’s image makes the seeds printing-press letters rather than books. They are lying on the ground waiting for someone to interpret them.⁵ Books lie in wait across time: they are seeds planted in one generation that will sprout into the changed sky of another.

The old metaphor lives today in works about the power of texts in dystopian futures. In Octavia Butler’s *Parable* series, which takes place after an unexplained societal collapse, the protagonist develops a religion called Earthseed: the word refers both to the forms of life on earth and to the nature of the religion itself, with its easily transportable, reinterpretable verses designed to take root among her followers: the survival of earthly life is inextricable from the survival of texts. Similarly, in *Cloud Atlas*, words turn into seeds. The novel consists of six stories, each of which is set in a different time period: the earliest (featuring Adam Ewing) takes place in the nineteenth century, and the latest (centered on Zachry) is set in a distant, nightmarish future. The first halves of each story appear in chronological order; the second halves follow in reverse chronological order: Ewing’s tale both begins and ends the book, while Zachry’s appears without interruption in the middle. Every protagonist except Ewing consumes the story of the preceding section—in the story that follows Ewing’s, a composer named Frobisher finds Ewing’s journal; in the next story, Luisa Rey, a journalist, comes into possession of Frobisher’s letters; and so on. The novel’s structure, in other words, reflects the ways narratives are received in and used by the future.

The internal plots of each story also foreground the unpredictable afterlives of texts.

An escaped clone, Sonmi-451, asks others to “seedbed” her Catechism, a revolutionary manifesto (346): she hopes it will spark a revolution to topple her society, and eventually it does become a religion. “A seed sprouted thru the crust o’ my mem’ry, an’ that seed was a word,” thinks postapocalyptic Zachry (281), recalling a prophecy that he is about to obey. Zachry’s prophecy and Sonmi’s Catechism—like the dragon’s teeth—anticipate not just future interpretation but future action. Sonmi, like Cadmus, wants to start a fight; Brubeck wants to avert atrocities yet to appear; the writers of *Future Library* hope that their not-yet-read texts will cause the conservation that will allow their texts to be printed. When words grow into the future, they begin to have unpredictable consequences.

I dwell on this because textual futurity is often imagined without reference to the actions of future readers. In a recent anthology of climate-themed fiction, for instance, Atwood’s contribution is entitled “Time Capsule Found on the Dead Planet.” The story ends by referring to its own form: “on the last day of all our recorded days I place our final words” (193). The time-capsule model is in some ways opposite to *Future Library*: a self-conscious snapshot of the past, requiring no commitment from the future. Indeed, in Atwood’s version, there may not even be a future.

This kind of apocalyptic scenario has long had an uneasy presence in literary statements about the lasting powers of texts. Take Joseph Conrad’s version: he summons up a far-future vision where humanity awaits an environmental apocalypse; the world is ending, but the artist’s vision is still “imperishable” (16). Artistic endurance and absence of a future are somehow not just compatible but inevitably twinned:

[T]here is a group alive, clustered on the threshold to watch the last flicker of light on a black sky, to hear the last word uttered in the stilled workshop of the earth. It is safe to

assume that if anybody, it will be the imaginative man who would be moved to speak on the eve of that day without tomorrow, whether in austere exhortation or in a phrase of sardonic comment—who can guess. (17)

The “stilled workshop of the earth” encapsulates the strange role of the artist in Conrad's essay: the artist's workshop now seems blurred with the planet as a whole, and the work of authorship will last as long as the planet itself. The alternatives Conrad sketches out here for that work—comment against exhortation, description against action—present us with an important distinction. Is climate fiction, we might ask, important for what it represents—for how it makes us see a particular future—or for what it tells us to do—for how it tries to create a particular future?

Reading for the Future

Climate change in fiction is often perceived as posing a problem of representation.⁶ Amitav Ghosh has called on writers “to imagine other forms of human existence . . . to think about the world only as it amounts to a formula for collective suicide” (128). Artists, he suggests, have an ethical responsibility to figure out how to represent the inconceivable. Climate's global and temporal scales, in particular, seem to challenge the norms of the novel. The writer Bill McKibben says, introducing the collection of short stories containing Atwood's “Time Capsule” (as well as a piece by Mitchell), “The problem with writing about global warming may be that the truth is larger than usually makes for good fiction” (1). How, he asks, can we turn what is typically the “background” of fiction (the environment) into the “highest drama” (4)?

Yet fiction's role in this debate is about not only what it shows us but also what it asks of us, as suggested by the mechanics of *Future Library*, with its need for collective preservation. And novels do, often, directly ask us

for things beyond mere acts of imagination. *Cloud Atlas* moves from the past through our present to a postapocalyptic future and then back, ending with the conclusion of the story with which it began, whose protagonist, Ewing, declares himself committed to rejecting the mantra “the weak are meat”: “If we *believe* that humanity may transcend tooth & claw . . . , if we *believe* leaders must be just, violence muzzled, power accountable & the riches of the Earth & its Oceans shared equitably, such a world will come to pass” (508). The structure of the novel, demonstrating the apocalyptic endpoint of a history in which people see themselves as residing in a predatory world and behave accordingly, supports the urgency of this moment. We have just seen where predation leads (Zachry's postapocalyptic world), and now we are back at the beginning with Ewing, able to choose a different path. The novel depicts history repeating itself in order to show how unbearable that proposition is, to make us assent to a future that will not repeat the past.

But it is worth noting how self-consciously awkward this proposition is, both in the novel and in criticism of it: Ewing adds immediately after the passage I just quoted, “I am not deceived. It is the hardest of worlds to make real.” Fredric Jameson asks, citing a different example of the novel's tendency toward direct statement, “[I]s this particular ‘philosophy of history’ simply thrown out, . . . as a sop to the reader who still needs ‘meanings?’” (312). To see the novel as offering a meaning seems an embarrassment to its literary achievement. And this is, finally, the real problem of singling out a work as “climate fiction”: the idea seems awkwardly message-oriented.⁷ It denies contradiction and multiplicity; it makes the literary novel sound like a public-service announcement.⁸

Jameson implies that the novel's various messages reduce the complex worlds and historical patterns Mitchell has presented us. Ewing's conclusion is, in fact, directly at odds with the history the novel has just unfurled

ahead of us, which constitutes an unrelenting spectacle of metaphoric and literal cannibalism, offering no reason to believe humanity can manage anything other than tooth and claw. But this tension is deliberate—the novel’s nested narrative structure directs our attention away from what the novel represents and toward what we as readers will believe and do. Mitchell’s writing is not just an interesting way of representing the complexities of history; it also exposes the limitations of the representational model of how literature relates to history. What literature has to offer the fight against climate change is not a way of representing the not-yet-thought—but instead a parallel history of responsibility and action across temporal boundaries. Anticipating a textual and readerly future forces action in the present, in *Future Library*; in *The Bone Clocks* and in *Cloud Atlas*, anticipating the future makes us not only recognize how the present is implicated in a history beyond itself but also commit to changing that history.

We may need to get over our fear of literature as public-service announcement. The model of literature written under the pressure of futurity—literature aimed at a future audience, and therefore thinking through its own responsibility to future worlds—is also a model of literature that is less concerned with drawing out complex meanings and more invested in delivering messages. The word *message*, unlike *meaning*, foregrounds the question of the audience, whether that audience lives in 2014 or 2114. For the distinction between *message* and *meaning* to become visible, we need to look at novels like Mitchell’s—and their thinking about human and literary futurity—as an attempt not merely to represent history but to interact with it. Reading, in other words, shapes not just literary history but history itself.

Cloud Atlas offers us the familiar appeal of a time-travel story. We end wondering if the future can be changed or if it is already written. The text develops at first through

the minor miracle of literary time travel, as the protagonists of each section read the first halves of the preceding stories. But this changes to the major miracle of a literal return to the past in the second half, as we move slowly in reverse order back to Ewing, when the future we have already seen is yet to occur. The novel reveals with terrifying vividness the worst possible outcome for the failings of corporate capitalism, and it ends with an explicit address demanding change from a twenty-first-century reader who is already halfway down the dark path from the nineteenth century to the future the novel sketches. Mitchell’s works obsessively dramatize the breakdown of social order, the turn toward global apocalypse—*Ghostwritten* (his first novel), *Cloud Atlas*, and *The Bone Clocks* all do this. And yet, as Mitchell says, his participation in *Future Library* “is a vote of confidence in the future” (“Ayes”). What the novels *represent* is precisely not what they are ultimately supposed to *do*.⁹ The conclusion of *Cloud Atlas* reverses the usual call of the storyteller: it asks us *not* to suspend our disbelief. Refuse to believe in the world I have represented, the novel says; believe in what I haven’t shown, and act according to that belief.

I am dwelling on the tension in *Cloud Atlas* between representation and exhortation because it is at odds with the most familiar piece of conceptual architecture by which critics bridge the gap between representation and political consequences. Ghosh’s implication when he focuses on how literature alters what can be “imagined” or “thought” is that representing something expands the reader’s perception. The same premise appears when Ian Baucom, describing the reader’s relationship with *Cloud Atlas*, repeats the phrase “gain access” to conceptualize the novel’s political usefulness: for instance, we “gain access to a new conception of justice” (156). The “access” model, whereby the novel is one more window or doorway, underwrites Jameson’s conclusion as well. For him, the novel’s contradictions

yield an epiphany: rejecting readings that seek “shabby ideological messages and . . . rather pitiful calls to this or that action,” he declares that “the moment of the aesthetic is not that call but rather its reminder that all those impulses exist: the revolutionary Utopian one fully as much as the immense disgust with human evil” (312). In other words, if the reader of *Cloud Atlas* feels a call to action, the action is less important than the reader's perception of the existence of the call.

This seems an impoverished conception of the political dimensions of the aesthetic. What, exactly, is the difference between a “shabby ideological message” and a “reminder” of utopian impulses? And why, we might ask, is the difference so important? The politics, we might say, needs to stay unconscious for Jameson to approve of it. Readership, here, becomes an active process (uncovering all those unconscious features) because the text itself is relatively passive—it does not exhort or offer “messages.”

In the end, Baucom's “access,” Jameson's “reminder” of what exists, and Ghosh's notion of the expanding range of what can be thought all share a certain vision of literature as throwing open doorways in the house of our social imagination: the worldviews and concepts offered by texts become spaces through which the reader might wander at will. But as a variety of scholars have noted, texts do more than offer spaces in which readers act; they can themselves be agents, and their activity does not necessarily script readerly passivity by contrast.¹⁰ Michael Warner's “Uncritical Reading,” for instance, foregrounds reading practices that constitute “demands” on the reader (32–33)—reading that conscripts rather than offers access.

Cloud Atlas's two possible interpretations, then, also correspond with two understandings of reading—a representative one, whereby readers become aware of a way of understanding the world, and a rhetorical one, whereby they are compelled to actively

change the world.¹¹ These two conceptions appear in two contrasting temporalities of reading. Viewing *Cloud Atlas* as an experience unfolding in time highlights its qualities as exhortation and rhetoric; viewing it as a spatial object of our analysis—as a space that we may access and examine at our leisure—reinforces the persistently bleak world it represents.¹² In one understanding of the work of reading, *Cloud Atlas* invites us to face the frightening contents of a dark room; in another, it enjoins us to slam the door shut and seek out or build a better room.

To take the side of representation and of spatial hermeneutics first, the novel provides many spatial metaphors for its structure. One of the images noticed by reviewers was a matryoshka doll: each story encloses its successor. At one point in the novel, a character describes “[o]ne model of time” as “an infinite matryoshka doll of painted moments, each ‘shell’ (the present) encased inside a nest of ‘shells’ (previous presents) . . .” (393). The quotation marks around “shells” hint at something odd about the metaphor. We might ask, Why is the future interior? Most natural objects with concentric growth patterns (tree rings, pearls) are constituted by layers of the future around an older center (“previous presents,” going back to an ancient kernel). Paterson cites tree rings as the initial inspiration of *Future Library*, and she adopted them as its central image, labeling the center and outermost rings “2014” and “2114,” respectively (fig. 1). Shells are generally oldest at the smallest point: a nautilus builds its shell from the center of the spiral outward. Narrative form, too, often places the past, not the future, at the center: the phrase “frame narrative” usually describes works where events are enclosed by a later narrator.

In *Cloud Atlas*, the future, rather than the past, lurks within the present. The startling quality of this reversal is visible in the fact that Baucom undoes it even while describing the novel itself: “each age gathers

and contains within itself the ages and times that have preceded it" (151), he says, implicitly turning the novel inside out. Remember, the novel both begins and ends with the earliest story; the latest is uninterrupted at the center of the text. Mitchell's structure, viewed spatially, seems to set the future more firmly in place: today holds it already. In this light, the repeated scenarios of slavery and predation in the novel seem inevitable; no matter what the characters hope, the same invidious truths wait to become their future.

This is the dark vision next to which Ewing's demands for belief and action seem impossible. But the spatial metaphor of the matryoshka doll has a limit: the image of shells, which seems to describe the novel's structure so tidily, obscures the main effect of the structure on the reader—the withholding of what happens next in the past, the delay of each story's conclusion until after all the later stories have been resolved. We find out the future before we find out the full truth about the past.¹³ The process of reading holds open ambiguities of interpretation that seem more closed the farther away we stand from the text: the more we look for themes that connect the different sections, the more brutal our vision of human nature will be.

The novel, however, tests our interpretations-in-process against those of its characters; we learn to know all the narrators, in other words, in part through their status as readers of the same texts we have encountered. One shocking moment occurs in the second section, when the composer Frobisher reads the section of Ewing's tale we have read and comments that Ewing "hasn't spotted his trusty Dr. Henry Goose [*sic*] is a vampire, fueling his [Ewing's] hypochondria in order to poison him, slowly, for his money"

(64; "[*sic*]" in original). This—in the experience of every member of one undergraduate seminar, and of most other readers I have asked—comes as a surprise.¹⁴ Although re-reading the novel makes it hard to miss the signs of Goose's villainy (e.g., his description of himself as a metaphoric cannibal), Frobisher's interpretation is not obvious to most readers—though, many pages later, it is proven correct. Readers respond in the moment differently to Frobisher's revelation—some, for instance, treat it as evidence of his own cynical nature. (Frobisher, at this point, seems like a predatory type himself.) Reading confronts us with judgments we are not necessarily aware we have made—and with the contingency of those judgments, the things we do not yet know even in the future.

We might think of *Cloud Atlas*'s demand that we disbelieve in what it represents as an answer to the problem of the "vicious circle" of critical art, as Jacques Rancière describes it, whereby the more a work uncovers the

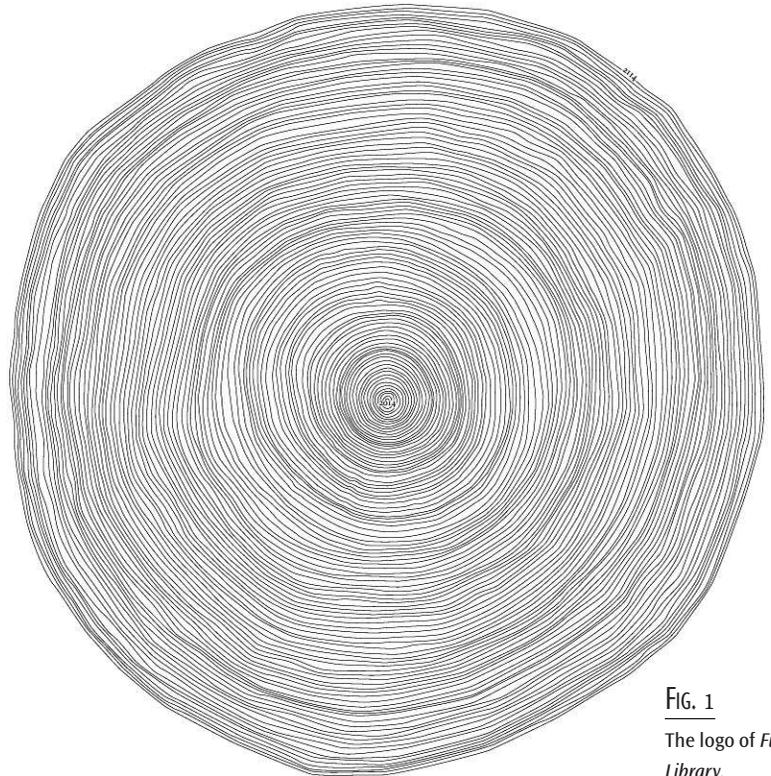


FIG. 1
The logo of *Future Library*.

structures of the world's injustices, the more it risks naturalizing them as inevitable (45–46). The novel instead makes its readers constantly confront their doubts about the things it represents—and then, at the end, mobilize all those doubts to try to avert a future that has already partially come to pass. The magic trick of the novel's structure is to render the future uncertain even when the reader knows what will happen: when we move backward in time through the second halves of each novella, we know what is coming on a global scale even as we do not know what will happen to individual characters. We are encouraged in this inquiry by future readers themselves: Sonmi makes reading the end of the preceding story her last wish before execution; Frobisher wishes to read on and find out what will happen to Ewing, though he is convinced he already knows: “Happy, dying Ewing” (460), he says, preparing for his own suicide, although Ewing, after all, will live. Like the later readers whose curiosity we have shared, we know the future while also being wrong about it, and we want something from the past. And, when we return to those withheld endings, we cannot help weighing them against the waiting twists of history.

This, too, is the structure of *Future Library*: the immediate future drops out of view while we look a century ahead. The future of the *Future Library* is both a distant, fixed point and an ongoing series of events that will happen between then and now.¹⁵ It is fixed and free at the same time—precisely the situation we as a species face at this moment. The effects of carbon dioxide already released into the atmosphere will play out inexorably, but that is not to say that nothing can be done to shape the consequences or mitigate the damage. Like the reader of the second half of *Cloud Atlas*, we fear we know what will happen. And yet also like that reader, we do not yet know what it will mean in any immediate or specific sense. The distant future may seem fixed; what happens to us tomorrow—and what we do—is not.

Intergenerational Responsibilities

Though we do not know what the world of 2114 will look like, we do know that we will have created it. In *The Bone Clocks*, characters have a notion of “the Script”—a vague sense of what is to come, which they have trouble reading (see, e.g., 411). I, typing this essay on a computer hooked up to various regional electric grids fired primarily by the burning of natural gas, am one of many who are writing a script for the planetary future. Rather than view Mitchell's “Script” as a representation of the dilemmas of determinism, we might recall that a script is something written, fashioned—an expression of agency.¹⁶ We are all stuck living in the climate-change script because human beings started writing it years ago. As the very name of our current era—the Anthropocene—suggests, the problem of climate change is that, on an ever-grander scale, human beings have become as much the authors of nature as they are of texts. Today's extreme storms and wildfires may not be designed and planned by human beings the way a skyscraper is, but they are as surely the product of human activity as suburban sprawl.

Textual reception, like global temperature patterns and their consequences, is unpredictable. In Anne Washburn's *Mr. Burns: A Post-electric Play*, episodes of *The Simpsons* circulate and morph: seven years after the apocalypse, a market in half-remembered “lines” helps theater companies reconstruct episodes in order to provide “Meaningless Entertainment” (70); seventy-five years after that, the vague outlines of the original episode provide an operatic allegory for the struggles of life after radiation. Theater, after all, has always demanded that the future adapt and reimagine its texts.

As the past inscribes our present, we continue to script the future. A recent round of lawsuits involving climate change has highlighted the concept of “intergenerational equity”—arguing that “sustainable development relies on a commitment to equity with future

generations” (Weiss 19).¹⁷ Similarly, one of Mitchell’s recurring claims is that civilization is the sense of ethical obligation to the future: in *Cloud Atlas*, one character tells another that civilization is knowing to eat only half your grain and plant the rest (303). As a vision of civilization and savagery, this leaves something to be desired—after all, one might not have enough food to plant half and still survive to harvest it. Thinking about futurity, one might say, is a luxury: if you have the financial and social breathing room today to look ahead, you are doing all right. But we might as easily view futurity as a responsibility. Mitchell’s ethics in these novels are focused on the choices made by those who have—or at least think they have—some power. And, arguably, this is also the problem of climate change: those with power are the ones whose ethical choices are most consequential.¹⁸ The mark of civilization in this novel is that those who are able plan ahead, look toward the future, because, Ewing says, “for the human species, selfishness is extinction” (508).¹⁹ If Ghosh indicts artists, seeing the failure to imagine other forms of living as a suicide pact, Mitchell uses Ewing to remind us that the crucial thing is to *act* on one’s ability to imagine.

Future Library itself, demanding that already famous authors donate one text that will little profit them, demonstrates the mechanism of any potential solution to climate change: the privileged must sacrifice. But it also connects the fortunes of writers with varying degrees of international power: Sjöen, who writes in Icelandic, is the third author. He has been translated around the globe but wonders, “Will there be people in the future who understand the language I write in?” (*Future Library* Trust). This is the *Future Library* as a traditional archive, a challenge to the future to preserve the means to comprehend the past. All the authors will, alike, share in the resources of *Future Library*’s trees.

To the extent that Mitchell’s novels have been given ethical or political force, critics

foreground their global interconnectedness.²⁰ But if his early novels focus on the surprising ease with which geographic boundaries can be crossed, his more recent works emphasize the fearsome difficulties of crossing temporal boundaries. Increasingly, too, they imagine not simply the relatedness of individuals across space and time but also responsibility for them. *Cloud Atlas* is full of intergenerational predators that foreshadow the carnivorous cults of his later novels. The clones in Sonmi’s section are murdered after thirteen years of labor to be fed to their own successors. In the first half of his section, the young Frobisher, secretary to the elderly and acclaimed composer Vyvyan Ayr, plots to steal rare books from his employer’s library and seduces his wife—only to realize in the section’s sequel that Ayr intends to plagiarize all of Frobisher’s musical ideas. Frobisher thinks he is the strong preying on the old and weak; it turns out that, despite his youth, he is weak in a world of wealth.

Edelman’s indictment of “reproductive futurism”—of the ways in which the image of a child is deployed to demand conformity to social norms today—reveals how impoverished is our understanding of other, alternative futurities.²¹ But it also reveals how much we desire them.²² Edelman’s children, after all, do not really signify the future in all its possibilities of difference and radical change: they signify the present reproducing itself eternally.²³ They signify, in other words, a conservative future. “Futurism,” Edelman says, “generates generational succession, temporality, and narrative sequence, not toward the end of enabling change, but, instead, of perpetuating sameness, of turning back time to ensure repetition” (60). This is the future as matryoshka doll, fractally contained in the present. Edelman’s critique of the appeal to the future is so powerful precisely because the figure of the child he’s critiquing is not the future but the present in disguise.²⁴

Mitchell’s victimized children in *The Bone Clocks* might look like a form of reproductive futurism, in which the innocence of

children erases the claims of adult experience. But we might instead take children in the context of *Cloud Atlas*, where the young and the elderly alike become victims of capitalism's violence: they are the weak whom the strong do eat. A character confined against his will to a nursing home suggests the interchangeable nature of these generational relations when he describes the home making a presentation "to the children (I nearly wrote 'parents') of prospective residents" (359). Harming children (or the elderly) is not about innocence but about vulnerability: violence across generations, for Mitchell, is the canary in the coal mine of society—a first sign that something is wrong.

The handoff from one generation to the next is a moment of fragility—when it is all too easy to freeze one's own moment into permanence. In *The Bone Clocks*, the carnivores gain immortality by keeping their cells from dividing and hence never aging, while the benign atemporals who oppose them age and die again and again, moving across races and genders as they do so. Carnivores, like reproductive futurism, demand a future bearing the image of the past; atemporals, by contrast, are intimately subject to the erasing and remaking effects of time.

Texts are useful because, like Mitchell's atemporals, their transhistorical status depends on change and adaptation. Literary futurity is not, intrinsically, a queer or a revolutionary futurity—it does not necessarily demand radical otherness. But it requires openness to the other in the form of the unknown reader. It is an ecological futurity, as much of adaptation as of conservation—as witnessed by people living today in cities, where nesting peregrine falcons have found skyscrapers to be useful substitutes for cliffs. Texts offer a potentially benign vision of the relation between eras—a nonpredatory consumption. Like the atemporals (finding resurrection by happenstance, not seeking it out), texts change over time, grapple with new

conditions and gain new identities, are at the mercy of their future circumstances. In *Cloud Atlas*, as texts move across time, their genres, fictive status, and interpretations all change; reading destabilizes the endless perpetuation of the past in the present. Texts can call for action; but the call will be different in every era. In Mitchell's work, texts out of time are less consumers of the future than consumed by it; they are at the mercy of—but offer something to—their future readers.

Writing for the temporally distant audiences of texts, then, is one way of confronting historical change. *The Bone Clocks* is particularly scathing about the representation of present circumstances as a spur to immediate action; it finds the idea that writing might have immediate consequences both irresistible and absurd. Brubeck dismisses the present-day audience of reporting; meanwhile, a writer who looks for efficacy through representation turns out to be a delusional murderer: "Plan A was to alert the world through poetry. That failed. So we'll have to resort to Plan B" (400). If texts addressing climate change are a gift to a future, the gift is not knowledge: future readers will know the consequences of climate change better than we will.

Queer theory's suspicions of futurity often see attention to the future as part of an American ideology of optimism; Jack Halberstam, for instance, shares with Edelman a suspicion of "toxic positivity" (3). But the emotions that best define both the experience of reading Mitchell's or Butler's postapocalyptic fiction and the political act of demanding action on climate change are dread and fear, not optimism. *Cloud Atlas* transforms pessimism into dread in order to call for action. Trying to act for the future, in the context of something like climate change, is not an expression of optimism or pessimism but an expression of the dissonance between hope and fear, between the necessity of urgent action and the fear that it will not be enough.

Both Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick—critiquing paranoid reading—and José Muñoz—critiquing Edelman—see their targets as, in Muñoz’s phrase, “weirdly atemporal” (94); Sedgwick describes paranoid reading as having a “narrative stiffness . . . in which yesterday can’t be allowed to have differed from today and tomorrow must be even more so” (147). One does not need to have a faith in a progressive moral arc of the universe—indeed, at this moment, as at Sedgwick’s (141), such a faith might seem particularly absurd—in order to believe that things do change, dramatically, whether for the better or not. The future—especially in climatological terms—will be other; whether or not writing for the future strives to imagine the shape of that otherness, it must begin to imagine how literature will fit within it.

If *Cloud Atlas* represents its worlds in order to galvanize its readers to reject them, *The Bone Clocks* offers a spooky, fantastical world as a temptation—the ostensible pleasures of heroes triumphing over villains. James Wood’s review of *The Bone Clocks* criticizes the “Technicolor hues of Good and Evil” next to which “realism—the human activity—is relatively unimportant” (82). Yet the final section of the novel shows that, while the atemporals were busy fighting psychic battles with their equally fantastical opponents, humanity destroyed itself much more prosaically. That last section catches the reader in two traps: the first is Hood’s scorn for the generation before his, in which we can recognize that the villains are a mere exaggeration of the ordinary complicities of belonging to a generation that had the ability to consume so much so quickly—a generation that includes the first readers of the novel as well as its protagonists. The second trap closes on us as readers: if we read the novel for what is next in its apparent (Technicolor) plot, we miss the slow environmental drama of the growing Endarkenment. We are all Brubeck’s dismissed present-day readers: the novel’s “just got too much on at

the moment” for us to notice the background rising to flood the foreground. Climate change, like pollution, is an example of what Rob Nixon has analyzed as “slow violence”: “calamities that patiently dispense their devastation while remaining outside our flickering attention spans” (6). *The Bone Clocks* uses its psychic predators both to speed up climate change to fit our attention span and to alert us to what we miss by living within that span.

Of course—depending on the path history takes from here—readers of the future might not miss the same references we do, might never be fooled. *Future Library* partakes of the same perverse logic—the more successful it is as a call to prevent ecological catastrophe, the more distant from its eventual readers it risks becoming: Mitchell’s social decay and Atwood’s dead planets might seem like catastrophes averted, not haunting threats to living readers. Conversely, Butler’s *Parable of the Talents*, two decades on, has suddenly developed characteristics of unexpected and undesired precise realist representation: it features a conservative populist demagogic president who runs under the slogan “make America great again” (19). Should the worlds represented by these writers come to pass, *Future Library* might remain an incomplete artwork. Its completion requires not just the protection of the forest but the protection of a society in which the use of natural resources to produce books is not a moral impossibility, in which a sustainable harvest is possible and trees are not desperately needed nearby for firewood and shelter.

Reality, as it usually does, will likely take shape somewhere in between these extremes. The apocalypse may be averted, but lying in wait will always be a new threat to which these speculative texts might seem equally applicable; or, conversely, the catastrophe may come but will not be complete enough to make the idea of a vote of confidence in the future utterly absurd. Just as we both know and do not know the future in *Cloud Atlas*,

we both see and remain blind to the future we have written for ourselves.

The world's script is always both written and still being written. And literature, for all its active force, will not itself avert climate change's devastation. The actions of texts, no matter how direct the messages they deliver, are not simple—just as the future's relation to the present is not simple. The most clearly received message is the starting point for readerly activity, not its end. But the readers of the future put pressure on the present—both the literal, procedural demands of *Future Library* and literary futurity's calling us to account in the eyes of the future.

Future Library demands action from its 2114 readers, as well as from us. The title of Mitchell's unpublished contribution is *From Me Flows What You Call Time*.²⁵ The time-scale of *Future Library* becomes a bridge between 2015's *me* and 2114's *you*—the title frames its work as a message to the future, but one in which the future is already speaking too. We can imagine the readers of 2114 opening the new pages of the anthology, looking back, naming history, choosing whether to call into life the literary seeds of the past in order to decide what future they wish to make.

That's a guess, anyway. I won't live long enough to read it.

NOTES

1. Posthumous publication has a long tradition of "liberating" the author (Kingston), of facilitating authorial "freedom" (Twain 2). Freedom can be radical—imagining a world other than our own—but it looms less distinctly in the context of climatological futurity envisioned by *Future Library*, where writing for the future is a responsibility to use natural resources wisely.

2. Nixon presents a history of colonial and neocolonial resource extraction as an "appetite for time" (96–97).

3. At one extreme we might place Ozymandias's self-aggrandizing sculpture. At the other, perhaps, lies the field of nuclear semiotics: the selfless attempt to find a way to communicate across millennia that a repository

of nuclear waste is deadly. Of course, that effort of communication tries to repay the debt constituted by the production of nuclear waste in the first place.

4. The selfish side is amply represented in Mitchell by the venality of authors on the literary-festival circuit, most fully by Crispin Hershey's ego-boosting machinations in *The Bone Clocks* (293–402).

5. Marvell's image suggests the thought experiment of Knapp and Michaels, describing the interpretive problem that would result from a wave's leaving a stanza of Wordsworth on sand: the result, they say, is "either not intentionless or not language" (Knapp and Michaels 728). The question of intention fades when we conceive of the relation between text and reader as a script for interaction rather than a problem of who determines meaning.

6. Phillips criticizes ecocriticism for its "fundamentalist fixation on literal representation" (7).

7. Critics, however, have nevertheless devoted books to the topic. See, e.g., Mehnert; Trexler. See also edited collections from Canavan and Robinson; Mayer and von Mossner.

8. As Williams points out, the "singularly catastrophic and fiery future" of climate change (477) has ironically solidified precisely as futurology has shifted its attention from "the future" to "a plurality of possible futures" (473). Gestures toward the plural, the unfixd, and the ambiguous rest uneasily with calls for urgent action. Chun attempts to bypass this tension (680–81).

9. That Ewing's idealistic conclusion is a preoccupation of Mitchell's is suggested by the greater explicitness of the theme in his most recent novels, *The Bone Clocks* and *Slade House*. These exhortations against a predatory world seem a call to action that he has not yet tired of.

10. Felski uses Bruno Latour's actor-network theory to foreground the agency of texts (162); Best and Marcus suggest that the text can say as much about itself as we can (11).

11. This distinction is not always a bright line: for instance, Nixon examines the "representational challenges" of environmental catastrophe (275), but he does take representation to be a direct call to action; see also Mehnert (15). Nevertheless, literary critics all too often describe representation and the awareness/access model as political ends in themselves, or at least as the most important end of complex literary artifacts.

12. Ng's reading, for example, acknowledges the affirmative aspects of the novel's structure (115) while arguing that ultimately "one form of imperialism is merely replaced by another" (118).

13. It is possible to read *Cloud Atlas*'s nested narratives not as a representation of the history of one world but as metafiction, in which characters from earlier sections are fictional stories within later sections. As with the inverted temporal frame, such a reading seems to make the future more fixed—in this case, more "real" than the past.

14. I thank the members of my fall 2015 class Experience of Narrative at MIT for the observations they made while reading *Cloud Atlas*.

15. Many structural aspects of the project are left to its future trustees. For instance, they will decide whether the texts circulate beyond the copies made from the forest's trees.

16. For one reading of determinism in *The Bone Clocks*, see Hayot.

17. The most prominent organization launching these lawsuits is Our Children's Trust: the name alone sounds like reproductive futurism ("our" children, not everyone's). Law professors (and philosophers), like literary critics, have struggled to figure out how unknowable generations can become part of our analysis (D'Amato 3–14).

18. This is also one representational challenge for climate-change fiction: as Chun (702) and Trexler (4) both point out, the moral choices of individuals are not the central problem of climate change.

19. At the time of writing, this statement was one of the two most frequently highlighted passages in the Amazon Kindle edition of *Cloud Atlas* (Random House, 2008). The sentence is, one might say, designed to circulate.

20. Walkowitz writes about Mitchell that his books "invite affiliation across nations and across languages" (45)—an echo of Nussbaum's old notion that books train readers in openness to others (166, 184).

21. Literary futurity is sometimes entangled with procreation—perhaps most famously in Shakespeare's sonnets. But it tends to be a queer futurity nevertheless: the sonnets make print a metaphor for sexual reproduction (in, e.g., sonnet 11), but slowly literary endurance begins to efface its fleshly counterpart.

22. The most optimistic alternative to Edelman's association of the future with heterosexual reproduction is Muñoz's declaration "The future is queerness's domain. . . . Queerness is essentially about the rejection of a here and now" (1). For a nontemporal critique of Edelman, see Halberstam 106–10.

23. For queer ecological futurity, see Anderson on the implications of a "breeders' apocalypse" (63).

24. Edelman's critique of "every notion of a general good" (6) is beyond the scope of my analysis (perhaps beyond that of any paper foregrounding climate change), but his key association of the future with the normative sense of the social represented by children is questionable. Children in fiction often signify the moral demands of the present: in *The Bone Clocks*, Brubeck balances going to see his daughter's school play against the work he can do reporting in the Middle East (219, 267). Butler's *Parable of the Talents* features the daughter of a prophetess, Lauren Olamina, who resents that her mother seems to care more about building her religion than reuniting her family.

25. The title is taken from a 1990 work of the same name by the Japanese composer Toru Takemitsu.

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