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**ODYSSEUS RE-IMAGINED: EXPERIMENTAL FICTION RESPONDS
TO THE CALL OF THE ANCIENTS- TECHNOLOGY AND SCIENCE
FULFILL CLASSIC EPIC DEVICES IN CLOUD ATLAS AND THE
SILENT HISTORY**

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ODYSSEUS RE-IMAGINED:
EXPERIMENTAL FICTION RESPONDS TO THE CALL OF THE ANCIENTS-
TECHNOLOGY AND SCIENCE FULFILL CLASSIC EPIC DEVICES IN *CLOUD*
ATLAS AND THE SILENT HISTORY

A Thesis
Presented to the
Faculty of
California State University,
San Bernardino

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts
in
English Composition

By
Debra Jeanette Freeland

September 2019

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ABSTRACT

The timeless, lyrical poem of Ancient Greece, revered for its grand battles, supernatural forces and legendary heroes is a fading memory of a forgotten past. Many critics, scholars, and authors like Theodore Steinberg concur, “. . . “[the] twentieth-century epic” is oxymoronic, the epic died with Milton” (10). Yet, the echoes of the past resound in the present as the characteristics and literary conventions of the Homeric epic are easily found in contemporary genres, including fantasy, sci-fi, and dystopian fiction. What has emerged is not a repeat of the past, but something different, something new. The influence of science and technology is apparent even to the most relaxed reader. Contemporary writers have adapted forms of technology, communication, and modern science to perform as the traditional literary devices of the epic genre.

In his book, *Epic in American Culture*, Christopher N. Phillips remarks that, “Epic did not die with Milton . . . it developed new power and shape. . .” as writers dismissed the traditional formats to allow for artistic growth advancing the use and understanding of epic, “. . . the new insights, literary and cultural history that emerge once synchronic, monolithic definition of form are abandoned-the surprises in the archive of American literary engagements with the epic form are myriad” (4,10). This release of boundaries allowed space to create, one that intersects with specific moments in time and sociocultural influence, allowing the inclusion of modern understanding and experiences. I found a kernel in

Catherine Morley's book, *The Quest for Epic*, where she examines the influence of the epic on the American novel, and the means with which writers continue to approach and engage epic, “. . . compulsively and consciously appropriated and reinvented aspects of the antique and the modern European epic traditions to advance their own aesthetic designs” (13). Furthering the writer's vision is only part of the epic's adaptation, and the formulation of other genres, including sci-fi and fantasy, provide many reference points in its long evolutionary cycle. Why the need for new genres? What did writers have to address to warrant these spaces? Technology was one answer. Technological advancements placed a demand upon writers, stirring the authors to push against canonical boundaries. The cultural importance of the mythology surrounding the epic is infused, and the result is an expanded, (dare I say new?), technology rich, contemporary epic. Same genus, different species.

So, what does this new cutting-edge insertion look like? How does it function? What role does technology play in contemporary figurations of the epic? How does modern science perform in ancient conventions? Can they maintain the ethos of the traditional Homeric epic? This thesis will investigate through literary scholarship and theory, Homer's classics, *Iliad* and *The Odyssey*, and two contemporary novels, David Mitchell's *Cloud Atlas* and *The Silent History* by Eli Horowitz, Matthew Derby, and Kevin Moffett.

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CHAPTER ONE

THE EVOLUTIONARY ASPIRATIONS OF THE ANCIENT EPIC

Introduction

“Why cover the same ground again? ... It goes against my grain to repeat a tale told once and told so clearly.” Homer

To say that the Homeric epic has influenced literature minimizes its long-range impact and effect. Western education rests on a foundation primarily composed of those ancient literary traditions. These practices stood for centuries as the standard that all other literature was held to. While its clout is widely understood, the status of the epic has been debated and argued among scholars for decades. The fluidity of genre boundaries creates a rich source for opposing ideas regarding the life of the epic; some say it is dead and no longer necessary, while others, including myself, believe the epic has evolved and adapted. The postmodern era capitalized on literary innovation, creating texts which held many of the literary devices and conventions of the Homeric poems. New forms and frames were experimented with and new genres were created. Yet, most went unmentioned as such until the epic genre discussion again questioned the survival of the epic poem. Authors of 1950's science fiction and fantasy started a movement, awaking the collective memory of ancient traditions. These writers stretched genre boundaries by using many of the literary devices and conventions of the Homeric epic such as codes of hospitality and war, span of

time, epic similes, and heroic deeds performed by a culturally significant hero. While use of the traditional conventions may be evident, it is the less obvious traditional devices that I am drawn to; technology performing as the heightened/elevated language, as supernatural force, underworld or god, the expanded settings that include unknown space and time, and the critique of perceived cultural assumptions in a world that has yet to exist. The use of modern technology and sciences in the epic genre is compelling. I question how and why it plays such a vital role in this contemporary fiction that shadows the ancient frameworks. The contrary nature of modern automation in classical structures, as well as reanimating the “dead”, even in literary form, intrigues me. Epic’s premature and supposed postmortem allowed a space for experimentation and re-creation, which writers have responded to, using classical devices as donors, grafting frames and structures. Recently, authors have tapped into a medium that was unavailable a century ago. Contemporary writers are incorporating science, robotics and other technologies situated in fantastical, space-age, and dystopian futures, figuratively “shocking” the heart and bringing it to a new life. While centuries of literature have maintained classical tradition using epic conventions, the technology spike of the 1950s allowed writers to suspend disbelief while creating imaginative works that not only use epic conventions, but function, as the ancient classic epics do, to reflect the reality of the time, the values of the peoples, and the struggles faced by humankind. The use of robotics and automation in the last fifty years has

provided a fertile plain for writers to create works that are relevant to the current collective reality. Just as Homer's works expanded the understanding of ancient Greek values and beliefs to those studying them centuries later, so too will the experimental texts of writers of contemporary fiction impact future readerships. So, what does this new cutting-edge reworking look like? How does it function? I am particularly interested in the roles that technology play in contemporary figurations of the epic. How does modern science perform in ancient conventions? Can adapting science and technology for literary conventions maintain the ethos of the traditional Homeric epic?

Appropriation

"Epic" might be one of the most liberally co-opted and misused words in contemporary American culture. It has become a buzzword in US pop culture and is exploited, misused, or manipulated, by everything from advertising to zombies, contrary to its literary origins. Richard McDonald's chapter "The Epic Genre and Medieval Epics" which appears in *The Companion to Old and Middle English Literature* affirms,

Undoubtedly, you have heard the word "epic" used in contemporary, casual conversation. It is often used as an adjective for words such as "huge," "vast," or "monumental". In today's parlance, if we call something epic, it means that it is large and important, and although the usage is not entirely true to the nature of what "epic" means, there is something about the largeness and

importance of epics that makes these two characteristics integral to understanding the term. (233-234)

The timeless, lyrical poem of Ancient Greece, revered for its grand battles, supernatural forces and legendary heroes seem a fading memory of a forgotten past. What is epic? What are the characteristics, devices, or features that make an epic? It serves as both noun and adjective, yet, in pop culture those lines are very blurred. This was not always so. Some 4000 years ago, before historical records were written, epic poetry served to preserve the stories of a people. Originally sung, the epic helped to remember genealogy, historical events, and cultural values. While the ancient lyrical poems sought to reinforce cultural/social expectations, Theodore Steinberg's *Twentieth Century Epic Novels* details that context in which those works were created,

. . . The *Iliad* is more than simply a poem that describes the horrors of war. It explores the behavior of extraordinary human beings, male and female, in a world that is characterized by this war. The poem explores what it means to be a human being in a world where such wars, such shame, such mortality exists. Given the fact of human mortality—and the fact that we are so often in such a haste to hurry it along----- how do we, and how should we, continue to live in this world? Homer asks such questions, and he addresses them throughout the poem. (32)

Steinberg questions the ancient works use of the literary devices, the heroic

code, the monsters or gods which the hero faces, and the failures that they encounter. Wars still exist, although no longer primarily hand to hand combat, and the horrors of war are more readily present because of the technology that spreads its images and accountings worldwide in seconds. Contemporary writers, like ancient epic, are examining the human condition in the space that they live in, an expanse that provides infinite information at lightning speed, something that the writers of classical and traditional epic could only have dreamed of. Steinberg contends that while monsters and gods posed a threat to society, in ancient works, “The more dangerous threat to society, however, have human sources and frequently involve deception or some other human failing. Anyone looking at the monsters would recognize them immediately as evil, but how can we tell what evil lurks in the hearts of men?” (37). Science and technology have created many forms of artificial intelligence that can look like a monster or be disguised as a human, are performing tasks previously reserved for humans, and consequently, societies have become dependent on technology. This opens a plethora of options for conflict, excitement or evil, and authors are examining that space as both convenience and threat while using it to reconcile current realities, experiences and conditions.

However, categorizing the functions of the classic epic by any specific definitions becomes problematic, because as McDonald says, “. . . often epics just happen. The maker of Beowulf was not trying to create an epic; he was trying to tell a heroic story” (234). Epic has evolved from its ancient tight roots

into a many limbed tree with multi-genre branches. It has been elemental in expanding literary genres and the adapted use of epic conventions in the genres of science fiction and fantasy has created a significant expansion of the readership. Technology, with its ability to locate vast forms of information in seconds, has eclipsed the epic as a means for passing on history and genealogy, yet as Aristotle described it, it is still a representation. Homer's audience relied on the poems of antiquity for historical and cultural information and used them to inform future generations. Even in an age that allows for immediate access to the past, contemporary epic continues to provide a better understanding of values and beliefs, often paralleling the ancient's efforts to examine the human condition. Why and how do ancient epics like *Beowulf*, *Paradise Lost*, or those by Homer remain relevant? Why the need or desire to "cover the same ground" as Homer questioned?

Designation

As Paul Merchant phrases it in his book, *The Epic: The Critical Idiom*, "There would be no value in attempting a simple definition of a literary form which includes *Iliad*, *The Prelude*, and *War and Peace*". He continues, including the phrases 'surpassing the dimensions of realism' and 'including history' as each end of the spectrum of ". . . the experience described as epic", allowing for a very broad space to navigate (1). In what seems both contrasting and supportive of Merchant's claim, the introduction of the book *Epic Traditions in The Contemporary World: The Poetics of Community*, edited by Margaret Beissinger,

Jane Tylus, and Susanne Wofford, define it in a manner that is both concise and relevant to a literary argument,

The epic is defined here as a poetic narrative of length and complexity that centers around deeds of significance to the community. These deeds are usually presented as deeds of grandeur or heroism, often narrated from within a verisimilitudinous frame of reference . . . The epic also has a peculiar and complex connection to national and local cultures. (2)

They continue, noting the “reimagining” of epic by emerging or struggling nations to orient themselves with their new situation or place. When discussing the contemporaneity of epic, Beissinger, Tylus, and Wofford refer to two influential critics, Mikhail Bakhtin and Walter Benjamin, as presenting opposing ideas on the evolutionary path of the epic. Bakhtin seems to have “. . . inherited the attitude of those Renaissance writers who busily rehabilitated epic in the name of cultural and political privilege they were trying to claim for themselves”. (4) They proceed, noting that Bakhtin sees epic as “an antiquated and outmoded form which of necessity yielded to the popular novel” but that Benjamin views it very differently, “. . . as itself a genre that reflects a “popular spirit: it is the product of a community and is thereby ever-changing, insofar as it is told by a storyteller whose manner of presenting tales is oral and alive” (5). Benjamin’s essay, “The Storyteller”, according to the editors, is “. . . an act of mourning for the loss of a tradition that once gave communities their identity, a tradition no longer possible in an age defined by technology” (6). The combination of these

two views have led many who study comparative literature to take a narrow position, “. . . that the epic has no value for the contemporary moment” (6). Yet, the epic maintains more than a nostalgic nod to a long-ago time, it has sustained its place of discussion in literary scholarship, in the community that produces it, and, one could claim, in the readership of contemporary and experimental fiction.

Critics, scholars, and authors have argued, in fact, that the genre of the epic is dead and gone. Or as Bakhtin puts it, “. . . the epic as a genre that has not only long since completed its development, but one that is already antiquated”. He continues, comparing the study of genres other than the novel to, “. . . studying dead languages” (3). Steinberg disagrees, as do I, with those scholars who emphatically argue, “. . . “[the] twentieth-century epic” is oxymoronic, the epic died with Milton”. He furthers his argument that the epic is far from dead, Just as there are varieties of poetry -elegy, sonnet, ballad- so are there varieties of novels, and among their number is the epic novel . . . [the novel] has, in such cases, merged with the form of epic; and that fusion did not leave epic untouched. It had to undergo change, but not such drastic change that it was no longer epic (10).

Eulogizing the epic may have been premature as critics continue to explore the epic’s lineage in its contemporary descendants. The modern progeny of epic has DNA strands that come from ancient donors but may not bear a strong resemblance to their ancestors, “. . . just as individual people differ from their great grandparents and yet remain part of the same family” (Steinberg 54). What

has emerged is not a repeat of the past, but something different, something new that is both recognizable and unfamiliar. “The epic’s infiltration of the novel has been discussed at length by John P. McWilliams . . .” says Catherine Morley in her book, *The Quest for Epic in Contemporary American Fiction*, asserting that, “For McWilliams, the epic in the New World had no choice but to take the shape of the novel, a medium whereby it would attract the widest possible audience and thereby fulfill its characteristic and classical aim of speaking to and of the people” (15). According to Franco Moretti, in his book *Modern Epic; The World System from Goethe to Garcia Marquez*, “For literary evolution does not normally proceed by inventing new themes or new methods out of the blue, but precisely by discovering *a new function for those that already exist*” (20). If the epic can ‘take the shape of the novel’ then by that inclusion it stands to reason that a novel can be an epic. The literary devices and conventions of the traditional, classic or ancient epic may not be as recognizable as those of Homer as they are being stretched, coerced and manipulated in contemporary adaptations of the epic. They are present but ‘functioning’ in new, inventive and creative ways. So, what do the ancient tradition and classical devices look like, what are their new functions and how do they perform in contemporary, experimental literature?

The echoes of the past resound in the present as the characteristics and literary conventions of the classic or Homeric epic are easily found in contemporary genres, including fantasy, sci-fi, and dystopian fiction. In its many reinventions, epic has survived, relatively hidden and small in the shadows of

other genres, at least until recently. Now, it has re-emerged, larger than life on the big screen, and unceasingly on the page. Barbara Graziosi, author of *Homer: The Resonance of Epic*, and professor of Classic Literature at Harvard University, explained the epic genre in this way to the audience at the 2005 Homerizon Conference,

Epic, as a genre, is defined using many different criteria, from mode of discourse (although some epics are not predominantly narrative), length (though some epics are short), relationship to other genres (though not all epics incorporate minor genres), subject matter (though not all epics involve war or travel), theological framework (though not all epics mention the gods), national or epic significance (though not all epics are closely linked to a particular nation or ethnic group), elevation of diction (though not all use high language), mode of composition (though not all epics originate from oral composition), mode of dissemination (though not all are primarily intended for oral performance), and metre (though not all use the dactylic hexameter). It seems that one of the very few issues on which we all agree-perhaps the only one- is that the Homeric poems are examples of the genre.

Epic genre is fluid, almost without boundaries as Graziosi's definition reinforces, which allows the inclusion and incorporation of other genres.

The epic is no longer isolated to a specific culture or society and has adapted to a global audience through mediums that did not exist in the past as it strives to satisfy the human desire for heroic actions and deeds. A rigid boundary would not allow for such inclusion and availability to writers, or towards the global community that technology has nurtured. Catherine Morley explores the epic as a “. . . genre that seems culturally specific, but which is in fact transcendent of regional boundaries, it is also a genre that offers insights into much wider realities and tendencies across national literatures”. She continues, discussing the epic’s ability to “enable a dialogue between local, global, and international perspectives” (19). She describes the evolution of epic as this,

If we take Homer as our starting point, the general critical consensus is that Virgil’s appropriation of the genre to recount the story of the foundation of Rome is definitive. The act is indicative of the epic’s capacity for reinvention—shape-shifting and regeneration to fit new thematic. Temporal, formal, and geographical contexts. Homer and Virgil set the epic in its lofty, poetic heights, instituting the genre in a multi-book poetic structure teeming with supernatural figures and deeds of monumental fortitude. Since then, however, the epic has long been commandeered and re-engineered, chameleonic in its multiple guises.

Furthermore, it has long transgressed national perimeters. In the euro-American context, Camoes, Tasso, Dante, Eliot and Joyce, to name but a few, have each transformed the genre; structurally, with the shift from the multi-book formula;

and thematically, with the founding of nations less a concern than the enquiry into the meaning and implications of nationhood and citizenship. (19-20)

Homer's epic poems are filled with the 'founding of a nation' while contemporary texts, like *Cloud Atlas* and *The Silent History* explore what it means to be a part of that nation, to be a citizen in that space, from multiple perspectives, places and times.

The formal definition of epic is very different than its slang, which, currently describes everything from a blockbuster movie, or a number one song, to a burrito at a fast food drive thru. The literary epic contains characteristics that provide and maintain its structure as well as its function and meaning, "A long narrative poem written in elevated style, in which heroes of great historical or legendary importance perform valorous deeds. The setting is vast in scope, covering great nations, the world, or the universe, and the action is important to the history of a nation or people" (Webster-dictionary.net). It is the phrase ". . . important to the history of a nation or people", that underscores the evolution of the epic. Important events plot the history and perhaps the future of a nation, but often the details are rather tedious and even boring. But if the history becomes a story, if the scribe becomes the storyteller, the opportunity for the audience to engage increases. If the storyteller is imaginative or good with visualization, the tediousness diminishes. If the audience is engaged, then it is not only better received, it is easier to share through generations. While the details might get lost or passed over as insignificant to future generations, the story retold

becomes something of relevance and interest. If, as the story is retold, it is embellished or exaggerated, does that change the history? Does the inclusion of socially relevant events that are connected to the original event change it? In contrast: Does what is removed, omitted, and adjusted, to fit the ambition or orientation of the knowledge by those who re-document it, change the history? Seth Schein's chapter "An American Homer for the Twentieth Century" in the book *Homer in the Twentieth Century- Between World Literature and the Western Canon*, examines the great books courses in the undergraduate humanities since the 1920's. Focusing on how the ancient texts are taught, Schein asserts that while these courses, ". . . express the culture of the educational institutions in which they are offered, they also have been taught in ways that help to construct or reinforce a national culture and national ideology"(280). Schein argues that the works of Homer are projected to specifically reflect Western values, often distorted or simplified to unify a course curriculum. He explains,

In the United States, at least in great books courses in which they are usually read in only a week or two, the Homeric epics are typically transformed into documents at the beginning of a progress toward (and justification of), 'our' own supposed Western values and selves, especially when, as all too often happens, they are studied as part of a series of texts in relation one to another, with insufficient attention to the social, cultural, and historical contexts in

which they were produced. Thus, at the most simple-minded level, students may be invited to view Achilles in the *Iliad* as 'selfish', unpatriotic, and therefore in the wrong, without considering what selfishness or patriotism might and might not mean in the world of the poem, or whether the epic represents or implies different notions of right and wrong from the students' own, or whether right and wrong are even relevant categories of analysis and interpretation. (282)

Therein lies the rub; the ancient epic sought to be relevant and reflect the nation or people who retold it, their experiences, knowledge, and understanding of their own realities and the time in which it is told, while the evolved epic has changed many times depending on what the need was of the people who were documenting it, those who were sharing it, or those who were teaching it.

The inclusion of advancements, whether historical, cultural or technological, has sustained and perhaps even thinned the mercurial fluidity of the genre and enhanced the space for innovative writers who push back against the canon. Schein states,

The *Iliad* and *Odyssey* . . . in their own time called into question, or problematized, the institutions and values of the culture they represented and those in which they were created, whether to subvert or, in the end, to reaffirm and reinforce them. When, however, these works are absorbed into a tradition and established

as part of a canon, they lose their critical edge, in part because their value now seems self-evident. (282)

Contemporary productions of epic look to reclaim that critical edge. How better to do that than by pushing back against the canon, to question tradition and the institutions that create it, and allow space for renewed critical engagement.

In a world of constant updates and upgrades, ease of information and global influence, critical engagement requires writers to look at their work with a larger perspective on adaptation. Christopher N. Phillips book, *Epic in American Culture*, notes that this transformation has been going on for quite some time. Explaining that as more and more forms of informational resources become available, “. . . the work of bringing meaning to events is displaced, and events therefore cannot be resonantly meaningful in the modern present as they could when distances of place and time obviated the need for accuracy”. He calls it, “the crisis of realism in epic form-the problem of making a larger-than-life story or persona widely believable” (19) Yet, this has not stalled the efforts of writers. Describing Timothy Dwight’s *Conquest of Canaan* (1785) and Joel Barlow’s *Vision of Columbus* (1787) as “visions of futurity” Phillips extends, “Dwight and Barlow’s epics were not a dead end of classical epic, but new attempts to use epic form as a vehicle for telling new kinds of stories about America and its future” (41). Writers continue to try new frames, formulas, and ideas, keeping the options for reinvention flexible.

One argument used by those who support the epic's demise is that it must be relevant to the social and cultural structure of the time. Writers of contemporary fiction have responded to that argument, rescuing the epic. In making every effort to include the collective and individual participation, the historical, cultural, and social boundaries and patterns, combined with the question of fate and destiny, they have resuscitated the epic, producing a narrative that is relevant and worthy in its adaptation. A second contention to the idea of a modern epic is the absence of the devices and conventions that were historically specific to the epic. McDonald discusses the perceptions of epic literature, explaining, ". . . ideas about epic literature vary from scholar to scholar" because cataloguing all of the characteristics of an epic is difficult, ". . . mainly because epics, although often similar, differ significantly in terms of what generic conventions they include" (MacDonald 230). While McDonald allows for the fact that the medieval writers did not use the word epic, he questions if there is a substantial difference between the definitions of medieval and classical epic, adding that there are many aspects throughout literary history that have been incorporated allowing for the broad definition and use of the term epic, "As a result, all epics share certain conventions. . . but different epics make use of various conventions to differing degrees" (234). As it is a genre that has little to any boundaries, finding a comprehensive list of epic convention depends on which genre the epic is 'housed' under. McDonald's explanation of epic is more detailed yet allows for the fluidity of genres,

An epic is a long narrative poem concerning events important to the history or mythology of a nation or race of people, featuring a hero or heroes of high position within that society whose valorous deeds represent characteristics viewed as beneficial to her/his society. The action of the poem covers a large portion of the hero's world and includes his/her interaction with supernatural forces or deities. Within the story there are events that are common, such as the arming of the hero, the explanation of a person's or inanimate object's ancestry, an emphasis on the importance of religious observances and/or prophecies and omens, a far ranging journey, references or allusions to legendary stories from that or previous societies, a presentation of how that societies gods interact, a descent into the underworld, and encyclopedic allusions to the types of learning valued by that society . . . The grandeur of the story is achieved through the frequent use of an elevated style, elaborate and often allusive similes (epic similes), formal speeches by the characters, authorial commentary, invocation of the gods or muses to aid the poet's presentation of the material, and all-inclusive lists of people or things involved in a part of the story (epic catalogue). Humor is scarce in an epic and of the dark or wry variety; the poem begins with the action already started (in media

res) and requires a character of wrath or guile to resolve the conflict that is often stated at the outset of the poem (epic question). (232)

While most lists of epic literary convention include these which McDonald speaks of, his version fits well with my inquiry and the scope of my two focus texts.

Steinberg concedes that the epic has many variations in modern literature, focusing specifically on the epic novel, “By epic novels I mean, quite simply, novels that employ certain elements that have been characterized as epic through the centuries” (9). Many have argued that the literary specifics, such as the elevated language, grand scale and span of time, just to note a few, are not represented or present in contemporary fiction, yet, I side with Steinberg in my observations of writers of contemporary fiction employing traditional or ancient epic devices, “It is simply a different kind of epic, just as the *Aeneid* is a different kind of epic than the *Iliad*, or *Paradise Lost* is a different kind of epic than either of those earlier works” (10). This ‘different kind of epic’ continues to branch out, finding fertile ground in many genres. Yet, the epic maintains more than a nostalgic nod to a long-ago time, it has firmly maintained a position of discussion in literary scholarship, in the community that produces it, and, one could argue, in the readership of contemporary and experimental fiction.

Expansion

I discovered early in my inquiry that the epic has been the focus of some 200 years of study. Literary communities have long been discussing, or arguing over,

its evolution and demise, as well as connecting it to more contemporary works, usually in comparative literature or genre theory discussions. The theory that epic has evolved from a form of poetry to a literary genre is a common discussion in literary research, as are the varied forms of adaptations of the epic. One possible reason for such a long discussion with no finite resolution is that definitions of genre tend to bleed over, and the lines can be quite muddled. Writers know this, many even rely on it when appropriating or adapting the epic for their project. Furthering the writer's vision is only part of those adaptations, and the formulation of other genres, including sci-fi and fantasy, provides many reference points in its long evolutionary cycle. These areas intersect allowing for manipulation and adaptation. Writers have produced forms and frames that test the boundaries of genre, experimenting with the traditional epic devices, creating new conventions, and furthering the life of the epic. *The Cambridge Companion to Science Fiction*, explains, "To be really effective, sf [science fiction] has to be subtle" adding that the writers of the genre have developed specific tools and devices, of which the most obvious is the use of language, ". . . the reading of a science fiction story is always an active process of translation" (5). This creative space, the notion of a contemporary epic, and the writer's use of modern features in ancient spaces, lead me to examine what was missing. What is being left out of the discussion, or what was not being readily approached. Why the need for new genres, I asked myself, what changes had to be addressed by writers to warrant these spaces? Technology was one potential answer to these questions.

Scientific, robotic and technological advancements have placed a demand upon writers, stirring the authors desire to defy the previous canonical boundaries. The flexibility of the epic genre provided a space for innovation, and the result is an expanded (dare I say new?), technology-rich, contemporary epic. Same genus, different species. This circles back to my initial questions regarding writers of contemporary fiction. What do ancient tradition and classical devices look like and how do they function in contemporary, experimental literature? What role does technology play in contemporary figurations of the epic? How does modern science perform in ancient conventions? Can technology and science maintain the ethos of the traditional Homeric epic?

I chose two novels whose writers address those questions, as they push the boundaries of the traditional literary epic by incorporating modern scientific and technological elements with unconventional formats, transforming and advancing the ancient devices of the epic genre. *Cloud Atlas*, by David Mitchell and *The Silent History* by Eli Horowitz, Matthew Derby, and Kevin Moffett, emerge from the shadows of science fiction, taking their rightful place as contemporary epics. A closer reading of the two texts will support my argument that technology is performing as specific literary conventions of the epic genre, connect the use of contemporary data and input to the traditional span of time and history, and explain how these novels have adapted specific elements of science fiction. *Cloud Atlas* presents its reader with multiple styles, formats, and voices, each expanding the settings and time frames. This provides the

framework to build the span of time required for the epic and the inclusion of futuristic technological and scientific components that have been adapted to perform as other traditional epic conventions. Technology and science perform as the supernatural force, as the hero, the underworld, and more, linking the future with the ancient past. *The Silent History* examines the intersection of language, technology, and society. Much like Mitchell's novel, the writers transform the traditional literary devices of the epic genre using science and technology. Unlike Mitchell's text, *The Silent History* began its life as a form of technology. Originally an app for the iPhone, the text was presented to its users as a interactive serial, with the entries being systematically released. The response was overwhelming, and the writers responded to the requests for a more comprehensive experience by writing the novel.

CHAPTER TWO

FROM HOMER TO A GALAXY FAR, FAR, AWAY

Lineage

“And so with men: as one generation comes to life, another dies away.” Homer

The historical context of the classic, ancient or traditional epic is filled with periods of adaptation, influence and adjustment. *The Epic of Gilgamesh* is the oldest epic, predating Homer’s *Odyssey* and *The Iliad*, perhaps the two most recognized epics. The ancient Sumerian/Babylonian epic was written in Mesopotamia over 4000 years ago. Most of the ancient epic poems created before the first century were of Mesopotamian, Greek or Indian origin. Andrew Ford contributed a chapter entitled “Epic as Genre” to *A New Companion to Homer*, which catalogs the inception, designation, and history of the epic genre. Ford explains that the epic genre evolved from oral tradition, and that it was Greek critics who gave epic its name, “. . . the Greek ‘Dark Age’ was crucially important for developing the themes and the special style we see in the Homeric poems” (397). Roman contributions began to appear about 3 BCE, alongside the Indian and Greek contributions. Latin epic poetry also surfaced during this time. Virgil’s *Aeneid* became the Roman national epic in the 1st century BCE. Epic has been instrumental in the mythological and ceremonial traditions in many cultures, such as the Norse mythology in Edda and Germanic mythology in

Nibelungenlied, and more recently, “the Finnish mythology of Elias Lönnrot’s Kalevala” (Poets).

The Middle Ages and Renaissance epics were heavily influenced by Christianity, and the morality issues brought forth by the church. *The History of Epic*, written by Adeline Johns-Putra explains,

Both poets and their commentators, writing in a Christianized age, felt the need to account for the pagan origins of epic heroism, which, whether as the wrath of Achilles or the unforgiving patriotism of Aeneas, could be perceived as cruel and unchristian. These needed to be reconciled with the demands of a Christian moral system, with its attendant emphasis on compassion and kindness.

(49)

The classical epic is influenced by the genre of the chivalric romance during this time as it told of the conflict between the wickedness of paganism and the goodness of Christianity, as well as the inward battle of patriotism and national loyalty against compassion and love. Johns-Putra categorizes *Beowulf* as, “One heroic narrative that deals explicitly with the problem of Christian heroism in the pagan world. . .” (55). *The Cambridge Companion to The Epic*, puts forth that Charlemagne, while illiterate himself, required that “. . . the age-old narrative poems, barbarous enough, it is true, in which were celebrated the warlike deeds of the kings of ancient times to be written down and in this way preserved for posterity” (55). Unfortunately, the next successor to the empire was against

pagan poetry and they were lost. Other epic poems written during this period include Italian poet Torquato Tasso's *Gerusalemme Liberata*, Edmund Spenser's *The Faerie Queene*, and Milton's *Paradise Lost*.

Wanderings of the Germanic tribes from the 3rd to the 6th century CE brought more richness to the oral tradition, developing many epic poems in the Middle Ages, including the *German Hildebrandslied*, which contains the theme of the fatal fight between father and son. Those before the sixth century are classified as Ancient epic, while those dated between the sixth and fifteenth century are known as the Medieval epic. The Arthurian romance, whose heart is the legend of King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table, includes contributions from French and German poets as well as British and Celtic.

The fourteenth century brought us Dante's *Divine Comedy*. By the end of the fifteenth century the contributions now include French, Scottish, Irish, Japanese and Tibetan epic poetry, as well as Arabic, Siamese and Middle English. One work that stands out during this same period, according to Johns-putra, is Cervantes' *Don Quixote*, as it pushed back against the theme of chivalry, opting for mockery of the binding thread of Christian values,

Don Quixote's most important contribution to the epic tradition, however, is to allow for an alternative heroism to that of romance and epic, specifically an anti-idealistic heroism. In doing so, it opens up a space into which the individual of early novel may step. It facilitates a comparison between epic romance heroes and the

'real' people of the novel as it emerges in the eighteenth century.

(83)

Epic composed between the sixteenth century and now are referred to as Modern epic.

The period following *Paradise Lost* saw changes that included epic translation, mock epic and what has come to be known as comic epic. The value of classic literature and thought carried on in France and England due to the influence of epic theory in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. Significant parameters were being established following the example set during the Italian Renaissance which formed a set of precepts that included, “. . . the consolidation of the epic's status as the premier literary form, the emphasis on the epic's didactic nature and the continued narrowing of suitable epic exemplars to two poets - Homer and Virgil” (Johns-Putra 86). These ideas were passed to England through texts such as René Le Bossu's *Traité du poème épique*, which was translated into English twenty years later. The Academy of American Poets states,

Over time, the epic has evolved to fit changing languages, traditions, and beliefs. Poets such as Lord Byron and Alexander Pope used the epic for comic effect in *Don Juan* and *The Rape of the Lock*. Other epics of note include *Beowulf*, Edmund Spenser's *The Faerie Queene*, Dante's *Divine Comedy*, and John Milton's *Paradise Lost*. (Poets.org)

Epic saw another adaptation in its evolutionary course in the nineteenth century as the Romantic Age influences the epic with a focus on individualism and expression of self. As epic theory and critique declined, boundaries of genre widened, and epic was identified as related, similar, or identical to romance. The lax of epic criticism opened the way for creation, spontaneity was encouraged, and the production of epic increased. Blake, Wordsworth, Keats, and many other poets, flourished under this relaxed literary atmosphere creating texts that questioned individual self-development, psychological aspects of self, and personal realities.

The twentieth century initiated a new level of epic, resulting from an awakening to the knowledge that there is more than one reality and that perspectives and perceptions are subjective and fluid. The destruction caused by two world wars coupled with mass production and capitalism disrupts previously held ideologies,

The modernist epic looks back to the mythical beginnings of ancient epic in order to make sense of the world while attempting to capture something of the uncertainty of the twentieth century. It is defined by its allusion to early epic narrative - usually, because of its peculiar connotations of both restlessness and return, to the *Odyssey* in particular – as well as by a fragmentation of this narrative – using a range of stylistic and technical innovations. Such an attitude to traditional epic arises out of a concern, even

anxiety, that its old, stable teleology is simultaneously irrelevant to the modern world and a necessary antidote to it. (Johns-Putra 155)

Writers questioned the effects of colonialism and human rights, pushing back against a canon of privileged white males. Critics viewed the epic as irrelevant or obsolete in comparison to the novel, “The idea of epic theory in the twentieth century is oxymoronic because much epic criticism of the twentieth century is devoted to proclaiming the death of the epic, particularly at the hands of the now ubiquitous form of the novel” (156). Bakhtin compared the study of epic to “studying a dead language” believing the epic was “complete” and that the only form of genre that was alive was that of the novel.

The discourse of epic in the mid twentieth century included questions of an anthropological nature, while the long debate over its classification as either poetry, song, or a standing testament to the past continued. The supposed demise of the epic opened a space for a return, the modernist epic is reflective, looking to the ancient epic for orientation to the modern world, yet, as time and technology advance, elements that are twenty-first century and beyond become relevant. Recent theorists have credited the twentieth century with further expansion in the evolution of epic,

Most strikingly, Franco Moretti has asserted the existence of what he calls the ‘modern epic’, which he defines as a text that struggles to express a modern worldview while maintaining a connection with previous epic tradition; that is, it reveals ‘a discrepancy between the

totalizing will of the epic and the subdivided reality of the modern world'. This balance takes the form. . . of an allusion to and reliance on the mythical wholeness promised by traditional epic, in order to show up the chaos and flux of the present day. (Johns-Putra 157)

The twenty and twenty-first centuries would see further development and adaptation of the epic as the birth of film provided a new medium in which to present the modernist epic.

Approach

The popularity of the novel in the modern and postmodern eras offered a space for forms and traditional literary devices to be experimented with, providing for further creativity and imagination. Phillips notes that "The revolutionary wide interpretations of epic in the generation of Emerson and Longfellow had opened a possibility that epic might not be only a matter of literature after all-epic belonged, at least potentially, to virtually all forms of cultural expression . . ." (285). Science fiction writers in the 1950's responded to the technology and the capitalistic smorgasbord of automation, electronics, and consumer credit with fantastical texts, larger than life characters, and sweeping vistas of settings. The science fiction genre emerged strong in the 1950's, although with little enthusiasm from the canonical hierarchy. The decade saw a surge in movies centered in the US, the majority worked with themes such as anti-communism and nuclear war, filled with recurring representations of mass destruction, monsters, insects, mutants, and reptiles such as Godzilla, created from nuclear

radiation, aliens looking for planets to inhabit, and the validation of scientific/military collaboration or discovery (Cambridge 85).

This may be one of the reasons the epic was able to re-emerge; the space of perceived cultural assumptions was rampant with war and conflict, people were looking for ways to calm their fears, heroes were being created by Hollywood, and deeds or battles were glorified at every turn. The 1960's brought many forms of conflict; besides the shadows of the Cold War, the country saw civil unrest, radical forms of protest, and the Vietnam War. The new subtlety of propaganda allowed for moments of question, crisis of conscience, and the tide slowly began to turn. Two primary marketing strategies based at consumers were the opportunity of escape from the imagery and ideology of war or immersion into it. Epic found a host in which to sustain itself, with writers like Tolkien, Steinbeck, and C.S. Lewis, the novel took on many of the attributes of the epic, even though the use of classic epic literary devices went unrecognized by most of the readership. Philip K. Dick, Ray Bradbury, and Isaac Asimov, took us to new worlds, introduced us to new beings, and spoke to us in the language of the future; technology. Gene Roddenberry's science fiction television series, *Star Trek*, first broadcast in the US in 1966, was cancelled by NBC after three years of poor ratings. Several years later, the series achieved a following of "Trekkies" in syndication, giving it cult status and influence on popular culture, "*Star Trek* eventually spawned a franchise, consisting of six additional television series, thirteen feature films, numerous books, games, and toys, and is now widely

considered one of the most popular and influential television series of all time” (Asherman). The genre of science fiction and fantasy saw a steady stream of increase in the readership which many attributed to the popularity of Roddenberry's work.

Advancement

The surge in the readership of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries comes as no surprise as availability and exposure increased, movies were being made from bestsellers, the authors had more exposure through many forms of media, and the bookstore went from being the small, friendly, neighborhood gem to huge, corporate driven, national retail chains. New forms of text were introduced, and new genres developed. The evolutionary ladder of the epic took a few rungs at this point, finding a balanced foothold on which to gain strength for the next step in its adaptive process.

Tolkien's *The Hobbit* (1937) and *The Lord of the Rings* (1954), “. . . looms over all the fantasy written in English- and in many other languages- since its publication . . .”, according to editor Edward James' chapter, “Tolkien, Lewis and the Explosion of Genre Fantasy” in *The Cambridge Companion to Fantasy Literature* (62). Many of the same devices that James comments on as the “characteristics of genre fantasy” could as easily be categorized as those of the epic genre. He names them differently, but they include the decline of a civilization due to war, the quest of the hero(es), the displacement of the hero(es) into an unfamiliar world in which they are assisted by a mentor or God, and

several others. The grand scope of landscape and passage of time further support these characteristics as those of the Homeric epic. The idea of a secondary world, in this case Middle Earth, erased the need to explain the settings, or describe them as dreams, like Odysseus experienced. Tolkien argued throughout his life that, “. . . works of imaginative creation, that fantasies, can express real and important truths. . .”, truths that arguably were as relative to medieval cultures as they are to modern ones, like the functions of metaphors and similes in the classic Homeric epic. The Science fiction genre turned out many texts that contain the devices of the classical or ancient epic. The lack of support from the literary community for these ‘new’ genres provide just one explanation as to why these works went unnoticed for their use of epic conventions, while the subject matter and nature of the characters and settings can provide another.

Gone with the Wind by Margaret Mitchell was adapted for the big screen and premiered in 1939. This was a crucial moment in the evolution of the epic. A technology that was new, motion pictures, began its adaptation of the ancient tradition, setting the stage for more variations. Epic had re-appeared to the collective, was reaching a large audience and was being acknowledged as such. Potentially, the most significant adaptive change for contemporary epic came in 1977 with the release of George Lucas’s *Star Wars*. Audiences responded to the science fiction epic in a manner not previously seen. No science fiction book, film, or television series enjoyed the impact that the initial trilogy had on its

audience. It became, and still is, a pop culture phenomenon, with many of the phrases from the film becoming part of the American lexicon. This period is key to the further development of the science fiction and fantasy genres and to the incorporation of technology into the stories told by those writers.

Theories abound on why the *Star Wars* franchise has been so successful, why and how the once “dead” epic could be restored to such a vibrant element. While there are many ‘grounds’ for arguing its success, I tend to lean towards the idea that while different, there is something that is recognizable, we just can’t quite put our finger on it at the initial viewing. The acceptance of other galaxies, space travel, non-human species, and advanced technology in *Star Wars* or Lucas’ other mega-movie (both released in 1977), *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* may have been easier for audiences because the framework (of the traditional epic), felt comfortable even if the plot and characters were unknown. The galaxy is vast, and the lineage of the characters provided part of the scope and history necessary for epic, while the fall of the Galactic Republic, the rise of The Empire and the subsequent Rebel Alliance which later lead to conflict between the New Republic and the First Order provides the necessary war and hospitality codes as it expands the history and scope of landscape and peoples. Heroes and heroines “of high position within the society” are present and performing “valorous deeds”, as are most of the conventions listed by MacDonald, including “. . .a character of wrath or guile”. The holographic image of Princess Leia shown by the droid R2-D2 and the technology that it depicts

would be repeated, advanced, and exploited in books and film from that point on. The humanization of characters like R2-D2, Chewbacca and C-3PO drew the audience in. Audiences didn't care that they couldn't understand Chewbacca or R2, as one of their human counterparts or the film's actions would provide the information needed. The use of computer-generated sounds, telekinesis, and 'the force' as communication provides the elevated style or language necessary for an epic, as the heroes of the film understand what the audience cannot. Obi-Wan Kenobi's "These are not the droids you are looking for" creates a new dimension of the power held by the Jedi while it serves to provide the supernatural forces and elevated language necessary to the classic or Homeric epic. Todd H Sammon's article, appearing in *Science Fiction Studies* in 1987, focuses on the problem with comparing *Return of the Jedi* with epic poetry, although he puts forth,

. . . I am not too concerned about the question of Lucas's knowledge of specific epics, because I am not interested here in how epic motifs got to Lucas. The plain fact—which I will establish below—is that they did. This is why I have used the words "motif" and "analogue" to characterize the relationship between *Jedi* and the various epics, since those words are elastic enough to mean "unconscious association" as well as "conscious allusion." (300)

Sammon's goes on to examine the many conventions of epic that are present in

the third installment in the saga. Although he firmly states that he does not think of *Jedi* as an epic, the argument could be made for it being one book in the saga, much like Homer's classic epics. At the time this article was written, *Return of the Jedi* was considered the final part of a trilogy, although now it is understood that it was the middle installment of a 'trilogy of trilogies' that went on to include nine films and has spawned several multi-media spin offs.

The film substantiated the suspension of disbelief, creating a more receptive audience for writers while stretching the genre barriers even further. Advanced, unknown, and experimental technology was used both on screen and in the making of the film. Lucas and his team advanced previous systems and created new technologies for the special effects and sound that we see and hear, providing a platform for further computerized animation, graphics, and sound. But it wasn't just the technical aspects, it was the experience of moviegoers that led to its unexpected and continued success. The spectacle thrilled and astounded audiences, the characters held their attention and interest, and the blending of genre captivated them, even if they were unaware of those designations. These films situated themselves between science fiction and fantasy, not just fitting into both, but creating a space to combine, where contemporary writers have eagerly followed. *Cloud Atlas* and *The Silent History* have roots in that space, blending elements of sci-fi, fantasy and epic to create different versions of classic conventions. The creative groundbreaking done by George Lucas over four decades ago has provided contemporary fiction writers,

like Mitchell or Horowitz, Derby and Moffett, a space to explore and experiment with the framework of the ancient epic and traditional literary devices combined with the science fiction genre and the seemingly endless advances in science, automation, and technology.

Implications

The literary devices of epic in their traditional form do not “render” the experiences of the twenty first century audience, so writers had to find a way to bring relevancy to those conventions. As *Star Wars* demonstrates, one option is the use of technology. Philip K Dick’s novel *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep* (1968) and short story *Minority Report* (1956) are two examples of the popularity of the incorporation of technology as elements of the narrative. Both were adapted into motion pictures, the first 1982’s *Blade Runner*, and the second in 2002 with its original name. Both *Star Wars* and *Star Trek* have been reinvented for the audience of the new millennium. The designation of technology as a thematic element was common with the robotic influences in early Sci-fi, but more recently technology has stepped into its role as a formal characteristic or literary convention of the epic bringing texts like *Star Wars*, and those that would follow, into that genre. Therefore, just incorporating computers or robots to a storyline or an android as a character may enhance thematic elements, it doesn’t provide or perform as the required literary devices. To supply the required elements of epic literary conventions, technology, science, and automation have branched out from primary thematic devices and are now performing as

languages, as with the character of R2-D2, performing as hero as in *Cloud Atlas*, or challenging society as in *The Silent History*. New textual formats, such as field reports, video recordings and time stamps, which are used in *The Silent History*, measure or create time and history, or provide a framework, that allows for relevance while serving to fulfill the literary conventions. The use of technologically generates languages, computer and binary codes and creates a visible and suggested span of time, as in *Cloud Atlas*. Both novels depend on the inclusion of contemporary textual modes of communication to influence plot, movement, and action, which helped to further push technology from literary theme to literary device.

While once limited to the common science fiction genre, technology now occupies a dominant position in many genres. Readers encounter forms of text, such as diary entries, journals, data, or CGI imagery as part of a setting or to frame time and its passage. Authors include technological aspects such as emails, text messages, emoticons, and code as elements of plot structure, action, and character. Writers are using technology and science as landscape, creating spans of time and grand scope endemic to the epic. Technology both informs and creates the aesthetic methods and approaches to epic. The CGI used in the *Star Wars* films provided the audience with a grand scope in setting, characters, and history.

Elevated language and imagery have been replaced by computer generated sound and images, digital voices, binary code and artificial

intelligence, such as the character Sonmi 451 in *Cloud Atlas*, or even the absence of a spoken or signed language at all, as is the case in *The Silent History*. War is still war, but the historical accounting of it is no longer done only by the scribe, it is revealed in field reports, data compilations, visual media or catalogs, as well as a return to orality from generation to generation. The images of war are readily and immediately available, rather than an artist's depiction years after the fact. War is no longer on a distant shore but instead, on the screen in your family room, your office, or at a doctor's office. Deeds of cultural or historical significance may now be performed by a machine of some form, the underworld is often a return to a time before advances in technology, and the god often associated with the hero's journey has been substituted for some form of artificial intelligence. The codes of hospitality and war remain intact though they are represented through means of automation or applied science rather than the kings or gods we might be familiar with in the classic epic. This is not to say that the inclusion of science is a new approach, but the use of technology to fulfill the elements of the classic epic devices in a novel is something that the canonical world of literature has often recategorized to fit a specific generic boundary or need, as Northrop Frye stated, "In nearly every period of literature there are many romances, confessions, and anatomies that are neglected only because the categories to which they belong are unrecognized" (Steinberg). While it is important to recognize that genres may be structured, it is equally, if not more vital to recognize they are not finite in that structure. Steinberg suggests, "In the

Renaissance . . . genres serve as signposts that told the audience what to expect” (20). He expands in a manner that really emphasizes the quest for an answer to the “so what” question, “*The Tempest* may fulfill the conventions of a comedy, a romance, an apology for colonialism, or other generic classifications, and our understanding of the play increases as we grasp each possibility” (21). It is these possibilities that writers of contemporary fiction are putting out to their readership. The world of the 21st century is focused on the opportunity to gain better understanding through multiple layers and forms of information, why should literature be any different? In an age of ever advancing technology and science, knowing what to expect does not satiate the hungry reader eager for an experience or adventure. No, it is the unexpected, the unusual, and the unknown that draws in this readership, while the peeling away of genre forms and layers enables the participant to be even more engaged than any expected or fulfilled genre conventions could. Today’s readers want to be surprised, they want to discover the novel, its obvious and obtuse nature, and come away feeling as if they have a unique perspective on the story, or that it helps them relate to their personal reality. Steinberg remarks, “The epic vision takes the reader outside himself or herself, outside of a single society, and reveals something about the individual, the individual’s relation to history, and the meaning of that history. It questions, it probes, it inspires” (54).

Much like the ancient epics, my two focus texts question the meaning of freedom, both individually and collectively, provide multiple perceptions and

points of view on what it means to be human, and spotlight the social constructs and expectations of both. Like *Odysseus*, the trials set forth in both novels examine the ripple of consequences stemming from both choices and understandings of the individual in question, to the effects on such that the passing of time can create. Both novels focus on the larger collective culture/society/community by examining each of the individuals as the parts that make up that whole. These texts amplify the ways in which action taken by one individual can be or is connected to another, and another, and eventually to the collective.

In 2004, David Mitchell's book, *Cloud Atlas* was released to an audience that was unprepared for the experimental framework. Some reviews described it as, "a rollercoaster ride that the audience wants to get off of", many claimed it was deliberately difficult and nightmarish, yet others found it to be dazzling, entertaining, powerful, and unique. In his NY Times review, "History is a Nightmare", Tom Bissell compares Mitchell's epic to Joyce's *Ulysses* saying, "*Cloud Atlas* is friendlier than *Ulysses*, but far less fallibly human . . . This is a book that might very well move things forward. It is also a book that makes one wonder to what end things are being moved" (Times). As Byatt's 2004 review in *The Guardian* states "*Cloud Atlas* is powerful and elegant, because of Mitchell's understanding of the way we respond to those fundamental and primitive stories we tell about good and evil, love and destruction, beginnings and ends. . . Mitchell is indeed both doing what has been done a hundred thousand times

before and doing it differently” (Guardian). An interesting find was a review that was written eight years after the books release, by Brian Green who is an ethicist, “. . . not a lit guy”. His post on The Moral Mindfield is lengthy, examining the text from a moral and philosophical point of view, including that genres of Science fiction and Dystopian worlds. He puts forth that these genres, “. . . often include great moral elements. . .”, and that, “Mitchell’s capacity for genre is amazing”. One of the consistent themes of the many book reviews written over the decade after the release of the book is that of a familiar, but unknown story. Readers engage in stories that reflect their own experiences, even if the settings or situations seem unfamiliar or even uncomfortable. *Cloud Atlas* anticipates the reader, as Bissell says in, “. . . its need to render every kind of human experience” (Times). Mitchell’s text explores many different forms to create a story that weaves technology throughout its body.

The Silent History, by Horowitz, Moffett, and Derby, reaches just a bit further, not just blending technology within the body, but incorporating some modern technological advances and conveniences as the manner of informational input, or data as it were, creating the framework that houses the narrative. The novel began its life as an app for iPhone users, an interactive story, or serial, allowing for hands-on, physical interaction, consisting of location-based experiences that allowed the user to participate and even input data. The printed version, that was published over a year after the app debuted, used multimedia forms of input to build a modern epic that replaces the elevated

language with an absence of speech. The puzzle like format moves through three decades of events that are told by the participants and outsiders, allowing for multiple points of view and understanding. In a 2014 book review by an unknown author for *Publishers Weekly*, *The Silent History* is described thusly, “Form follows, explores, and transforms function in this novel . . . Short narratives—field reports, log entries, anecdotal memoirs—offer a jigsaw-puzzle oral history starting in the present (2011) and advancing into the future (2044). . . an ingenious variety of perspectives and locations that create a richly textured vision of a dystopian future” (PW.com). These transformations that are formed, through the use of technology, is one of the ways that the epic has been reinvented, or perhaps, re-presented, in a manner that is relevant to contemporary cultures, audiences, and readerships.

CHAPTER THREE
REINCARNATION, THE FIRST

Cloud Atlas

“The creations of genius always seem like miracles, because they are, for the most part, created far out of the reach of observation” Homer

Paul Merchant reasons that the epic is forever changing, as it, “. . . is a still developing and expanding form . . . and while it need not necessarily be long, it must have epic proportions”. He continues, explaining that [the epic], “. . . is not a matter of length or size, but of weight”, adding that the epic “. . . gives a special pleasure because its events and persons enhance our belief in the worth of human achievement and in the dignity and nobility of man” (1). These descriptions of epic not only fit well within the cultural adaptations and use of epic, but with contemporary, experimental fiction that examine critical themes like war and post-apocalyptic societies. These writers bring the struggle of humankind within a technological world to the forefront of their stories. As mentioned earlier, I agree with Steinberg in that the epic is alive, as it remains relevant and continues to flourish under the stewardship of contemporary writers. Perhaps reincarnated is a better description of the epic’s adaptation to modern audiences, but whatever the moniker, epic is present, distinguishable and not hard to locate, if one chooses to look.

The writers of my two focus texts use multiple formats of media and structure to provide the story. It is not just that technology is functioning as elevated language and other literary conventions or devices of epic. Engineering, automation, technology, and applied sciences have evolved to perform as conventions; hero, the journey, war, gods or the underworld, landscape, and even as time markers. It is not that science and technology has replaced these things, instead, they are engaging with them, working alongside and in relation to the traditional devices. A different audience requires a different approach. The epic must be updated in order to be relevant and relatable to people in their specific time frame. As Steinberg points out, “. . . every age and every people that have produced epic have produced their own kind of epic . . . Scholars create rules; artists manipulate them. The conditions for certain types of epic no longer exist, so other types of epic, retaining the essence of epic, have come into being to reflect contemporary conditions” (23). It is that “weight” and “the essence of epic” that I find prevalent in my focus texts.

David Mitchell's *Cloud Atlas* incorporates history, multiple writing styles such as first person narratives and eyewitness accounts, combined with multiple genres such as comedy, science fiction and mystery, coupled with contemporary conditions to present a convoluted web of connections between peoples and places, while it establishes a grand scope of landscape and time, retaining, as Steinberg says, “the essence of epic”. The novel spans five centuries containing six main characters, with six settings in their time, while it moves from genre to

genre including slave narrative, science fiction, mystery, and satire. It's circular, repeating patterns, connections, and positioning, provide a grand scope, historical relevance, and a span of time that can arguably be compared to that of *Iliad* or *The Odyssey*. Chronologically, it travels from the remote islands of the South Pacific in the 1800's to 1930's Belgium, then to 1970's West Coast, present day England, to a post-apocalyptic Korea and finally a savage, future Hawaii, before circling back to the South Pacific. This use of time and landscape not only fulfills the classic epic conventions of time and place but sets up the points of intersection of the characters, while it establishes a history, which is necessary to the epic. The different formats of text also serve to provide a timestamp as the connections begin to unfold. However, this is not a linear presentation, the story hops from time frame and format to another and another, which at first, seems random, but as the intersections are established, the reader makes those connections between the actions and consequences of the characters one to another. There is a lot of circling back, but most often it is subtle, and even overlooked if the reader is too casual.

Beginning with Adam Ewing and the slave trade of the mid 1800's, the reader then encounters letters between lovers in 1930's Belgium, before they are treated to the threat of nuclear waste leaks with Luisa Rey in 1975, then jumping to modern day Britain and the tale of Timothy Cavendish, a comic if not satirical story of financial instability, corruption, the mob, and nursing homes. From there, the reader explores a futuristic world of artificial intelligence, and finally, a post-

apocalyptic, uncivilized yet technologically advanced, Hawaii. This epic moves through a span of about 1000 years that seems, at first, vast and unrelated but soon becomes navigable, and even familiar. In his New York Times book review of 2004, Tom Bissell explains the connections this way:

Running across its muscularly told tales are two obvious connectors. The first is that every story is in some way “read” by a character in another, (Ewing’s journal is found by Frobisher, Frobisher’s letters are read by Rey, Rey’s story is submitted to editor Cavendish, Cavendish’s story becomes an old film watched by Sonmi-451, one of the gods worshipped in Zacary’s world is Sonmi herself). The second is the strongly implied notion that every central character is a reincarnation of a previous character . . . Cavendish himself addresses this as he mulls over the novel about Luisa Rey that was submitted to him: “One or two things will have to go: the insinuation that Luisa Rey is this Robert Frobisher chap reincarnated, for example. Far too hippy-druggy-new age” . . . It need render every kind of human experience; *Cloud Atlas* finds itself staring into the reflective waters of Joyce’s *Ulysses*. (Times)

The connections provide for those epic conventions laid out by McDonald in chapter one , “. . . events important to the history of a nation or a race of people . . . covers a large portion of the hero’s world . . . the explanation of a person’s or inanimate objects ancestry . . . prophecies and omens . . . a far ranging journey .

. . references or allusions to the types of legendary stories from that of previous societies . . .” (232). An epic catalog is also mentioned by McDonald, which Mitchell has easily provided with the six very different stories written in different styles and presented through different mediums, documenting peoples, places, and objects.

With eleven entries from the six main characters, (we hear twice from all but Zacary) the reader sways and is sometimes thrown back and forth, yet there is a tether that keeps them upright and connected. As they continue the journey of effect and affect, the reader experiences a sense of *deja vu*, of having been there before, as they become aware of more threads of connections.

In a Homeric manner, the intertwining fates of the characters is revealed as their individual stories progress. The traditional literary devices of epic are all present, but it is the presentation that may serve to disguise them. Mitchell presents this story in a manner that is like researching on a computer, multiple open websites that one flips back and forth through. Diary entries, letters, a novel, and other forms of text may not be a seamless connection, but Mitchell uses language, language barriers, and cultural structures to connect the spaces that seem unstitched or frayed. The reader first encounters the journal entries of Adam Ewing, a notary who harbors a fleeing slave in 1849. The nature of the slave trade, colonialism, and greed work to provide constant tension and a despairing background in the diary of a seemingly mild mannered, kind individual who finds himself at odds with not only his assigned task but the reality of his

own cultural expectations. Ewing, both fearful of and fascinated by Autua, endeavors to connect to this slave who has hidden himself in Ewing's bunk room on the ship, "You know I, you seen I, aye -- you pity I . . . Maori whip I -- you seen . . . You good man . . . If you no help -- I in trouble dead" (Mitchell 26). This encounter describes the essence of Ewing, his exposure to the slave trade, and the fate that awaited both Autua and Ewing had they not been thrown together. Ewing's journal entries are cut off mid-sentence . . . returning nine sections later, right where they left off. John Shanahan's 2016 article for the publication *Criticism*, pegs Ewing as, ". . . the originating point of the soul that recurs in the others and facilitates their unity with one another on a karmic plane. Ewing, in other words, is the means of entry . . ." (Shanahan 120). Ewing's story is the first and last entry in the novel, providing not just the frame, but a foundation for the other stories and characters.

The reader is unexpectedly swept from Ewing's plight to 1931 Belgium via a series of letters from Robert Frobisher, to his lover, Rufus Sixsmith. Poor choices and demanding creditors force Frobisher to find employment away from his English home, so he travels to Belgium, in the hopes of working as an amanuensis for the famous but reclusive composer Vyvyan Ayr's who is blind and dying of syphilis. A composer himself, Frobisher hopes to work with the artist to create a work that will make them both famous. Frobisher, in debt and lacking good moral character, sleeps with Ayr's wife and steals rare books from Ayr's library to sell, including the first half of *The Pacific Journal of Adam Ewing*. Ayr's

has Frobisher help him write a song about a dream, “I dreamt of a . . .nightmarish cafe, brilliantly lit, but underground with no way out. I’d been dead a long, long time. The waitresses all had the same face. The food was soap, the only drink was cups of lather” (79). This dream is more of a premonition of a future, a foreshadowing of the future. The reader finds its significance as the different entries continue to unpack the story.

The language in these letters often harken to the ancients, “. . . 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 civilizations architects, masons and priests . . . our role is to make civilization ever more resplendent” (Mitchell 81). Yet, it is Ayr’s dream of an inescapable homogeneous future that pushes Frobisher to compose his masterpiece.

Next, the reader finds themselves *in medias res* of a mystery novel set in a fictional city in Los Angeles. They are introduced to the main character of this section, Luisa Rey, who meets Rufus Sixsmith in an elevator. Set in 1975, the mystery swirls around corruption and the safety of a nuclear power plant. Sixsmith tips her off about falsified safety reports before he is killed. Corruption in the power structure swims throughout the mystery, sometimes glaringly but mostly as a shadow or disguised as progress. Rey discovers Frobisher’s letters while searching for Sixsmith’s report on the plant. The action rises to a point

where in Luisa is being pursued by those who wish to keep the lid on this corruption and she is forced off a bridge with Sixsmith's report.

All of the stories are nested, much like Matryoshka dolls, with each story being read by the next character, creating initial connections that evolve into a much larger network. The break between the sections of character/story comes at a pivotal moment in each character's arc and leaves the reader unfulfilled yet somehow prepared to jump into the life and story of the next.

Much like Frobisher, editor Timothy Cavendish, has habitually overextended himself with unscrupulous creditors. He turns to his brother who offers not to loan him anymore money, but instead, offers a ". . . comfortable place where you could possibly lie low for a while" (158). Cavendish gladly allows his brother, Denny, to arrange for a stay at Aurora House, thinking that the hotel in the north is a good refuge in his current situation, ". . . I was scot-free, and Denny, dearest Denholme, was footing my bill. Brother in need, brother indeed. In the morning life would begin afresh. . . this time round I would do everything right" (173). Cavendish has a rude awakening, literally, when he finds that his brother has tricked him, sending him to an unscrupulous nursing home and that the 'registration' which he signed upon arriving were actually custodial residency papers. As the story continues, one questions a system in which one can imprison another under the guise of health and well-being.

It is in sections five and seven, "An Orison of Sonmi-451" that I could no longer ignore technology functioning as literary device in this modern epic. This

portion, in combination with the diary of Ewing, the letters of Frobisher, or the narrative about Luisa Rey, works to solidify a great span of time and landscape. In order to update the epic, the novel pushes the reader through modern history and socially relevant topics before planting them into an unknown future. Today's audience may not keep their own diary, but they know its significance, and many now opt for some form of technical version of a journal such as a blog or social media. Beginning with a past that is still socially relevant and careening to a technologically advanced future that is reminiscent of that same past. According to John Whittier-Ferguson, whose chapter "Ezra Pound, T.S. Elliot, and the modern epic" appears in *The Cambridge Companion to the Epic*, novels like *Cloud Atlas* and *The Silent History* are updating the epic genre,

Like the epics that preceded them in Western culture, these modern works aim to assemble, on the grandest possible scale, a model of the world that will both represent and explain the way things are, how they came to be, and the position of the human subject in the scheme of things, and yet the obstacles to this gigantic act of making in the modern era are so great that the attempt to make the model, and the record of the others' attempts at such constructions, past and present, move to the center of the epic enterprise. The paramount achievement recorded in the modern epic is not the justification of God's, or gods' ways with us, or a hero's battles, or journey, or the foundation of a nation or an empire. It is an aesthetic

act that may or may not have some social, cultural, political, or theological ramifications: the author's unlikely writing of the book we read. (212)

In combining social and cultural relevance, their understanding of how things are and how they came to be, and the qualities of the epic, writers have continued to move the epic forward as figuring out how things came to be requires reflection, inquisition and imagining scenarios and worlds unknown.

Orison is an ancient word for prayer, and as such adds to the layers of time that have thus far been created by Mitchell. The full automation of society in this futuristic world provide span of time, but also fulfill a historical element adding to the epic catalog. Technology has advanced but civilization seems to have declined. The character of Sonmi-451 provides something unique to the modern epic. Sonmi-451 is both hero and supernatural, in a sense. She is a replicant, or clone, manufactured to work at a fast food restaurant called Papa Song's. The use of advanced technology in this portion, as well as the settings and the journey she undertakes, seems otherworldly to the reader. It is familiar, yet, the reader questions its existence, its viability and the role of humankind in such an existence. Sonmi-451 is being interviewed by an Archivist from the Ministry, before she is executed as the head of Union, a pro-Abolitionist group that fights against and has been declared an enemy of Corpocracy-the governing structure. Again, the reader is confronted with perceptions of freedom and suppression, corruption and power, but it is in Sonmi's sections that the

questions of humanity and what it means to be human are magnified. This section is presented entirely in dialogue, as the Sonmi recalls her experiences in her responses to the interviewer's questions. The interview is being digitally recorded, which provides some of the backstory to the sixth and seventh chapters. It is not so much the back and forth of the interview that provides the epic conventions, it is the way Sonmi-451 fulfills those things mentioned by Whittier-Ferguson, ". . . both represent and explain the way things are, how they came to be, and the position of the human subject in the scheme of things . . ." (211). Which in turn provides a familiarity of the story that is told, one of hospitality, war, an omniscient god, and the struggle of the people against oppression and subjugation. Specifically, the language used to describe the "cycle" of life in this futuristic setting provides the elements of traditional epic, although they bear little resemblance to those in Homer.

As Sonmi-451 responds to the interviewer about her earliest memories, the reader is aware that she also sets the pace for this section. In answering a question about her past and her memories of it, her response is anything but typical, "Fabricants have no earliest memories, Archivist. One twenty-four-hour cycle in Papa Song's is indistinguishable from any other". Her description of the cycle, or the day in the life of a fabricant, uses technological and futuristic nomenclatures to describe such mundane tasks as turning on the lights in a room or taking a shower, "A server is woken at four-thirty by stimulin in the airflow, then yellow-up in our dormroom. After a minute in the hygiener and steamer, we put

on fresh uniforms before filing into the restaurant” (185). This use of language, specific to this future and this character, creates the requisite elevated language that the traditional epics held as it does not use slang or idioms but rather is directed to the events or persons, their cultural/historical significance, and the impact of their actions, as part of the historical documentation being done. Sonmi’s recounting continues, providing for the prerequisite hierarchy and cultural practices found in ancient epics, “Our seer and aides gather us around Papa’s Plinth for Matins, we recite the Six Catechisms, then our beloved Logoman appears and delivers his Sermon . . . For the following nineteen hours we greet diners, input orders, tray food, vend drinks . . . then we imbibe one Soapsac . . . That is the blueprint of every unvarying day” (185). Again, the language is purposely functioning as futuristic, above the typical. The lexicon in the Sonmi-451 sections is deliberate and exacting, “yellow-up” as a nod to Homer’s description of a sunrise in *The Odyssey*, “Dawn soon rose on her splendid throne . . .”(Fagles 170.53). The efficiency of word use should also be noted, which I interpret as the platform of the technology, as this form of advanced artificial life is designed to respond in a specific manner, one that is pre-programmed, leaving little room for improvisation.

The required literary convention of the epic hero is realized in Sonmi-451. While a case can be made for several other characters in the novel being heroes, Sonmi-451, fulfills the devices; she is culturally significant, interacts with gods, (technology and the formal power structure) takes on the hero’s journey,

participates in what will be significant cultural events, performs heroic deeds, and later fulfills a prescribed destiny. Her section begins with a formal statement, "Truth is singular. Its "versions" are mistruths", which situate her as an authority connected to this created future (185). Yet, her humanity or any lack thereof is quickly pushed to the back of the reader's mind as her hero's journey reverberates with the conventions necessary to make her such, and the adaptive twists that Mitchell uses to make the tales socially relevant. She is technology at both its finest and its worst, a reflection of a consumer culture whose humanity has been ignored in favor of comfort and convenience. A machine, one manufactured for this specific life, takes the place of flesh and bone as the epic's hero, automation in its ultimate form defies the canonical boundaries and fulfills a literary convention.

Early in her story, Sonmi-451 is oppressed, controlled, and forced to perform the ritualistic tasks, "For Fabricants, "rests" would be an act of time theft", they live a controlled, structured existence, ". . . we rarely wonder about life on the surface. Additionally, Soap contains amnesiacs designed to deaden curiosity", and along with the others in her situation, maintain a collective goal, "We had only one long-term future; Xultation" (186). The reader connects this to Ayrs dream in section two but also recognizes it from multiple literary genres, even if the character and setting is foreign. The oppression of one class, race, or gender is not new, nor is the idea that enlightenment comes from a source within that same oppressed group.

Sonmi-451 is ignorant to the social hierarchy until a Fabricant, Yoona-939, informs her of their plight. The theme of oppression is strong within each of the individual stories and is integral to the story arc. All of the characters possess the same comet shaped birthmark which Shanahan calls “. . . an emblem of de-individuation within larger causes as we read of their struggles with the dynamics of oppression in their various worlds” (120). He also remarks on the supernatural nature of the shared birthmark, “. . . the similar birthmark, noted earlier, possessed by five characters over many centuries, implying that they are reincarnations of a single soul. . .” (121). Mitchell employs recurring instances of inequality, abuse, and oppression throughout the novel, often linking one instance in the story of one character to that of another, “. . . for example, a lizard-tattooed brute whips a weaker islander, and, in the far future Hawaii in the middle chapter, a lizard-tattooed savage is identified among the group of savages who burn the last books on the island” (Shanahan 122). The tradition epic similes are at play throughout the novel, but often go unnoticed as such because of the scattered timeline.

The Archivist proposes that fabricants do not have personalities, Sonmi-451's responds in a manner which underscores the epic devices of historical and cultural relevancy as well as why she is being interviewed,

This fallacy is propagated for the comfort of purebloods . . . To enslave an individual troubles your conscience, Archivist, but to enslave a clone is no more troubling than owning the latest six-

wheeler ford, ethically. Because you cannot discern our differences, you believe we have none. But make no mistake; even same-stem fabricants cultured in the same wombtank are as singular as snowflakes (186-187).

The Archivist continues the interview, catching himself when he describes the differences as “deviances” and quickly changing it to “singularities”, but the reader recognizes the terminology as one of the oppressors, or a member of the oppressive portion of society. As the dialogue continues, the language reaffirms this as Sonmi-451 describes events which the Archivist labels as atrocity, hermetic, complicit, and blasphemous hubris. Questioning one's “station”, why things are better for some and worse for others and trying to figure out one's place in society are the essence of the performance of the traditional epic.

It is obvious to the reader, in this early part of the dialogue between Sonmi-451 and the Archivist, that this questioning is not one of simple information gathering. Fabricants live a structured existence, “. . . we rarely wonder about life on the surface. Additionally, Soap contains amnesiads designed to deaden curiosity”, and a collective goal, “We had only one long-term future; Xultation” (186). Sonmi-451 recalls her ascension,

First, a voice spoke in my head. . . Secondly, my language evolved; for example, if I meant to say *good*, my mouth substituted a finer-tuned word such as *favorable*, *pleasing* or *correct*. In a climate when purebloods thruout the Twelve Cities were reporting

Fabricant deviations at the rate of thousands a week, this was a dangerous development, and I sought to curtail it. Thirdly, my curiosity about all things grew acute; the “hunger” Yoona-939 had spoken of. I eavesdropped diners’ sonys, AdV, Boardmen’s speeches, *anything*, to learn . . . Lastly, my sense of alienation grew. Amongst my sisters I alone understood our xistence’s futility and drudgery. (198-199)

Sonmi-451 is a threat as she longer blindly follows the rules set forth by the Unanimity forces. The interview is more interrogation than conversation. She is a member of the oppressed group, and slowly, they are gathering, joining together to push back, to fight. If the previous sections have not held the prerequisite epic literary device of conflict or war, this section begins that fulfillment.

Since the cold war and early 1950’s science fiction, the argument surrounding artificial intelligence has included the idea that that same intelligence would destroy its maker, the robots would rise up and destroy humankind. These sections of Mitchell’s text explore how that might come to happen, what it might look like, beginning with conflict on a most intimate level within Sonmi-451. She questions not just her place and her daily life, but her own thought process. The voice in her head is her own, reiterating and confirming, questioning and responding. Every hero in the epic tradition must look inward, to reflect and internalize, contemplating their place in the reality in which they find themselves. Sonmi-451 finds that her ruminations lead to a stronger desire to know, creating

more questions, and more discipline to avoid notice. Reflection, observation and information often create rebellion, and rebellion sometimes leads to war. While a war in a technologically advanced setting is fought a bit differently, it no the less fulfills the literary conventions necessary to be an epic. Conquest, as in Homer's work, is no longer reserved for kingdoms or realms.

As Papa Song's is underground, a place controlled and stimulated by forces outside human actions, an argument can be made that this hero's journey began in the underworld, however, this reader sees it as just a setting, the underworld is much darker, a place with few options and escape comes at a cost. Wendy Knepper's article, "Toward a Theory of Experimental World Epic: David Mitchell's *Cloud Atlas*" examines the epic, it's uses of cannibalism, and the literary devices that are recycled, such as the epic journey to the underworld,

“. . . *Cloud Atlas* complicates and extends the epical journey through its multiple scales of representation, beginning with its focus on the cannibalistic threat. . . the presence or sign of the cannibal unifies the six sections, linking disparate histories of capitalist violence into an epical whole. . . a series of dialogues with the dead emerge as each of the six stories reanimates a preceding history. Consequently, this epic extends a sense of community through space and time. . . *Cloud Atlas* serves up a "banquet" of cannibalized figures and cannibalizing processes for its reader to digest, thus involving the reader as an active participant in the

epical process of making sense of the world through an underworld journey. (109)

The process of using salvageable or spare parts is an interesting angle in the movement of the story, but this reader also sees it in the advancement of the epic genre. Writers are cannibalizing those ancient epics, taking the still relevant and useable parts and applying them to another similar unit, the contemporary epic. This brings the reader into the mix, not just as the consumer of the information, but as a user of it. The remade epic is a product of experience and imagination, a mix of what is and what could be, exploring cause, effect, and consequences from a more common point of view. The singer, muse, and tales of gods and monsters has been dismantled. The catalog of experiences in *Cloud Atlas* come from the salvaged parts, literary epic conventions. Those parts are then assembled by automation, bound together by technology, and adapted by science to provide the information that fits the writers project.

Sonmi ventures into the underworld soon enough. Her experience as a specimen, or test subject, at the University begins that journey. The hero often finds themselves being held, watched, questioned, in hopes of their captures learning valuable information, for ransom or leverage, or as in the case of Sonmi-451, to learn more about the enemy. She is assigned to a grad student, Boom-Sook, and meets another fabricant of a different type, "His collar confirmed he was a fabricant, but I could not guess his stemtype . . . He boasted that he could operate in deadlands so infected or radioactive that purebloods perish there like

bacteria in bleach; that his brain had only minor genomic refinements . . ." (205-206). He advises her that she needs to learn how to read, provides her with an electronic device, known as a sony, but cautions her, "He showed me its operation, then warned me never to let a pureblood catch me gathering knowledge, for the sight scares them, and there is nothing a scared pureblood will not do" (207). The oppression mentioned earlier continues, and as Sonmi continues her quest to discover what it means to be human, what it means to be a fabricant and the uncrossable line between the two, she becomes more aware of the the high-tech power structure and its policies.

The Korea, or Nea So Copros, of Sonmi-451 is close enough to be familiar, but distant enough in time to be believable and not be uncomfortable. Shanahan describes it this way, ". . . its oblique description of ecological catastrophe brought about by a toxic mix of neoliberalism and nuclear war . . ." (Shanahan 124). Mitchell uses platforms of media which are foreign to the traditional epic, incorporating cyberspace within the network of characters, and engaging in what Shanahan calls "cybercultural models of reality", he expands, ". . . a dualism consequent upon the development, over the past three decades, of vague notions of cyberspace and, more recently, "the cloud," by means of religious vocabulary" (Shanahan 126). Sonmi is now self-aware, something that artificial intelligence is not supposed to be. While attending a lecture at the University, as part of the experimental study of which she was the subject, Sonmi is taunted, teased and humiliated. She later asks the professor why she is hated

by the purebloods. His response echoes with Homer's classics, ". . . fabricants are mirrors, held up to the purebloods consciences; what purebloods see reflected there sickens them. So, they blame you for holding up the mirror." When she questions when the purebloods will blame themselves, he responds with a familiar motif, "History suggests, not until they are made to" (Mitchell 222). As the interrogation continues, the reader becomes aware at the inexperience of the Archivist, his lack of sufficient knowledge and questions that trail from the purpose of his interview, but most glaringly, they provide an insight into the strength of this hero, she is the one in control, "Archivist, my appointment in the Lighthouse is approaching. Can we segue to my final night on campus?" (Mitchell 233). She proceeds to catalog the events that led to the discovery that her trusted confidant is actually a member of the resistance movement known as Union.

"An Orison of Sonmi-451" is divided into 2 sections, respectively section five and seven of the novel. It is divided by "Sloosha's Crossin' An' Ev'rythin' After" which is the chronological future beyond Sonmi, yet Zacary's tale serves as the "loci" for this modern epic according to Shanahan, connecting the characters, the timelines, and the history,

Only the central tale, set in the far future, is unbroken and serves as a spine or hinge from which the other tales emanate like ripples from a drop in water. It makes a compelling formal analogue for a transcendental vision of ever-expanding circles of entanglement

and ever-widening frames of reference. But there is a more important consequence of this narrative topography. *Cloud Atlas* is a print novel but is made of stories narrated as though each is a different media or genre, from written diary entries to digital recording to oral storytelling. This device creates a powerful mimesis of multimedia literacy in the age of Web 2.0: this print novel's six stories run simultaneously and, as it were, like multiple apps or browser windows, each dedicated to a different media platform. (133)

Shanahan later comments that Mitchell employs technology and intertextuality that "mime the sense of movement and flow associated with browsing online, dipping in and out of stories across multiple media" (135). Technology not only performs, but provides the mythology, creates the historical content as well as the value system in Mitchell's work.

Sonmi-451 continues her interview in section seven, however, the reader is exposed to the future that she is never aware of. Zacary's story, (chapter six), exposes that Sonmi is a god to him and his people. His story takes place far into the future, a post-apocalyptic, barbaric version of Hawaii, civilization has fallen and life is savage and bleak. Chapter seven serves to expand the role that Sonmi-451 plays for Zacary, and the events that transpired to elevate her to that level. Here, Mitchell examines more of the hero's quest, as Sonmi-451 discovers that enlightenment has placed her in the crosshairs of the Unanimity forces. She

explains to the Archivist that Corpocracy is collapsing, the laboring, lower class of purebloods, known as the downstrata, are being systematically assassinated so that they can be replaced by fabricants to cut costs and dissent amongst the workforce, “We cost almost nothing to manufacture and have no awkward hankerings for a better, freer life. We conveniently expire after forty-eight hours without specialized soap and so cannot run away” (Mitchell 325). The archivist is livid at this thought, accusing her of believing Union propaganda and calling the premise “fantasy” and “lunacy” to which she replies, “All revolutions are, until they happen, then they are historical inevitabilities” (Mitchell 326). Sonmi-451’s responses are not that of a programmed interface but, instead, they are the words of a warrior, headed into battle, and unbeknownst to her, greatness.

As Sonmi-451 recounts her time on the run with Hae-Joo, the reader is drawn into a ghastly tale of barbaric practices that seem to fly in the face of the advanced civilization portrayed by the Unanimity. Hae-Joo takes Sonmi to see something before she decides on assuming the role of the face of the rebellion. When they arrive, she recognizes the building as Papa Songs’s Golden Ark, the place that conveyed the fabricants unto Xultation in Hawaii. She sees hundreds of her former ‘sisters’, Yoonas and Sonmis, all singing Papa Song’s Psalm, “How jubilant they sounded. Their investment had paid off. The voyage to Hawaii was underway, and their new life on Xultation would shortly begin” (341). She is envious of their positivity and certainty of their future. That feeling changes quickly, as the duo move into the adjacent chamber. She discovers that the

Fabricants are not being loaded for journey, but instead, executed, one by one. As if this knowledge were not enough to stir her towards the rebellion, the next chamber turns out to be a slaughterhouse, cementing her decision to join them. The traditional or classic epic hero reaches a crossroads, a point where they must make a choice, often putting themselves in harm's way in order to achieve a greater good. This usually requires the hero to travel to an underworld in order to complete some task, a standard convention of the epic. In this depiction, biotechnology has created the hero, the descent into hell, and all of the characters.

As questions of ethics and humanity loom in the shadows, the propaganda of the high-tech controlling agency keeps the light at bay. The Archivist is unaware of such savagery, questioning the reasoning for such a thing, doubting Sonmi-451. The answer is horrifying, especially in a time of such technological and scientific advancements; the corpocracy is producing Soap and food for Papa Song's consumers by "recycling fabricants". "It is a perfect food cycle" Sonmi-451 explains (343). Automation, science, and technology created the corporate dream; a controlled workforce that provides its own renewable energy and resources. As the interview continues, it is clear to see that Unanimity has deceived everyone, even those considered vital to the ministry. Everything comes to the people in digital form, through lenses controlled by the governing establishment. The optics are generous, depicting a place of beauty and kindness. However, no person has ever seen Xultation, except on a

screen. There are no communities filled with 'retired' replicants, in fact, there are no replicants that are not in service. Sonmi-451 questions, where are they? Technology inserts itself into the means of recording the history and cataloging events that is necessary for the traditional epic, but in Mitchell's novel that is not all it does. Technology is the source, creating the history, the mythology, and reinforcing the values deemed appropriate, "Xultation is a sony-generated simulacrum dijied in Neo Edo. It does not xist in the real Hawaii, or anywhere" (344). An artificial world, birthed from data, processors and computers, propagated with artificial intelligence, sets the boundaries, doles out the consequences, and provides the morals and codes of conduct for this civilization.

Sonmi-451 records her declarations, gives the sony to Hae-Joo, and is arrested by Unanimity forces. The depth of control, corruption and power comes in the last few exchanges between Sonmi and the Archivist as she explains that the entirety of her existence was fake. Union is real, but works to gather the rebels, like herself, so that the government can keep tabs on them, while it works to supply an enemy "required by any hierarchical state for social cohesion". A common enemy to unite the 'chosen' against the 'other', or in the case of epic, to provide the two sides of the requisite war or battle. Her enlightenment was choreographed, and she knew it and willingly participated, emerging as an epic hero trying to do what is right for her people, in the farce benefiting Corpocracy, "To generate the show trial of the decade. To make every last pureblood in Nea So Corpus mistrustful of every last fabricant . . . To discredit Abolitionism" (348-

49). Sonmi-451 explains that by engaging in the charade, in a conspiracy to deceive, her message has reached further than she could have ever done on her own, “No matter how many of us you kill, you will never kill your successor” (349). This ends Sonmi-451’s narration of her own story, but much like Hector or Achilles, her legacy continues.

Zacary’s tale expands Sonmi-451, where she, arguably, functions as both the poet and the muse, two literary conventions of the ancient epic, while she serves as deity to Zacary’s people. His story is set far in the future, and the sony which contains the Declarations of Sonmi-451 is their record of the past.

Mitchell continues his use of technology as creator of mythology and values. Sonmi-451 has risen to god status, her ‘teachings’ are revered and followed. There is an element of the supernatural to her now, as the technology that created her is no longer in existence in this time period. The setting is a post-apocalyptic Hawaii, the inhabitants uncivilized, tribal communities that fight for territory. Young Zachry’s innocently stumbles across them, and this first experience sets the tone for his section,

“ . . . till I ran schnock into the pool clearin’ an giddied up a bunch o’ horses. Nay, not wild horses, these were horses decked in the studded leather armor an’ on the Big Isle that means one thing only, yay, the Kona. Ten-twelve of them painted savage was ‘ready risin’ n’ reachin’ for their whips’ n’ blades, yellin’ war cries at me! . . . The Kona was circlin’ our camp, their bullwhips crackin’. The Kona

chief, one sharky buggah, he got off his horse an' walked splishin'
thru the shallows to pa, smilin' back at his
painted bros got out his blade an' opened Pa's throat ear to ear".
(340-41)

The language here is deliberately broken, a form of pidgin English, which serves to reflect the setting, characters, and their understanding of the larger world around them. It also functions as an epic convention, showing the lower, common language of the people in contrast to that of the visitor from another planet, Meronym, who arrives on the Great Ship of the Prescients. She holds a position of much higher stature or rank than that of Zacary and his people, and while the language is not refined, her inquiries reflect a deeper level of critical thinking, ". . . human hunger birthed the Civ'lize, but human hunger killed it too. . . Times are you say a person's b'liefs ani't true, they think you're sayin' their life ain't true an' their truth ain't true" (Mitchell 273). Meronym's wisdom is sometimes lost on Zacary as he tries to relate her larger understanding to his small knowledge base as he believes that savages are stronger than Civ'lized people. Her response acknowledges his question "Is it better to be savage'n to be Civ'lized?", as it explains the larger picture of survival for the islanders,

The savage sat'fies his needs now. He's hungry, he'll eat. He's angry, he'll knuckly. He's swellin, he'll shoot up a woman. His master is his will an' if his will says-soes, "Kill" he'll kill . . . Civ'lized got the same needs too, but he sees further. He'll eat half his food

now, yay, but plant half so he won't go hungry morrow. He's angry, he'll stop'n' think why so he won't get angry next time. . . His will is his slave, an' if his will say-soes, "Don't" he won't, nay . . . savages an' Civ'lizeds ain't divvied by tribes or b'liefs or mountain ranges, nay, ev'ry human is both, yay. Old Uns'd got the Smart o' gods but the savagery o' jackals an' thats what tripped the Fall. Some savages what I knowed got a beaustome Civ'lized heart beatin' in their ribs. (303)

Her explanation engages a higher level of knowledge and experience, allowing for language that reflects elevated thinking and discernment, as well as helping to establish a scope of the human condition in the larger time frame.

Mitchell's epic presents a global perspective, one that engages past, present and future with the understanding that everything that happens in all place and time affects the entire planet at some point. The story of Sonmi-451 is in present in some form for each of the other characters stories, no matter when or where they occur. Much like the epics of the ancients, this modern tale of people, their defeats and triumphs, their culture, values, and history are all connected through one means or another. One key characteristic of the modern epic reflects the ability to connect that technology has provided. For today's reader, the epic has to present itself on a much larger scale as the distances between people becomes smaller and smaller. The global information age required a transformation of the epic to fit an audience that can see, using live

streaming and video chat, their neighbors on a worldwide basis. As Knepper states,

The experimental world epic engages in critical and creative worldmaking activities through its efforts to mobilize, reincorporate, recycle, or revitalize cultural resources, frameworks of knowledge, and global literacies that hitherto have been neglected, forgotten, or repressed. . . it involves readers as active interpreters and participants in its narrative of transformation. (98)

Mitchell's epic engages in not only a story of transformation, but in the transformation of the epic genre itself. Homer sent Odysseus on an adventure to lands unseen, to battle unknown forces. Today's epic does the same, but has to be creative in order to use the tradition literary devices. The use of language, specific to the story, the character, time frame or place, is one way in which the old becomes the new, the classic becomes the modern, and the epic continues to thrive. In *The Silent History*, the writers push a bit further with language, or lack thereof. The story takes place in the US rather than globally, yet, there is an 'everywhere' sense that makes the reader pause and question the viability of such a thing happening in their lifetime.

CHAPTER FOUR
REINCARNATION, THE SECOND

The Silent History

“To write a history, we must know more than mere facts. Human nature, viewed under an introduction of extended experience, is the best help to the criticism of human history” Homer

In his book review which appeared in *The Guardian*, Richard House does an excellent job of explaining the premise of *The Silent History*. House offers comparisons to John Wyndham’s novels in which children are “both threat and threatened”, likening the splintering form used by the three authors to some modern-day zombies, and referring to the balancing act the novel performs between sci-fi and supposition. He touches on the way the story weaves through the accountings of “The Silents” from members of their own families, to doctors and scientists, and other observers, even mentioning how the novel is not all doom and gloom, “Despite the seriousness of the condition, the writing and plotting are hugely playful” (House). His synopsis continues with a summary of the parts that move the whole

Doug Johnstone, a reviewer from *The Big Issue*, wrote, “By nature the book version suffers in comparison to the interactive app a little but is still a fascinating attempt to deliver a story in a fresh way” (Johnstone). The novel was written for the app, so perhaps Johnstone is missing the interactive maps,

exploration and collaboration that was available to those iPhone and iPad users who chose to download it. The users of the app were the driving force to have the book published in print, as they wanted more than the series that was released section by section over periods of time. This reader would beg to disagree with Johnstone and many of the other reviewers as they missed one of the key elements that envelopes the reader in the story; the use of literary traits and devices that create a modern epic. Using the salvage method discussed in chapter three, Horowitz, Moffet, and Derby, have found a way to format a fresh story and present it in an epic manner. Unlike the Homeric epic, the story is told through many different narrators, some of whom appear multiple times, some unreliable or biased, all cataloging this extraordinary situation from an outside point of view. In this text, technology performs as the language of the oppressor, seeking to create and control while destroying that which was naturally created. The ancient epic contained this same language, albeit in forms of speeches and addresses to warriors and kings, but it was meant to inspire to victory, to maintain control, and to minimize resistance.

Starting in 2010, the testimonials, documentations, and field reports, describe a fictional future in which many children are born without the ability to communicate through speech. This use of varied, and often prejudicial, points of view provides for an invested, seemingly reliable form of storytelling while providing a larger scope both in setting and time. It provides a type of historical

accounting of a significant cultural event using the different textual formats and voices.

The span of time creates the first essence of the classic epic, the grand scope, as we are introduced to the director of the silent's project, Hugh Purcell, who is writing the prologue in 2044, yet does not make another appearance in the novel. The futuristic placement is well thought out, providing for just enough space, from now, to make the premise of the silents a plausible one. This advancing of time also allows for the readers disconnect from current technology and medical ethics, as well as creating small spaces to insert references to historical events, another epic treatment. Purcell's job is documentation, ". . . our continuing efforts to better understand the scope of the silent phenomenon" (3). Purcell's report of his first encounter with silents is chilling, reminiscent of the savage treatment of the Native Americans by the American government in the mid-19th century, "The crew of contract soldiers stood around the transport truck that would take the silents to a camp outside the city limits" reminds one of the reservations that the Native Americans were moved to in order to accommodate the US govt. in its effort to expand its control (Horowitz 5). Power, greed, and the suppression of one culture by another is another device of epic, which is well used in this story. The subtlety of the suppression, in the first parts of the novel, could be lost on a reader with little knowledge of the manners in which the US government has asserted its power over marginalized groups. Later in the novel the reader will find instances that are eerily familiar to the internment of Japanese

Americans, or the Nazi Human experiments in the early 1940's. As the story unfolds readers are exposed to many points of view, explanations, descriptions, and perceptions, of the silents. Who better to believe than the mother or father of a silent? Or someone who has no real vested interest, familial connection, or scientific curiosity, such as one of the young heroes, David Dietrich, or Flora Greene, a silent.

Volume One, which follows Purcell's recounting of his experience, takes place in 2011, and the novel continues in a linear fashion from that point, concluding in 2043. The reader is introduced to many people who have some form of connection to a silent, starting with parents of two of the silents who are unrelated. Lineage plays an important role in the historical element in the ancient epic, and the trio of writers create a timeline, both in span and history by starting with the end, and then moving to the very beginning, with some of the first individuals or characters of the story. Furthering the historical documentation, the third installment in this volume is from Dr. August Burnham, the Director of the Center for Neurodevelopmental Services and an expert on the "Childhood Disintegrative Disorder", who provides the first "medical opinion" in the book. His intrigue with the young silent, Calvin Andersen, leads him to further his examination of this phenomenon. Following Burnham are the experiences of Monica Melendez, who seems to be either a nurse or doctor that works within the study that ensues, and who, like Purcell, never appears in the novel again. Next is Francine Chang, a teacher who had silents in her classroom. We are then

introduced to a sister of a silent, followed by a young man, David Dietrich, who is fascinated by them and tries to befriend silents in his class. His experiences are peppered throughout the novel, and throughout the timeframe, as are those of Theodore Green, father of silent Flora, and Nancy Jernik, mother of silent Spencer, as well as that of Francine Chang. This deliberate move to establish the lineage with supporting 'experts' and historical factors creates the requisite literary devices needed for the landscape of the epic.

Purcell's prologue entry sets up tale as it takes place after everything that follows it, and ends on a very philosophical note, preparing the reader for what is to come,

Every day we are learning more about this strange condition, and every day there are more questions-questions that are, themselves, bound by language, a chamber sealed so tightly that we can hardly even imagine an experience behind its walls. . . This document presumes nothing about the future; it is strictly a record of the past, of what we looked like before, and how we got here. Are words our creation, or did they create us? And who are we in a world without them? Are there wilder, more verdant fields out beyond the boundaries of language, where those of us who are silent now wander? (9)

The question of who we are in this world is the basis of the epic, both ancient and modern. From *Beowulf* to *Iliad*, *The Green Knight* to *Star Wars*, one's place

in the larger scheme of things is what sends the hero on his quest, establishes boundaries and starts wars, merges peoples and values, creating the epic, both story and genre.

However, the landscape of epic in this novel is not merely the place and history, it is the participants themselves that fill the space, providing other conventions and devices, often in unique or subtle ways. The gathering of the silents on the beach is, at first, an uncomfortable reminder of *the other*. House comments on this, as well as the allusion to other protest movements, in his review, "What happens when a numbered minority, who will not (or cannot) lay out specific demands come together?" There is a sense of a threat that is difficult to put into words, to explain, or to *voice*. This lack of voice is one of the interesting ways in which Horowitz, Moffett, and Derby, engage their readers, without directly asking them how it would feel to be unable to explain a feeling, define an understanding, or simply make a request. It is, in a literary sense, a heightened language, one which is not common or ordinary, specific to a select few. The gathering at Coney Island also serves to underline the way in which society deals with *the other*; since the collective does not understand the individual, they are seen as a threat, even without provocation or reasons to the contrary, "At the beach, the crowd swelled and contracted, like a giant breathing animal. I tried to imagine all the little transfers between them, all the exchanges of happiness. I felt shivers. It was the most beautiful thing I had ever seen" (161). David understands the silents as other, but not as a threat, he sees them as

being one of the better parts of humanity, something he perceives as valuable and important, “I can’t say how many there were, maybe ten thousand . . . Down there things were airtight, sacred . . . I could protect them and make sure nobody did anything stupid. Starting with me” (160). This army of ten thousand silents harkens to the armies and sieges in Homer’s works, yet, the reader may not recognize it as such because they are not presented as warriors at this time, but as a marginalized group which represent a possible and unknown threat.

The absence of language performs as more than one literary epic device. The most obvious seems to be that their lack of spoken communication has given way to a much higher, elevated language that only these specific participants can understand. The criteria of the conventions of epic have been amplified in modern texts and while it may seem a stretch, this lack of verbal communication serves to elevate their status to members of the few, not the common. Their unique ability to communicate amongst themselves relays their superior ability to the reader, while the stories have to be told by those who do not have the ability. It is the ultimate irony—the people telling the stories cannot know the truth as they did not experience it, yet, those who can and do live it, cannot tell. Less evident is the way the lack of spoken language provides for spaces in which the codes of hospitality and war are examined, histories are presented and questioned, and the values and morals of a culture are placed in the focus of the characters. Science and technology play a large part in the

questions of how and why, but are subtly brought out, not glaringly as one might expect, which serves as space for the influence of the supernatural to linger.

But then, could it fit the epic genre without the struggle between gods and men, the interference by supernatural forces, and the eternal question of fate or destiny? Whether we are discussing the app or the novel, the role of technology is both powerful, controlling, and at times, unexplainable, not unlike either god or supernatural force. The use of science, specifically chemicals plays fast and hard early on, with the support of targeted marketing and corporate branding. The social stigma of being overweight, depressed, fatigued and stressed performs as the catalyst in the telling of the history by Nancy Jernik, mother of one of the silents,

I started taking Ambitor about a year before I found out I was pregnant with Spencer. This was right about the time it first went on the market, and almost half the women at Yan Talan started taking it. I remember seeing this ad for it, a three-panel foldout in the front of *Fortune*. It had a picture of a women sitting behind a huge wooden desk in a corner office with floor-to-ceiling windows. She had her legs propped up and was sitting back- like reclining in a big upholstered chair, smoking a cigar. She was in the middle of blowing a smoke ring, and the caption said something like *Call the Shots*. That was it except for the Ambitor logo and the tiny text that described all the side effects, which seemed like a small list to me,

as someone who had taken a bunch of different antidepressants and weight control pills and stuff. I looked at this woman in the ad and thought, That's me. That's where I want to be . . . I want to be in control. (16-17)

The language of the marketing campaign could be argued as an elevated form as it targets the disenfranchised women of this society, specifically. While a marketing campaign is aimed at gathering the masses, its use of psychological subliminal messaging places it above the average conversation level of language. This form of targeted marketing is created based on psychological factors and honed to achieve the most optimal results. It is not the way the message is sent out, or who sends it out, it is the specifics required to create it that elevated its style.

The image and slogan are more important than the medical and scientific information and it conveys a message of unworthiness, lack of control, and ineptitude on the part of the women. Her account continues, "So I started taking it, and suddenly I had this capacity to *do* things. I had access to a whole new reservoir of energy". The elation was profound for Nancy, remaining strong long after the knowledge that her son Spencer was born silent. She continues, "It was pretty incredible actually, I mean, I still think about what it was like to be on Ambitor, and I would probably be taking it right now if I could. If it was still on the market" (17). Nancy continued to take the drug throughout her pregnancy and still after. She returned to work and her dosage increased, and even knowledge

that it was found to be dangerous didn't stop the use. The influence and use of the drug are outside the natural order, which fulfills the literary device of supernatural. Technology in the form of science and research may have created it, but the means in which it is applied in this text allows space for the question of the silents being far more than side effects, indeed, something unimaginable and not of the natural order.

The involvement of Patty Kern helps to weave fate versus destiny with the threads of technology and human interference. It also interplays the use of the natural world as a form of refuge, balance, and retribution, that while sometimes supplying a dark humor or slight comic relief, harkens back to the Native Americans and their acceptance of natural anomalies as gifts from the spirit gods. Not unlike the classic epic, the natural and supernatural world are key. Kern's desire to experience what she sees as the medium to a better existence is strong, harkening on an ancient past,

We have so much to learn from these people. You have to understand, words are just conduits. We invented them because we needed something to hook at the truth-but words have become an obstacle, a smoke screen. There was a time, not as long ago as you think, when we had no words we were just pure intention and purpose and spirit and feeling . . . these children were put here to return us to those days. Watch them, understand them. Meet them with love. Listen to all they're not saying. (57)

Patty Kern stirs up the two ghosts of the epic's past, the muse and the singer, with the philosophical, lyrical tone of her request.

The entries follow a linear timeline, with sometimes several appearing from the same year, and a minimum of two different peoples accounting per year. Some people are only heard from one time, but they provide a specific angle or viewpoint that makes that entry hold substantial weight. The entries advance the history, values and cultures of the peoples involved. They are not a homogenous group, instead they have different ages, come from different regions, socio-economical, education, cultural, and occupational backgrounds. The common denominator being the connection to the silents. Even that connection varies, some are parents, educators, or classmates, while others are medical, scientific, technological, or psychiatric specialists. Some capitalize on the silents, however innocently, like Prasant Nuregesan, who has a silent niece and invents a mouth exerciser that is often used to make it look like the silents are speaking, “. . . the discovery phase here was almost impossible, because how do you really know what these kids need? You can't know” (59). While others, like classmate David Dietrich, feel a physiological and spiritual connection to them, “You're asking if I identified with the silents? I don't even know what that means. Probably . . . What if I was the first known person to turn himself into one?” (39) . But the reader is aware of two binding threads, the presence of the supernatural influence and the role of language. As August Burnham points out, the silents are themselves, outside the natural order, “The urge to speak is deeply human. It's woven into our

DNA, into the structures of our brains. In a very real sense, thought requires language” (40).

At first, the lack of language or verbal communication may not be recognizable as the epic device of elevated language, but as Volume Two unfolds, the reader is made aware that it is “. . . a form of nonlinguistic communication with a depth and breadth that continues to surprise. . .” and that the ‘face-talking’ that the silents engage in is in fact, “. . . a rich form of communication nonetheless, capable of conveying emotional nuance more accurately, deeply, and immediately than any proper language could” (82). As the second section continues, the reader is presented with accountings of interactions with silents, many that frame the lack of communication as a source of fear, anger, a means for financial gain, or, as explained by patrolman Palmer Carlyle, “ I just felt this almost uncontrollable desire to dive headlong into the world of words again. I know it doesn’t make sense, but it was almost like walking around among those kids had somehow drained the language right out of me” (168). The gathering of silents at Coney Island is presented from many points of view. While most are negative and derogatory, “For some reason I cannot describe, I just didn’t want them to touch me” from a food vendor or another from the perspective of a street performer,

It took me seven years to perfect this narrative . . . And yet there were these kids, these little cocksucking street urchins more or less nailing it on their first try. But not just nailing it. Adding to it.

Enriching it, rounding it out. It was an insult and an affront, and it made my fucking blood boil . . . I remember looking down at the kid after I hit him, and I saw it was fear that made me do what I did. I was afraid of how easily he'd taken my life's work from me and made it his own. Like it was no big deal. Like it was, I don't know, second nature. (119)

His fear of 'the other' is unmistakable, and while it doesn't warrant his actions, it is a portion of his response.

There is a more positive perspective from Dietrich who could be argued as the requisite epic heroes in the story. He is not only intrigued by the silents, but identifies with their plight, even feeling that he understands their situation and them, "I'd watched the silents more than anyone, I knew them better than any scientist or researcher in the world. I could do this" (113). He fancies himself as a protector of the group, often trying to befriend them, but the lack of language and ability to communicate is reflected in his musings about his interactions with a particular silent young lady,

On the fifth day she took me to a playground behind the closed library. She let go of my hand and I followed her to the playground where two boys and a girl were sitting in sand. They were just looking at each other, and when the girl came up to them, they all gestured toward her, and she sat down, too. I kept standing. They barely looked at me. These weren't the kind of silents I

remembered. These guys both wore fake basketball jerseys over long-sleeved shirts. Like anybody. They looked happy and greedy for each other's company. What's the point of being silent if you're going to be like everyone else, I wanted to ask? (114)

David wants to be different, not a latchkey kid, a remedial student, or the young man whose neglectful mother lives with a man that he dislikes, "I didn't yell at him to quit burdening me with his horribleness" (114). He sees the silents as special, as unique, and does not understand that they may not want to be singled out or designated as the other. His interaction reinforces the presence of an elevated language, especially considering David is common, a boy from the lower levels of the larger society, while those he is so desperate to connect with communicate on a much higher level.

Four years later, David follows the silents to the Coney Island incident, "As soon as I saw the gathering on the news, I took a thirty-six-hour bus ride to Penn station, and the subway to Coney Island" (158). He perceives himself as their defender, "As I stared out into the sea of them, I knew why I'd come . . . I could protect them and make sure nobody did anything stupid. Starting with me" (160). He immerses himself into the oceans waters in an effort to prevent himself from becoming one of the gawkers, and his role as protector is solidified when he overhears some men in a paddleboat planning to upset the group, ". . . something about "giving the silents something to talk about" (162). Which leads him to swim under the paddleboat and tip the men over, consequently, earning

him a beating from one of the men. Losing consciousness, he later supposes that the silents saw it all happen and rescued him. Every epic needs its hero figure, and Dietrich fits the bill. He is nondescript, one of those people who are invisible in a larger group, a loner who seeks connections, trying to find a space of inclusion. Yet, as the reader goes further into the story, David's quest for inclusion is often sought in a space that can never be his.

Small-town mayor, John Parker Conway, sees an opportunity to make a name for himself, as he designates his town, Monte Rio, as a sanctuary for the silents. Volume Three follows the growth of that small rural community, including new resident Patty Kern. She firmly believes that she can connect to the silents through love and what she calls 'silent communions'. She moves to Monte Rio with the intention of creating a community for the silents, one that includes her, "So often we use speech as plumbing. We redirect needless emotional waste and dump it onto others. One of our sixty-four goals was to make people aware of this. To rid us of this petty flushing" (141). As the reader continues to engage with each of the separate three- or four-page accounts, they begin to seriously question the motives of all who tell of their experiences with the silents. As there is no single protagonist, every entry seems like an opportunity for connections to the silents. However, as the reader is unable to hear from any of them, the link is never established. Often, the conquerors are those who tell the story, write the history, and continue to perpetuate it, yet, in this epic, those who are the scribes are fighting a losing battle.

The epic codes of hospitality and war are present, yet often go unnoticed as they are subtle or disguised. The forms of hospitality the reader encounters in the entries is often invasive, callous, or exploitive, under the guise of helping, understanding, or fixing the silents communication skills. The epic device of hospitality refers to a common social ritual in Ancient Greece. Homer's works are filled with the examples of it. It loosely translates to guest-friendship, which required the men to a pact between men and visitors. Basically, the host would provide lodging, food, and safety in exchange for a promise that the guest would return the favor and pose no threat to the host or his property. Those who speak in this text see themselves as hosts with guests who they cannot trust, and therefore feel vindicated in not providing for their "guests", even if they are their family members. As Francine Chang, and educator at one of the schools for the silents, observes

At orientation I was given a binder of newspaper articles, diagrams of cortexes, anecdotal evidence, first-hand accounts, to shoe what we were working against. I skimmed them. God, it was depressing. Dr. So-and-So says the silents are incapable of what we would describe as thought. They possess no language, no symbolic vocabulary. And Professor XYZ declares that without some new procedure or miracle intervention, these children would be profoundly retarded, if not permanently defective, by age eight. (74)

Most of the entries in the novel that are from so-called trained professionals and experts focuses on the silents as a disenfranchised group, inferior in some way, rather than look at them as individuals with a different, even superior form of communication, yet still part of society, part of the communities. The divisiveness comes in many forms but starts when the silents are young children. Because they are different they are treated differently, since they cannot be understood, often those parents, teachers, family members and doctors are afraid of what they cannot and do not know, and the approach includes segregation, invasive medical and scientific testing, examining and studying, and the ostracizing by others in their community.

Most of the narrators share experiences that seem relevant and even trustworthy, as the reader expects a parent, teacher or doctor to provide information based on actual events or facts. The authors strategically place the “experts”, engaging the educated with the uneducated, the emotional with the apathetic, creating a twisted balance that magnifies the one-sided nature of this epic. The code of war is less evident, as the battle lines are not specific, the skirmishes scattered, and the participants unrepresented. The strategies presented lack an opponent, as the silents cannot participate in the telling and those doing the planning do not know what they are fighting. It’s clear that there is a war going on, but why, and who, are blurred by misguided notions and altruistic methods. Some see themselves as guardian, like Dietrich, supporter, like Kern, and benefactor, like Burnham, “I was angry-partly at the system, a

society that would allow a whole population to collapse on itself, but also at myself. I'd been coasting along . . . when what I needed to do was to drop everything immediately and get back to work-the real, a hunt for a genuine cure for the silence" (225). Most of the silents have been cast out, living as squatters in many of the abandoned buildings, establishing their own community, one that lacks many of the basic forms of the protection and safety a community provides. After one of the silents, Isabelle, hangs herself rather than be taken away from her group, the reader becomes aware of the collateral damage from this war on silence. In trying to 'cure' them, in trying to eradicate this disease, those in positions of power and expertise have removed any chance for inclusion in society while at the same time, punishing them to gather together to form their own.

The war shifts into tangible lines when a standoff ensues between a group of silents and local police. Unlike Homer's classics, the writers do not portray both sides as having justification to fight, rather, this novel is adapting the classic codes of war and hospitality to fit the lack of the ability to communicate. As one group is unable to speak their case, unable to negotiate, the other side sees it as opportunity to conquer. The silents do not rise up to fight as a noble response, but rather as a form of defense. To further complicate things, the standard operating procedures and codes of conduct are not applicable to this group, "How do you talk to someone who doesn't talk? How do you change the mind of a person who doesn't know what mind means? "(211). This means of a calmer,

more humane approach is swiftly replaced with “. . . they’d crossed a line, and as I saw it the only thing to do was shift the line back across the sand until they had nowhere to go”, and subsequently the use of methods specific to the crowd, “. . . blasting the sound of dying rabbits, placing high powered floods outside all of the windows, blowing hot air in through the basement, helicopter flybys”(213). The use of flares, tasers and barriers by the police leads to the silents throwing a large beehive off of the warehouse, which hits a patrol car, the swarm killing the occupant.

Full force is used according to Prashant Nuregesan, who witnesses the end of the five-day standoff between police and the group of silents. Ramming the building with a tank reveals the extent the ‘talkers’ will go to define the lines of battle, “I peered in through the hole, and that’s when I saw Isabelle. She was hanging there by her, you know-just from the rafters . . .She just didn’t think any other life was going to bring her the kind of joy or whatever she experienced when she was in that warehouse” (216). Motives continue to plague the reader. Isabelle’s death haunts her uncle, Nuregesan, so he flees to New Delhi and takes a ten-day vow of silence in order to cleanse his soul, “Isabelle’s death was not my fault. My failure to rescue her was not rooted in some personal flaw. She died because of silence. It was the silence that made her tie that cord to the rafter. And if there was one thing that I was put on this earth for, it was to find a cure. A real, lasting cure” (281). Yet, the reader, having knowledge of the larger

picture and knowing more viewpoints that just Nuregesan's, questions; did she die because of the silence, or because of the war against it?

Technology inserts itself, again, as a form of elevated language, with the invention of The Soul Amp. A collaborative effort of Dr. Burnham and Nuregesan, the implant allowed the silents to verbally communicate for the first time,

. . . I had to essentially seed their brains with a foundational catalog of words and word categories, the basic set of tools that any three-year-old possesses, but which my patients couldn't access. I tried various methods of inserting this grammatical DNA into their heads, with little success, until Paul Warner came out with his modular memory actuator, which allowed me to flood a patient's language processing center-again, I'm speaking broadly here- with every word the patient had stored in long-term memory. . . all of the words and phrases . . . necessary grammatical architecture, they were *already inside* the patients. . . these sounds were already linked to a complex array of emotional and neurological states . . . The memory actuator made all of this raw data available. (262)

The creation and success of the implant changes the outcome of this battle, but the war is not won. Indeed, it is far from over.

The victor disguises their conquest in the guise of a technological breakthrough, presenting it as something that will benefit all,

Once the federal integration policy went into effect, all the silents in transitional facilities got the implant and the places shut down.

People who had never been able to work got this incredible second chance. And the response from the community at large was just completely inspiring, the way these new members of society were welcomed without a trace of fear-mongering or bitterness. (282)

Nuregesan goes on to create, “. . . a set of user-configurable mods that would allow anyone with an implant to customize their speech-or the speech of their children-to suit the individual context” (283). Dialect could be chosen, or blended with others, or the voice of a celebrity or historical figure. Helping the silents to communicate was not enough. They had to be controlled, lest they resist. They were programmed how to talk, what to say, and even the voice in which it was said.

One of Dr. Burnham’s previous patients, Calvin Andersen, is the golden child in the unveiling of the implant and its capabilities. However, it’s the entries from Andersen himself that give the reader pause; the first verbal engagement with a silent, “I’m at a loss to tell you how it felt to look at a thing and know its name. The power of it rippled through me . . . Everything had the feel of magic, which scared me” (277). His experience in the world of language is filled with discovery, yet, the artificial nature of his means of communication do not take long to insert themselves into his understanding. His attempt at conversing with a woman at a bar turns into humiliation when the limits of the technology become

apparent, “I might as well have been urinating in my pants, was how vulnerable and exposed I felt” (279). He is confident that this is just part of the process, as he continues, “He [Dr Burnham] said it would learn as I went through my days. He said it would adapt and improve. I wasn’t worried, but I was anxious to put the memory of that woman behind me” (279). The implant, a piece of technology, implanted in the human body reminds the reader of the early sci-fi tales of mind control devices which is not far from the truth.

Calvin’s next entry comes four years later, and the effects of being the experimental guinea pig are apparent immediately, “The sound of Burnham’s voice drilling me with question after question, not because he is curious about my life but because he is testing his implant. That is the worst sound in the world, and every day feels like a slow death” (349). He continues, exposing the truth of such control, “I finally got to the place where his constant testing of me was too much to take . . . ”(349). He later elaborates about being a test subject, “Burnham doesn’t dare contemplate, in that becoming his living experiment, has in no way set me free. I am not a happier person. My soul is not singing”, he then furthers his position, “So I can banter with chattering fools-so what? Before I became this manacled freak, a sideshow curiosity, a party game . . . My life was a simple, beautiful routine” (251-52). Calvin is no longer just learning for himself; Burnham has made a conduit to others by connecting him to their implants for study and manipulation purposes, which Calvin despises. He tries to push back, teasing the doctor, calling him “Dr. Burned Ham” and then finds that the phrase has been

wiped from his ability at the next session, “But the worst thing by far was the way he paraded me around as his shining trophy-the living, breathing, walking, embodiment of his genius” (351). The good doctor is in control of Calvin’s ability to speak, but not his ability to think. His awareness is disturbing to the reader as he understands and explains that he can no longer access what he knows is there. His realization of his status as the bastion of Dr Burnham’s intellect and knowledge reveals his critical thinking abilities, despite the doctor’s effort to curb them.

Calvin gives a disturbing account of the contrast between his former life and this new existence, “Before Burnham switched on the implant for the first time, I had no voices in my head-no roaring chorus that now plagues me from the moment I open my eyes to when I fall on the bed, exhausted after yet another day of intensive testing” (352). Dr. Burnham’s entries from the same year presents a very different picture than that of Calvin’s, “It’s like waking up in paradise every morning. We are at peace here . . .” (345). He negates the claims that he is just filling other people’s minds with the things he, and the others in control, want them to say, by giving examples of famous, former silents who he feels have contributed to society. Burnham sees himself as savior, previously describing his work this way, “My mission wasn’t just to give the silents language-I had to give them back their souls” (265). Burnham’s desire to play god relies on technology and a lack of resistance. The ancient epics had conquerors who depended on brute force, and a lack of resistance to lay siege on those kingdoms

they desired. Burnham replaced the need for a strategy and brute force with a technology that does the heavy lifting for him. The codes of war and hospitality are warped through Burnham's desire for power, prestige, and recognition. He is the antagonist to the protagonist Calvin, but more than that, he is one of the tasks the hero must overcome in his journey. Calvin is finding himself, questioning the veracity of his situation, and reflecting on his place in his environment. The inquiry and introspection are but one part of the epic conventions required for the hero's journey. The technology performs as the prison of which he must break free, although they are disguised as the freedom itself. The implant is a control mechanism, proven when Dr. Burnham removes the teasing phrase from Calvin. He literally can control every word that they say, how they say it, and what they cannot say. Give them back their souls, but not their free will, or the ability to speak for themselves.

Resistance comes in an unlikely form, as the hero often does, shortly after Calvin discovers the reach of Burnham's control. Calvin's next entry describes the break-in at the lab where he lives, "He punched in a sequence of numbers and the server rack on the far wall lit up as the units began to overload . . . he saw me standing by the doorway . . . There was nothing in that room I cared to protect. I turned around and walked out of the server room . . . I kept walking. . ." (409-410). David Dietrich sets the silents free by blowing up the lab where all of the technology that controlled them was kept. He had been hiding out, with a group of silents that did not get the implants, in an abandoned, underground silo.

The silo serves as the hero's journey to the underground, the space where he struggles with his own demons and has an epiphany which enable him to conquer them and make his return home. For David, there is no home to return to, "Almost all realizations come too late", he says as he contemplates his past and his present, "What was I pretending to be now? Commando, mercenary, slave? In a world of frauds and imposters, I was the fraud king" (405). He recollects that he has never had anything that felt permanent to him, no matter how hard he tried, the feelings of shame and doubt which turned into anger always surfaced and pushed him back. He feels that now is the time to do something permanent, make a difference that matters, "I will not dream of how anything I do will be perceived . . . Now it's time to follow the end that's been there all along, waiting for me all the time I spent running following hiding. All that separates us is a tiny line. It's time to step over" (406). This is the last entry from David Dietrich.

The explosion at the lab sets of a ripple effect that spans the globe. The technology that operated the implants is damaged beyond repair, ". . . the worm spread across the globe, grinding PhonCom to pixel dust. Rendering the implant completely useless. Crippling the linguistics faculties of every implanted silent worldwide" (415). Those who were implanted as infants and toddlers turn into feral creatures, fighting, biting and behaving erratically. The others, older children and adults seem to adjust better, although, the chaos caused by the younger ones affects all, including those who are not silents. The children are so out of

control that force becomes necessary as they attack anyone in their line of sight, silent or not. Tear gas and a foam spray that hold them in place is used to contain them and take them to hospitals. The doctors trying to treat them have no idea what to do. The hospitals are full, spilling over into YMCA's and other large facilities. There was no back up plan, Dr. Burnham is at a loss of what to do as rebuilding will take time, and the children are in such a state that they are being forcibly placed into holding facilities and detention centers. Burnham learns that Calvin Andersen escaped during the explosion, with the Reiss calibration helmet that Burnham used to access all of the implanted silents for programming. Calvin gives the helmet to a young boy, born of two silent parents who have been hiding out in the same silo as Dietrich. Somehow, this boy is able to cease the static in their minds and calm the implanted children. Burnham sees him as the catalyst for future success of the next implant and wants to turn him into the next Calvin. The boy's silent parents, who had been forced to run and hide and were almost starving in the silo, are now being treated like royalty, "They put us up in a suite on the top floor . . . told us we could spend the night and as many nights after that. We should think of this as our home for now" (470). The irony is unmistakable, the former fugitives have become the special, and the preference is short lived as the motive for such treatment is revealed, "A man in teal scrubs entered the room pushing a gurney . . . a fin-shaped apparatus . . . with bundles of multi-colored leads . . . and what looked like a set of defibrillators" (471). The young boy whose ability to relieve the implanted children is the next guinea pig.

Theo, father of the boy's mother, Flora, tells Nancy Jernik, whose silent son, Spencer, is the father of the boy, to get them to Canada, so she takes the little family and Calvin to the train station across the street. In this last volume of the book, technology performs as the language of the oppressor, a supernatural entity, seeking to control and create the technology that was destroyed, all the while destroying that which was naturally created. The ancient epic contained this same language, albeit in forms of speeches and addresses to warriors and kings, but it was meant to inspire to victory, to maintain control, and to minimize resistance.

Dr. Burnham's plan to 'study' the boy is thwarted, and nature emerges as the victor against technology and the supernatural. The virus determined as the cause for the silent epidemic has mutated, stimulated by an electromagnetic pulse put out by the implants themselves as they went offline. It is airborne and contagious, infecting hearing individuals. The mutation makes them silents, but without the ability to communicate amongst themselves as the original group had. In this, his last entry in the novel, Burnham questions many things, the scope and magnitude of the virus, the effects and their duration, but not once, even after knowing his implant is responsible for the mutation, does he question his role in inventing the implant, in controlling the silents, in creating this new epidemic. When he acknowledges that he has tested positive for the virus, he does not assume any responsibility for his actions, ". . . when our access to the great pool of knowledge is shut off, where will we be then? What will we be? How

will we be able to go on living in communities, as nations? Can we then really consider ourselves human?" (410). He claims his motives are for the future, that a cure must be found, but the reader is very aware that he has removed any blame that lay upon him.

The epilogue is from Calvin Andersen, three years after Burnham's final entry. The reader discovers that Calvin can speak but cannot understand words. The helmet connects to his implant but it has not network to connect to so it is only an input with no output, "Without Phoncom there is no language processing. No comprehension. I can make words, but I cannot understand them. I do not know where Dr. Burnham is . . . but I know that someday he will lose his words and I will have mine . . . This amuses me" (512). As he continues, there is a clarity that could only come from a silent,

My parents wanted a boy who could tell them he loved them. My doctor wanted a success story. The rest of the talkers wanted to see the handicapped man struggle to rise to their level of perfect health. I tried hard to be all of these things. I did whatever they wanted. But I couldn't rid myself of this feeling of being somebody's experiment. (513).

His final statement, about a dog, is profound in its simplicity, "Let the dog have his thoughts, whatever shape they may take. Let the unknown be unknown. The things we need will reveal themselves in time" (513). Technology resists that notion, as the authors of *The Silent History* understand, it seeks to know all. The

use of science and technology to fulfill the literary devices of the epic genre engages the reader in an evolving genre, allows the reader to be a part of that adaptation. As elevated language, as supernatural force, underworld and the conduit for the scope of time, history, and the codes of war and hospitality, science and technology, like that which created the implant, placed David Dietrich as the hero, and in turn, was conquered by nature to turn the tables on the part of society that would not “Let the dog have his thoughts, whatever shape they may take” and was unwilling to let things take their own natural shape.

CHAPTER FIVE

NOT A TWICE-TOLD TALE

CONCLUSION

“An epic poem is, at its root, simply a tale that is told” Homer

Every genre has literary conventions that must be present in order for it to ‘make the cut’ for that genre. Technology has been adopted by contemporary authors, adapted in a variety of ways, allowing them to re-present those crucial aspects and devices of the classic epic through a contemporary lens. For example, in a classic or traditional epic such as Homer’s, there is a supernatural influence, or an omniscient god who knows all, sees all, or is everywhere. For contemporary fiction writers, technology easily fills this role. The monitoring capabilities of modern technology provides this ‘god’ who is everywhere and knows everything. The history is now presented in textual formats rather than tales of lineage, battles and victories. Elevated language is no longer that of the few as communication technology continues to advance. Through the centuries, writers have used their social, political, and personal experiences to expand genres, adapt conventions, and to provide areas that allow for further creative elements. Technology is a large part of those experiences for today’s readership, so writers have risen to the task of pushing the boundaries in order to use technology in their adaptations and remakes of many classic or traditional pieces. Technology allows a space for writers to reimagine and reposition the

hierarchical use of elevated language found in the traditional epic as a more level, democratic medium that the readership relates to.

The use of modern science and technology as standard literary devices have become more and more common, the fantasy of 1950's science fiction is the reality of the 21st century writer. Today's reader has an access unknown in the time of the ancient epic, therefore, the modern epic needs to present itself on a more vast scale as the distances between people becomes less and less, *Cloud Atlas* by David Mitchell approaches the epic with a multitude of stories, seeming fractured, but ultimately connected. The main connection, a humanoid, an advanced form of science and technology who is transfigured into a deity. Mitchell frames technology as the main factor that creates the history, mythology and the values system of the characters. In Eli Horowitz, Matthew Derby, and Kevin Moffett's *The Silent History*, technology is the foundation, the catalyst, the victor and the defeated. In both novels, the use of data creates plot, fulfills form and provides background and foreshadowing. Whether approaching the app or the novel, the function of technology is controlling, unexplainable, and powerful.

Technology and modern science have been adapted and manipulated into literary devices that function as the traditional epic devices do; the use and appearance of unconventional timelines create both span of time and a grand scope of landscape, historical background is supported by eyewitness accounts, diaries, and letters, technology and science perform as elevated language and as the language of the oppressor. Science and technology is transfigured into

supernatural influence, creating and controlling technology that was once destroyed while annihilating that which was created naturally. Technology, science and modern communications provide the foundations in establishing codes of hospitality and war, even being presented as an underworld for the hero's journey in the case of Sonmi-45. The simple tales being told by contemporary authors ripple with the rings started by the ancient epics, those like *Beowulf* or *Homer's Iliad*, and *The Odyssey*, reaching further than the authors of those texts could have even imagined.

The argument over the death of the epic seems redundant in the face of the many epics that have been published in the last fifty years. Writers have responded to the call of these ancient texts with stories that incorporate and engage the old with the new, inventing new forms of the traditional epic literary devices, creating the muse and the singer rather than representing them, building historical backgrounds and spans of time and space from elements of science and technology that did not exist for those first epics. These texts provide but a small portion of the evolution of the epic and have opened the doors for further experimentation and adaptation. The epic genre is far from its last breath. More likely, it is in the best shape of its very long life, with a future full of possibilities and opportunities. As technology and science are applied to current issues, like climate change, health and longevity, global economies, as well as efficiency and convenience, the stage is being set for writers to utilize all of it. Genre boundaries are perhaps more fluid than at any time in the past, technology moves at a pace

that was never really forecast, and as such, the opportunity for experimentation and invention seem infinite.

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