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Translit as Thought-Events: *Cloud Atlas* and Storyland

Abstract:

In recent years, there has been an increasing interest in (and publication of) multi-narration novels that surf time, genre hop and shift geographical location. In 2012, novelist and critic, Douglas Coupland, coined the term 'translit' to describe such novels (11). If we accept Coupland's term, David Mitchell's *Cloud Atlas* (2003), Steve Amsterdam's *Things We Didn't See Coming* (2009), Jennette Winterson's *The Stone Gods* (2007), and Michael Cunningham's, *The Hours* (1998) and *Specimen Days* (2005), might all be called translit, so too Virginia Woolf's not so recent *Orlando* (1928). By choosing to travel across time, space and genre boundaries, what might a translit author be attempting to do? What might such a novel offer the reader? Through an analysis of David Mitchell's *Cloud Atlas* and by comparison with my own creative work, a novel Storyland (unpubl.), this paper argues that through multiple narrations and space-time leaps a translit novel might be what Hannah Arendt calls a 'thought-event' (1961: 10). Thought-events are defined by Arendt as a particular kind of thinking or writing that defies traditional currents of thought in response to unique cultural and political circumstances (3-15). In order to make my arguments I consider the ways temporality and multiplicity interact in two translit novels, and examine how a narrative schema, that juxtaposes an uncertain present with the imagined future and the historical past, might hitch singularity with collectivity to offer

a different way of paying attention to the world and to the construction of our individual and cultural identity.

Biographical note:

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Keywords: Illawarra, translit, *Cloud Atlas*, Storyland, narrative, cultural identity

Introduction

In recent years, there has been an increasing interest in (and publication of) multi-narration novels that surf time, genre hop and shift geographical location. In 2012 novelist and critic, Douglas Coupland, coined the term 'translit' (11), to describe such novels. Coupland says: 'Translit novels cross history without being historical; they span geography without changing psychic place. Translit collapses time and space as it seeks to generate narrative traction in the reader's mind. It inserts the contemporary reader into other locations and times, while leaving no doubt that its viewpoint is relentlessly modern and speaks entirely of our extreme present' (11). If we accept Coupland's term, David Mitchell's *Cloud Atlas* (2003), Steve Amsterdam's *Things We Didn't See Coming* (2009), Jennette Winterson's *The Stone Gods* (2007), and Michael Cunningham's, *The Hours* (1998) and *Specimen Days* (2005), might all be called translit, so too Virginia Woolf's not so recent, *Orlando* (1928). Although these novels have been thoroughly reviewed, what has given rise to this surge of interest in the multi-narration form has received less attention. By choosing to travel across time, space and genre boundaries, what might a translit author be attempting to do? What might such a novel offer the reader?

Through an analysis of David Mitchell's *Cloud Atlas* and by comparison with my own creative work, a novel Storyland (unpubl.), this paper argues that through multiple storytelling and space-time leaps a translit novel might be what Hannah Arendt calls a 'thought-event' (1961: 10). Thought-events are defined by Arendt as a particular kind of thinking or writing that defies traditional currents of thought in response to unique cultural and political circumstances (3-15). Recent translit novels, *Cloud Atlas* and Storyland included, have several things in common: they engender a

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world that is in constant flux; a world of disorder and loss, yet also of continuity and emergence; a complex world, where boundaries are blurred, plurality acknowledged and uniqueness valued, if only for the briefest time. Instead of offering a clear 'cause and consequence' sequence of events, translit emphasizes confluence of cause and connectedness across time. The gaps and elisions between the tales that make up a translit novel suggest untold, missing or hidden stories, allowing opportunities for the reader to imagine alternate pasts and possible futures. In order to make my arguments I consider the ways temporality and multiplicity interact in two translit novels, and examine how the narrative schema, by juxtaposing an uncertain present with the imagined future and the historical past, might hitch singularity with collectivity to offer a different way of paying attention to the world and to the construction of our cultural and individual identity.

The Age of Storytelling

In 1957, and with the after-effects of the Second World War still pervasive, Alain Robbe-Grillet declared 'that "to tell as story has become strictly impossible" ' (Meretoja 2014: 1). Literary theorist, Hanna Meretoja, reminds us that Robbe-Grillet was voicing a sentiment 'widely shared among his contemporaries' (2014: 1). According to Meretoja, what was first proclaimed in the fifties to be the 'death of the subject' (1), seems to have become 'more like an ongoing process of rethinking subjectivity' (1). Storytelling, and how it relates to being human, was continually debated in the twentieth century, particularly so with antinarrative movements post the Second World War. Since the latter part of that century, however, a more expansive comprehension of narrative and its function began emerging, one that reclaimed storytelling as an intricate part of understanding others and ourselves.

Political theorist, Hannah Arendt, once wrote that life ought to be 'lived as a story' (1970: 107). Perhaps, she suggested, what 'one has to do in life is to make the story come true?'(107). Meretoja claims that 'today not only narrative theory, but fiction, cinema and other media abound with such a plethora of reflections on how we are entangled in narratives that it would not be preposterous to argue that ours is an age of storytelling' (2). Umberto Eco suggests that fictional stories are like children's games, they help us 'give sense to the immensity of things that happened, are happening, or will happen in the actual world' (1998: 87). Stories help us come to terms with the events that happen to us individually and as a community. Arendt, however, believes that stories can offer portals into other communities as well as our own (Swift 2009: 4). For Arendt 'storytelling reveals meaning without committing the error of defining it' (1970:107). She insists that stories have 'the potential to offer a more attentive and particular treatment of events than philosophical and theoretical systems' (Swift 2009: 4). Arendt is 'committed to the idea that each event that happens in the world is new and unique, and that we always risk doing violence to the event's newness and uniqueness by trying to fit it into an overall world view' (4). Thus if we attempt to set one historical event against another in order to classify it, we risk losing the particularity of that event. In Arendt's view, we should look to what is unfamiliar, rather than familiar. Stories, she argues, offer different ways of understanding the world based on different cultural positions; stories, and the possibility of different interpretations of the meaning of the story, offer ways to discuss the world around us with others (4). With this in mind, what might a translit author be attempting to do? What might a translit novel offer the reader?

Translit as Thought-Events

In *Between Past and Future: eight exercises in political thought* (1961) Hannah

Arendt employs one of Kafka's parables to talk about a particular 'non-time-space in

the very heart of time' (13), a kind of dream space, where a human being might

metaphorically step away from their present reality to meditate upon a contemporary

cultural or political circumstance (3-15). For Arendt thinking and writing from this

meditation time might be called a 'thought-event' (10). She describes this 'non-time'

13) as:

the odd in-between period which sometimes inserts itself into historical

time when not only the later historians but the actors and witnesses,   the

living themselves, become aware of an interval in time which is   altogether

determined by things that are no longer and by things that   are not yet. (9)

To ruminate on what metaphorically this 'thought-event' might be like Arendt

employs an excerpt from one of Kafka's parables (10).

The excerpt reads:

He has two antagonists: the first presses him from behind, from the

origin. The second blocks the road ahead. He gives battle to both. To

be sure, the first supports him in his fight with the second, for he wants

to push him forward, and in the same way the second supports him in

his fight with the first, since he drives him back. But it is only

theoretically so. For it is not only the two antagonists who are there, but

he himself as well, and who really knows his intentions? His dream,
though, is that some time in an unguarded moment—and this would
require a night darker than any night has ever been yet—he will jump
out of the fighting line and be promoted, on account of his experience in
fighting, to the position of umpire over his antagonists in their fight with each
other. (Arendt 1961: 7)

 For Arendt the antagonists represent the past and the future pressing in on the man
who is the subject of the story. She claims there are three fights going on—one
between the man and each different antagonist, and one between the antagonists
themselves (10). The depiction of the past and the future as forces is important to
Arendt. According to her understanding of the parable, the place where the man
stands as the forces act upon him creates a gap. Linear time is broken and what is
created, 'resembles what the physicists call a parallelogram of forces.'(12). The
battleground depicted by the story results in a third force being created. This third
force shoots off on a diagonal line, beginning at the point where the two forces, past
and future, clash, and whose direction is determined by those forces, but whose
'eventual end lies in infinity' (12). This, Arendt suggests, is 'the perfect metaphor for
the activity of thought' (12) she is interested in. Along this metaphorical diagonal line
a new kind of thinking can develop; 'this diagonal, though pointing toward the
infinite, remains bound to and is rooted in the present' (12). Arendt uses this
metaphorical diagonal line to describe thinking that is not inhibited by traditional
currents of thought. Each new generation, she argues, has the opportunity to evaluate
the past and the future as relevant to their own circumstances but to do that, one must

think in a way that is free from any tradition that might lay down the rules for what and what *not* to value.

Translit novels, in refusing to follow a single protagonist through the novel, and in demanding that the reader accept varied tales bound within the one book, not as a series of short stories or novellas but as a single narrative, do their imagining, I suggest, along Arendt's metaphorical diagonal line. A good example is David Mitchell's *Cloud Atlas* (2003). This well known novel, now a major film, employs six narrators to tell six stories, with each new story jumping time and geographical space. The first tale, 'The Pacific Journal of Adam Ewing', is set in the nineteenth century and traces Ewing's sail from Chatham Islands to San Francisco on board the schooner, *Prophetess*, and relates his slow poisoning by the ship's doctor, who has befriended him. In the following 1931 story, youthful composer, Robert Frobisher, writes a series of letters to friend and onetime lover, Rufus Sixsmith, recounting his move from London to Bruges to work as amanuensis for a renown but aging composer. The third tale takes place in seventies California, where reporter Luisa Rey, investigates and exposes the corruption of a nuclear power company, while the fourth relays how sixty-something English publisher, Timothy Cavendish, on the run from a disgruntled client, is committed to a nursing home. In the fifth futuristic story fabricant Sonmi-451 describes her escape from 'a dinery owned by Papa Song Corp' (187) and the events that led to her joining the abolition movement. The final story, recounting the brutal colonisation of one tribe by another, is set in post-apocalyptic Hawaii and is told by Valleysman, Zackry. We read the first half of five of the stories in succession, then, the sixth dystopian story is told in full, before the second half of each of the previous five stories is completed. Through its very structure, framing

individual tales within a more expansive geographical and temporal context, *Cloud Atlas* might be said to be attempting what Arendt calls a thought-event —providing a new way of paying attention to individual tales by presenting them as one. Mitchell guides the reader to accept each individual narrator as part of a larger global environment that spans the past, present and future. To further bind individuals across time, Mitchell employs recurring themes (reincarnation, cannibalism, corruption), events (colonisation, massacres, slave-making) and motifs (birthmarks, reading the 'other'). For example, each protagonist that follows the Adam Ewing tale 'reads' the story of the previous protagonist: Robert Frobisher reads Ewing's journal; Luisa Rey is given the Frobisher letters; a script entitled 'Half Lives – The First Luisa Rey Mystery' is sent to editor Timothy Cavendish; while the Cavendish story is seen as a movie by Sonmi-451; and a digital recording of Sonmi-451's final recorded interview is found by Zachry.

Literary theorist, Theo D'haen, claims that Mitchell's *Cloud Atlas* insists on a 'cosmodern postmodern humanism' (2013: 275) and emanates from the kind of literature that forsakes 'the politics of identity in favor of recognition and acceptance of alterity' (274). Cosmodern is a term used by Christian Moraru to describe a literature that involves a recognition of 'the other that is not implicated in any will to rule' (274), but also a 'recognition of each individual's, each group's, each nation's connectedness to the rest of the world—a relation of *with*, as Moraru calls it' (274). In *Cloud Atlas,* however, identity is not given over for alterity, rather, otherness becomes a way of contextualising identity. *Cloud Atlas* seeks a new way to tell a story, one that does not follow a single protagonist through a realist three-act narrative, but instead takes up Moraru's notion of 'with' using multiple narratives across different eras to

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develop contemporary ideas. Mitchell stages a world self-aware of stories and story forms. The characters reading each other might be a post-modern writing strategy, a neat trick that highlights fictionality, but it is also an acknowledgement that we, as Rimmon-Kenan claims, 'live our lives as stories and our identity is constructed both by stories we tell ourselves and others about ourselves and by the master narratives that consciously or unconsciously serve as models for ours' (2002: 11). Mitchell's characters don't consciously emulate the stories they read, yet their reading weighs the thematic threads of individual tales against each other. As if placed on the scales of Justice, difference is weighed against similarity, what is lost is weighed against what survives. Similarly, time in *Cloud Atlas* is presented as both linear and cyclical. In 'Genome time: Post-Darwinism then and now' (2013), Jay Clayton argues that *Cloud Atlas's* 'paradoxical combination of linear and cyclical perspectives on time reflects contemporary genomics' (58) and 'captures the way in which our culture's understanding of time has developed in tandem with biology's exploration of evolution' (58). He claims that the 'result today is a dual temporal consciousness that might be called "genome time" ' (58). Genome time acknowledges, on the one hand, that our 'genetic code is unique' (58), something given to us from our parents and grandparents, while on the other hand, also concedes that this code reaches back to 'the first primordial cell and forward to whatever future humanity may encounter' (59). This complexity of understanding is reflected in the structure of *Cloud Atlas* and this structure is employed as metaphor throughout the novel. An instance of this is the '*Cloud Atlas Sextet'* (2003: 479) Frobisher writes, an overlapping musical piece for six solo musicians. 'In the 1st set, each solo is interrupted by its successor: in the 2nd, each interruption is recontinued, in order' (463). Mitchell crosses boundaries and creates interruptions for a purpose, and that purpose is to show the potential of human

endeavour. Frobisher says: 'All boundaries are conventions, national ones two. One may transcend any convention, if only one can conceive of doing so' (479).

Different, multiple and interconnecting stories bound within the one tale have long fascinated me. When I first read *Cloud Atlas*, I was struck by its wit, verve, and surprising humanity. When I began to write my own novel, Storyland, I wanted to engage with a similar form, but to do so in a way that was uniquely Australian. If *Cloud Atlas* seeks acknowledgement not only for the way stories shape lives, but also for the way they shape each person's, each country's connection to a global community across time, Storyland might be said to seek acknowledgement of a human being's place within the natural world. Storyland is set in the Illawarra, New South Wales, in locations along a waterway that runs from Mount Kembla (Djenbella) down to the sea and includes Dapto Creek (Dabroo) and Mullet Creek (Bawn) and Lake Illawarra (Jubborsay). The geographical hop for each story occurs within the same region, with central locations in one tale, visited by characters from another. The novel is made up of five stories told by five different narrators. There is a story set in both the near and distant future (2028 and 3017) and four set in the past (1796, 1822, 1900, 1998). The waterways, rivers, creeks and lake, become focal points for a tale of different Australians – Nada, a woman whose memories hold a clue to an ecologically driven apocalypse; Bel, a young girl on a rafting adventure with two friends; Mary, a dairy farmer whose brother is suspected of abducting a teenager; Hawker, a convict who murders an Aboriginal woman on the same night he contemplates suicide; and Will Martin, a young man on a voyage of discovery with Matthew Flinders and George Bass. The story structure begins in the future, then wavelike, moves backwards and forwards in time. There is a violent episode in each

story that may or may not be correctly reported; tempests build in intensity across stories, birds fly through them, animals, trees and places of significance, appear and disappear. Arendt's thought-event here has an ecological dimension that is a global concern. Storyland, however, also has a local emphasis. Underpinning each story is a focus on the clash of two cultures - Indigenous and European - and how they both collide with other cultures to create what we today call Australia. This is not a novel that tries to give a sense of the multicultural experience, yet through its structure it is clear that within the communities depicted there are diverse stories, many of which are concealed, suppressed, some simply forgotten. Miscommunication—the way we misread intentions and make assumptions, and the consequences, sometimes severe, that flow from that—shapes each story, as does the way we interact with, and have interacted with, the natural world. What lies behind the story schema, however, is the idea that we create the world around us by what we do and don't pay attention to.

In Storyland, through leaps across time (voids, chasms, rifts) and through multiplicity of story (some told, others untold, hidden, hinted at), attention is drawn to our human connection to or disconnection from the environment—the land, water, flora and fauna. In the future story (3017 and 2028), the narrator Nada, descends the mountain to view the destruction that has occurred post a cyclone. She says:

> We cross to the southern side of the ridge and stop to catch our
> breath at the tourist lookout.
>> I'm not prepared for what I see.
>> Can't speak from shock.

> To the east, Port Kembla—that in my childhood had been a
>
> place of fire-blowing smokestacks—Port Kembla is gone and between
>
> where it once was and where I now stand there is only water.
>
> (2014: 13)

Nada later says: "I'm overawed by the power of water. It's ability to change all that we are. Water is the giver and taker of life' (142). In the 1998 story, only 20 years away from the weather event that disrupts Nada's world, ten-year-old Bel standing by the lake, looks down and sees 'black sludge' (24) below the water. Bel explains: 'No one that lives by the lake actually goes on the lake except for Lenny the biker who lives next door to Ray and has a bathroom that is all black tiles and gold taps' (25). In the 1900 story, Mary, out checking her rabbit traps, describes the rainforest: 'Fallen cabbage-palm leaves, yellow like ancient parchment, run in waves through the narrow gullies. The tree trunks are tall here, like ship masts trapped in a storm of vines, the canopies their verdant sails' (37). Later, she leaves the forest and creek and recounts the change in the landscape: 'fenced fields that are barren and narrow and look more like pig paddocks than arable land. In the distance are the smelter works' (39). In the next story Hawker chronicles the same forest and creek-bank: 'Green moss runs over the roots of trees, like the trailing tresses of majesty' (83). The time-space leaps in Storyland position the characters in the same geographical region but in an altered landscape and in this way focus attention on past, present and future landscape transformations. The intercutting of stories takes the reader from a lost landscape, back to a lush forest, passing through regenerating forests, industrialized or denuded landscapes along the way. Time hopping allows the individual story to be viewed within a context that expands beyond a single historical period.

Like *Cloud Atlas,* Storyland places multiple stories within a time frame that includes the historical past and the imagined future so that each story is situated within an expanded cultural context. Both *Cloud Atlas* and Storyland, however, are firmly bound to the point in time from which they were written. In explaining her concept of thought-events Arendt is adamant that her metaphorical diagonal line is rooted in a specific present and uses the experience of French resistance writers to develop her point. For Arendt, these writers were torn away from the 'weightless irrelevance of their personal affairs' (1961: 4) to become active agents of their futures. She says:

In this nakedness, stripped of all masks—of those which society   assigns to its members as well as those which the individual fabricates   for himself in his psychological reactions against society—they had   been visited for the first time in their lives by an apparition of freedom,   not, to be sure, because they acted against tyranny and things worse   than tyranny—this was true for every soldier in the Allied armies —but   because they had become "challengers," had taken the initiative upon   themselves and therefore, without knowing or even noticing it, had   begun to create that public space between themselves where   freedom could appear. (4)

In other words, the resistance writers were able to step away from the forces of the past and future colliding in on their lives and view their world from this 'non-time-space in the very heart of time' (13). By resisting invasion, they discovered for the first time in their lives, what it might mean to be free: free from societal convention; free from traditional thinking about justice, law and order. As French resistance poet

and writer, René Char, says: 'our inheritance was left to us by no testament' (Arendt 1961: 3). Because they emerge from particular political and cultural circumstances, thought-events, such as those of resistance writer René Char, cannot be handed down by previous thinkers, cannot be 'inherited' (13), they are, and must be, discovered 'anew' (13), by each generation.

Arendt's resistance writers, like Arendt herself, were concerned with issues of authority and freedom that were bound to their own unique set of cultural and political events. *Cloud Atlas* and Storyland have been written during a time when climate change, refugee movements across borders, decreasing natural resources, increasing terrorist acts, oil spills, nuclear reactor meltdowns, and continued debates over who can and can't own nuclear weapons, has created interest in questions about the future of human civilization. Both novels have ecological interests and an apocalyptic future at their core, but focus their thought-events slightly differently. Storyland attempts to concern itself with the spirit of the natural world, and a human being's place within it, while Mitchell's *Cloud Atlas* directs attention to the interior spiritual realm. Literary theorist, Heather Hicks, suggests that 'all of Mitchell's protagonists are initially depicted as isolated individuals caught up in the sweep of history' (2010: 4). Further clues to Mitchell's thought-event, however, are given by the birthmarks that link several of the protagonists, suggesting that they 'share a soul that is recycled across time' (6). Luisa Rey, on reading Frobisher's letters, experiences a 'dizzying vividness of the images of places and people that the letters have unlocked. Images so vivid she can only call them memories' (Mitchell 2003: 121). Frobisher has a 'comet-shaped birthmark between his shoulder-blade and collar-bone' (122). Rey sports a similar birthmark as does Timothy Cavendish, Somni-451

and Meronym. Protagonists sense a connection to other characters that echo earlier relationships. Rufus Sixsmith, after being trapped in an elevator with Luisa Rey, says to her, 'I feel I've known you for *years*, not ninety minutes' (97). Souls and belief patterns are traced through each story. Mr D'Arnoq, recounting the belief systems of the Moriori to Adam Ewing, says: 'the Moriori's priestly caste dictated that whosoever split a man's blood killed his own *mana* – his honour, his worth, his standing & his soul' (12). In 'Half-Lives', a 'minor league rock musician' (91) named Richard, makes it clear to Luisa Rey that his 'moonstone and jade ankh' (90) can get him personal audiences with his guru. In this world the spiritual can be bought and paraded around as a status symbol. Yet in the story set in the future, 'An Orison of Sonmi-451', the spiritual concept of the 'soul' has degenerated to become no more than a credit card: the customers at Papa Song 'debit their Souls on ... Hub Tellers' (188). In 'Sloosha's Crossin' ', however, the soul again becomes something interior, private, and ineffable. Like the Moriori described in Ewing's journal, the Valleysmen believe that to murder is to forsake one's soul. The souls in Zachry's world are as transmutable as they are ineffable. Zachry says: 'Souls cross ages like clouds cross skies, an' tho' a cloud's shape nor hue nor size don't stay the same it's still a cloud an' so is a soul' (324). Mitchell's thought-event is to attempt to evoke what technology cannot, the intangible and ethereal nature of the concept of the soul and its rebirthing across time. When technological advances are at their highest point in *Cloud Atlas*, the soul has become equated with finance, only when those advantages are lost does a reimagining of the soul return. Yet this link to the inner spiritual realm is not enough to save Zachry and his home. Zachry's existence in a post apocalyptic world is precarious, and the end of the tale recounts his removal from Hawaii to Maui (323). Mitchell does not extol belief, primitive or otherwise—it is not the panacea for

troubled civilizations. Instead, he recounts the sincerity of believers in the soul and gives credence to valuing the ineffable.

Cloud Atlas and Storyland remind us that while an individual human life may seem to have a clear beginning, middle and end, when viewed from the perspective of the community, local or global, human life becomes complex, ever-changing and fluid. The multiplicity of stories in these two translit novels prompt the reader to think about collectivity and community, making the reader aware that we live in what philosopher and social and political scientist María Puig de la Bellacasa might call 'crowded worlds' (2012: 202): worlds full of multiple connections and disconnections. Yet also worlds full of story gaps, elisions, compressions, distortions, echoes.

Gaps, elisions, compressions, distortions, echoes

Translit novels, such as *Cloud Atlas* and Storyland, compress different epochs into one narrative structure, directing the reader's gaze not only to the historical past and the imagined future but also to unnarrated tales. Time-space jumps draw attention to a particular question or narrative the novel may be interested in, but also encourage the reader to imagine what questions or stories have been left out. In *Cloud Atlas* and Storyland there are numerous tales that are hinted at, but not recorded. For example, in *Cloud Atlas*, a young man named Rafael is mentioned in Adam Ewing's journal. The boy's relationship to Ewing is only briefly explained, and in doing so Ewing's own upbringing is alluded to. Yet, like the nature of Ewing's relationship to Rafael, the full story is not recounted. Mitchell hints at two untold stories and leaves the reader to wonder. Similarly, Rufus Sixsmith's response to the death of his friend Robert Frobisher is never related, nor most of what has happened in Sixsmith's life

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since the death of Frobisher in the second tale, and Sixsmith's meeting with Luisa Rey, in the third. Such gaps in narration are a puzzle space for the reader: voids, chasms, chinks, from which new imaginings might emerge.

In Storyland, narrators distort or keep secret, events and occurrences. After Hawker has shot an Aboriginal woman, Vince Finch, overseer of the property, sets the dogs on her. Vince says: 'The dogs mauled her is what we'll tell the magistrate' (223). The truth of the murder will be perverted, and blame placed on the dogs, not Hawker. Will Martin witnesses Flinders shooting at Aboriginal men near Lake Illawarra and subsequently takes note of Flinders' argument that if future expeditions are to be granted by the Governor, some stories must not be told. Later, Will confirms he has absorbed this new knowledge: 'For if I am to rise, it will come not only by what I tell of what I dare, but also, by what I don't tell' (209). In both novels, objects, places and names appear and disappear. In Storyland, for example, Djembla is the Aboriginal name for Mount Kembla, Cook said it was shaped like a hat, and it became for a time Hat Hill, then Mount Hat, then Mount Kembla.

Threads of information are picked up, utilized or abandoned, leaving traces that may or may not be understood by subsequent generations. In *Cloud Atlas*, the *Prophetess*, the schooner that Ewing sails on, is preserved and docked in the same marina as Sixsmith's yacht (448), used only by Luisa Rey as a direction marker to the more modern vessel. Luisa Rey's mother lives in 'Ewingsville' (128), a suburb that may or may not have a connection to the Adam Ewing who wrote the journal of the first story, but certainly an echo of that earlier tale.

Benedict Anderson states in *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism* (1991) that 'all communities larger than primordial villages of face-to-face contact (and perhaps even these) are imagined. Communities are to be distinguished, not by their falsity/genuineness but by the style in which they are imagined (6). In *Cloud Atlas*, this style is made evident through the different storytelling forms employed: diary, letter, script, memoir, interview, oral tale (albeit written down). Doubt is placed on each story told. At the end of 'Sloosha's Crossin'' Zachry's son says: 'Most yarnin's got a bit o' true, some yarnin's got some true, an' a few yarnin's got a lot o' true' (324). In Storyland the community imagined, from the past to the future, is a fragmented community. The story schema meditates upon the human connection to and disconnection from the natural world, the characters know their world is shaped not only by the stories told but also by those not told. While both *Cloud Atlas* and Storyland are themselves thought-events, the gaps between stories offer an opportunity where the reader might enact their own thought-event. For Arendt world events need to have some form of 'thinking completion after the act' (1961: 6) in order for a story to be told. While the stories in translit novels may resolve, they suggest gaps where other stories may exist, where other stories wait to be told, wait to have the 'thought completion.' They do this by time-space leaps that collide the present with the historical past and the imagined future. Such leaps jar the reader and mark the present as unstable: a place of possible futures and multiple pasts.

Conclusion

In the translit novels discussed—*Cloud Atlas* and Storyland—temporality is foregrounded. Time may be circular, or follow a traditional reticular linear flow, yet in such a fragmented way that it destabilizes traditional conceptions of narrative time.

Our perspective of time is challenged; the conception that the past, present and future are separate entities is questioned. Faulkner wrote, 'The past is never dead. It's not even past,' (1965: 85). Perhaps something similar may be said about what lies ahead —the future never arrives, yet it is always with us. Translit novels, I suggest, proffer the past, present and future as forces that flow into and impact upon each other. In Storyland and *Cloud Atlas* (2003), an apocalyptic future is part of the story structure. Through leaps across time these novels warn of the need to pay attention to past, present and future interconnections. Such leaps present a narrative sequence that is contiguous rather than continuous. By placing unique yet connected stories within the one novel, (like neighbouring houses in the same suburb, where each house summons up a particular period of history), novels such as *Cloud Atlas* and Storyland can easily evoke disruption and loss, while at the same time kindling a sense of continuity and emergence; different species, including human beings and the cultural constructs they invent, as forever vanishing, forever emerging. Such time hopping allows the individual story to be viewed within a context that expands beyond a single epoch, even beyond a single planet.

If time leaps both broaden and collapse perspective, the multiplicity of stories, narrators and/or protagonists in translit novels like *Cloud Atlas* and Storyland both broaden and collapse community. Instead of a singular story, the reader, like the Greek sophist thinkers and their audience, experience different perspectives; live, for a short time, in different houses, taking on the identity of its occupants. In these novels major and minor protagonists come and go, their historical relevance swelling, diminishing or disappearing, in stories that follow. The nineteenth century notion of progress as a concept of continuing improvement, is undermined, and readers become

aware of the individual within a cultural context. Identity is shaped not only by a subject's own culture, but through a range of global cultural and political events. A story made up of stories that cross time might encourage an acknowledgement that there are, and have always been, multiple cultural contexts, multiple ways of being in and of seeing the world, and of creating stories about it. If it is true that different interpretations of a story offer ways for us to discuss the world around us with others (Swift 2009: 4), then it might also be true that the multiple stories offered in translit novels, remind the reader that there is not one story to be told, not one simple way identity is shaped. By having different stories that cross time yet are connected by theme, landscape, or protagonist, translit novels such as *Cloud Atlas* and Storyland jolt the reader into viewing the past, the present and the future, through different cultural, social or gender lenses.

Thought-events, as Arendt defines them, are those non-time-spaces (1961: 13) where each generation throws off traditional thinking, thinking which has become threadbare, to meditate upon their unique cultural and political circumstances. Hannah Arendt uses the experience and reflection of poets who joined the French Resistance to mediate upon how thought-events spring from the present (3-15). I have used here David Mitchell's *Cloud Atlas* and my own novel, Storyland, to think about how Arendt's thought-events might relate to the translit form. Both *Cloud Atlas* and Storyland spring from a specific period where debates about moving populations, food shortages, deforestation, pollution, and anthropogenic global warming, are creating anxiety. Not only are these anxieties reflected in both the *Cloud Atlas* and Storyland narratives, but they also exist in the spaces between the narratives. In those spaces lie unanswered questions, the beginnings and ends of tales not fully told,

perhaps never heard. In *Cloud Atlas,* Mitchell draws attention to the gains and losses made through scientific and technological advances and to the ineffability of the soul. In Storyland, I wanted to draw attention to the way we humans interact with, and have interacted with, the land and waterways; to explore how humans might be blind-sighted to potential environmental dangers; and illuminate gaps in knowledge that exist now, have existed in the past, and perhaps may exist in the future. Using *Cloud Atlas* and Storyland as examples, this paper argues that translit novels, through leaping time and by conjuring multiple stories into one narrative universe, have the potential to focus a reader's attention onto contemporary cultural and political circumstances and in this way are themselves thought-events. In addition, the gaps between those stories might invite the reader to embrace a thought-event—to imagine a story or set of political or cultural consequences that might arise from what the author of a translit novel has drawn their attention to; an imagining that drifts up from the spaces, gaps, voids, that are left between the stories.

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