

**Together in the Crowd of Time:
Temporal Decentering and Ethical Action in David Mitchell's *The Bone Clocks***

by

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ABSTRACT

In *The Bone Clocks*, the novelist David Mitchell demonstrates how crowded time leads to the interruption of self-centred temporal flows, creating moments of collision between the self and others, and sparking points of narrative inflection and ethical opportunity. Such moments call into question the value of empathy as a foundation of ethical action, and suggest new ways to think about the trajectories of subjects and civilizations alike. Whereas some might intend the expression “get lost” as an insult, in Mitchell’s best-case scenarios we can read it as an invitation to embrace interruption as a means to temporal decentering and ethical action.

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CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

How could you not be interested in time? It's like being a fish and not being interested in the sea. It's where we live.

– David Mitchell, *Between the Covers*

“Do as you would be done by ... The golden rule of reincarnation.”

– Robert Macfarlane, *Underland*

In the year 2114, a forest of 1000 trees growing just north of Oslo will be felled, pulped and made into the paper for a new literary anthology. The trees were planted in 2014 as part of Future Library, an art project that will collect an unpublished manuscript from a celebrated author every year for a century, locking the 100 texts away as the forest grows, until its trees are ready to be transmuted into the leaves of books (Paterson). Given that many of the participating writers will likely be dead in 2114, the stewards of Future Library are offering a gamble with time. Yes, they say, the effort you put into crafting your text will go unread and mostly unrewarded today, but we can promise you the strong likelihood of readers in the future – a certain guarantee of posterity. Such an idea and deal seem especially fitting for the English novelist David Mitchell, given his fascination with time and the kinds of ethical compacts humans make – and break – within it. In 2015, Mitchell became just the second annual contributor to Future Library with a text called *From Me Flows What You Call Time*. Given the secretive nature of the project, we know little else about Mitchell's text except for the titular hint that once again Mitchell returns to his preoccupation with the experiences of subjects in time. Such scant details are tantalizing, considering all the effort invested in reading patterns within and across his many novels, short stories and other works. Mitchell describes his project as “bringing

into being a fictional universe with its own cast, [where] my books are one chapter in a sort of sprawling macronovel. That's my life's work, for however long my life lasts ... I write each novel with an eye on the bigger picture, and how the parts fit into the whole" (qtd. in Dillon 5). As Mitchell's body of work has grown, so too has scholarly attention on the interconnected nature of his subjects and forms, which "present the multiple effect of networked narratives, histories and subjectivities," across "various geographical spaces and historical times" (Dillon 14, 16). This approach and scope have earned Mitchell both literary and popular acclaim as an innovator of the Anthropocene novel (Harris 151), "translit" (Coupland) and world literature (Robbins 174).

Yet Mitchell's innovation is as much fueled by pattern-breaking as it is by pattern-making, as time and again he uses techniques of interruption to disrupt his chosen forms and themes – including his preoccupation with time. This approach is overtly foregrounded in *The Bone Clocks* (2014), which is structured between two scales of time: the globetrotting lifetime of its protagonist Holly Sykes, on the one hand, and the centuries-long conflict between the soul-sucking Anchorites and the time-looping Horologists on the other. *The Bone Clocks* is a hybrid cosmopolitan-fantastic novel crowded with various forms of time that, like a crowd of people, jostle and interrupt one another within a dynamic field. Through the novel, Mitchell brings into question the very nature of continuity as it is understood to constitute the flow of time, human mortality, and the linear nature of narrative. Indeed, by interrupting such temporal flows, Mitchell creates opportunities for his characters and readers to lose themselves, as if in a crowd. In her writing on the ethics of representing others in cosmopolitan fiction, Shameem Black suggests the metaphor of crowding is useful as a representational and interpretative

strategy (Black 14). Like crowded space, crowded time leads to the interruption of self-centred temporal flows, instead creating moments of collision between the self and others, sparking points of narrative inflection and ethical opportunity. Such moments call into question the value of empathy as a foundation of ethical action, and suggest new ways to think about the trajectories of subjects and civilizations alike. Whereas some might intend the expression “get lost” as an insult, in Mitchell’s best-case scenarios we can read it as an invitation to embrace interruption as a means to temporal decentering and ethical action.

David Mitchell’s success as a novelist to date might be attributed to how he plays with and breaks expectations. Mitchell’s works – starting with his spotlight-seizing debut *Ghostwritten* (1999) and including his best-selling *Cloud Atlas* (2004) – have broken across the boundaries between literary acclaim and popular culture, to the point where he might be as at home on a Hollywood red carpet as at the Hay Festival.ⁱ Mitchell won acclaim early in his writing career, feted as one of the best young British novelists of 2003 by the literary journal *Granta* (“David Mitchell”) and as one of the world’s most influential thinkers in 2007 by *Time* magazine (Iyer). Now middle aged and firmly established in the literary mainstream, Mitchell continues to be praised for his versatility across multiple voices and genres, where his “extraordinary facility with narrative” means “he can do anything he wants, in a variety of modes, and still convince” (Wood). This versatility is evident in the ambitious scope of time, space and form to be found in Mitchell’s novels. In many instances, Mitchell employs multiple genres within one novel, perfecting a technique he calls the “compounded short [story] ... [where the] borders get so porous and so squished up that you no longer see them” (qtd. in Dillon 4). While this

compounded approach is discernible in all of Mitchell's works, it is particularly apparent in the fragmented novels *Ghostwritten*, *number9dream* (2001), *Cloud Atlas* and *The Bone Clocks*, within which characters and motifs recur while, at the same time, narratives are repeatedly interrupted so that new stories can begin.

Mitchell's formal ambition and experimentation are matched by his reputation as a "maximalist world-builder" (Harris, "Laboratory of Time" 16) where the accumulating body of his "various novels, short stories, and libretti [are] 'one chapter in a sort of sprawling macronovel' ... [with an] implied narrative trajectory [extending] from seven millennia in the past ... to several hundred years in the future" (Parker 2). Writing about *The Bone Clocks*, Paul Harris observes,

the heterogeneous characters and events ... are all always already written into something called "The Script," a self-reflexive motif for the text itself. But

Mitchell's entire corpus could be seen the same way: all of the stories within all of his books, as they unfold, seem on completion to assume their place in an already-existing Script threading together all his texts. (Harris, "Fractal Imagination" 148-149)

Through his macro-novel scope and the connective tissue of the Script, Mitchell makes and breaks narrative patterns within the confines of his ever-expanding literary universe.

Given the repetition in Mitchell's project, it's not surprising that much of the scholarly attention on his writing to date has focused on pattern-making. The burgeoning field of Mitchell criticism includes Harris's identification of the works' fractal-like qualities and anthropocenic scope (152-153), Edwards' tracing of "[networked] ... individuality within a community or multitude that stretches across history" (189), and

Berthold Schoene's reading of Mitchell's work as "[pioneering] the novel as opening upon a world-creative *tour du monde*" (Schoene 59). Some have even playfully noted the recurrence of cats as a motif in Mitchell's novels (Dillon 8). While it is true that critical attention has also been paid to the role of pattern-breaking in Mitchell's work, scholars have tended to do so in support of larger pattern-making arguments. Jo Alyson Parker, for example, argues that the cumulative effect of "narrative ellipses" in *The Bone Clocks* "spurs readers to link past causes and future effects and to pay attention to the attritional environmental destruction that is taking place across a vast time-scale" (Parker 1). Will McMorran suggests that "[even] (or perhaps especially) in a composite novel, we continue to look for a unity that entails completion, for reassurance that the text we are reading is not going to be 'just' a collection of stories. And, inevitably, the more difficult this unity is to find the more the reader desires and searches for it" (McMorran 169). Clearly, hunting for patterns in Mitchell's writing continues to be a productive and worthwhile form of close reading. Recognizing that Mitchell is both a novelistic innovator and breaker of boundaries and conventions, however, I turn to consider the significance of pattern-breaking as an end in itself within *The Bone Clocks* – particularly as it is deployed to disrupt the temporal flows of the subjects represented in the novel.

CHAPTER 2 CROWDED TIME

Moments hop by, birdlike.

– David Mitchell, *The Bone Clocks*

To be human means *to be* in time. Minutes, days, weeks, months and years accumulate to form our lifetimes, lending sequence to the jumble of experiences that occur before our time, inevitably, is up. Georg Lukács describes time's organizational quality, writing how it "brings order into the chaos of men's lives and gives it the semblance of a spontaneously flowering, organic entity" (Lukács 125). Hans Meyerhoff argues this sense of ordering is essential in constituting "[what] we call the self, person or individual [which] is experienced and known only against the backdrop of the succession of temporal moments and changes constituting his biography" (Meyerhoff 2). Furthering this accretive metaphor, Barbara Adam describes how the time that underpins our lives accumulates to create "layers of meaning," where "[time] is experienced, known, theorized, created, regulated, sold and controlled. It is contextual and historical, embodied and objectified, abstracted and constructed, represented and commodified. In these multiple expressions time is an inescapable fact of social life and cultural existence" (Adam 1). Adam, like Lukács, Meyerhoff and many others, articulates the ways that time is both constitutive and constructed by subjects in their social contexts. In other words, our being in time means making use of time to form meaning, even though much of this time-building occurs unconsciously.

Mitchell's belief in the importance and ubiquity of time is apparent when he suggests that "time is to us what the ocean is to marine life, only more so: time, the great enabler of being. Yet time is a slow-burning 'decay bomb' not outside us but within us,

all the while transforming our newborn selves through biological maturity into our senescent selves: time, the great dismantler of being” (Harris, “Laboratory of Time” 8-9). By thinking of time as both humanity’s oceanic enabler and undoer, Mitchell already hints at the complexity and ambivalence with which he views time. For him, time is neither simple nor natural, but rather a multi-streamed and multi-dimensional complex whose currents buffet subjects and events at different scales from both within and without. This textured and nuanced notion of time is discernible in much of Mitchell’s work, but especially so in *The Bone Clocks*, in which Mitchell shakes up and disrupts the centrality of subjective time to the novel.

Just as time is integral to human experience, so too is it central to the evolution of the novel as a form. In his foundational work *The Theory of the Novel* (1920), Georg Lukács tracks the evolution of the novel form away from the timeless transcendence of its progenitor, the epic, into a temporally fluid state of “transcendent homelessness” (121). “In the novel,” Lukács writes, “meaning is separated from life, and hence the essential from the temporal; we might almost say that the entire inner action of the novel is nothing but a struggle against the power of time” (122). Lukács is much influenced by the philosopher Henri Bergson’s notion of time as *durée*, in which time is conceived as “continuous flow ... characterized not only by successive moments and multiple changes but also by something which endures within successive change” (Meyerhoff 14-15). Time as *durée* is all about “becoming, change, and embodied development, memory, intuition and the irrational” (Adam 55). Picking up on this idea, Lukács argues that

[the] greatest discrepancy between idea and reality is time: the process of time as duration ... that time – that ungraspable, invisibly moving substance – gradually

robs subjectivity of all its possessions and imperceptibly forces alien contents into it. That is why the novel, the literary form of the transcendent homelessness of the idea, includes real time – Bergson’s *durée* – among its constitutive principles.

(Lukács 121)

Here, Lukács acknowledges the intertwined significance of time and subjectivity to the novel form, which, in his reading, centers on the durational experiences of subjects who quest for transcendence but never quite manage to achieve it. No wonder, then, that he zeroes in on Cervantes’ *Don Quixote* as a key example of the novel form (101), given the way that the Don’s quest for self-realization is never achieved and becomes increasingly tragic-comic as time passes.

John Neubauer credits Lukács with developing one of the “two most comprehensive theories of the novel in our century,” naming Mikhail Bakhtin’s work on dialogic forms as the other (Neubauer 531). Like Lukács, Bakhtin is also interested in the differences between epic and novel forms. Yet unlike Lukács, Bakhtin views these forms not in a teleological sequence, where epic gives way to novel, but rather as two impulses in “constant struggle” within historical time (Holquist 77), where the epic represents all that is “elevated, stylistically fixed, incapable of laughter” while, on the other hand, the novel stands for that which is “low, stylistically mobile and diverse, serio-comic” (Dentith 49). In another point of similarity to Lukács, Bakhtin’s work on dialogic relationships also comes to centre a Bergson-like temporal subject. For “[conceiving] being dialogically means that reality is always experienced, not just perceived, and further that it is experienced from a particular position [in time and space]. Bakhtin conceives that position in kinetic terms as a situation, an event, the event of being a self”

(Holquist 21). Bakhtin extends this relativistic thinking to narrative theory in his concept of the “chronotope,” which seeks to delineate the “intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature” (Bakhtin et al. 84). Bakhtin describes the chronotope as the point where “[time] ... thickens, takes on flesh, becomes artistically visible; likewise, space becomes charged and responsive to the movements of time, plot and history” (84). Bakhtin describes various kinds of chronotopes – the salon and parlour (246-247), the threshold and public square (249) – claiming these time-space contact points are where “the knots of narrative are tied and untied” (259), lending momentum to narratives and making it possible to shift from thinking about *storylines* to *storyfields* – where any number of simultaneously existing temporal flows are constantly being bound then undone as part of a larger tapestry, breaking apart to form new contact points and configurations. For the purposes of my essay, this is perhaps the most important difference between Lukács and Bakhtin on time. While both agree on the subjective experience of time, Lukács thinks of the subject in somewhat isolated, linear terms, while Bakhtin’s dialogistic model imagines the self as being constituted through interaction and multiplicity.

Lukács’ and Bakhtin’s positions on subjective time echo developments in our understanding of time from the world of physics. As mentioned, Lukács’ emphasis on time-as-durée draws on the work of the late-19th and early-20th century philosopher Henri Bergson, who in turn was influenced by the eminent 17th-century physicist Isaac Newton. As Barbara Adam explains, “the influence of Newton’s *Principia* [1687] cannot be overestimated. It towered over the intellectual landscape of its period. Not only fellow scientists but also philosophers were compelled to engage with its theories” (Adam 30).

In this seminal work, Newton describes time in linear terms as “time taken, the duration between events, which is unaffected by the transformation it describes” (Adam 30). A few centuries after Newton, the iconic physicist Albert Einstein’s work on relativity comes to challenge notions of time as linear and separate from the events that occur within it. On the contrary, Einstein demonstrated, time and space are inextricably bound together in specific points of contact that behave in relation to one another. Here, time is not a line but a dynamic field – space-time – in which “[instantaneity], simultaneity, action at a distance, synchronicity, prophecy ... all operate at or beyond the boundary of causality” (Adam 62). Further, this discovery “suggests that relative, contextual time is not the preserve of a social world. Rather, it is integral to all of nature, which includes the human social world” (Adam 62).

This relativistic model of time is a crucial influence on Bakhtin’s thinking (Holquist 20; Dentith 20) and on continuing developments in our scientific understanding of time. Working in the field of quantum physics, which builds on the foundations established by Einstein and others, the contemporary physicist Carlo Rovelli proposes that “[the] basic units in which we comprehend the world are not located in some specific point in space. They are – if they are at all – in a *where* but also in a *when*. They are spatially but also temporally delimited: they are *events*. On closer inspection, in fact, even the things that are most ‘thinglike’ are nothing more than long events” (Rovelli 97-98, emphasis added). On the basis of this “ubiquity of impermanence,” Rovelli suggests that “the best grammar for thinking about the world is that of change, not of permanence” (Rovelli 97). Here, in Rovelli’s description of reality as a field of events, there are echoes

of Bakhtin's chronotope, as well as the invitation to think about humans as subject-events. The image of time as a crowded place becomes ever sharper.

Whether thought of as primarily linear or relativistic, subjective and durational time has continued to exert a strong force on the evolution of the novel form through the 20th century and beyond. Owing to its very ubiquity in the novel, Patricia Drechsel Tobin argues that "time resists critical articulation" while also "[exerting] a double pressure on the realistic novel: as form, it is largely silent and unobtrusive, but as process, it is noisy and ubiquitous" (Tobin 99). Rising to this challenge of articulating time, many modernists and post-modernists have sought to replace the "classical narrative model of the novel" with "revolutionary innovations," "[defining] time and place anew for the greatest possible ... variety of perspectives and point of view" (Nowotny 20). Such pluralist experiments do not necessarily mean an abandonment of time as a subjective flow. The turn to stream of consciousness in much modernist literature doubles down on the concept of temporal streams and continuity, signifying "what the symbolism of time and the river has always meant to convey, namely, that time as experienced has the quality of 'flowing,' and that this quality is an enduring element within the constantly changing and successive moments of time" (Meyerhoff 16). Virginia Woolf's tour-de-force passage "Time Passes" in *To the Lighthouse*, for example, conveys a torrent of imagery coursing through the Ramsey's empty holiday house, as "[night] after night, summer and winter, the torment of storms, the arrow-like stillness of fine weather, [hold] their court" (Woolf 153). In order to depict the passage of time in the absence of human characters, Woolf imbues physical objects, spaces and processes with subjectivity,

illustrating the persistence of time as subjective flow even as the novel shifts gear into high modernism and its later phases.ⁱⁱⁱ

In another kind of reaction to the objectivity of the nineteenth-century realist novel and modernist stream-of-consciousness experiments, much postmodernist writing seeks to foreground the artificiality of texts and forms. In characteristically forensic-yet-playful detail, for example, Italo Calvino describes how “a story is an operation on duration, an enchantment that affects the flow of time, contracting it or expanding it” (Calvino and Brock 41). Mitchell has written about his admiration for Calvino’s *If on a winter’s night a traveler*, describing his youthful seduction on encountering that novel’s “intertextuality,” “audacious structure” and “interrupted” manuscript. Provoked by the question “What would a novel where interrupted narratives are continued later look like?”, Mitchell went on to write *Cloud Atlas*, his formally symmetrical novel whose many interlocking narratives are interrupted but then resolved in reverse sequence (Mitchell, “David Mitchell Rereads Italo Calvino”).

Like Calvino and other postmodernists, Mitchell is also interested in foregrounding the constructed nature of textuality. Yet, as if seeking to move away from the idea of creating intellectual puzzles for their own sake, Mitchell’s project tends to be more humanist than merely performative or ironic. Peter Childs and James Green describe Mitchell’s goal as “[articulating] the fluidity and multiplicity of contemporary relations and subjectivities” in an increasingly globalized world (Childs and Green 26). Caroline Edwards describes Mitchell’s “shift towards a revised version of humanism as it is being played out through the spatially- and temporally-disjunct coordinates of unevenly expanding globalization, with its emerging cosmopolitan identities” (Edwards 180). I will

return to consider the ethics at play in a temporal cosmopolitan reading of Mitchell's work later. For now, suffice to say his work aspires to engage with his reader's heads, hearts and hands, inviting meditations on what it means to be an ethical actor in the jostle of time, encountering and crossing borders between subjective positions.

Borders can be fraught spaces, and perhaps none more so than those which intersect sites of deeply embedded systems of injustice, oppression and marginalization. In her writing on the ethics of border crossing in fiction, by which she means representing marginalized others, Shameem Black proposes the metaphor of crowding as a means to avoid "[committing] new forms of representational violence, even (and perhaps especially) when the subject hopes to valorize or redeem its object of description" (Black 3). In *Fiction Across Borders*, Black identifies two interlinked textual strategies at work in novels by postcolonial writers including Ruth Ozeki, Amitav Ghosh and J.M. Coetzee. In varying ways, Black argues, these writers attempt to depict social difference via "crowded selves" and "crowded style," in which the borders between selves and forms "jostle against the edges of others, and this mediating position allows for the contours of each to become more porous and flexible" (Black 47). In other words, *crowding* means foregrounding representations that depict identities and forms dialogically, in a Bakhtinian sense, negotiating exchanges of meaning and value across porous borders, where the subject is "always already multiple, flexible, and open to future metamorphosis" (Black 47), which in turn "[invites] ... readers to share in forms of border crossing that can question, rather than inevitably reinscribe, the inequalities and injustices of a globalized world" (Black 65).

Since the publication of Black's *Fiction Across Borders* in 2010, calls to address power relations between privileged selves and marginalized others have become increasingly urgent. Although they have different objectives, such protest movements as Black Lives Matter, #MeToo and Time's Up are connected by a desire to call out systemic racism and the patriarchy, pointing to histories of systemic injustice and oppression. To different degrees, each of these social movements also asserts its own position of counter-privilege, in a back-and-forth dialogue across the borders that trace shifts in the historical centres and margins of power over time. The call to remove statues of historical figures who are now perceived to have been racist, for example, is a move that enlists the past to make a statement about shifting borders of power and responsibility in the present. Similarly, recognizing that "the image of border crossing is a spatial one," Black suggests we can "also consider it as an attempt to reconcile different scales of temporality" (Black 65), which includes the ability to think historically and see the legacy of the past in the present. Here, Black appears to be subscribing to a view of time that is also inherently multiple, occupying different scales as well as relational positions: that is, in a word, crowded. Taking up this invitation, and extending her crowding metaphor, I will turn to look at the various layers of crowded time at work in *The Bone Clocks*.

More than any other of Mitchell's works, *The Bone Clocks* is all about time. The novel "takes time itself as its central subject matter" (Naimon), its title being a metaphor for mortality, equating humans with timepieces that are always and everywhere winding down towards death. The book is structured by the lifetime of Holly Sykes, whom we meet as a boundary-testing teenager in the 1980s England of Margaret Thatcher. Holly's

15-year-old character straddles adolescence and adulthood. On the one hand, her worldview is unquestionably romantic, merging the “thirsty sky and the wide river” outside her bedroom window with lustful thoughts of “Vinny’s chocolatey eyes, shampoo down Vinny’s back, beads of sweat on Vinny’s shoulders” (3). On the other hand, Holly also demonstrates a characteristic preference for action over thinking or dreaming, already planning the pots of “Sunflowers, roses, pansies, carnations, lavender, and herbs” she will plant at her boyfriend’s house, where she will also bake “scones and plum pies and coffee cakes” (13). On uncovering her relationship with the considerably older Vinny, Holly’s mother confronts her daughter, leading to an angry slap that propels Holly out of the family home. If this act rehearses the end of childhood, Holly’s youthful timeline comes to a clear and abrupt break soon after, once she learns of the mysterious disappearance of her younger brother Jacko, and, much later, how this is connected to the “invisible war” (52) taking place between the Horologists and the Anchorites, in which she will also come to play an important role.

Fast forward six decades, and we meet Holly again as a much older, wiser and wearier woman, eking out a living on the west coast of Ireland in a post-oil, post-technology and post-civility world. Gone are romantic visions of thirsty skies and wide rivers. Instead, Holly observes “[waves], shoulder-barging the rocks below the garden. The creaking bones of the old house. The creaking bones of Holly Sykes, come to that” (523). Time has passed, effacing Holly’s youth and middle age, bringing her and global petroculture as we know it to death’s doorstep. This vantage point underscores both the precariousness and preciousness of life, where “[you] only value something if you know it’ll end” (183). By bookending his novel with the vital youth and brittle old age of an

engaging protagonist, Mitchell establishes mortality as a key form of time in *The Bone Clocks* and might be suspected of buying into the tradition of centring subjective time, or *durée*, in the novel form. Yet, as his mirroring of human and civilizational time already suggests, mortal time is more crowded than it may first appear.

Although we think of a lifetime as a continuous, subjective flow, Mitchell posits instead that to be mortal is to experience time unevenly, intersubjectively and interruptedly. To start, having established Holly as his protagonist, Mitchell quickly relegates her to the margins for much of the book. Each of the novel's decade-hopping chapters is related via first-person narration, but Holly only narrates the novel's first and final sections. The intermediary chapters are each narrated by different characters: the amoral and power-hungry student Hugo Lamb (briefly, Holly's lover), the conflict-junkie Ed Brubeck (Holly's life partner and baby-father), the once-feted-now-sidelined literary star Crispin Hershey (Holly's critic-turned-friend), and the mysterious Marinus, a Horologist who has already lived through several centuries-worth of lifetimes (Holly's erstwhile guardian). Matching this crowded cast of narrators is the novel's crowd of genres, which include the *bildungsroman*, the comedy of manners, the thriller, climate fiction, the cosmopolitan and the fantastic. Through the accumulated jostling of these various characters and genres, all of "the significant events in Holly's life play out" (Parker 4), including the mysterious disappearance of her younger brother Jacko, her romances, her period of fame as a non-fiction writer, her battles with cancer, her motherhood and grandmotherhood, and, crucially, her growing awareness of and control over her psychic abilities, which enable Holly to tune into the psyches of others, both living and dead, and to catch glimpses of events that have yet to occur.

The effect of these frequent shifts in narrative position is a kind of temporal texturing and decentring, illustrating how Holly's lifetime is both inherently fragmentary, uneven and intersubjective. Throughout the book, Holly and other mortal characters reflect on how time seems to slow down or speed up during more intense experiences, sometimes manifesting as "big fat seconds [that] ooze by" (6), while elsewhere "seconds pass, I think they're seconds, they could be a day" (349). The decade-long gaps between the novel's chapters come to represent the fragmentary nature of the aging process, too, where time seems to both skip ahead and accelerate all at once (pithily described by the character Crispin Hershey when he quotes the Bengali poet Rabindranath Tagore: "Youth is a horse, and maturity a charioteer" (359)). As an elderly woman, Holly reflects that "Once upon a time 'my body' meant 'me', pretty much, but now 'me' is my mind and my body is a selection box of aches and ailments" (558). Thinking back on her life and increasingly frequent gaps in her memory, Holly observes that "Often, there are just blanks" (532). These gaps in memory, or breaks in time, are accentuated by the shifts in narrative perspective, which aggregate to depict Holly's life as a temporal mosaic. To call this representation a subjective flow would be to misrepresent Mitchell's aim, which is instead to depict mortal time in all its rich textures and discontinuities.

Mitchell also explores the layered and disrupted nature of ordinary time by playing with the descriptive conventions of realist literature, blending different layers of contemporary detail with historical and pre-historical incursions. To build a strong realist foundation for this novel, Mitchell represents the lives of Holly and the novel's other characters as being "[grounded] in each specific time period via the inclusion of pop culture references and ordinary routines of daily existence to create a sense of social

realism in contrast to the fantastical elements being played out on a much grander scale” (Shaw 2). Hence in the 1980s chapter, Mitchell includes references to the band Talking Heads (3), striking coal miners (10), and nuclear power stations (31). By the final chapter, set in post-apocalyptic Ireland, the plausibly neo-agrarian economy is suggested through depictions of scratching chickens (528), “horse-drawn ploughs” (535) and tenuous sources of fuel (530). Yet Mitchell often blurs the edges of the historical periods he is sketching by bringing in the traces of periods past. Hence, in fairly quick succession, the teenaged Holly walks through the Kent marshes along an old Roman road (19), and sees a fort that “used to house anti-aircraft batteries in the [Second World] war” (22). On a skiing trip in the French alps, Hugo Lamb mentally edits the landscape, removing people and artefacts, seeking to “airbrush modernity from all I survey,” until, satisfied with his work, he observes “Now that’s what I call medieval” (136). Crispin Hershey has a similar experience later in the novel when, while undertaking a writing fellowship in Iceland, he observes that his view of the stark northern island contains “[not] a telephone pole, not a power line” (342), while a glacier looms like “an ice-planet smooshed onto Earth” (343). Here, Crispin rewinds the clock much further than either Holly or Hugo, whose mental time-traveling remains within the scope of the written record of history. Instead, the Icelandic scene conjures up the depths of geological or planetary time, bringing the contemporary Crispin into momentary contact with a point in time some hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of years in the distant past. These incursions of the past into the present pull the characters out of their specific moment in time into new perspectives – another instance of decentering, and part of a larger strategy of estrangement that I shall explore more shortly.

While it's true that Holly's "chronological storyline" structures the novel (Parker 3), and the characters' quotidian experiences generate much of its literary realism, Mitchell also explores fantastic modes of being in time. Speaking to Paul Harris about *The Bone Clocks*, Mitchell confirms that "time [can be] a plural concept, even in the same novel" (Harris, "Laboratory of Time"). In the same conversation, Mitchell goes on to describe *The Bone Clocks* as a laboratory in which he can play with different models of being in time – including concepts of immortality and reincarnation, as represented in the villainous Anchorites and benevolent Horologists respectively. Holly's aforementioned psychic gifts bring her to the attention of these warring atemporal beings, whose centuries-long conflict forms the novel's other throughline.

The predatory Anchorites are first on the scene, via the glamorous figure of their second-in-command, Immaculée Constantin. This vampish figure is introduced via flashback, grooming the child Holly for mysterious purposes. As Constantin later hints to Hugo Lamb, the Anchorites have developed a way to cheat death and escape mortal time. "What is born one day must die," Constantin says, adding, "So says the contract of life, yes? I am here to tell you, however, that in rare instances this iron clause may be ... rewritten" (97). Here, Constantin alludes to the periodic ritual of soul decanting, during which the Anchorites lure unsuspecting-yet-psychically-gifted youths to their metaphysical chapel so that they might "decant" their hapless victim's soul into "Black Wine" (436) – a substance that preserves the bodies of the Anchorites in perpetuity. Conveniently for opponents of the Anchorites, however, these "apex predators" (Shaw 8) can be killed. Yet doing so is difficult, given the Anchorites' abilities with psychosoterics (430) – a toolkit of psychic powers that includes the ability to read minds, and to inhabit

and impel other bodies to do their will. In her initial exchange with Hugo, Constantin describes power as something that “is never lost or won, never created or destroyed [but rather] a visitor to, not a possession of, those it empowers” [96]. By conceiving of power in these terms, Constantin reveals the essentially amoral nature of the Anchorites, whose drive to immortality is positioned as a kind of natural law, rather like Newtonian linear time. Conveniently, this position relieves the Anchorites of any ethical obligations towards their victims, or to mortals in general, as is evident when Hugo encounters Constantin occupying the body of a homeless man. Not yet realizing the fantastic act of possession taking place before his eyes, Hugo challenges the man, who replies, ““If you mean “Who is the owner of this body?” then, frankly, who cares? ... If you mean, “With whom am I speaking?” then the answer is Immaculée Constantin, with whom you discussed the nature of power no very long ago” (135). Eventually, the Anchorites invite Hugo to become one of their number, offering what he describes as a “real, live Faustian pact” (188), a pact he accepts, interrupting his burgeoning love affair with Holly.

Hugo’s disappearance is not the first time that atemporal intervention disrupts Holly’s mortal time. Soon after the slap that propels Holly out of her childhood home, she experiences two acts of fantastic and abject violence that split her sense of self, time and the world, wide open. In the first of these episodes, Holly sees what she believes to be her younger brother Jacko entering an underpass that is miles away from the home she left that morning. Confused and concerned, she follows the apparition of Jacko, only to find the underpass “changing its shape” and “becoming somewhere else” – a chapel-like space surrounded by “grey dunes” and a “black sea, utterly black-black” (43). Holly finds this transformation “incredible and ... terrifying,” even more so when she is joined by a

vision of the snowy beauty Miss Constantin, the nocturnal visitor from Holly's early childhood that she had since dismissed as an imaginary friend (43). Holly wonders:

Why's my mind doing this to me now? We head towards a picture hanging in a sharp corner, of a man like a saint from Bible times, but his face has no eyes ... There's a black spot on the saint's forehead ... It's growing ... The dot's an eye. Then I feel one on my own forehead, in the same place, but I'm not quite sure I'm still Holly Sykes ... from the spot between my eyes something comes out and hovers there ... Then another comes out, and another, and another. Four shimmerings ... Then it's like bombs going off and Miss Constantin's howling and her hands are talons, but she's flung away, bowled down the table by a whip-cracking blue light. The old saint's mouth's opened, full of animals' teeth, and metal screams and groans. Figures and shadows appear like a shadow-puppet show in the mind of someone going mad. One older man springs onto the table. He has piranha-fish eyes ... Black flames and a roaring loud as jet engines fill the place, and I can't run and I can't fight, and I can't even see any more so all I can do is stand there and listen to voices. (43-44)

Holly then finds herself back in the underpass, grounded once more by the sound of birdsong and "a lorry passing overhead" (44). The apparition of Jacko, the chapel, and its horrifying events have vanished, leading Holly to rationalize the experience as a waking nightmare, or, in her terms, a "daymare" (45) – something she had experienced frequently as a younger child.

Holly continues her flight from home, assisted by the leftist youths Heidi and Ian, whom she meets at a service station. The pair invite Holly to their country home, where quotidian time is once again torn asunder by horrifying violence. On an otherwise dull, domestic morning, Holly discovers Heidi and Ian lying dead in the garden, “busy black dots [ants] zigzagging up Heidi’s arm” (57). Inside, the piranha-eyed man, called Rhîmes, has rematerialized from her earlier daymare, calling Holly a “slut gashed bone clock” (58), and using psychic abilities to drag and crush Holly’s body. As her life is squeezed away, Holly observes that “[his] eyes aren’t quite human. My vision’s going, like night’s failing, my lungs’re drowning, not in water but in nothing ... and the drumming in my ears has stopped ‘cause my heart’s shut down” (62). She is saved by the zombie-like, re-animated forms of her friends. First comes Heidi, her head “lolling about like she’s got that disease, multiple sclerosis” (63). This lurching saviour is killed once more, however, when Rhîmes sends a chopping board “hurtl[ing] across the living room into the back of Heidi’s head,” making “a noise like a spoon going into an eggshell” (64). Then the reanimated Ian intervenes, stabbing Rhîmes from the back of his head so that blade appears like “the tip of a sharp tongue from his mouth” (64). Through the expository dialogue that occurs during and after this episode, Mitchell begins to sketch out the details of Rhîmes and the Anchorites, whose metaphysical chapel was attacked by the benevolent Horologists, including Marinus (briefly inhabiting the body of the re-animated Holly) and Esther Little, to whose act of finding asylum inside Holly’s memories (66) I shall return.

The Anchorites’ violent interruptions of Holly’s mortal time are revealing in two senses. First, they suggest moments of abject time, which, in her writing on the

experience of abjection, Julia Kristeva describes as being “double: a time of oblivion and thunder, of veiled infinite and the moment when revelation bursts forth” (Kristeva, *Powers*, 9). Similar to the ways that mortal time is inherently uneven and plural in its flow, the abject violence Holly undergoes splits open her experience of time, revealing fantastic alternatives to her ordinary temporal experience while also transporting her close to death and the very limits of her own being in time. It’s no accident, I argue, that this extreme violence is perpetrated by beings for whom time maps so closely to the sense of subjective duration described Lukács and Bergson. In their extended, potentially limitless lives, the Anchorites come to embody a monstrous form of *durée*, which centres their own survival at the expense of all others. By casting such temporal beings as the villains of his novel, Mitchell begins to illustrate the ethical pitfalls of existence without limits, which he equates with the rapacious selfishness of modern petroculture. Contrasted with this are the opportunities for ethical and empathetic discovery inherent in more crowded experiences of time – whether that’s the mortal time of Holly, or the cyclical time of the novel’s other atemporal beings.

Seeking to protect psychically gifted people like Holly, and thus to destroy the Anchorites, are another group of atemporals – the Horologists, whose psyches spontaneously migrate between bodies at the time of death, thus rendering these beings a benevolent counterpart to the villainous Anchorites. The Horologists – including Marinus, Moombaki/Esther Little, and Xi Lo/Jacko – are born as atemporals, unlike the Anchorites, who elect to extend their own lives. As Kristen Shaw explains, “[because] their souls survive death, atemporal Horologists in the narrative take up residency and inhabit a new body via a process of transmigration – ‘ingressing’ into the new host but

carrying with them the collective memories of previous lives as well as acquiring the new memories of their current host” (Shaw 2-3). In contrast to the extended linear time of the Anchorites, then, the Horologists’ experience of time is both cyclical and accretive – a form of reincarnation that tends towards benevolent and generative modes of relationships with others of their kind and the mortals they protect. Mitchell thinks of the Horologists as “metaphors of mortals ... [who] have repeated lives to slouch towards enlightenment, [while] we [mortals] have just the one to scramble there as best we may, ... the methods and the destination are the same” (Harris, “Laboratory of Time” 13). If the Anchorites embody the worst extreme of subjective duration, living as cultural fossils without regard for their impact on the present or the future, then the Horologists come to embody the rich potential of crowded time to enable empathetic and intersubjective encounters with others.

Before taking a deeper dive into cosmopolitan currents, I will briefly consider the significance of the labyrinth as a pivotal motif in *The Bone Clocks* through which Mitchell signals his interlocking interests in crowded time, self-estrangement and ethical action. Mitchell introduces the labyrinth in the novel’s first chapter via the mysterious figure of Holly’s younger brother, Jacko. As becomes clear later, Jacko is not merely the pre-teen boy his body appears to be, but the current embodiment of Xi Lo – the oldest known Horologist in existence. Before Holly runs away and Jacko disappears, he urges his sister to accept a hand-drawn labyrinth. “Take it,” he urges, “It’s diabolical ... The Dusk follows you as you go through it. If it touches you, you cease to exist, so one wrong turn down a dead-end, that’s the end of you. That’s why you have to learn the labyrinth by heart” (7-8). At the time, Holly humours her brother and accepts the gift, which comes

to be a kind of talisman in her life and remembrance of her vanished brother. Later, when Holly accompanies the Horologists on a raid to destroy the chapel of the Anchorites, Jacko's labyrinth is revealed to be a physical reality, through which Holly must navigate to avoid being annihilated. While Jacko's labyrinth thus functions as both McGuffin and *deus ex machina* in *The Bone Clocks*, the motif gains additional significance in light of crowded time and Mitchell's privileging of ethical action over mere empathy. For Holly and other subjects who attempt to navigate their paths, labyrinths are experienced as complex mockeries of linear pathways, whose walls and other pitfalls throw up interruptions that must be negotiated if one is to either escape or find the centre of the labyrinth. These blockages can also be considered as devices of estrangement, forcing subjects outside of their individual trajectories to consider other pathways and positions. Further, when viewed from above, a labyrinth takes on the quality of a dynamic field, in which multiple potential pathways and flows exist simultaneously. From this vantage, Jacko's labyrinth closely resembles a visualization of crowded time, reinforcing the importance of this temporal modality to Mitchell's novel. Crucially, the evolution of the labyrinth in Holly's lived experience from abstraction to a physical reality that Holly must negotiate places additional emphasis on the value of taking action versus just sharing thoughts and feelings – suggesting a critique of the limits of empathy, to which I now turn.

CHAPTER 3 ESTRANGEMENT, EMPATHY AND ETHICAL ACTION

The problem is, if you've heard voices in your head once, you're never sure again if a random thought *is* just a random thought, or something more.

– David Mitchell, *The Bone Clocks*

As many have argued, estrangement is an essential prerequisite for cosmopolitan encounters, for to become a “citizen of the world” requires a “kind of exile ... from the absorbing drama of pride in oneself and one’s own” (Nussbaum). Cosmopolitanism is something we must work at, cultivating “a degree of estrangement from [our] own culture and history” (Gilroy 75), so that we might attempt to cross the borders dividing us from the experiences of others. As a hybrid cosmopolitan-fantastic text, *The Bone Clocks* playfully imagines literal forms of temporal self-estrangement, as we see in Holly Sykes’s psychic channeling of past voices and future events, and in the body-hopping metalives of the Horologists. Again, many earlier cosmopolitan readings of Mitchell’s works have tended to focus on spatial models, where the author’s globalist scope and speculative forms imagine “new ways of co-existing with radical forms of cultural otherness” (Shaw 2). Some other readers have engaged with the novel’s “temporal cosmopolitanism,” which is “less familiar” than the prevalent geographical and spatial modes of imagining otherness (Robbins 172). Paul Harris falls into this category, for example, with his notion of an “Anthropocene memory” at work in *The Bone Clocks* (Harris, “Fractal Imagination” 152). Whereas these scholarly readings tend to focus more on patterns in space and time across Mitchell’s works, I will instead explore how the pattern-breaking jostle of crowded time can generate new opportunities for representing otherness and engendering ethical action.

First, *The Bone Clocks*' hybrid and doubled form inscribes hesitation – or breaks in the flow of time – as the typical reaction at the moment of encounter between selves and others. Mitchell's novel hybridizes elements of cosmopolitan and fantastic genres, creating a tension between the cosmopolitan real and the metaphysically incredible. In his structuralist analysis, Tzvetan Todorov establishes three conditions for a text to meet in order to qualify as fantastic:

First, the text must oblige the reader to consider the world of the characters as a world of living persons and to *hesitate* between a natural and a supernatural explanation of the events described. Second, this hesitation may also be experienced by a character; thus the reader's role is so to speak entrusted to a character, and at the same time the hesitation is also represented, it becomes one of the themes of the work – in the case of naïve reading, the actual reader identifies himself with the character. Third, the reader must adopt a certain attitude with regard to the text: he will reject allegorical as well as “poetic” interpretations. (Todorov 33, emphasis added)

Todorov's first and second conditions rely on hesitations as moments of shared uncertainty between readers and the characters with whom they identify. The evanescent nature of these hesitations recalls the idea, echoed in Rovelli's work in quantum physics, that events are the building blocks of the universe (Rovelli et al. 97-98), while also illustrating the power of a break in time's flow to generate moments of empathic encounter and ethical inflection. As readers and characters alike hesitate to wonder and worry about the cause of something they cannot easily rationalize, real readers are invited to attend to the thoughts and emotions of imaginary characters, hence exercising the

function of empathy. Just so in *The Bone Clocks*, readers come to empathize and identify with Holly Sykes and other mortal characters as they encounter and attempt to understand their extraordinary experiences with the metaphysical realm and atemporal beings.^{iv}

Like the fantastic, cosmopolitanism also invites questions about the role time plays in human relationships. As Brangwen Stone observes, many writers and thinkers have explored the potential for cosmopolitan texts to engender empathy. Stone notes, for example, Susan Sontag's contention that the "'ability to weep for those who are not us or ours' is exactly what literary narratives can 'train', while Martha Nussbaum contends that the genre of the novel in particular, 'on account of some general features of its structure, generally constructs empathy and compassion in ways highly relevant to citizenship'" (Sontag and Nussbaum qtd. in Stone 5). One of the general features identified by Nussbaum as empathy-inducing is the ability of novels to give readers access to the temporal and spatial perspectives of selves other than their own – which in turn invites readers to question and open up the boundaries of their own self-understanding.

Admittedly, others have called into question the ability of novels to engender empathy, and even suggested real empathy might be an impossibility altogether. Suzanne Keen cautions readers to "[resist] the analogy that would equate the use of empathetic narrative techniques in fiction with real-life empathy-altruism," given that "we do not in fact find reliable evidence of altruistic results in the social and political realm of tens of thousands of empathy-inducing narratives" (Keen 384). Further, Keen suggests that being part of a press of people might lead subjects to a "diffusion of responsibility, by which an individual in a crowd absolves himself of responsibility to act" (Keen 384). Here, Keen sheds light on the inherent ambivalence of crowded self-other encounters, illustrating

how crowds can be places in which subjects become bystanders, abstaining from action just as often as taking it. Going further than Keen, Claudia Rankine suggests true empathy might be altogether impossible, given the barriers erected by deeply ingrained systems of oppression and discrimination. For example, writing on the effects of racism in the USA, Rankine argues that “there really is no mode of empathy that can replicate the daily strain of knowing that as a black person you can be killed for simply being black” (Rankine). Paul Gilroy pulls at a similar thread, describing the tendency for “racial difference [to] obstruct empathy and [make] ethnocentrism inescapable” so that “[it] becomes impossible even to imagine what it is like to be somebody else” (Gilroy 70). In place of a potentially impossible empathy between entrenched identity positions, Gilroy champions “conviviality ... [or] the *processes* of cohabitation and interaction that have made multiculturalism an ordinary feature of social life” (Gilroy xi, emphasis added). Here, convivial processes suggest pragmatic *actions* rather than mere shared feelings. As I’ve suggested earlier, Mitchell also seems to privilege ethical action over mere empathy in *The Bone Clocks* by contrasting the pragmatic “doing” of Holly Sykes and the Horologists against the empathic thinking, feeling and manipulations of Hugo Lamb and others. Before exploring those ideas further, however, I turn to briefly consider the role of self-estrangement as a critical prerequisite form of action in cosmopolitan encounters.

The nature of self-estrangement has been explored across multiple disciplinary boundaries. In the realm of psychoanalysis, for example, there is Sigmund Freud’s uncanny – “an effect of profound disturbance sparked by something familiar ... which awakens a repressed memory of forbidden desire or trauma” (Warner 120). Where Freud detected this effect in the doubling of familiar objects, Kristeva extends this concept from

something to someone, conjuring the figure of the foreigner, or stranger, as an uncanny force that acts both outside and inside the subject. “The foreigner is within us,” Kristeva says, “[and] when we flee from or struggle against the foreigner, we are fighting our unconscious – that ‘improper’ facet of our impossible ‘own and proper’” (Kristeva and Roudiez, *Strangers*, 191). Moving from psychoanalysis to philosophy, Rosi Braidotti extends the thinking of Gilles Deleuze to articulate a

nomadic subjectivity ... [that] moves beyond identitarian categories and ... rests on a process ontology that challenges the traditional equation of subjectivity with rational consciousness and resists the reduction of both to a linear vision of progress. Thus, instead of deference to the authority of the past, we have the fleeting co-presence of multiple time-zones, in a continuum that activates and de-territorializes stable identities. (Braidotti 408)

Here in Braidotti’s account of nomadic subjectivism is a textured sense of time existing across many zones, which echoes Bakhtin’s relativistic views on the interaction of subjects that are both spatially and temporally open and multiple, creating dynamic exchanges and possibilities.

Although she also draws on many disciplines to bolster her thinking, Shameem Black’s concept of self-estrangement is firmly grounded in the field of ethics. Black writes how representations of crowded selves can challenge the perspectives of “privileged subjects” by opening up these perspectives to entangled encounters with other, traditionally marginalized selves (Black 45). Black identifies Emmanuel Levinas as a key influence on her thinking, as she

draws upon the Levinasian tradition of conceptualizing ethical obligation, which encourages a turn away from the rights of the self to the needs of others. For Emmanuel Levinas, otherness is prior to being; the other punctures the self's claim to a world where everything is assimilable to the consciousness of the self. This rupture entails responsibility, so that existence and obligation are very difficult to distinguish in Levinas's conception. (Black 44)

Levinas's notions of relational and ruptured selves aligns with the inherent plurality of perspectives in *The Bone Clocks*. If, like everything else, humans are just another kind of event in time and space, then the intersubjectivity and outward-orientation described by Levinas also can be read to illustrate the interaction and interruption of subject-events within crowded time. Yet, unlike particles bouncing around in a jar, humans have agency – the ability to make decisions and take (or defer) actions that affect others. Imagining a spectrum with complete self-interest at one end and complete selflessness at the other, Levinas's ethics would compel us to move to the latter pole, while the philosophy of Thomas Hobbes might privilege more selfish agendas. As an extension of cosmopolitan thinking, then, Black's notion of crowded representations relies on the idea of an interplay between modes of selfhood and, in its most productive sense, forms of decentering self-sacrifice, where “the self might make room for the other, diminishing its own claims to literal and metaphoric possession of its place in the world” (Black 204). Given the essential nature of time to the self, then, self-sacrifice must inevitably involve giving up one's sense of temporal privilege – one's *durée*.

Becoming a temporal cosmopolitan may entail becoming more comfortable with constantly shifting scopes of time. Just as advances in physics have led us to conceive of

the field of time in more relative and complex ways, so too have advances in geology and other natural sciences radically expanded the boundaries of our timescales. As Bruce Robbins writes,

[the] concept of deep time dates from the late eighteenth century, when geologists trying to estimate the age of the Earth diverged dramatically from the biblical account of the Creation. Eventually they arrived at the conclusion that the Earth is more than five billion years old. That is a very large number, and as is often pointed out, it makes the period of history we care about interpreting and changing seem very, very small. (Robbins 173)

Robbins suggests that to “think or behave like a temporal cosmopolitan” might entail “[developing] a sense of responsibility to people, peoples and events distant from us in time that would parallel our responsibility (recently recognized as more acute) to people, peoples and events distant from us in space,” while cautioning that such an approach could lead to pitfalls, such as how “going back in time might well lessen the responsibility towards distant actors in the present, and vice versa” (183). Failing to arrive at an unproblematic definition of temporal cosmopolitanism, Robbins suggests that “the playing field [of time and space] must always be inspected for hidden inequalities” nonetheless (185). Rather than a failure of definition, this call to a ceaseless ethical attentiveness is a recognition that to be in time means constant change – of direction, of scale and of potential collisions with the trajectories of other subject-events. Here, again, is the imperative to sacrifice positions of self-centred temporal privilege – to recognize our timeline is no line and never ours alone.

In *The Bone Clocks*, Holly Sykes's psychic abilities render her akin to a temporal radio antenna, able to channel the subject-events of others from the past, present and future. As a child, Holly describes being able to hear the voices of "radio people," "[hundreds] of them, all whispering at once" (20). As she ages, her tuning abilities appear to gain greater precision, as is apparent when she is able to pinpoint the exact location of her missing daughter in a contemporary Brighton hotel (270). Later, on a visit to Rottnest Island off Western Australia, Holly slips into another instance of temporal channeling, her "voice ... flattening out and faltering, as if she's not speaking but translating a knotty text. Or picking one voice out from a roaring crowd" (323). Her acquaintance Crispin Hershey listens, astonished, as Holly gives voice to long-dead indigenous Noongar elder, for whose people Rottnest Island was the terrible culmination of genocidal practices carried out by European settlers. The elder-via-Holly recites how "[the] djanga [or white people] came. We thought they were the dead ones, come back. They forgot how to speak when they were dead, so now they speak like birds ... They shot our animals, but if we killed their animals, they hunted us like vermin, and took the women away" (323). As well as being able to channel timelines present and past, Holly reveals to Crispin her ability to feel a "certainty" about the future, such as the pattern a tossed coin will take, or glimpses of what transpires to be Crispin's last living moments (341). Holly is ambivalent, if not hostile, about the nature of her gift, describing with a certain anger the way "[voices] just ... nab me. I wish they didn't. I wish very badly that they didn't. But they do" (335-336). Rather than a blessing, Holly describes her glimpses through time as something she suffers. "I *endure* my certainties" she tells Crispin, aggrieved. "I live *despite* them" (338). It becomes clear that, in many instances, Holly considers her

psychic episodes to be forms of interruption that crowd into the flow of her ordinary time. Nonetheless, she comes to recognize the ethically instructive nature of these interruptions as they repeatedly take her out of herself and into the subject-events of others.

Sometimes, particularly in relation to her family, Holly thinks of her experiences of temporal crowding in much more favourable terms. In the final chapter of *The Bone Clocks*, Holly's main preoccupation becomes to ensure the survival of her orphaned granddaughter Lorelei and adopted ward Rafiq – a Moroccan child refugee rescued from the sea. In a half-joking, half-serious entreaty to a folkloric figure said to reside in the landscape near her Irish home, Holly pleads “Hairy Mary, Contrary Fairy: please, let my darlings survive” (536). Then, when challenged by a sanctimonious acquaintance about her anti-church position, Holly snaps back, “I didn’t give Rafiq a home because the parish admired me, or because ‘the Lord’ wanted me to – I did it because *it was the right thing to do*” (552, emphasis added). Through a lifetime’s instruction at the school of temporal crowding, Holly has internalized the kind of lesson of self-sacrifice and other-privileging promoted by Levinas and others, perhaps even coming to view the distinction between self and other as an artificial construct altogether. After all, Holly spends much of the novel as a hybrid self-other, having offered sanctuary within her mind to the psyche of the ancient Horologist Esther Little. Holly’s fluid identity and outward orientation could be said to represent a form of generativity – a term coined by the psychologist Erik Erikson to describe the stage of adult life in which “‘*giving forth*,’ of sharing or bequeathing what one has to others” – particularly to future generations – comes to the fore (Snow 19, emphasis added). Holly’s life can also be read as a series of generative acts – as she variously seeks to give of herself to Vinny, to the search for

Jacko, to the homeless, to her lovers, readers and friends, and finally to her grandchildren, both biological and adopted. Towards the end of the novel, when a final intervention by the benevolent Horologist Marinus means that Holly must say goodbye to Lorelei and Rafiq, she describes a generative moment of temporal crowding where the timelines of her immediate family members – including her dead partner and daughter, as well as the still-living family dog – collide and merge in an extended now. “Then the three of us hug,” she narrates, “and if I could choose one moment of my life to sit inside for the rest of eternity ... it’d be now, no question. Aoife’s in here too, inside Lorelei, as is Ed, as is Zimbra, with his cold nose and excited whine. He knows something’s up. ‘Thanks for everything, Gran,’ says Lorelei ... ‘It was my honour,’ I tell them” (594). By giving up her sense of temporal privilege to share time with her family – even, arguably, foreshortening her own life in order to extend the lifetimes of Lorelei and Rafiq – Holly demonstrates the potential for crowded time to generate ethical action.

In contrast to Holly’s drive to action, Mitchell offers a critique of mere empathy in *The Bone Clocks* by foregrounding characters who are highly adept at empathy but who use it selfishly to reinforce their position of comparative privilege and to further their own ends. Hugo Lamb, for example, weaponizes his insights into the thoughts and feelings of his peers, family members and acquaintances, leveraging these perceptions to advance his own lust and appetite for wealth and power. With a characteristic blend of self-awareness and callousness, Hugo goes so far as to describe himself as a “sociopath,” separated from the “Normals” by the emotions he can read and play upon but refuses to feel (149). Thus is he able to string along a number of sexual conquests, to exploit his university peers for money, drugs and access to the French Alps, and to orchestrate a

complex scam for cash that leads to the suicide of a so-called friend. Similarly, the novelist Crispin Hershey weaponizes the empathy he has honed over a long and successful writing career in order to frame the literary critic, Richard Cheeseman, who has poured scorn on his latest novel. When Cheeseman winds up wrongfully convicted of drug trafficking and imprisoned for many years in a Colombian prison, Crispin fails to confess his wrongdoing, but instead helps form an advocacy group that half-heartedly agitates for the critic's release. This fiction permits Crispin to make an empty show of ethical action rather than perform the real thing. In addition to illustrating the unsavoury counterpart to true ethical action, Crispin's great crime – like Hugo's suicide-prompting scheme before it – can also be read as another in a number of unforeseen outcomes that arise from acts of self-centredness in *The Bone Clocks*, at both the individual and the societal levels. The ethical dimensions of crowded time come to the fore once more in demonstrating how short-term gains can lead to longer-term pain, for people and for civilizations alike.

In addition to his mortal protagonists, Mitchell uses the cyclical and accretive lives of the Horologists to further illustrate the potential for ethical action to arise from interruptions in crowded time over different timeframes. Recall that the psyches of Marinus, Esther Little, Xi Lo and other Horologists automatically migrate into new bodies at the time of their death, extending their lifespans over centuries rather than the typical three score and ten years. Mitchell describes these atemporal beings as living “larger-scale [models] of a mortal life” and as “role models,” adding:

They face death with the equanimity and preparedness. Sure, the Horologists know they're coming back with their memories and

aggregate identities intact, but I still found it instructive to build them, wind them up and watch them go. I value the notion of reincarnation as a kind of metaphor for a single life. In our life we do, metaphorically, die and experience rebirth quite often, depending on how high you want to set the bar. Each major formative experience, rite of passage, near-death experience, Dear John letter, wedding day (hopefully not too many of them), deathbed scene, conversion, behavior-modifying mortification and every January 1st – these are deaths and rebirths, of varying magnitudes. (Harris, “Laboratory of Time” 12-13)

In other words, the embedded interruptions in the cyclical lifetimes of the Horologists figuratively represent how breaks in time infuse and enrich mortal life. Further, the body-hopping nature of the Horologists becomes a literal embodiment of self-estrangement at work, as each rebirth in different bodies and socio-historical contexts prompts new learning about power dynamics and their ability to create privilege and marginalization. Take Marinus, for example, who first appeared as a pivotal character in Mitchell’s earlier novel *The Thousand Autumns of Jacob de Zoet*, and who, in *The Bone Clocks*, is revealed to have lived for one-and-a-half millennia, having occupied during that time the bodies of both women and men of different ethnicities and social classes. Marinus’s final appearance in *The Bone Clocks* is in the body of a young Icelandic man called Harry Veracruz, “hardly into his twenties,” who has “somewhat African lips, sort of East Asian eyes, Caucasian-ish skin, and sleek black hair, like a Native American in an old film” (585). By representing Marinus in this racially and culturally hybrid manner – as a kind of one-person crowd – Mitchell underscores the impact of reincarnation as a figurative

device that denotes temporal and spatial intersubjectivity. In addition, the name Marinus, and the character's oceanic reappearance at the end of *The Bone Clocks* astride a literal lifeboat, recall Mitchell's earlier contention that time is the sea we inhabit and share with others.

The frequent interventions of the Horologists to save Holly and others from the predatory intentions of the Anchorites – another demonstration of the value of action – is mirrored when Holly provides asylum for Esther Little inside the memories of her past. Unlike the Anchorites, who use psychosoterics to inflict harm, the Horologists use their psychic abilities in protective modes, “redacting” traumatic memories (65) and “hiatusing” bodies (460) to avoid new traumas from being inflicted. Mortal characters who have undergone these acts of psychic keyhole surgery frequently express puzzlement or concern, noting their inability to account for periods of time. Here, again, their time has been interrupted, but for reasons that are ethically motivated. In a deliberate act of reversal, however, a key plot point in *The Bone Clocks* hinges on Holly's ability to save the Horologists in return. In the novel's first chapter, following the unsuccessful attempt of the Anchorite Rhîmes to kill Holly, the Horologist Esther Little escapes her own death by taking “asylum” inside Holly's mind – a request to which Holly accedes, albeit somewhat unwittingly (65). Holly's memories – or, better yet, her forgetting – becomes a kind of “oubliette” or “safe-house” (62), in which Esther Little can hide until Marinus is able to rescue her – an act that involves working backwards through Holly's memories, “like rewind on an old-style DVD” (471-472). Esther Little is saved not only because she is able to exit the present and hide in the past on her own, but because of Holly's co-operation. This collaborative act of mutual sacrifice and salvation illustrates the ethical

potential inherent in crowded time. In short, crowded time means subjects might get in each other's way, but it also means they can enrich and protect the subject-events of others.

CHAPTER 4 CONCLUSION: ENDINGS, BEGINNINGS AND UNCERTAIN OUTCOMES

It's not far away. The future looks a lot like the past.

– David Mitchell, *The Bone Clocks*

If there are whispers that humanity might be in peril peppered across the decades depicted in *The Bone Clocks*, those voices have become a veritable scream by the novel's final chapter. In addition to its many other genres, Mitchell's novel can be read as an instance of climate fiction (or what Dan Bloom has coined "cli-fi" (Glass)), given its projection out into a post-apocalyptic future. As a sub-genre of science fiction, cli-fi's effects depend on eliciting "cognitive estrangement" (Suvin 375), extrapolating from our known world to deliver "a diagnosis, a warning, a call to understanding and action, and – most important – a mapping of possible alternatives" (Suvin 378). By foregrounding the interplay of various kinds of time, *The Bone Clocks* traces the continuing effects of humanity's energy-related anxieties, and the ways these fears feed larger concerns about the collapse of social, climate and ecological orders. Whether it is coal shortages in 1980s England, the oil-driven gulf wars of the 1990s and 2000s, or the projected near-future collapse of energy systems following nuclear and environmental calamity, Mitchell's novel renders "a doomed sense" of the "overriding, totalizing importance" of oil and other fossil fuels, "which in turn generates ... a crushing sense of impending futurological limit, of resources and even time itself running out" (Canavan 333). Towards the end of *The Bone Clocks*, the aged Holly reflects on the ongoing collapse she sees everywhere around her, noting that "[people] talk about the Endarkenment like our

ancestors talked about the Black Death, as if it's an act of God. But we summoned it, with every tank of oil we burnt our way through. My generation were diners stuffing ourselves senseless at the Restaurant of the Earth's Riches knowing – while denying – that we'd be doing a runner and leaving our grandchildren a tab that can never be paid” (534). Holly also describes how humanity's resource depletion and planetary despoilment has broken the flow of ordinary time, rendering it, if anything, more crowded and chaotic than ever before, as seasons fracture and the future looks increasingly like the past. She describes how

[in] the early 2030s the seasons went badly haywire, with summer frosts and droughts in winter, but for the last five years we've had long, thirsty summers, long, squally winters, with springs and autumns hurrying by in between. Outside the Cordon the tractor's going steadily extinct and harvests have been derisory, and on RTE two nights ago there was a report on farms in County Meath that are going back to using horse-drawn ploughs. (535)

In another moment, she captures the regret of her increasingly fractious community as they negotiate over rationed resources and diminishing fuel supplies, describing how “[we] try to catch a whiff of the stuff [oil], and suffer a fresh round of pangs for the Petrol Age” (549). Here, then, mortal lifetimes suggest a correlation with time at the level of civilizations, for even “[empires] die, like all of us dancers in the strobe-lit dark” (163).

In *The Bone Clocks*, Mitchell reminds us that civilizations, like individual humans, are just another kind of time-bounded event on a different scale – and just as ethically inflected. In her writing on moral life and psychology, Amanda Anderson argues for the importance of “slow time” in understanding how “moral action ...

[involves] more than punctual acts or limited processes of deliberation; [instead taking] place over stretches of time and [involving] modes of thoughts at once ruminative and reasoning” (Anderson 58). In other words, the desire of Holly and others to do the right thing – or, whether wittingly or unwittingly, the *wrong* thing – becomes clearer over longer timeframes, whether that is an entire life or, in the case of a civilization, the passage of many decades or even centuries. Most tellingly, Holly and others in *The Bone Clocks* fail to act on repeated warnings about the limits of oil and the impending collapse of petroculture, instead perpetrating what Rob Nixon describes as “slow violence” against the planet, a kind of harm all the more insidious and difficult to prevent because of its “temporal dispersion” (Nixon). Nixon suggests that to “confront slow violence is to take up, in all its temporal complexity, the politics of the visible and the invisible” (Nixon). What else is Mitchell doing if not extending a similar yet no-less-urgent invitation via the Script, which he positions as a narrative that determines the course of events within time and is only ever partially readable, exerting an inertial force on his characters and their societies? If nothing else, *The Bone Clocks* treats both the visible and invisible complexities of crowded time – including contemplating the potential for calamity and renewal that occurs when time runs out for the script of petro-based civilization.

In *The Sense of an Ending*, Frank Kermode traces the persistence of apocalyptic perspectives in the Western world’s religious and literary traditions. Kermode says the apocalypse “ends [things], transforms [things], and is *concordant*” (Kermode 8, emphasis added), by which he means that our notion of “Apocalypse depends on a concord of imaginatively recorded past and imaginatively predicted future, achieved on behalf of us, who remain ‘in the midst’” (Kermode 8). In other words, people worry about and yearn

for the apocalypse because it helps them to see their lives whole. It closes things off, gives them new meaning, and ushers in new ways of being. The apocalypse is, in short, a transition point between events – a form of creative destruction.

Although writing on how narratives start, unlike Kermode's focus on how they end, Edward Said describes the ways that a "beginning is *making* or *producing difference* ... difference which is the result of combining the already familiar with the fertile novelty of human work in language" (Said, *Beginnings* xiii). Said continues, arguing that "the more crowded and confused a field appears, the more a beginning, fictional or not, seems imperative. A beginning gives us the chance to do work that compensates us for the tumbling disorder of brute reality that will not settle down" (50). Said's formulation, I suggest, still holds true if you substitute crowded time for "brute reality." And, taken into account alongside Kermode's thinking on the apocalypse, it's possible to think of beginnings and endings as two sides of the same coin, two facets of the interruptions in time that break things apart but also allow them to be reconstituted in new, productive forms. Here is that same energy of breaking and reforming that drives the dynamism at play in crowded time, which could also be conceived as a kind of "far-from-equilibrium [system]", which

thrive[s] on high degrees of energy exchange because the discarded energy of one system functions as an energy source for another ... Newton's linear, time-reversible world is a world without surprises, a machine reality that could be taken to bits and then rebuilt again. In contrast to this, the world of dissipative structures is unpredictable, non-linear, flowing, irreversible connectedness, a world of broken symmetry and timefulness. (Adam 33)

The final passage of *The Bone Clocks* is nothing if not time-full, pithily summarizing the dynamic nature of time and the generative power of endings-beginnings. In the novel's last passage, Holly is standing on the shore, watching as her granddaughter and ward are spirited away from the peril of a collapsing civilization to the relative safety of the Icelandic navy. "Now the launch is skimming off at full speed over the dark and choppy water," Holly narrates, "and Rafiq's waving and Lorelei's waving and I'm waving back until I can't make out the figures ... Incoming waves erase all traces of the vanishing boat, and I'm feeling erased myself, fading away into an invisible woman. For one voyage to begin, another voyage must come to an end, sort of" (595). In the final instance, Holly makes the ultimate sacrifice to save her young family members, recognizing her self-erasure in the interplay of real waves and the waves of temporal experience other than her own.

As Mitchell demonstrates in *The Bone Clocks*, representations of crowded time prove to be a powerful challenge to self-centred notions of time as either lived in reality or depicted in the novel. By demonstrating the inherently interrupted, intersubjective and uneven nature of mortal time, and the potential of both monstrous *durée* and generative discontinuities, Mitchell the moralist appears to call on his readers to surrender their temporal privilege, or, at least, to accept that the borders of their subject-events are more porous than realized.

The Bone Clocks is clearly an ambitious novel, whose inner contradictions and complexities mirror those of its author and readers. On the one hand, Mitchell seems to be at pains to acknowledge the kinds of traditions into which he is writing. He deploys the author-avatar Crispin Hershey to ruminate on the intersubjective and entangled nature

of literary creativity, where “a poet inhabits a poetic tradition to write within, but no poet can singlehandedly create that tradition. Even if a poet sets out to invent a new poetics, he or she can only react against what’s already there” (361). In another passage, Crispin delivers a lecture on the debt the novel owes to the epic, specifically Norse sagas, claiming these ur-texts “[deploy] the very same narrative tricks used later by Dante and Chaucer, Shakespeare and Moliere, Victor Hugo and Dickens, Halldor Laxness and Virginia Woolf” (362). It’s tempting to glimpse in this tracing of formal lineage Mitchell’s own acknowledgement that novel writing itself means participating in crowded time, interrupting and breaking apart the innovations of yesterday to recycle and create new forms.

Similarly, the novel’s mortal and fantastic characters become avatars for different facets of novel reading. Holly’s psychic abilities, for example, are akin to tuning into the voices and perspectives of fictional characters. Reading can be considered as a kind of predation – as is modelled in the Anchorites – where to read means to decant the souls of the characters on the page. On the other hand, by identifying with the subject-events of characters, readers also practice a kind of reincarnation and ethical interventionism not unlike that of the Horologists. This ambivalence is very likely deliberate, as Mitchell seems to entreat his readers to question our investment in the categories of self and other, given how those are broken down by the interruptions and discontinuities at work within crowded time. His clear valorization of Holly and the Horologists, however, promotes the value of ethical action versus the practice of empathy alone. Yet, finally, his recurrent focus on unforeseen consequences strikes a note of caution – no one cannot perfectly predict how things will turn out. This interplay of ethical action and imperfect foresight

suggests a constant need for recalibration. Mitchell recognizes that ethical engagement is dynamic and processual rather than temporally or spatially fixed. In this light, the value of interruptions caused by temporal crowding becomes all the more apparent. These moments of hesitation and disruption become vantage points from which subjects can pause, look around and look ahead to weigh the consequences of their actions.

To be in time with others requires a constant form of attentiveness, a continuing openness to being interrupted, and a preparedness for unforeseen consequences. To return to the Future Library project as a metaphor, being in crowded time means being able to see not only the forest, trees, books, writers and readers in dynamic interplay throughout time, but also remaining open to the possibility that 100 years from now there may be no forest, no books and no readers. To paraphrase Mitchell's closing rumination in *The Bone Clocks*, for one story to begin, another must come to an end. Perhaps.

ENDNOTES

ⁱ *Cloud Atlas* was adapted by the Wachowski siblings and Tom Tykwer into a Hollywood blockbuster in 2012, and Mitchell is currently working with Lana Wachowski as co-writer on a new film in the *Matrix* series.

ⁱⁱ It is possible Mitchell's interest in interrupted narratives emerges from his own experience with a speech impediment. Mitchell describes his lifelong stammer as "a disability that cannot say its name" (Mitchell qtd. in Reitzes 6:31-6:34). He describes the ways that speech impediments like his lead to both "individual discomfort" and "a broader cultural 'looking away'" (Mitchell, *Lost for Words*), given the stigmatization of such conditions. In seeking to expose and overturn this stigma, Mitchell describes his decision to "stop thinking of my stammer as an enemy, and to start seeing it as an informant about language, and a feature of me; as legitimate as my imagination or conscience" (Mitchell, *Lost for Words*). Perhaps foregrounding interrupted narratives is another way, however consciously or unconsciously, of owning his stammer.

ⁱⁱⁱ It is notable that the centrality of durational time has come under serious challenge in postcolonial artistic and scholarly work, especially so given the ways that cosmopolitanism has been informed by postcolonial practice. In postcolonial thought, space tends to trump time, because "[at] some very basic level, imperialism means thinking about, settling on, controlling land that you do not possess, that is distant, that is lived on and owned by others" (Said 7). In *The Empire Writes Back*, Ashcroft, Griffith and Tiffin describe the "[extreme importance] in all models ... and epistemologies ... [of

privileging] space over time as the most important ordering concept of reality” (Ashcroft et al. 37). I would propose that the sense of time based on post-Einsteinian physics, and from relativistic culture theory such as that of Bakhtin, somewhat undermines the postcolonial emphasis on privileging space, given the inextricably interconnected and relativistic nature of time and space.

^{iv}Todorov’s extended analysis moves on to admit another potential generic definition of the fantastic, one arising from the existentialist thinking of Jean-Paul Sartre, who detects in the works of Franz Kafka and others that “there is now only one fantastic object: man. Not the man of religions and spiritualisms, only half committed to the world of the body, but man-as-given, man-as-nature, man-as-society” (Sartre qtd. in Todorov 173). Based on this analysis, where the fundamentally absurd and constructed nature of human-centric world views and texts is called out, Todorov suggests that “[the] ‘normal’ man is precisely the fantastic being; the fantastic becomes the rule, not the exception” (Todorov 173). Whether this line of argument potentially collapses the space between realism and the fantastic is a question worthy of further attention. For the purposes of my essay, I take from Todorov’s existentialist turn confirmation of the temporally complex nature of human experience and perception, where that which we think of as ordinary life is rife with hesitations, discontinuities and ethical dilemmas – including the predicament that short-term actions often lead to unforeseen consequences in the long term.

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