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Archiva(b)l(e) Bodies and Cyber Afterlife in David Mitchell's *Cloud Atlas*

Abstract: David Mitchell's *Cloud Atlas* challenges the possibilities of textual (re)generation, problematizing archival practices in the posthuman age through the multiplication of Sonmi's (inter)faces from the subject interviewed by the Archivist to the mysterious embodiment revered by the Valleysmen and the hologram of Meronym's orison. In cyberspace, a "bodiless exultation" (William Gibson), her existence as an avatar, a term relevant both for Hinduism and technology, is symptomatic of the "state of exception" (Giorgio Agamben) brought on by Unanimity's attempt to scapegoat her. My paper will discuss the storing and restoring of cultural meaning, be it in the Icon'ry or the orison as a Borgesian map of the Empire, as well as the power of micro narratives to disrupt and displace master narratives. Sonmi's haunting presence sheds new light over the structure of the novel, splicing reality and fiction as well as reality and simulated reality.
Keywords: Archive; Avatar; Cyberspace; Bare Life; ICEVORG.

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When I got 'nuff spunk I speaked up,
I murmed,
"Sis, are you a lost soul?" Ignored me
she did, so I asked,
"Sis, can you see me?"
(Mitchell 233)

While most stories voiced by the non-human arrivant tackle the issue of archiving as a move against dominant ideologies, hoping to shape cultural heritage in favor of the posthuman, *Cloud Atlas* doubles the stakes by offering us the after-image through a glimpse into Unanimity's post-apocalyptic future in Zachry's account of the clashes between Valleysmen and Prescients, as seen in the chapter titled "Sloosha's Crossin' An' Ev'rythin' After." I will focus on the multiplication of Sonmi-451's (inter)faces as a subject interviewed by the Archivist, a central figure in the mythology of the Big I, as well as a hologram in Meronym's orison. Firstly, we must note that her being scapegoated later opens for her the possibility of becoming a cyber goddess. The multiplicity inside and constructed around her falls in line with Haraway's description of the cyborg as "a kind of dissembled and reassembled, post-modern collective and personal self. This

is the self feminists must code."[1] After ascending or gaining self-awareness, Unanimity frames her as "damaged goods," i.e. a malfunctioning Fabricant, like Yoona-939, which makes her commodifiable. Zachry, learning of her untimely death, wants to know how she was "judased"/betrayed. The question is no longer one of property. If she was harmed, she was a subject and the event was a personal experience rather than an accident. For the Prescients, she is now a digital artifact, living in the virtualization of the body, while for Valleysmen she is a mysterious embodiment. Which one is it? Deleuze and Guattari's world of the "body without organs," where everything is connected in a rhizomic manner, or Rosi Braidotti's world of "organs without body," where body parts seem to have no origin and are easy replaceable? The answer is both. She is not just a hyphenated cyborg-turned-avatar. The avatar is a representation that is neither fact nor fiction, interacting with humans yet on different evolutionary and ontological levels, thus virtually disembodied. Nusselder's *Interface Fantasy: A Lacanian Cyborg Ontology* (2006) draws from the meaning of the concept in Hinduism, where they are incarnations of gods, to define avatars as symbolic embodiments of "the changing states someone lives through," bridging different dimensions.[2] "Cyborg," a term coined by the NASA scientist Manfred Clynes in the 1960s, is a portmanteau of "cybernetics" and "organism," originally intended to refer to an organism that could have an unconscious existence as an "exogenously extended organizational complex functioning as an integrated homeostatic system."[3] Unlike the avatar, the cyborg is embodied. Donna Haraway explains it as

a hybrid entity which displaces the natural vs. cultural opposition. This is not an impermeable organic wholeness. To use Hayles' term, the avatar and the cyborg are spliced, the emergent entity being what Alvarez calls the ICEVORG, which "expands beyond representation into the actual physical world by means of media transgression. The word itself is an acronym, with 'I' for both 'I,' suggesting selfhood, and for 'intelligent,' 'C' for 'cyberspace,' 'E' for 'electronic,' 'V' for virtual, and 'ORG' for 'organism'."[4]

Before we go on, we need to clear the question of "cyberspace," a concept coined by William Gibson in *Neuromancer* (1984). For Donna Haraway, cyberspace is a postmodern utopia and she mentions Kevin Robins's definition of it as a kind of "nowhere-somewhere" which permits multiple identities.[5] Shortly put, cyberspace is the space of virtual embodiment or the electronic matrix. VR (virtual reality) and AI (artificial intelligence) can be assimilated to it; it doubles ontological possibilities – as computer musician Jaron Lanier puts it, "whatever the physical world has, virtual reality has as well."[6] Importantly, this is not a contrast between a "real" world and a virtual one – both are realities, yet they differ in quality – but the real world is less flexible in changing its coordinates, while the virtual one is self-generating (occasionally self-replicating, too) and can challenge its own algorithms. Its evolution is nothing like what we see in the physical world (I avoid the term "natural" since the world we inhabit is marked by successive selections made by humanity, thus being both natural and cultural although in varying degrees) –a professor of computer graphics quoted in a 1991 *Chronicle of Higher Education*

article was firm in his belief that both VR and AI were unattainable goals – but still, by the mid-1990s VR applications for surgical simulations started turning into the norm. The question of cyberspace is not "When?" but "What then?" If cyberspace is a shared hallucination of reality, VR is ascribed similar labels, being described as "electronic LSD" or an "electronic out-of-body experience."[7]

It would seem there is just a step from this to the trance-like state of Valleysmen watching Sonmi's hologram. VR encounters, which first garnered attention in the 1980s, a decade when the body was seen as increasingly vulnerable both discursively and physically, can be said to have an ability to provide "an illusion of control over reality, nature, and especially over the unruly, gender- and race-marked, essentially mortal body."[8] This is the effect orisons have on the people of Nea so Copros and Prescience I, but for those on Big I, it is a sign that argues against transitivity and for an acceptance of mystery as an integral part of reality. For them, this is an unmappable space (although it is a livable map in itself to those who are proficient at using it. For the Valleysmen, there is no recognizable Archimedean point from which they could reconstruct a totalizing view. Orisons are Borgesian books of sand, with a number of pages ("windows" and "memories") that defies counting, none being the first or the last. The disorder in an orderly format also recalls the volumes in the Borgesian Library of Babel, all predictably organized the same (four hundred pages with forty lines each page and approximately eight black letters each line), yet with wildly different contents, mixing pattern and randomness.

An ICEVORG, reclaimed by multiple dimensions (e.g. mental, physical, electronic), can only be observed when transgressing the boundaries between them, being the descendant of the simulacrum, "an image that is not, a body that has none."[9] At once both medium and message, what holds the ICEVORG together? It is the hypertext, just like Poe's "The Man That Was Used Up: A Tale of the Late Bugaboo and Kickapoo Campaign" (1839), which features General A. B. C. Smith, a man whose "glue" is electric. Sonmi-451 can no longer live outside the hypertext. Extensive cross-referencing based on graphical material is what brings her into being, whether we picture it in its strict sense as the matrix of "windows and memories" described by Meronym or as the Icon'ry that connects the past and present of all Valleysmen through Sonmi. For Valleysmen, the Icon'ry is sacred because its logic is tautology, as for any god. To force upon it limiting labels is, to Zachry, counterintuitive:

> Is icons a home for the soul? Or a common mem'ry o' faces n'kin'n'age'n'all? Or a prayer to Sonmi? Or a tombstone wrote in this-life with messages for next-life? See it was always whys'n'whats with Prescients, **it weren't never 'nuff-sumthin' just *was* an' leave it be.**[10] [bold mine]

Out of Meronym's suggested meanings, it is all at the same time as it stores and (re)creates meanings and Sonmi infuses their meanings with her reconstructed presence-in-absence. Her multiple avatars are not limited to the image inside the orison. Indeed, "[s]he lived 'mongst us, minderin' the Nine Folded Valleys. Most

times we cudn't see her, times was she was seen, an old crone with a stick, tho' I sumtimes seen her as a shimm'rin' girl."[11]

Especially in a world where cyberspace is a reality rather than wishful thinking, society is obsessed with storing information. The archival impulse is to process more data and, in turn, hopefully to generate more profound insight. All this is done in the name of self-preservation. As a species, we have survived all natural existential risks but we have no track record for non-natural existential risks, which makes us deeply anxious. In Nea So Copros, Fabricants pose one such risk. Sonmi-451 gives a face to this terror: the simultaneous ascension of millions of Fabricants who would all give up on serving customers in any line of work. Even without resorting to violence, Unanimity would fall overnight. This points to the paradox of Nea So Copros: weak AIs do not suffice and strong AIs threaten it. What if they come to realize they are superior to us and act just like we do to our perceived inferiors? In short, it is not just a fear of the unknown(able) nonhuman. One audience rebels thanks to her Catechisms, the other is lulled into a quasi-religious trance. Prolonging her existence by virtual means is not entirely different from actually giving her a "soul," and I do not mean it in the monetary sense described in the novel, where a "soul" was a portable bank account. Her appearing before the known audience echoes the Christian individual judgment following shortly one's death, while the unknown eyes gazing from the future parallel the Final Judgment since they have access to the after-effects.

Unanimity's archival drive is to "insulate" her deviant narrative. She cannot choose how to tell her story because she must follow the Archivist's "script" that determines what *proper* archiving looks like. The information is to be processed by "safe" agents since the posthumans themselves are mistrusted. In this, there is a recognition that story-telling is never simply the cold and hard facts. Objectivity is normative discourse rendered invisible through ubiquitous use. Following Lyotard, the best way of addressing the desire for justice is with the help of paganism as a godless politics, an argument in favor of plural, specific judgments and against universal judgment. For a justice of multiplicities, a multiplicity of justices is in order. Sonmi-451 is not simply a plaintiff against the wrongs of Nea So Copros's corpocracy. That would make it a case of litigation, a dispute that could have been resolved once both parties agreed on a rule of judgment if they wished to do so. Rather, the ascended Fabricant is a victim precisely because her jailers cannot agree on a rule of judgment. If the gendered body is "a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance,"[12]the physical body as cultural text and its constructedness can also be revealed although the bodies of purebloods are presented as unitary despite being "editable" through surgery and prosthetic extensions. This is to be implicitly contrasted with the fragmentary and sedimentary nature of Fabricants. They can be "recycled" after the Xultation ceremony and fed back to themselves with no legal repercussions. The name of the ceremony in which the bodies of Fabricants are literally disposed of recalls Gibson's idea of cyberspace described in *Neuromancer* as a "bodiless exultation."[13] Arthur Kroker

reasserts, with Mary Douglas, that "cultures think themselves through the body," claiming, in *Body Invaders* (1987), that the "natural" body has been replaced by a technologically-produced simulacrum.[14] The new "panic body" marks "a declining culture where the body is revived, and given one last burst of hyper-subjectivity, as the inscribed text for all the stress and crisis symptoms of the death of the social."[15]

The underlying conflict is between what Deleuze and Guattari call "royal science" and "nomad science."[16] The Archivist's practices handed down by Unanimity favor linearity, totalizing meanings, reproduction, and (re)iteration. Unanimity even sets up a day of remembrance for her transgressions and has children listen to her blasphemous Catechisms to better reject them. Her "nomad science," on the other hand, follows the logic of itineration and is a vector of territorialization. Thanks to Sonmi-451, the temporal links are no longer "ossified," fixed; there are now blending timelines as she walks into mythology because the temporal links she establishes are ligaments, both steadying and flexible. The tension during the interview is perceivable: the Archivist is tasked with colonizing her account with his "shadow archives," a concept drawn by Joseph Pugliese from photographer Alan Sekula to highlight the "historical reservoir of images that functions to construct the enabling conditions for the emergence and cultural intelligibility of any image."[17] Still, as the Archivist is not of the upstrata, he displays enough curiosity to bridge the gap to the non-normative so as to render Sonmi-451 intelligible to her audience and unveil her "subjugated knowledge" (Michel Foucault). Ideally, for an ethical, radically open-ended

archival practice, the power relations between the Archivist and Sonmi-451 would be flattened out during a preparatory discussion where they would negotiate how the interview is to be framed and structured. Unanimity, however, has no interest in her processual subjectivity or her possibilities of de-territorializing and re-territorializing into another becoming.[18] Being coded as female so as to appease customers and not make them feel threatened also opens up for her the possibility of becoming-woman,[19] which places her on the path to an ongoing actualization of virtualities. In other words, becoming minoritarian enables her to dismantle the system from within. Sonmi's Ascended Catechisms demand for a transition from deindividualization and dehumanization to understanding and personalizing the horrors.[20] Grounding her new-found identity on an internal locus of control also opened up for her the possibility of heroism. She fulfils all of Zimbardo's conditions: her subversive one-time whistle-blowing saves whole classes of individuals, it is a voluntary effort without any sort of anticipated secondary gain and it exposes her to serious risk. As a system, the corpocracy of Nea So Copros came to be by seizing both *potestas*, the juridical power derived from social function, and *auctoritas*, the biopolitical power derived from one's personality, situated above advice and below an order. *Potestas* allows it to control the legal system, to discipline, and punish the aberrant. Union is nothing but a heterotopia where would-be malcontents can be observed. The promised revolution is nothing but a simulacrum and Sonmi-451 notices it.

This leads us now to the question of the sacred. Meronym knows that Sonmi-451

was a scapegoated "freakbirth," while Zachry, learning of her death, immediately concludes that she was "judased." The simplification of the vocabulary, a lexical application of the law of minimal effort, incidentally makes all betrayals take up this ominous religious undertone. Despite conflicting meanings ascribed to her death, it is clear that her consciousness has, in a sense, survived by transfer to the cyberspace. Zachry was already exploring several layers of reality such as the village, the Icon'ry, the "spesh" dreams sent by Sonmi, and the woods haunted by Old Georgie, but it is the orison that completely alters his understanding of the world, as a Borgesian map of the Empire, since Meronym scans a whole room at its real scale. Situated outside the natural order, it is reabsorbed into the supernatural. In a way, both the orison and the Icon'ry are at once networks for the living and archives for the dead, hyperreal spaces where the line between life and death is obscured by rituals of memory. This recalls William Gibson's *Neuromancer* (1984), whose name encompasses multiple meanings that do away with the old dichotomies, making a new blend with tones both warm and ominous: "Neuro from the nerves, the silver paths. Romancer. Necromancer. I call up the dead. But no, my friend [...] I am the dead, and their land."[21] In short, the orison offers a heterotopia to be explored:

> Enhanced visualization technologies make it difficult to continue to think about the material body as a bounded entity or to continue to distinguish its inside from its outside, its surface from its depth, its aura from its projection.[22]

Sonmi's existence turns from product into process to be observed, from embodiment to effect. It is enough to ascertain her existence and for the Valleysmen to hear her speak to have a sense of quasi-familiarity. As a techno-body, it mixes the organic/natural with the technological/cultural, being a cultural concept that is "more real than real."[23]

Even so, what does Meronym exactly mean by "memories" and "windows"? Are "memories" simply data stored from the past and "windows" real-time connections or could orisons be more complicated than they seem? It would be difficult to believe that, given their technology, there is no AI. These "Smarts" could contain simulations of sentient beings past and present. *Cloud Atlas* repeatedly points to its fictionality, generating "multiphrenia," the condition of being simultaneously drawn in different, even conflicting directions in the context of technologies that increase social contact, a concept created by the psychologist Kenneth Gergen in *The Saturated Self* (2001). Its most overt instance is found in Luisa Rey's chapter. The fragment bears quoting:

> *The actual past is brittle, ever-dimming + ever more problematic to access + reconstruct: in contrast, the virtual past is malleable, ever-brightening + ever more difficult to circumvent/expose as fraudulent.*[24]

It is strange that the characters should use similar images and strings of words, especially given that the stories follow one another, as if hyphenated or even spliced together. Adam could have been the complete fiction of an ambitious writer. Robert seems to have existed, a fact ascertained both by Sixsmith and the vinyl record. The next chapter, however, lays doubt on

everything: Timothy Cavendish is reading the manuscript of Luisa Rey's story, which makes it possible for all three previous speakers (Adam, Robert, Luisa) to be fiction to a certain degree if not entirely. Timothy is later fictionalised in Sonmi's story as a character in a movie adaptation, whereas Sonmi later appears as a character in Zachry's story as passed down to the youth, and the last unnamed speaker, who calls Zachry "pa," is uncertain how much truth there is. Besides, as Zachry had already disclosed, the orison is a fragmented archive for them. Language has mutated so much that they only understand one word out of six, so who is to guarantee that Sonmi's chapters are the "real" orison of Meronym and not a reconstructed version by generations of Valleysmen trying to fill in the gaps? The structure of the novel is never disclosed to us through a paratext, so a supremely skeptical reader might argue that there is no guarantee that she did not lie and invent the plot of the movie and, when given the Archivist's sony and his password, searched for something else entirely. The highest levels of reality, that is, the ones with fewer reasons for doubting them, are Sonmi's and Zachry's, which are also the ones set furthest in the future Might the Prescients be making ancestor-simulations, perhaps in the orisons? Even if Zachry and Sonmi told the whole truth that was accessible to them, how come we have access to the extended narratives of Adam, Robert and Luisa? What if they are not retrieved from the past but reconstructed as simulations in the future, all stored inside orisons such as Meronym's? While Graham Swift's *Waterland* (1983) presented the world as being one tenth "Here and Now" and nine tenths (hi)story, *Cloud Atlas* seems to be a case of one tenth physical reality and nine tenths hyperreal.

Why simulate them at all, given the fact that Robert and Luisa had presumably never achieved notoriety? In the words of Gordon R. Dickson from his Dorsai series, a Final Encyclopedia that contains and correlates all knowledge, as the orison could become, would enable mankind to see the back of its head. The Oxford-based transhumanist philosopher Nick Bostrom distinguishes between three possible cases. All three, just as possible, have extremely different consequences: S(1) means that we will reach extinction before reaching the posthuman stage. This may be attributed to any number of reasons from natural and non-natural existential risk. S(2) calls for three conditions: having the means to run ancestor-simulations, achieving a convergence of all sentient life capable of doing this, and a reason to either prohibit it to everyone under all circumstances or to make it completely unappealing to posthumans. S(3) is the most interesting of the three because it can be divided into two subcategories of scenarios. Suppose simulations are "holons" (Arthur Koestler) and can further simulate other realities and, in turn, be simulated by others. Reality would be mostly VR and it is possible that sentient beings, once they discover that they are simulations, are wiped out like computer bugs, "fixed" or suffer from an existential crisis that leads to their self-annihilation. The second scenario, S(3)b, an even more worrying one, is that simulations have a limit for the complexity they can generate because of their computing power resources. This does not rule out the possibility of our being simulations, but it strongly

implies that once we are close to becoming posthuman, our simulation will be terminated by our descendants because they do not have the resources to maintain our existence. Given these options, Bostrom hopes that S(3)a is true so that S(1) is proven false and admits that, if the computational constrains of S(3)b means our annihilation just before reaching the posthuman stage, then S(2) is the second most optimistic outcome.[25]

This hypothesis means that the novel can be read at the same time in a postmodernist manner, as nine tenths fiction and one tenth reality, and in a posthuman manner, as nine tenths simulated reality and one tenth reality. This would change the relations between the successive narrators. According to Bostrom, the posthumans running a simulation are like gods in relation to the people inhabiting the simulation: the posthumans created the world we see; they are of superior intelligence; they are "omnipotent" in the sense that they can interfere in the workings of our world even in ways that violate its physical laws; and they are "omniscient" in the sense that they can monitor everything that happens. Secondly, there is a cruel irony embedded in the novel. While we, as human readers, regard Adam, Robert, Luisa and Timothy as being, to varying degrees, "one of us," Sonmi unsettles us because she makes us question our humanity. In a sense, she has a greater degree of "reality" than all of them combined and still they all inhabit the same cyber afterlife.

While Valleysmen take Sonmi very seriously, proudly pointing out that even the tribes that favor multiple gods include her, Prescients have an anthropological passing interest in her. She was the one behind The

Fall and Meronym needs to understand her Catechisms fully "*'cos I was studyin' her brief life, to und'stand you Valleysmen better.*"[26] His descendant even notes, amused, that Sonmi's death did not disrupt his system of beliefs, it only re-arranged it: if Sonmi died, she must have gone to the womb like all good Valleysmen and been reborn: "he even b'liefed Meronym the Prescient was his presh b'loved Sonmi, yay, he 'sisted it, he said he knowed it all by birthmarks an' comets'n'all."[27]

Consequently, the hologram is for the Valleysmen the ghost of someone already reincarnated. Their system allows for a doubling of the soul and having her soul fixated in a loop in the orison is a kind of haunting. Walter Benjamin proposes an understanding of haunting that is fit for our situation. It extends temporality and it is impactful because the course of history is altered not by hiding the past out of sight but by holding "the tension between waiting for the expected, a practice assumed by chrononormativity, and waiting in a state of expectancy, a practice in which haunting is implicated."[28] What matters is that Sonmi's memory endures even though it is no longer legible to them. According to Paul Ricoeur, memory is both presentation and representation,[29] an idea confirmed by the brain's memory-editing functions. Sonmi is at once both absence and presence. For the Prescients, Sonmi's hologram in the orison is a 3D archive, a trace of her passing through the matrix. The Valleysmen recuperate it and reconfigure it as a sort of sacred mourning space. Knowing very well that she is now a "memory" and not a "window," they visit her looping image as one would go to a virtual cemetery, a memorial page or an urn vault. Ricoeur was right to

state that memorialization of the deceased, as a phenomenon triggered within and by the mourner, as well as between the mourner and the deceased, prevents the dead from ever *really* dying.[30] Instead, "they are perpetually sustained in a digital state of dialogic limbo."[31] For the Valleysmen, the discovery that she has her own "memorial loop" mutates the meaning of her death. The Valleysmen have an understanding that the difference between their ontological statuses is greater than the one between them and the angry Prescient in the orison telling Zachry off for touching the gadget. The existentialists' Hell was others, while cyber Hell is hyperpresence, "the erasure of depth [that] also flattens out history and experience,"[32] being watched by others as if you are there without understanding or interaction.

In Roland Barthes's vein, we may say that what she does is create a "punctum" (wound) in the "stadium"; her entering the cyberspace post-mortem has multiplied her framings. Sonmi-451 started off from a posthuman embodied memory or body as archive – in its most literal sense, we can refer to her (birth)mark. In the novel, the comet traces her kinship with people from other timelines, while in the film adaptation, the comet mark is the direct consequence of shredding off her Fabricant collar. Later on, she is presented as an archive as body during the interview where her discourse assumes materiality once recorded. Compared to the modern archivistic inaction of mere registering, once in cyberspace, she accumulates multiple layers of meaning. Sonmi's transition was made possible by her escape from the Foucauldian hegemonic self-regulatory technologies that can no longer reclaim

her as a docile body for the dominant ideology. She has made a "puncture" in the script when she turned the tables on the Archivist, demanding whether he had noticed the stitches in the narratives and that everything was a simulacrum.

Before her interview, the changes made by the skilled facescaper are reverted so that she can look and be recognized as a Sonmi rather than pass for a pureblood. This is another layer of simulacrum that gets transferred to her cyberspace embodiment. It is, as Baudrillard would put it, a lie to tell the (narrative) truth for the virtual viewers. After her death, her body is the virtual one of the hologram, not dissimilar to the inaccessible simulated images assumed by the Wizard of Oz during royal hearings. Much like Dorothy, we are tempted to look around and behind. The Valleysmen are adamant that Sonmi is everywhere on the map and beyond it; it would seem as if they need to take off their green spectacles. Zachry discovers the artifice when he tries to touch her, only to have his hand go through the hologram. The good news is that they now know the wizard is not *really* there anymore. The strange news is that it does not matter since there is no way of returning to the earlier chrononormative system. While dividing time according to proximity to great wars made sense, it does not seem a stretch to propose a system where Prescients and Valleysmen alike would speak of events happening in year X Before (or After) Sonmi. After all, that is more or less what The Fall signifies – the time when her Catechisms managed to shake the world. Ironically, her existence escapes taxonomy by making use of the very medium that was to settle her into a category. Sonmi-451 manages to escape their narrative confinement.

The arborescent system was replaced with the grass-like image of the rhizome: strike one zone and multiplicities continue to arise, defying hierarchies. The posthuman slave managed not only to overcome her condition, but to suggest a way out of the slave-master power struggle. That the Konnas still terrorize Valleysmen only hints at the fact that this, too, remains a project of becoming, a vector of territorialization.

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