

The Cult and the World System: The *Topoi* of David Mitchell's Global Novels

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In Haruki Murakami’s global bestseller *1Q84* (2010), the mystery begins with the backstory of a cult. A strange young writer grows up in a group called Sakigake, or “Forerunner,” which had previously split into two separate groups (155). The Sakigake core group had been an organic farming commune; the splinter group, Akebono, espoused radical politics and stockpiled weapons, before becoming embroiled in a police shootout and disappearing. Later, the Sakigake group, too, closes its doors to the outside, applies for governmental recognition as a religious organization, and becomes a radical cult itself (293). In its layered doubling of the spaces of the political enclave, the commune, and the religious cult, *1Q84* asks the reader to consider the utopian and dystopian features of closed-off forms of society in the contemporary moment. Throughout the novel, the closure of these cults is cast as both a cause and an effect of their inscrutability and extremism. Moreover, the cult’s isolation stands in stark contrast to the formal strategies of this voraciously cosmopolitan novel, which draws on a global palette of intertexts, genres, and cultural icons. The protagonist of the novel conducts research on the Sakigake cult that leads her to the conclusion she is in a new world, a new year—not 1984, the year of the Apple Macintosh, but a post-Cold War 1984 in which the police have become militarized and the Americans and Russians are collaborating on a moon base (79). She concludes that she is in,

“1Q84 ... a world that bears a question” (138). The part of the question that extends beyond *1Q84* itself is how we understand and represent the spaces that refuse exchange—such as the cult commune and the terrorist cell—in the Cold War and post-Cold War eras.

The role of the cult in post-WWII literature has been relatively little studied, particularly as a non-democratic space.¹ In this essay, I propose that the *topos* of the cult—a set of conventions that developed through exchanges between post-WWII fiction, political science, and social science—has played a key role in novelistic strategies for representing global networks, geopolitical totalities, and the possibilities for individual agency within them. Characterized by charismatic leadership, closed systems of communication, specialized vocabularies, and an isolated physical location, the *topos* of the cult fundamentally shaped how we have described non-democratic spaces since World War II, even as they have evolved through scenes of the totalitarian state, the communist re-education camp, the cult compound, and the terrorist cell. Indeed, *1Q84* itself suggests some of the contours of post-World War II political representation that the *topos* of the cult throws into relief: 1948, the year George Orwell wrote *1984*, and the era during which the concepts of totalitarianism and “brainwashing” were forged; the post-1960s and especially post-1989 resurgences of cults, as small-scale, often pathologized, extremist religious

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¹ Notable discussions of the cult in contemporary literature include Amy Hungerford’s work on religion and language in Don DeLillo’s novels and Colin Hutchinson’s description of the cult as a post-1960s social formation, a “bad community,” in the work of DeLillo and Thomas Pynchon.

and political formations; and, inevitably, the global War on Terror of the past decade, wherein fundamentalist consciousness has so often been related to the space of the terrorist cell. The present article will focus on the post-1989 moment, by considering two works by the British novelist David Mitchell that exemplify both formal and thematic shifts from the Cold War global novel of conspiracy to the post-Cold War novel that maps a different kind of global complexity. The totalizing conspiratorial narrative that critics including Patrick O'Donnell, Timothy Melley, and Emily Apter have identified as a cultural dominant of Cold War-era fiction and film becomes something different in these post-Cold War global novels, which often reconfigure the conventions and details of the totalizing conspiracy novel—and especially the conventions established in *1984*—within smaller-scale cults that forcefully resist the values of post-Cold War globalization. In Mitchell's novels, the cult also provides a point of traction for considering global complexity, as the cult member's outlook on the global situation eerily, and sometimes humorously, mirrors that of the conspiracy theorist's fantasies of unfreedom. In what follows, I will explore the contemporary persistence of the *topos* of the cult in Mitchell's fictions, which map out both the complexity of the contemporary world system and the consequences of that complexity for a pragmatic understanding of individual agency within global networks.

I. The Cult and the Global in *Ghostwritten*

David Mitchell's 1999 novel *Ghostwritten* takes on the question of global interconnectedness in a grand style. Circling the globe in a particular moment, a series of nine interconnected vignettes take the reader from Okinawa to New York, by way of seven other urban and rural sites, each culturally adjacent to the other. Rita Barnard and Berthold Schoene have compared it with the 2005 film *Babel* as a "hyperlinked" global novel, and its form is

dotted with references and exchanges between the separate episodes, such that all is connected within a complex web (209). A text that takes this explicit interest in global exchange, hybridity, and connection has a jarring starting point and frame: it begins with a strange, and oddly playful, depiction of one of the cult members from Aum Shinrikyo, the Japanese doomsday cult that attacked the Tokyo subway with sarin gas in 1995.

The episode, titled “Okinawa,” narrates the aftereffects of the Aum Shinrikyo subway bombing from the perspective of one of the bombers. The sociologist Ian Reader describes Aum Shinrikyo as, “from the beginning ... a world-rejecting movement that defined the everyday world as corrupt, evil, and in need of spiritual transformation,” a transformation it was trying to undertake (189–90). The group began in 1984 as a yoga and meditation group led by Shoko Asahara, and from 1986 it was headquartered in a remote communal center near Mount Fuji (Reader, 193–4). A millenarian cult, the group saw itself as a beneficial agent of violent change that would bring about Armageddon—in fact, they believed that their violence would benefit its innocent victims most fully (Lifton *Destroying* 59).² The sarin gas attack was carried out on March 20, 1995 by Ikuo Hayashi, at Shin-Ochanomizu station in the central business district of Tokyo, and it resulted in two deaths and two hundred thirty-one injuries. Despite the small number of deaths, the incident was a major disruption of urban life in Japan, rivaling in terms of its effects on Japanese culture and urban space the major U.S. cult and terrorist events of the

² In fact, their particular vision of history, and their desire to speed the laws of history along, square quite well with one of Hannah Arendt’s later descriptions of totalitarianism: a desire to speed along Darwin’s law of natural selection, for the Nazis, or Marx’s law of class struggle, for the communists (462). In all three situations, individuals become passive carriers of a universal law.

1990s, such as the Branch Dravidian shootout (1993), the Oklahoma City bombing (1995), and Heaven's Gate (1997). Haruki Murakami himself wrote a bestselling and widely translated book on the relationship between Aum Shinrikyo and Japanese culture, *Underground: The Tokyo Gas Attack and the Japanese Psyche* (1998). Its interviews with both victims and Aum Shinrikyo members are echoed in several of the particulars of *IQ84*, such as the leader's blindness, the cult's secluded headquarters, and the cult's registration as a recognized religious entity (*Underground*, 217). The Aum Shinrikyo bombing resonated in Japan and globally, not only because it highlighted citizens' vulnerability to terrorism in urban spaces worldwide, but also because these particular terrorists seemed to be a particularly inscrutable, irrational force. In *Ghostwritten*, we meet the sarin-gas attacker himself, codenamed "Quasar," as he travels to an Okinawan fishing village in order to hide out after executing the gas attack. He is introduced as an anti-social, strange character, whose involvement with the cult and the bombing slowly becomes clear. In his visit to the island, his ties to the cult are successively severed, leaving him stranded among friendly strangers. In an inversion of the conventions of cult programming, Quasar's belief system slowly breaks down as his separation from the cult compound continues, and by the narrative's end, he accepts his neighbor's invitation to dinner, signaling the beginning of a new life.

This choice of a starting point for a global novel comes as a surprise, since the reader expects such a novel's international representations to foster sympathetic identifications with its far-flung characters. The global purview of such a fiction would purportedly allow readers to feel as though they have a wider, more cosmopolitan horizon of sympathy. The cosmopolitanism that Mitchell performs within his own work is linked to the work's genesis: in an interview with Catherine McWeeney, Mitchell begins by describing how the first three stories, set in Okinawa,

Tokyo, and Hong Kong, had been written “on location,” spurred by his interest in contemporary Japanese culture, and then continues westward across the globe as a whole. In the interview, Mitchell goes on to describe how his book, “reverses the usual direction of Orientalism, and challenges the Eurocentric view of the world map.” The reader of *Ghostwritten* finds, for the most part, a sophisticated generosity of perspective that allows her to identify with a boy in a record store in Tokyo, a desperate Hong Kong financier, a downtrodden woman who runs a rural Chinese tea shack, and so on. As indicated by Mitchell’s interest in “connectedness” in that interview, his novel exemplifies what Rebecca Walkowitz has called “comparison literature,” that is, “world literature for which global comparison is a formal as well as a thematic preoccupation” (536). In fact, the emphasis on comparison in *Ghostwritten* even exceeds Walkowitz’s definition, as the novel attempts an extremely large-scale comparison, between nine locations that stand in explicitly for a global totality: Okinawa, Tokyo, Hong Kong, Mount Emei (China), Mongolia, Saint Petersburg, London, Clear Island (Ireland), and New York City. (Parenthetical mentions of locations in South America, Africa, and Western Europe round out the map.) Each vignette, as locales shift, occupies a new perspective in terms of place, race, gender, class, and position in the core or periphery of globalization. Some readers have seen limitations in this virtuosic writing style, and Barnard notes that the suggestiveness of the novel’s cosmopolitan and post-national frame is sometimes undercut by Mitchell’s “falling back on national stereotype” (213). While Mitchell’s fiction obviously cannot believably inhabit such a diverse cast of characters—he indicates in the novel’s acknowledgments that his firsthand knowledge of Mongolia, for instance, has been supplemented by another author’s travelogue—the novel is successful at least in suggesting an idealized array of perspectives.

By contrast with the global and cosmopolitan ambitions of both the author and the

implied reader of *Ghostwritten*, the millenarian terrorist, Quasar, shuts out the outside world, and frustrates the reader's attempts at sympathetic identification from the beginning. The first point of abrasion arises early in the episode, when he reveals his fascistic views about the superiority of the Japanese as a race—he calls Okinawans “unclean” and “not real Japanese,” suggesting that an investment in ethnic purity lies among his motivations for joining the cult (4). When he encounters consumer culture in the guise of two teenagers with cell phones, Quasar employs a Whitmanian grammar for a deeply un-Whitmanian statement: “Hate them and you have to hate the world, Quasar. Very well, Quasar. Let us hate the world” (12). For all his detestability, the novel simultaneously plays him as a figure of ridicule: he thinks, for instance, that his “alpha control voice” has a way of controlling others' minds in a fashion embarrassingly similar to Obi-Wan Kenobi from *Star Wars* (4). Quasar's world, which pivots on the unseen order of special-power-enabling alpha waves and impure gamma waves, is clearly not the same one his interlocutors inhabit.³

The novel also expresses formally the difficulty of identifying with the terrorist, through its convention of the hyperlink. The points of contact among and between the other segments of the novel occur predictably as forms of connection: characters across the globe are tied together through family bonds, old friendships, chance flashbulb encounters, work relationships, and

³ These particular beliefs, as touches of humor in the narrative, are more reminiscent of scientologists' belief in “engrams,” the negative energies that accumulate in the body, than any of Aum Shinrikyo's beliefs. While Robert Jay Lifton notes that many possibly questionable scientific activities like the study of “brain waves” were undertaken at the Japanese cult, notions of the blind Asahara's telekinetic powers seem not to have been part of the group's belief system (*Destroying* 118). For more on scientologists' engrams, see Cowan and Bromley.

criminal networks. The hyperlinks for the terrorist, if they can be said to exist at all, are broken: he makes a phone call, misdirected to a character in another vignette, only to leave an undecipherable message in code, which had been meant for his cult's leader: "the dog needs to be fed" (26; 53). As with the alpha control voice, Quasar is unprepared for the possibility that his messages will be misunderstood. In another passage, Quasar echoes a statement made by a character from another vignette, but it is clear that he only partly inhabits the same world. Upon noticing "Burger King, Bennetton [and] Nike" he and a woman in Russia both remark, "High streets are becoming the same all over the world, I suppose" (11, 211). But the woman in Saint Petersburg remarks on this change as a banal fact of globalization, while Quasar considers it a sign, not of corporate globalization, but of the global scale of worldly doom. For him, these signs and others lead inevitably to his previously mentioned thought: "Very well Quasar. Let us hate the world" (12). Toward the end of the novel, Quasar calls in to a radio show in New York City, thinking that the computer intelligence featured on the show, "Zookeeper," is the reincarnation of his cult's leader. The English-speaking DJ cannot understand Quasar's Japanese, a fact that underscores another form of missed connection. The episode that closes *Ghostwritten* also teems with broken links. In a scene set just prior to his appearance in the opening vignette, Quasar rides in the subway car he is about to bomb, and he notices items from many of the places the novel has been: a tourist's guide to St. Petersburg; a graphic design with the London Underground; a whisky label from Clear Island, Ireland; the call sign from the New York City radio show. He escapes the subway car, leaving the novel's "world" behind, refusing to follow those signs through, even in his thoughts, to the places they represent. In a novel that is explicitly "about" its own global scope and the complexity contained within it, *Ghostwritten* begins and ends with a cult member who refuses to acknowledge that complexity, a refusal that seems to verge on

psychosis.

In positioning the cult member as a key to the questions of globality it stages, *Ghostwritten* activates a conception of cults with a long history in the sciences. In psychological and sociological studies of cults, political exigencies have weighed heavily on scientific practice and judgment, particularly because cult pathology has so frequently figured in judgments of legal and moral accountability for extremist acts of violence. At stake in that pathologization is the question of who counts as a rational agent within democracy, and indeed as a participant in a global community. Sociological and psychological research about cults, by Margaret Thaler Singer and Robert Jay Lifton—both expert witnesses in the Patty Hearst Trial in 1976—as well as Janja Lalich, Thomas Robbins, Benjamin Zablocki, J. Gordon Melton, and others, has remained politically contentious, even at the level of nomenclature: should these groups be called “cults” or “New Religious Movements” (NRMs)? The latter appellation signals that these groups are worthy of reverence as both religious and cultural formations. “Cults” on the other hand, have been associated in the mainstream media with human rights abuses and, notoriously, mass death, as they occurred in Jim Jones’s People’s Temple, the Heaven’s Gate group, Aum Shinrikyo, the Children of God, and so forth. Despite the longstanding technical usage of the word cult, that recent history of violence carries a negative connotation and a skeptical viewpoint even into the scientific community (Zablocki and Robbins 5). As Douglas E. Cowan and David G. Bromley point out, the “cult stereotype” of the charlatan and his or her dupes, within and outside the scientific literature, negatively impacts all new religious groups by suggesting to the public that emergent religions are necessarily fraudulent entities (216). Building on this terminological dispute, scholars have also asked whether the coercive persuasion practiced by some cults amounts to something we can refer to as “brainwashing.” Sociologists who

sympathize with New Religious Movements (NRMs) point out, for instance, that sociological data about cults and their persuasion tactics is frequently obtained only from ex-members of a particular group, who tend to exaggerate about the extent of persuasive tactics (5). The sociological literature on “brainwashing” techniques within cults has been described as particularly “lengthy, acrimonious, and polarized” (Zablocki and Robbins, 20). “Brainwashing” has been mobilized as a sort of popular hermeneutic of suspicion, which implies both the scene of the “closed” totalitarian space of the re-education camp and the machine-like, abnormal mind of the victim of brainwashing. Nevertheless, anti-cult sociologists see the term “brainwashing” as a powerful weapon against cult mentalities.⁴ Such terminological issues ultimately rest on a debate about the extent and nature of religious diversity within scientific practice. The pathologization in which anti-cult sociologists engage takes shape informally in terms of Stockholm Syndrome and “brainwashing” but is best formalized in terms of the *topos* of the cult. Margaret Thaler Singer has stated that the cult is identified by three main characteristics: 1) the use of coercive persuasion (i.e., brainwashing or propaganda techniques), 2) the closure of communication with the outside world and the use of specialized language; and 3) charismatic or quasi-divine leadership (7). Even these criteria are contentious to proponents of NRMs, but their persistence within popular and literary narratives makes them a fine crystallization of what Cowan and Bromley call the “cult stereotype” (4).

⁴ See Zablocki, “Towards a Demystified and Disinterested Scientific Theory of Brainwashing.” for a thorough argument for the use of the term; for an equally thorough argument against, see Dick Anthony, “Tactical Ambiguity and Brainwashing Formulations: Science or Pseudo Science.” David Bromley compares the rhetoric of “brainwashing” and “conversion” in “A Tale of Two Theories: Brainwashing and Conversion as Competing Political Narratives.”

On the psychiatric side of this research, the discipline's standard Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM-IV-TR) (2000) explicitly excludes religious beliefs from the category of psychoses: for both sociologists of NRMs and psychiatrists, religious groups are excluded from being defined as social problems or as explicitly pathological; religious culture is placed beyond the domain of scientific "correction." The DSM-IV-TR contains apparent contradictions in stating, for instance, that while pathologized "grandiose delusions may have a religious content (e.g, the person believes that he or she has a special message from a deity)" (325), religious hallucination may well be a cultural norm, such that "visual or auditory hallucinations with a religious content may be a normal part of religious experience (e.g., seeing the Virgin Mary or hearing God's voice)" (306). The difference lies in how cultural norms are construed; we might even think of this as a question of whether a cult's size enables it to constitute a "culture" worthy of recognition.⁵

In fiction, those questions of comprehensibility, pathology, and recognition find expression through choices of perspective. In *Ghostwritten*, Mitchell hews closely to the three characteristics outlined in Singer's sociological anti-cult work, thus reaffirming stereotypes concerning these anti-connected pockets within globalization: the leader, "His Serendipity," even has the supposed power to teleport people, and has given Quasar the gift of spurious ESP; the

⁵ In its introduction, the DSM-IV-TR also advocates for a cultural sensitivity, the limits of which necessarily remain nebulous: "A clinician who is unfamiliar with the nuances of an individual's cultural frame of reference may incorrectly judge as psychopathology those normal variations in behavior, belief, or experience that are particular to the individual's culture. For example, certain religious practices or beliefs ... may be misdiagnosed as manifestations of a Psychotic Disorder" (xxxiv).

cult uses a specialized language that makes Quasar seem to inhabit an utterly different world; his discomfort in the outside world attests to his not having been outside the cult's compound, "Sanctuary," in quite some time. These features, widely employed conventions of cult representation, allow Mitchell to play a complex game with the narration, which shuttles between reliability and unreliability, straightforwardness and dramatic irony, throughout the episode. Quasar's own confidence in his agency drives the narrative from his perspective, even as dramatic irony and humor at his expense distance the reader from sympathetic identification with him. Another episode, narrated by a teenager in Tokyo, mentions the perspective of the cult member in similar terms to what Timothy Melley has called postmodern "agency panic," that is, uncertainty about the individual's role relative to the overwhelming structures of governments and corporations (49). This young narrator makes the unusual claim that, "Internet [chat rooms], manga, Hollywood, doomsday cults, they are all places where you go and where you matter as an individual" (38). In this counterintuitive list—many of these spaces provide anonymity—the teenaged narrator imagines the cult as a kind of subculture, and the cult membership in consumerist terms as one lifestyle choice among others. But in the "Okinawa" episode, the question receives more sustained attention, through a conversation in the fishing village about the pathological nature of cult membership and the etiology of cult belief. One character, seeing news about the Aum Shinrikyo bombing on television, asks why anyone would join such a cult, and one fisherman simply answers, "Brainwashing" (22). Another speculates that the troubled people of all walks of life "need shinier myths that will never be soiled by becoming true. The handing over of one's will is a small price to pay, for the believers" (23). Such an explanation hovers between pathology and a sort of arrested development, as though the cult member were Hegel's beautiful soul, too pure for the real world. When interviewer Catherine McWeeney notes

that all the protagonists in *Ghostwritten* are in some sense “entrepreneurial”—and hence agents within global capitalism—Mitchell holds up Quasar as the exception, giving a similar explanation to the woman in the village: “Quasar the cultist sloughed off his old life to be free from the responsibility of free will ... sort of brushing off the fruit of forbidden knowledge and trying to hang it on the tree.” In this striking metaphor of innocence recaptured, Mitchell grants Quasar the solution to agency panic: the ability to imagine the vastly complex contemporary world as one of Edenic simplicity.

II. The Global Novel and the World System

In one of *IQ84*'s many metafictional moments, a character states, “There’s no longer a place for a Big Brother in this real world of ours” (295). That statement lays out a curious criterion for novelistic realism in the present, in which presumably neither all-powerful totalitarian states nor all-encompassing conspiracies seem plausible. Indeed, Quasar’s map of the globe mirrors that of the conspiracy theorist in finding a single organizing principle for the whole world, or a single, all-controlling power like Big Brother. The “Big Brother” criterion for realism also suggests the exhaustion of a particular genre, the novel of grand conspiracy in the period since the Cold War. That family of novels and films has grown to include even pastiches such as the Mel Gibson vehicle *Conspiracy Theory* (1997), while the high-postmodern conceit of the novelist as Big Brother, a prevalent theme in fiction by Kurt Vonnegut, John Barth, Paul Auster, and others, has aged as well. Perhaps, too, the ever-more-visible narcissistic dimension of paranoia has made the conspiracy theorist predominantly a figure of ridicule in popular culture. While Timothy Melley and Patrick O’Donnell have offered convincing accounts of a paranoid or conspiratorial cultural dominant within Cold War culture, *Ghostwritten* shows us

that the post-1989 novel can map out a world defined by something other than conspiratorial totality. While Berthold Schoene has discussed how *Ghostwritten*'s frame moves the novel beyond its attachment to the nation-state as a representational frame, Mitchell's novels move several steps further in their ambitions. *Ghostwritten* exemplifies global complexity in its embrace of the heterogeneity not just of links, but of *kinds* of links between the spaces that the novel engages. Between these kinds of links in *Ghostwritten*, there can be no obvious hierarchy, as when the flows of global capital seem all-important in the Hong Kong stockbroker's section and wholly unimportant in the section set at Mount Emei, a peripheral space where the rhythm of life holds constant through several Chinese regime changes and economic upheavals. The novel emphasizes a variety of coexisting networks in order to depict a global community that accounts for even those, like Quasar, who cast global community aside. A magisterially complex novel that features global networking on multiple levels—exchanges occur through travel and the movement of capital, but also through family connections, criminal networks, data networks, and even a disembodied spirit who occupies different hosts—can hardly be understood as a totalizing conspiracy, even as local conspiracies do occur in several episodes.

One recent indication of a new direction for literary studies of this sort of novelistic global mapping is that of “world-systems analysis” borrowed from the work of the sociologist Immanuel Wallerstein. As Wallerstein's collaborator Richard E. Lee has suggested, world-systems analysis eschews a single totalizing analytic—global capital, say—in favor of “analytically distinct but functionally ... inseparable” forces that interact, including “the axial division of labor, the interstate system, and the structures of knowledge” (32). The complexity of the world-system, then, operates with more agents, avenues of exchange, and forms of power than can be accounted for in conspiratorial or totalizing visions of, for example, corporate

oligarchy or military intelligence alone.⁶ Moreover, Franco Moretti has suggested that such a vision of complexity allows us to “‘see’ a new literary genre ... the one trying to represent the world as a totality” with a new emphasis on the complexity of its interconnections (66, original emphasis). Leerom Medovoi has recently described Mohsin Hamid’s novel *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (2007) as a provisional example of a “world-system literature” that imagines “transnational relations and imperial power are but partial expressions” of the system of international exchange. He reads Hamid’s novel as an allegory of American decline, charged with the “military and financial hollowings of American power” that lead its protagonist to abandon the culture of Western democracy (656). If Hamid’s novel, a straightforward allegory of decline, represents the beginnings of the heterogeneity of world-system literature, then *Ghostwritten* enacts the complexity of the world-system in a more thoroughgoing manner that sheds further light on the possibilities of those representations, a global representation that, in the words of David Palumbo-Liu and Bruce Robbins, does “not require a single political hegemony [nor] cultural homogeneity” (5).

While a straightforward division between Cold War-era paranoid conspiracies and post-Cold War recognition of global complexity would need to admit some exceptions—Thomas Pynchon’s *Gravity’s Rainbow* (1973) in particular—such a distinction can provide traction for reevaluating conspiracy as a theme. Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri imagined the new

⁶ Counter to this interpretation, Emily Apter calls on Wallerstein’s work to support a paradigm of global paranoia in contemporary culture, citing the world system as a “one-size, supranational entity,” that is, a multimodal but nonetheless singular totality (365). I follow Lee’s, and, cited below, Medovoi’s and Robbins’s and Palumbo-Liu’s characterizations of world-systems analysis as recognizing the piecemeal nature of global power relations.

complexity of post-Cold War “Empire” as a situation in which there is no longer a Winter Palace to storm, an era in which the complexity and distribution of both repression and resistance have increased dramatically. For instance, what Rob Nixon has called the “slow violence” of environmental catastrophe and systemic genres of violence like the perpetuation of hunger pose serious representational challenges to traditional narrative forms in which individual villains, victims, and deeds seem mismatched to politically and environmentally consequential practices of production and consumption. In the present decade, the very notion of conspiracy has changed along with WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange, who defines conspiracy as the banal fact of undertaking a transaction—of whatever sort—in secret. As Aaron Bady has explained, Assange’s notion of conspiracy is that ordinary conspiracy simply exists when corporate, bureaucratic, and diplomatic communities are able to communicate with the assurance of secrecy. Conspiracy is, then, a network effect, and Assange’s goal is not to expose individual secrets so much as to eliminate the assurance of secrecy that allows ordinary conspiracy to flourish. In this way, even our understanding of conspiracy itself has evolved such that it takes place on a local, microscopic, scale, rather than a globally comprehensive one.

It is precisely this question of scale that animates Mitchell’s further exploration of Quasar’s cult consciousness. The other characters’ notions of ambiguous pathology, arrested development, and agency panic come across differently in Quasar’s internal monologue, where he brings the question of the cult’s validity to an interpretive deadlock: “Speculation about the ‘doomsday cult’ continues. How it annoys me! The Fellowship stands for life, not for doom. The Fellowship is not a ‘cult.’ Cults enslave. The Fellowship liberates” (12). Enslavement and liberation—Quasar is, for instance, liberated from consumer culture—take form here as the simultaneously loaded and nebulous terms that they are. This interpretive impasse, in which

Quasar and the villagers believe themselves to be free, could be considered in terms of reduction: the text refers us to a scientific discourse that explains beliefs in pathological terms, by reducing the mind to a predictable mechanism. That mechanism's current state is wholly determined by previous conditioning, as though it were a program or a clock rather than a human being. Such an attitude, in which the villagers regard the cult members, and in which Quasar regards the villagers in turn, is featured in the novel as incompatible with the closeness of sympathetic identification. Such a deadlock, as a symmetrical practice of mutual suspicion, suggests that the interpretive communities in question float apart in a haze of misunderstanding and supposed irrationality, never to be brought together.

That paradox fades when viewed in historical perspective, however, particularly when we consider how diagnoses of cult "brainwashing" derived from new descriptions of unfreedom that developed in the post-World War II moment. Throughout the work of the Harvard psychologist Robert Jay Lifton in particular, there is a structural homology between totalitarianism, the purported communist brainwashing, and the features of cult membership, which aligns with those traits mentioned above: coercive persuasion, closed communication, and charismatic or quasi-divine leadership. The term "brainwashing" emerged during the Korean War, and was first used to explain defections among American POWs, several of whom spoke out against the U.S. involvement in Korea and 21 of whom decided against repatriation. Edward Hunter, the CIA operative who coined the term, explicitly credits the novel *1984*'s insights about language, mobilized the discourse of "brainwashing" in books and articles that warned of its threat to American freedom. Studies of "brainwashing" that flourished in the 1950s joined other studies of authoritarianism and totalitarianism that continued alongside them—most notably Erich Fromm's *Escape from Freedom* (1941), Hannah Arendt's *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951)

and *Eichmann in Jerusalem* (1963), and, in the U.K., Karl Popper's *The Open Society and its Enemies* (1962) and Isaiah Berlin's "Two Concepts of Liberty" (1958). This body of work in political and social theory dealt with concepts of freedom and unfreedom that would also be at the center of scientific studies such as Theodor Adorno et al.'s sociological study, *The Authoritarian Personality* (1950), and Lifton's *Thought Reform and the Psychology of Totalism* (1961). Lifton's 1961 book is the study that brings the scientific discussion of "brainwashing" techniques into broader, non-governmental applicability. His term "totalism"—which implicitly splits the difference between "totalitarian" and "totalizing"—denotes an authority's desire to have complete control over its subjects and, unlike totalitarianism, the authority need not be governmental in nature. The cult, then, reproduces the strategies of totalitarianism in miniature. Likewise, for Lifton, who conceives of religious, political, and scientific totalisms as equivalent, there are a number of sufficient criteria for totalistic societal structures, which include those also highlighted by Singer. Lifton calls them "milieu control" (control of communication) and a "demand for purity," a linguistic culture than involves a "cult of confession," an "aura of sacredness," and the "constriction" of group language (420–430). Interestingly for the humanities, Lifton offers as the alternative to totalism an explicit reference to Lionel Trilling's liberal imagination, an "essential imagination of variousness and possibility" holding the "awareness of complexity and difficulty" (qtd in Lifton, 446). Even within the scientific literature, then, the values that Trilling associated with the novel's encouragement of cosmopolitanism and critical thought are a touchstone of democratic self-definition. By replicating the form of the totalitarian state in miniature, the cult's brand of unfreedom is seen as deriving from a non-democratic form of society, rather than from any particular religious doctrine.

Approaching the cult with Lifton also helps us to imagine a way of periodizing it as a formation, as the extremist religious or political social formation that came to prominence in the wake of the larger political movements in the 1960s, including the Symbionese Liberation Army, Jim Jones's People's Temple, the Children of God, and the Unification Church. Perhaps, though, the cult comes to even more prominence in the 1990s, with Heaven's Gate, the Branch Dravidians, Aum Shinrikyo, and other doomsday groups. In the 1990s especially, the cult stands as a category for resistant formations in an age of global capitalism, a grouping that includes the post-9/11 moment, where fundamentalist terrorism is often cast within those same conventions of the cult. *Ghostwritten* has been called "prescient" in its interest in terrorism before 9/11, but it arguably simply describes a structure that was already there in 1999: the cult stands as a refusal of globalization, hybridity, and exchange, a refusal to participate in the post-1989 end of history. By the same token, *Ghostwritten* proves newly relevant in its activation of the problem of fundamentalism for secular and post-secular accounts of global fiction. In these depictions, the cult exists as a local site of resistance to the values of neoliberal capitalism and globalization, but one without the kinds of solidarity with other local sites of resistance that Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri have seen as constituting the "multitude" in this period of capitalist globalization's triumph that they call "empire." And just as the cult refuses to fit within Hardt and Negri's smooth global networks of resistance, it also turns away Thomas Friedman's "flat" world of global free markets. In the transition from the Cold War to the post-Cold War era, the descriptions of the enemies of democracy—totalitarians, brainwashers, cult members, and fundamentalists—are described in similar structural terms and within matching narrative conventions. The primary difference is one of scale. The unfreedom of the cult member in *Ghostwritten*, then, is both the unfreedom of pathologizing scientific discourses and the anti-

democratic unfreedom that has been written with a very specific set of meanings and ideological functions since World War II.

Within this context, we might well ask why the global novel dwell on what Lifton called “totalist” spaces and cultures such as the cult and the narrative conventions of *1984*. As I have argued of *Ghostwritten*, more recent novels replicate the comparatively simple structure of *1984* within their own vastly more complex structures for representing global complexity. Another dimension of the cult’s persistence within contemporary fiction, I hazard, is the representational appeal of unfreedom. Even popular understandings of discipline and conditioning beg the question of what constitutes total discipline, total control over the subject. At what stage of human programming, what scale of “totalism,” does the unfree individual also lose his or her human-ness? That representational quandary drives a great deal of speculative fiction, though it is perhaps most compellingly posed in novels that attempt to fit that question within a larger global framework, such as *IQ84*, Neal Stephenson’s *Snow Crash* (1992), Paolo Bacigalupi’s *The Wind-Up Girl* (2009), or, the other novel by Mitchell I will take up here, *Cloud Atlas* (2004).

Mitchell’s best-known novel and the basis for the 2012 film of the same name, *Cloud Atlas* retains references back to conspiracy theories and totalitarian cults, even as it surpasses the organizational complexity of *Ghostwritten*. *Cloud Atlas*, a series of nested novellas linked by different textual media, travels across time and space through a series of characters with comet-shaped birthmarks, from the 1800s to the distant future. Since the narrative travels across the globe and through time, its structure seems like an explicit expansion upon *Ghostwritten* since it is a diachronic, rather than synchronic, examination of echoes and commonalities across the globe. *Cloud Atlas* presents narratives that, in their historical breadth, highlight shifts within the modern world-system, most notably: in a narrative of the 1800s, the exploratory moment of

American empire before Frederick Jackson Turner's "frontier thesis"; in the conspiracy novel, the Cold War-era, science-driven military-industrial complex weaponry scheme; a future global division of labor based on fabricated human life forms; and, finally, a post-apocalyptic return to primitive conditions. These different forms of global organization depend not on a single variable, such as the Marxian stages of labor relations, but rather a variety of forms of knowledge production, labor relations, state organization, and more. As such, *Cloud Atlas* seems to build upon the world-system ambitions of *Ghostwritten* by drawing attention to heterogeneous global systems both across geographic distances and through the long duration of historical process.

Despite its global (though heavily circum-Pacific) traffic, the novel takes a curious interest in hermetically sealed spaces. The episodes are all structured around heterotopias, such as the ship at sea, the recluse's mansion, the madhouse, and a lone island that has escaped a global apocalypse. That focus on the closure of communication makes these spaces seem all the more like discrete worlds within worlds, appropriate for the inverted Russian-doll structure of the novel. The most prominently closed space in the novel is that in the section, "An Orison of Sonmi-451," a distant-future dystopia set in the "corpocracy" of a Korean super-state called Nea So Copros. The protagonist of this narrative, Sonmi, begins as a low-consciousness clone who works as a server in the fast-food chain, Papa Song's. The clones, called "fabricants," do not know their condition, never see the outside of the restaurant complex, and worship Papa Song, a figure more or less analogous to KFC's Colonel Sanders. In their monastically structured daily work cycle, the fabricants pause only for a sermon and a recitation of the "Six Catechisms," the contents of which touch on the value of money and the principles of customer service (185). Such a space evokes the third-world factory as a space of ultimate discipline and exploitation, which has come under recent scrutiny in the controversy over the Apple hardware supplier

Foxconn's working conditions in China; it is a space also implicitly explored through the Hailsham "school" that houses organ-donor clones in Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go* (2005).⁷ Indeed, the Papa Song restaurant's multiple resonances with the institutions we associate with Michel Foucault's *Discipline and Punish* (1975)—"factories, schools, barracks ... prisons" (238)—are by no means coincidental. The closed space of instruction, reform, and labor, in its very closure, constitutes the form of coercion, of discipline, and of unfreedom. The conventions governing the treatment of that closure, moreover, precede the work of Foucault, and find roots in the Anglo-American anti-totalitarian thought of the 1940s and 1950s.

Accordingly, "Orison" borrows its conventions from the *topos* of the cult as it appeared in Orwell's *1984*. In *1984*, Winston Smith lives within a perfected totalitarian state, wherein the government Party's near-total control of language has created a functional false consciousness in its citizens. In a cruel twist for rebels like Winston, the apparent structure for rebellion, the Brotherhood, resides squarely within the surveillance network of the Party. Behaviorist techniques of personality modification ultimately defeat Winston, who fully capitulates to the Party in the novel's end. As in *1984*, language takes on a key role in self-consciousness in this section of *Cloud Atlas*. The plot of "Orison" takes off when one of the fabricants discovering "a newfound word, secret" (190) after which Sonmi's "language evolve[s]" with the addition of other "finer-tuned words" (198). The choice of "secret" as a starting point is a significant one: it makes possible private knowledge, the formation of the groups who share such knowledge, and points to the recovery of subjective interiority denied to other fabricants. Moreover, *Cloud Atlas*

⁷ Foxconn came into the public spotlight after several worker suicides and creative journalist Mike Daisey's piece on the National Public Radio program, *This American Life*, which aired 6 January 2012. For a brief discussion of labor in *Never Let Me Go*, see Shameem Black, 795.

implements the totalitarian language of *1984* within the larger totalitarian super-state; Sonmi's limited consciousness is reflected by her restricted vocabulary and recitation of platitudes, but so in turn is that of the bureaucrat who interviews her. In his larger, outside world of "corpocracy," the interviewer seems equally limited by orthodox vocabulary. For instance, each citizen's electronic identifier tag is called a "Soul," and the interviewer, upon hearing of Sonmi's escape with the revolutionary "Union" group, exclaims, "Unionmen really cut out their own eternal Souls? I always thought it was an urban myth" (314). In a clever twist of dystopia-genre writing, Mitchell makes the "eternal Soul" that durable electronic component of the body that is most directly responsible for citizens' subjection. The clueless citizens miraculously believe that the means of their subjection is the very thing that makes them human. The related final twist of Mitchell's novella is the same as that in *1984*: the supposed revolutionary group exists only to "attract social malcontents" and to provide "the enemy required by any hierarchical state for social cohesion" (348). This group, the "Union," which had helped Sonmi to escape and to become a figurehead for the fabricant underclass everywhere, is revealed on the final page to be nothing more than a safety valve. As with the revolutionary Brotherhood of *1984*, the freedom promised by the Union turns out to be no more than a shadowy corner of the Party's large-scale conspiracy.

Cloud Atlas dwells on this dystopia in much the same way as *Ghostwritten* dwells on Aum Shinrikyo, as a meditation on a closed societal structure, in comparison with other places and moments in which individual agency seems, to varying degrees, relatively free. The novel's complex historical frame makes the "corpocracy" a transitory and hence incomplete map of *Cloud Atlas*'s world, which the novel understands as both spatial organization and historical process. Moreover, the novel takes its distance from the dystopia by treating it explicitly as a

genre: in addition to borrowing its plot structure from *1984*, “Orison” alludes directly, through the name of the character Dr. Mephi, to Evgeny Zamyatin’s *We* (1921) and borrows its narrative of language discovery from Ayn Rand’s *Anthem* (1938). The text of “Orison” becomes a sacred relic to the future primitive society in the final episode within *Cloud Atlas*, where the obsolete story of rebellion against the totalitarian state is activated as a myth. In so situating this *1984*-esque narrative, Mitchell effectively re-stages within his fiction the way in which *1984* has become a cultural myth for the Cold War era, where it is the forms of societal closure and restricted language that signal the obverse of democratic openness, evolution, and exchange.

In *Cloud Atlas*, the cult and totalitarian spaces of Papa Song’s and Nea So Copros share the same basic shape, a hermetic quality that signals the radical impossibility of agency. Within the “Orison” episode at least, this association between cult spaces and unfreedom replicates the ideological program of the Cold War sources Mitchell’s novel otherwise reworks. Conversely, within *Ghostwritten* Quasar and Aum Shinrikyo offer the opposite pole of agency panic, wherein the cult offers its members the possibility of sublime knowledge and importance. Alongside that display of agency panic, Sonmi and Quasar participate in visions of global simplicity—an all-powerful state and a doomsday scenario, respectively—that are belied by the very forms of the novels in which they appear. Just as Fredric Jameson described the conspiracy theory as the least sophisticated and most appealing concept of global connectedness—“the poor person’s cognitive mapping” (356)—*Ghostwritten* includes the doomsday cult as a limited cognitive map by contrast with the wider novel’s own vast and complex structure. In turn, *Cloud Atlas* encompasses that global community in historical motion, preserving within it the *topos* of the cult as an echo of Cold War-era totalizing narratives.

The two linked transitions these novels map out—from totalitarian state to cult, from totalizing conspiracy to the complex modeling of world systems—mark the post-Cold War era as one where institutional power and individual agency operate on scales that are both further-reaching and more limited. In this sense, while the content of these contemporary novels skews toward the realm of speculative fiction, their form might be best described as network realism. These novels make a project of describing complex worlds and their unfathomable contours while at the same time portraying characters who attempt to act within a world of which they have only partial knowledge. This emphasis on complexity, perhaps a way of bringing Trilling's liberal imagination up to date, is essentially anti-totalitarian and anti-fundamentalist in its political orientation. It also brings to the fore the kinds of partial and networked agency that are difficult but necessary to describe—indeed, in both novels, many characters' actions have wholly unintended, and unpredictable, effects on others who are far distant. In taking on that complexity, Mitchell encourages us to move beyond both a traditional liberal notion of individual freedom and the conspiracy theory's spectacle of absolute unfreedom. And yet, by including cults in his fiction, Mitchell—and Murakami alongside him—indulges in the representational appeal of non-democratic unfreedom and the spectacle of the controlled body. By taking readers inside the cult, the totalitarian state, and hybrids between the two, Mitchell and Murakami attempt to fill in what are perhaps the last spaces that are truly other, truly alien, in the contemporary moment.

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