



## World building *Nea So Copros*: power relations in David Mitchell's "An Orison of Sonmi-451"

بناء عالم 'نيا سو كوبروس': علاقات القوة في «أوريسون صونمي-451»  
لديفيد ميتشل

### La construction du monde de *Nea So Copros*: les relations de pouvoir dans «L'orison de Sonmi-451» de David Mitchell

Doctorante Lina Luiza Draa

University of Algiers 2, Faculty of Foreign Languages (Algeria)

Pr. Assia Kaced

University of Algiers 2, Faculty of Foreign Languages (Algeria)

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#### ملخص

يناقش هذا المقال بناء العالم الخيالي "أوريسون سونمي-451"، إحدى القصص المتشابكة في رواية أطلس السحاب لديفيد ميتشل. وبشكل أكثر تحديداً، فهو يدرس المؤسسات السياسية والمصنوعات والممارسات الثقافية التي تصورها المؤلف لنقل الأفكار الفلسفية الواردة في عمله. يركز هذا التحليل على مفاهيم السلطة السيادية والقوة الحيوية التي صاغها ميشيل فوكو وكيفية تنفيذها من قبل حكومة نيا سو كوبروس، وهي ديستوبيا مستقبلية تعتمد على الاستهلاك حيث تهيمن الشركات على الأفراد. وعكس ما ورد في سلطة فوكو بشأن عدم تعايش السيادية والسلطة الحيوية بشكل طبيعي، يطمح المقال إلى توضيح كيف أن الاستخدام المشترك لهاتين القوتين، والذي أصبح ممكناً من خلال الرخصة الإبداعية لبناء العالم الخيالي، يدين حتماً الطبقات الدنيا من السلطة إلى حياة العبودية والموت الفظيع.

الكلمات الدالة: "أوريسون سونمي-451": بناء عوالم خيالية. السلطة السيادية؛ الطاقة الحيوية. أدب المدينة الفاسدة.

#### Abstract

This paper discusses the construction of the fictional world of "An Orison of Sonmi-451", one of the interwoven stories of David Mitchell's novel *Cloud Atlas*. In particular, it examines the political institutions and cultural artefacts and practices invented by the author to convey the philosophical ideas embedded in his work.

The study is interested in the ideas of sovereign power and biopower as conceptualized by Michel Foucault and in how they are implemented by the government of Nea So Copros, a futuristic dystopia based on consumerism where corporations rule at the expense of individuals. Whereas in Foucault's history of power, sovereign power and biopower do not normally coexist, this paper aspires to demonstrate how the combined use of these two powers, made possible through the creative license of worldbuilding, ineluctably condemns the lower strata of the system, the fabricants, to a life enslavement and an atrocious demise.

**Keywords:** “An Orison of Sonmi-451”; worldbuilding; sovereign power; biopower; dystopia.

### Résumé

Cet article traite de la construction du monde fictif de « L'orison of Sonmi-451 », l'un des récits imbriqués du roman *Cloud Atlas* de David Mitchell. Plus particulièrement, il examine les institutions politiques et les artefacts et pratiques culturels inventés par l'auteur pour transmettre les idées philosophiques contenues dans son œuvre. Cette analyse s'intéresse aux concepts de pouvoir souverain et de biopouvoir formulés par Michel Foucault et à la façon dont ils sont mis en place par le gouvernement de Nea So Copros, une dystopie futuriste basée sur la consommation où les entreprises règnent aux dépens des individus. Alors que dans son histoire du pouvoir, le pouvoir souverain et le biopouvoir de Foucault ne coexistent pas naturellement, cet article aspire à démontrer comment l'utilisation combinée de ces deux pouvoirs, rendue possible grâce à la licence créative de la construction de mondes de fiction, condamne inéluctablement les couches inférieures du système, les androïdes, à une vie d'esclavage et à une mort atroce.

**Mots-clés:** «L'orison of Sonmi-451»; construction de mondes de fiction; pouvoir souverain; biopouvoir; dystopie.

### Introduction

“An Orison of Sonmi-451” is part of the web of stories that constitute the intricate narrative fabric of David Mitchell's novel *Cloud Atlas*. As a work of dystopian science fiction, “Sonmi” stands out from the rest of the storylines of the book in that it presents extensive and sophisticated worldbuilding. The particular aspects of worldbuilding under scrutiny in this paper are the political philosophy and institutions as well as the cultural practices and artifacts invented by the author. These are studied through the lens of Foucault's concepts of power: sovereign power and biopower.



## 1. Worldbuilding

Worldbuilding refers to the purposeful construction of fictional environments, or secondary worlds, that are markedly different from the primary world, i.e. our own reality. Worldbuilding is more often found in genres of speculative fiction such as fantasy, science fiction, dystopias, and utopias. Although worldbuilding gravitates around fiction literature and its outgrowths such as cinema and video games, one essential characteristic of worldbuilding is that it is a distinct process from that of storytelling (Wolf, 2012).

Worldbuilding scholar, Mark Wolf, specifies that “[r]ecognizing that the experience of a world is different and distinct from that of merely a narrative is crucial to seeing how worlds function apart from the narratives set within them...” (Wolf, 2012, *Toward a Theory of Imaginary Worlds*). The setting of a worldbuilding work has a sense of autonomous existence that arouses the audience’s interest and curiosity as to what might exist beyond the story (Wolf, 2012). This is the case of the secondary world in which the events of “Sonmi” unfold, namely the huge and economically powerful nation of Nea So Copros in South East Asia, which is possibly the last standing bastion of civilisation after an all-out nuclear conflict (Mitchell, 2004).

Making up imaginary places, or *paracosms* (Shone, 2022), is an in-built cognitive function active since our early years and the innate human ability to imagine hypothetical situations without playing them out which acts as a survival training (Wolf, 2012). This evolutionary function can be traced back to philosophy’s use of secondary worlds are thought experiments. Indeed, secondary invention introduces new ways of thinking. The liberty to create new structures allows secondary worlds to “embed and support philosophical ideas to an even greater extent than stories set in the Primary World” (Wolf, 2012, *Philosophy*).

One famous example of early worldbuilding is Kalliopolis, the ideal city constructed by Plato as a philosophical thought experiment in “The Republic” (Wolf, 2012). Through this secondary world, Plato proposes an alternative way of living by resetting the conditions and parameters of human society, explains Wolf. Similarly, *Cloud Atlas* as a whole can be seen as a philosophical contemplation on the meaning of life and the relationships that bind humanity together, but “Sonmi” in particular comes across as a philosophical thought experiment. Its highly speculative nature lends itself to commentaries of political philosophy.



In much alternative world fiction of the turn of the twentieth century, science fiction and fantasy mixed freely (Wolf, 2012). However, contrary to fantasy's remote and optimistic worlds, science fiction would integrate contemporary issues and concerns (Wolf, 2012). Therefore, British science fiction of the period 1920-1950 was marked by pessimistic speculation about the future of the world and social development (Wolf, 2012). This disillusionment and loss of faith in civilization is explained by the devastating experience of the Great War, the catastrophic economic crisis, and the looming menace of another global conflict. Because it is a work of dystopian science fiction, "Sonmi" is more in tune with the Western zeitgeist, and expresses concerns about issues such as savage capitalism, racism, the march of progress, the rise of AI and post-human technology, and many more.

If for a majority of authors, the tools of traditional storytelling are adequate to convey the ideas embedded in their works, some writers resort to tools and strategies that are only available through worldbuilding (Wolf, 2012). Thus, by inventing specifically tailored cultures, writers are able to meet their narrative needs without being burdened by the weight of an existing culture since all the aspects of the world are designed to accommodate the narrative fabric (Wolf, 2012). This is the case of "Sonmi's" specially designed Nea So Copros, a futuristic dystopian society dominated by corporations and where the population is divided into naturally-born pure-blood consumers and enslaved clones (Mitchell, 2012).

Among the specific techniques used in worldbuilding is *invention*, which indicates the changes brought by the author to the default parameters of the primary world (Wolf, 2012) as well as the new elements imagined for the secondary world. One area in which invention can occur is the *nominal realm* in which the writer may give new names to existing things to draw attention to specific aspects of familiar things, or they may develop new concepts entirely. However, the *cultural realm* is where most changes occur, and it consists of artefacts and practices and includes new objects, technologies, customs, ideas, countries, institutions and much more (Wolf, 2012).

Examples of such inventions in the nominal and cultural realms are abundant in "Sonmi". For instance, the citizens or pure-bloods of Nea So Copros also a 'Soul' (Mitchell, 2004). Mitchell reimaged this concept as a computer chip connected to an individual bank account and which is implanted in their index finger and allows them to travel 'freely' and make financial transactions while being monitored by the Corporation. Furthermore, in



this savage consumer-driven society, each citizen is under constant surveillance and has a compulsory spending quota.

Constituting the lower strata of society are the genetically altered or 'genomed' clones, called 'fabricants' who are manufactured for specific tasks such as serving food and cleaning up radioactive water. Unlike pure-bloods, the fabricant servants have no 'Souls', only necklaces to control them and a subcutaneous identification bar code implanted in their neck (Mitchell, 2004).

Storyworlds, as alien as they may seem, are in a way versions or variations of our own; they always retain familiar aspects of the primary worlds that allow the reader to relate to the fictional universe (Wolf, 2012). This is because regardless of the amount and degree of worldbuilding involved, the basic elements and mechanisms of a storyworld are always reminiscent of those of the primary world (Wolf, 2012). The secondary world remains epistemologically accessible in the sense that it is comprehensible and conceivable by the readers or the audience. Thus, the changes, or invention, brought to a secondary world must reflect and correspond to situations in the primary world by making connections to the audience's own lived experience (Wolf, 2012). Thus, the reader uses his world knowledge to understand the story as well as the storyworld and also comes up with reflections, conclusions, and lessons drawn from his reading and applicable in the real world.

Another important worldbuilding technique is the use of *infrastructures*, also known as *structures*, or *frameworks* (Wolf, 2012). These are systems and devices that help both writer and audience to organize the diverse pieces of information about the world into a coherent whole. They allow the audience to situate "individual facts and details into the larger contexts needed for them to be fully understood" (Wolf, 2012, *World Structures and Systems of Relationships*). Frameworks range from the most concrete and material aspects of a secondary world to its more metaphysical. Infrastructures can be maps, timelines, economic systems, political institutions and much more (Wolf, 2012). On a more abstract level, *philosophy* is a framework that includes the ideology of the characters but also that of the author through the world's structure and events (Wolf, 2012).

The main concern of this study is the analysis of higher-order worldbuilding, in particular the overriding political philosophy that shapes and dictates the life and death of fabricants as artifacts/ beings in the constructed world of



Nea So Copros. The study relies on the two concepts of *sovereign power* and *biopower* as formulated by Michel Foucault. In this enquiry, emphasis is placed on worldbuilding inventions and frameworks such as artifacts, institutions, as well as cultural, religious, and economic practices that help convey the nature of this system of oppression.

## 2. The Political Philosophy of “An Orison of Sonmi-451”

The two political concepts most evidently on display in “Sonmi” are sovereign power and biopower. They represent two historical stages in the development of the prerogative of the ruler (the monarch or the government) as to the existence of their subjects. They define the nature and extend of the ruler’s control over and intervention in the life (and death) of the governed. Here the two concepts are discussed in relation to the invisible government of Nea So Copros’s exploitation of the fabricants.

Sovereign power is the implementation of the monarch’s authority through the “instrumental use of law” (Lichtenstein, 2022, p. 117). It hinges on the division between legality and illegality and makes all forms of submission reducible to obedience to the law (Lichtenstein, 2022). Power in this case is “limited to the punishment of legal transgression” (Lichtenstein, 2022, p. 117).

Biopower, for its part, is a form of political power that “revolves around populations (humans as a species or as productive capacity) rather than individuals (humans as subjects or citizens)” (Buchanan, 2010). It is implemented by the nameless bureaucrats and policy-makers who actually run governments and is concerned with increasing and maintaining the power of the state (Buchanan, 2010). The population is considered a resource, the biology of which is studied in order to develop the capacity of humans as machines by disciplining their bodies (Buchanan, 2010) through mechanisms and institutions such as health systems, schools, bureaucracy, laws, surveys and statistics. Biopower can be seen as “the set of mechanisms through which the basic biological features of the human species became the subject of a political strategy, of a general strategy of power” (Then & Now, 2019, p.5-10).

Foucault identifies the shift from the classical juridical-legal or sovereign power to the modern form of biopower in the 17thC century, as a shift from a right to administer death to a power over life (Taylor, 2011). While sovereign power enabled the king or queen to “take life or let live”, biopower is the power “to foster life or disallow it to the point of death” (Foucault). Taylor explains how:



*...[u]nder sovereign power death was ritualized as the moment of passing from one sovereign authority to the next [that of God]. Death was the ultimate expression of the sovereign's power and was made into a public spectacle whenever this power needed to be affirmed. In contrast, under biopower, death is the moment in which we escape power. (Taylor, 2011, pp. 48-49)*

Biopower, then, is a power "working to incite, reinforce, control, monitor, optimize, and organize the forces under it: a power bent on generating forces, making them grow, and ordering them, rather than one dedicated to impeding them, making them submit, or destroying them" (Foucault).

Historically, deductive and violent sovereign power was gradually complemented and partly replaced by biopower, a form of power that has a 'positive' influence on life, "that endeavors to administer, optimize, and multiply it, subjecting it to precise controls and comprehensive regulations" (Foucault, 1978, p. 137).

As Gutting and Oksala explain: "[m]echanisms of power and knowledge have assumed responsibility for the life process in order to optimize, control, and modify it. The exercise of power over living beings no longer carries the threat of death, but instead takes charge of their lives" (Gutting and Oksala, 2018, p.3-5). Unanimity -the dominant government of the constructed universe of "Sonmi's" Neo So Copros-, however, oppresses and controls fabricant through their simultaneous and morbid use of both sovereign power and biopower (Mitchell, 2004).

## 2.1 Sovereign Power

Although not as striking and prevalent in "Sonmi" as biopower, sovereign power is one of the main instruments used by Unanimity, the hidden and anonymous ruling body of Nea So Copros, to subjugate fabricants and use them as unremunerated working hands (Mitchell, 2004). Gutting and Oksala explain that "[s]overeign power was historically based on violence i.e. the right to kill. It was a deductive power that appropriated a portion of the nation's wealth, imposing a tax on products, goods and services, or by demanding a portion of the subjects' time, strength, and ultimately life itself" (Gutting and Oksala, 2018, p.3-5). The evolution of the right to kill is explored in the next section. What is particularly relevant to the use of sovereign power in "Sonmi" is the prerogative of demanding labour from the population.



A number of worldbuilding elements are put in place in order to explore the concept of sovereign power in “Sonmi”. Clones or fabricants are humanoids created to perform service functions (Mitchell, 2004). One such fabricant is [Sonmi-451](#), a former dinery waitress who achieves ‘ascension’ or enlightenment and joins the insurgents’ Union to rebel against Unanimity. At the beginning of the story Sonmi works at Papa Song's, a futuristic fast food restaurant in Neo Seoul, where the clones take orders, clean up the dining room, and serve the food but receive no salary in return. They are housed at the restaurant, work nineteen-hour shifts, and never see natural sunlight. In this dystopian secondary world, the king is replaced by the Corporation and the Unanimity government that exact the fabricants time and labour (Mitchell, 2004).

During her interrogation by a Unanimity archivist after her eventual arrest, Sonmi testifies how “[o]nly purebloods are entitled to “rests” ... For fabricants, “rests” would be an act of time theft. Until curfew at hour zero, every minute must be devoted to the service and enrichment of Papa Song” (Mitchell, 2004, An Orison of Sonmi-451). When discussing the outcome of a possible fabricant rebellion with the archivist, Sonmi affirms that Corpocracy is entirely dependent on fabricant labour and she wonders “[w]ho would work factory lines? Process sewage? Feed fish farms? Xtract oil and coal? Stokereactors? Construct buildings? Serve in dineries? Xtinguish fires? Man the cordon? Fill Exxon tanks? Lift, dig, pull, push?” (Mitchell, 2004, An Orison of Sonmi-451).

Fabricants are so vital to the capitalist Corpocracy that they are basically put in chains and branded like slaves as they all wear an identification collar and a subcutaneous bar code. In order to keep the fabricants further under their yoke, Unanimity mixes an ‘amnesiad’ into Soap -the fabricants liquid food- to keep them from asking questions about the outside world, maintain them in a dazed state, take away their free-will, and thus turn them into docile servants (Mitchell, 2004).

As gruesome as it is, the exercise of sovereign power in Foucault’s theory as well as in “Sonmi” has its limits. Taylor points out that “[s]overeign power is a power which deduces; it is the right to take away not only life but wealth, services, labour and products (Taylor, 2011, p. 41). Taylor clarifies that sovereign power’s only impact power over life is “to seize that life, to end, impoverish or enslave it; what it does not seize it leaves alone. Sovereign





power's right over life is merely the right of subtraction, not of regulation or control (Taylor, 2011, p. 42).

Thomas Hobbes as well as Foucault argue that sovereign power is “a juridico-legal power to kill which leaves the daily life of the body alone” (Taylor, 2011, p43). Taylor (2011) explains that according to Hobbes “it would be ludicrous for a sovereign to attempt to regulate the corporeal dimensions of a subject's existence” (p42). Hobbes deems “corporeal aspects of life such as dwelling (abode), desires (what we want to purchase and consume), the care of the body (diet), and childcare and education to be outside of the interests of the sovereign and hence free” while Foucault considers these aspects as some of the privileged loci of the mechanisms of biopower (Taylor, 2011, p. 43).

In “Sonmi” however, the mechanisms of power are more in line with Adams' interpretation that argues that “[i]mportantly, biopower did not *replace* repressive and deductive functions of power, but worked together with such technologies of power” (Adams, 2017). Indeed, in “Sonmi”, Unanimity and the Corporation continue exploiting the labour of fabricants while also thoroughly controlling their daily life, bodies, and biological functions during their entire life cycle up until their death through the perverted and gruesome use of biopower (Mitchell, 2004).

## 2.2 Biopower

In her discussion of biopower, Taylor points out that

*...[p]ower would no longer be dealing simply with legal subjects over whom the ultimate dominion was death, but with living beings, and the mastery it would be able to exercise over them would have to be applied at the level of life itself: it was the taking charge of life, more than the threat of death, that gave power its access even to the body.* (Taylor, 2011, p. 43)

Foucault explains this will to control bodies and maintains that “[t]his biopower was without question an indispensable element in the development of capitalism’ which made possible ‘the controlled insertion of bodies into the machinery of production and the adjustment of the phenomena of population to economic processes’ (Foucault, 1978, p.140) which is precisely what the Corporation and the Unanimity government do to fabricants (Mitchell, 2014). In “Sonmi”, three features of biopower in particular stand out: its link to the Church, its control of biological functions, and its incorporation of state racism.



### 2.2.1. Biopower and Organized Religion

In her discussion of Foucault's political thought, Kelly explains how

*...the main precursor to biopolitics can be found in the Church, which is the institution that did maintain records of births and deaths, and did minister to the poor and sick, in the medieval period. In the modern period, the perception grew among governments that interventions in the life of the people would produce beneficial consequences for the state, preventing depopulation, ensuring a stable and growing tax base, and providing a regular supply of manpower for the military. (Kelly, 7)*

Western states inherited biopower from the Church that not only dictates dos and don'ts -catechisms-, but aims to know people's mind –through confession- and direct desire and thoughts (Then & Now, 2019, 07:15).

The power of the 'church' in "Sonmi" is omnipresent. The whole story is actually an account of the events by Sonmi, the rebel fabricant, being interrogated by an Archivist, a government official, after she is arrested by Unanimity (Mitchell, 2004). Rather than a testimony, Sonmi's interview is more akin to a religious confession. The Archivist inquires about the slightest details of Sonmi's deepest thoughts, actions, and motivations. But more importantly, he wants her so confess her 'sins', that is the crimes committed against the state during her rebellion (Mitchell, 2004).

The presence of the 'church' is embodied in a number of worldbuilding inventions inserted by the author. At the beginning of the story, Sonmi works at a Papa Song diner (Mitchell, 2004). Papa Song is one of Logomen: mascots who dub as spiritual leaders of the major corporations of Neo So Corpo. The fabricants of the diner devote a cult to their Logoman, Papa Song, and worship him like a god, following his teachings blindly, even though he is dressed as a clown. They are even promised a heaven, a retirement in a Hawaiian island, by Papa Song after twelve year of loyal service. Sonmi explains how "Catechism Three teaches that for servers to keep anything denies Papa Song's love for us and cheats His Investment" (Mitchell, 2004, An Orison of Sonmi-451). The capitalized pronoun referring to Papa Song highlights deity status, while in reality he is only a holographic projection and not even an actual person (Mitchell, 2004). Sonmi's comment shows how blindly fabricants worship him and follow his teachings blindly.

When Sonmi describes the morning routine at Papa Song's, she says how "[their] seer and aides gather [them] around Papa's Plinth for Matins, [and



they] recite the Six Catechisms, then [their] beloved Logoman appears and delivers his Sermon” (Mitchell, 2004, An Orison of Sonmi-451). She also explains her reaction after a fellow servant, Yoona, secretly starts her ascension - chemically induced enlightenment- and shows signs of deviance rebellion, saying that she, Sonmi, was “not the *evildoer*... Moreover, [she] was scared of being destarred for failing to *judas* Yoona to Seer Rhee. [She] *prayed* to Papa Song to heal [her] friend...” (Mitchell, 2004, An Orison of Sonmi-451).

The terms emphasized above and others used by Sonmi, such as: Matins - morning prayers-, Catechisms, Vespers -evening prayers-, and Sermon all unequivocally point to a religious Christian-like organization (Mitchell, 2004). This latter aims at taming fabricants through their consent instead of using brute physical force to stop them from leaving the diner.

Indeed, biopower does not necessarily affect people physically, like pointing a gun at them, but controls possible future actions, possibilities and choices. Biower is an action upon an action, it constrains and encourages “a total structure of actions brought to bear upon possible actions; it incites, it induces, it seduces, it makes easier or more difficult; in the extreme it constrains or forbids absolutely; it is nevertheless a way of acting upon an acting subject” by structuring the possible field of action of others (Then & Now, 2019, 09:26). In the case of “Sonmi”’s fabricants, Papa Song’s religious teachings aided by constant surveillance in the diner and administered by the Seer -manager- (Mitchell, 2004) all help the impose this soft but insidious power.

### 2.2.2. Biopower and the Control of Biological Functions

The dystopian setting of “Sonmi”, Nea So Copros, is that of a corporatist society gone awry where cloned humans are forced to work as slaves (Mitchell, 2004). As such, it offers an opportunity to reflect on the link between capitalism, biopower, and the control of (fabricant) bodies. Foucault claims that under biopower, supervision “was effected through an entire series of interventions and regulatory controls that aimed to “increase the body’s usefulness and its docility” (Foucault, 1978, 139).

He believed that biopower and Capitalism are closely linked and wrote that biopower not only “operated in the sphere of economic processes”, but that it “was without question an indispensable element in the development of Capitalism (Adams, 2017, Genealogy of Biopower). Biopolitical rationality is thus linked with the development of capitalism wherein the bourgeoisie



took over the disciplinary mechanisms of power as “a technology for the production of docile bodies for capitalist labour” (Adams, 2017, Genealogy of Biopower).

Kelly comments on how:

*...[s]ex was the most intense site at which discipline and biopolitics intersected, because any intervention in population via the control of individual bodies fundamentally had to be about reproduction, and also because sex is one of the major vectors of disease transmission. Sex had to be controlled, regulated, and monitored if the population was to be brought under control. (Kelly, 7)*

“Sonmi” pushes this idea to extremes; fabricants, though still humans of flesh and blood, are created without sex organs and are ‘grown’ in tanks (Mitchell, 2004). Sonmi gives the following account of her visit to one of the fabricant nurseries:

*The tangled, stringy broth I saw through the tanks’ viewing windows concealed their contents, for a moment. Then individual limbs and hands came into focus, nascent, identical faces.... We were in a genomics unit. I watched the clusters of embryo fabricants suspended in uterine gel; I was witnessing my own origin... The embryos I was looking at had been designed to labor in uranium tunnels under the Yellow Sea. Their saucerlike eyes were genomed for darkness. In fact, they go insane if xposed to brite unfiltered daylight. Us. Fabricants. We cost almost nothing to manufacture and have no awkward hankerings for a better, freer life. We conveniently xpire after forty-eight hours without a specialized Soap and so cannot run away. We are perfect organic machinery. (Mitchell, 2004, An Orison of Sonmi-451)*

After the fabricants are oriented to a specific corporation, their lives and bodies follow a strict routine and are kept under tight control. This is apparent in Sonmi’s description of a typical day at Papa Song’s where she details how fabricants are “woken at hour four-thirty by stimulin in the airflow, then yellow-up in [their] dormroom. After a minute in the hygiener and steamer, [they] put on fresh uniforms before filing into the restaurant...” (Mitchell, 2004, An Orison of Sonmi-451).

She goes on to describe their typical work day where for “nineteen hours [they] greet diners, input orders, tray food, vend drinks, upstock condiments, wipe tables, and bin garbage. Vespers follows cleaning, then



[they] imbibe one Soap sac in the dormroom. That is the blueprint of every unvarying day” (Mitchell, 2004, An Orison of Sonmi-451). The fabricants natural biological functions like sleeping and eating are hijacked and artificially manipulated for maximum efficiency and profitability. For instance, fabricants cannot wakeup without stimulin, and Soap, a liquid food source genetically engineered to suppress fabricant intelligence, promote docility and hinder intellectual development (Mitchel 2004).

Fabricants slave for various corporations until their owners have no more use for them (Mitchell, 2004). Then, in an ultimate act of commodification and objectification, they are disposed of in the most morbid way possible: they are killed and their bodies are recycled. Sonmi witnesses this horrid moment on a fabricant slaughter ship and describes it as follows:

*A slaughterhouse production line lay below us, manned by figures wielding scissors, sword saws, and various tools of cutting, stripping, and grinding. The workers were bloodsoaked, from head to toe. I should properly call those workers butchers: they snipped off collars, stripped clothes, shaved follicles, peeled skin, offcut hands and legs, sliced off meat, spooned organs... drains hoovered the blood ...* (Mitchell, 2004, An Orison of Sonmi-451)

Sonmi explains Unanimity’s devious reasoning behind this literal slaughter:

*The economics of corpocracy the genomics industry demands huge quantities of liquefied biomatter, for wombtanks, but most of all, for Soap. What cheaper way to supply this protein than by recycling fabricants who have reached the end of their working lives? Additionally, leftover “reclaimed proteins” are used to produce Papa Song food products, eaten by consumers in the corp’s dineries all over Nea So Copros. It is a perfect food cycle.* (Mitchell, 2004, An Orison of Sonmi-451)

The afore-mentioned biopower practices and techniques only foster life to better exploit it. They are meant to organize the activity of the fabricant population so the operation of the corporation runs smoothly. By treating the body as a dehumanized machine, the Unanimity can impose methods that are productive but violate the bodies and the humanity of fabricants.

### 2.2.3. Who Should Die? Biopower and State Racism

According to Foucault, biopolitics and sovereign power are incompatible (Kelly, 7). He referred to sovereign power and biopolitics and thanatopolitics as the politics of death and the politics of life respectively (Kelly, 7). The latter



is a form of power that works by helping people to live, the former by killing them, or at best allowing them to live (Kelly, 7). Thus, it would be theoretically impossible then for any individual to be simultaneously under the influence of both forces (Kelly, 7).

However, Kelly highlights the fact that the group of people allowed to live must be clearly differentiated from the group of people destined to be killed or simply let to perish (Kelly, 7). Kelly adds that “[t]he most obvious dividing line is the boundary between the population and its outside at the border of a territory, but the “biopolitical border,”... is not the same as the territorial border” (Kelly, p. 7) He further says that “[i]n Society Must Be Defended, Foucault suggests there is a device he calls “state racism,” that comes variably into play in deciding who is to receive the benefits of biopolitics or be exposed to the risk of death. (Kelly, p. 7)

Kelly clarifies that:

*...[t]he essential point about “state racism” is not then that it necessarily links to what we might ordinarily understand as racism in its strict sense, but that there has to be a dividing line in modern biopolitical states between what is part of the population and what is not, and that this is, in a broad sense, racist. (Kelly, 7)*

This demarcation line between the two different population groups is integrated in the worldbuilding of Neo So Copros. Right from the beginning of the story, the reader is made to understand that there are fundamental differences between pureblood consumers and cloned fabricants, and that the former are much higher up in the social order, while the latter are treated like disposable bodies to be slaughtered and recycled after they are no longer serviceable (Mitchell, 2004). Sonmi points out that fabricants are widely believed not to have a personality, but that it is mere wishful thinking on the part of the free citizens as dehumanizing fabricants makes it easier and more acceptable to enslave and mistreat them.

However, even though they are genetically engineered, fabricants are not robots or cyborgs; they are flesh and blood humans. Nonetheless, they are othered and commodified by Unanimity and purebloods to rationalize their exploitation and mass killing. As expressed by Sonmi “[t]o enslaves an individual troubles your consciences...but to enslave a clone is no more troubling than owning the latest six-wheeler ford, ethically. Because you



cannot discern our differences, you believe we have none” (Mitchell, 2004, *An Orison of Sonmi-451*).

Foucault argues that biopower is bound to be racist, since racism, in broad terms, is a necessary precondition that grants the state the power to kill and justifies the eradication of sub-groups under the pretext of protecting a people (Foucault, 1990, 2003 as cited in Taylor, 2011, p50). Foucault writes that “[i]f genocide is indeed the dream of modern powers, this is not because of a recent return of the ancient right to kill, it is because power is situated and exercised at the level of life, the species, the race, and the large-scale phenomena of population” (Foucault).

In “Sonmi”, fabricants are supposedly granted a retirement in a Hawaiian island after 12 years of service (Mitchell, 2004). This, however, is a deception orchestrated by Unanimity and the Corporation. Instead of the promised tropical paradise, fabricants are taken to slaughter ships where they are made to wear special helmets that remove their collar to and free them. When Sonmi sneaks into one of these ships, she witnesses the gruesome end her fellow fabricants meet. Instead of the long-awaited island retirement, fabricants are taken to be slaughtered like cattle on a mechanical conveyor rail while workers Hoover and clean their blood (Mitchell, 2004). In accordance with state racism, the entire fabricant population is mobilized for slaughter in the name of economic necessity. Their massacre has become a vital part of the corporatist system.

## Conclusion

This brief analysis has revealed how the configuration of worldbuilding inventions such as the fabricant factory and slaughterhouse, the fabricants’ necklaces and bar code, Soap, the Papa Song cult, the Unanimity government, and many more is used to depict how one segment of the Neo So Copros population, namely the fabricants (Mitchell, 2004), is abused and subjugated through the joined use of sovereign power and biopower. While sovereign power is exercised to extract unpaid labour from the fabricants and reduces them to slavery, biopower artificially manipulates and controls their bodies.

Fabricants’ biological functions are tempered with since their conception and manipulated for maximum economic gain. In addition, a church-like organization instils teachings into fabricants to keep them docile and obedient of their own accord without the need to resort to brute force. By virtue of their externally-inflicted biological differences, fabricants are



eventually sent for slaughter in order maintain the efficiency of the capitalist economic cycle.

The dystopian worldbuilding in “Sonmi” is employed to comment on certain issues such as the danger of oppressive political systems, the loss of individuality and critical thinking, and the drawbacks of mass consumption, mass production, and unhinged capitalism. Even though the secondary world of “Sonmi” may seem bizarre and far removed from our reality, it can nonetheless ring true. As a philosophical thought experiment and exercise in worldbuilding, it resonates with the reader who is bound to draw parallels with the contemporary Western lifestyle. In this sense, “An Orison of Sonmi-451” is a cautionary tale against current political and economic trends.

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