

Article

From Orison to Scripture: Mediated Testimony and Religious Authority in David Mitchell's *Cloud Atlas*

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Abstract

Cloud Atlas (2004) presents a process of religious genesis. This genesis is set against the backdrop of the retreat of stable institutions and recoverable origins, gradually taking shape at the far end of a broken transmission chain. Existing criticism has tended to examine this novel's nested form separately from Sonmi-451's posthumous sanctification. This article connects these lines of inquiry by reading the orison as a witness medium within a broken chain of narrative transmission. Along this chain, Ewing's Pacific diary establishes a compromised model of institutional Christianity, in which faith gains public effectiveness from conversionist rhetoric. This damaged state of institutional religion constitutes a reverse baseline prior to the formation of Sonmi's testimony as a witness medium. Sonmi's interrogation in Nea So Copros records political speech as testimony, giving material form to a condemned voice and supporting it to survive beyond her execution at the end of her world. Zachry's post-apocalyptic valley receives this damaged medium, whose legal grammar has vanished from local memory, but the loss of this grammar does not bring reception to an end. In this context, Meronym's historical interpretation of Sonmi's origin intensifies the pressure on devotional allegiance, with sacred use first persisting in prayer and ritual space, then entering the cradle-side oral narrative. The novel's nested design allows the reader to move across separate storyworlds. Only in this cross-world position can the reader juxtapose the state-recorded testimony with its afterlife as an object of prayer. Thus, religion as a communal claim is formed under semantic loss and becomes clearly visible only from the reader's cross-world position.

Keywords: *Cloud Atlas*; orison; mediated testimony; nested narrative transmission; scripture-like authority; post-apocalyptic reception



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1. Introduction

In *Cloud Atlas*, religion stands at the receiving end of damaged transmission. In this novel, a preserved voice acquires enduring meaning after it is detached from its political origins. Many twentieth- and twenty-first-century speculative narratives have removed religion from stable church institutions. Religion hereafter begins to attach itself to surviving objects, and also to stories formed through repeated practice after the collapse of institutions. Hrotic's research on religion in science fiction describes one form of this shift. His research shows that meta-narratives of speculative futures in science fiction, shaped by scientific rationality, technological imagination, and a decline in confidence in scientific utopianism, place religion back within a changing social field (Hrotic 2014, pp. 169–70). Dystopian and

post-apocalyptic novels push this question further by placing religious formation in post-apocalyptic worlds. There, governance has failed, and knowledge circulates in fragmented forms. Advanced technology survives as weathered remnants, whose uses and origins are only partially understood by post-apocalyptic communities. Furthermore, Berger's research on post-apocalyptic representations suggests that surviving societies read the past by means of surviving traces (Berger 1999, pp. 19–20). Thrall explains how sacred texts, surviving media, and interpretive communities collectively generate religious authority (Thrall 2016, pp. 344, 350). Aldemir and Ataseven's analysis of Herbert's *Dune* provides a useful contrast. In *Dune*, religion is a pre-designed and implanted control system driven by imperial engineering (Aldemir and Ataseven 2026, pp. 1, 8–9). By contrast, Mitchell's novel unfolds a different narrative process. It traces how material fragments and preserved speech are passed from one broken narrative layer to another. After these objects and traces are separated from their original social environment, receiving communities fold them into religious practice. In the novel, belated reception means that material survival precedes doctrinal stability.

Cloud Atlas builds its nested design around this post-apocalyptic problem by linking six stories across distinct historical and future worlds. Since its publication in 2004, the novel has drawn critical attention in relation to global history, narrative form, and imaginations of the future. The novel spans from nineteenth-century Pacific voyages to Nea So Copros, a future corporate state built on the labor of cloned service workers called fabricants, and finally to a post-apocalyptic Hawaii, using six linked layers to organize colonial violence, capitalist economy, consumer society, the corporate state, and civilizational collapse. The six stories are arranged in a nested sequence. The outer five stories open one after another, reach the innermost layer by way of Zachry's oral story, and close again in reverse order.

Each story is received by the following layer by means of a material medium. In the novel, Ewing's Pacific diary is read by Frobisher, Frobisher's letters are taken up in Luisa Rey's narrative, Luisa's story arrives in Cavendish's layer as a manuscript, Cavendish's experience is remade as the film watched by Sonmi, whose testimony as a condemned fabricant is recorded in an orison, a silver device that preserves her voice and image, and Zachry's oral tale passes this fragmented memory to the listeners who inherit his story. Zachry's world is set after civilizational collapse in a Hawaiian valley, where Sonmi's name has become divine for the Valleysmen, and the orison survives as a silver object. The sequence of journal, letters, manuscript, film, orison, and oral tale passes each story to the next world in altered material form. These media move story material across separated storyworlds. O'Donnell's discussion of narrative mediation, reception, and temporal recurrence reads this mediated design as Mitchell's way of binding past and future across separated narrative layers (O'Donnell 2015, pp. 82–83, 95–96). Each transfer across layers occurs in a new linguistic and material setting, so the movement between storyworlds becomes the basis on which belated religious reception develops. The narrative of the past undergoes formal deformation and contextual detachment at each passage between layers.

In this sequence of media, the orison marks a point at which the transmitted narrative begins to raise questions about its religious use in a post-apocalyptic world. Earlier media alter the form of the stories, but their recipients can still understand the language and recognize the media themselves. This allows them to place these materials within a generally comprehensible context. They still have room to question these materials, suspend judgment, or reinterpret them. With the orison, Sonmi's voice and image from the official testimony arrive in Zachry's post-apocalyptic valley. The orison preserves a recorded statement that has been detached from its original prosecutorial setting. This paper focuses on how a recorded political testimony is ultimately accepted as religious authority.

Across Mitchell's fiction, the boundaries of individual novels are frequently re-opened in subsequent texts. Windberger characterizes Mitchell's oeuvre as an "Über-book," and her study of recurring characters and family lines across his novels shows how individual works form parts of a larger fictional network (Windberger 2021, pp. 102, 121). In this sense, *Ghostwritten* (Mitchell 1999) marks an early experiment in form, as its discrete narratives ask readers to connect separated storyworlds through delayed recognition. *Cloud Atlas* tightens this sequential relationship into a six-part nested structure, so that each story reaches a later world by means of a material medium. *The Thousand Autumns of Jacob de Zoet* (Mitchell 2010) extends this cross-book network into historical fiction, and later works continue character and family lines associated with Jacob de Zoet. *The Bone Clocks* (Mitchell 2014) makes this shared fictional universe more explicit by gathering figures and conflicts from Mitchell's earlier works across a wider temporal frame. In this wider context, *Cloud Atlas* occupies a distinctive position within Mitchell's fiction. It compresses Mitchell's cross-book logic into a single novel in which connection becomes a chain of media transmission and a narrative condition for religious authority.

Existing research on *Cloud Atlas* generally follows two paths. One focuses on discussing Mitchell's experimentation on narrative design. In the essay collection *David Mitchell: Critical Essays*, Childs and Green analyze how this novel organizes its six stories through an interwoven design that connects narrative segmentation with a larger scale of human history (Childs and Green 2011, pp. 29, 34). Hicks discusses its treatment of apocalyptic historicism (Hicks 2016, p. 55), while Bayer connects the novel's anachronistic structure and historical simultaneity to the omnipresence of the apocalyptic (Bayer 2015, pp. 346, 348). Dimovitz examines the role of subjectivity and silence in narrative from the perspectives of eschatology and language limits (Dimovitz 2015, pp. 71–72). These studies all trace the novel's formal architecture in detail, but with less attention to the religious functions that develop across the media chain.

The second critical approach focuses on the sanctification of Sonmi after her death and the post-secular implications of this process. Harris-Birtill discusses the post-secular world and issues of faith in Mitchell's novels, pointing out that Mitchell's work consistently addresses spiritual needs and religious remnants within a secular context (Harris-Birtill 2019, pp. 16–17). Diamant's research is closest to the present study. She traces Sonmi's post-death existence, explaining how the holographic image acquires a sustained embodied form in technological archives, Icon'ry, and orison viewing, summarizing this media-preserved continuity as archival embodiment and cyber afterlife (Diamant 2018, pp. 218–20, 223–26). However, simply stating that Sonmi becomes visible still fails to explain her status as an omnipresent figure of worship. Most existing research treats the novel's narrative chain and Sonmi's post-death existence as two separate issues. Referring to her as the god of the Valleysmen merely states the end of the novel's religious arc. What still needs to be asked is how an officially recorded testimony, detached from its initial legal context, begins to exert religious authority within a post-apocalyptic community.

This question first concerns how a post-apocalyptic community claims continuity with a recorded voice from the past. In Hervieu-Léger's view, religion can be understood as a community's claim to continuity with a remembered source (Hervieu-Léger 2000, pp. 81–82). The Valleysmen's claim to continuity with Sonmi is embodied in a series of ongoing practices. At this point, the history of Sonmi's origin is difficult to reconstruct, but these practices still maintain the community's connection to her. The ritualized invocation of Sonmi, by repeatedly recalling an authoritative past, gives this continuity a stable form (Hervieu-Léger 2000, pp. 124–25). Testimony theory further clarifies the earlier moment of address that makes such reception possible. Felman and Laub's discussion of testimonial speech clarifies the listener's position built into testimony at the moment of utterance

(Felman and Laub 1992, p. 57). Ricoeur's discussion of memory, history, and testimony specifies the evidentiary and ethical weight of this orison-bound address. For Ricoeur, testimony asks those who hear it to receive a speaker's statement as an ethical claim with evidentiary weight (Ricoeur 2004, pp. 164–65). Her statement reaches them as witness speech within a broken chain of memory.

The material form of witness speech becomes crucial when spoken testimony is separated from its original scene. Testimony is originally spoken. Once it takes material form, later recipients can return to the same sensory object across repeated acts of engagement. It is in this sense that it can be presented to the receiving community in a binding manner. The orison provides precisely this context. It preserves the speaker's statement in a silver object, and this object can be reopened after the official interrogation that produced the statement has ended. Meyer's discussion of mediation and the generation of presence suggests that religious presence relies on specific sensory conditions as it reaches the shared perception of the community (Meyer 2014, pp. 217–19). Morgan's research on religion and material culture understands faith as something that occurs within material and sensory life (Morgan 2010, pp. xiii–xiv, 5, 73). These two research approaches support an understanding of the orison as a witness medium. The material nature of the orison makes sacred reception of Sonmi's statement possible even before any doctrine has formed around it.

Across these frameworks, this article argues that mediated testimony acquires scripture-like authority through a broken chain of nested narrative transmission. Sonmi's death-bound testimony arises within the interrogation and execution mechanisms of Nea So Copros, takes material form in the orison, and persists after her death and the rupture of civilization. The argument of this article traces three stages of this process, starting from institutionalized faith to witness mediation and ultimately obtaining post-apocalyptic reception. Other intervening story layers in the novel are read as links in the media chain that connects these stages. Ewing's narrative of colonial Christianity first provides a contrast and baseline. It shows how institutionalized Christianity operates within visible social relations in the Pacific region. With the orison, the analysis shifts to the discourse and technological mediation of official interrogation. This paper traces how this discourse is shaped into a witness medium and explains how it subsequently acquires the conditions for reception elsewhere. Zachry's post-apocalyptic valley is the receiving end of this process. There, the shared practices surrounding the orison organize the veneration of Sonmi. Mitchell's nested structure thus treats religion as a reception problem across storyworlds. The words left behind by a speaker sentenced to death survive beyond the scene of the trial, outlast her execution, and ultimately support a receiving community's memory of the past.

2. Colonial Christianity and the Compromised Institutional Sacred in "The Pacific Journal of Adam Ewing"

The Ewing diary defines colonial Christianity by its institutional entanglement with village life under mission rule. At Raiatea, Christianity gains public effectiveness from the visible discipline, which is established by the Horrox mission in the daily life of the village. Ewing opposes violence against Indigenous peoples. In defending their lives, he speaks from an evangelical civilizing logic, so his humanitarian position inherits its limits. Goose goes on to articulate the limitations of this humanitarian stance in a more sobering way, setting the future of Indigenous peoples in advance within a timeline leading to extinction. In the Horrox couple's settlement, authority operates within the framework of daily life, and conversion is carried out through physical discipline and store credit. Christianity in Ewing's diary has institutional religion as its public shape, its power coming from the actual operation of conversionist rhetoric inside colonial space.

Inside this conversionist grammar, Ewing rejects the extermination of Indigenous peoples and uses creation theology to provide a basis for this opposition. In this passage, he writes that the colonists' mission should be "to civilize the Black races by conversion" and should reject "their extirpation," for "God's hand had crafted them, too" (Mitchell 2004, p. 16). This sentence binds protection to conversion in the same civilizing grammar. In it, "mission" casts imperial action as religious duty. "Civilize" carries that duty further, marking Indigenous peoples as subjects awaiting transformation. "Conversion" puts this transformation of indigenous people into the framework of soul salvation. At the end of the sentence, the final clause, "God's hand had crafted them, too," gives Indigenous lives value within a created world. In this way, Ewing's protest targets the most extreme forms of colonial violence and records his moral response to the injustices of the colonial setting. The protest, however, speaks in the language of mission, civilization, and conversion. As a result, the claim that Indigenous lives deserve protection and the demand for their transformation use the same vocabulary that Ewing has been using since his first protest. His humanitarian Christianity condemns colonial killing in a grammar that gives colonial transformation its authority.

Henry Goose follows Ewing's vocabulary, but within this grammar, he speaks more directly of a colder historical premise. Responding to Ewing, he speaks of these religious agents, saying their efforts "merely prolong a dying race's agonies for ten or twenty years" (Mitchell 2004, p. 16). "Dying race" defines the future of Indigenous peoples as a gradual process of extinction, with their intervention reduced to a brief delay in that process. Within this framework, their charity serves only to extend suffering for a short time. Ewing describes conversion as a way to preserve Indigenous lives, while Goose's response puts this act of charity within a timeline of extinction. Although their tones differ, both stem from an imperial imagination in which the future of Indigenous peoples is predetermined by external power. In this sense, "dying race" exposes the obscured racial temporality in Ewing's humanitarian protest.

In Horrox's settlement, conversion is defined through material displays, with doctrines being transferred into the daily order of the village, and religious superiority becoming visible in the everyday space of the colony. Mrs. Horrox, explaining the mechanism of conversion, says that "The pagan mind is impressed with material display," linking clean houses, white wealth, and "White God" (Mitchell 2004, p. 478). "Material display" is the operative term of the Horrox system. Conversion is enacted in the Horrox's arrangement of domestic space and bodily habit. Clean houses transform domestic order into evidence of Christian superiority, white wealth transforms material possession into an appearance of moral superiority, and "White God" incorporates this material superiority into a divine name. Comaroff and Comaroff's study of Protestant colonial consciousness describes evangelical labor as remaking local subjects' everyday world, with reformed habit and disciplinary control built into spatial and material arrangements (Comaroff and Comaroff 1991, pp. 230, 242, 312).

Horrox himself makes no attempt to disguise the settlement's military origins. He acknowledges that "Had our pistols not won that first week's battles, well, the Raiatea Mission should have remained a dream" (Mitchell 2004, p. 478). According to Horrox, the mission was initially secured by pistols and later order was maintained by laws enforced by converts. In the daily life of the settlement, the Indigenous converts are called "Guards of Christ," and they "enforce these laws in return for credit at my husband's store" (Mitchell 2004, p. 479). This compound phrase encapsulates the operation of Horrox's mission. Patrols enforce the law in the name of "Christ," at the same time receiving payment from credit at Horrox's store. The converts who patrol the settlement are paid in store credit for this service. Religious authority at Raiatea originates from the violence that established

it and the economic exchange that sustains it. Porter's research on British Protestant missionary work and overseas expansion describes this pattern, in which missionary activities are intertwined with commerce and colonial rule (Porter 2004, p. 117).

When Ewing first meets Autua, Autua is an enslaved Moriori hiding in his cabin. Autua first states his name, "My name is Autua," and reminds Ewing that he is the one who was whipped by the "Lizard King" and had elicited Ewing's pity (Mitchell 2004, p. 26). Autua is asking Ewing to hide him from his pursuers and help him remain aboard the ship, away from enslavement. At first, this appeal is grounded in Ewing's recognition of the beaten man before him, not in Autua's Christian identity. Ewing soon writes this request into the language of baptism and sacrament. Ewing writes that Autua "was baptized & turned to the Lord" (Mitchell 2004, p. 31), and with this baptism, Ewing can assert a claim for Autua before the ship's officers. He protests that Autua had "received holy sacrament" (Mitchell 2004, p. 35) and invokes "Another statute book named Conscience" as a standard of judgment superior to the ship's rules of conduct (Mitchell 2004, p. 34). The ship's racial hierarchy views Indigenous peoples as targets of conversion and domination. Presented in terms of baptism, Autua's life becomes easier for that order to recognize as worthy of protection. Autua himself learns to use this grammar. When asked where his shirt came from, he answers, "That Christian gent'man gave, sir" (Mitchell 2004, p. 34). So Autua has learned to use Ewing's Christian identity as part of his own defense. He is first defined by this colonial and missionary grammar as someone to be saved, but in the shipboard scene he uses this grammar in turn to secure his own survival.

Autua's promise of debt returns after Goose's poisoning, but this time Ewing is the one who needs saving. Autua had earlier said that he was in Ewing's debt "until the day he saves *my* life" (Mitchell 2004, p. 37). The prediction is fulfilled after Goose's poisoning, as Ewing wakes to find that "Autua was holding me", having made him swallow brine to "flush out" the poison (Mitchell 2004, p. 504). Autua carries him down the gangplank and says, "Patience more, Mr. Ewing—this place smell death—I take you to Sisters" (Mitchell 2004, p. 505). Autua, whose life Ewing had earlier defended in sacramental terms, now saves the Christian notary with his own body. Ewing writes of the rescue in providential language. He thanks "my guardian angels & Autua, the last free Moriori in this world, for my deliverance" and writes that he is "thankful to God for all his mercies" (Mitchell 2004, p. 506). In Ewing's writing, the rescue becomes mercy and deliverance. It begins his abolitionist awakening. Ewing finally writes that he will pledge himself to the Abolitionist cause, since he owes his life "to a self-freed slave" and "must begin somewhere" (Mitchell 2004, p. 508). The conversionary grammar frames him as a converted subject, but his movement from baptism and debt to rescue and freedom redirects this vocabulary toward a reversed relation of dependence.

After this reversal, Ewing's final sentence defines the Raiatea station's daily arrangements more directly, with the mind's assent presented as the prize sought by colonial power and the field on which that power works. Near the end of the novel, he writes, "Belief is both prize & battlefield, within the mind & in the mind's mirror, the world" (Mitchell 2004, p. 508). With the term "prize", belief is taken as the object sought in this competition, around which conversionary discourse and civilizing rhetoric both revolve. "Battlefield" names the mind as the field of conflict in which power works. The next phrase extends this conflict outward. The phrases "within the mind" and "in the mind's mirror, the world" connect inner faith with external order. Thus, Ewing's statement brings the social machinery of Raiatea station back to the struggle for inner life. This colonial system seeks precisely this inward prize, using the regulated village itself as the battlefield. Ewing's sentence keeps this struggle within Raiatea station, the station that has produced this form of struggle. The mind's battlefield is shaped by the station outside the mind.

Ewing's diary moves this compromised religious order beyond its colonial setting and into the novel's media chain. The next reader is confronted with a fragmented written object. When Frobisher discovers the diary in Zedelghem, it is "a curious dismembered volume," so he asks Sixsmith to help him find a complete version. The diary "begins on the ninety-ninth page," its "covers are gone," and its "binding unstitched" (Mitchell 2004, p. 64). The word "dismembered" describes the diary's physical damage as bodily dismemberment, as if a complete record has been broken into fragments. At this distance, the system of rule behind this religious language has vanished from Frobisher's reading context. He reads Ewing from afar, comparing him to "Melville's bumbler Cpt. Delano in 'Benito Cereno'," judging him "blind to all conspirators", as he is slowly poisoned by Goose without ever seeing it (Mitchell 2004, p. 64). This comparison moves Ewing away from the position of moral witness and into that of a literary figure. In this literary identification, Ewing's moral commitment to this damaged order reads as laughable naiveté. The diary's material damage also raises a question of textual reliability. Frobisher even finds "something shifty about the journal's authenticity". He argues that it "seems too structured for a genuine diary," and that "its language doesn't ring quite true" (Mitchell 2004, p. 64). "Too structured" and "doesn't ring quite true" turn the journal's credibility itself into a question. He is faced with a text fragment that can be judged by aesthetic criteria.

The diary's damaged form fully registers at the point where Frobisher reaches its interruption. He writes, "the pages cease, midsentence, some forty pages later, where the binding is worn through," adding, "A half-read book is a half-finished love affair" (Mitchell 2004, p. 64). "Midsentence" fixes the interruption inside a single sentence. Ewing's sentence is cut off by material wear before grammatical completion. Once the binding wears away, the sentence stops before it can finish, and the damaged book sets the limit of what Frobisher can receive from the past. This colonial-Christian text continues to circulate in a damaged state. The coercive machinery of the mission station and the abolitionist decision that sets the diary's ending on its moral course both fall outside the tattered copy Frobisher obtains. For Frobisher, "A half-read book is a half-finished love affair" translates the material interruption into an emotional experience; he replaces the moral urgency in Ewing's diary with aesthetic regret. A compromised formation of belief, after the institutions that maintained it have disappeared, reaches readers at a historical distance as a dismembered volume. At this literary distance, Ewing's moral protest has become part of an unstitched volume that Frobisher can doubt, read for style, and put aside. By the time it reaches Frobisher, Ewing's journal has left the setting sustained by the missionary order and store credit. The public efficacy of Christian language in the earlier narrative layer gives way here to a hesitant reading prompted by a fragmentary text. Between Frobisher's reading of Ewing and Sonmi's testimony, letters, manuscript, and film carry the narrative relay through three further storyworlds. Across these passages, each story reaches a new recipient in a different material form and interpretive setting. Ewing's diary and Sonmi's orison mark two distinct religious conditions within this chain. The diary transmits the language of an already established but compromised Christian institution after its social ground has disappeared from view. The orison begins as a witness record whose religious authority develops through later transmission and reception. The argument accordingly moves from the afterlife of the institutional sacred to the making of a witness medium.

3. Testimony and the Making of a Witness Medium in "An Orison of Sonmi~451"

In Nea So Copros, Sonmi's testimony draws a devotional resonance from the chapter title "An Orison of Sonmi~451" and the ambiguous role of the Archivist as her "confessor." At this time, a stable cult surrounding Sonmi has yet to form. The orison fixes her voice

and image in the official deposition, making them into a form of evidence. This form can continue to circulate after her execution. The meaning of “orison” is present in this framing before the character’s actions, as the title “An Orison of Sonmi-451” already names her testimony through a term associated with devotion. At the level of official procedure, the Archivist tells Sonmi, “when I petitioned to orison your testimony, approval was granted before I had the chance to come to my senses. My friends told me I was crazy” (Mitchell 2004, p. 189). In this sentence, “petitioned” and “approval was granted” write her narrative in the register of administrative assignment. He obtains approval to handle an assigned case, apart from the position of a private listener. This clause suggests that approval came before the Archivist could reconsider the petition, casting her case as one pre-arranged by a higher level of power. This administrative position gains a second resonance in the Archivist’s position as Sonmi’s “confessor,” which pushes his administrative role toward a religious register. “Confessor” lends his position a hint of confession, and the quotation marks around the term keep the ambiguity of the title. He is the one asking the questions within the official system, and he also occupies the role of the listener in a confessional setting. The chapter title frames the recorded exchange with a parallel religious inflection. The title’s “orison” works on this same level. “Orison” in English means prayer, its etymology tracing back to the Latin word “oratio” (Oxford English Dictionary 2026b, s.v. “orison, n.”). This titular meaning precedes her actions but has pressed down on this exchange through the title and “confessor.” In *Nea So Copros*, it sits within the framework of interrogation and deposition and opens a semantic gap toward future devotional address.

After the Archivist occupies the position of “confessor,” Sonmi’s speaker position needs to be understood within *Nea So Copros*’s hierarchy of fabricant personhood. The Corpocracy assigns her case, approves the deposition, and lets her speak as an “I” during the interrogation, but the same system refuses to acknowledge that the fabricant has the status of a full person. She points out the ethical logic of this exclusion to the Archivist:

To enslave an individual troubles your consciences, Archivist, 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. But make no mistake: even same-stem fabricants cultured in the same wombtank are as singular as snowflakes. (Mitchell 2004, p. 187)

The metaphor of a “six-wheeler ford” equates the fabricant with property and consumer goods. “Wombtank” traces this property arrangement to the point of bodily production. The fabricant enters an ownership structure from the moment of manufacture. Sonmi’s rebuttal to this vocabulary of manufacturing and ownership rests on the word “singular.” She insists that every fabricant is “as singular as snowflakes,” answering the homogeneity assumed by the logic of manufacture with each individual’s irreducibility. After she returns this difference to the fabricant herself, the Archivist passes over the question of individuality and speaks in the register of institutionally allocated rights. He says, “Even fabricants have carefully defined rights, guaranteed by the Chairman!” (Mitchell 2004, p. 344). The two modifiers do much of the work in this sentence. “Carefully defined” gives the boundaries of these rights entirely to institutional measurement, and “guaranteed by the Chairman” fixes their source in the Chairman’s authorization. A fabricant can be said to possess certain rights, but how these rights are defined and by whom they are guaranteed are decided apart from the fabricant’s own subjective status. Sonmi’s claim to individuality, initiated by the word “singular,” is folded into a top-down granting system in the Archivist’s response.

Sonmi’s statement in first-person point of view challenges this measured order from within the state’s own deposition scene. She returns body and experience to the first

person. The “I” becomes a speaker with a body and lived experience, beyond a voice recorded during interrogation. A pureblood describes her condition as “an intelligent mind trapped in a body genomed for service” (Mitchell 2004, p. 223). She answers the split between mind and service body by claiming a bodily attachment equivalent to the pureblood’s own, “I had grown as attached to my body as he had to his” (Mitchell 2004, p. 223). Corpocracy attempts during the trial to detach this subjectivity from authorship. The Archivist notes that the “xpert witnesses” during the trial denied that the Declarations could have been written by a fabricant, arguing that they were ghostwritten by Union or a pureblood Abolitionist (Mitchell 2004, p. 346). She insists, “I, only I, wrote Declarations”, and says that the “logic and ethics” of these texts are “the fruits of my mind,” from the experiences she has narrated that day, because “No one else has lived this life” (Mitchell 2004, pp. 346–47). This statement ties authorship to the same speaking “I” that has lived the narrated life. By the end of this exchange, the official scene had initially framed her as a controllable case. The case is meant to prepare her for prosecution, and the spoken “I” has crossed the institutional boundary that it was meant to enforce.

The Archivist’s questions push this spoken “I” further beyond the boundaries of official retelling. He begins by asking, “Did you feel . . . well, what did you feel? Resentment? Grief?” (Mitchell 2004, p. 210). The question hesitates over whether a fabricant possesses an inner life before asking her to name her feelings. Later, he asks, “How could you know the new order would not give birth to a tyranny worse than the one it xpired?” (Mitchell 2004, p. 327). This question turns the Archivist’s focus on Sonmi from requiring her emotional narrative toward asking her political judgment. Before Sonmi answers, the Archivist’s use of “Surely” and “wisest” manifests his reformist stance (Mitchell 2004, p. 327). The most pointed exchange turns on “cooperation.” “But if you knew about this . . . conspiracy, why did you cooperate with it? Why did you allow Hae-Joo Im to get so close to you?” (Mitchell 2004, p. 349). In this interrogation, the pause before “conspiracy” and the repeated “why” press Sonmi to explain why she accepted a role she had already identified as scripted. At this point, the Archivist is more than a recorder. His questioning makes him a listener, pressing Sonmi to explain herself. As Felman and Laub argue, testimony requires a listener (Felman and Laub 1992, p. 70). The recording fixes this listening position in the orison. The weight of Sonmi’s testimony comes from her first-person claim to lived experience (Ricoeur 2004, p. 164), and near execution, this claim is sealed into the device. Centuries later, Zachry’s valley reopens the orison and receives her final statement.

Sonmi’s Declarations are recalled in the same recorded exchange, challenging the system from within the very legal and classificatory vocabulary of corpocracy. Recalling her reaction to seeing the slaughtership, she says, “The shipyards that build them must be demolished. The systems that facilitated them must be dismantled. The laws that permitted the systems must be torn down and reconstructed” (Mitchell 2004, p. 346). This statement begins with the physical location of the slaughtership and ultimately points to the laws that made that location possible. Sonmi’s language progresses from physical destruction to institutional reconstruction. Her core argument pushes this progression toward personhood itself. She declares that “fabricants are purebloods, be they grown in a wombtank or a womb” (Mitchell 2004, p. 346), using corpocracy’s own classificatory vocabulary to dismantle the hierarchical order established within it. The juxtaposition of “wombtank” and “womb” places the physical origins of fabricants and purebloods in the same syntactic position. She also describes herself as the drafter of these claims, “I am the one to compose this declaration of rights” (Mitchell 2004, p. 346). In Nea So Copros, the Declarations use public language that even the authorities prosecuting them can understand. This legal readability is crucial to their circulation in the later parts of

the novel. The vocabulary that makes the Declarations readable to the state is also the vocabulary that allows corpocracy to keep them in circulation long after Sonmi's execution.

Corpocracy's relabeling of the Declarations rewrites political dissent into a doctrinal order of teaching and heresy. Near the close of the official session, she says, "We see a game beyond the endgame. I refer to my Declarations, Archivist. Media has flooded Nea So Copros with my Catechisms. Every schoolchild in corpocracy knows my twelve 'blasphemies' now" (Mitchell 2004, p. 349). "Declarations" is the original programmatic term, referring to public statements and programmatic claims. "Catechisms" moves these claims into doctrinal training. "Blasphemies" changes their position, treating dissent as an offense against orthodoxy. Corpocracy keeps her Declarations in circulation and sets them in the linguistic positions of doctrine and heresy, placing the condemned claims under a religious stigma. In Christian tradition, catechism refers to doctrinal teaching in a question-and-answer format, where the teacher asks questions, the learner answers, and doctrine is fixed and transmitted by repetition (Oxford English Dictionary 2026a, s.v. "catechism, n."). The irony of "Catechisms" lies in Corpocracy's use of doctrinal training terms to diminish the Declarations, even as the term sets her words in a repeatable instructional pattern. This Q&A sequence thus acquires a doctrinal instruction-like appearance.

Corpocracy's punishment of Sonmi's discourse relies on its continued circulation. This reliance creates a paradox. The state can orchestrate the death scene at the Litehouse and dictate how the Declarations are labeled and taught. But to sustain the stigma in public memory, the condemned words must keep moving through schools, media, and daily repetition. The schoolchild figure in Sonmi's closing statement best illustrates this paradox. The recipient hears her name and words at an age before judgment has solidified. The child who memorizes the twelve blasphemies is not being asked to evaluate them. Although Corpocracy wants these children to remember these words as wrong, Sonmi's own use of the verb "knows" exposes the limits of this discipline, because knowing is the minimum condition for rejection and the minimum condition for preservation. Sonmi herself clearly sees this consequence: "My ideas have been reproduced a billionfold" (Mitchell 2004, p. 349). Reproduction, which is originally intended for condemnation, unexpectedly gives them a life that outlasts the moment of execution.

The Archivist's probing question about "cooperation" provides a chance for Sonmi to rename the scene. She says, "Why does any martyr cooperate with his judases?" (Mitchell 2004, p. 349). In this sentence, she replaces the state's narrative framework of her execution with vocabulary containing connotations of Christian martyrdom and betrayal. "Martyr" redefines her impending death at the Litehouse as the suffering of a witness, one whose testimony costs life itself. "Judases," in the lowercase and plural, strips Judas of his singularity. The biblical betrayer becomes a recurring position, one that spreads across the agents surrounding her death. The word "cooperate" returns this vocabulary to the interrogation room itself. Her cooperation with the Archivist's questioning is the very means by which she leaves her testimony on the orison. She accepts the betrayal and uses it. The logic of martyrdom, as Castelli describes it, depends on this future reception. For violence suffered to acquire martyrial meaning, it needs to be remembered, recounted, and passed on after death (Castelli 2004, p. 33). Sonmi's statement, bound to the orison, has already given her condemned voice this martyrial framing before a receiving community has formed.

Beyond the martyrdom terms "martyr" and "judases," Sonmi describes her entire experience as a narrative product designed by Corpocracy. When questioned by the Archivist, she says it is a "theatrical production," and that the play is orchestrated while she is still a server in Papa Song's (Mitchell 2004, p. 348). The term "theatrical production" condenses Sonmi's entire experience into a pre-arranged drama. From working in a dinery

and accepting her final execution, Sonmi's path has been set in a Unanimity-arranged script. The Archivist presses on whether this means "your whole confession is composed of . . . scripted events?" and Sonmi confirms, "Its key events, yes. Some actors were unwitting, Boom-Sook and the Abbess, for xample, but the major players were all provocateurs" (Mitchell 2004, p. 348). The words "actors," "unwitting," and "provocateurs" divide the characters into unwitting supporting roles and appointed guides. She further names Xi-Li's death "an xpendable xtra in Unanimity's disney" (Mitchell 2004, p. 348). "Xpendable xtra" reduces a dead young person to a sacrificial character type, and "Unanimity's disney" identifies the entire process by which Unanimity handles dissent as an entertainment-industry script system. Dinery weaves fabricant labor into a story of consumption and promised reward. Union, on the other hand, packages rebellion as a plot of impending victory. The voice preserved by the orison records Sonmi's identification of this entire script. Importantly, Sonmi does not speak from outside the script. She speaks while still within the role assigned to her by Corpocracy, only pointing out the whole state arrangement from within that role.

Sonmi's final words fix the orison as a medium of witnessing impending death, and also situate her at the intersection of two forms of record within the novel's narrative chain. She says, "Now, my narrative is over. Switch off your silver orison. In two hours enforcers will escort me into the Litehouse. I claim my last request" (Mitchell 2004, p. 349). "My narrative is over" signifies the end of her oral testimony. "Switch off your silver orison" then delivers this testimony to a visible object, and "in two hours" presses this record against the impending execution at the Litehouse. The orison receives this narrative, sealed away only as death approaches. Her final request continues to push this ending towards another form of reception. Sonmi requests to watch Timothy Cavendish's film. At this point, she is situated between two media, receiving Cavendish's film and at the same time leaving her testimony as a record, awaiting reception from another world.

4. Post-Apocalyptic Reception and Scripture-like Authority in "Sloosha's Crossin' An' Ev'rythin' After"

Zachry's story begins by situating Sonmi in the position of a real deity. He says, "Valleysmen only had one god an' her name it was Sonmi. Savages on Big I norm'ly had more gods'n you could wave a spiker at. [...] But for Valleysmen savage gods weren't worth knowin', nay, only Sonmi was real" (Mitchell 2004, p. 244). In this passage, "only Sonmi was real" compresses the Valleysmen's belief into a boundary judgment. The assertion that Sonmi is "real" proves her existence and distinguishes the Valleysmen from the surrounding communities. Her reality becomes the standard for dividing the community between inside and outside. Acknowledging Sonmi as real, it means one has been accepted into the Valleysmen's discourse and memory.

The following "savage gods weren't worth knowin'" further marks the outside of this boundary. The gods of the surrounding communities are excluded and categorized as "not worth knowin'." Thus, Sonmi's position is first fixed within the Valleysmen's community through the distinction between true and false deities. Subsequently, Sonmi's status in Valleysmen life moves from the community's boundaries into the daily order of death and rebirth. Zachry declares Sonmi "lived 'mongst us," "helped sick uns, fixed busted luck," and "when a truesome'n'civ'lized Valleysman died she'd take his soul an' lead it back into a womb somewhere in the Valleys" (Mitchell 2004, p. 244). Zachry's claim of "truesome'n'civ'lized" adds a qualification to this order of rebirth. The soul Sonmi leads back must be recognizable as a Valleysman. "A womb somewhere in the Valleys" locates rebirth inside the community's own living space: the dead return through a womb still imagined within the Valleys. Zachry continues, "we knew we'd always be reborned

as Valleysmen, an' so death weren't so scarysome for us, nay" (Mitchell 2004, p. 244). The main pressure falls on the phrase "as Valleysmen." The dead return under the same communal name and into the same Valleysmen order. The dialectal form "reborned" makes the afterlife part of Zachry's inherited speech, a concept spoken from within the valley's own language. Death is drawn back into the continuing life of the Valleysmen, one passage in the community's cycle.

Old Georgie describes the failure of this return as the weight of the soul. A person who "b'haved savage-like an' selfy an' spurned the Civ'lize," led by Georgie to "barb'risk", has a soul "heavy'n'jagged an' weighed with stones", which Sonmi cannot put into a new womb (Mitchell 2004, pp. 244–45). These people are called "stoned", and "no fate was more dreadsome for a Valleysman" (Mitchell 2004, p. 245). By labelling as being "stoned", the fatalism transforms moral failure into perceptible material weight, which a soul is too heavy and already broken to reach the valley womb. "Selfy" locates this failure in self-isolation, manifesting as a rupture in the mutual obligations on which Valleysmen survival depends. "Civ'lize" is the most revealing keyword in this passage. In Ewing's diary, the use of "civilize" resides within the grammar of conversionary discourse and imperial expansion. In the Valleys, "Civ'lize" has been narrowed into the daily ethic of the Valleysmen. The word keeps the language of civilization in view, but it now measures whether a person can live according to the obligations of the Valleysmen and return to valley life after death. The imperial program of transformation has receded from this word. The word now marks a moral threshold for rebirth. Her role organizes death and moral failure as a valley rebirth pattern, in which a soul aligned with valley obligations returns to a womb and a selfy soul stays stoned beyond return.

The Prayer grounds this rebirth order in the funeral rites, and the Icon'ry sets this invocation in the valley's established holy site. At the father's funeral, this invocation takes the form of a plea over death and rebirth, "Dear Sonmi, Who art amongst us, return this beloved soul to a valley womb, we beseech thee" (Mitchell 2004, p. 241). This prayer borrows its syntax from the memory of the Lord's Prayer, especially the worship sequence in "Our Father, who art in heaven" (Matthew 6:9). "Who art in heaven" sets the divine presence in the heavens, and "Who art amongst us" anchors her in Valleysmen life. Her sacredness takes on spatial closeness; she is perceived within the community and invoked among people. The Icon'ry is the space where this presence is most concentrated. Zachry states, "the Icon'ry was a spesh holy place an' Sonmi was norm'ly list'nin' there" (Mitchell 2004, p. 245). Community members leave their mark on their icons throughout their lives, and after death, these objects are stored in the Icon'ry. In that space, Zachry hears "a sort o' roaring underneath the silence, made o' mil'yuns o' whisp'rin's like the ocean," and he knows that "Sonmi was in there list'nin' to us" (Mitchell 2004, p. 245). "List'nin'" writes her as a figure of active perception. In the room, she listens from the Icon'ry, a presence shaped by their sense that she is listening. The darkness of the Icon'ry and the icons marked across a lifetime set her "list'nin'" inside a site of prayer and contemplated presence (Meyer 2014, p. 220). Valleysmen step inside the room, facing icons etched with the marks of life, and hear "mil'yuns o' whisp'rin's" beneath the silence. They feel that she is there, list'nin', continuing to watch over the lives of the dead beside these icons. The funeral prayer "Who art amongst us" has its physical setting in this room, where the living step inside and sense Sonmi among the marked icons of the dead.

Zachry's memory of Dreaming Night is in his body before Meronym explains anything about Sonmi's Old-Un history. He states, "When fourteen notches on our icons said we was a growed Valleysman, we'd sleep 'lone in the Icon'ry an' Sonmi'd give us a spesh dreamin'" (Mitchell 2004, p. 245). The fourteen notches are the mark of adult identity inscribed on a personal icon, the same object that will be stored in the Icon'ry after its owner's death. On

this night, the boy is taken out of kinship space and left alone in the ritual darkness of the Icon'ry, surrounded by the ancestral icons and Sonmi's listening presence. Van Gennep's account of rites of passage clarifies the movement in this scene, as Zachry leaves kinship space, spends the night alone in the Icon'ry, and returns as a recognized adult of the valley (van Gennep 1960, p. 11). Zachry recalls her telling him in the dream, "Climb down, Sonmi told me" (Mitchell 2004, p. 246). The command is specific, and it stays in his body. "Climb down" is already part of Zachry's motor memory before he hears Meronym's version of who Sonmi was. When her historical explanation arrives, Sonmi's authority has been learned as a bodily command.

Zachry asks Meronym about Old Georgie, rather than Sonmi. "You don't b'lieve he's real, do you?" (Mitchell 2004, p. 272). As Zachry later retells it, Meronym's answer opens a gap inside the word "real": Old Georgie "weren't real for her, nay, but he could still be real for me" (Mitchell 2004, p. 272). Meronym is speaking about Old Georgie here, and she addresses his standing before turning to Sonmi. "For her" and "for me" connect "real" to two positions inside Zachry's narration. This statement juxtaposes the Prescient's historical knowledge with Zachry's convictions formed during his valley life, thus giving both positions a degree of validity. "Could still be real" acknowledges that Old Georgie has a practical role in Zachry's world, even though Meronym possesses a different kind of historical knowledge. This dialogue prepares for her subsequent explanation of Sonmi. In the same conversation, she traces the historical origins of this valley belief and acknowledges its significance in valley life. Prescient historical knowledge and Valleysmen piety meet in her words, and Zachry's oral tale will carry both forward.

Meronym's explanation pulls Sonmi, used to determine a person's place in life and death, back to the historical time of the Old World. She tells Zachry, "She was Sonmi, Zachry. Sonmi the freakbirthed human what your ancestors b'lieved was your god" (Mitchell 2004, p. 277). "Freakbirthed" is a compound word; "freak" marks anomaly, and "birthed" marks physical origin. This word formation sets Sonmi within the natural history categories that the Prescient can recognize, restating the Valleysmen's god in human and anomalous physical terms. The Prescient's choice of "freakbirthed" for Sonmi employs Zachry's dialectal word formation, compressing anomaly into a compound word that a Valleysman can understand. "Your ancestors b'lieved was your god" casts Valleysmen faith in the past tense. The past tense of "b'lieved" reveals the Prescient's external positioning of that faith. For Zachry, Sonmi remains to be a sacred reality continually acknowledged in communal life. Meronym's interpretation takes this reality back to the past, writing it as a judgment of faith made by the ancestors using the word "b'lieved." In this way, the subject of religious action shifts from Zachry to "your ancestors." The practices that the Valleysmen continue are also imbued within a past ancestral act that has ended. "Was your god" further tightens this external positioning.

In the same explanation, Meronym states that Sonmi "was killed by Old-Un chiefs what feared her," and "b'fore she died she spoke to an orison 'bout her acts'n'deedin's" (Mitchell 2004, p. 277). She uses "acts'n'deedin's" to summarize Sonmi's dying words to the orison. The phrase reduces the testimony to remembered acts and deeds. This compression removes the legal framework of the interrogation scene and the exchange between speaker and listener. In her sentence, the orison becomes the object of Sonmi's speech, an Old World recording device. In this retelling, the state-produced recording relation from the interrogation is reduced to the image of a person speaking to an object before death. The Icon'ry and the prayer "Who art amongst us," however, have already set the ritual framework in which Zachry hears these words. Historical knowledge about her origins enters the valley, with the prayer still active in valley practice.

When Zachry gets Meronym's interpretation, the ancestral chorus on the Mauna Kea mountain path transforms historical knowledge into a judgment of belonging. Truman Napes Third first cries out, "She's a sly un, no frettin', Zachry!" He follows it with "You b'lief her or your own kin?" (Mitchell 2004, p. 278). "Sly un" labels Meronym a deceiver. This question places the Prescient and Zachry's kin on opposite sides, targeting Meronym's interpretation toward the question of whom Zachry trusts. More cries follow: "Judas!" and "Pack mule!" (Mitchell 2004, p. 278). These labels transform acceptance of an outsider's version into a betrayal of kin. Zachry's response is brief, "S'picion rotted me" (Mitchell 2004, p. 278). "Rotted" renders doubt as bodily decay, placing the judgment of the community within Zachry's body. This chorus reaches its strongest expression in the deceased Old-Un priest-king speaking in the abandoned power station, who says, "Ain't no right or wrong, [...] jus' protectin' your tribe or judasin' your tribe, yay, jus' a strong will or a weak un" (Mitchell 2004, p. 279). "Ain't no right or wrong" removes the standards of right and wrong from the scene of judgment. Her distinction between freakbirthed human and god is recast as a test of tribal loyalty. "Protectin'" and "judasin'" compress the judgment into a choice between protecting the tribe and betraying the tribe. The word "judasin'" shares the same biblical root as "judases", which Sonmi uses to refer to the Archivist, Union, and corpocracy before the Litehouse (Mitchell 2004, p. 349). This word of betrayal crosses a broken chain of transmission and reverses its target. In Sonmi's mouth, "judases" condemns those who drive her to the Litehouse. In the priest-king's mouth, "judasin'" condemns Zachry for believing the truth about Sonmi. When the priest-king utters, "Kill her, bro. She ain't no god, she's only blood'n'tubes" (Mitchell 2004, p. 279), the preceding "judasin' your tribe" has already become a demand for action. "Bro" calls Zachry back through kinship language, so killing Meronym can be heard as part of protecting the tribe. "She ain't no god" takes up Meronym's historical distinction about Sonmi and turns it against Meronym. Meronym has explained Sonmi as human, and the priest-king answers by reducing Meronym herself to a killable foreign body. "Blood'n'tubes" strips the Prescient interpreter of her speaking position, leaving an image of flesh and tubes. The ancestral voice twists historical knowledge into permission for killing, and Zachry is pressed to answer as kin before he can judge the explanation as true or false.

Zachry's oral narrative preserves both Meronym's historical interpretation and the priest-king's accusation in Valleysmen dialect. This dialect has its own grammar and phonetic markers. "What" works as a relative pronoun where standard English would use "that" or "who," and the contracted "'n'" makes phrases such as "acts'n'deedin's" and "blood'n'tubes" sound like compact oral units (Mitchell 2004, pp. 277, 279). On the written page, forms such as "b'liefed," "b'haved," and "reborned" keep the sound of nonstandard valley speech, from swallowed syllables to altered verb endings (Mitchell 2004, pp. 244–45, 277). Ong's research on oral expression emphasizes the memory function of these formulaic patterns; in predominantly oral cultures, recurring linguistic forms are fundamental to preserving articulated thought (Ong 2013, p. 34). Dialectal forms keep the community's sonic habits on the page, giving historical interpretations and judgments of belief their own Valley accent. It imbues historical interpretation with the voice of the valley people, making Meronym's narrative closer to everyday experience and more readily accepted. Graham's research on the oral dimension of scripture shows that written scripture keeps its oral life by recitation and listening (Graham 1987, p. 7). Zachry's narrative incorporates the controversy surrounding Sonmi into the community's memory precisely by means of this oral transmission. The notion that Sonmi is a "freakbirthed human" (Mitchell 2004, p. 277) coexists with the priest-king's accusation of betrayal. Zachry continuously recounts these two judgments, making the former an explanation of her origin and the latter an evaluation

of her actions. Both pass into the community's memory and transmission (Assmann 2011, pp. 36, 41).

Accompanying this oral transmission, the "silv'ry egg" in the hands of Zachry's descendants brings the closed witness record out of Nea So Copros's official archive and into the scene of family twilight. In the father's story, this object needs to be warmed by the palm of the hand: "if you warm the egg in your hands, a beaustome ghost-girl appears in the air an' speaks in an Old-Un tongue what no un alive und'stands nor never will, nay" (Mitchell 2004, p. 309). The descendants call the orison "silv'ry egg", a name derived from their own sensory experience. In their hands, it is first and foremost a silver object that can be held, warmed, and viewed, and its identity as Nea So Copros's official recording device has receded into the background. "[N]or never will" severs any possibility of semantic recovery. The father also says, "It ain't Smart you can use", adding that it "don't kill Kona pirates nor fill empty guts" (Mitchell 2004, p. 309). As an Old World technology, the orison has lost its practical function for present survival. On "some dusks", the family still "wake up the ghost-girl jus' to watch her hov'rin'n'shimm'rin'" (Mitchell 2004, p. 309). The phrases "wake up" and "jus' to watch" make the act of use rest on awakening and watching themselves. Heating, waking, and watching make the record part of bodily habit. Connerton divides the transmission of social memory into inscribing practices and incorporating practices (Connerton 1989, pp. 72–73). The orison was originally an official inscription produced by state power. The official inscription now survives through bodily habits inside family life (Stolow 2013, pp. 5, 84).

At the farthest point of this family reception, "babbybie our babbits" delivers Sonmi's whispers into the infant's earliest bedtime experience (Mitchell 2004, p. 309). The pronunciation of "babbybie" is close to "lullaby," first directing the sound to the cradle-side lullaby scene; "babbits" then identifies the receiver, fixing the scene around the infant listener. Thus, the interrogation speech originally directed at the Archivist leaves the interrogation room and is compressed into the rhythm of whispers in the babbits' bedtime experience. The silver object, warmed in adult hands, brings this rhythm into nighttime bodily sensation. The listener faces the incomprehensible "Old-Un tongue" while simultaneously hearing her voice rising from the silver object. Smith's comparative study of scripture defines scripture as the practical relationship between the community and the text, with formal canonization belonging to later developments (Smith 1993, pp. 4, 18). The Valleysmen's repeated use of this medium has, in effect, formed a communal practice of engaging with Sonmi's voice. Her incomprehensible voice acquires scripture-like authority before textual completeness or institutional canonization is established. This bedtime voice predates shared judgments like "only Sonmi was real" and any historical knowledge of Nea So Copros. At the cradle, her whispers reach the earliest point in this chain of contact, as well as the farthest point from the legal grammar that generated this voice.

5. Conclusions

In *Cloud Atlas*, Sonmi's testimony is first preserved in Nea So Copros's interrogation record. The Archivist's repeated questioning and the orison's recording of her voice and image both occur close to the time of her execution. During this period, her words could still be called the Declarations, or renamed Catechisms and blasphemies by Corpocracy. Ewing's diary uses a different religious language. The term "Guards of Christ" still allows readers to see the missionary order of Raiatea and the credit exchange of Horrox's store. After Sonmi's orison leaves the state interrogation, later generations can still access her voice and image, but can no longer reconnect them to the original legal context. Centuries later, Zachry's descendants warm the same silver object at dusk. The children no longer hear the political language of the Declarations, only "Old-Un tongue what no un alive

und’stands nor never will” (Mitchell 2004, p. 309). At this point of reception, Sonmi’s authority no longer requires the original meaning to become clear again. The family recounts the story of this object generation after generation, and the Valleysmen reopen it time and again. The incomprehensible voice acquires scripture-like authority at this farthest point of reception, after the medium has lost its recoverable legal meaning and passed into repeated use among the Valleysmen.

This emphasis on reception under semantic loss distinguishes Mitchell’s novel from a familiar post-apocalyptic pattern. Walter M. Miller Jr.’s *A Canticle for Leibowitz* provides a well-known narrative example of scriptural relics in post-apocalyptic fiction. After nuclear war, the monks of the Leibowitz Order preserve pre-war fragments in the ruins, materials kept for centuries as Memorabilia; scientists reread the technological meaning of the pre-war physics fragments in the Memorabilia, juxtaposing liturgical preservation and recovered meaning in the book’s final stage (Miller 1961, pp. 54, 161). *Cloud Atlas* shares this starting point with that tradition. A technological relic moves into the religious life of those who follow after the collapse of civilization. At a crucial point, the novel deviates from the trajectory of *A Canticle for Leibowitz*. In Miller’s narrative, the act of preservation itself carries an expectation of a return to meaning. In his novel, those fragments preserved as Memorabilia can wait indefinitely for future scientific readers to reconstruct their technical meaning. However, the valley where Zachry lives assigns this relic a different fate. Sonmi’s voice, preserved by the orison, continues to exist, but the language it uses is no longer understandable to the living. With “nor never will”, the later narrator shuts off the possibility that this language might be read in the future; it is unreadable to the living and closed to later recovery (Mitchell 2004, p. 309). In this sense, *A Canticle for Leibowitz* links sacred preservation with the ultimate restoration of meaning. *Cloud Atlas*, on the other hand, places devotional engagement after the original semantics have fallen away.

This difference leads *Cloud Atlas* down a third path in post-apocalyptic religious narratives. One common path treats the sanctification of technological relics as a misrecognition, thereby exposing the cognitive limitations of the post-apocalyptic community. Another path restores the relic’s original meaning, allowing recovered knowledge to confirm, correct, or replace ritual use. The third path is more austere. Explanation arrives, and restoration fails to follow (Mitchell 2004, p. 277). The first two common paths allow knowledge to determine the status of the relic: one by revealing errors, the other by restoring meaning. Even after Meronym explains Sonmi’s origin, the distance between political recording and post-apocalyptic reception stays in force after the interpretation arrives. In this distance, scripture-like authority gains ritual weight. Mitchell sets the formation of religious authority inside the irreducible gap between official production and household transmission.

Within this third path, the reader occupies the only position in the novel where Sonmi’s political testimony is juxtaposed with the devotional life attached to it centuries later. No character inside the novel has this dual position. Mitchell’s nested structure places the reader between Sonmi’s orison testimony and Zachry’s inherited tale, and the reader alone holds both. It is at this intersection that religion becomes legible as a function of fictional narrative. What the reader sees is a devotional structure, one that extends beyond the speaker’s own agency and is only partly comprehensible to the community that lives by it. The nested structure gives formal design religious weight. It shows how a recording acquires devotional authority as conditions of reception gradually accumulate in separate storyworlds. From this position, these scattered conditions become visible as one process.

In many fictional narratives concerned with sacred texts, scripture is already recognized by a community before the reader sees its earlier formation. The passage from preserved trace to sacred text is usually pushed behind the finished status of scripture.

Cloud Atlas brings this earlier passage to the surface through its nested structure. Mitchell treats Sonmi's later sanctification as more than a simple error of post-apocalyptic memory. The novel gives religious authority a narrative history. The cradle-side phrase "babbybie our babbies" marks the farthest point of that history, since Sonmi's voice reaches a listener who hears before doctrine and before understanding (Mitchell 2004, p. 309). The reader alone can hold both ends of the chain together: the condemned testimony in Nea So Copros and the sacred voice heard in the Valleysmen household. In this gap between political origin and devotional reception, *Cloud Atlas* locates religion inside fictional narrative itself. Religious authority arises from the movement of testimony across broken storyworlds, with no doctrine announced in advance by the novel.

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