

## Contents

<b>1</b>	<b>three</b>	<b>2</b>
1.1	chapter overview . . . . .	2
1.2	sex . . . . .	3
1.2.1	section overview . . . . .	3
1.2.2	1. <i>Dawn</i> overview . . . . .	4
1.2.3	2. the human contradiction . . . . .	4
1.2.4	3. fear of the unknown . . . . .	5
1.2.5	4. fear of the known . . . . .	7
1.2.6	<b>TODO</b> 5. sensuality in communication [add Anzaldua] . . . . .	8
1.2.7	6. Oankali social collectivism . . . . .	9
1.2.8	7. pleasure overrides choice . . . . .	11
1.2.9	<b>TODO</b> 8. the posthuman critique . . . . .	14
1.2.10	9. scrambling sense and thought . . . . .	14
1.3	flesh . . . . .	17
1.3.1	section overview . . . . .	17
1.3.2	1. the reduction of flesh . . . . .	17
1.3.3	2. fungibility -> fugitivity . . . . .	18
1.3.4	3. opacity -> foreclosure . . . . .	19
1.3.5	4. surface -> shifting registers . . . . .	20
1.4	skin . . . . .	21
1.4.1	Media Archaeology overview . . . . .	21
1.4.2	how information lost its body . . . . .	22
1.4.3	turing test . . . . .	23
1.4.4	formal materiality . . . . .	25
1.4.5	abstraction -> tangibility of data . . . . .	26
1.4.6	torque -> materializes the shift of software registers . . . . .	27
1.4.7	flickering signifiers . . . . .	28
1.4.8	Hayles perhaps underestimating materiality of flicking sig . . . . .	29
1.4.9	<i>skinonskinonskin</i> . . . . .	29
1.5	unstructured fragments . . . . .	38
1.5.1	flesh becomes a queer form . . . . .	38
1.5.2	unmappability, collision of registers . . . . .	39
<b>2</b>	<b>Works</b>	<b>40</b>

# 1 three

"Containment and Dominance: Encoding Queer Erasure in Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*"

## 1.1 chapter overview

This paper juxtaposes two unlikely texts—an early hypertext work from 1999, and a science fiction novel from 1987—to unpack the role of “media” across physiological and technological systems. The early hypertext work, *skinonskinonskin*, written collectively by the artist-couple known as Entropy8Zuper!, explores electronically-mediated desire through a series of digital love poems that combine hypertext, audio, and Flash media technology. Moving from digital to embodied desire, the science fiction novel, *Dawn* by Octavia Butler, poses a post-apocalyptic scenario where humans find themselves coerced into sex and procreation with extraterrestrial colonizers. In these couplings, sexual contact is routed through an alien intermediary, whose ability to plug directly into the human brain’s pleasure centers intensifies their sexual instincts into all but irresistible compulsions. Though Butler’s novel and *skinonskinonskin* present vastly different narrative worlds and physical formats, I’m interested in how both texts trouble the boundary between materiality and abstraction, in one case technological, through computer hardware and software, and in another physiological, through nervous systems and brain chemistry.

My analysis reads for sensuality across medial environments in each text. In Butler’s novel, I examine how human flesh—the traditional site for sexual contact between two partners—is bypassed for direct neural stimulation facilitated by an alien intermediary. Because this direct neural connection scrambles traditional distinctions between the body and mind, during the sex act, the humans have trouble differentiating their embodied feelings from their cognitive interpretations. The alien colonizers, who describe themselves as “gene traders,” exploit this human susceptibility to sexual pleasure in order to interbreed with them. By bypassing the flesh, this method of intercourse dissolves the binary between self and other—the foundation for possessive individualism—as well as sense and thought. Drawing from thinkers in Chicana Studies and Black Feminist Studies, I argue that this method creates an ethics based on pleasure rather than choice or consent.

To better understand the compulsions of pleasure and the flesh, I engage Black Feminist Studies’ theorizing on the flesh. According to critics like Hortense Spillers, C. Riley Snorton, and Amber Jamilla Musser, the systematic

reduction of the Black body to the physical flesh, a process that began during the violences and atrocities of the Middle Passage, creates an opportunity for rethinking the political potential of pleasure and eroticism. In my analysis, this concept of the flesh becomes a ground for understanding how physical registers interact with symbolic ones. Here, I examine how the concept of the Pornotrope, that is the reduction of body to flesh, of the conceptual (body) to the material (flesh), creates a ground for new theorizations of meaning and materiality. Specifically, this reduction of Body to Flesh offers a model of resistance to racial exploitation that reinforces sensuality and pleasure.

Turning to *skinonskinonskin*, I examine the hardware and software formats that facilitate the display and preservation of this work, tracing the complicated stack of technologies, which include internet networks, web tools, Flash media, and more recently, a computer system Emulator. Borrowing from Media Archaeology and Network Studies, I take a close look at what Matt Kirschenbaum describes as the “formal” level of materiality, or the effects on the screen, moving down the layers of abstraction, through the compiled code of Flash media, into the level of hardware, what he calls the “forensic materiality,” of the internet network. My goal is to examine the material qualities of the medium—be it technical or physiological—for the ways it offers a kind of capacious mode for theorizing new forms of ethical relations.

## 1.2 sex

### 1.2.1 section overview

These sections examine human vs Oankali social structures to read the prioritization of sensuality and feeling as a basis for more ethical relationship. While human nature struggles within the "contradiction" of hierarchy and intelligence, the Oankali harness their physiological ability to bypass flesh for direct neural connections that enable collectivity. The Oankali offer a model of ethics based on mutual feeling, rather than choice or consent. Interestingly (and a point I will pick up in my "skins" section), in the process of having "neural" sex with each other through the aliens, the humans begin to blend cognitive processes with their sensual experiences. The blending of thought and feeling shows a collision of registers, which will be useful for my media archaeological reading of the stack of technologies in the hypertext piece, *skinonskinonskin*.

The crucial point of this section occurs in my close-reading of the scene when Lilith first meets the aliens, and her experience of xenophobia, which is crystallized in her use of the comparison to "Medusa". I draw from

Chicana Studies to explain how the comparison to Medusa expresses a fear of the unknown through the frame of the known. Furthermore, it shows the "human contradiction" at work—the intersection of a hierarchical impulse and a capacity for intelligence—a contradiction which the novel demonstrates can be resisted overcome by bypassing the flesh, which is the topic of my next section.

### 1.2.2 1. *Dawn* overview

Octavia Butler's novel, *Dawn*, published in 1987, is the first book of a trilogy, initially titled *Xenogenesis* and more recently, *Lilith's Brood*, about humans who are coerced into interbreeding with extra terrestrial beings. The story begins with Lilith Iyapo waking up in a prison cell on the Oankali spaceship, where she soon finds out that the humanity has been all but extinguished, and that the Oankali intend to reproduce with the remaining survivors. Over the next several chapters, it becomes clear what the Oankali want Lilith to do: to shepherd a group of humans to accept what they call the "gene trade." The gene trade is a form of genetic manipulation where Oankali and human genes are combined to yield a new, hybrid race. As the "Judas goat" who leads the sheep to slaughter, Lilith must convince the humans to accept a fate which she herself cannot bear: that humanity will become something profoundly different from what it is; that their children will look far from human, what she describes as "Medusa children" (Butler 87).

### 1.2.3 2. the human contradiction

One reason that humans cannot accept the gene trade can be attributed to their own genetics which contain, in the words of the Oankali themselves, the "human contradiction." As explained by Jhdya, the first Oankali that Lilith meets, humans have two characteristics that enabled humanity to survive and evolve but now threaten the future of the species:

"You are intelligent," he said. "That's the newer of the two characteristics, and the one you might have put to work to save yourselves. You are potentially one of the most intelligent species we've found, though your focus is different from ours. Still, you had a good start in the life sciences, and even in genetics."

"What's the second characteristic?"

"You are hierarchical. That's the older and more entrenched characteristic. We saw it in your closest animal relatives and in

your most distant ones. It's a terrestrial characteristic. When human intelligence served it instead of guiding it, when human intelligence did not even acknowledge it as a problem, but took pride in it or did not notice it at all. . . ." [...] "That was like ignoring cancer. I think your people did not realize what a dangerous thing they were doing."

The tendency toward hierarchy, as a "terrestrial" characteristic, is ingrained in all humans. The impulse to stratify people, to create social groupings, even to colonize and oppress, descends from an ancient instinct that once served to sustain, protect, and organize early human tribes. But when the hierarchical instinct grows unchecked into the modern world, Jdhaya explains, it becomes dangerous, like a cancer. Stratifications between gender, race, nationality, and class, for example, descend from this very foundational tendency to mark and divide what is different, what is other, from what is familiar. This novel explores how such a tendency, deeply ingrained in human nature, comes to the fore even as it is threatened by aliens who intend to "fix" the human contradiction through gene manipulation in interbreeding. The tendency to self-organize appears early on, when the humans are being woken up from suspended animation in order to prepare and train for survival. For example, the pressure to couple brings a remnant of human society into the strange, alien spaceship which offers some form of social stability for the survivors. When one woman hesitates to choose a mate, another woman remonstrates: "What the hell is she saving herself for? . . . It's her duty to get together with someone. There aren't that many of us left" (335). Throughout the novel, the social stratifications intensify as the humans become more desperate in their resistance against the Oankali colonization. Growing more and more agitated in their captivity, certain men like Peter and Curt eventually attack Lilith and her followers, who they regard as responsible, with deadly force.

#### **1.2.4 3. fear of the unknown**

One of the implications of the human contradiction is how the hierarchical tendency works in tandem with the propensity for intelligence to create a fear of the other. Early in the story, this fear is established as a stubborn and innate human trait. To wade through this fear, familiar categories and concepts are often imposed onto foreign phenomena. This is why, when she first sees her captives, Lilith processes the alien body in human terms:

The lights brightened as she had supposed they would, and what had seemed to be a tall, slender man was still humanoid, but

it had no nose—no bulge, no nostrils—just flat, gray skin. It was gray all over—pale gray skin, darker gray hair on its head that grew down around its eyes and ears and at its throat. There was so much hair across the eyes that she wondered how the creature could see. The long, profuse ear hair seemed to grow out of the ears as well as around them. Above, it joined the eye hair, and below and behind, it joined the head hair. The island of throat hair seemed to move slightly, and it occurred to her that that might be where the creature breathed—a kind of natural tracheostomy.

Lilith glanced at the humanoid body, wondering how humanlike it really was. "I don't mean any offense," she said, "but are you male or female?"

"It's wrong to assume that I must be a sex you're familiar with," it said, "but as it happens, I'm male."

Good. It could become 'he' again. Less awkward. 29

Lilith initially describes the alien's features by cataloging a "nose," "hair," "eyes," "ears," and "throat," though he has no such organs, and the first question she asks is to inquire him of his sex. These responses illustrate the strength of the instinct to interpret bodily appearances according to pre-existing anatomical categories. Although Jdhaya points out Lilith's mistake in making assumptions about gender, she nonetheless takes some comfort from being able to call Jdhaya a "he."

When, however, the strangeness of the alien's appearance proceeds the terms available to her, she immediately turns to what would likely be read as a fear of the other:

She did not want to be any closer to him. She had not known what held her back before. Now she was certain it was his alienness, his difference, his literal unearthliness. She found herself still unable to take even one more step toward him.

"Oh god," she whispered. And the hair—the whatever—it-was—moved. Some of it seemed to blow toward her as though in a wind, though there was no stirring of air in the room.

She frowned, strained to see, to understand. Then, abruptly, she did understand. She backed away, scrambled around the bed and to the far wall. When she could go no farther, she stood against the wall, staring at him.

The narration in this passage suggests a process as Lilith attempts to place the alien into pre-existing categories. First, when the truth of his total alienness begins to register, it occurs in a pre-linguistic, embodied level. It begins with an intense aversion toward physical proximity—"She found herself unable to take even one more step toward him" (29-30). Then, when she examines his "features," she still struggles to process his physical composition until she finally, "abruptly... understand[s]," and her impulse is to move away. Her encounter with Jhdaya's unknown alien form demonstrates an aversion through terms of body language. Then, the narration moves from depicting body language to description through figuration, an evocation of the mythical figure "Medusa." Here, Lilith's subscribes the unknown in terms of something that is, albeit in the context of myth and fantasy, familiar to the human imaginary. The narration in this passage, which builds from instinctual body movement to imagination, reinforces the processes that humans undergo when encountering the unknown. The tendency toward hierarchy demands that she place this being on a scale of familiarity, comparing him to what she already knows about other living beings, for example, that Jhdaya is male. However, the hierarchy fails to subsume his other qualities, the sensory organs, intelligence steps in to create an analogy, and her mind makes the leap between what she sees and what she already knows. The two sides of the contradiction, hierarchy and intelligence, work together here to engender a sense of all-consuming fear of the other.

#### 1.2.5 4. fear of the known

The comparison to Medusa, however, demonstrates that the fear of the other is based not on the unknown, but on the known. Lilith's use of similitude evokes a point that Cherrie Moraga, Chicana feminist activist and writer, argues that the cause of racial fear is not the totally foreign, but a similarity that the subject perceives in the other, despite their difference. In her influential essay, "La Guera" [The White Girl], Moraga explains:

it is not really difference the oppressor fears so much as similarity. He fears he will discover in himself the same aches, the same longings as those of the people he has shitted on. He fears the immobilization threatened by his own incipient guilt. He fears he will have to change his life once he has seen himself in the bodies of the people he has called different. He fears the hatred, anger, and vengeance of those he has hurt. 32

Describing how her lesbianism unlocked the workings racial and class oppression, Moraga explains that "[her] lesbianism is the avenue through which I have learned the most about silence and oppression, and it continues to be the most tactile reminder to me that we are not free human beings" (28-29). For Moraga, similarity is the foundation on which fear of the other is built. This similarity is apparent in Lilith's use of the "Medusa" comparison, and marks the moment when the subject, which can find no expression beyond body language, finally settles on a familiar designation, relating the unknown to a form within the human imaginary. Despite his alienness, at that point, Jhadaya becomes incorporated into an anthropocentric worldview. This process is about finding similarity in difference as it is being felt, in the form of "aches" and "longings." Who has lighter skin and more education than most in her Latino, working-class background,

#### 1.2.6 TODO 5. sensuality in communication [add Anzaldua]

For Chicana theorists like Moraga and Gloria Anzaldua, the body is both the central obstacle and the solution for achieving interpersonal connection with the other. To overcome the fear of the other, it is necessary to come to terms with similarity in the body coded different—by race, gender, class, disability. This occurs in a process by which one opens one's body, particularly sensations, oneself to full accounting of oppression. Moraga explains that:

The danger lies in ranking the oppressions. *The danger lies in failing to acknowledge the specificity of the oppression.* The danger lies in attempting to deal with oppression purely from a theoretical base. Without an emotional, heartfelt grappling with the source of our own oppression, without naming the enemy within ourselves and outside of us, no authentic, non-hierarchical connection among oppressed groups can take place. Emphasis original, 29

As Moraga explains, one must not only acknowledge the existence of others' oppression, but come to terms with the oppression's specificity, a process which involves looking within the self to experience its physical, sensual components, what she calls "an emotional, heartfelt grappling" of one's own oppression. Moraga's argument, which is an intersectional Feminist response to the identity politics of second-wave feminism, offers a model for interpersonal understanding while keeping the specificity of oppression local and situated, which is to say in some way unknowable or un-essentializable.



The power of this kind of connection comes from its incompleteness, its partiality, its lack of fulfillment.

Chicana and Latin American theorists like Ofelia Schutte and Norma Alarcon emphasize the danger in achieving perfect communication. Schutte, for example, explores the problem of "cross-cultural communication," specifically, the question of "how to speak to the 'other' who is different from oneself" (Schutte 53). Schutte's strategy is to emphasize attention to what she calls "incommensurability," that is, the "residue of meaning that will not be reached in cross-cultural endeavors" (56). Incommensurability refers to the quality that is lost in translation, so to speak, when members from two cultures interact. In order to tap into incommensurability, Schutte explains, interlocutors might attend to moments when the other's speech "resonates in [one] as a kind of strangeness, a kind of displacement of the usual expectation" (Schutte 56). The point here is to not subsume that quality of strangeness in the other into familiar structures of knowledge, like the way that Lilith subsumes Jhadaya's strangeness into the similitude of the terrifying Medusa. Rather, the point is to sustain the feelings of difference without trying to incorporate them into pre-existing (dominant) modes of thought. Norma Alarcon makes a similar point in her argument about the dangers of "ontologiz[ing] difference," that is, of subsuming specific difference into a universal identity politics. She explains that,

The desire to translate as totalizing metaphorical substitution without acknowledging the "identity-in-difference," so that one's own system of signification is not disrupted through a historical concept whose site of emergence is implicated in our own history, may be viewed as a desire to dominate, constrain, and contain.

133

The challenge, according to Schutte and Alarcon, is to achieve connection without totally subsuming the other into totalizing and therefore oppressive paradigms of subjectivity. One potential solution, as Schutte and Moraga exemplify, is to attend to the feelings of the body, of both the "emotional, heartfelt grappling" within the self *and* the "incommensurability" of the other, which seeks to feel without attempting to recodify.

### **1.2.7 6. Oankali social collectivism**

For most humans, who are bound and determined by their biological impulses and social conditioning, this process is nearly impossible. It is only through significant effort and supra-human capabilities that Lilith herself is able to

move beyond her fear of the Oankali. Crucially, this novel refrains from offering an easy solution to the problem of xenophobia that accompanies the innate human characteristic of hierarchy. Rather, it explores how hierarchical human nature might engage with an alternative, even antithetical social paradigm, that is, social collectivism. The novel's proposal for this new form of social organization comes down to Oankali anatomy and their sense organs, which enable direct connection between themselves and their human partners. Connection between the Oankali is based the immediate sharing of feelings, sensations, and thoughts through the neural linkage enabled by their sensory organs, in particular, their "sensory hands" which they use for gene manipulation and sex. By connected to each other's bodies and minds, the Oankali have no need for deception or even memory, for they are compelled to share experiences directly. This form of collectivism enables the novel to explore new alternatives for collectivism based on mutual sensation, in particular, through pleasure. It offers the human-Oankali couplings allow for a reconsideration of the role of agency in ethics.

Before moving forward, however, it is important to situate Oankali collectivism within a larger purpose of colonization. Jhadaya explains that the deepest drive for the Oankali is to acquire new species for their "gene trade": "We acquire new life, seek it, investigate it, manipulate it, sort it, use it. We carry the drive to do this in a minuscule cell within a cell, a tiny organelle within every cell of our bodies" (84). The Oankali compulsion to acquire may seem to have some similarities with the human drive for hierarchy, in particular, that it requires taking in and incorporating new beings into an existing structure. However, there is a crucial difference between the Oankali and the humans, which has to do with the collective nature of the alien species. One of the Oankali children, Nikanj, explains to Lilith that they evolved from a life form that consisted of numerous interconnected beings: "'Six divisions ago, on a white-sun water world, we lived in great shallow oceans,' it said. 'We were many-bodied and spoke with body lights and color patterns among ourself and among ourselves'" (123). From their "many-bodied" ancestors, the current Oankali inherited a constitution of collective, rather than individual, consciousness, which affects their concept of agency. As the Oankali evolved, this collective nature affects the way they communicate, which is by sharing sensory information directly so that the interlocutor experiences what is being related to them, and the way they make decisions, which is by unanimous agreement. Agency is distributed among the beings, who are singular and plural at once, "ourself and ourselves."

Their method of acquisition, though arguably similar to human acts of colonization in the way they expand through incorporation, presents different

priorities when it comes to ethical relations. Because health and vitality are necessary in order to trade genes, the Oankali do not admit any form of harm or destruction of life. At several points in the book, this attachment to life creates a blind spot, preventing them from anticipating acts of violence and at one point, even death, by humans. Toward the end of the novel, Lilith's partner, Joseph, is killed by a group of humans who rebel and attempt to escape the Oankali. Soon after his murder, Nikanj uses Joseph's genetic material to impregnate Lilith without her knowledge. Nikanj explains to Lilith that it gives her what she truly wants, though she cannot admit it,

"You'll have a daughter," it said. "And you are ready to be her mother. You could never have said so. Just as Joseph could never have invited me into his bed—no matter how much he wanted me there. Nothing about you but your words reject this child." 468-9.

Nikanj's reasoning is simple: no matter what Lilith says, it knows she will love and accept the child. For the Oankali, pleasure, not preference or choice, is the principal factor for decision-making. For, unlike humans, Oankali lack the capacity to self-delude through language. When Lilith protests that "It won't be human," Nikanj warns that "You shouldn't begin to lie to yourself. It's a deadly habit. The child will be yours and Joseph's" (469). That agency depends on pleasure rather than individual choice has significant implications for ethics, particularly for what counts as coercion and manipulation.

### 1.2.8 7. pleasure overrides choice

For, even when this sex act appears contained to the mind, it is always portrayed as something that relies on and is guided by the material exigencies of the body. When being seduced by the ooloi, the humans' sex drive is so strong that it overrides the question of consent. Jayna Brown points out that "the pleasurable experience of sex with the Ooloi is so highly compelling it is sometimes likened to rape in the text" (105). Lilith, however, appears to willingly surrender to the Oankali when it comes to sex, even when she resists their control at all other points of the novel. This tension emerges when Nikanj invites Lilith to join it and Joseph in bed:

"Lie here with us," it said, speaking alone. "Why should you be down there by yourself?"

She thought there could be nothing more seductive than an ooloi speaking in that particular tone, making that particular suggestion.

She realized she had stood up without meaning to and taken a step toward the bed. She stopped, stared at the two of them. Joseph's breathing now became a gentle snore and he seemed to sleep comfortably against Nikanj as she had awakened to find him sleeping comfortably against her many times. She did not pretend outwardly or to herself that she would resist Nikanj's invitation—or that she wanted to resist it. Nikanj could give her an intimacy with Joseph that was beyond ordinary human experience. And what it gave, it also experienced. 306

Lilith welcomes her body's immediate, unconscious response to Nikanj's invitation, and doesn't attempt to hide or resist this response. Where one might expect a split between embodied instinct and free will, or drive and determinacy, one instead encounters their collapse or conflation. This total surrender to her sexual desire appears in stark contrast to her other attempts to resist Oankali colonization, summarized what can be considered her motto, "Learn and run!", that she repeats up until the last page of the novel. Speaking of the *Parable* novels, which also depict the events following societal collapse, Jayna Brown explains that, for humanity, "changing and prevailing cannot coexist... We must adapt to survive, but species are never stable over time if they successfully adapt" (Brown 94). Throughout the novel, Lilith toes the line of this paradox, simultaneously encouraging the humans to obey the aliens' directions while preparing them for escape.

In this novel, adaptation requires changes that necessarily re-formulate what constitutes subjectivity, that is, the boundaries of the liberal humanist subject. The novel uses sexual pleasure in the flesh to destabilize the assumptions underpinning free will, which has the effect of challenging the boundaries of what is traditionally considered the individual. Brown argues that feeling, the receptivity to feeling, can be a basis for a kind of subjectivity that moves beyond the individual subject: "to surrender to touch, to our sensations, is to loosen the bounds of individualism, to mingle with other flesh and with the elements" (11). Her concept of the flesh mends Spillers's earlier differentiation between flesh, or "captive body," from "motive will," to offer a model of collective subjectivity enabled by feeling. While the senses "individuate us, demarcate our boundaries," they also "mark the ways our bodies are open. The body, the self, is porous, receptive, impressionable" (Brown 14). This openness recalls the immersion between Lilith and Joseph during sex: "Now their delight in one another ignited and burned. They moved together, sustaining an impossible intensity, both of them tireless, perfectly matched, ablaze in sensation, lost in one another" (309). The

pleasure in the flesh appears to momentarily dissolve the boundaries of the individual.

Basing subjectivity in the volition of the flesh dismantles one of the core tenets of liberal subjectivity, that of agency. The notion of choice becomes reformulated to the sharing mutual feeling, of feeling in the flesh. This proposes a model of ethics based on receptivity and vulnerability, rather than agency. Crucially, however, this model of ethics does not resolve inequalities that stem from hierarchy or subject/object formations. Although relationships based on pleasure admit less opportunity for exploitation, there are still hierarchical systems without the Oankali society. While the Oankali's repeated failure to anticipate human acts of violence reinforces the blindspots imposed by a social structure that cannot account for the destruction of life, they still exhibit hierarchical tendencies. For example, the ooloi, the third-gender beings who have sensory arms that can manipulate genes, are in charge of the gene trade and act as matchmakers among the males and females. They demonstrate that individuals within collective structures require some level of separateness and delegation in order to work cooperatively. Brown emphasizes this point when she distinguishes her interest in "feeling" from "sentimentality":

"Feeling together does not secure a place free of hierarchical relationships nor affirm a universalism based on the notion of oceanic unification. I am not invested in conciliatory politics, in some notion of symmetrical reciprocity. Rather, I want to get at something that sentimentality attempts to but can never fully harness, for feeling, as we explore it here, is anarchistic, a modality that cannot be controlled or always directed" (Brown 28)

Some form of hierarchy and individuality are crucial components for maintaining an environment that enables desire. Ironically, this separateness is reinforced in the moment of seamless connection. For example, when Lilith asks Nikanj to share its feelings of grief after Joseph's untimely death, its response suggests that some feelings cannot be entirely expressed: "It gave her... a new color. A totally alien, unique, nameless thing, half seen, half felt or... tasted. A blaze of something frightening, yet overwhelmingly, compelling" (Butler 429). Despite their direct neural connection, the description here derives its expressive power on the quality of unknowability, using formations of strangeness or liminality, ("half seen, half felt," "alien," "a new color") for its poignancy. It also puts into relief the contrast between human and Oankali approach toward difference: for the Oankali, who are enticed by difference, the other is "something frightening, yet overwhelmingly, compelling."

For humans and Oankali, individuality, and the inexhaustability of individual specificity, is what drives the desire for connection. As Audre Lorde affirms, "The erotic is a measure between the beginnings of our sense of self and the chaos of our strongest feelings," then individuality is central for the experience of its own dissolution (54).

### 1.2.9 TODO 8. the posthuman critique

This ethics based on feeling revises traditional humanist and posthumanist elisions of the body. As N. Katherine Hayles's work demonstrates, such elisions emerge from early conceptualizing of the liberal humanist subject, in which the rational mind *possessed* a body, into the posthuman, where cognition and feeling are *collapsed* into informational patterns. Hayles explains that the dualism of mind/body and the attendant erasure of the body from cognitive processes enables further suppressions: "Only because the body is not identified with the self is it possible to claim for the liberal subject its notorious universality, a claim that depends on erasing markers of bodily difference, including sex, race, and ethnicity" (4-5). The model of sex in Butler's novel revises this essential fiction spun in over the history of cybernetic development, mending the rift between body and mind.

### 1.2.10 9. scrambling sense and thought

One of the consequences of the Oankali focus on pleasure as a foundation for ethics may seem perhaps paradoxical from a human perspective. The method that Oankali have sex dispenses with what is for humans the source of sexual pleasure—the flesh. Flesh, which is the means through which humans achieve sexual contact, is an obstacle for Oankali sex. In the Oankali sexual union, the male and female do not touch, but are rather routed through an intermediary, nonbinary being whose "sensory arms" plug directly into the brain. The ooloi intermediary dispenses not only with the clumsiness of human bodies and the flesh, but also with human modes of communication and intimacy, to achieve direct stimulation of the brain's pleasure centers. In the process of seducing Joseph, Nikanj explains that it "offer[s] a oneness that your people strive for, dream of, but can't truly attain alone" (359). The direct connection facilitated by the ooloi offers a sensual and cognitive experience which cannot be paralleled by physical intercourse. Once Nikanj has her "plugged in", Lilith

immediately received Joseph as a blanket of warmth and security,  
a compelling, steady presence.

She never knew whether she was receiving Nikanj's approximation of Joseph, a true transmission of what Joseph was feeling, some combination of truth and approximation, or just a pleasant fiction.

What was Joseph feeling from her?

It seemed to her that she had always been with him. She had no sensation of shifting gears, no "time alone" to contrast with the present "time together." He had always been there, part of her, essential.

Nikanj focused on the intensity of their attraction, their union. It left Lilith no other sensation. It seemed, itself, to vanish. She sensed only Joseph, felt that he was aware only of her.

Now their delight in one another ignited and burned. They moved together, sustaining an impossible intensity, both of them tireless, perfectly matched, ablaze in sensation, lost in one another.  
308-309

While Lilith's experience of sex with Joseph and Nikanj explains a lot about the relationship between physical pleasure and mental experience, it also instructs one crucial lesson about human relationships. That Lilith questions whether her mental experiences are true or not, the fact that she doubts, points to an issue with human intimacy—that there exists a gap for miscommunication and misunderstanding. This gap is created and sustained by the flesh, which can be a clumsy, cumbersome, and unreliable space through which two sexual partners must navigate to reach sexual unity. By contrast, the Oankali sexual experience bypasses this gap directly, plugging into the brain's pleasure centers. By routing sensual connection to the brain, they eliminate the space for discomfort and even repulsion which can occur when in flesh-to-flesh contact.

The elimination of flesh in sex reveals a complex imbrication between physical sensation and mental experience, which pushes against a tendency in narratives that feature the "posthuman," that is, figures who extend the bounds of the traditional human subject by technological, biological, or spiritual modification. Because the sexual experience occurs entirely in the brain, it is easy to assume, as Lilith and Joseph do, that the experience is a simulation. Their assumption perpetuates one crucial tenet of liberal human subjectivity, according to N. Katherine Hayles, that the rational mind *possess* a fleshy body which functions as an extension of the mind. Hayles explains that for the posthuman, the mind represents pure intelligence, a set of informational patterns, while the body functions as a sort of prosthesis, which

can be substituted, updated, or even removed from the intelligent mind. The classic example is William Gibson's *Neuromancer* novel, which poses a virtual "dataspace," known as a "matrix," where users can move and interact without the need of a physical body. This emphasis on cognition creates an "erasure of embodiment" which assumes that feelings and sensations that occur in the body can be experienced in a flesh-less environment (Hayles 4-5). In the novel, Lilith appears to make the same assumptions as the posthuman when she questions whether the feelings she receives from Joseph are "true." However, as her conversation with Nikanj develops, she brings the body back into consideration:

"He... felt everything I felt?" "On a sensory level. Intellectually, he made his interpretations and you made yours. "I wouldn't call them intellectual." 310-311

Lilith's response here indicates that sense and thought are not as distinct as might have been assumed, in Hayles words, that "abstract pattern can never fully capture the embodied actuality" (22). Indeed, during the sex act, the terms that she uses to describe their sexual union appear to blend feeling and thought. The physical "warmth" with which she receives Joseph is immediately augmented with mental interpretations of "security," that is, comfort and protection. Further on, the intensity of their connection appears not only to dissolve her sense of time, as she feels "she had always been with him," but also to intuit what he was feeling, "that he was aware only of her" (308). While sex with the Oankali focuses on physical pleasure, the mind builds mental interpretations that seem to be inextricable from physical sensation.

# 1. Dawn Quotes

- (a) Colonialist intentions, Crossbreeding vs Trade: "It is crossbreeding, then, no matter what you call it.' 'It's what I said it was. A trade. The ooloi will make changes in your reproductive cells before conception and they'll control conception.'" (Butler 87).

- (b) Irresistible sex drive

"Lie here with us," it said, speaking alone. "Why should you be down there by yourself?"

She thought there could be nothing more seductive than an ooloi speaking in that particular tone, making that particular suggestion. She realized she had stood up



without meaning to and taken a step toward the bed. She stopped, stared at the two of them. Joseph's breathing now became a gentle snore and he seemed to sleep comfortably against Nikanj as she had awakened to find him sleeping comfortably against her many times. She did not pretend outwardly or to herself that she would resist Nikanj's invitation—or that she wanted to resist it. Nikanj could give her an intimacy with Joseph that was beyond ordinary human experience. And what it gave, it also experienced. This was what had captured Paul Titus, she thought. This, not sorrow over his losses or fear of a primitive Earth.

### **1.3 flesh**

#### **1.3.1 section overview**

Bound by the impulses of the "human contradiction," the flesh poses a problem for interpersonal relationships. It functions as a barrier to more pleasurable forms of social organization. Black Feminist studies help us to see how the Flesh can be redeployed, through their examination of flesh as surface. Their emphasis on the surface finds fugitivity and foreclosure as possible modes of resistance.

#### **1.3.2 1. the reduction of flesh**

The process of racialization, which builds from the flesh not only helps us to understand the inextricability of the material from the mental, but also offers a possibility for developing social relations into toward more ethically equitable forms. To help unpack this inextricability between registers, I turn to thinkers in Black Feminist Studies whose theorizations of the flesh enables them to parse various racial and gendered processes, the "symbolic order" or "American grammar," in Hortense Spillers words, ascribed to Black bodies over time (68). These theorizations of the flesh, which index a liminal space where meaning is simultaneously ascribed and obscured, will become the ground for my working through the intersections of physical materiality and symbolic meaning in my next section, *skin*. They will allow me to trace in more detail how the process of reduction to flesh simultaneously creates an opportunity for resisting certain kinds of reading(s) [definitely rephrase].

In the nearly impossible task of the history of transatlantic slavery, thinkers in Black Feminist Studies have redeployed the systematic reduction

of the body to flesh into a tool of resistance. The idea of black flesh as a reduction of the black body is first theorized by Hortense Spillers in her influential essay, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book." Here Spillers puts forth the conception of the black body as a stack of "attenuated meanings, made in excess over time, assigned by a particular historical order" (65). These meanings developed from the Black body that had been reduced to flesh, "severing of the captive body from its motive will," that Spillers traces to the middle passage. Spillers enumerates four effects of this violent process (67):

1. the captive body becomes the source of an irresistible, destructive sensuality;
2. at the same time—in stunning contradiction—the captive body reduces to a thing, becoming being for the captor;
3. in this absence from a subject position, the captured sexualities provide a physical and biological expression of "otherness";
4. as a category of "otherness," the captive body translates into a potential for pornotroping and embodies sheer physical powerlessness that slides into a more general "powerlessness," resonating through various centers of human and social meaning.

67

Imposed by the reduction of Black bodies to bare physicality, to a material substance for labor and exchange, there is, in "stunning contradiction," some form of meaning which adheres to the flesh. This process of the reduction to flesh, which Spillers calls "pornotroping," opens a space for the layering of sensuality, objectification, otherness, and powerlessness (Spillers 67).

### 1.3.3 2. fungibility -> fugitivity

Following Spillers, who poses flesh as the "zero degree of social conceptualization", thinkers in Black Feminist Studies have drawn from the flesh as a ground for theorizing the intersection of materiality and meaning (Spillers 67). For example, C. Riley Snorton attends to flesh as a site of resistance against the imposition of racial signification. Snorton explains that the whittling down of black subjectivity, which enabled chattel slavery, imposes a state of interchangeability, what he calls the "fungible." This fungibility in Black flesh creates a possibility for "fugitivity," or escape, from the trappings of sex and gender: "Captive and divided flesh functions as malleable matter for mediating and remaking sex and gender as matters of human categorization

and personal definition" (20). Snorton describes how the reduction of black female bodies to flesh for experimental purposes enabled the emergence of field of gynecology as a white women's science. While white femininity prevents the inspection of white female genitalia, it is constructed out of the "scopic availability" of black flesh (Snorton 33). Beyond facilitating the study of white bodies, however, Black flesh also creates a "capacitating structure" that enables "fungibility for fugitive movement" (Snorton 53). Here, Snorton interweaves various narratives of fugitivity, such as that of Harriet Jacobs, whose story of escape in 1842 is documented in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861). While traditional racial "passing" assumes an ambiguity that enables one to pass for white, the reduction to Black flesh, by contrast, endows a "gender indefiniteness" for "cross-gendered modes of escape" (56). In other words, it is the "blackening" of Jacobs that allows her to obtain a level of "fungibility, thingness" that precludes her recognition (Snorton 71). Being susceptible to multiple mappings of meaning here, the Black flesh therefore opens a site for potentiality that paradoxically facilitates escape from signification. The reduction to flesh creates an almost chaotic state where the body can slip in and out of signification.

### 1.3.4 3. opacity -> foreclosure

Like Snorton, Musser builds off Spillers' theorization of the Black flesh as a reduced state. For Musser, this means thinking alongside the inherent violence that adheres in the concept of the pornotrope: "'to think with the flesh and to inhabit the pornotrope is to hold violence and possibility in the same frame" (12). Drawing from Alexander G. Weheliye's point that sexual desire cannot be severed from domination, Musser's emphasis on fleshiness brings to the surface other modes of relationality that exist alongside and are in tension with the desire to dominate. One of these modes is hunger, which she reads through a photograph of the artist Lyle Ashton Harris's impersonation of Billie Holiday. Musser's reading of its surface emphasizes a self that is excessive yet inaccessible. Musser notes the details of the Harris's dress, such as the "pearls, eye shadow and lipstick" that capture the light of the image, as the "Shine [which] plays joyfully with the idea of the body as body while rejecting the demand to present anything other than surface" ("Surface-Becoming" par. 3). Musser explains that Harris's open mouth, for example:

tells us nothing of Holiday or Harris, but it reveals a sensuality or mode of being and relating that prioritizes openness, vulnerability, and a willingness to ingest without necessarily choosing what one

is taking in. This is not the desire born of subjectivity in which subject wishes to possess object, but an embodied hunger that takes joy and pain in this gesture of radical openness toward otherness. 5

While emphasis on the surface here indexes the matter, the material aspects, of the image, it also *forecloses* access to that which we cannot know. In this way, Musser explains, the surface aesthetics of the image exist in tension with the inescapable violence of the pornotrope: "we can understand surface as the underside of the scientific/pornographic drive toward locating knowledge in an 'objective' image" ("Surface-Becoming" par. 2). In foreclosing access to interiority, opacity opens relational possibilities that transcend the boundaries of the possessive subject.

#### 1.3.5 4. surface -> shifting registers

In another example, Musser moves to a painting by artist Mickalene Thomas entitled *Origin of the Universe 1* (2012), whose depiction of a female vulva evokes French realist painter Gustave Courbet's *Origine du Monde* (1866). Here, the vulva is black, and encrusted with rhinestones, creating an effect of brilliant surface which Musser argues is a "formal strategy of producing opacity" (*Sensual Excess* 48). While this work, like Harris's citation of Billie Holiday, instrumentalizes opacity as a means of foreclosing access to interiority, it does so alongside a more pronounced subtext of objectification that results from the commodification of the black female body. Here, Musser's analysis turns to the rhinestones, which function simultaneously on two registers: first, their flashiness "as a reminder of the long association between black people and the commodity" (*Sensual Excess* 50); and second, as a brilliance that evokes wetness, as a result of sexual pleasure. This dual possibilities exists simultaneously, as Musser explains:

Thinking the rhinestone as a trace or residue of Thomas's wetness and excitement allows us to hold violence, excess, and possibility in the same frame. Even as the source is ambiguous, the idea that rhinestones might offer a record of pleasure—pleasure that is firmly constituted in and of the flesh—shows us a form of self-possession. This self is not outside of objectification, but its embellishment and insistence on the trace of excitement speaks to the centrality of pleasure in theorizations of self-love. *Sensual Excess* 63

I want to emphasize the movement between these registers here. While the signifiatory system that works on the image of the black vulva is inescapable, the effect of objectification exists alongside the projection of pleasure. The surface of the image facilitates this shift in registers. Attention to materiality, to opacity of the brilliant surface, enables one to apprehend this movement from one frame to another, from "violence, [to] excess, [and to] possibility."  
[connect this to the notion of "torque" in M. Kirschenbaum]

## 1.4 skin

Here we see the layers of flesh as "surface effects."

- Hayles and Kirschenbaum enable us to deconstruct how what we think is immaterial is actually embodied/inscribed.
- First, to understand, as Hayles explains, that "information loses its body" and see how this perpetuates liberal humanist reductions of the subject. Hayles frames this within a discussion of the posthuman.
- Second, to examine K's concept of formal materiality, where abstraction engages manipulation and sensuality, the shifting of registers.
- K's torque enables us to read sensuality into Hayles's concept of flickering signifiers.

-> Bringing back the flesh: pattern as material in the form of opacity, surface, torque. -> deep reading of different technologies in *skin*.

### 1.4.1 Media Archaeology overview

New Media studies poses an understanding of digital media as alternately undifferentiated or immaterial, or then as durable and particular inscription. Media theorist Friedrich Kittler, who famously conceives digital media as undifferentiated, argues that:

The general digitization of channels and information erases the differences among individual media. Sound and image, voice and text are reduced to surface effects, known to consumers as interface. Sense and the senses turn into eyewash. Inside the computers themselves everything becomes a number: quantity without image, sound or voice. *Grammophone* 1

From Walter Benjamin's seminal "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," Kittler bring media theory to consider the effects of the digital in conversation with recent theoretical developments, like discourse analysis and structuralist psychoanalysis. Kittler imposes Lacan's concepts of the symbolic, imaginary, and real to give detailed accounts of the specificities brought about by differentiation of communication technologies in writing, sound, and visual media. Writing, for example, as a "symbolic" medium with letters and words operating within a signifying system, contrasts with the phonograph, which etches acoustic effects of the "real" into vinyl material, and with film, whose projection evokes the imaginary. Kittler's essential proposition is that media do not simply reflect our thought: rather, they shape thought. It is not that the film mimics our unconscious, but that our unconscious mimics film. Film projects the effect of light waves at speeds fast enough to sustain an illusion of movement. For Kittler, the digital computer is the medium to end all media: "What will soon end in the monopoly of bits and fiber optics began with the monopoly of writing" (*Grammophone* 4). He presents a reintegration of all differentiated materialities into the stream of zeros and ones:

Our media systems merely distribute the words, noises, and images people can transmit and receive. But they do not compute these data. They do not produce an output that, under computer control, transforms any algorithm into any interface effect, to the point where people take leave of our senses. *Grammophone*

2

Kittler argues that the effect of the computerization is to flatten the material specificity of various media, which corresponded to various sense perceptions. By "computing these data," the digital medium does the feeling in place of the human senses.

#### **1.4.2 how information lost its body**

Working to unflatten the zeroes and ones, scholars influenced by literary studies, like N. Katherine Hayles and Matthew Kirschenbaum, emphasize the *materiality* in digital media. According to Hayles, the disarticulation of digitality from materiality has been in production since the emergence of computing technologies in the mid-20th century. Hayles's influential text, *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics* (2000), lays out the "waves of cybernetic development," that is, the development of systems theory among prominent information and

communication theorists like Norbert Wiener, John von Neumann, Claude Shannon, and Warren McCulloch (2). Hayles traces the first of these waves, "how information lost its body," to bring to the surface the conceptual moves that, throughout cybernetic development, reduced intelligence to information processing, the calculation and manipulation of symbols. To re-materialize the conceptual moves that evacuate embodiment, Hayles offers a dialectic of "pattern/randomness," in which information is as a formal organization of symbols (pattern) against arbitrary or chaotic "noise" (randomness). This privileging of intelligence in the human congeals an imaginary for developing increasingly sophisticated machines that can compute streams of seemingly weightless, massless numbers. The body and the experience of embodiment becomes more and more displaced in favor of a conception of humanity as primarily information processing entities.

This development, according to Hayles, extends reductive ideologies in the liberal human into the "posthuman." Specifically, the displacement of embodiment in favor of information processing perpetuates liberal humanist conceptions that privilege a dominant, unmarked rationality over embodied experience and especially, embodied difference. As Hayles explains, "Information, like humanity, cannot exist apart from embodiment that brings it into being as a material entity in the world; and embodiment is always instantiated, local, and specific" ("Virtual Bodies and Flickering Signifiers", 1993, 91). The liberal humanist subject is characterized by classical mind/body divisions and hierarchies that posit embodiment as separate from and subordinate to intelligence, in which the rational mind *possesses* a body. Extending this framework, the posthuman is characterized by an intelligence consisting of informational patterns that *inhabit*. This progression from possession to inhabitation suggests that the next move will be to transcend the material realm altogether, as consciousness can be uploaded to a virtual space where life itself is infinite.

### 1.4.3 turing test

Hayles inaugurates the story of "how information lost its body" with a Alan Turing's famous thought experiment, the "Turing Test." In a 1950 paper, "Computing Machinery and Intelligence," Turing outlines criteria for evaluating whether or not machines can "think" in a way comparable to human thinking. The resulting Turing Test, or "imitation game," as it's also known, poses a strategically simplified definition for computer intelligence. The question is not whether a computer can intrinsically display intelligent or conscious thought which, Turing points out, is difficult enough to gauge

in a human. Rather, the question is whether a computer can adequately *impersonate* a human to feign intelligence. Turing therefore sets up the test to include one human and two interlocutors, a human and a machine. The test consists of the first human typing questions to the two interlocutors whose answers will enable the human to guess which one is a human and which a machine. Because all communication occurs is routed through a keyboard and screen, the game relies on how well each interlocutor can respond in verbal form to questions posed by the first human.

Hayles points out that this first step toward Artificial Intelligence crucially *sidesteps* the role of the body in thinking. By distinguishing *embodied* experience from verbal representation, the test poses a concept of intelligence which is detachable from its material instantiation. Hayles drives this point home with the comparison to gender that Turing makes prior to his explanation of the Turing Test, as a way of introducing the idea and structure of a guessing game based on verbal questioning and responses. Here, rather than intelligence, the person taking the test must gauge which of the two interlocutors is male and which is female. By sequestering the body into another room, Hayle explains, the test effectively severs gender into two components: the embodied component, and the represented component. If the person taking the test guesses correctly which is the man and which the woman, then gender is reconsolidated into a single identity; However, as Hayles points out, "The very existence of the text... implies that you might also make the wrong choice" (*Posthuman* xiii). That gender can be represented *discursively*, as a formal or symbolic phenomenon, bifurcates gender into embodiment and representation. As Hayles explains, "the overlay between the enacted and represented bodies is no longer a natural inevitability but a contingent production, mediated by a technology that has become so entwined with the production of identity that it can no longer meaningfully be separated from the human subject" (*Posthuman* xiii).

My first chapter explores how gender has been characterized within discursive frame, in terms of performativity. In that chapter, I examined how coding structures (the for loop, for example) create iterative forms which can be reworked toward evoking iterativity in gender performativity. Here, I want to take a different approach. I want to examine how Hayles' reading of information as represented on the computer screen, which she frames as an evacuation of embodiment, might actually be reframed as a *distinctly material* and *sensual* process. I want to consider the ways in which the language on the computer's screen is only the topmost in a layer of various software stacks that contain their own materialities.

In my view, the test's most interesting move isn't that it evacuates



embodiment, but that it speculates the terms under which embodiment can be *performed*. Turing, who spends a significant portion of his argument clearing the ground for what he means by "thinking" in the context of computation, which is decidedly not thinking as humans experience it, explains that it is necessary to elide questions of embodiment and consciousness when it comes to assessing intelligence. The inclusion of typing purposefully evacuates body/feeling from the test, as Turing explains,

In order that tones of voice may not help the interrogator the answers should be written, or better still, typewritten. The ideal arrangement is to have a teleprinter communicating between the two rooms. Alternatively the question and answers can be repeated by an intermediary. The object of the game for the third player (B) is to help the interrogator. The best strategy for her is probably to give truthful answers. She can add such things as "I am the woman, don't listen to him!" to her answers, but it will avail nothing as the man can make similar remarks. 434

Turing is careful to construct the components of the test in a way that deliberately reflects an anthropocentric frame. The question, for Turing, is not whether a machine can "think," but whether a machine can act indistinguishably from the way a thinker acts. Avoiding the difficult philosophical problem of defining what it means "to think," Turing can instead focus on how a formal system of symbol manipulation might generate a performance of intelligence. From this perspective, the Turing test deliberately offers up gender and cognition as a simulation. Another way of putting it is that cognition and gender become features of a certain type of formal performance.

#### 1.4.4 formal materiality

In what follows, I explore the *formal* aspects of this kind of symbol manipulation. Here, I draw from Hayles and Matthew Kirschenbaum to tease out the sensual aspects of digital media. As Kirschenbaum points out, the effects of the screen, where objects appear, disappear, and move with apparent fluidity that seems to defy matter (have you ever wiggled a window?), reinforce a common misconception that digital media is "immaterial"—that it isn't based on physical objects, in this case, the physical level of digital inscription on computer hardware. To counter this misconception, which Kirschenbaum calls "screen essentialism," Kirschenbaum offers a dual framework of "formal" and "forensic" materiality. Together, these levels of materiality produce what Kirschenbaum calls "the illusion of immaterial behavior" on the screen (11).

Forensic materiality examines the physical level of digital inscription, that is, the magnetic encoding at the level of computer hardware, and it how it bubbles up the software stack through the levels of programming languages toward specific interface effects on the screen. Kirschenbaum demonstrates how a reading of physical materiality of digital media, such as file formats or software specifications below the level of human senses and awareness, might influence the “close-reading” of textual material in electronic formats to challenge widespread theorizations about electronic formats manifesting post-structural aesthetics like fluidity and ephemerality. For example, his reading of an early story authoring software called *Storyspace* points out that the physical realities of software create idiosyncratic reading experiences of the same story.

If forensic materiality denotes the physical level of computer hardware, such as the magnetic polarities inscribed on hard drives, which are invisible to the naked eye, formal materiality consists of visual and conceptual phenomena such as display and appearance on the screen, as well as underlying software logics and structures, such as programming languages and data formats. Kirschenbaum asserts that the effects of the screen, which suggest that digital objects are easily manipulated, is a deliberate result from a long process of normalization as data moves up the software stack. Just as older technologies like the telegraph employ relay systems to reinforce signals over long stretches of transmission, so software employs signal "reinvigoration" that refreshes data as it travels through software environments. Contrary to the misconception that digital processes enable "transmission without loss, repetition without originality," electronic data is continually reproduced and refreshed to fix errors and idiosyncracies that occur during transmission. Kirschenbaum describes this process as "allographic reproduction" in which information systems standardize data through *approximation* rather than exact copying (136). As a result, Kirschenbaum argues, formal materiality, the effect on the screen, is a "built" and "manufactured" phenomenon, "existing as the end product of long traditions and trajectories of engineering that werer deliberately undertaken to achieve and implement it (137).

#### 1.4.5 abstraction -> tangibility of data

Although formal materiality acts as a buffer between the user and the digital inscription, there is an inverse relationship between digital abstraction and tactile manipulation. At the most basic level, electronic data consists of one of two possible ("binary") marks on a magnetized surface, a north polarity signifying "1", or a south polarity signifying "0". As data moves up the stack,

this binary digits, or "bits," abstract into informational patterns, which take the form of shapes on the screen. More specifically, these binary digits are compiled into low machine languages such as Assembly language, then into higher order programming languages like Java and Python. Kirschenbaum points out that the higher that data climbs up the levels of abstraction, the more malleable and manipulatable digital objects become, a state which he calls "digital volatility" (140). By manipulating the graphical user interface, for example, by dragging and right clicking on items, users can move, duplicate, or delete large quantities of data. Kirschenbaum explains this "dynamic tension... between inscription and abstraction, digitality and volatility" makes formal materiality more susceptible to movement and change than physical inscription, which remains inaccessible. Moving away from the inscription, is a move toward something that users can handle and "touch," so to speak.

#### 1.4.6 torque -> materializes the shift of software registers

The concept of formal materiality not only applies to conceptual objects on the screen, such as windows and icons, but also to the ways that data is transformed as it moves up the stack. Kirschenbaum explains that formal materiality, as a term, "tries to capture something of the procedural friction or perceived difference—the torque—as a user shifts from one set of software logics to another" (13). Kirschenbaum's choice of *torque*, a concept from physics and mechanics, is significant. Torque signifies a force that results in a rotational movement, and can be represented with the formula  $\tau = f * d$ , where  $f$  denotes an external force, and  $d$  denotes distance from the object's pivot point. This force combines energy from two directions, first, from the external force acting upon the object, and second, from the relation between the exact point of contact on the object and the object's own weight. Typically, objects rotate along their "center of mass," or pivot point, the point along the object where it can be balanced, where its distributional weight is zero. For example, one could balance a twelve-inch ruler by placing a finger under the sixth inch. By applying some force to the center of mass, the object would not pivot, but move in a linear direction, either up or down, or sideways, depending on the direction of the force. However, if external force was applied along either side of the center, say at the second or ninth inch, the object would pivot. Its direction would then be determined by its pivot point, whether that be its center of mass or the point where the object is affixed to another object, if the ruler were nailed to the wall, for example. In this case, the ruler would pivot around this point of attachment, and

the force and direction of its pivot would be measured as "torque." Torque, therefore, is a measure of a force that relies on *distance* between the point of contact the object's center.

The concept of torque is useful for materializing the shift from one code to another. The distance between the point of contact and the center of weight, which with force determines *torque*, can be understood as the gap between one sign and another. Or at a larger scale, the shift from one signifiatory system to another as data travels up the software stack.

#### 1.4.7 flickering signifiers

Hayles wonders, "Why do we talk and write incessantly about the 'text,' a term that obscures differences between technologies of production and implicitly promotes the work as an immaterial construct?" ("Flickering connectivities in Shelley Jackson's Patchwork Girl: the Importance of Media-Specific Analysis," 2000, par. 57). Hayles offers the concept of the "flickering signifier" to tease out the cultural assumptions behind digital immateriality. The flickering signifier consists of words and objects on the screen that appear immaterial, "characterized by their tendency toward unexpected metamorphoses, attenuations, and dispersions" ("Virtual Bodies and Flickering Signifiers", 1993, 76). Due to this appearance, the flickering signifier perpetuates a liberal humanist ideology about the body/mind separation into the posthuman one of hardware/code. Just as the mind rules the fleshy body, so the *code* represents a an insubstantial standard that drives computation. Hayles frames the flickering signifier within a poststructuralist critique that work to destabilize meaning and truth within classical knowledge paradigms. Evoking Jacques Lacan's "floating signifier," the idea that a word has no referent, but "floats" above a text, attaining whatever meaning it can by a play of differentials within other floating signifiers, the "flickering" refers to the ways that electrical signals, which represent words, travel up the software stack. Hayles explains that the floating signifier belies an immateriality:

As I write these words on my computer, I see the lights on the video screen, but for the computer the relevant signifiers are magnetic tracks on disks. Intervening between what I see and what the computer reads are the machine code that correlates alphanumeric symbols with binary digits, the compiler language that correlates these symbols with higher-level instructions determining how the symbols are to be manipulated, the processing program that mediates between these instructions and the commands I give the computer, and so forth. A signifier on one level becomes

a signified on the next higher level. Precisely because the relation between signifier and signified at each of these levels is arbitrary, it can be changed with a single global command. Virtual Bodies and Flickering Signifiers", 1993, 77

Hayles's description of the flickering signifier, what she calls a "flexible chain of markers," materializes the various levels of transformation that digitized inscription must undergo in order to reach the level of the screen. The process begins at the level of physical inscription, where binary markings on disks are translated to machine code and other lower level programming languages, when are then fed into a compiler procedure that rewrites these codes into more readable programming languages (also known as "higher order" languages), at which point they are composed into applications and files that humans can engage directly via a graphical user interface. In this movement up the stack, data shifts between registers and becomes more tangible, a process that is belied by the fleeting and diaphanous forms that finally emerge on the computer screen.

#### 1.4.8 Hayles perhaps underestimating materiality of flicking sig

Flickering signifiers bring consideration of "transformations" into view. though I do think she is underestimating the "matter," "energy" which goes into it.

When a text presents itself as a constantly refreshed image rather than durable inscription, transformations would occur that would be unthinkable if matter or energy, rather than informational patterns, formed the primary basis for the systemic exchanges. This textual fluidity, which humans learn in their bodies as they interact with the system, imply that signifiers flicker rather than float. 30

#### 1.4.9 *skinonskinonskin*

In what follows, I read the flickering signifiers, this "flexible chain of markers bound together by the arbitrary relations specified by the relevant codes" ("Virtual" 77). They are productions, they are manipulable, they are shifting.

*skinonskinonskin* is a work of "net art" created in collaboration between Auriea Harvey and Michael Samyn, who go by the name Entropy8Zuper!. *skin* documents the inception of their love affair, which began in an internet chat room in 1999, in the form of a digital correspondence of web pages, or "digital love letters". (*skinonskinonskin* Net Art Anthology).

By today's technological standards, the net artwork is inaccessible to modern browsers. The work consists of HTML (HyperText Markup Language) pages animated by now obsolete web browser code (HTML and JavaScript) and Flash software. Due to modernization, the browser languages HTML and JavaScript use now depreciated elements like `<layers>` and `<area>` to add animation. Additionally, since Flash technology, a compiled software that is not "human-readable", has been discontinued, it is very difficult to find solutions for editing and viewing Flash elements. Besides the difficulty with authoring languages, it was created to run on the Netscape 4 browser which offered, for the time, a platform agnostic solution that would render on both Harvey's Mac and Samyn's PC. *skin* takes part in a body electronic work called "Electronic Literature," which is now practically inaccessible. Electronic Literature, which spans several subgenres, like hypertext fiction, network literature, interactive fiction, and generative text share a common interest in exploring aesthetics that draw from the digitality of the medium.

In what follows, I am going to discuss this work according to three key ideas from black feminist studies: [force], foreclosure, and fugitivity.

1. haptics -> movement engages source code's "shifts" (torque) The hypertext work plays with haptic engagement (the hand on the mouse) in ways that point to *shifts* that occur in the underlying program code.

-> These shifts can be what? What is a "shift" – a piece of code that executes?

-> What is the significance of these shifts? That they are rooted in constraints, conditional statements, static images, to engage motion?

The pages by Samyn, in particular, deploy animation techniques that engage the user's physical movement. One page, "air.html," challenges the user's tactile ability, requiring precise mouse manipulations in order to "move" elements across the page. On this page, the user controls two small bodies in horizontal, flying position, as they float over a field of a field of rotating lines, which evoke a rolling, cyber-landscape. The animations operate like magnets, always moving toward the mouse, but the strength of their attraction depends on the mouse's speed. By slowing down the speed, the individual bodies can touch, but they can never cross each other. Even with the most precise movements, Samyn's body remains on the left, while Harvey's is on the right. [SEE GIF] The illusion of freedom in floating, therefore, has constraints.

[include gif of air.html]

The animation is defined in the JavaScript, in the page's source code. Observe the if/else statement for the JavaScript function, `flyMouse()`.

```
if ( mouseX < halfW ) { var mFactor = 0.1; var aFactor = 0.01; } else {  
var mFactor = 0.01; var aFactor = 0.1; }; ... dMove('flyingmL','document.',mLeft  
+ thisXDiff*mFactor,mTop + thisYDiff*mFactor); ... dMove('flyingaL','document.',aLeft  
+ thisXDiff*aFactor,aTop + thisYDiff*aFactor); moveGround();
```

Though the full workings of the source code remain fuzzy (at least to me), it is clear that the basics of the animation element relies on an if/else statement. Here, the movement of the bodies is conditional on their distance between the mouse and the original positioning of the bodies on either side of the screen. Depending on this distance, the magnetic force for each of the bodies is multiplied against a factor of .1 or .01. This results in a stronger movement from Samyn's body when the mouse is on the left side of the screen (Samyn's original position), and a stronger movement from Harvey's body when the mouse is on the right half of the screen. The binary nature of this conditional statement—it can be true or it can be false, and will execute the associated code—accords with an animation that is, at its core, about dual movement. Here, the movement by the hand and the oppositional constraints which the user comes up against, engage the transformations that take place in the code, "under the hood" of the work, so to speak.

Throughout this work, the user engages with HTML and JavaScript code via haptics on the browser. The source code endows digital "objects" with properties and methods so that they can become manipulable at the level of surface. These constructs, which are defined under the hood of the browser, enable sensual experiences for the user.

One example occurs on "obsessed.html," which contains a view of a concentric circles, in green, that move against the cursor in a circular motion. The motion of the circles, which are rooted in the unmoving center circle, and whose outer layers increase in mobility, recall a spring mechanism, flexible yet taut. If "air.html" play with magnetic forces, this plays with the opposite, with opposing force. Moving the mouse across the screen pushes the circles away. If one, however, moves the mouse to the center of the circle, they settle back into a neutral position.

The center circle, when clicked, leads to a new page, "control.html." While the source code for most pages include a title, author, and

date, this page only contains a title, "you:controlMe." It consists of a monochrome green image of Harvey, whose head rolls from side to side in the direction of the user's cursor. The effect, which is reinforced by the cursor appearing as a pointing hand, as it does when something becomes "clickable," is that the user manually turns Harvey's head from one side to the other by pressure of the cursor-as-hand. Additionally, when the user moves Harvey's head from side to side, they not only see more or less of her face, but also peices of "alt-text" with words like "go" "believe" "ocean" and "mind". The [SEE GIF].

[INSERT GIF]

There are two interesting things here. The first is the way the animation engages directly the sensuality of the human user. Not only does the cursor implicate hand movement, in that the user *moves* Harvey's face by passing the mouse over it, but the animation itself lends an aura of super-reality. Rather than represent a smooth movement from side to side, Harvey's head takes little jumps from one position to another. A look into the source code reveals that the animation consists of 23 images that loop according to the position of the user's mouse. The effect is a slight lag, a series of fleeting pauses that intensify Harvey's direct gaze into the camera.

2. foreclosure - > language & code Although the user has full access to Harvey's image, they have only partial access to the alt-text that appears when they pan over certain parts of the animation." Alt-text is one of several attributes tied to each of the 23 images used to animate the movement of Harvey's head, including coordinates for the mouse to activate the relevant image and conditional statements that define visibility. The code for a single image of the 23, for example, consists of the following: `~<AREA SHAPE=RECT ALT="i" HREF="#" COORDS="0,0,8,142" onMouseOver="strokeimage.src=stroke1.src ; window.status='i' ; return true">~`. Alt-text," short for "alternative text," triggers the displays descriptive text meant to stand in place of the image, for accessibility reasons and in the case that the image fails to load. Without knowledge of the precise location of each alt-text coordinate, accessing all of the alt-text embedded within the images requires a peek at the source code, which lists the alt-text for each of the 23 images one by one: `<AREA SHAPE=RECT ALT="i" ..> <AREA SHAPE=RECT ALT="believe" ...> <AREA`



SHAPE=RECT ALT="in" ...> <AREA SHAPE=RECT ALT="it"  
...> <AREA SHAPE=RECT ALT="you" ...> <AREA SHAPE=RECT  
ALT="created" ...> <AREA SHAPE=RECT ALT="it" ...> <AREA  
SHAPE=RECT ALT="in" ...> <AREA SHAPE=RECT ALT="my"  
...> <AREA SHAPE=RECT ALT="mind" ...> <AREA SHAPE=RECT  
ALT="my" ...> <AREA SHAPE=RECT ALT="mind" ...> <AREA  
SHAPE=RECT ALT="cannot" ...> <AREA SHAPE=RECT ALT="let"  
...> <AREA SHAPE=RECT ALT="it" ...> <AREA SHAPE=RECT  
ALT="go" ...> <AREA SHAPE=RECT ALT="the" ...> <AREA  
SHAPE=RECT ALT="ocean" ...> <AREA SHAPE=RECT ALT="the"  
...> <AREA SHAPE=RECT ALT="waves" ...> <AREA SHAPE=RECT  
ALT="its" ...> <AREA SHAPE=RECT ALT="a" ...> <AREA  
SHAPE=RECT ALT="vision" ...> While the user may experience  
a number of these phrases as they pan over the image, here the ordering  
creates a sense of coherence. When viewed in this way, from the top-  
down, the words string together into intelligible thoughts like "i believe  
in it," and "my mind cannot let it go." What appears on the surface of  
the work, then, is only a particle of the full description occurring below.

Below the overt narrative of surface effects, lies another narrative  
within the source code. Here, within the HTML and JavaScript that  
define the content, presentation, and animations on the page, lie secret  
messages meant for human eyes. While most of the work is visual  
and haptic in nature, these hidden messages combine natural language  
with code to make verbal exhortations of love. For example, on the first  
page, "breath.html," an array of romantic protestations are assigned to  
the value, "whispers." These "whispers," which include phrases like "i  
will love you forever," "i want to breath you," among others included  
below, do not manifest directly on the browser, which only shows  
a moving image of a bared chest accompanied by breathing sounds.  
Rather, the messages are hidden within the source code, waiting only  
for the curious and experienced user to come and find them. whispers  
= new Array(); whispers[0] = "breath me"; whispers[1] = "i will  
love you forever"; whispers[2] = "skin"; whispers[3] = "skin on skin";  
whispers[4] = "skin on skin on skin"; whispers[5] = "implode"; whispers[6]  
= "soft"; whispers[7] = "slow"; whispers[8] = "can you feel me?";  
whispers[9] = "touch me"; whispers[10] = "one more cigarette"; whispers[11]  
= "i am so open"; whispers[12] = "i want to feel you inside of me";  
whispers[13] = "smoke"; whispers[14] = "i want to breathe you"; whispers[15]  
= "we are smoke"; whispers[16] = "yesss"; whispers[17] = "deeper";

whispers[18] = "i am disappearing"; whispers[19] = "warm";

Musser describes foreclosure as an overflow of surface effects that preclude understanding beyond them. Foreclosure is strategy of resistance against attempts at incorporation. Something is always withheld. Similarly, I want to suggest that computer code creates a level of foreclosure by making elements always partially inaccessible. The surface effects of the screen engage elements within the code, sometimes in code from other pages, which are inaccessible to the general user, to surface additional layers of foreclosure. For example, the page, "close.html," takes a series of filenames from "smoke.html" to overlay the image of the chest from "breath.html" (SEE IMAGE). Rather than take the content of the files directly, this new page takes the *filenames* of the words, such as "ccy01Over.jpg." The move creates a double foreclosure: first, in the original image, which requires precise activation by the user's mouse; and second, in the filename, which gives no indication of the image's content and cannot be found (as far as I can tell) for further examination on the server. In other words, the filenames on the chest stand for images which the user cannot see directly. This effect surfaces a displacement inherent in all signifiatory systems but particularly in machine language systems, which rely on levels of abstraction in its software stack.

[IMAGE OF CLOSE.HTML]

3. flash foreclosure In "words.html," view-source:<http://entropy8zuper.org/skinonskinonskin/rhizome/words.html> By Samyn on valentines day, 1999.

Samyn animates a beating heart, overlaid with words and phrases that move in various arcs from its center. [SEE IMAGE/GIF]

The code for this page does various things: first, it defines the list of strings, or words/phrases, which will arc over and around the heart. Then, it includes a series of JavaScript functions that selects words, calculates their trajectory and timing, and resets their position to restart the loop.

```
unction startMove() { floatWords(0,Math.round(words.length/4));  
setTimeout("floatWords(Math.round(words.length/4),Math.round(words.length/2));",5000);  
setTimeout("floatWords(Math.round(words.length/2),Math.round(words.length/4*3));",10000);  
setTimeout("floatWords(Math.round(words.length/4*3),Math.round(words.length));",15000);  
};  
  
function floatWords(startNumber,endNumber) { for ( i = startNumber  
; i < endNumber ; i++ ) { floatWord(i); }; };
```

```
function rePos(thisNumber) { dMove('wordL'+thisNumber,'document.',halfW-
rand(50),halfH-rand(50)); floatWord(thisNumber); };
```

```
function floatWord(thisNumber) { var randTime = (rand(15) + 5)*1000;
var thisRand = rand(4); if ( thisRand = 1 ) { dMoveStraight('wordL'+thisNumber,'document
+ thisNumber + ');',''); } else if ( thisRand = 2 ) { dMoveStraight('wordL'+thisNumber
20-rand(100),randTime,'wordVal'+thisNumber,''); } else if ( thisRand
= 3 ) { dMoveStraight('wordL'+thisNumber,'document.',stageW
+ rand(100),rand(stageH),randTime,'wordVal'+thisNumber,'rePos('
+ thisNumber + ');',''); } else if ( thisRand = 4 ) { dMoveStraight('wordL'+thisNumber
+ rand(100),randTime,'wordVal'+thisNumber,''); } if ( rand(4) == 1
) { dShow('wordL'+thisNumber,'document.','visible'); } } };"words.html"
```

I'm going to give a brief overview of each function. The first function, **startMove()**, sets a series of timers that initiate and perpetuate the animation. The second function, **floadWords()**, loops through the list of words and phrases and passes individual selections from this list to the next function, **floatWord()**, which sets the trajectory and timing for their movement. Within this function, a call to **rePos()** repositions the word in a new location, to begin the cycle anew.

On line 98: "\$we are disembodied arms and mouths "

Let us look more closely into the flash animation, which contains its own foreclosures. Flash is a standalone application and web browser plugin for authoring and viewing animations. It began development in the mid-1990s and gained popularity for its ability to deliver relatively advanced graphics (such as video and sound, primarily) at a time when media-rich content traveled slowly over the web. However, with the development of newer, more efficient and secure animation technologies in the last 10 years, Flash began to fall out of popularity and was officially discontinued on December 31st, 2020. Although the general internet user will not feel the difference, since newer technologies like HTML5 and Javascript have stepped up to deliver what Flash had initially offered in much more flexible, portable, and efficient ways, this development has cast a generation of internet games, net art, and electronic literature into obsolescence. Today, the only way to view Flash content is through plugins, emulators (like the one for *skin*), or "decompiler" programs (discussed below).

The elements of foreclosure emerge most starkly with non-plain-text content like Flash files. This is due to Flash code, unlike plain-text, being a binary code format. If opened in a text editor, for example,

Flash files (which usually have an ".swf" or ".fla" extension) would appear to be made of incomprehensible characters and symbols, some of which the text editor may recognize, and others which it would display as a question mark. For example, here is a plain text rendition of the file that contains the sound animation of the heartbeat on "breath.html":

[IMAGE OF TEXT EDITOR OF HEARTBEAT.SWF]

Because binary code is unreadable to the human eye, it requires specific authoring software to work with it. A "Flash decompiler" program, for example, offers an interface for seeing the components of a Flash file without having to deal with the machine code layer. The file is separated into components. The above file, for example, contains components like "sounds," "frames," and "scripts." So the file becomes abstracted in a way that humans can make sense of it. Below is an image of the flash decompiler interface, with all of the components of the image on the left sidebar. Interestingly, when examining the frames, one can distort the sound of the heartbeat.

[IMAGE OF FLASH DECOMPILER INTERFACE ON "HEARTBEAT.SWF"]

What I want to emphasize here is that this code cannot be edited directly.

How does an emulator work? Does emulation add another layer of sensuality to the peice?]

The final aspect of this text I want to discuss is reduction. The love affair is reduced to digital objects which can pass over the wires. The couple make this point in a chat between the two of them, discussing how constraints constitute the relationship:

womanonfire: the sound is a bit distorted with these things  
zuper: (private) yes womanonfire: if no one was around me  
here zuper: (private) the image is distorted too womanonfire:  
i would speak to you zuper: (private) but that's ok womanonfire:  
yes! womanonfire: these are all part of our relationship  
womanonfire: these limitations womanonfire: we must zuper:  
(private) 26 letters, no sound, no image womanonfire: learn  
new ways zuper: (private) make DHTMLove to me... **http:**  
**//entropy8zuper.org/**

The way that digital objects play with reductions of complexity here evokes what Snorton says about the reduction of black bodies to flesh.

Such a reduction enables flesh to harness the chaos of signficatory possibility. I want to argue that digital objects, as distillations of real world referents, are imbued with expressive potential.

In what follows, I'm going to examine the ways that Harvey's (black) body has been reduced with this effect. The question of Harvey's race emerges in a chat between Harvey and Samyn, though it is buffeted by questions of physicality more generally. To get a sense of the conversation, I quote the chat at some length:

womanonfire: i wonder wht your voice is like zuper: my voice? zuper: let's try zuper: it's weird to talk in a silent office at night womanonfire: yes womanonfire: i can just barely make you out womanonfire: how fitting womanonfire: it sounds so far away but you feel so close zuper: yes zuper: i am close zuper: i don't understand myself womanonfire: i will write you a very long letter tonight zuper: I'm falling in love with a 160x120 pixel video... zuper: Yes please write me a long letter womanonfire: it is difficult for me here right now zuper: why is it difficult? womanonfire: i was just about to write one about this womanonfire: because i love you zuper: ... womanonfire: seems so womanonfire: strange womanonfire: maybe it is lust womanonfire: i cant tell anymore zuper: pixellust? womanonfire: right zuper: I my case only ASCIIlust... womanonfire: but i want to make a home for us womanonfire: in the network zuper: Have you read Sterlings 'Holy Fire'? womanonfire: no zuper: They have places called 'Memory Palaces' on the net zuper: where they keep all their souvenirs and where people can meet womanonfire: i just heard you that time womanonfire: ! zuper: in dutch! womanonfire: yes! zuper: (private) I realised today that I have never been in love with somebody who doesn't speak Dutch before. womanonfire -> zuper: i have never been in love with someone in another country before zuper: (private) I have never been in love with someone with green dreadlocks before zuper: (private) let alone black skin womanonfire -> zuper: yes i hope you wiwll like my skin zuper: (private) I already do. womanonfire -> zuper: :) <http://entropy8zuper.org/>

The question of race becomes one in a list of other physical attributes, is

equated to speaking a foreign language, is buffeted by concerns about connectivity and finally, transported and made possible by network technologies.

The reduction of her body to certain attributes, her black skin and green hair, for example, endows her physical being with expressive possibility. The dark-skinned green-haired floating woman. Here, the less detail an element has, the more meaning the viewer can impose to the elements.

We see this in the black hand which touches our screen. It is a simple shape, but it is expressive.

Materiality hearkening back to black fem theory Sensuality in their shifts and their surface effects, particularly in the way they foreclose *forensic* materiality, refuse depth. Here we draw from black feminist theorizing.

## 1.5 unstructured fragments

### 1.5.1 flesh becomes a queer form

Snorton explains that the materiality of a daguerreotype suggests "a visual grammar for reading the imbrications of 'race' and 'gender' under captivity" (40). In the daguerrotype, the surface becomes the ground, flipping the traditional (presumptive) way of reading for what is under the surface. This method is about *taking what has been a method of reduction*, what has been a tool for appropriating the complexity of real world objects for the purpose of exploitation, and using that *to instead seek out moments of obfuscation*, a kind of diversion from or foreclosure to objectification, which does not attempt to deny the power of objectification. These strategies are rooted in ways of reading materiality, in the ways that Black Feminist Studies have discovered within the violent history of the Black flesh some kind of **subversion**, which is not quite resistance, which is not quite empowerment. To approach material as something slippery, shifting, which confuses rather than resolves meaning.

It leads to a **re-formulation** for understanding the interaction between the material and the symbolic in media, and how these relate to power dynamics. Eventually, we will look at *skinonskinonskin* to read these qualities of the flesh—opacity, torque, vulnerability—in the technological stack. But first, it will be helpful to ground our discussion in Media Archaeological debates.

### 1.5.2 unmappability, collision of registers

This inextricability of physical sensation from mental interpretation has an analogue in the collision of registers, such as the visual and the material. C. Riley Snorton describes this collision as "unmappability," relating this ambiguous and liminal space to the process of racialization. As an example, Snorton does a close reading of the material qualities of a daguerrotype, an early method of photography:

To view a daguerreotype is to look at an image that does not sit on a surface but appears to be floating in space. Rather than an antiquated form of modern photography, as Foucault's characterization implies, the daguerreotype provides a series of lessons about power, and racial power in particular, as a form in which an image takes on myriad perspectives because of the interplay of light and dark, both in the composition of the shot and in the play of light on the display. That the image does not reside on the surface but floats in an unmappable elsewhere offers an allegory for race as a procedure that exceeds the logics of a bodily surface, occurring by way of flesh, a racial mattering that appears through puncture in the form of a wound or covered by skin and screened from view. 40

The format of the daguerreotype evokes the method by which meaning is stripped then reapplied to flesh that, for captive bodies, "functioned as a disarticulation of human form from its anatomical features" (18). The physical material of the image, that is the silvered copper plate of the daguerreotype, at once solidifies its ground and indexes an ambiguous space, what Snorton describes as the "unmappable elsewhere" which swells to obscure while simultaneously containing the evidence of racial significations. Snorton's curious use of the word "puncture" here recalls Roland Barthes's concept of the "punctum," which indexes the experience of being pierced by a detail of the photograph (*Camera Lucida* 27). Opposed to the concept of the *studium*, which represents the dominant historical, social, or cultural meaning portrayed within and by the photograph, the *punctum* is the "sting, speck, cut, little hole... that accident which pricks me (but also buises me, is poignant to me)" (Barthes *Camera Lucida* 27-28). Barthes explains that, "However lightning-like it may be, the *punctum* has, more or less potentially, the power of expansion. This power is often metonymic" (*Camera Lucida* 45). For Barthes, the *punctum* is that detail of a photograph which at once pierces the viewer and suggests an expansion, an effect which is exaggerated

in erotic photographs, where the *punctum*, "is a kind of subtle *beyond*—as if the image launched desire beyond what it permits us to see" (59). Barthes's theorization of the *punctum* allows us to see how the flesh can be at once a *mattering*, a becoming matter, and an accumulation of meaning, which in simultaneity, has the effect pierces the viewer. We cannot, as Snorton points out, locate the image at a specific point on the copper-plate is essential, though we can feel its puncture. That the image cannot be traced back to a single location, yet is contained and signifies within that physical space, is crucial for understanding the way that the physical registers interact with symbolic ones. The meeting between this liminal space of the image's visual content and its silver-plated copper ground offers another perspective for understanding the collision of flesh and racialization.

## 2 Works

Alarcon, Norma. "Conjugating Subjects in the Age of Multiculturalism" *Mapping Multiculturalism*. Avery F. Gordon and Christopher Newfield, editors. University of Minnesota Press. pp. 127-148.

Barthes, Roland. *Camera Lucida*.

Butler, Octavia. Dawn. Grand Central Publishing. 1987.

Chun, Wendy. Control and Freedom: Power and Paranoia in the Age of Fiber Optics. 2006.

Entropy8Zuper!. skinonskinonskin. Rhizome. <https://anthology.rhizome.org/skinonskinonskin>

Galloway, Alexander and Eugene Thacker. The Exploit: A Theory of Network. Univ Of Minnesota Press. 2007.

Galloway, Alexander. Protocol: How Control Exists after Decentralization. 2004.

Hartman, Saidiya. "Venus in Two Acts." *Small Axe*, vol. 12 no. 2, 2008, p. 1-14. Project MUSE [muse.jhu.edu/article/241115](https://muse.jhu.edu/article/241115).

Hayles, N. Katherine. Writing Machines. MIT Press, 2002. p. 107.

Kirschenbaum, Matthew G. Mechanisms: New Media and the Forensic Imagination. MIT Press

1.

Moraga, Cherrie. "La Guera", from *Loving in the War Years: Lo que nunca paso' por sus labios*.

Musser, Amber Jamilla. *Sensual Excess: Queer Femininity and Brown Jouissance*. NYU Press,



1. JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctvwrn5ws>.

Musser, Amber Jamilla. "Surface-Becoming: Lyle Ashton Harris and Brown Jouissance." *Women & Performance*, vol. 28, no. 1. February 26, 2018 <https://www.womenandperformance.org/bonus-articles-1/28-1-harris>.

Schutte, Ofelia. "Cultural Alterity: Cross-Cultural Communication and Feminist Theory in North-South Contexts." *Hypatia*, vol. 13, no. 2, 1998, pp. 53–72.

Snorton, C. Riley. *Black on Both Sides: A Racial History of Trans Identity*. University of Minnesota Press, 2017. JSTOR, <https://doi.org/10.5749/j.ctt1pwt7dz>;

Spillers, Hortense J. "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book." *Diacritics*, vol. 17, no. 2, 1987, pp. 65–81. JSTOR, <https://doi.org/10.2307/464747>