# Contents



# 1 three

## 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 explore the mediation of pleasure, in one case technological, through computer hardware and software, and in another physiological, through nervous systems and brain chemistry.

My analysis reads for sensual pleasure across the 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 the third sexual partner, the 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 Chicanx 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 priortization of sensuality and feeling as a basis for more ethical relationship. While human nature struggles within the "contradition" of hierarchy and intelligence, the Oankali harness thier physiological ability to bypass flesh for direct neural connections that enable collectivityñ. 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 peice, *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 crytallized 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 Jhdaya, the first Oankali that Lilith meets, humans have two characteristics that enabled humanitity 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 instict 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 immediatley 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.
>
> Medusa. 30

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, ableit 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 Jhadaya 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 percieves 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 sensastions, 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 incompletion, 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 dsiplacement 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 metphorical 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 deceoption 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 inheirited 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 desctruction 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 exegencies 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, apepars to willingingly 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 re-formulated 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 a 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 togeher 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 receprocity. 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 inexhastability 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 poshumanist 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 attendent 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 esssential 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 consequnces 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 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 recieved Joseph as a blanket of warmth and security, a compelling, steadying 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 is 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 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 recieves 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) Irresitable 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 inexctricability 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 resistence. 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 "attentuated 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 aheres to the flesh. This process of the reduction to flesh, which Spillers calls "pornotroping," opens a space for the layering of sensuality, objectificaiton, 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 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 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 suceptible 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 significatory 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

incoming.

## 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 forclosure 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 resistence, 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 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 significatory system, constrasts with the phonograph, which etches acoustic effects of the "real" into vinyl material, and with flm, 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.

Matthew Kirschenbaum, by contrast, works to unflatten the zeros and ones.

As Kirschenbaum argues, "Digital inscription is a form of displacement. Its fundamental characteristic is to remove digital objects from the channels of direct human intervention" (Kirschenbaum 86). As a result of this displacement, scholarship about electronic media generally focuses on conceptual or abstract levels of media, such as the effects of interface and visual design, and only occasionally considers logical structures like data formats and programming languages, and even less frequently, the material realities of hardware and networks

### 1.5.3 unmappability, collision of registers

This inexctricability 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 a 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, occuring 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 daggueereotype 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 exagerrated

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 simulteneity, has the effect peirces 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 undersanding 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.

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