# CHAPTER THREE

# "Sex, Flesh, Skin: A Media Archaeology of Octavia Butler's *Dawn* and Entropy8Zuper!'s *skinonskinonskin*"

## Sex

In the novel *Dawn*, the first of the *Xenogenesis* trilogy by Octavia Butler, the main character, Lilith Iyapo, is seduced by an alien. The alien, called "Nikanj," is an ooloi, a neutral-gendered being. Nikanj coaxes Lilith to join it and her human partner, Joseph: "'Lie here with us,' it says, 'Why should you be down there by yourself?,'" an invitation which Lilith cannot resist:

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

The erotic desire that Lilith experiences is intense enough to make her temporarily ignore that these aliens, called "Oankali," have descended upon earth with one goal: to coerce humans to reproduce with them and create a human-alien species. As an ooloi, Nikanj has a special sexual organ that facilitates a neural connection between a male and female partner, in this case, between Lilith and Joseph. It makes this connection by inserting this organ, a "sensory hand," into each partner's spinal cord at the back of the neck. During the sex act, this organ stimulates each partner's pleasure centers in the brain and collects genetic information which the Oankali will eventually use to engineer a human-alien embryo.

Despite her eagerness to have sex with Nikanj, Lilith harbors a deep resistance against the Oankali's intention to procreate with humanity. Scenes like the one above, in which Lilith surrenders to her sexual desire, appear in stark contrast to her determination to escape, conveyed by her invocation to "Learn and run!" which she repeats up until the last page of the novel. Having barely survived a nuclear apocalypse only to be "rescued" by the aliens, Lilith, along with the surviving humans, is a prisoner on the Oankali spaceship until they are ready to do their part in the "gene trade"–that is, to re-populate the earth with a new human-Oankali species. The Oankali have given Lilith a special job: she will be a guide, what she calls a "Judas goat," that shepherds humans into accepting that humanity will change forever, that their children will look like what she calls "Medusa children" (Butler 87).

The conflict between various biological drives, such as the sex drive versus the survival drive, speaks to a larger debate among the novel's critics about the primacy of biological impulses in determining human behavior. Even when this sex act appears contained to the mind, it is always portrayed as something guided by impulses and tendencies of the body. Donna Haraway, for example, argue that the interspecies couplings challenge naturalizing assumptions about sex, race, and the human/animal divide. Haraway's influential analysis from *Primate Visions: Gender, Race, and Nature in the World of Modern Science* (1989), reads this story "as if it were a report from the primate field in the allotopic space of earth after a nuclear holocaust," where inter-species relations "facilitate revisionings" of "difference, reproduction, and survival" (Haraway 376-7). On the other hand, critics like Stephen Barnes and Nancy Jesser argue for a biological determinist reading. Stephen Barnes, who knew Butler personally, emphasizes the influence of biological research in her writing on human nature, sharing that Butler was fascinated by what she called "emergent properties," which begin from small impulses, like the tendency to categorize something as either similar or different, and seed complex social behaviors and structures. Nancy Jesser emphasizes the determinist perspective on sex, arguing that "the plot relentlessly reinforces certain sociobiological notions of essential and 'natural' male and female through the concept of biological 'tendency'" (Jesser 41-42).

Critics from both sides of the debate agree on one point, however: that the text reflects a firmly heterosexual paradigm. These views are due to the gendered structure of the sex act, which maintains a male/female dynamic, despite the addition of an ooloi participant. Haraway, for example, asserts that, "Heterosexuality remains unquestioned, if more complexly mediated. The different social subjects, the different genders that could emerge from another embodiment of resistance to compulsory heterosexual reproductive politics, do not inhabit this *Dawn*" (380).

This chapter argues that the heterosexual paradigm is indeed disrupted, and it is disrupted by a queer mode of relation which emerges in the tripartite sexual union enabled by the ooloi figure. In what follows, I will examine the connection created by this union, whose linkage of neural pathways between two bodies scrambles the distinctions between thinking and feeling, a clash of registers that blends the materiality of the flesh with the abstraction of cognitive processes. I will then explore how this clash of registers operates across two seemingly unrelated domains: Black Feminist Studies and Media Archaeology Studies. Examining how each of these domains theorizes the intersection of physical embodiment with chemical, conceptual, and/or electrical signaling, I will put these ideas into practice in analyzing a work of electronic fiction, *skinonskinonskin*.

To begin this exploration, I first examine a moment of heightened sensuality from the story, a moment of extreme fear. This moment occurs when Lilith comes face-to-face with her captors for the first time. Jdahya, a male Oankali, meets Lilith in her isolation room. She initially processes his alien body according to human anatomical 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

Although Jdahya points out Lilith's mistake for assuming his gender, she nonetheless takes some comfort from being able to call him a "he." The gender designation, along with a catalogue of mammalian anatomical features "hair," "eyes," "ears," and "throat," reveals the impulse to categorize the unknown according to familiar terms. This small comfort, however, evaporates when the strangeness of the alien's appearance exceeds the categories available to her:

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

In attempt to place the alien into familiar categories, Lilith undergoes a complex physio-cognitive process. First, she uses mammalian anatomical categories to perceive Jdahya. Then, as his difference begins to register, she apprehends him on a pre-linguistic, embodied level, characterized by paralyzing aversion where she is "unable to take even one more step toward him" (29-30). Finally, when She examines his face more closely, the interval of immobilizing fear ends abruptly with her "understand[ing]," and she expresses her aversion by evoking the mythical figure "Medusa."

The choice of "Medusa" here is significant. It demonstrates that Lilith subscribes the unknown in terms of something familiar to the human imaginary, ableit in the context of myth. Her physio-cognitive progression from instinctual body movement to intellection suggests a peculiar way that humanity experiences the unknown, that is, xenophobia. This can be attributed to a particular combination of human traits, which the Oankali call the "human contradiction." Later in this scene, Jdahya describes these two traits:

"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."

According to Jdahya, the tendency toward hierarchy, 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, Jdahya explains, it creates unjust divisions within society.

"Medusa" marks the moment when Lilith, who until then has been struggling to place this strange being within known phenomena, finally settles onto a familiar designation. For Lilith, then, the tendency toward hierarchy first demands that she place this being on a scale of familiarity. She compares Jdahya to what she already knows about other living beings, placing him into a binary gender system, for example. However, when the hierarchy fails to subsume his other qualities, like the strange, moving "hair" growing all over his body, her intelligence steps in to speculate with an analogy, "Medusa." Here, her mind makes the leap between what she sees and what she can imagine, indicating that this particular type of xenophobia is not just of otherness, but in the interplay between otherness and similarity. What really scares Lilith is an apparent familiarity of this humanoid, this bipedal, two-limbed creature, whose audible language and conscious intelligence is combined with aspects that do not belong to any mammal. Despite his alienness, at that point, Jhadaya becomes incorporated into an anthropocentric worldview–specifically, into a fearsome figure that represents monstrous and deadly femininity.

Criticism on the novel does a good job of situating the tension between similarity and difference within intersectional feminism.[[1]](#footnote-1) Here, however, I am interested in this experience of difference and similarity-in-difference as a physiological response, and what it can reveal about ethical relations. I draw from Chicana feminist theorists Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa who write about the expereince of xenophobia from a sensual dimension. Moraga, for example, argues that the fear of the other is heightened by a perceived similarity between the self and other. Speaking about social hierarchies of oppression, Moraga asserts that, "it is not really difference the oppressor fears so much as similarity" (32). However, Moraga explains, at the same time that perceived similarity causes fear, it also offers an opportunity for connection. For example, she draws from her sexuality to relate to her mother, who experienced levels of poverty and colorism that Moraga, as an educated "guera," was able to avoid:

It wasn't until I acknowledged and confronted my own lesbianism in the flesh that my heartfelt identification with and empathy for my mother's oppression–due to being poor, uneducated, and Chicana–was realized. My 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

Here, Moraga's sexuality enables her to make a connection to other kinds of difference, specifically differences across skin tone and economic class. When such difference is a source of "silence and oppression," as it has been for Moraga's sexuality, finding similarity can be a deeply sensual process, a confrontation that occurs "in the flesh," a "tactile reminder" that bridges the gap between self and other.

Anzaldúa, a Chicana lesbian like Moraga, explores possibilities for incorporating difference into identity. Anzaldúa, who grew up on the Texas-Mexico border, works to integrate her Aztec, Spanish, and Mexican backgrounds into a modern Chicana identity. She explains that surfacing this history and heritage will require "developing a tolerance for contradictions, a tolerance for ambiguity… learn[ing] to be an Indian [sic] in Mexican culture, to be a Mexican from an Anglo point of view" (Anzaldua 78-79). Here, Anzaldúa resurrects latent aspects of the cultural psyche in the form of the fearsome Aztec goddess, Coatlicue. Like Medusa, Coatlicue is associated with snakes, her name translating from Nahuatl into "serpent skirt." As the "Earth Mother who conceives all celestial beings out of her cavernous womb," Coatlicue embodies a unity of opposites, the dual forces of life and death, fertility and destruction (Anzaldúa 46). Over time, however, Anzaldúa explains that this unity has been severed into "pure" and "impure" aspects. Influenced by a growing patriarchy, Aztec culture splits Coatlicue into "Tonantsi," the puta, and into "Coatlalopeuh," the chaste (27). Then, with the arrival of the Spaniards, the figures are split again, this time into the Virgin of Guadalupe, the most revered figure of Mexican Cathololicism, with the negative aspects incorporated into La LLorona and La Chingada.

*Coatlicue* incorporates the originary whole that Anzaldúa aims to bring into a modern imaginary: "Coatlicue- Cihuacoatl- Tlazolteotl- Tonantzin- Coatlalopeuh- Guadalupe–they are one" (50). She calls process by which Anzaldúa accesses and integrates the scattered aspects of Coatlicue the "*Coatlicue* state." Here, Anzaldúa enters into a trance, a spiritual opening, to confront the pain, shame, and loneliness of a severed identity. She explains that, "We need *Coatlicue* to slow us up so that the psyche can assimilate previous experiences and process the changes" (Anzaldúa 46). Anzaldúa describes the visual confrontation with *Coatlicue*:

Seeing and being seen. Subject and object, I and she. The eye pins down the object of its gaze, scrutinizes it, judges it. A glance can freeze us in place; it can "possess" us. It can erect a barrier against the world. But in a glance also lies awareness, knowledge. These seemingly contradictory aspects–the act of being seen, held immobilized by a glance, and "seeing through" an experience–are symbolized by the underground aspects of *Coatlicue*, *Cihuacoatl*, *Tlazolteotl* which cluster in what I call the *Coatlicue* state. 42

Here, vision is simultaneously a tool for capture, for being "pin[ned] down" or "immobilized," and a tool of enlightenment, in "awareness, knowledge." Anzaldúa embraces the duality of this kind of vision, and in what seems to be its paradoxical effect, which is freedom in possession. Being the object of *Coatlicue*'s gaze both reliquishes agency and opens a connection, enabling an intimate relation to the other.

Unlike humans, Oankali are attracted to difference. As Jdahya explains to Lilith: "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). This essential drive, which powers their "gene trade," is made possible by that which the humans find most disturbing about their captors–the tentacle-like organs that sprout from their bodies. These organs transmit all external sensory information such as sight, hearing, touch, smell, and taste, provide channels for the immediate sharing of thoughts and feelings in intra-Oankali communication, and faciliate sex. This sensory capacity not only puts them into direct contact with those who are different, it also enables them to absorb and incorporate that difference through gene manipulation. This craving is encoded in their own genetic ancestry, as Nikanj, Lilith's mate, explains: "'Six divisions ago, on a white-sun water world, we lived in great shallow oceans'[…] 'We were many-bodied and spoke with body lights and color patterns among ourself and among ourselves" (123).

From this ancestry, a collective consciousness that is singular and plural at once, "ourself and ourselves," the current Oankali inheirited a drive for collectivity that destabilizes the assumptions underpinning free will. When Nikanj is an adult, Joseph's genetic material to impregnate Lilith without her knowledge, much less her consent. It explains to Lilith that it only gives her what she truly wants, which is a child, "'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'" (468-9).

The sex scenes in particular portray a level of sensual pleasure and connection that makes it difficult to separate concious will from embodied desire. As Jayna Brown points out, "the pleasurable experience of sex with the Ooloi is so highly compelling it is sometimes likened to rape in the text" (105). Not only are humans seduced into sexual relations by the Oankali's potent pheramones, they also use involuntary sterilization (as in the case with Lilith), are complicit in human-on-human rape, and more seriously, in Nikanj's rape of Joseph. Joshua Yu Burnett explains that while "the novel's treatment of the issue [of consent] is both provocative and troubling," "none of this is meant to suggest that the Oankali are vicious, brutal rapists" (110, 117). Because their communicative style leaves no room for deception, "they seem quite genuine in their insistance that human claims of non-consent belie a deeper, physio-psychological consent" (Burnett 117). Adding more nuance to the issue, Justin Louis Mann's "pessimistic futurist" reading of the novel points to the ways that subjugation and coercion revises the human contradiction to put pleasure and coercion on the same plane.[[2]](#footnote-2) Mann explains that the sexual relationship between Lilith, Joseph, and Nikanj is crystalized in the image of Nikanj's "sensory arm" wrapped around Lilith's neck, which she describes as "an oddly comfortable noose" (Mann 62). Mann points out that this noose, while drawing from history of subjugation and death, also evokes comfort, a kind of complacency with the highly pleasurable sexual experiences that Lilith enjoys with Nikanj. According to Mann, this complacency replaces the oppression of the human contradiction with coersion into physical pleasure (Mann 62).

When Nikanj presents himself to Lilith, one might expect a split between her sexual desire and her determination to rebel against the forced interbreeding. But instead, one instead encounters their conflation, where Lilith welcomes her body's immediate, unconscious response to Nikanj's invitation. The conflation between embodied instinct and free will suggests a more fundamental collapse between physical sensation and mental experience that occurs during the sex act itself. When Nikanj "plugs" into her and Joseph, Lilith experiences a torrent feelings that leads her to question the objective reality of her experience:

She 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. 308-309

What Lilith first feels as a physical presence, a "blanket of warmth," she builds into cognitive interpretations, particularly of doubt then reassurance. She questions the objective truth of her experience, and is reassured when presence transforms into a mental certainty: "he had always been there, part of her, essential." Meanwhile, Nikanj, who is mediating the experience, becomes imperceptible to the two of them:

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

Sex dissolves the sense of time, space, and the distance between Lilith and Joseph, who she felt "was aware only of her." In the midst of this intensity, the intermediary which makes this fusion possible fades, leaving Lilith and Jospeh "lost in own another." Afterward, when Lilith asks if the sex is simulated, Nikanj explains that although sensory experience is shared between herself and Joseph, "Intellectually, he made his interpretations and you made yours." To this, Lilith remarks that she "wouldn't call them intellectual" (310-311). That Lilith questions whether her mental experiences are true or not, at the same time that she indicates their sensual nature, suggests the deep imbrication of the sensual and cognitive registers during the sex act. The direct neural connection makes this imbrication possible, creates a channel through which embodied sensation and intellectual interpretation can blend into one another.

In human-alien sex, the fusion between minds surfaces a sensation of exactly that which their neurological connection bypasses–the flesh. While humans must navigate through the flesh (and the potential miscommunication, misunderstanding, and even xenophobia) to attain unity, the Oankali bypass it entirely by routing directly into the brain's pleasure centers, eliminating the space for physical discomfort and even repulsion. This immediate connection facilitated by the ooloi offers, as Nikanj explains, it "a oneness that your people strive for, dream of, but can't truly attain alone" (359). The pleasures that come from physical sensation, the feeling of which is heightened in sex, is what enables the Oankali, to crave, rather than fear, difference.

The importance of bodily effects and sensations speaks to one critical debate about the influence of the body, in particular, the influence of biology, on identity and behavior in the novel. [[3]](#footnote-3) While critics mostly disagree on whether Butler deconstructs or reinforces biological categories and essentialist notions of behavior, they do agree on the primacy of heterosexuality.[[4]](#footnote-4) I would suggest, however, that the bypassing of flesh to simultaneously invigorate fleshy sensation requires a new understanding of sexuality, one that disrupts the traditional boundaries of subjectivity. Here, I draw from Jayna Brown's emphasis on the flesh and how it opens possibilities for reconceiving subjectivity. According to Brown, 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). In the novel, this openness to feeling is achieved by re-routing around the flesh and its senses, the traditional channel for feeling, in a way that emphasizes that which it bypasses. The effect is to transform cognitive and conceptual phenomena into physical, sensual experiences.

Here, separateness is crucial for enabling connection. While direct connection can momentarily dissolve the boundaries of the individual, a distance between self and other energizes sensation and understanding. For example, when Lilith asks Nikanj to share its feelings of grief after Joseph's untimely death: "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 liminality, ("half seen, half felt," "alien," "a new color"). Within the context of identity politics, Chicana scholar Norma Alarcón warns against the dangers of what she calls "ontologiz[ing] difference." The challenge is to achieve connection without totally subsuming the other into totalizing and therefore oppressive paradigms of subjectivity. 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

Rather than subsume alienness into familiar structures of knowledge, like the way that Lilith subsumes Jhadaya's tentacles into the similitude of the terrifying Medusa, the neural connection sustains the difference in the other.

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## Flesh

Paradoxically, in human-to-human sex, the flesh which facilitates contact also functions as an obstacle, creating the potential for miscommunication, misunderstanding, and fear of the other. Could the flesh, which poses a problem for intra-human connection, also offer a solution to this problem? In what follows, I explore two how two very different fields–Black Feminist Studies and Media Archaeology Studies–offer critical methods for thinking through materiality. Though vastly different in focus, with Black Feminist Studies exploring the concept of the flesh within the context of slavery, and Media Archaeology exploring the materiality of electronic media and processing, both areas of inquiry share a similar investment in reading deeply into surfaces. Their theorizations of materiality, which index a liminal space where meaning is simultaneously ascribed and obscured, will become the ground for my analysis of the intersections of hardware and software in my next and final section, "Skin."

In Black Feminist Studies, critics like Hortense Spillers, C. Riley Snorton, and Amber J. Musser deconstruct racial and gendered processes, a "symbolic order" or "American grammar," in Hortense Spillers words, ascribed to Black bodies since the violences of trans-Atlantic slavery (68). In her influential essay, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," Spillers describes the Black body as a stack of "attentuated meanings, made in excess over time, assigned by a particular historical order" (65). The "severing of the captive body from its motive will," creates a what Spillers calls a "stunning conntradiction (67). Here, the contradiction is between the body's reduction to materiality, "reduc[ing] to a thing, becoming being for the captor," and the simultaneous layering of signification, "becom[ing] the source of an irresistible, destructive sensuality" (67). First, there is a reduction of the body to its bare physicality–into flesh–a material substance for labor and exchange. At the same time, however, this reduction also opens a possiblity for signification, where elements of sensuality, objectificaiton, otherness, and powerlessness can be layered onto the flesh. Spillers, and thinkers in Black Feminist Studies who build from flesh as the "zero degree of social conceptualization," call this simultaneous reduction and accumulation of meaning "pornotroping" (Spillers 67). The next critical move is to take this reduction, which has been a tool for appropriating the complexity of real world objects for the purpose of exploitation, to instead create tension between possbilities of signification, which multiplies rather than resolves meaning.

Attention to the violence of the pornotrope brings to the surface relations that are in tension with the desire to dominate, "allow[ing] us to see the radical potential of excess without flattening the violence at its core" (Musser 9). One strategy is that of "foreclosure," which Musser explains, involves "hold[ing] violence and possibility in the same frame" (12). Pushing against trends in Afropessimism that take the pornotrope as a foreclosure of Black subjectivity, Musser explores how the denial of access or knowledge offers possibilities for new modes of relation. For example, a brilliant surface can foreclose access to interiority in a way that creates multiple registers of interpretation. Musser demonstrates this "surface effect" in the painting *Origin of the Universe 1* (2012) by artist Mickalene Thomas, whose depiction of a female vulva references French painter Gustave Courbet's *Origine du Monde* (1866). In Thomas's piece, the Black and rhinestone-encrusted vulva creates a brilliant surface, a "formal strategy of producing opacity" (Musser 48). By instrumentalizing the opacity of surface effects, this work multiplies the potentiality of meanings that work alongside a more pronounced subtext of objectification about the commodification of the black female body. Musser asserts that to the rhinestones function simultaneously on two registers: first, their flashiness "as a reminder of the long association between black people and the commodity" (50); and second, as a brilliance that evokes wetness, suggesting sexual pleasure. Both possibilities exist in tension:

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. 63

The significatory system that commodifies the black vulva exists alongside a production of pleasure. This surface whose opacity seems to insist upon itself facilitates a simultaneity of registers, enabling a movement, or a shift, between one and the other, like a shifting between frames, from "violence", to "excess," and finally, to "possibility."

Foreclosing access to interiority creates a state where meaning is fugitive, where bodies slip in and out of signification. The concept of fugitivity, or escape, is based on a condition of commodification where Black bodies have undergone a reduction into a "fungible" exchange value. C. Riley Snorton argues that this "fungibility" of black flesh turns bodies into "malleable matter" that enables a fugitivity from markers of sex and gender (20). He illustrates this effect with stories of fugutive slaves, such as of Harriet Jacobs, whose escape from slavery in 1842 is documented in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861). Snorton explains how the "blackening" of Jacobs's face with charcoal endows her with a level of "fungibility, thingness" to pass as a man, even deceiving those who knew her well (Snorton 71). As oppposed to traditional racial "passing" that assumes a degrees of whiteness, blackness reduces gender to an "indefiniteness" that enables Jacobs' escape (56). By undergoing this reduction, the Black body simultaneously opens up its significatory potential.

This fungibility creates an almost chaotic state in which the Black body becomes suceptible to multiple mappings of meaning and can therefore slip in and out of signification. Snorton offers up an example of the daguerrotype, an early photographic technology that involves using chemicals on silver plates. Snorton explains that dagguerotype offers "a visual grammar for reading the imbrications of 'race' and 'gender' under captivity" (Snorton 40). It does so by flipping expectations about surface and depth: here, rather than depth existing below the surface, the surface becomes a ground for the layering of depth. Snorton describes that this flip creates an "unmappability" of meaning:

… 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 physical material of the image, that is the silvered copper plate of the daguerreotype, at once solidifies its ground and indexes a liminal space, what Snorton describes as the "unmappable elsewhere." The image of the daguerrotype, which changes according to angle and lighting, evokes the condition of racialization as "a procedure that exceeds the logics of a bodily surface" while nonetheless adhering to that surface, "a racial mattering that appears through puncture." Snorton's use of the word "puncture" perhaps revises Roland Barthes's concept of the "punctum," suggesting instead a lack of localization or circumscription to a specific point.[[5]](#footnote-5) That the image resists fixity is crucial for undersanding the way that the physical registers interact with symbolic ones in the collision of flesh and racialization.

With quite different political focus, thinkers in Media Archaeology Studies offer deep readings of digital media and technological processes to tease out the role of materiality in hardware and software stacks and how they produce seemingly immaterial surface forms. These thinkers resist common assumptions about media as immaterial, assumptions that have been in production since the emergence of computing technologies in the mid-20th century and are famously encapsulated by Media Studies theorist Friedrich Kittler:

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. 1

Working to unflatten the "surface effects," N. Katherine Hayles's research traces how "information lost its body," that is, how information processing, the calculation and manipulation of symbols displaces the physical matter upon which it relies. Hayles disarticulates the binary of information/hardware which, she argues, extends liberal humanist ideology of mind/matter into the "posthuman," in which a dominant, unmarked rationality is privileged over embodied experience and especially, embodied difference. Whereas the liberal humanist subject is characterized by classical mind/body divisions and hierarchies that posit embodiment as separate from and subordinate to intelligence, the postuman is characterized by the figure of a machine that houses informational patterns. According to Hayles, this progression from possession (by a body) to inhabitation (by a machine) suggests that the next move will be to transcend the material realm altogether, as consciousness can be uploaded to a virtual space where information/mind is infinite. But Hayles asserts that "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," 91).

In what follows, I will draw some parallels between Black Feminist Studies and Media Archaeology. The first parallel has to do with the concept of displacement, which is related to that of foreclosure. As Matt Kirschenbaum argues, "Digital inscription is a form of displacement… remov[ing] digital objects from the channels of direct human intervention" (86). Kirschenbaum uses the term "forensic materiality" to refer to the most innaccessible level of computer hardware in the hard drive. Here, data is encoded in markings of one of two (binary) marks on a magnetized surface, a north polarity signifying "1", or a south polarity signifying "0". Examining these binary digits, or "bits," through magnetic force microscopy, Kirschenbaum notes that each one is unique:

The bits themselves prove strikingly autographic, all of them similar but no two exactly alike, each displaying idiosyncrasies and imperfections–in much the same way that conventional letterforms, both typed and handwritten, assume their own individual personality under extreme magnification. 62

That electronic data, at its core, corresponds to physical markings shatters the illusion of digital immateriality, of a stream of code all the way down.

To trace the transformations of these physical elements as they travel up the software stack, Hayles offers the concept of "flickering signifers." Here, she brings Jacques Lacan's concept of "floating signifier," that a word does have a stable referent, but "floats" above a text and attains its meaning through a play of difference against other words, to illustrate the interplay between the immateriality of the screen and the materiality of computer hardware. Rather than destabilize meaning, however, the flickering signifier dissolves the illusion of immateriality by grounding it to physcial signals that move through the software stack:

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… "Virtual Bodies" 77

Hayles's description of this "flexible chain of markers" materializes the various levels of transformation that digitized inscription must undergo in order to reach the level of the screen (*Posthuman* 31). First, physical traces on a magnetic surface are mapped into low-level machine languages which are illegible to human readers. Then, these patterns are translated into "Assembly" languages that pertain to the computer's Central Processing Unit (CPU), the main processor that executes instructions, arithmetic, and logic. Finally, as data moves up the stack, it abstracts into high level programming languages like Python and JavaScript which power applications that users interact with in the form of the Graphical User Interface (GUI).

To challenge the "illusion of immaterial behavior," the illusion that objects on the screen appear, disappear, and move without a physical origin, Kirschenbaum offers the concept of "formal materiality" (11). While forensic materiality consists of physical inscriptions, such as magnetic traces on hard drives, formal materiality manifests these traces as they are computed up the software stack, through levels of programming languages to specific interface effects on the screen. It describes not only display and appearance, but also the way that these are deliberately produced to reinforce the fluidity and ephemerality of objects on the screen. Kirschenbaum explains that as data moves up the stack, it is continually refreshed to fix errors and idiosynracies that occur during transmission. As a result, screen effects "exist as the end product of long traditions and trajectories of engineering that were deliberately undertaken to achieve and implement it" (137). He likens this process of data normalization to older technologies like the telegraph, which uses relay systems to reinforce signals over long stretches of transmission. As data moves through electronic processing, signal "reinvigoration," a kind of "allographic reproduction," refreshes and standardizes it through approximation rather than exact copying, so that materiality is a "manufactured" phenomenon (136).

Although the screen displaces the user from digital inscription, there is in actuality an inverse relationship between digital abstraction and tactile manipulation. The higher that data climbs up the levels of abstraction, the more manipulable it becomes, a state which Kirschenbaum calls "digital volatility" (140). For example, by dragging and right clicking on items on the screen, users can move, duplicate, or delete large quantities of data. Kirschenbaum explains this "dynamic tension… between inscription and abstraction, digitality and volitality" makes formal materiality more susceptible to movement and change than physical inscription, which remains inaccessible. Perhaps unintuitively, moving away from inscription is a move toward something that users can handle and "touch," as anybody who has dragged a file from one folder to another can confirm.

Another more subtle force operates in the translation between one register and another–that of torque. Kirschenbaum describes this force as a "procedural friction or perceived difference… as a user shifts from one set of software logics to another" (13). Typically in physics, objects rotate along their pivot point, where the distributional weight is zero. Torque, however, is characterized by a rotational movement that combines energy from two directions: first, from the external force acting upon the object, and second, from the relation between the point of contact on the object and its pivot point, or the point along the object where it can be balanced.[[6]](#footnote-6) Torque therefore measures a force that relies on distance between the point of contact the object's center. In Kirschenbaum's usage, this term refers to the gap between one signficatory system and another, such as a machine-level programming language and its a more abstracted language, or the rendition of the same on the screen, as data travels up the software stack. Energized by a sense of volatility in data and by torque between software registers, this chain of transformations culminates at the screen, where the end user experiences them as visual and haptic effects.

In the next section, I explore how these "screen effects" of digital media relate to "surface effects" of the flesh. Here, I will demonstrate in practice how the concepts of flickering signifiers, volatility, and torque engage with those of foreclosure, fugitivity, and unmappability to read the screen effects in a hypermedia literary work, *skinonskinonskin*.

## 

## Skin

*skinonskinonskin* (1999), a work of "net art" created by Auriea Harvey and Michaël Samyn, under the collaborative artist name, *Entropy8Zuper!*, documents the inception of Harvey and Samyn's love affair, which begins in an internet chat room and grows in an exchange of "digital love letters" ("*skinonskinonskin*" *Net Art Anthology*). These letters consist of web pages containing animated love notes, authored using software that is mostly defunct. The *Rhizome.org*'s *Net Art Anthology*, where the work is preserved with emulator software, describes it as a "complex portrait of an artistic and romantic relationship that shows that online intimacy is as deeply felt, embodied, and full of risk and reward as any other form" ("*skinonskinonskin*").

*skin* takes part in a body electronic work called "Electronic Literature," which is now practically inaccessible to modern web browsers and applications. Electronic Literature spans several subgenres, including hypertext fiction, network literature, interactive fiction, and generative text, and share a common interest in exploring digitality as an aesthetic. Although the work is written in HTML (HyperText Markup Language), which continues to be the default language for the web, it is animated by depreciated versions of JavaScript and Flash software.[[7]](#footnote-7) Besides the outdated code, it also has an incompatibility with its web browser, Netscape 4. The decline of this browser, which was popularized as a platform agnostic solution at the time (rendering HTML pages on both Harvey's Mac and Samyn's PC), brought with it the depreciation of certain HTML and JavaScript elements. Today, the only way to view Flash content in something like its original context is through plugins or emulators, like the one hosted on *Rhizome.org* that enables viewers to read *skin* through a simulated Netscape 4 window.

In what follows, I embark on a close reading of the work's "surface effects," that is, the appearance and interactivity of objects and words on the screen, to emphasize how these elements facilitate a haptic engagement, a sense of touch and movement through the user's mouse. Throughout, I will turn to the underlying source code, the HTML and JavaScript code, to examine how the coding layer might influence the reading of the work's surface effects. To explore programming structures and interactive elements on the screen, I draw from concepts in Black Feminist and Media Archaeology Studies, such as fugitivity and torque, foreclosure and displacement.

I begin with the "air.html" page, which depicts an animation of two small figures over a black background. The two figures, which represent Samyn and Harvey, float in a horizontal, flying position over a cyber-scape of rolling, green lines. As the user's cursor pans across the screen, it attracts each of the figures toward it, like a free floating magnet. This illusion of free movement, however, is deceiving. While the figures slide effortlessly in all directions, precise movement requires a controlled tactile ability from the user's mouse. Additionally, while mouse can bring the individual bodies into contact, they can never cross each other, or to the other's side of the screen. Samyn's body remains confined to the left, while Harvey's is to the right (see video #1).

*Video #1: Screen recording of the "air.html" animation.*

The bodies' animation is defined in the source code of the page, in a series of functions written in JavaScript, the standard language for authoring interactive elements on web pages. Below is an excerpt of one JavaScript function called 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);

This if statement defines the direction and speed of the of the bodies' movement. An if statement, or "conditional statement," is a foundational construct in programming that exists in most languages. It determines the "control flow," or the order of operations, in a block of code based on whether a specific condition is true or false, a Boolean value. The If statement enables programmers to write code that makes decisions, so to speak, to execute the relevant block of code that matches each condition.[[8]](#footnote-8) 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 near Samyn's original position on the left side of the screen, and a stronger movement from Harvey's body when the mouse is on the right half of the screen, Harvey's original position.

The binary nature of this conditional statement–it can be true or it can be false–enables an animation that moves in many direction. That a binary structure, at its core, supports a multiplicity of movement suggests there is something intractable here, an intractibility that is reinforced by the figures, which resist being controlled by the mouse even while they are drawn to it.

If "air.html" plays with binary movement, another page, "control.html," plays with lag. The page consists of a monochrome green image of Harvey's head, which rolls from side to side in the direction of the user's cursor as it pans over the image. As the cursor exposes Harvey's face at different angles, it also displays peices of alt-text, containing words like "go" "believe" "ocean" and "mind."

*Video #2: Screen recording of the "control.html" animation.*

The surface of the peice only reveals part of the full message, which is contained in the source code (see below). The source code reveals that the animation consists of 23 images, each of which is associated with a specific alt-text and coordinate. The full message of the alt-text is the following: "i believe in it you created it in my mind my mind cannot let it go the ocean the waves its a vision." Each of these words and its corresponding image activates only when the cursor pans over the associated coordinate. Thus the movement of Harvey's head across the screen in an illusion created by a series of images whose coordinates have been activated by the mouse and then super-imposed on the screen. This explains why Harvey's head takes little jumps from one position to another, rather than a smooth progression from side to side. The effect is to create a slight lag, a series of fleeting pauses in which Harvey gazes directly to the viewer.

<AREA SHAPE=RECT ALT="i" HREF="#" COORDS="0,0,8,142" onMouseOver="strokeimage.src=stroke1.src ; window.status='i' ; return true">

<AREA SHAPE=RECT ALT="believe" HREF="#" COORDS="8,0,15,142" onMouseOver="strokeimage.src=stroke2.src ;window.status='believe' ; return true">

<AREA SHAPE=RECT ALT="in" HREF="#" COORDS="15,0,22,142" onMouseOver="strokeimage.src=stroke3.src ;window.status='in' ; return true">

<AREA SHAPE=RECT ALT="it" HREF="#" COORDS="22,0,30,142" onMouseOver="strokeimage.src=stroke4.src ;window.status='it' ; return true">

When examining the source code, it appears that the peice is about control, specifically, with control over the female body. While most pages contain an author, title, and date, this one only contains a title, "you:controlMe." Ostensibly, the code addresses a message for Samyn to "control" the movement of Harvey's face back and forth across the image. The tactile qualities of this page, the sensual but laggy effect of the animation in which the user manually turns Havery's head from one side ot another with the cursor-as-hand, are further emphasized by the cursor itself, which appears as a pointing hand. These haptic qualities, along with the foreclosure of the full message, indicate that full control is not possible.

Under the overt narrative of surface effects lies another narrative within the source code, where hidden messages mix natural with computer languages to make verbal exhortations of love. On one page, "breath.html," an animated male torso swells slightly and emits a breathing sound when the mouse pans over it. Both the swell and sound accelerate with each swipe of the mouse. Below the surface, within the HTML and JavaScript that defines its movement, are words meant only for human eyes: a list of "whispers," romantic protestations like "i will love you forever" and "i want to breath you." These messages, unlike the alt-text in "control.html," never manifest on the work's surface display:

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";

Turning on the themes of touch and air, this inaccessible layer seems to extend the sensory affordances of the animation above. In particular, the numerous references to smoke suggest making visible that which is invisible. In the way that smoke is air that takes on opacity, so this stream of pure letters (which includes the work's title) suggests sensory qualities.

Computer screens inherently contain a level of foreclosure that masks inaccessible elements in the source code. This displacement, however, also opens significatory possibilities for communication. An early chatroom conversation between Samyn and Harvey, published on their website under the title "Whispering Windows," demonstrates how the limitations of digital media can bring to the surface a sense of intimacy. The chat records their frustrated attempts to connect video and sound:

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 limitations of the medium, the "26 letters" of the alphabet and their appearance on the screen, are the material for "DHTML love." Despite these limitations of the medium, their effect is to magnify the tone and syntax of the exchange. Samyn, under the username *zuper*, writes under a private mode, while Harvey, under *womanonfire*, uses the public one.[[9]](#footnote-9) While *womanonfire* tends to cut her syntax into pithy expressions ("we must") that arrest the flow of thought and restart it on the next line ("learn new ways"), *zuper* responds in "private" mode with gentle reassurance ("but that's okay") that reinforce *womanonfire*'s messages. Even reduced to "26 characters" on a screen, the conversation reveals a synchronized flow between the lovers.

Even as they struggle with technical difficulties, Samyn and Harvey revel in the intimacy enabled by this mode of communication:

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 dificult 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…

That *womanonfire* "can just barely make…out" *zuper* is "fitting" because the physical barriers that separate their connection are considerable. Yet, *zuper* responds that he feels "so close" despite his distance, a phenomenon which he "doesn't understand [himself]". The question of whether their connection is really love, or if it's lust (or "pixellust"), recalls Lilith's questioning Nikanj about sex, of whether the feelings she experienced were "real" or not. Like Lilith's neural connection to Joseph, this connection attains its strength by bypassing obstacles that could trouble direct human-to-human contact. Here, Digital communication collapses aspects that could prohibit an intimate connection between two people, such as space, cultural differences, and even race. In this case, the network connection overcomes the obstacles:

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 reduction of their communication to letters on a screen flattens physical realities that might otherwise be obstacles to communication and understanding. Race becomes one in a list of other attributes like hair color or speaking another language. This flattening of attributes like hair and skin color severs them from their location on the physical body, instead transposing them to words on a screen. Separated from the referent, they flicker in the "unmappable elsewhere," where they cannot be pinned down.

Like the bypassing of flesh in *Dawn*, the foreclosure of depth paradoxically creates a flattening effect that reinforces physicality of the uppermost layer, of the surface, the *skin*. Tactile qualities of the net art work, where the user can manipulate objects on the screen with her mouse, is complicated by lags due to structures of the underlying code. The displacement of certain elements like hidden messages in the source code reinforces the levels of digital materiality that operate throughout the stack with varying degrees of accessibility. When objects on the screen are in tension with the signified, the surface itself creates a kind of chaotic environment where everything becomes skin.

Through vastly different means, both *Dawn* and *skin* explore a kind of desire that bypasses the physical body with the effect of magnifying embodied sensation. In *Dawn*, the gap between bodies stokes a debilitating fear of the other that is temporarily bridged by a neural connection. In *skin*, the physical body is also bypassed, but in this case, for a connection across spatial barriers. Reading these two texts together enables one to think through materiality across various contexts, from the physiological, to the technological, and finally, to the social. The collapse of registers between mind/body and code/display across these texts offers possibilities for reading materiality into apparently immateriality, through plays between matter and meaning.

1. The criticism from the novel situates this interplay of similarity and difference within intersectional or "Women of Color" feminism, particularly in Chela Sandoval's theorization of "differential consciousness." Using terms that echo in her famous followup work, "The Cyborg Manifesto," Donna Haraway describes this text (and Butler's fiction in general) as being "about the monstrous fear and hope that the child will not, after all, be like the parent" (Haraway *Primate Visions* 387). Catherine S. Ramirez builds from both Haraway and Chela Sandoval to explore the tension between essentialism and constructedness in the novel, which she calls an example of "cyborg feminism"–a feminism that explores a strategic tension between between "affinity and essence, and "plurality and specificity" (Ramirez 395). Ramirez argues that, by "critiqu[ing] fixed concepts of race, gender, sexuality and humanity, and, subsequently, 'fictions' of identity and community" this work displays a "strategic deployment of essence," that is, the claiming of a subject position for the purpose of resisting subjectification (Ramirez 375, 395). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Mann argues that the novel evokes the concept of "pessimistic futurism," combining the cynicism of afro-pessimism, which associates blackness with ontological death and the impossibility of black subjectivity, and the optimism of afro-futurism, which speculates and potentializes liberatory black subjectivity and futurity. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. As I have mentioned, one group of critics generally maintain that the novel destabilizes biological categories its associated assumptions about behavior, while a second argue that the novel reinforces biological determinist views. The first group emphasizes the novel's revision of biological determinist views, particularly when it comes to gender. "Gender," Haraway argues, "is not the transubstantiation of biological sexual difference," rather, it is "kind, syntax, relation, genre" (*Primate Visions* 377). Critics who build Haraway's reading, like Catherine S. Ramirez and Kitty Dunkley, explore how Butler deploys aspects of biological identity in a strategic way. Ramirez explains that Butler strategically deploys essentialist identity categories, as a tool for "imagining and mobilizing new subjects and new communities" (395). Within the frame of humanism, Kitty Dunkley emphasizes Butler's revision the anthropocentric and patriarchial structures that necessitate essential notions of gender. An example is the men's fear of the sexual seduction and penetration by the ooloi, which "threatens to usurp the men’s position at the pinnacle of a gendered hierarchy" (Dunkley 100). For both Ramirez and Dunkley, the biological "facts" of gender are deconstructed, rather than reinforced, in the novel. By constrast, Nancy Jesser centers the role of biological determinism within Butler's fiction. Jesser boldly asserts that "Genetics is the science of Butler's fiction. The translation of genotype to phenotype is the plot" (52). According to Jesser, the novel re-works genetic tendencies of behavior by deploying feminine traits, like maternal self-sacrifice, nurture, and relationality, to correct tendencies of dominance, possessiveness, and aggression typically displayed by the males (41-42). On this side of the debate, biology is a physical fact that determines behavior, but can also be re-worked or overcome through other tendencies. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. There is one exception to this view, from Patricia Meltzer, who argues that the trilogy, and its third installment specifically, presents a view of non-normative sexuality which can literally transform bodies at will. In this book, the human-Oankali constructs evolved the ability to manipulate organic matter within their own bodies, as shape-shifting beings who can adapt to their prospective partner's desires. Drawing from Judith Butler, Meltzer poses a body that is queer because it is constructed by desire:

   "Butler's concepts here are positioned neither in a biological essentialism that insists on gender identity (woman) as derivated of a body's sex (female), nor in a social and/or psychological constructivism that udnerstands the body's materiality as dominated by (social) discourse. Instead, desire and sexuality are based in the body's need for others… the body follows desire. Meltzer 241

   While other critics point out the disruptions to normativity, like in those in which the binary is destabilized, upended, where gender roles are reimagined, here Melzter draws out alternate visions for sex, gender, and desire altogether. Building from Butler's concept of performativity, Meltzer defines queerness as resisting the normative correlation of sex/gender/desire. The failure of easy alignment among these elements opens up the possibility of imagining how desire can construct new configurations of sexuality, that are "rooted in the body's amorphous craving for physical pleasure" (Melzter 236). I agree with Meltzer that the sex act is a queer one, but not because of a desire that literally transform bodies. Rather, the sex act is queer because of the way that it simultaneously bypasses and invigorates the flesh. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. As opposed to the "studium," or subject, of a photograph, the "punctum" is a detail that "pierces" the viewer. See Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 27. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. For example, if one balances a twelve-inch ruler by placing a finger under the sixth inch and applies 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 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." [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. JavaScript is still in use today, but has updated syntax and elements which make it incompatible with modern web browsers. Flash, by contrast, was officially discontinued on December 31st, 2020. Though Flash delivered advanced graphics at a time when media-rich content traveled slowly over the web, over the last 20 years, the development of newer, more efficient and secure animation technologies brought Flash into obsolescence. This termination made a generation (roughly from mid 1990s to 2010) of internet games, net art, and electronic literature virtually inoperable. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. For example, an email inbox will display unread emails in bold formatting depending on whether or not that email has been opened by the user. Behind the scenes, an if statement checks if the email has been opened. If it has, the email will render with regular formatting, but if it has not, it will render in bold formatting. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. If there are others in the chatroom, they have been removed from the transcript. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)