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“Flowing along the wall”: Anarcha-feminist Bioethics and Resistance
in Octavia E. Butler’s *Dawn*

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Reading Dawn in the “Biocultural Age”

Science fiction (sf) texts conversant with the temporal play between past, present, and future push readers to imagine the extremes of human and environmental existence, interaction, and potential. Simultaneously, despite the sf genre's tendency to traffic in extremes, these texts provoke readers to consider the ways in which these imagined worlds are grounded in history as well as in the contemporary social moment. As Donna Haraway has argued, "the boundary between science fiction and social reality is an optical illusion" (306). This illusory boundary must continue to be traversed in order to consider how sf literatures, particularly those which imagine speculative, posthuman social structures, sketch radical methods of social and individual resistance to institutionalized centers of power.

Identifying resistance strategies at work in sf texts is particularly important in the context of the relationships between humans and technology. This is a crucial intervention for sf scholars reading in what Sherryl Vint calls "the biocultural age," which is marked not only by advances in biotech but also by radical climate change and its proposed solutions from bioagricultural and geoengineering industries (161). Power relationships between humans and biotech experiments on the environment, for example, have been observed by scholars such as Selena Middleton. In her reading of *The Windup Girl*, by Paolo Bacigalupi, power appears in the symbolism of the seed which, Middleton states, "is a potent symbol that recurs in life and literature and allows for speculation that projects the technologies of the past [...] into the possibilities of the future" (126). Controlling the seed is imperative to the institution of scientific-state empires: control the seed and you control the world. The seed operates at both literal and figurative levels; it is relevant to bioagricultural applications as well as to human reproduction technologies, such as ART's (assistive reproductive technologies), and advanced methods for birth control and sterilization. In both environmental and human contexts, reproductive power is assumed by

scientists, and environmental and reproductive choice activists alike; where they tend to differ is over who is entitled to its control.

Outlining resistance strategies that appear in sf texts is part of a vital response to the increasingly popular calls for population control as a method to combat climate change. Unfortunately, some scientists, humanitarians, and environmental rights advocates rightly and necessarily invested in combating the devastating effects of climate change contribute to the seizure of women's bodies in the name of environmental sustainability. Women of color are disproportionately represented among those exploited and violated by population control agendas. As Policy Director of the Colorado Organization for Latina Opportunity and Reproductive Rights (COLOR), Karla Gonzales Garcia argues:

We must look at how we can shake up the systems around the use, abuse, and consumption of resources and the impacts of current systems on the environment while also supporting immigrants and refugees and ensuring that reproductive healthcare is advanced through a rights-based lens rather than a pseudo-eugenic population control approach. (4)

Advances in biotech which include both environmental and individual applications require a robust bioethical response. As such, this paper seeks to enter the scholarly conversation on the importance of sf texts in the biocultural age with the following questions in mind: How do sf texts ask readers to engage with themes of medical and bodily autonomy? How do sf texts imagine resistance to seemingly all-pervasive, socio-biological systems of control? And, most importantly, how do we resolve images of the (post)human in sf texts with the non-fictional conceptions of human rights? The question over who controls the reproductive body (whether it's a plant, animal, or human body) is, fundamentally, a question of ethics. As such, this paper

focuses on the representations of biotechnologically controlled human reproduction in sf literature. My purpose is to reconsider representations of biotechnologies through an ethical lens in order to better understand the argument(s) made by sf texts regarding the ethics (or lack thereof) of power groups, and to find methods of resistance to seemingly all-encompassing systems of biopower.

Engaging with sf literatures is key to understanding the inherently speculative social project of changing the world through biotechnology. Sf texts often touch on historical references to state-sponsored eugenics programs and population control agendas, and offer a tangible way to relate to the imperative of environmental protection as it collides with reproductive choice. Octavia Butler's works--in particular the *Xenogenesis* trilogy--offer an opportunity to read, or reread, sf texts concerned with the potential for both emancipation and for abuse inherent in state-implemented biotech programs. *Dawn* (the first book in the trilogy) imagines human society in the context of catastrophe. An alien force (the Oankali) has rescued the few surviving humans following nuclear war. The Oankali are a colonizing force who prize humans for the genetic potentialities offered by their cancers. Various members coerce Butler's protagonist, Lilith, into biomodifications, selectively sterilizing her, then forcibly impregnating her by the end of the novel. Simultaneously, the Oankali are the saviors of the human race who embrace a seemingly egalitarian social structure, and live in symbiotic relation to each other and their "ship," a womb-like, living vessel that changes, grows, and is readily discarded when the Oankali merge with new species and require an evolved environment.

When Lilith awakens on board the Oankali vessel, she has been reproductively modified, and she undergoes a series of biomodifications, some consensual, some not. The biochemical augmentations to which she consents allow her to "awaken" the other humans aboard the ship.

Lilith is recruited by the Oankali to help assimilate the other humans to life aboard the ship, to facilitate their eventual return to earth, and to acclimate the humans to the ultimate evolutionary project: merging with the Oankali species. Despite that much of the Oankali's drive to absorb human DNA accelerates without Lilith's consent, Lilith's limited agency offers her opportunities to begin building social cohesion among other humans and other Oankali. However, as a result of her genetic hybridity, the social cohesion she attempts to build is threatened. The other humans worry that she isn't human enough to share their concerns, to have their best interests at heart, to lead them back to earth, or to resist the Oankali.

Reading *Dawn* in the biocultural age necessitates thinking through both Butler's ambivalent depiction of the Oankali, and her depiction of Lilith's resistance which is, at times, elusive and inconsistent. I argue that Lilith's resistance strategy is encompassed by Butler's image of *flowing*, which she uses to describe Lilith's abilities to draw humans from their hibernation within the ship. Flowing is a dynamic process which resonates with the Afrofuturist tradition of the simultaneity of temporality, and reflects the inherent structure that underlies social movement--both cohesion and resistance. In addition, I argue that Lilith is a midwife figure, and that *midwiving* is integral to both her flowing strategy, and to Lilith's desire to build anarchistic affinity groups, which include members across species. Finally, I argue that social action in the present exists as a perpetual safeguard against the stasis of oppression. I locate Lilith's action, as I understand them, as firmly rooted in a multiplicity of present moments, which, though they may echo the past and project hope for the future, points toward the acknowledgement of social interaction as a dynamic force, always happening now and never finished.

Scholarly Engagements with Butler's Posthuman Constructs

Biopower has long been a theme of interest to Butler scholars. The Foucauldian term expresses the exercise of power over life, and encompasses the idea that social institutions have the power to “make live or let die” specific individuals and groups of people. It is, perhaps, no surprise that scholars continue to grapple with Butler’s ambiguous representations since, as Lisa Dowdall observes, Butler’s works represent a “politics of ambivalence” by depicting human resistance to the genetically determinist Oankali (506). Though many agree on the importance of considering representations of race, gender, sexuality, politics, hierarchy, and history in Butler’s works, scholars differ regarding how to prioritize these intersectionalities within the following narrative themes: structure versus agency, individual bodies and the body politic, utopian potential and dystopian devolution, and constructions of the human and posthuman. This literary, scholarly discussion operates in tandem with the bioethical discussion mentioned previously: how do sf texts represent who controls the seed, and what do sf texts have to say about who *should* control the seed?

Some Butler scholars cite the body as a site of political change and action, and read *Xenogenesis* for the emancipatory possibilities that emerge through depictions of the body, namely by looking at the assemblages of gender, sexuality, and race, and the language of genetics. Scholars such as Naomi Jacobs, Federica Caporaso, and Jessie Stickgold-Sarah have built arguments around Donna Haraway’s iconic concept of the cyborg as a posthuman figure. In “Cyborg Manifesto,” Haraway describes cyborg figures in sf texts as complex amalgamations of human, animal, and machine parts not reconcilable to a unified whole. Since the cyborg disrupts binary oppositions between these categories, Haraway argues that the cyborg possesses the ability to destabilize dominant systems of control. Caporaso, for example, argues that Butler complicates race relationships through her presentation of queer and feminist modes of sexual

pleasure, a complication, she states, that can potentially eradicate racial constructions of difference. What's left after the displacement of racialized difference, for Caporaso, is a freedom offered by uncontrollable biochemical alliances with no regard or use for racial diversity. Similarly, Stickgold-Sarah sees emancipatory potential in the language of DNA. Examples of genetic manipulation suggest that Butler "imagines change even when human action does not suffice" (424). Because genes, as depicted in the novel, are malleable, Stickgold-Sarah argues that *Xenogenesis* offers a radical method of social change that can combat entrenched hierarchies. Here, as in Caporaso's piece, human agency and social action are displaced in favor of biologically deterministic paradigms for change. Jacobs produces, perhaps, the most tenacious defense of the posthuman, Harawayian cyborg figure:

These human beings would all be dead, as a result of human actions, if they had not been rescued by the aliens. Yet they persist in believing the human superior to any new form into which they might evolve--no matter how evidently superior their 'oppressors' might be. With most of them, their opposition appears more an irrational psychological resistance than a true desire for liberation. (99)

Though these writers are deeply invested in feminist modes of critical thought and action, and though they read for the symbiosis of radical thought offered by Butler's depictions of social and biological agency, these readings displace the power of the social, favoring, instead, a paradigm of change that is biologically-based and out of human control. More importantly, these arguments do not trouble some of the foundational assumptions made by the Oankali, and perhaps by Butler herself, namely, the genetic "human contradiction" between intelligence and hierarchy that supposedly dooms humans. Are the Oankali correct in their assessment that all humans are genetically predisposed to hierarchical social organization? Does the mystification of

the Oankali's superpowers denote a "true" superiority to humans? Is a biochemical response more "real" or reliable than an emotional or intellectual one? And, perhaps most importantly, should we assume that the actions of some humans to enact nuclear war necessarily represent the will, and, thus, fatal flaw of *all* humans?

Some scholars find examples in Butler's works that problematize the inherent agency of Haraway's cyborg. Rather than read scientific metaphors for their emancipatory potential, Rachel Stein argues that, "Butler's novel [*Dawn*] should put us on our guard against the insidiousness of racist theories of biological determinism and against state or transnational programs that control women's fertility and motherhood without their freely given consent" (216). Likewise, Aris Mousoutzanis (relevant, though this piece doesn't focus on Butler) sees the cyborg in relation to the empire in which it exists and argues that the cyborg body can be assimilated to a new or alien culture. In this case, a "technological hegemony" prevails over previously hierarchical structures based on assemblages of race, class, gender, sexuality, etc. (68). This argument directly contradicts the emancipatory potential of DNA that Stickgold-Sarah observes, and that of queer sexuality noted by Caporaso. Compellingly, Gerry Canavan points out that much of the scholarship on Butler's *Xenogenesis* trilogy tends toward Oankali apologism; Haraway's discussion of the Oankali in her book *Primate Visions*, Canavan argues, aligns with her "posthuman cyborg theory's embrace of radical self-difference" and is "compatible with the postmodern, postcolonial politics of difference that remains quite fashionable on the academic left" (102). Canavan, however, takes an opposing stance:

I feel I must insist on the extent to which the Oankali turn out, in this reading, to be genuinely monstrous after all. The surface humanitarianism of the Oankali belies the threat of (xeno) genocidal violence on which their interactions with

human beings are predicated; if this is supposed to be a cosmopolitan utopia, it comes only at the barrel of a gun. (107)

Though he notes the ambiguity evident in all Butler's works, and states that making a polarized response to structure and agency in the *Xenogenesis* trilogy is difficult to sustain, Canavan's position helps to answer one of the questions posed earlier in this piece: how to reconcile the image of the posthuman alongside non-fictional conceptions of human rights? Canavan's argument is shaped, in part, by comparing the actions of the Oankali to the definition of genocide outlined by the United Nations; he finds the Oankali guilty on all counts.

Reading these scholars together, it is necessary, at this point, to recognize Butler's Oankali contradiction: their "powerfully acquisitive" and genocidal governing drives which persist despite their seemingly non-hierarchical, benevolent, symbiotic socio-biological organization. If there is anything emancipatory about the posthuman in this context, it is in the modes of resistance that Butler provides her characters--which are equally ambivalent. Resistance in *Dawn* is necessarily dynamic from the perspective of feminist ethics--Lilith is a "non-ideal agent in a non-ideal world" who must make decisions in the "messy contradictions of an actually lived life"; stasis and rational choice do not always govern Lilith's agency (Gotlib). Resistance requires making sense of the Oankali contradiction and deciding how to respond. Bioethical concerns resonate with feminist ethics particularly because *Dawn* depicts the deployment of forcible surgery, sterilization, and impregnation of Lilith in the service of "the greater good." Butler provides a social context rich with opportunities for exploring Lilith's agency in a non-ideal world, a world that has historical roots in slavery and early 20th century eugenics programs, and contemporary salience in Vint's "biocultural age." Equally important to Lilith's resistance strategies in this context are her desires and methods for building a new

posthuman social structure. More than resist the Oankali bio-state, Lilith awakens other humans with the hope of assembling a new, dehierarchized human order somewhat apart from the Oankali's bio-social control. Her attempts reflect an anarchist ethic which seeks to create horizontal social organization in the absence of the State. As such, *Dawn* is a site at which *anarcha-feminist bioethics* becomes a mode of understanding the Oankali contradiction, and the subsequent dynamic resistance and social organizational strategies at work in the text.

“Flowing along the wall”: The fluidity of resistance

Dynamic resistance occurs early in *Dawn*. At the beginning of the novel, Lilith understands that if she “chooses” not to participate in the Oankali's drive to merge with humans, she will return to eternal hibernation inside the ship. As a sleeping subject, Lilith has no right to bodily autonomy, evidenced by the fact that the Oankali have performed their version of surgery, and sterilized her, both without her consent, during her time asleep. Upon vocalizing her wish that the Oankali had left her on earth rather than “rescuing” her, Jdayah offers, against his “nature,” to kill Lilith. He directs her toward one of his lethal tentacles and offers to sting her, a quick and painless death. Butler writes, “It was a gift he was offering. Not a threat” (42). The “gift” offered is one of choice--the choice to participate willingly in the species hybridization project or to die. Canavan's assessment that species hybridity comes “at the barrel of a gun” is exemplified in this moment between Lilith and Jdayah. It is in this context that Lilith's subsequent resistance must be understood. Participation is the only mode of existence available to Lilith that offers her any chance to exert agency. In addition, her decision to become an “awakened” participant (rather than a sleeping experimental subject or a corpse) is largely an ethical one. Though Lilith expresses confusion about her inability to allow Jdayah to kill her, the anarcha-feminist bioethic is present: “She stared at his head tentacles. She raised her hand, let it

reach toward him almost as though it had its own will, its own intent. No more Awakenings. No more questions. No more impossible answers. Nothing. Nothing” (42). What Jdayah offers Lilith is an escape from being a non-ideal agent, escape from the non-ideal world. By refusing to sleep or die—which she realizes may not be the most rational choice considering her new environment—she claims what little biological control over her body and her futurity she can, which eventually positions her as an agent of resistance.

Lilith’s mode of resistance is epitomized in the following passage, which takes place in part three of the novel, “Nursery,” as Lilith begins to “awaken” the other humans. The humans are stored in a plant-like encasement that both nourishes and feeds off of the human life inside. To access them, Lilith must biochemically read a “print” and draw the person from the wall:

Lilith closed her eyes and began inching along again. She let herself lose track of time and distance, felt as though she were almost flowing along the wall. The illusion was familiar--as physically pleasing and emotionally satisfying as a drug—a needed drug at this moment. (135)

“Flowing” implies a response to an underlying structure, and denotes a resistance that, at times, appears to be free from constraint; it helps to describe the incremental approach to enacting resistance and establishing a new social group in an oppressive structure, while also encompassing the fluidity and constant change necessary to accommodate each new being to the group. The *OED* offers the following definitions of flowing: “To move on a gently inclined surface with a continual change of place among the particles or parts; to become liquid” (“Flowing” OED). “Flow” from a mathematical perspective can also mean “to increase or diminish continuously by infinitesimal quantities; to vary” (“Flow” OED). Butler’s use of this term in this moment, during a scene depicting “awakening,” (re)birth, and the hope of building a

radically new (post)human community, suggests that Lilith's resistance modes are infinitely flexible and dynamic; that she can "increase or diminish" according to the underlying structure is a helpful construct for understanding how, for Lilith, resistance includes moments of outward disdain toward and withdrawal from the Oankali, as well as moments of submission and acquiescence to Oankali goals and her liminal role. In addition, flowing helps to explain her resistance or acquiescence to other humans, for example, her revulsion at Paul's attempts to rape her, and the development of sexual feelings for Joseph.

"Flowing along the wall" is akin to the "learn and run" strategy noted by Lisa Dowdall who argues: "for Lilith in particular, "learn and run" is a form of colonial negotiation that reveals how assemblages of race, gender, and empire demand creative ways to assert personhood and mount resistance" (510). Dowdall's claim accurately synthesizes the important social and historical constructions at work in Lilith's resistance. However, Lilith makes clear that she cannot simply run once she feels she has learned enough to escape. Reacting to Leah, who has an instant, aggressive reaction to being "awakened," Lilith screams: "I'm a prisoner here just like you. I can't let you out. I can't get out myself" (Butler 137). What flowing lends to the learn and run strategy is a dynamism inherent to the social interactions between Lilith and the Oankali, one that encompasses the "continual change of place" that will continue after the Oankali have completed their modifications. While learning implies an extrinsic knowledge which Lilith must acquire, flowing encapsulates the biomodifications that have become intrinsic, and that will persist for generations. Even if Lilith could escape the grasp of the Oankali, she can't escape her own body or her ascribed role as parent to a hybridized species without withdrawing her participation, her autonomy, and, likely, her life.

Also in this passage, Butler highlights “awakening” others as a pleasurable, drug-like experience. If flowing helps to explain Lilith’s resistance strategy, it follows (flows) that the act of “awakening” itself is a resistant act. Though “awakening” is in line with Oankali goals, when the only other option is death or a perpetual state of sleep marked by forced experimentation, waking the other humans provides the opportunity for fissure. That Lilith derives pleasure from aiding in the (re)birth of other humans from the ship suggests that community building within an oppressive environment is pleasurable, that *social participation and resistance in and of themselves are pleasurable*. This passage is commensurate with what adrienne maree brown terms “pleasure activism,” which she defines as “the work we do to reclaim our whole, happy, and satisfiable selves from the impacts, delusions, and limitations of oppression and / or supremacy” (13)¹. Understood this way, representations of physical pleasure in the text are more than moments of respite for Lilith, more than examples of black-queer-feminist modes of disruptive sexuality. Hope for a posthuman community and Lilith’s decision to participate becomes, for her, a pleasurable experience. In this passage, Butler suggests that the drive to social action and engagement is meditative (in the disruption of time and space), embodied (in the biochemical process of drawing bodies from the ship), and intoxicating (in the drug-like effects). Flowing encompasses these modes, and offers a way of seeing fluidity and sociality which displaces the cyborg’s fragmentation and self-difference. The emancipatory potential offered in this passage with regard to pleasure suggests that subverting the bio-state is not only dependent upon the varying assemblages and disruptions embodied in the individual, but in the erotics of socially interactive resistance and community building.

Midwiving & Social Awakening

Considering Lilith's role as the human parent to posthumanity is possible from the vantage point of the whole *Xenogenesis* trilogy. But in the context of *Dawn*, Lilith's role as "parent" to a new species isn't concretized until the last few pages. Considering the way in which Lilith "awakens" people aboard the ship she appears more as a midwife than parent, the midwife being a dangerous and persecuted figure amid the birth of a men's-only, Western medical paradigm. The images Butler writes during "Nursery"—an evocative title indicating reproduction, birth, and (re)birth—are clearly connected with childbirth as Lilith coaxes the first woman, Tate Merah, from the ship walls:

The plant lay, writhing slowly, still surrounded by the foul odor that had followed it through the wall. She could not see well enough through its thick, fleshy body to know which end concealed Tate Merah's head, but that did not matter. She drew her hands along the length of the plant as though unzipping it, and it began to come apart [...]. She [Tate] would not awaken until she was lifted completely clear of the suspended animation plant. Her body was wet and slippery, but not heavy. Sighing, Lilith lifted her clear. (127)

Perhaps the danger of being a midwife is, in part, due to the ways in which the term can also act as a verb: "to midwife" means "to help or be instrumental in bringing (something hidden) to light or a piece of work [especially art] into being or public view" ("Midwife" OED). Lilith effectively becomes *a* midwife to the ship, helping it to expel the humans. But, more importantly, she *midwives*, which resonates with Butler's generous use of the term "awakening;" she brings to light the seemingly inescapable bioculture in which she and the other humans exist.

While Lilith's acquiescence to midwifery fulfills the Oankali's designated role for her, she also delivers the message of their abuses to the other humans, thus, facilitating human

resistance to the Oankali. This dual purpose has roots in black women's literatures, and is an observable mode of resistance among black midwife groups in the rural South. In her discussion of the "granny midwife" figure in black feminist writing, Valerie Lee argues that women speaking in midwife clubs "spoke both a discourse with which they were familiar and another discourse that was pleasing for officials to hear" (86). Listening to this dual discourse, Lee says, is akin to jumping rope "double dutch," an analogy which Lee describes as acknowledging the ways in which black women writers are "grounded in the history and folkways of their respective communities" (103). The "double dutch" concept helps to elucidate how Butler simultaneously articulates black female power and subordination, black histories and futures, how Lilith appears to help her oppressors and resist them, and how the mystified biochemical changes Lilith undergoes can both aid in and detract from her agency. The rhythmic qualities of skipping "double dutch" align with flowing as resistance as both depict dynamism, a constant interchange of parts and particles, people and rope--jumping, swinging the ropes, singing, or watching. Each represent interconnected modes of participation that are potentially ceaseless.

Lilith's actions read as midwiving provides a way to understand the overt reproductive imagery in *Dawn*, but, more importantly, offers a dynamic concept that elucidates the tensions that arise between Lilith, the other humans, and the Oankali. Midwiving suggests multiple meanings associated with her decision to "help" the Oankali, meanings that are legible both to the humans aboard the ship and their alien captors, and demonstrates both moments of increasing and diminishing at work in her flow. The anarcho-feminist bioethics at work in *midwiving* include Lilith's decision to draw humans from the ship walls, to give them a choice regarding if and how they want to participate. Midwiving allows Lilith to resist the "nothing" Jdayah offers early in the novel, and prompts the rebuilding of human community. This is one mode of

resistance where Lilith flows over the stated, static, unchangeable, inescapable goals of the Oankali. Midwiving is at once a pleasurable, flexible, enlightening, and dangerous mode of resistance, deeply entwined with the histories and speculative futures of black women.

Anarchist Affinity Groups

As mentioned previously, creating a new social organizational model is as important as recognizing modes of resistance. In other words, subverting the bio-state is not always a destructive act; subversion requires creation and the building of something new. Creation of a new order is a deeply held anarchist tenet. Colloquially, anarchy is often used synonymously with the word “chaos,” and often invokes images of destructive violence against the state. When not discussed as inherently dangerous, anarchy is largely dismissed as unrealistic. According to anarchist literary theorist, Jeff Shantz, some goals frequently stated by anarchists include, “critiques of corporatization, prisons, and patriarchal relations as well as explorations of developing anarchist perspectives on revolution, ecology, sexuality, and mutual aid” (2). These explorations occur within a seemingly inescapable, statist, socio-political environment, and entail an understanding of social interactions as a dynamic balance between the rights of the individual and the preservation of the group. One of the central tenets of anarchism includes, as Jesse S. Cohn writes, “a special concern with the coherence of means and ends” (14). For anarchist theorists and activists, this means that the tools chosen to facilitate social change must be sustainable and reflective of the idealism of the speculative future. Fusing anarchist and feminist theories, Michelle Campbell argues that the problem with the Oankali project is its absence of symbiosis between means and ends, “which the Oankali do not seem to find problematic in their nonhierarchical and powerfully acquisitive society” (266). Ethical symbiosis appears to be the only kind of symbiosis the Oankali haven’t perfected. To the extent that the Oankali are an

allegory for the abuses of state biopower against marginalized groups, their lack of ethical symbiosis disrupts any clear reading of the Oankali as egalitarian or benevolent in their social organization.

Lilith's attention toward ethically-based social cohesion is evident before she embarks on "awakening" the other humans. Lilith expresses anarchistic sensibilities after "awakening" a group of both men and women: "'Down on Earth,' she said carefully, 'there are no people left to draw lines on maps and say which sides of those lines are the right sides. There is no government left. No human government, anyway'" (Butler 142). Also, Lilith expresses to Tate her understanding that the social order will need to take a shape radically different than before: "All the people I have to Awaken are here without their families. We're all alone. We've got each other, and nobody else. We'll become a community—friends neighbors, husbands, wives—or we won't" (Butler 139). Instead of attempting to assemble a new centralized authoritative structure, Lilith's solution can best be described as creating an anarchistic affinity group. Affinity is defined by the Anarchist Library as follows:

To have affinity means to have knowledge of the other, to know how they think on social issues, and how they think they can intervene in the social clash. This deepening of knowledge between comrades is an aspect that is often neglected, impeding effective action. ("Affinity group")

Because of her biomodifications, Lilith must know herself and recognize that she too is "other," that her hybridity facilitates her liminal role—her foot in Oankali, human, and posthuman social groups. By leaning into her biomodifications, Lilith re-tools her hybridity in order to attempt to convene a new posthuman social group. The anarchistic definition of the affinity group is useful for considering Butler's ambiguous depiction of social alliances.

The affinity group structure Lilith begins to create is complicated by her modified biology. Paradoxically, the biomodifications that allow Lilith to reproduce people from their pods are the same chemical traits that provoke fear and suspicion from the other humans. The Oankali's belief that humans are inherently hierarchical blinds them to the ways in which they have reinforced this tendency; by modifying Lilith, they've marked her as "other," as separate, as a leader. Despite this, Lilith does not seek to reinstate former centralized systems of power. Nor does she exclude Oankali members from her affinity group. After she is paired with Nikanj—a third gendered ooloi—and they connect sexually, Lilith's attractions and desires become intertwined with the alien. Because of this physiological connection, and despite her anger at being biochemically altered by the Oankali, Lilith seeks to bring Nikanj and the other ooloi into the group. Discussing her sexual connection to Nikanj with Joseph, Lilith implores Joseph to accept Nikanj: "We need to know them for what they are, even if there are no human parallels-- and believe me, there are none for the ooloi" (170). Though this "knowledge of the other" is biologically and sexually reinforced, Lilith sees the social value in inclusion.

The roots of Lilith's acceptance appear well before any sexualized biomodifications have taken place. In the absence of human camaraderie, Lilith regards Nikanj as a friend:

Only Nikanj gave her any pleasure, any forgetfulness. The ooloi child seemed to have been given to her as much as she had been given to it. It rarely left her, seemed to like her--though what 'liking' a human might mean to an Oankali, she did not know. She had not even figured out Oankali emotional ties to one another.

(58)

Pleasure makes an appearance here, as it does later in the novel when Lilith midwives. In both contexts, Lilith is developing social connections with humans and Oankali aboard the ship. Again,

though their bonding is in line with Oankali goals, there is a “double dutch” discourse occurring; Lilith derives pleasure from the act of attempting to “know the other,” which is integral to building a diverse, anarchistic affinity group. Though it could be said that the Oankali are also engaged in this process, what marks their actions as separate is the inherently coercive nature of their project, and their inability to speak the ethical language of humans that is not necessarily expressed in human biochemistry. Despite her modifications, Lilith’s situatedness denotes an anarcha-feminist bioethics at work in the novel.

Dynamic Presence

Thus far, I’ve chosen the terms, flowing, midwiving, and building to illustrate multiple modes of resistance which, I argue, operate in coherence within an anarcha-feminist bioethical framework. Doing so allows for an understanding of the ambiguities of the novel as continuous, flowing simultaneously into the past and future. These terms align with the Afrofuturist tradition, which Kodwo Eshun states, “aims to [reorient] the intercultural vectors of Black Atlantic temporality towards the proleptic as much as the retrospective” (459). Butler’s presentations of social action reflect this tradition, echoing conditions of slavery and state-sponsored eugenics programs while projecting contributions of African-Americans into the construction of a radically different future. Justin Lewis Mann terms these themes in Butler’s works “pessimistic futurism,” to explore the ambivalent relationship between futuristic possibilities and the inherent doubt in a hopeful future. This is a crucial intervention in sf scholarship considering that, as Mark Bould states, quoting Public Enemy, for black people, ““Armageddon been in effect”” (6).

This is where Butler opens the first novel in *Xenogenesis*: 250 years following nuclear war, Lilith awakens aboard the Oankali ship, and this isn’t the first time the Oankali have woken her. The humans have already been modified without consent; they’ve been interpolated by a

system which values only humans' biological contributions to the ecosystem. Lilith can neither change the context for her "rescue" nor the biochemical changes taking place in her body when she wakes. As such, resistance and the building of community takes place through a concept I call *dynamic presence* which I define as a multiplicity of present moments and interactions requiring constant reassessment and intervention into the social order. The present is dynamic as it cannot be pinned down; time seems to hurtle toward the future leaving only a space for reflection of the past. As such, dynamic presence coheres with flowing, encompassing the constant interchange between parts and particles as moments in time. Additionally, dynamic presence reflects anarchist social cohesion goals. As Jeff Shantz argues, anarchist politics "offers needed insights into real world attempts by individuals and *collectives to radically transform social relations in the here and now of everyday life* (while seeking broader social change" (2 emphasis mine). Focusing on the here and now, as Shantz states, does not eschew the past, rather, it encompasses a full acknowledgement of the histories that construct our present moment. Social action occurs in this temporal context.

Lilith's dynamic presence allows her to focus on the most immediate social goals: "She had learned to keep her sanity by accepting things as she found them, adapting herself to new circumstances by putting aside the old ones whose memories might overwhelm her" (Butler 132). Tate, however, does not share Lilith's resolve, and articulates the conundrum inherent in flowing between assimilation and resistance: "I don't know whether I should be shedding the constraints of civilization and getting ready to fight for my life or keeping and enhancing them for the sake of our future" (134-5). Tate's indecision represents a moment where the past and the future collide; for Tate, the present represents indecision and inaction rather than action, dynamism, or flowing. Lilith, however, continues to insist on the importance of present action

when Tate questions Lilith's presence of mind, wary of her seeming unwillingness to discuss her past. Lilith explains: "I lived in those memories for my two years of solitary. By the time the Oankali showed up in my room, I was ready to move into the present and stay there" (135). To stay in the present is to embrace dynamic presence.

Flowing into the Future

The anarchist ethic seeking the coherence of means and ends resonates with black feminist author, Audre Lorde's oft cited assertion, "the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house. They may allow us temporarily to beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change" (2). However, the "tools" at work in *Dawn* are biochemical, mystified, scientific, available for the Oankali to deploy, there to be experienced and forever changed by the passive, captive human. Connecting these ideas back to biotechnology in the biocultural age presents those interested in anarchist, feminist, and bioethics with a daunting task: given that biotechnologies are progressively and increasingly invasive, permanent, and inescapable, how can using biotech that may have been coercively or forcefully applied and implemented become useful to social change projects invested in the symbiosis of means and ends?

Flowing, midwiving, building affinity groups, and dynamic presence emerge from Butler's chosen language, each suggesting that Lilith's project is a continual process that is contingent upon being (re)born into a society already in motion. Building affinity requires constant accommodation and knowledge of "the other," and takes place within and around a seemingly inescapable biocultural environment. *Dawn* calls readers' attention to the intersections between issues of informed consent, genocide, bodily autonomy, and the ways in which marginalized groups seek opportunities for resistance, which is a pleasurable act. Butler provides

examples among the human characters of the potential for resistance in line with an anarcho-feminist bioethical framework. The ethically hybrid approach to reading *Dawn* allows for recognition that the novel theorizes about feminist, anarchist, and bioethical understandings of the continuing impact of biopower.

Endnotes

1. Agency and pleasure are of particular interest to brown who writes in her chapter titled, “a spoilerific gush on how octavia butler turns me on”: “I have a hypothesis that Octavia believed pleasure to be one of the most important strategies and activities for long-term survival [...] I even think she understood that the moral essence of the species was unveiled in these complications around what we desire and how we follow it or deny it” (54).

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