

FICTIONS OF IMMANENCE: GENDER-FLUIDITY IN THE SCIENCE FICTION OF ANGELA CARTER AND OCTAVIA BUTLER

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ABSTRACT

This paper reads Deleuze-Guattarian and new materialist theories alongside two landmark works of speculative science fiction by Angela Carter and Octavia Butler that queer normative conceptualisations of gender and sexuality. These theoretical and fictional explorations argue that subjectivity should be reconceptualised as immanent rather than fixed. Utilising uncanny affective registers, they attempt to push rigid ideas about gender/sex toward more fluid configurations that affirm a heterogeneity of lived experiences, situating subjectivity along lines of becoming. To execute such moves, Deleuze and Guattari propose a kind of experimental and experiential rupturing process; a mechanism for accessing what is immanent to everyday experience, rather than governmental. This is particularly useful for exploring transgender and other minoritarian subjectivities. By invoking breaks or ruptures from habituated ways of thinking and feeling, as these philosophers suggest, writers, artists and theorists might succeed in creating points of emergence around which new configurations and relations of gender-fluid identities might coalesce. I will investigate how Deleuze and Guattari, as well as Carter and Butler, who wrote before the emergence of transgender studies during the 1990s, paved the way for nomadic conceptions of sexuality, gender and lived contradiction.

Keywords: Angela Carter; becoming; biopunk; Body without Organs (BwOs); Deleuze; Guattari; gender-fluidity; immanence; Octavia Butler; science fiction

INTRODUCTION

“Attention,” as Simon O’Sullivan writes, implies an “opening up to the world”; a “suspension of normative modes” of conceptualising that doesn’t resort to arbitrary value judgements or hierarchical gradings of experience (2010, 206). This paper argues that critically rejecting narrow definitions of fundamental human experiences, such as sexuality and gender, as well as challenging dominant cis-gendered heteronormative discourses, requires strategies that encourage paying due attention to difference and multiplicity. Calling for ways of subverting binary models of thought that attempt to fix human identity, transgender theorist Jack Halberstam (2006, 577) argues that “the belief that anatomy is destiny” constitutes “the most violent condition [that] heterosexist culture has to offer.” Jim Miller (1998, 347) describes the speculative science fiction of writers like Octavia Butler as attempts to resist such violence by negotiating subjectivity in terms of lived contradiction, as well as heterogeneous experiences and durations, thereby enacting “cognitive mappings” by which it is possible to “transform our own present” in the image of some “unexpected future.” Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari argue that affects and aesthetics are immanent to experience itself and not merely conditions thereof, making them excellent literary tools for queering representations of subjectivity. Perhaps the best way to approach categorisations of human experience, as these philosophers suggest (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 69), is to imaginatively unfix them from their transcendental and idealist moorings and situate them instead on a “plane of consistency”; a continuum of becoming in “which there is no lesser, no higher or lower organisation.” I will investigate two examples of science fiction by Carter and Butler that situate experiences of gender and sexuality on such a plane of immanent becoming. Arguing for more malleable conceptions of gender and sex, these authors rely on uncanny styles of encounter as well as de-familiarising combinations of horror and beauty. Such destabilising affective and aesthetic moves align Carter and Butler with the strange ontological and ethical (or onto-ethical) entanglements of Deleuze-Guattarian and new materialist philosophies. Onto-ethical positions such as these embody a disquieting nomadic notion of subjectivity that confounds any specific kind of hierarchical schemata or value judgement. From such a position, which is also the position of transgender and queer theory, no one point of view or “truth” can ever be the only correct one. Able to entertain more than one reality construct simultaneously, this kind of theory and fiction is affective and transversal; it has flattened all differences onto a single plane, the “plane of consistency” or “immanence” (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 69). From such a position we might, as Carter and Butler attempt to do, weave conceptions of gender, sex and even genre into more fluid and affirmative configurations and, in so doing, create new spaces of affirmation for trans and gender-queer subjectivities.

New materialist thinkers such as Elizabeth Grosz and Rosi Braidotti, building on the work of Deleuze and Guattari, insist on an immanent ethics of joy that confounds mutually exclusive/exhaustive binarisations (such as mind/body, reason/passion, material/ideal and male/female). Grosz (2017, 137) explains that the “plane of composition” inhering

to works of art and literature “and the effects they induce” is co-extensive with a plane of immanence, which includes “both material practices and the production of ideality” as “ways of thinking/feeling/acting.” An immanent ethics situated on such a plane, she continues, is “irretrievably caught up with the movements of events, with how events may be lived” (Grosz 2017, 151). Such an ethics can be called science-fictional because, as Braidotti (1997) argues, the uncanny fabulations of science fiction may help us to think about immanence—particularly in terms of how idealities or concepts are, or may yet be, embodied and experienced—in critically important ways. Science fiction, as Deleuze and Guattari (1987, 248) note, can serve as a base for every kind of minoritarian practice because it is, at its root, a literature of non-normative becoming and boundary transgression, having “gone through a whole evolution taking it from animal, vegetable, and mineral becomings to becomings of bacteria, viruses, molecules and things imperceptible.” In new materialist and Deleuze-Guattarian praxes, as well as in science fiction orientated along these lines, the normative thinking subject is uncannily decolonised and sexed-identities based on gendered opposition are dissolved. “Multiple variables of difference or of devalued otherness” thereby become situated “as positive sites for the redefinition of subjectivity,” placing “minority subjects of subjugated knowledges,” such as feminist, black, postcolonial, indigenous and multiple gender-queer or trans persons, “in privileged positions as readers” (Braidotti 1997, 68). Science fiction, as well as science fiction-flavoured theory, such as that of Deleuze and Guattari, allow “via representations of immanent processes of becoming” for a total reconfiguring of “the image of thought” and therefore of the image of the human (Braidotti 1997, 68). Concerned with durations rather than chronologies, a science-fictional ethics of immanence views subjectivity as dynamic and relational; as a “meshwork” or complex material “entanglement of paths, processes and lines of habituation” between humans and non-human things in constant movement (Ingold 2011, 69–70). From a Deleuze-Guattarian and, indeed, a new materialist perspective, affirmative notions of difference, as well as nuanced conceptions of lived orientations will, however, only become possible once we make concerted conceptual efforts to foster subjectivities that do not require the marginalisation of others with respect to majoritarian norms and do away with the hierarchical modes of thinking that invariably influence our doings. In this task, as I will demonstrate, the ground-breaking science fiction of Carter and Butler has proven to be instrumental.

Contemporaneous with Deleuze and Guattari’s *Anti-Oedipus* (first published in French in 1972 and appearing in an English translation in 1977), Angela Carter’s *The Passion of the New Eve* (1982) explores analogous themes. Like *Anti-Oedipus*, Carter’s *Passion* is a recasting of Decadent sensibilities, as well as uncanny science fiction tropes and affective registers, suggesting that our society of rigidly fixed gender, sex, social, genre and other hierarchies is green with rot; a situation that necessitates a total conceptual rewiring, predicated on radical physical and affective experimentation. Carter, as Roger Luckhurst (2005, 184) writes, “best exemplifies this new sense of knowingness about the

artifice of generic conventions” as well as categorisations of gender and sex. Texts like *Passion* have been classified alternately as instances of postmodern fabulation (McHale 1987), Gothic novella (Botting 2008), literary Decadence (Stableford 2010) and science fiction (Luckhurst 2005). This confusion was partly encouraged by Carter herself, whose work eschews genre in favour of “theoretical readings of science fiction,” Gothic romance, and fairytales “in fictional form” (Luckhurst 2005, 184). This parallels with the work of Deleuze and Guattari’s own genre-busting “science-fictional” theoretical project, whose impact should not be underestimated with regard to the work of feminist new materialists (such as Grosz and Briadotti) and transgender theorists (such as Halberstam) who are resolute in their arguments for a porosity of boundaries. What makes a work like *Passion* an instance of science fiction in the contemporary “queer” sense, as John Clute and Peter Nicholls (1999, 200) write, is precisely its “engagement in a recognisably science fiction displacement of reality” alongside its “freedom” to range beyond generic categorisations of fiction, theory and subjectivity. Written over a decade after *Passion*, Octavia Butler’s *Lilith’s Brood* (1989; 2000) takes analogous delight in the blurring of boundaries. While it engages in a dialogue with the scientific discourse of molecular biology in the “biopunk” mode of science fiction, it employs Carter’s flair for the phantasmagorical tropes of body horror and boundary violation to queer hierarchical norms of race, gender, sex and genre. Today, largely in part to the ground-breaking efforts of authors like Carter and Butler, it is possible to celebrate a newly established subculture of science fiction written by self-identified trans and gender-queer authors such as Gabriel Squailia and Charlie Jane Anders. While the fight to create social-justice and “normalisation” for transgender subjects is far from over, both in fiction and in fact, Carter and Butler’s immanent science fiction have set invaluable precedents. As Deleuze and Guattari have done in the realm of theory, these writers argue convincingly that the old conceptual forms that still persist in defining the way we think about ourselves and our stories are either dead or *in extremis*, requiring radically new perspectives. They suggest, moreover, that unfixing gender, sex and genre from normative binarisms, necessitates a further step toward the dismantling of anthropocentrism itself. We must, as these authors and theorists suggest, shrug off habituated ways of thinking about the human by also developing an affinity for the non-human. Furthermore, realising a more fluid and tolerant self and society, in their narratives, requires processes of radical de-familiarisation; becomings that draw heavily on archaic shamanism’s insistence on intensive rites of passage to mark the dissolution of boundaries between self and other, human and non-human.

19th century Decadence, an aesthetic system with a predilection for narcotics and sexual transgression, instilled a curiosity about archaic “techniques of ecstasy” existing outside the normative boundaries of Western society. Decadent sorcerers like the infamous “beast” Alistair Crowley (1992, 23) expressed a Nietzschean urge to “go beyond the herd” via a body of fantastical occult fictions and magical “memoirs” that celebrated the polymorphous sexualities and hallucinogenic experimentations of shamanism, as well as

the self-dissolving “mantras and spells” of tantra and sorcery. Enabling initiates to step outside the boundaries of self and society, shamanism in particular, presented not only Decadent, but later Surrealist, Dadaist, postmodern and poststructuralist writers, artists and thinkers with new ways of thinking about cultural novelty. It has played a similarly important role in science fiction, queer theory as well as in Deleuze-Guattarian and new materialist praxes for the ways in which it troubles the boundaries of embodiment, cognition and affect. Scholars of shamanism such as Mircea Eliade (1989, 171) chronicle the violence of shamanic healing and initiation rites, in which the subject is psychically disembowelled, eviscerated and de-boned, before being refashioned, remodelled and remade on a plane of immanence (which Eliade refers to as the “*axis-mundi*”). Could remaking self and society along more fluid lines require an experimental rite of passage that is similarly ferocious? In *Anti-Oedipus* and its sequel, *A Thousand Plateaus* (1980; 1987), Deleuze and Guattari refer to this kind of shamanic restructuring via violent upheaval as the building of a Body with Organs (BwO); an intensive aesthetic device whereby the body (both textual and physical, imagined and real) may be situated as the site of a radical experiment in immanent becomings. For Halberstam (2005, 101), the BwO offers an imaginative and affective formulation whereby artists, writers, theorists and activists can express a radically “expanded sensorium ... some new, yet [previously] unimaginable dimension” that “corresponds precisely to the [radically] new forms of embodiment that have come to be called transgender.” The BwO, as Deleuze and Guattari (1987) explain, is an exploratory or submersible device that shaman writers, performers, composers and self-experimenters have used to plunge themselves and their audiences into the plane of immanence. Accessing this ordinarily inaccessible plane of becoming requires, in the Deleuze-Guattarian ontology, a manner of psychic and affective intensity. In constructing these kinds of intensive BwO’s, Carter and Butler utilise various modes of science fiction; respectively the Decadent and biopunk modes. These modes, as Luckhurst (2005, 214) writes, utilise body-horror and the grotesque to unmake familiar conceptions of human experience and affective relations. Body-horror, as Halberstam (2006, 576) notes, plays on the “spooky and uncanny” effects and affects that result from confusing the boundaries of bodies, sexualities and gender. The task of this kind of uncanny abjection is to model a kind of painful striving toward a new mode of freedom centred on embodiment and affect, as well as on new sets of conceptual relations. Gender, writes Halberstam (2006, 582), is revealed to be “a sewing job which stitches identity into a body bag ... a mask, a suit, a costume ... not a transcendent signifier of humanity.” Although some postmodern critics of horror fiction, such as Fred Botting (2008, 49), have argued that contemporary examples of science fiction and theory that employ the tropes of the monstrous and grotesque (particularly in the context of gender and sexuality) close pathologically on sameness, I will argue the opposite. What is affirmed by the negative gestures of body-horror and the “science-fictional grotesque” in the work of Carter and Butler, I will contend, is an affirmation of lived contradiction as well as the necessity of an immanent ethical outlook centred

on notions of hybridity and fluidity. By locating the unfamiliar alongside the familiar, the immaterial alongside the material, masculinity alongside femininity, the grotesque alongside the sublime, these authors flatten oppositions out on a plane of immanence from whence new neither/nor modalities of race, gender and sex can be constructed. In these examples of science fiction, as well as in Deleuze-Guattarian and new materialist philosophies, critically negative or uncanny gestures (such as monsters and transgressive sexualities, for instance) have lost neither their potency nor revolutionary capacity. Venturing well beyond circularity and relativism of much postmodern theorising, these writers and theorists help to situate subjectivity within a more affirmative position of embodied immanence—a position from which we can begin the task of both imagining and working towards a queer society yet to come.

THE DECADENCE OF THE NEW EVE

In *The Passion of the New Eve*, Angela Carter utilises the language and sensibility of literary Decadence to envisage the combined apocalypse of Western culture and its secure gender identifications. The tone of her novel expresses, as the 19th century critic Theophile Gautier wrote of the Decadent movement, “the hallucinations of fixed ideas turning to madness in language already veined with the greenness of decomposition” (Gautier cited in Stableford 2010, 22). Carter executes this affinity with ironic aplomb, utilising, as Nicolletta Vallorani (1994, 368) writes, the Decadent image of the “body carnivalised [and] made grotesque” to enact “the disruptive power implied” by such a move. The Decadents, as literary critic and author Brian Stableford (2010) observes, were reclusive aesthetes who attempted to escape social rigidity by retreating into artistic worlds of their own creation from whence they could toy with notions of sexual identity and gender psychology as well as indulge in erotic fantasies and deviant pleasures. Stableford describes how the literary fabulation of some Decadents, like Joris-Karl Huysmans and Jean Lorrain, celebrated hallucinatory drugs, wild sex and the occult as “ways out of the world” (Stableford 2010, 169). Others, such as Camille Flammarion, Anatole France and Villiers de l’Isle-Adam, experimented more ardently with science fiction’s “narrative space of the future” in order to stage similar escapes. Carter enacts both strategies. Her protagonist Evelyn/Eve (both before and after her male-to-female surgical transition) is transported, often with the aid of narcotic hallucinations, as well as via numerous Sadeian sexual abuses, to experience, as Georges Bataille notes of the Decadent impulse, “the poetic temptation of the end of the world” (Bataille 2006, 124). Eve/lyn is modelled on the very image of Decadent “sufferer,” who “plagued by ennui and spleen,” craves “new experiences” (in Stableford 2010, 151). Carter utilises Decadent aesthetic tropes of the abject and carnivalesque, however, to gesture in the direction of an affirmative and experiential immanence.

In *Spinoza: Practical Philosophy*, Deleuze (1988) conceives of bodies as more than collections of organs and functions; rather, he writes, they are “kinetic,”

involving “power, expression and endurance,” as well as the “dynamic” capacity “to affect and be affected” (1988, 124). With *Anti-Oedipus*, Deleuze, in collaboration with Guattari, extends this vision of the body by setting out a critique of the ways in which contemporary capitalist society psychically inscribes its relations and passes judgements on the bodies of its subjects. These positions are reflected by Carter who uses them alongside Decadent aesthetic registers to imagine an apocalyptic collapse of the Oedipal social order and its bodily inscriptions of gender and sex. As such, *The Passion of the New Eve* chronicles the experiential and experimental transition of a male-to-female transsexual in the wake of an imagined apocalypse, when the mythic and moral judgements enacted over bodies are slowly disintegrating. In Carter’s text, the chaotic collapse of the old order gradually frees up the conceptual categories of gender and sex, as well as her protagonist’s experiences of them. Opening with the hallucinatory adventures of Evelyn (in the body of a man) in New York, Carter presents an image of the old social order collapsing in a vertiginous chaos. In a paranoid delirium of hashish-fumes Evelyn encounters Leilah, who masquerades the ideal male fantasy of woman for him; an ideal that Evelyn sadistically abuses before fleeing the collapsing city. Seized by militant separatist feminists, castrated and forcibly transformed into the very feminine ideal he has just abused, Evelyn is renamed Eve in ironic homage to the now defunct biblical prototype of the female gender. “A change in appearance will restructure the essence,” s/he is told (Carter 1982, 68). Carter is intent, however, in lampooning such essentialist arguments about the fixity of gender and sex. Although “possessing a woman’s shape” and sex, her protagonist has by no means “yet become a [gendered] woman” and her journey into the labyrinth of her new identity has only just begun (Carter 1982, 83). Escaping only to be captured by the Sadeian nihilist Zero, Eve is brutally raped, recruited into his harem of submissive wives, and forced to conform to Zero’s defunct stereotypes of the feminine gender. Through abuse, exploitation and fear, the kinetic, dynamic and affective capacities of her new body are constrained. Through such processes, argues Carter, the binary heteronormative “masks” or “judgements” of gender and sex are affixed.

While still under the sway of Zero’s paranoid patriarchy, Eve encounters the enigmatic Tristessa St Ange, a Garbo-like transvestite film star, a Hollywood icon of wounded femininity who performs the “perfection” of the heteronormative gendered woman. Here Carter gestures at Villiers de l’Isle-Adam’s *L’Ève Future* (1886), a Decadent science fiction novel in which a machine-woman, Hadaly, the first fictional “android,” enacts the perfect performance of stereotyped biological femininity. When Zero dresses Eve up in double-drag as a mock groom in an evening suit, s/he observes that “under the mask of maleness I wore another mask of femaleness ... I was a boy disguised as girl and now disguised as a boy again” (Carter 1982, 132). Like Hadaly, Eve discovers that sex too, like gender, is a mask, albeit one that “is not so easily removed” (Carter 1982, 132). Via a mock marriage enacted between Tristessa the transvestite and Eve the transsexual, Carter satirises essentialist myths of gender fixity,

but also calls into question the fixity of those who would view gender solely as a social construction. Eve observes that “masculine and feminine are correlatives which involve one another ... But what the nature of masculine and the nature of feminine might be, whether they involve male and female ... that I do not know” (Carter 1982, 149–150). Carter’s point, as Vallorani (1994, 377) observes, is that fixed categorisations of gender and sex (whether essentialist or constructivist) turn humans into “icons of themselves,” images whose elements, though they can be “deconstructed and reassembled” remain ultimately frozen in the enactment of “a journey that can have no end because it is circular.” When Eve, with Tristessa, escapes Zero’s clutches s/he is finally ready to cast off the judgements, masks and categorisations of the old order and become something completely new. Situated between genders and sexes, s/he becomes a “*tabula rasa*, a blank sheet of paper” (Carter 1982, 83) on which she can, as she finally intuits at the novel’s close, inscribe a new story wholly of her own making. Before s/he is able to reach this point of immanence, Eve must first unmake her old self. This is a shamanic process that involves the crafting of an experimental body or BwO; a process which Deleuze and Guattari (1987, 158–59) outline as follows:

To be done with the Trinity ... the three great strata that concern us: the organism, significance, and subjectification ... The organism is not at all the body, [the true body is] the *Body without Organs*, (BwO) a stranger unity that applies only to the multiple [and is overrun by] forces, essences, substances, elements [and] remissions ... You cannot reach this world if you stay locked in the organism, or into a stratum that blocks the flows and anchors us to this, our world.

For Eve, Carter’s fictional transsexual, gender and sex become wholly fluid categories grounded in the lived contradiction of her experiences as both male and as female. If any truth on the matter is to be had, Carter speculates, it lies with individual experience as well as with a more fluid and ambiguous conception of self and society that encompasses and affirms the entire heterogeneous continuum of gendered and sexed becomings. By the novel’s close, Carter’s Eve has come to embrace the neither/nor position of subjective immanence and become a nomadic subject. Nomadic subjectivity, as Tamsin Lorraine (2011, 87) explains, is achieved in the work of Deleuze and Guattari via the construction of BwO’s; bodies, imagined or real, that are freed from the judgements inhering to the cultural constructions of organism/organisation. The BwO is “re-constructed” in a way that opens up its dynamic and kinetic capacities, making it able to occupy “the gap between perception and action”; a process of self-construction, continues Lorraine (2011, 87), that enables the self “to deterritorialise from majoritarian subjectivity and to make a transition to more open conceptions and relations. At the novel’s close, Carter has Eve build such a deterritorialised nomadic “body” by staging a re-enactment of a shamanic rite of passage; a flight on the plane of immanence or *axis mundi*. Hallucinating in the depth and darkness of a sea-cave, Eve experiences the shamanic initiate’s “panic of entry into the earth’s entrails” (Carter 1982, 180). Crawling forward naked, literally and psychically, Eve experiences “time running back on itself” (Carter 1982, 183). Entering the primordial cave, with its “walls of meat and slimy velvet,” Eve is flung

along the plane of *axis mundi*, “where rivers roll up on themselves like spools of film and turn in on their own sources”; where the “sinuous by-ways of evolution” unfold in an endless “labyrinth” of becoming (Carter 1982, 185). Science fiction can present us with the protocols for such a journey of becoming; a journey by which we situate ourselves on the plane of immanence, “which knows only speeds and affects” (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987, 262). Delving into uncanny aesthetic registers to invoke such a transport of affects, science fiction, as Carter uses it, becomes more than a forum of thought-experiments. *The Passion of the New Eve*, as the title suggests, is about the liberation of affects and passions; about the process of setting free and affirming that which seeks life, experience and new becomings. Via an experiential journey through the permutations of gender/sex, as well as through a metaphysical process of radical de-familiarisation and de-personalisation, Eve is able to detach from the stratified and static bondage of patriarchy. Finally, she can fully become a wholly new Eve, freed at last from the stern judgements of the Oedipal God, open to the multitudes of assemblages that connect each individual with the world. She becomes, as Carter concludes, “a seminal indeterminate being” who grasps a radical continuity and contiguity with a world beyond the human; a sensual immanence with a “perpetually evolving” continuum of critters and things, all, like him/herself, “composed of a multitude of contradictory elements” (Carter 1982, 185).

POLYMORPHOUS PERVERSITY: GENDER-QUEERING IN *LILITH'S BROOD*

In *Lilith's Brood* (Butler 2000), originally published as the *Xenogenesis* trilogy (consisting of *Dawn*, 1987, *Adulthood Rites*, 1988 and *Imago*, 1989), African-American writer Octavia Butler weaves an uncanny tale of radically transgressed sexual, gender and racial boundaries. As an example of “biopunk” science fiction, *Lilith's Brood* is deeply concerned with the impact of “soft” biotechnologies on the human body and its affective capacities. Biopunk, which combines elements of body-horror with cyberpunk themes, explores what science fiction writer Bruce Sterling refers to as the “visceral ... pervasive, utterly intimate” nature of new technologies that are “redefining the nature of humanity [and] of subjectivity” (Sterling 1986, xi). In biopunk narratives, such as that of Butler, writes Luckhurst (2005, 218), the figure of the human is read as protean and polymorphic, subject to all manner of biotechnological syntheses and potential evolutionary becomings. Continuing her abiding science fiction explorations of slavery, miscegenation and hybrid subjectivities, Butler like many other African American writers, as Malik Gaines and Alexandro Segade (2008, 146) observe, seeks through her fiction to “defy a tyrannical, taxonomical order of seeing: that most violent imposition [of hierarchically evaluated notions of difference and otherness] projected onto the bodies of those made into specimen.” Speaking to marginalised subjects who are already “at home in disaffecting life-worlds,” her unsettling science fiction explores

“intimate and perverse allegiances” with strange others (Gains and Segade 2008, 146). In *Lilith’s Brood*, Butler merges racial politics with the politics of sex and race, hybridising them with speculation drawn from the emerging field of molecular biology, to argue for new forms of polymorphous embodiment in the techno-social world. For these reasons, Haraway (1989, 379) calls *Lilith’s Brood* a “salvation history” of a society yet to come while Jennifer Cross (2015, 350) refers to it as a “model” for “QTPOC [queer trans people of colour] representation in science fiction.”

Lilith’s Brood plays off on a post-apocalyptic Earth where a mysterious alien species of gene-traders, the Oankali, have resuscitated the human survivors of a self-induced apocalypse and repaired the biosphere. Despite their saviour-status the Oankali invoke an uneasy response, not only in the humans they revive for the purposes of engaging in trade, but also in the minds of Butler’s readers. Humans have little say in this trade—they either participate or are sterilised—a programme that clearly echoes that of slavery. Simultaneously, as Luckhurst (2005, 218) observes, the perverse attraction felt by humans toward their new masters, and vice versa, echoes the “psychic structure of racism” whereby “repulsion is coupled with overpowering desire.” Butler names the mythical monster “Medusa” to invoke the aesthetic current of uncanny horror that the grotesque “tentacled” appearance of the Oankali conjures in humans (Butler 2000, 11). Human attraction to the Oankali, she writes, is made up of a “kind of curiosity” born out of “disgust” (Butler 2000, 328). This ambivalence is shared by the Oankali who find humans to be a curiously seductive mix of “horror and beauty in rare combination” (Butler 2000, 54). Butler does more, however, than to simply, as Jenni Wolmark (1994, 35) suggests, re-examine narratives of slavery and the “culturally-specific nature of definitions of otherness.” As the trilogy progresses, binaries such as master/slave, good/bad, man/woman, and self/other are increasingly troubled. When asked whether they intend to “improve” the human species, the Oankali state that their genetic trade/merger will not make humanity better, “only different ... something other than you were” (Butler 2000, 32). While the humans of *Lilith’s Brood* are an odd mixture of pragmatic survivors and ugly xenophobes, the Oankali combine qualities of condescension and beneficence. As Eric White (1993, 404) observes, through the ambiguity of these juxtapositions and contradictions Butler reworks the notion of difference itself, presenting a vision for a future society “averse to any teleological organisation of experience” and suspicious of value judgements or binarisms, such as body/mind or good/bad, based on a false idealism that could “instrumentalise the immanent experience of embodiment by subordinating the body’s self-delight to an end beyond itself.”

Butler further invokes the uncanny via numerous descriptions of sex amongst humans and their new polytendriled alien overlords. Oankali sex is distinctly different to human sex, working through “direct neural stimulation” that involves “touch signals, signs and multisensory images transmitted through [their] head or body tentacles” (Butler 2000, 534). Erotic intensity is not localised, but spread out over multiple erogenous zones, connecting the nervous systems of multiple partners that share

pleasure in an equal exchange of “impossible intensity ... perfectly matched, ablaze in sensation” (Butler 2000, 163). Their gene trade with humans involves such exchanges of polymorphous perversity that, in line with Deleuze and Guattari’s notion of BwO’s, muddy the boundaries between bodily organs, gender or sexual assignments, racial designations as well as between bodies themselves. Instead of the usual human binary mirroring/pairing, the Oankali/human trade involves polyamorous five-way sexual partnerships in which a human male and female conjoin with male and female Oankali siblings in a twinning “bound” by a gender-neutral “oolio” (a third-sex Oankali that disperses pleasure and mingles genetic materials between the various partners). In this way, a new hybrid race of polygendered human-Oankali offspring are produced; an act of miscegenation that reads racial and gender anxieties alongside the cultural anxieties produced by evolutionary theories which situate biological life on a spectrum of immanent becoming and suggest that humanity is infinitely protean. For Butler, the triple-sexed Oankali are a model of this kind of perpetual non-purposive becoming. As the trilogy progresses, it transpires that they are not even singular organic beings, but rather colonies of symbiotically co-habiting cells for whom gene-trading is a biological imperative, tracing to an organelle carried in every cell of their bodies. “The original Oankali,” we are told, “had evolved through that organelle’s invasion, acquisition, duplication and symbiosis ... making them into collectors and traders of life,” forever satisfying a primal urge to symbiotically merge with new species (Butler 2000, 544). There are intimations here too of the essentialism of “evolutionary psychology;” a mode of explanation that attributes cultural proclivities—such as the Oankali attraction to symbiosis/differentiation, and the human attraction to rigid hierarchical binarisms—to questions of genetic inheritance (Luckhurst 2005, 219). Like Carter, however, Butler resists taking up any one position, assuming instead the neither/nor perspective of Deleuze-Guattarian immanence. In her science fiction, biological and cultural essentialism vie with more open-ended polymorphic and symbiotic theories, “producing contradictory responses of horror and ecstasy at bodily transformation,” observes Luckhurst (2005, 219). “The alien as terrifying other, threatening the integrity of the same, is intertwined with the alien as intimate symbiont, promising ecstatic difference” (Luckhurst 2005, 219). Oankali/human sex is not only free from the gendered inequalities of human sex, but indescribably erotic, egalitarian and guilt free. “Let [humans] know that it isn’t shameful to be together with one another and with us,” declares one Oankali, driving home the point (Butler 2000, 200). As Jim Miller (1998, 344) writes, the “letting go,” inherent in Oankali sexuality, the total “loss of selfhood” it implies, is not only completely “beyond the “natural” heterosexual experience,” but beyond human experience generally. Butler, he continues, thereby suggests a “process of blissfully merging with the self that includes the non-human other;” one that “exists at the boundary between/beyond gender” (Miller 1998, 345). Along with the boundaries of gender/sex, the borderlines of anthropocentrism are also breached. The extended human/Oankali families that are realised at the close of *Lilith’s Brood*, as Michelle

Green writes, include “not only humans and Oankali, but animals, plants and sentient spaceships too” (Green 1994, 189).

Given the vicissitudes of human nature, the arrival of these “nomadic, shapeshifting, triply-sexed, polymorphously perverse, pleasure-seeking, medusoid, extraterrestrial genetic engineers” thereby seem “to herald for humanity an ideally posthuman future of unlimited possibility,” writes White (1993, 404). In Butler’s uneasy vision, however, this future is not easily achieved but necessitates arduous rites of passage for her human protagonists. The extreme egalitarianism of the Oankali clashes against the violent territorialism and “single-vision” of humans, who can’t help feeling “revulsion and hatred” for the radical queerness of the alien other (Butler 2000, 328). “Humans,” counsels Butler, “fear difference ... Oankali crave difference. Humans persecute their different ones, yet need them to give themselves definition and status ... when you feel a conflict, try go the Oankali way. Embrace difference (Butler 2000, 329). As White (1993, 407) observes, Butler argues for a Deleuze-Guattarian ethical position of immanence and nomadic subjectivity; an affective grounding in an “erotics of becoming,” an affirmation of “the flux of matter in motion” as suggested by new fields of inquiry such as “evolutionary theory” and “posthuman” (or new materialist) philosophical praxes.

As with more recent writers of “queer” African-American fantasy and science fiction like NK Jemesin, Butler’s intention is to craft an interspecies, multi-gendered and multicultural zone of possibility space out of experiences of suffering, dread and threat. As with Carter, her work demands harrowing ordeals that entail an often uncomfortable coming to terms with queerness/otherness, employing tropes of body horror and the carnivalesque to generate what Jane Bennett (2010, 53–54) refers to as a “destructive-creative force-field;” an aesthetic expression that combines abject horror with the sublimity of creativity’s “plenitude” and “overflow” in order to generate new spaces for non-normative minority subjectivities. *Lilith’s Brood* offers a protean and decidedly uncanny view of evolutionary becoming, one that celebrates a perverse pleasure in the reversal of binaries as well as in the uncanny and strange. Butler’s figuring of the triple-sexed alien other as humanity’s saviour queers “all dualistic thought: the (apparent) sexual dimorphism that serves as the basis for every hierarchized binarism,” suggests White (1993, 404). In the world of new materialist and Deleuze-Guattarian praxes, as in Butler’s science fiction, writes Sadie Plant (1998, 3), emphasis shifts away from reductive binarisms to the seething networks of inorganic life that have the capacity to take conceptions of the human self beyond its borderlines. The polymorphous perversity of viral and bacterial exchanges, which molecular biology has revealed as the basis of all Earthly life, directly challenge, like Butler’s Oankali, what it means to have sex or to be a sex. “If we consider the great binary aggregates, such as sexes and classes,” write Deleuze and Guattari, “it is evident that they too cross over into molecular assemblages of a different nature” (1987, 256). Butler continually enacts such a “crossing over,” challenging readers to re-evaluate habitual cultural ways of thought that seek to fix and order the world into static categories and subjectivities. Fixity, in Butler’s vision, is seen

as something entirely destructive that tends to “abominate the body and materiality in general,” observes White (1993, 407). Juxtaposing the conceptual postmodern “crisis of abjection occasioned by the advent of modern evolutionary thought” against the material and affective “degradation” caused by a “restrictive cultural economy,” he continues, Butler troubles the human tendency to confine subjectivity within “a narrow range of arbitrarily privileged satisfactions” and privileges (White 1993, 407).

CONCLUSION: CRAFTING SITES OF IMMANENT RESISTANCE

“Rather than worrying, ‘what is gender really?’ or ‘what is race, really?’” writes gender theorist Sally Haslanger, “we should begin by asking (both in the theoretical and political sense) what, if anything we want them to be” (Haslanger 2012, 246). As I have demonstrated, the immanent praxes of Deleuze-Guattarian and new materialist theoretical fictions as well as the “queer” science fiction of writers such as Carter and Butler argue against fixity for more fluid notions of gendered and sexed subjectivities based on a heterogeneity of individual orientations. Trans performance artist and author Kate Bornstein argues that to go from female to male, or from male to female, is not necessarily to stay within the binary frame of gender, but to engage transformation itself as the meaning of gender (Bornstein 2006, 240). Like Carter’s Eve/lyn, Bornstein (2006, 240) resists categorisation as male or female, and calls for an indeterminate position “beyond gender.” The trans artist and musician Genesis Breyer P-Orridge, who identifies as pandrogynous and similarly resists fixity, advocates the use of “pleasure as a weapon”; a methodology whereby artists, writers and musicians can “make commentaries on what it is to be alive” as well as on the multiple ways in which we might experience pleasure on a potentially infinite spectrum of individual becomings (in Hanra 2017, 1). Butler and Carter wield pleasure in an analogous manner, merging it with horror to suggest that the uncanny is the most powerful weapon of all against the walls of heteronormativity that seek to fence-in experiences of gendered and sexed selves. In their science fiction, the melding of seeming oppositions and contradictions facilitate a de-familiarisation; a radical rite of passage that gives way to a position of ethical immanence and nomadic subjectivity. Confrontations with the uncanny, as Karen Armstrong notes, are powerful weapons of minoritarian subversion because they facilitate “*ekstasis*; a stepping out” from the welter of ordinary existence in order that we might see ourselves and our relations with the world more clearly (Armstrong 2007, 61). Fiction, in the hands of both Carter and Butler, becomes a kind of aesthetic and affective weapon, inducing “shocks to thought” that, as Bornstein writes, “shine a light the injustice of the gender/sex system.” In these imaginative “flashes of illumination,” she continues, “we see that the emperor is wearing no clothes ... that this either/or system we’ve got is truly oppressing us” (Bornstein 2006, 244).

Steve Goodman (2010, 16) writes that contemporary science fiction which deals in the uncanny, represents a kind of aesthetic orientation that finds itself “entangled in webs of fiction, myth and dark science”; conjuring an uncanny transport of affects around which new collectives of resistance and belonging can form. Science fiction of this stripe appeals to minoritarian groups, writes Lance Olsen (1991, 287), precisely because of its inherent opposition to the kind of “absolutist distinctions” that typify normative outlooks on gender, racial, and human/non-human binaries; a resistance that enables its authors, theorists and composers as well as its readers to “reconstruct these binaries in new and more challenging conceptualisations.” Black, feminist, lesbian, gay, trans-sexual and other “crosswise” authors have recently begun to contribute significant works to the genre, affirming pagan scholar and advocate Graham Harvey’s opinion that science fiction’s minoritarian appeal has come to lie in its tendency to “allow and encourage explorations and encounters that linear, hierarchical, systematic and normative cultural distillations prevent” (Harvey 2000, 1). Like the “minoritarian” science fiction of Butler and Carter, Haraway’s *Cyborg Manifesto* (1991, 151) takes “pleasure in the confusion of boundaries.” Susan Stryker and Stephen Whittle (2006, 103) argue that Haraway’s *Manifesto*, and the science fiction of authors like Butler and Carter that inspired it, paved the way not only for the emergence of new materialist/posthuman philosophies in the 1990s, but also for the field of transgender studies itself. It was the philosophy of Deleuze and Guattari, writing both separately and together, however, that provided the ultimate blueprint for the kinds of science-fictional ruptures and cross-contaminations between different types and fields of knowledge that characterise Haraway’s transgressive cyborg discourse, as well as the queer science-fictions and new materialist praxes that have formed their wake. Taken as a whole, these movements constellate in Deleuze-Guattarian fashion around immanence, “insisting on the impossibility of dualistic and dichotomous distinctions that rely on an either/or model” (Grosz 2017, 131). More importantly for the purposes of this article, the emphases placed by Carter and Butler as well as by Deleuze-Guattarian praxes on fluid notions of gender/sex based on a continuum of affects and becomings, have set important precedents, opening an excess of cultural, political and intellectual spaces for trans and other “minoritarian” subjectivities, both in fiction and in social-justice activism.

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