

THESIS

I KIN SEA SLUGS:

AWKWARD KIN, INHUMAN HORROR, AND QUEERING ENCOUNTER IN OCTAVIA

BUTLER'S *DAWN*

Submitted by

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In partial fulfillment of the requirements

For the Degree of Master of Arts

Colorado State University

Fort Collins, Colorado

Spring 2023

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## ABSTRACT

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Anthropocentrism is rooted in narratives of evolutionary teleology and the human/nonhuman binary which exalts the human, *homo sapiens*, as the dominant Earth species, and taxonomizes nonhuman species according to human value systems. Octavia Butler's science-fiction novel, *Dawn*, raises important questions about the human as an identity category, according to anthropocentrism, and as a species. By introducing a multispecies encounter with an extraterrestrial species, Butler troubles our understanding of what it means to be human. Butler queers human-centric notions of ecology and evolutionary teleology through her protagonist, Lilith, as she attempts to adapt to a radically different, and at times hostile, environment. Lilith's horror for both the Oankali, humanity's alien rescuers, and the potential for an inhuman future, prompted by a hybrid-species zygote, introduce an opportunity to dissect human abjection for the non-/in-human and to overcome anthropocentric discomfort with human vulnerability to the nonhuman. Joining conversation with Lee Edelman's theory of reproductive futurity, Donna J. Haraway's concept of *sympoiesis*, and Julia Kristeva's essay on abjection, this argument examines Lilith's fear for the inhuman to discuss the ways in which anthropocentric ideology jeopardizes humanity's ability to take action amidst the worsening climate crisis. As nonhuman Earth species' fate becomes increasingly tied to humanity's ability to responsibly

address climate change, we need to reevaluate the way that humanity situates itself in multispecies Earth ecologies.

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BUTLER'S *DAWN*

*Introduction*

Encountering an Oankali for the first time during her captivity, Lilith, in Octavia Butler's science-fiction novel, *Dawn*, describes the extraterrestrial's body as if "small, tentacled sea slugs—nudibranchs—[had] grown impossibly to human size and shape."<sup>1</sup> Lilith's use of the sea slug to reconcile her disgust for the Oankali's undulous body presents an interesting intervention in human repulsion for the radically different: the most familiar image Lilith could use to negotiate the alien shape of the Oankali was the sea slug. Although Lilith's search for soothing familiarity ended with the sea slug, her "revulsion" for its likeness, describing the Oankali's form later as "[t]he grotesque sea-slug appearance," persisted.<sup>2</sup> Regardless of the Oankali's "alienness" or "unearthliness," Lilith's word choice demonstrates a discomfort for both the Oankali and the sea slug by relating their aesthetic forms through metaphor.<sup>3</sup> Yet, the sea slug offers an alternative opportunity: reconciliation with the grotesque. Although the sea slug may seem alien, with many species dwelling in the ocean's depths, in reefs, and/or on seafloors away from human eyes, it is nonetheless a creature endemic to Earth, and therefore, a more familiar, digestible candidate for encounter than the extraterrestrial Oankali.<sup>4</sup> However, according to a

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<sup>1</sup> Octavia Butler, *Dawn* (1987; repr., New York: Grand Central Publishing, 2021), 13.

<sup>2</sup> Butler, 27.

<sup>3</sup> Butler, 12.

<sup>4</sup> Encounters invite possibility through a reconfiguration of the actors in an entangled environment. An encounter is not a simple interaction by any means, rather it is a combination of interwoven potentials demonstrated through a single moment. As Maan Barua describes in his lexicon entry, "To encounter is to become-worldly, to open up contingencies and processes of life, ... Encounters 'ecologize' politics in ways that are vital for the environmental humanities' efforts to redistribute powers to act and to flourish" (269). Encounters are becoming-with our environment as a part of ambient space, realizing the complex and diverse ecologies at play with/as/around us. To encounter the unfamiliar, then, is to create new connections that open opportunities for new worldings in our

subsection of *Grzimek's Animal Life Encyclopedia* titled "Significance to Humans," sea slugs provide little utility or "significance" to our species other than being curiosities, pleasant or interesting to look at while snorkeling or touring the ocean.<sup>5</sup> For the sea slug, then, their value to the human directly relates to their ability to entertain our curiosity in a controlled environment. This perspective objectifies the sea slug to facilitate human, auto-realization as a subject, rather *the* subject, of Earth's ecosystems. The Earth's sea slugs, when compared to Butler's sea-slugesque extraterrestrials, are less threatening to the human subject because they do not inform human identity through a nonhuman lens. The Oankali's ability to shape humanity and human identity threatens the integrity of the anthropocentric subject. Because anthropocentric human identity lies in a historical context, its destabilization causes horror for the grotesque, non-anthropocentric (in)human, the abject, that the Oankali help to create and a wariness for a future that does not guarantee anthropocentric subjectivity.<sup>6</sup>

*Dawn* follows Lilith's encounters with the alien Oankali, in a deep future, set roughly 250 years after a thermonuclear war wiped out almost all life on Earth. Lilith quickly learns that the Oankali rescued humanity from its self-destruction and terraformed Earth's ecosystems to recover the damage caused by the war. However, behind the Oankali's rescue of humanity lurks a hidden motive: the gene trade, an event that promises the end of the human species and the birth of a hybridized, inhuman species. As Lilith negotiates her place among her alien rescuers (or captors), her sense of identity is threatened by the horrifying realization the Oankali plan to

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environment. See Maan Barua, "Encounter," *Environmental Humanities* 7, no. (2015): 265-270. <https://doi.org/10.1215/22011919-3616479>.

<sup>5</sup> Katherine E. Mills, "Opisthobranchia (Sea Slugs)," In *Protostomes*, 2nd ed., edited by Michael Hutchins, Rosser W. Garrison, Valerius Geist, Paul V. Loiselle, Neil Schlager, Melissa C. McDade, Donna Olendorf, et al., 403-410, (Vol. 2 of *Grzimek's Animal Life Encyclopedia*. Detroit, MI: Gale, 2004), 405.

<https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/CX3406700137/GVRL?u=coloradosu&sid=bookmark-GVRL&xid=e96c4901>.

<sup>6</sup> Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982).

use her as the harbinger of humanity’s evolution: the “Judas goat” that will lead the species to its own death.<sup>7</sup> For Lilith, the prospect of inhumanity—a state of being that exists beyond the human frame, and does not rely upon human existence(s) to make meaning or create identity—is horrifying; however, the Oankali’s impact on Lilith’s identity, as a result of their prolonged encounter, causes her to shift her identity away from the human and closer toward the inhuman that she fears. Yet, the inhuman is only horrifying on the basis that the human, as an identity marker, is no longer present to determine species or identity membership, via the human/nonhuman binary. The inhuman is an abject category for the human, as it lies beyond human conception and/or possibility. The impossibility of the inhuman is constituted through Lilith’s abjection. Let me be clear, however, Lilith’s abjection is not for the Oankali, specifically, but for the consequences resulting from her encounter with them. Encounters, as Maan Barua explores, cause transformations on several levels, for both individuals and the ecologies they inhabit.<sup>8</sup> Not only do Lilith’s encounters with the Oankali queer her identity away from the human/nonhuman binary and toward a new, emergent way of being, but they also reconfigure how she interacts with nonhuman beings to create new worldings—new possible realities, ecologies, and niches—that do not rely upon the human to make meaning.<sup>9</sup> Through encounter, ecologies are “reconfigured,” creating new opportunities for meaning-making by queering relationships towards multispecies interactions.<sup>10</sup>

Encounters queer ecologies by shifting the norms of various systems toward new ways of becoming through *sympoiesis* or “making-together.”<sup>11</sup> Lilith performs sympoiesis through

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<sup>7</sup> Butler, *Dawn*, 74; 275.

<sup>8</sup> Maan Barua, “Encounter,” 265.

<sup>9</sup> Donna J. Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), 58.

<sup>10</sup> Barua, “Encounter,” 265.

<sup>11</sup> Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*, 58.

Oankali relationships, especially with members of the Oankali family that adopts her like Jdhaya, Nikanj, and Khaguyat, to adapt to the circumstances of her new environment. Although sympoiesis provides opportunities for flourishing by working with other species to creating meaning, the consequences of a sympoietic relationship with nonhuman species, like the Oankali, threatens human *autopoiesis*, or “self-making”—reproduction, if you will.<sup>12</sup> Human autopoiesis guarantees both the reproduction of the human as species and the human as a social category or identity. Lee Edelman argues that heterosexual, procreative systems not only perpetuate future-oriented culture but trap humans in a cycle of reproducing the past through unrealized desire as our hope for the unattainable future.<sup>13</sup> The autopoiesis of reproduction, additionally, traps humanity within its self-made identity, perpetuating anthropocentric ideals and isolating the human from other species. The encounter between humanity and the Oankali change each species, on a social and species, or ecological, level. However, the changes that take place do not necessarily indicate a mutualistic, symbiotic relationship between the two. As humanity’s understanding of Earth and their place in the universe changes to include the Oankali, the awkward natures of encounter emerge demonstrating the impressions left upon each species by the other.<sup>14</sup>

Fear, disgust, horror, and revulsion are all consequences of encounter: they are emotional manifestations of Lilith’s juxtaposition between her perception of the human, and its virtual, prewar ecology and identity, against the actualization of the human as endangered species in the clutches of a strange extraterrestrial species.<sup>15</sup> Although for Lilith, her concept of humanity may

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<sup>12</sup> Haraway, 33.

<sup>13</sup> Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), 10.

<sup>14</sup> Franklin Ginn, Uli Beisel, and Maan Barua, “Flourishing with Awkward Creatures: Togetherness, Vulnerability, Killing,” *Environmental Humanities* 4, no.1 (2014): 113-123.

<sup>15</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Claire Parnet, “The Actual and the Virtual,” in *Dialogues II*, trans. Eliot Ross Albert, (New York: Colombia University Press, 2002), 148-152.

seem to be stable, actualized, and controllable; the Oankali are a horrifying revelation that the actual, the present moment for the human, is uncontrollable and the virtual perception of the human, an ephemeral, historiographic image of humanity, is not as stable as we may curate it to be.<sup>16</sup> “Horror reveals our limits,” states Jonathan Wald, referring to both humans’ ability to conceptualize abstract or “unimaginable” ideas and “conceptual thinking itself.”<sup>17</sup> Horror pushes us to “appreciate instability without rushing for the reassurance of singular framings.”<sup>18</sup> Lilith’s horror at the realization of actuality causes her to conceptualize and/or reconcile with the impossible: coming together or making kin with nonhumans who desire an inhuman future contingent upon the evolution of the human. Her realization that the human is instable in the face of inhuman possibility characterizes Lilith’s desire for the human as an identity that is lost within her sense of self. The violence of abjection demonstrates Lilith’s inability to “recognize [her] kin.”<sup>19</sup> As Lilith fights to conserve her humanity in the face of evolution, historiographic human identity comes under fire as the Oankali and the other human survivors attempt to make their own definitions for what is human, and therefore, their own definitions for what is non-/in-human.

The Intensity of Butler’s language, in designing deep, inhuman futures, contends with contemporary issues of anthropocentric human identity, and her speculation on human stubbornness toward and horror for inhumanity is especially timely with the worsening climate crisis and burgeoning anxiety for humanity’s future. Although in Lilith’s narrative universe, humanity’s downfall results from human conflict, *Dawn* reflects Earth’s potential for ecosystemic degradation if humanity fails to take action against extractive geopolitical and

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<sup>16</sup> Deleuze and Parnet, 151.

<sup>17</sup> Jonathan Wald, “Horror.” *Environmental Humanities* 14, no. 2 (2022): 367-368.

<sup>18</sup> Wald, 369.

<sup>19</sup> Kristeva, “Approaching Abjection,” 5.

economic systems that continue to negatively impact the planet. The key difference arising between the planetary outcome in *Dawn* compared to real-world climate change lies between the immediacy of radiation poisoning caused by thermonuclear fallout versus the exponential decline of Earth's biodiverse ecosystems due to capital and imperial extractive practices. In the Anthropocene era of climate disaster and burgeoning mass extinction events, the human/nonhuman divide poses a threat to making necessary systemic changes to address the harm human apparatuses have done to Earth systems. Donna Haraway's argument for the Chthulucene is rooted in multispecies kinship and calls for a radical reimagining of the way that humanity forms and functions in its various relations to both the human and nonhuman species in our Earthbound systems.<sup>20</sup> The Chthulucene, as in the *chthonic*, is predicated on the praxis of 'composting' that acknowledges the ever-entangled Earth-natures at play in our planet's biodiverse ecosystems.<sup>21</sup> Composting motions beyond the post-human toward an entangled-human or a compost-human that "stays with the trouble" by making conscious movements to become-with Earth systems, like the biodiverse ecologies that constitute ecosystems across the planet.<sup>22</sup> Staying with the trouble is a conscious effort to be in the present, entangled in the matter and mattering of our contemporary moment whether it be devastating, horrifying, joyful, or anything in-between.

However, to truly "stay with the trouble" and begin to rebuild human connections with Earth systems, I believe we need to queer our concept of human identity away from anthropocentrism and in favor of an entangled identity that acknowledges the human species as a member of the *chthonic* family of Earth kin.<sup>23</sup> To queer encounter such that human subjectivity is

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<sup>20</sup> Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*, 55.

<sup>21</sup> Haraway, 4.

<sup>22</sup> Haraway, 1.

<sup>23</sup> Haraway, 55.

not realized through misinformative narratives around teleological evolution creates opportunities for new ways of becoming-human that extends our care for identifying personhood to the nonhuman beings harmed by human extraction and capitalization upon Earth systems. By developing entangled relationships through multispecies intra-action with each other and with earth- and eco-systems, the Chthulucene decenters individual species and instead emphasizes networks of sympoiesis, collective making-with.<sup>24</sup> Haraway's chthonic networks and Butler's interspecies *relata* provide a framework for alternative approaches to being-with other species to produce more-than-human symbiotic kinship networks. I intend to demonstrate how horror and abjection as consequences of encounter with the virtual inhuman jeopardize humanity's ability to negotiate its role in the climate crisis and, more generally, in contemporary Earth systems. Using Butler's exploration of human encounter with a radically nonhuman species and the introduction of inhuman potentials, I will demonstrate Lilith's rejection for the inhuman as a result of her own hesitation to accept a changing human identity. Just as the Earth is radically changing as a result of climate change, the ecosystems Lilith was familiar with on Earth radically changed as a result of thermonuclear conflict. Additionally, the Oankali's intervention in Earth's dying ecosystems presented a stark shift in human familiarity and perceived domination of virtual ecologies required for autopoiesis. Not only is the human as an identity changed following exposure to the radical nonhuman, but the human as an embodied state is altered through Lilith and her adaptation to living with the Oankali. As Julia Kristeva notes, "abjection is elaborated through a failure to recognize its kin; nothing is familiar..."<sup>25</sup> The human has been reproduced through an anthropocentric lens to the point that it is isolated from its Earth kin; we can only recognize the human, objectify the nonhuman, and abject the inhuman. Horror acts as the barrier between the

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<sup>24</sup> Haraway, 59.

<sup>25</sup> Kristeva, "Approaching Abjection," 5.

human subject, its nonhuman objects, and abject virtual realities. Unless we can reimagine ‘what the human is’ and ‘what it means to be human,’ anthropocentrism will continue to isolate humanity through horror and fear, driving Earth systems apart and toward disaster.

### *Horriifying Encounters*

Octavia Butler’s *Dawn*, at first glance, may not appear as a horror novel, yet the affects Lilith experiences because of her encounters with the Oankali viscerally shake both her understanding of humanity, as a species, her identity as a human. The Oankali for Lilith, at first, are not simply alien, but monstrous beings. The Oankali are abject beings to the human in that they are written into an impossible ecology that defies human expectations. The distance Lilith places between herself and the Oankali, calling them “grotesque” and relating them to the similarly alien sea slug, fosters a virtual ecology that negotiates the impossibility of their encounters with the actualization of their togetherness through encounters in shared spaces.<sup>26</sup> While it is true that the Oankali exist outside of Earth’s natural systems, the mere fact of their existence, in the novel, disrupts Lilith’s perception of a stable reality through fear and disgust, demonstrating her vulnerability to more-than-human, sympoietic ecologies and multispecies encounters. Vulnerability is a symptom of encounters which points to the chaotic nature of our world. As Lilith’s humanity is subjected to other beings and ecologies, her world is reshaped, and her status as a human subject is decentered as a result of these encounters.

Horror emerges from encounters when historical concepts of the actual cannot be restored, and must, instead, remain virtual, and the emergent reality manifests as a monstrous, or grotesque version of what it previously was. The abject nature of inconceivable realities disrupts

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<sup>26</sup> Franklin, Beisel, and Barua, “Flourishing with Awkward Creatures: Togetherness, Vulnerability, Killing,” 116.

historiographic subject/object relationships.<sup>27</sup> Through encounter, the horrifying and the abject become possible through virtual ecologies created by the unstable subject as a means to negotiate the instability of their own identity. Maan Barua suggests that encounter serves as more than a static description of two (or more) things coming together. Encounters are dynamic; they “reconfigure” things at the point of contact to cause disruptions, transformations, evolutions, etc.<sup>28</sup> Butler uses encounters between Lilith, the Oankali, and other human survivors to demonstrate the dynamic elements of multispecies interactions. Not only do the encounters Lilith has with the Oankali impact her perception of her identity, but her interactions with other human survivors, like Joseph, cause her to reevaluate the human as an identity:

Lilith: “So what? What’s changed? On Earth we can change things. Not here.”

Joseph: “Will we want to by then? What will we be, I wonder? Not human. Not anymore.”<sup>29</sup>

Encounters guarantee change, whether on an individual or systemic level. They introduce new information and knowledge that, once discovered, leave an unwavering impression that recontextualizes the individual’s sense of subjectivity. Regardless of the affective dimension of an encounter, the existence of encounter predicates instability, flux, and change, and this especially applies to species and ecologies whose systems rely on encounters with both living, *bios*, and non-living, *geos*, elements of their environment for survival.

When the survival of the human species, in *Dawn*, hangs in the balance between forming multispecies kinships with a “grotesque” alien species and reconciling the horrifying consequences that arise through those multispecies kinship relationships, Lilith is forced to

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<sup>27</sup> Kristeva, “Approaching Abjection,” 1-3.

<sup>28</sup> Barua, “Encounter,” 265.

<sup>29</sup> Butler, *Dawn*, 223.

decide whether her humanity—her subjective human identity—is essential to her ability to survive in an uncertain future. Speaking to her failed efforts to convince the human survivors of her persisting humanity, Lilith laments, ““This would be so goddamn much easier if I weren’t human.””<sup>30</sup> Even to the human survivors, human identity is the dividing line between ally and enemy. However, Lilith’s own identity as a human becomes integral to her sense of self, especially as she becomes the progenitor of humanity’s evolution into the inhuman. The dilemma between Lilith’s humanity versus her non-/in-humanity prompts a blurring of the distinction between these identity markers. More specifically, Lilith’s horror at facing inhuman futures, predicated on the evolution of the human species via the creation of a hybrid-species child, calls into question where we draw the line between human and nonhuman. The crux of *Dawn*, then, is the proposition of a (reproductive) future that lacks humanity, or at the very least, humanity as we’ve known it in the twentieth to twenty-first centuries: the human of the Anthropocene.<sup>31</sup> In

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<sup>30</sup> Butler, 27.

<sup>31</sup> The “Anthropocene” refers to most recent, proposed addition to the Geological Time Scale, according to Zalasiewicz et al. (2010). The implications of this term, as a reference to geologic time and in linguistic use, are highly debated across the disciplines. Donna J. Haraway’s take on the Anthropocene in *Staying with the Trouble* (2016) sought to unsettle the human-centric notions that naming a geological time period in response to the human exacerbated climate crisis in the post-Industrial era. Haraway, instead, draws upon the name “Capitalocene,” introduced by Jason W. Moore, to center human systems’ (i.e. capitalism) detrimental impact on climate change and geologic narratives. Bruno Latour (2014) additionally explored the implications of the Anthropocene on agency and subjectivity both semiotically and ontologically: the language we use to describe “Earthbound” forms or “morphisms” are unable to capture the nuances of the actors that humans and their disciplinary languages tend to “anthropomorphize” to understand them. Stephen Herbrechter (2022) addressed the implications of the Anthropocene on “humanities” disciplines, looking at the “geologic turn” in many of these fields, such that a geolens is being applied to the way we think and shape our thinking in these various disciplines through theory and praxis. The Anthropocene, as a geologic concept, weighs on each of these conversations, however, as it signals the hand humanity played in critically altering Earth-systems. Taking each of these approaches to the Anthropocene into account, for my argument the Anthropocene that Haraway introduces, especially as a juxtaposition to her proposed Chthulucene, serves as the best definition. Haraway’s Anthropocene draws on the political nuances and economic systems that have contributed to the rise of this geological epoch, as it has been introduced and argued for as an official Geologic Time Scale. See Jan Zalasiewicz et al., “The New World of the Anthropocene,” *Environmental Science and Technology* 44, no. 7 (2010): 2228-2231. <https://doi.org/10.1021/es903118j>; Donna J. Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016); Jason W. Moore, “The Capitalocene, Part I: on the nature and origins of our ecological crisis,” *The Journal of Peasant Studies* 44, no. 3 (2017): 594-630. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03066150.2016.1235036>; Bruno Latour, “Agency at the Time of the Anthropocene,” *New Literary History* 45, no. 1 (2014): 1-18. <https://doi.org/10.1353/nlh.2014.0003>; Stefan Herbrechter, “Post Humanism and Deep Time,” in *Palgrave Handbook of Critical Posthumanism*, 1-26, (Springer, 2022). [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-42681-1\\_26-1](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-42681-1_26-1).

Butler's uncertain future, the human cannot assume its subjectivity in relation to other beings. As Butler deconstructs these assumptions of autonomy, control, and agential biopower, she poses the reader with complex questions that draw out implicit bias towards the human, disgust for the nonhuman, and fear for the inhuman.<sup>32</sup>

To queer humanity's fear, horror, and revulsion for multispecies kinship is to embrace and care for those who are different from us, humans. Encountering the radically nonhuman or the inhuman not only provides insight into alternative ways of becoming through multispecies *relata*, but also "reconfigure[s] how we conceptualize the human."<sup>33</sup> Queering this horror by bridging the empathy gap between the human and the nonhuman is to realize that we are not alone, we are not in control, and human futures are not a promise.<sup>34</sup> As Lee Edelman discusses in *No Future*, reproductive futurity, which hinges upon heterosexual procreation, reproduces the past, humans being born, as the future, procreation & human reproduction, creating a cycle of virtual projections rooted in anthropocentric and embodied temporal expectations.<sup>35</sup> Exposing the cyclical projection of human pasts as secure futures demonstrates the harmful telos of human-centric evolutionary narratives that inform the human identity as a species. Both the familiarity of the human of the past and the unfamiliarity of the uncertain future fosters Lilith's unease at the prospect of forming relationships with a nonhuman species. The horror Lilith

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<sup>32</sup> The distinction I draw between nonhuman and inhuman lies in the potential for humans to be included in multispecies *relata*/temporalities/ecologies/etc. While nonhuman suggests that a thing is juxtaposed to the human species/identity, the inhuman is excluded human identity, as we understand it. The inhuman motions to human insignificance, such that humanity is not necessary for making meaning in the universe.

<sup>33</sup> Barua, "Encounter," 266.

<sup>34</sup> Queering, in this sense, is an act of reimagining that seeks to turn the expectations of normative social practices and ideologies on their head. To queer is a radical act of reading/thinking/doing to push the boundaries of what is expected. Through this act I want to identify as many facets of the complex nature of *relata* and identity as they relate to the human experience. In this essay, when I utilize the verbiage "queering" or "to queer" or "queers," I am turning the argument to expose a new facet. While there are perks to looking at a question head on, I find a more dynamic reading methodology bears the gritty underbelly of these questions and the chthonic possibilities of encountering the yet discovered.

<sup>35</sup> Edelman, *No Future*, 10-11.

experiences forming a radical multispecies kinship with the Oankali, while predicated upon the procreation of a hybrid-species being, clearly demonstrates the fear humans hold for nonhuman kinship being a product of difference rather than similarity. The Anthropocentric view of human/nonhuman kinship decries this kind of relation for erasing the subjectivity of the human. Overcoming our tendency to abject those classified within inhuman taxa is the beginning of staying with the trouble. After all, if we can kin sea slugs—if we can care about a being so alien and unfamiliar to ourselves—then surely, we can begin to overcome our fear of being vulnerable to other species and enact necessary changes to actively care about and for our world.

### *The Inhuman Threat*

When Lilith discovers the nature of the Oankali's gene trade, she describes it as a "disease [spreading their genes] among unwilling humans."<sup>36</sup> For the Oankali, the gene trade is a necessary part of their species' life cycle, more specifically, evolution is a necessary part of the Oankali's adaptational niche. Unlike the Oankali who understand evolution as a necessary aspect of their species' historiography and future narratives, evolution to Lilith, and the human understanding of time she represents, is a deep and distant past. As radical species changes for the present human are too distant in our genetic past to witness firsthand, the prospect of encountering said radical evolutionary changes within our own lifetime creates anxiety. For evolution to become a promise, a threat to the Anthropocene human, the inhuman futures guaranteed through evolution deny the human a position as evolution's telos and de-realizes human subjects as exempt from adaptational change.<sup>37</sup> The sympoietic becomings sought by the

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<sup>36</sup> Butler, *Dawn*, 71-72.

<sup>37</sup> The word "threat" here is meant to demonstrate how evolution is a queering of the human social order that is built upon the conservation of the human species as evolutionary telos. Evolution queers the anthropocentric human away from its subjectivity and threatens the human as the dominant, social identity. I draw upon Edelman's use of the

Oankali require humanity to abandon its subjecthood in exchange for an entangled identity that appears inhuman and starkly unfamiliar. Lilith calls this identity, facilitated by the “Dinso line” of Oankali promising to colonize Earth with the surviving human population, “a threat.”<sup>38</sup> Lilith’s abjection for the “promise” of evolution through the Dinso transforms sympoietic potential into a threat against human identity.<sup>39</sup> The “threat” Lilith references in conjunction with the Oankali gene trade becomes the inhuman future, actualizing the end of the human via hybrid-speciation: the creation of a new branch in Earth’s evolutionary tree. The hybrid-child Lilith is impregnated with at the conclusion of the novel “won’t be human,” and therefore, the future promised through the child will not be human, either.<sup>40</sup>

Making subjects of othered, nonhuman species risks humanity’s historiographic identity as the teleological pinnacle of evolutionary “progress.” Despite the random nature of evolutionary processes as facilitated through natural selection, evolutionary theory has been used as a justification for human domination over the natural world. The human subject is realized through the objectification of nonhuman organisms who only served as steppingstones in the evolutionary line to arrive at the human animal, painting the human species as the protagonist of evolutionary narratives. Claiming that one species is more successful, or more fit for survival, than another disregards the chaotic nature of evolution in favor of a human value system which bears no significance to the organisms being analyzed. Butler explicitly addresses human interventions in natural selection processes in *Dawn* as Lilith, earlier in the novel, debates the potential implications of the Oankali’s gene trade: “Experimental animal, parent to domestic

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word “threat” as he describes the way conservatives understand queerness as a “threat” to the heterosexual social order as it is “married” to futurity. See, Edelman, *No Future*, 14.

<sup>38</sup> Butler, *Dawn*, 72.

<sup>39</sup> Butler, 72.

<sup>40</sup> Butler, 282.

animals? Or... nearly extinct animal part of a captive breeding program?... Humans had done these things to captive breeders—all for a higher good, of course.”<sup>41</sup> Claiming that humans’ intervention in natural selection to rescue “nearly extinct animal[s]” was “all for a higher good” demonstrates humanity’s virtual perception of control over natural processes. However, when these same interventions are posed against the human subject, or in this case Lilith, reproductive intervention is considered abject, as they destabilize autopoietic human control over its own species’ futurity. Similarly, the prospect of humanity’s failure to control the future jeopardizes anthropocentric teleology that dictates humanity is the final link in the evolutionary chain.

Evolutionary biology suggests organisms are the “product of 3.8 billion years of evolution,” adapting overtime to develop a biodiverse stream of living things that can be tracked back to the “origin” of species.<sup>42</sup> While we can claim that living things, such as single-celled organisms, plants and fungi, even animals, are the product of historical evolutionary processes, there is no evidence of a specific teleology, or goal-oriented direction, to these processes. However anthropocentric narratives misconstrue evolutionary process, narrating the human as the penultimate product of evolution, and therefore, the human actualizes evolutionary telos. The human subject requires an ending for its historical narrative to contextualize its self-realization and achieve fulfillment. Mark A. Bedau’s theory of supple adaptation demonstrates that biodiversity is a direct result of living things’ “unending capacity to produce novel solutions to unanticipated changes in the problems of surviving, reproducing, or, more generally, flourishing.”<sup>43</sup> Supple adaptation suggests that rather than evolution pointing towards a central

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<sup>41</sup> Butler, 67.

<sup>42</sup> Ernst Mayr, “What is the meaning of ‘life’?,” in *The Nature of Life: Classical and Contemporary Perspectives from Philosophy and Science*, edited by Mark A. Bedau and Carol E. Cleland, 88-101 (Cambridge University Press: 2010), 97.

<sup>43</sup> Mark A. Bedau, “The Nature of Life,” in *The Philosophy of Artificial Life*, edited by Margaret A. Boden, 333-357 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 338.

point with fixed standards of fitness honing adaptation to become progressively more “successful,” it encourages plurality with each new adaptation, such that speciation, or the emergence of a new species, represents a novel way to survive, reproduce, and flourish in an open, changing ecosystem.<sup>44</sup> Just as other organisms succeed in their adaptational niches through random natural selection, humans have survived within our own ecological niche, demonstrating adaptational capabilities that continue to reward our species with continuous survival.

The differences between human and nonhuman species serve as the basis for anthropocentric value judgements. In the case of the humans versus the Oankali, in *Dawn*, Lilith deems the Oankali as ugly, grotesque creatures solely according to her own, human value system. A similar distinction between the humans and the Oankali is demonstrated through Joseph, Lilith’s human partner, and Nikanj, her Oankali partner. Joseph acknowledges his disgust and fear for the Oankali while noting his frustration at failing to overcome their radical differences. Nikanj states, ““Difference is dangerous. It might kill you. That was true to your animal ancestors and your nearest animal relatives. And it is true for you, ”” explaining the reason why Joseph, a human, is frightened or unsettled by the sight of Nikanj’s alien body.<sup>45</sup> Difference threatens human exceptionalism, as the misunderstood Other stands as an object to be conquered by the human subject, identified, categorized, and placed in its specific biological taxa. The further a creature strays from the human, as evolutionary subject, the more humanity may have to lose from our inability to identify and understand it through an objective lens. In the case of the Oankali, humanity’s inability to taxonomize them threatens the subject/object binary, and the abject, lying beyond this binary, introduces an unfamiliarity that shakes the human of its social dominance in the face of the impossible. Being vulnerable to the objects of evolutionary

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<sup>44</sup> Bedau, 338-339.

<sup>45</sup> Butler, *Dawn*, 211.

taxonomy is to lose humanity's place atop the pyramid of our own hierarchical design. Assuming the human of the Anthropocene stands as a teleological end to the human species demonstrates an exceptionalism toward this iteration of our evolutionary line, which is also to say that naming *homo sapiens* as the telos for our ancestral and genetic lineage ignores natural evolutionary processes that have taken course over deep planetary time scales.<sup>46</sup> Lilith's anxiety toward and rejection of the end of the human species, in light of the "threat" of hybridization and, inevitably, evolution, suggests the desire, and perhaps expectation, for the survival of the human against evolution and apocalyptic circumstances.<sup>47</sup> Anthropocentric teleology takes a conservative approach to the human species. Which is to say, the human will survive, adapt, and grow, even against the odds of humanity's own attempts to "destroy itself."<sup>48</sup>

### *Worlding Hybridity*

Queering anthropocentric teleology demands an examination of the systems that reproduce optimism for, if not blind confidence in, human(-centered) futures. Reproductive futurity is an ideologic projection of the future centered around the symbolic image of "the Child," an ideal version of the human, an embodied "telos of the social order" that humanity "[holds] in perpetual trust."<sup>49</sup> To come to one's subjectivity through the Child is to adhere one's identity to an imaginary future perpetuated through procreative, heterosexual reproduction.<sup>50</sup> Through reproductive futurity and the Child, our futures remain human, but only virtually. The

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<sup>46</sup> *Homo sapiens* translates to "wise man" in Latin. Comparing this naming device to other members of the hominin genus, like *homo erectus*, the "upright man," or *homo habilis*, the "able man," *homo sapiens* suggests an intelligence that was not assumed to exist in our predecessors. The descriptors "able" and "upright" additionally allude to mere physical capability rather than cognitive. See Tattersall, Ian. "Homo sapiens." *Encyclopedia Britannica*, October 18, 2022. [www.britannica.com/topic/Homo-sapiens](http://www.britannica.com/topic/Homo-sapiens).

<sup>47</sup> Butler, *Dawn*, 72.

<sup>48</sup> Butler, 14.

<sup>49</sup> Edelman, *No Future*, 3; 11.

<sup>50</sup> Edelman, 11-13.

future is not a material reality, rather a projection of the past. Projected futures are reproductions of past, unrealized desires, and in the case of reproductive futurity, the future performs a repetition of the past in order to fulfill the subject through their inner Child.<sup>51</sup> Reproductive futures represent a desire to self-realize the inner Child through procreative reproduction, such that the reproduced Child can fulfill the desires of the incomplete subject. However, the future desired through reproductive futurity is “mere repetition and just as lethal as the past.”<sup>52</sup> The impossible dilemma presented through reproductive futurity demonstrates, regardless of the number of reproductions created, fulfillment and self-realization cannot be achieved through a projection of previously unrealized desire. No matter how many children are born for the sake of reproductive futurity, the Child will never materialize beyond an imagined reality or the order of the Symbolic. Yet, reproductive futurity remains the dominant narrative of our social order in the Anthropocene, reinforcing human exceptionalism through autopoiesis, self-making, or self-reproduction. Reproductive human futures depend on same species kinships being the foundation of our social order: the Child is an “investment in the rigid sameness of identity that is central to the compulsory narrative of reproductive futurism.”<sup>53</sup> Not only do human futures rely on reproductive futurism to propel the species forward, but they additionally rely on the human maintaining the same subjective identity.

Butler demonstrates reproductive futurity as an autopoietic system through Lilith’s rejection of hybrid reproduction of the human. Lilith claims that humanity can only be “reborn” through human means.<sup>54</sup> In other words, human reproductive futurity depends upon human autopoiesis. When Lilith rejects Jdhaya’s proposal for the gene trade as “the rebirth of your

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<sup>51</sup> Edelman, 3.

<sup>52</sup> Edelman, 31.

<sup>53</sup> Edelman, 21.

<sup>54</sup> Butler, *Dawn*, 45.

people [humans] and mine [Oankali],” she is rejecting sympoiesis in order to preserve the human. Stating that “[a] rebirth for us [humans] can only happen if you [Oankali] let us alone,” Lilith implies that the human can “only” come from the human. If humanity or anthropocentric human identity can only be derived through autopoiesis, then sympoiesis, for the anthropocentric human, can only produce the nonhuman or the inhuman. The human, for Lilith, stands in as the Child, a symbolic representation of the anthropocentric human identity—one founded upon human imagination and historiographic understandings of the human. Conservative reproductions of historical human identity pigeonhole the human in a doomed virtual reality that desires humanity as a vacuum. Similarly, the way that gender and sexuality have been used to foster identity groups, such as heterosexual and homosexual, or male and female, these identity markers additionally reproduce a binary structure that isolates these identities from intersectional and fluid expansion. Susan Stryker’s critique of queer theory as it is used to perpetuate a sexual and gender-based binary that excludes “transsexual” and transgender individuals.<sup>55</sup> Identities lying beyond the binary benchmarks “were considered abject creatures.”<sup>56</sup> Dehumanizing individuals, who take on fluid or queer identity markers, as monstrous, horrifying, or abject reinforces social norms to maintain oppressive systems that organize bodies according to a juxtaposing binary. Not only do these binary systems oppress those who do not conform to the standards of the system, but it actively seeks to prevent evolution or adaptation to create new identity categories or expand the binary to include queer identities that fall somewhere in between either side of the binary. Binaries survive through autopoietic means, and introducing opportunities for expansion or entanglement through encounter and sympoiesis threatens the dominant social order.

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<sup>55</sup> Stryker, “Transgender Studies: Queer Theory’s Evil Twin,” *GLQ* 10, no.2 (2004): 213

<sup>56</sup> Stryker, 213.

Just as the male/female or heterosexual/homosexual binaries dehumanize people belonging to marginalized and (gender-)queer identity groups through abjection, the human/nonhuman binary dehumanizes the nonhuman to reify anthropocentrism and abject to inhumanity, maintaining human dominance. Curt, one of the human survivors in Lilith's group, abjects Lilith and Joseph, by calling them "[Oankali] animals."<sup>57</sup> Curt's prejudice for the inhuman identifies Lilith and Joseph as not only nonhuman, using the word "animals," but inhuman through their more willing participation in multispecies relationships with the Oankali. As he threatens the Oankali with his ax, stating "'This is a human place!'... 'It's off limits to you and your animals,'" Curt's indirect address, using his "stare" to direct the concluding statement to Lilith, further dehumanizes her and actualizes her inhumanity in the eyes of the humans. Because Lilith lies in between human and nonhuman, or between the human and the Oankali, her identity lies in a virtual reality outside of the anthropocentric binary. The abjection of fluid identities by these binary systems, additionally, reinforces domination. Because fluid identities threaten binaries by existing in a liminal space beyond the polarizing subject/object divide, the dominant system will abject fluidity, or sympoietic becomings, to perpetuate autopoiesis. The anthropocentric perspective reproduces the human versus nonhuman divide, using the human identity as the dominant and the nonhuman as other to organize Earth systems, especially species, according to anthropocentric standards. To queer this binary through a multispecies perspective reorients the human/nonhuman divide by unsettling the binary through radical kinships which are abject sympoietic s. Queering human encounters with the nonhuman toward multispecies relata questions anthropocentrism and human teleology in the animal world, inviting hybridity and the abject impossibilities that anthropocentrism denies. Acknowledging

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<sup>57</sup> Butler, *Dawn*, 260.

the queerness of encounters creates opportunity for flourishing in the “awkward” spaces unrecognized by binary systems.<sup>58</sup> Horror or abjection for multispecies *relata* demonstrates the impossibility of sympoiesis in a binary system like anthropocentrism. The awkwardness of encounter gives rise to the possibility of death, violence, incompatibility, and pain.<sup>59</sup> Sympoiesis, like the decomposition of a corpse by fungi, or the predation of a gazelle by a lion, predicates awkward liminality between the life of one being and the death of another to continue ecological cycles of flourishing despite the inconvenient and ugly actualities of living systems.

Queering the awkward space of multispecies encounter embraces liminality in favor of evolutionary processes. Sympoiesis relies on natural selection to create new worldings that presuppose evolution. In the liminal spaces between life and death, flourishing emerges.<sup>60</sup> Queer sympoiesis encourages flourishing through entanglement and awkward multispecies togetherness. The gene trade is an example of queer sympoiesis as an awkward encounter that results in the “death” of one species and the birth of another. While Lilith abjects to the end of the human through this multispecies encounter, the inhuman consequences of the gene trade do not necessarily conclude the human but transform the human into something new. Nikanj argues, the emergent hybrid-species will be “better than either of us”: “it will be beautiful.”<sup>61</sup> However, in the process, the human and the Oankali will change, or as Jdhaya states, the hybrid-child will be “different.”<sup>62</sup> The difference between the hybrid species and the original human emerges through sympoiesis. Queer sympoiesis ends autopoiesis in favor of evolution and entanglement, which additionally puts an end to autopoietic anthropocentric human processes. The issue with

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<sup>58</sup> Ginn, Beisel, and Barua, “Flourishing with Awkward Creatures,” 114.

<sup>59</sup> Ginn, Beisel, and Barua, 113.

<sup>60</sup> Ginn, Beisel, and Barua, 114.

<sup>61</sup> Butler, *Dawn*, 282.

<sup>62</sup> Butler, 45.

queer sympoietics for the human, and more specifically for Lilith, then, is not the end of the human species but the end of human autopoietic processes that drive the virtual human past into the future. Queer sympoiesis instead offers a transformation of human systems of becoming to produce the inhuman, the antithesis of the anthropocentric human. Queering encounter toward the rise of the inhuman initiates human abjection for sympoiesis and the creation of processes that refuse human autopoiesis.

Lilith's horror emerges through her embodied encounter with the inhuman futurity she fears. Not only does she realize her offspring will be inhuman, but Lilith also understands her own body is becoming more inhuman through the act of gestating a nonhuman being: "She stared down at her own body in horror. 'It's inside me, and it isn't human.'"<sup>63</sup> Lilith takes on multiple identities through her horror, as she reconciles the human and inhuman aspects of her body. Lilith's becoming inhuman as mother of a nonhuman child additionally prompts a rebirth of her own identity. She is both the subject and object of her horrified reaction. Lilith recognizes her liminal positionality as her pregnancy is a transcorporeal embodiment of multispecies relata.<sup>64</sup> Transcorporeality offers material becoming-with through the body, fostering visceral connections between entangled worldings. Lilith's body becomes-with the Oankali to create a new lifeform that is representative of the encounter between their species. Looking down at her own form, Lilith may acknowledge the familiar form of her human body, yet the nonhuman zygote fertilized "inside" her womb is entirely unfamiliar to her.

Describing the zygote as "it," Lilith distances herself from the nonhuman entity gestating inside of her. Rather than humanizing the zygote, she chooses abjection, recognizing, instead, the

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<sup>63</sup> Butler, 281.

<sup>64</sup> Stacy Alaimo, *Bodily Natures: Science, Environment, and the Material Self* (Indiana University Press, 2010).

nonhuman qualities it will exhibit once born: “It will be a thing—not human.”<sup>65</sup> The pronoun “it,” while being gender neutral and the preferred term of the Oankali’s ooloi members, for humans connotes the nonhuman Other. When Lilith states “it isn’t human,” she is not simply making a statement of fact but is making a statement of abjection that identifies the zygote as a human impossibility. The zygote as “it” is more than nonhuman through Lilith’s horrified abjection of her pregnancy. It becomes inhuman through her horror. Even if the hybrid-child is partially human, the nonhuman aspects of its being present a bioethical dilemma, demonstrated through Jdhaya’s prediction of what the hybrid-species will become: “Different, as I said. Not quite like you. A little like us.”<sup>66</sup> As the hybrid-child and Lilith are linked through Lilith’s body, she also becomes nonhuman. The transcorporeal horror of becoming nonhuman displaces Lilith’s human identity, causing her to desire a separation from the inhuman future incubating within her body.

### *Amity Without Autopoiesis*

Lilith’s hybrid-species child troubles reproductive futurity through the procreation of a nonhuman offspring. The nonhuman identity of the child ends the cyclical repetition of “sameness” required for maintaining the integrity of human futures. Lilith argues, “[a] rebirth for [the human species] can only happen if you let us alone,” suggesting that humanity can only be reborn through human means, or via *autopoiesis*.<sup>67</sup> For the human to truly be human, it must come about through human self-making. The liminal identity of the hybrid-species child, however, queers human autopoiesis. Instead of humanity self-making humanity, the hybrid-child

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<sup>65</sup> Butler, *Dawn*, 281.

<sup>66</sup> Butler, 45.

<sup>67</sup> Butler, 45.

results from sympoiesis with the Oankali. Sympoiesis cannot reproduce the human, because sympoiesis does not replicate the Child as an idyllic projection of human desire for the future. Sympoiesis queers the human, becoming through its more-than-human potential for reproduction, adaptation, and flourishing.

The distinction between “babies” and “kin” calls into question the implicit assumptions made around reproduction and the relationships humans choose to facilitate—or are otherwise forced to reconcile.<sup>68</sup> (Which is to say, this distinction forces a reconciliation of both our human/human and human/nonhuman relationships.) The statement, or rather the call to action Haraway iterates, “Make kin, not babies!” is an explicit request to deny the future the assumption of sexual reproduction in favor of a kinship relationship that is not predicated on those very assumptions that threaten both socio-political systems that are (albeit tentatively) designed to support human children regardless of parental status and climate systems that are collapsing and continue to be threatened by the rapidly rising human population around the globe.<sup>69</sup> The call for kinship is a radical queering of reproductive futurity that explicitly favors sympoiesis and awkward flourishing over autopoiesis.

Amiability pinpoints the relational values of sentiment that overcome the distinction between kin and non-kin by drawing attention to the person as an individual.<sup>70</sup> Where the first supposes kin relations are subject to axioms, intrinsically part of an overall social structure, the second dwells on how the sentiments uncovered in friendship direct attention to a contrast between person-as-individual and person-in-society. Individual and society, here, become visible

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<sup>68</sup> “Make kin, not babies!” See Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*, 102.

<sup>69</sup> Haraway, 102.

<sup>70</sup> Marilyn Strathern, *Relations: An Anthropological Account*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2020), 154-55.

as the crucial tandem.<sup>71</sup> From a multispecies perspective, companion species offer a kind of becoming-with that demonstrates a similar tandem: “The partners do not precede the knotting; species of all kinds are consequent upon worldly subject- and object-shaping entanglements.”<sup>72</sup> Companion species demonstrate the way that multispecies *relata* work to realize complex ecological systems, akin to human social networks. Just as friendships reveal important self-realizing aspects of an individual’s identity in society, nonhuman species inform the human as it relates to those companion species and our ecological niche. For the human as individual and as species, biodiverse ecologies play an integral role in situating us in entangled Earth systems. Lilith’s refusal to participate in multispecies interactions at the start of her stay with Jdhaya and his Oankali family demonstrates how humans observe the human/nonhuman binary through an autopoietic lens. Relying on anthropocentric notions of human/nonhuman animal relationships, Lilith projects her fears of becoming nonhuman, or an “experimental animal” through human means onto her relationship with the Oankali.<sup>73</sup> Because Lilith perceived the Oankali as being closer to humans in their social *relata* than to nonhuman Earth animals, she understood her relationship with the Oankali would become like the scientist and the lab rat, with the Oankali acting as the agential scientist, and Lilith serving as the lab rat. However, as Jdhaya’s ooloi, Kahguyaht states, the Oankali seek a more entangled relationship with humanity: “within reason, we want you to know us.”<sup>74</sup> Although the nature of the Oankali’s desired entanglement goes beyond the autopoietic reproduction that a majority of human relationships rely upon, the desire for multispecies kinship in this case is not denying the human its own identity, rather it is encouraging the human to expand its understanding of how the human interacts with nonhuman

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<sup>71</sup> Strathern, 155.

<sup>72</sup> Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*, 13.

<sup>73</sup> Butler, *Dawn*, 67.

<sup>74</sup> Butler, 55.

species and how the human situates itself in evolving, biodiverse ecologies. Denying multispecies relata additionally denies the human its adaptational niche in a biodiverse system. Niches, like social networks, are dependent on networked intra-actions to inform the specific context of the niche's ecology. Humans need their Earth kin to be human, because without them, the human would not exist as human, at all.

To think of kin and kinship purely in relation to familial relata, excludes the blurring distinctions between these ideas and modern friendships. While families serve an important role in raising children to become individuals and participants in larger social apparatuses through various relata, friendships as another kind of kinship, nuance interpersonal relata, especially as friends foster a unique type of self-realization.

### *Reconsidering Relata*

Despite the hybrid-child's queering of reproductive futurism, Lilith's rejections of the child and its inhuman futures reinforces human reproductive ideology. Turning away from the future presents an alternative queering of this ideology. By longing for a foregone human past, the plight of reproductive futurism is revealed through Lilith's desire for humanity's survival through its own past. Lilith's rejection of the future orients her in a liminal temporality between two possible endings for the human species. With a guarantee of extinction in the past, facilitated by fallout from the war, and an inhuman future waiting to be born, Lilith cannot escape the reality of humanity's telos. While Lilith can try to advocate for human reproductive futures, to move forward, she must accept the actualization of the inhuman hybrid-child and its potential to change the human as it was known in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Lilith's turning back to the past,

ultimately, is a turn to the familiar, the autopoietic, a desperate attempt to reconcile humanity's self-destructive actions and replicate an impossible (and deadly) past.

Lilith's abjection to the unfamiliar yet impossible desire for the distant past human presents another issue for overcoming the empathy gap between herself and the Oankali. Lilith's fear of the inhuman is rooted in her identity as a human. Lilith calls the hybrid-child "monster" as it is not just nonhuman but also a bioethical dilemma, an actualization of the abject inhuman, being negotiated through her own body.<sup>75</sup> Nikanj attempts to soothe Lilith's anger and fear towards her pregnancy by arguing the "children will be better than either of us."<sup>76</sup> The internalized abjection for her offspring additionally translates to abjection for what she has become through her kinship with Nikanj and the Oankali. Lilith's identity, her connection to her humanity, is troubled through the hybrid-child. As Nikanj states, her body has not rejected the zygote: "Nothing about you but your words reject this child."<sup>77</sup> Nikanj's reading of Lilith's body alienates her identity from the genetic storying of her viable pregnancy with the hybrid-child. The paradoxical elements of Lilith's pregnancy queer reproductive futurity in the narrative toward the uncontrollable nature of evolutionary processes and even gesture to the uncontrollable nature of reproduction, itself. Reproductive futurity's reinforcement of goal-directed evolutionary progress narratives depends on the imaginary's virtualization of the Child to hoist humanity onto a pedestal, crafted through procreative, heterosexual reproduction. Queering reproductive futurity is not only a queering of human kinship relationships but it is also queering our definition of what it means to be human. If being human hinges upon our ability to adhere to reproductive futurity's social ordering through the Child, then we must consider the biological

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<sup>75</sup> Butler, 282.

<sup>76</sup> Butler, 282.

<sup>77</sup> Butler, 282.

and genetic implications of reproductive futurism such that human genomes and human bodies also inform the way that we create kinships. Lilith's abjection to the hybrid-child and her pregnancy by Nikanj not only serves as a barrier to protect her from becoming increasingly inhuman but additionally seeks to protect Lilith from actualizing her liminal identity by refusing her participation in sympoietic evolution.

Organizing human social systems around reproduction excludes those that do not then adhere to those organizing structures. The implications of heteronormative, procreative reproductive ordering systems again emphasize a human centric notion of how we understand the way we interact with the world in the age of the climate crisis. A queer understanding of the human and human kinship relationships both with the same species and with those of other species creates opportunities for developing mutual, symbiotic relationships. In the wake of radical and disastrous climate change and ecosystem degradation, making the conscious choices to care for other beings brings us one step closer to moving beyond the anthropocentric to understanding the beings in our planetary network as agential actors. Despite the context of these sentiments, my argument for queering human relationships as a critique of anthropocentrism is not a call for the end of the human, via the end of procreation, nor is it a call for inter-species breeding. However, it is a call for humans to, more consciously, evaluate the relationships we form, not only with other humans but also with the other species we coexist and symbiotically relate to. Kinships developed through reproductive futurity and autopoiesis are myopic, including only those considered human and those that adhere to the social ordering systems that perpetuate the image of the Child as the guiding symbol for our subjective identities. Therefore, to consider kinship with species we identify as nonhuman—or to consider marginalized individuals or historically oppressed groups as potential kinship partners—is to queer the

conventions of reproductive futurism by looking outside procreative kinship for meaningful relata that is not predicated upon sex acts and/or autopoiesis.

### *Awkward Kin*

The Oankali represent an impossible relation for the human. As Butler has imagined, the Oankali exist so far beyond the scope of what the human considers familiar that reaching a relationality beyond an encounter seems repulsive: "...[Lilith] could not stop herself from stumbling away from [Jdahya] in panic and revulsion."<sup>78</sup> Jdahya's "alienness" elicits a visceral response from Lilith: his unfamiliar form prevents the establishment of a relation beyond a face-value encounter.<sup>79</sup> Lilith accounts the "difference" between herself, and the "literal unearthliness" Jdahya and the Oankali species embody.<sup>80</sup> For Lilith, to relate to the sea-slug-like Oankali requires the reevaluation of her expectations around the familiar. Although this first visual encounter poses difficulty for Lilith overcoming her horror, the "reconfiguration" of her "identity, space, and political economies opens possibilities for growth."<sup>81</sup> Not only does Lilith register the affective dimensions of her horror, but she also analyzes the reasons why she is repulsed by the extreme differences between herself and the Oankali. Lilith, socialized in Earth-based and human systems, is barred from forming a connection with Jdahya because of the affective dimensions of her unfamiliarity with the Oankali, in context.

However, Lilith demonstrates an attempt at sympoiesis by drawing a connection between Jdahya and the sea slug to associate a semi-familiar image with an unfamiliar entity. By recognizing the familiar, the empathy gap begins to close. Similarly, as Lilith associates the

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<sup>78</sup> Butler, 27.

<sup>79</sup> Butler, 12.

<sup>80</sup> Butler, 12.

<sup>81</sup> Barua, "Encounter," 265.

Oankali with human-like features, she locates points of identification with the alien species. Although this metaphor proposes radical inhuman difference, the thought-experiment Butler offers encourages us to reexamine the ways we encounter difference—overcoming abjection and accepting the abject. Abjection demonstrates fear for the radical, impossible Other. The abject constitutes the aspects of the virtual that the subject does not want to actualize. Through horror, the subject rejects the abject and isolates the aspects of their identity that acknowledge the abject as a virtual possibility: horror becomes the barrier protecting the subject from the actualization of the abject.<sup>82</sup> The inhuman is isolated from the human through horror, fear, and disgust. These affective barriers defend the anthropocentric human from derealization. However, these barriers additionally isolate the human from making meaningful connections with the nonhuman out of fear that the inhuman will be realized through nonhuman interventions. The awkward possibility that the nonhuman will cause the human to disintegrate—to become unrecognizable by its own human kin—reifies anthropocentric abjection of the inhuman.<sup>83</sup> However, by acknowledging the barriers separating the human from the nonhuman and embracing the uncertainty of the virtual abject, the human becomes a dissociated “non-object,” itself: the human become abject.<sup>84</sup> Becoming with abjection breaks down the barriers around the human/nonhuman binary and creates opportunities for becoming-with the Other. Queer sympoiesis invites abjection to facilitate flourishing, awkward kinship, and ecological evolution.

Lilith does not establish meaningful kinship with the Oankali until she stops seeing them as merely alien, extraterrestrial beings and, instead, sees them as beings that exist on equal footing to her. Establishing a kinship relationship with the Oankali requires that Lilith

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<sup>82</sup> Kristeva, “Approaching Abjection,” 3-5.

<sup>83</sup> Kristeva, 5.

<sup>84</sup> Kristeva, 5.

understands not only *what* the Oankali are but begins to understand *who* the Oankali are.

Through their radical differences, Lilith comes to view Nikanj, through amiability, as an equal partner in their relationship. Lilith's devotion to Nikanj becomes tangible when it was mortally wounded by Curt in the training room. Lilith disregarded "how she would look to the humans still conscious" and watching her lie naked on the battlefield beside her Oankali companion to help it heal its severed arm.<sup>85</sup> Lilith's expressed vulnerability through her selfless act to save Nikanj in the heat of battle. Not only did Lilith aid Nikanj during its time of need, but she did so in an unstable environment that very well could have cost her physical safety:

[The other humans] would be certain now that she was a traitor. Stripping naked on the battlefield to lie down with the enemy. Even the few who had accepted her might turn on her now. But she had just lost Joseph. She could not lose Nikanj too. She could not simply watch it die.<sup>86</sup>

Over her safety, dignity, and humanity (at least in the eyes of the other human survivors), Lilith chose her relationship with Nikanj and her Oankali family. In these moments, Lilith's fear for inhumanness is overcome through sympoietic affects forged through her radical kinship with the Oankali, effectively replacing her fear of difference with her fear of grief and emotional loss.

Lilith's kinship with the Oankali troubles her identity as human through both *relata* and reproduction, placing her in a transcorporeal, liminal space. Lilith's becoming-with the Oankali suggests a complexity that fails to be described as simply human. As Lilith's body progenotes a hybrid-species and saves a member of another species, she becomes more-than-human. The transcorporeality of her bodily nature demonstrates a queer embodiment of multispecies *relata*

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<sup>85</sup> Butler, *Dawn*, 265.

<sup>86</sup> Butler, 265.

that able to be tenderly vulnerable, yet resilient in the face of radical difference and the derealization of species identities.

### *Conclusion*

Lilith's abjection of human hybridization, resulting in the creation of inhuman virtual ecologies, queers evolutionary teleology. Yet her horror at the very inhumanness that she faces suggests an internalized abjection for the kinships she established with Nikanj, her Oankali partner, and her other Oankali family members. The desire for a conserved human species binds Lilith in a past necessitating death and extinction, which perpetuates anthropocentric ideology. Despite her turning away from the unfamiliar futures of the Oankali-human, or the "Dinso-" line, Lilith is unable to escape the inhuman through her transcorporeal embodiment of both human and nonhuman evolutionary lines.<sup>87</sup> The liminal identity afforded by Lilith's body suggests an inevitability of evolution, the inhuman, and the reproductive futurity she so desperately attempts to refuse. Yet, again, Lilith's desire for connection—for meaningful kinship—in the wake of isolation, abjection for her own increasingly inhuman identity, the knowledge of the near-extinction of the human species, and the rejection by the very people she was supposed to reclaim the Earth with, demonstrates an unspoken openness that embraces the unknown. Lilith's radical attempts to overcome her own fear and prejudice, to connect with those around her—both the alien, inhuman Oankali and the paranoid survivors of the human species who echo her own internalized abjection—explore the possibility for new kinships, achieved through overcoming or, perhaps more importantly, accepting difference.

Octavia Butler's speculation about a non-/in-human future demonstrates the anxiety lying, often subconsciously, within anthropocentric mindsets. Butler's radical and, at times,

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<sup>87</sup> Butler, 72; 282.

horrifying narrative lays the groundwork for identifying barriers that the Anthropocene human faces in overcoming difference to face climate change with our Earth kin. Acknowledging the harmful othering practices perpetuated through human exceptionalism creates opportunities for movement toward response-ably addressing the climate crisis facing the Anthropocene world.<sup>88</sup>

Elizabeth Grosz's exploration of the human proposes a close examination of what constitutes the human in the Anthropocene to point out the various entanglements that may afford growth and becoming-withs in the world that decenter the human:

If the human is simply one among many of the trajectories that life on earth has elaborated, then many of the most cherished beliefs about how humans will and should behave in light of the manifest and lived differences that divide the human will be open to new lines of development, new kinds of practice, and new modes of thought.<sup>89</sup>

For Grosz, the human is highly nuanced and rooted in significant object-oriented historiographies, especially through the lens of Darwinian theory and its many interpretations both scientifically and philosophically. The nuances and deep histories that tie the human directly with the Earth and Earth-systems through lineage demonstrates a departure from these roots with the Anthropocene through the divisions enacted by human historiography and taxa.

The wounds of the Anthropocene, tying the human back to the Earth with a longing for bygone eras of ecological prosperity, queer the human away from an uncertain catastrophe of climate futures and toward a present-ness. Staying with the trouble to facilitate meaningful Earth-species-kinships demands a rethinking of our current epochal pneumatic. Radically becoming-with Earth systems to develop kinships with our nonhuman neighbors opens up

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<sup>88</sup> Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*, 55.

<sup>89</sup> Elizabeth Grosz, *Becoming Undone* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 2.

possibilities for conscious entanglement and action predicating “partial and robust biological-cultural-political-technological recuperation and re-composition.”<sup>90</sup> This is not to say that multispecies kinships across difference are the end-all-be-all solution to the consequences of the Anthropocene, but it is one possible beginning to an evolving story of the deep Earth histories that have led to this point. After all, if we can find a way to care for our fellow Earth kin—if we can kin a sea slug dwelling in an inhuman ecosystem on the ocean floor—we can make the necessary steps to support the differences that make diverse ecosystems a critical part of our ever-entangled Earth story.

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<sup>90</sup> Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*, 101.

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