


# The Uncanny Poetics of Capitalocene Meat: Carnologistics and Octavia Butler's 'Bloodchild'

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*Abstract.* This paper explores motifs of interspecies symbioses, posthumanism and flesh in Octavia Butler's short story 'Bloodchild.' Butler's interspecies symbioses have been much celebrated as investigating sensuous modes of living with other species. By contrast, this paper argues that new materialist symbiotic analyses too frequently miss dynamics of power and control that are central to Butler's posthumanism. Addressing this imbalance, the paper focuses on the industrial infrastructures, or 'carnologistics,' of animal agriculture. By reading Butler's uncanny poetics of carnologistics alongside recent work in the emergent fields of animal studies and vegan studies, in particular recent anthropologies of animal agriculture and slaughter, a different picture emerges of industrial symbiosis as a mode of anthropocentric and epistemic control. As the paper shows, this approach is particularly appropriate given Butler's own personal commitment to veganism. The paper argues that Butler's uncanny flesh poetics condemns humanism as dependent upon the violent carnologistics of industrial livestock.

*Key Words:* animal studies, the Capitalocene, carnologistics, flesh, parasitism, posthumanism, vegan studies

## ***Unheimlich* poetika kapitalocenegga mesa: karnologistika in »Bloodchild« [Krvavi otrok] Octavie Butler**

*Povzetek.* Članek obravnava motiv medvrstnih simbioz, posthumanizma in mesa v kratki zgodbi Octavie Butler »Bloodchild« [Krvavi otrok]. Avtoričine medvrstne simbioze so bile največkrat opevane kot raziskovanje čutnih načinov življenja z drugimi vrstami. Nasprotno pa pričujoči članek trdi, da novomaterialistične simbiotične analize prepogosto spregledajo dinamike moči in nadzora, ki so osrednjega pomena za posthumanizem Octavie Butler. Pri naslavljanju tega neravnotežja se članek osredotoči na industrijsko infrastrukturo ali »karnologistiko« živinoreje. Branje avtoričine *unheimlich* karnologistične

poetike skupaj z nedavnimi deli s porajajočih se področij animalističnih in veganskih študij, zlasti nedavnih antropologij živinoreje in zakola, izriše drugačno podobo industrijske simbioze kot načina antropocentričnega in epistemskega nadzora. Kot je prikazano v članku, je ta pristop še posebej primeren glede na avtoričino osebno zavezanost veganstvu. Trdimo, da njena *unheimlich* poetika mesa obsodi humanizem kot odvisen od nasilne karnologistike industrijske živinoreje.

*Ključne besede:* animalistične študije, kapitalocen, karnologistika, meso, parazitizem, posthumanizem, veganske študije

This essay proposes a new interpretation of Octavia Butler's celebrated and much-studied 1984 story 'Bloodchild.' The essay draws from and situates itself within the emergent literary critical fields of animal studies, vegan studies and ecocriticism in order to develop its original 'carnologistic' interpretational framework. As the essay demonstrates, carnologistics turns theories of Capitalocene exploitation and commodification of animals towards literary analysis.

Butler's 'Bloodchild' describes the symbiotic relationship of Earthling humans (named 'Terrans' in the story) and a giant insect species, the Tlic. As the story reveals, the Terrans have agreed to allow Tlic to lay their grubs in their bodies in return for being allowed a place to live. Butler's fiction herein sets up the narrative of an ambiguous and imbalanced power struggle that wavers between mutual symbiotic and one-sided parasitic species interrelations. Having been forced to flee Earth several generations ago, the Terrans seemingly owe their survival to the parasitic use of their flesh by the Tlic. Intrigued by the ostensibly allegorical or parabolic quality of the story's uncanny symbioses, critics have paid the story significant critical attention. What is notable is the fact that these critical studies can be grouped into two seemingly incompatible camps. In the first camp are the scholars of posthuman relationality. This is most widely known in Donna Haraway's celebratory reading of Butler's symbiosis from her trilogy of novels *Lilith's Brood* (2000) as 'sympoiesis' at the close of her influential book *Simians, Cyborgs and Women* (1991). Similarly, critics such as Laurel Bollinger and Zakiyyah Iman Jackson read the partnership between Terrans and Tlic as expressing mutuality and connectedness, standing as an allegory for our (post)human embeddedness within Earth's ecologies. It is notable that the other dominant critical tradition reads the story as a parable for slavery (a reading that Butler's preface specifically denies). Critics such as Donna Donawerth, Amanda

Thibodeau and Marty Fink find not mutual symbiosis, but rather the violent exploitation of slavery allegorized by the tale's parasitism.

This essay proposes a carnologic reading of 'Bloodchild,' that positions the fiction as an allegory for human commodification of nonhumans (reading the exploited Terrans as allegories for livestock). It claims that, in so doing, it draws together the two seemingly incompatible critical traditions that the story has elicited: commodification of livestock by industrial meat production might be seen as both a form of violently exploitative parasitism and yet also normative, conventional, seemingly unremarkable – and often assumed to comprise a form of mutually beneficial arrangement (see Ingold 1994, 1–22). As the essay shows, a carnologic reading locates in Butler's story both a forceful exploration and a rejection of the normative violence of carnologistics – the human commodification of livestock animals for consumption. As the essay suggests, such a reading is sensitive both to the story's tonal uncanniness and weird horror regarding the consumption of flesh, and also to Butler's own veganism, which previous critics of the story have not deemed significant.

### Capitalocene Meat

Capitalocene meat is arguably one of the most urgent problems humanity currently faces. Theorized (in partially divergent historical forms) by Jason W. Moore and Andreas Malm, 'the Capitalocene' describes the exploitative metabolic acceleration of ecologies and energy extraction from planetary geology during either colonialist plantationism (Moore 2015), or fossil capital's later shift to industrial production (Malm 2017). The term 'capital' itself derives from Latin *capitalis* ('of the head'), referring to heads of cattle and the possession of livestock. In David Nibert's account, from the beginning capitalism and the extractive domestication of animals share an intimately imbricated history, so that repeated historical violence, colonialism, and the ranching of indigenous land can be traced back to livestock domestication: '*pastoralist and ranching practices* [...] have been a precondition for and have engendered large-scale violence against and injury to devalued humans, particularly indigenous people around the world' (Nibert 2013, 2). As the culmination of this history, modern meat production constitutes a preeminent exemplification of Capitalocene metabolism. Sixty percent of planetary mammal biomass is now livestock, which biologists say is eight times more than the Earth can support (Bar-On, Phillips, and Milo 2018, 6506–6511). Meat production and consumption is a central driver of catastrophic biopoliti-

cal crises, such as global warming, land degradation, and mass species extinction, not to mention rapidly accelerating increases in rates of diabetes and obesity in human populations – which is why the UN Sustainable Development Project (Goal 12: Sustainable Consumption) urges governments to promote reduced meat consumption (United Nations 2016). The most recent IPCC report repeatedly stresses the carbon intensive nature of meat production, and the urgency of adopting plant-based consumption (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change 2022). Animal agriculture and associated land degradation are an ongoing pandemic danger, responsible in recent years for outbreaks of zoonotic pathogens including ‘African swine fever, *Campylobacter*, *Cryptosporidium*, *Cyclospora*, Ebola Reston, *E. coli* O157:H7, foot-and-mouth disease, hepatitis E, *Listeria*, Nipah virus, Q fever, *Salmonella*, *Vibrio*, *Yersinia*, and a variety of novel influenza variants, including H1N1 (2009), H1N2V, H3N2V, H5N1, H5N2, H5NX, H6N1, H7N1, H7N3, H7N7, H7N9, and H9N2’ (Wallace et al. 2020). Global poverty and wealth inequality is a key zoonotic pathway for these diseases to spread from industrial farming operations into global populations. Around 70 percent of the 1.4 billion world population who live in extreme poverty also live in proximity to livestock (World Animal Protection 2022, 25). Agri-business epidemiology is almost certainly also significant in the origins of SARS-CoV-2, the cause of the Covid-19 pandemic – with yet more severe pathogens highly probable in the future (Wallace 2020, 280). Yet rather than reduction, the rate of meat consumption is accelerating precipitously. Over one hundred billion animals are now slaughtered annually, almost doubling the rate of consumption of less than a decade ago (Schlottman and Sebo 2019; Weis 2013) – with global demand for meat anticipated to increase by 73 percent by 2050 (Percival 2022).

The accelerated commodification of creaturely flesh is at the centre of both the cultural life and the ecological catastrophes of late modernity, altering our work, our food, our gender relations, and our relations with other creatures: a situation in which ‘the most iconic symbol of the modern era’ has been described recently as ‘the Chicken McNugget’ (Moore and Patel 2018). Meat has shifted ‘from the periphery to the center of human diets’ (Hansan and Syse 2021, 2), a process Tony Weis has conceptualized as ‘meatification’ (Weis 2013). As Donna Haraway states: ‘Follow the chicken and find the world’ (Haraway 2008, 274). Since 1979, there has been a quadrupling of animals slaughtered. By comparison, the global population less than doubled in the same period, from 4.4 billion to 7.7

billion (Hansan and Syse 2021, 6) – indicating a speeding up of global average meat consumption. These transformations, which Marx theorizes as a ‘metabolic rift,’ arguably involve the internalization of planetary life processes by capitalism, and the subsequent internalization of capitalism by the biosphere (such as in ecological breakdown) (Moore 2015). In pursuit of profit margins, Capitalocene meat strips its livestock of all vestiges of the life that their instincts long for: housed for most of their lives in steel and concrete crates barely larger than their bodies (as a result of which their bodies are covered in sores and abscesses, as a result of which they are fed daily a cocktail of antibiotics), tail-docked, de-beaked, teeth-clipped and castrated at birth (Efstathiou 2021, 171–172). Alongside the interminable suffering of livestock animals, overwhelmingly ethnic minorities, women and the socially disempowered suffer from working in slaughterhouses and living in proximity to the effluent pollution of industrial farms (Bolin, Grineski, and Collins 2005; see also Pachirat 2011). By centralizing epistemic links between the violence of global meat production and systemic racial and gender inequalities, the concept of Capitalocene meat describes the naturalization and epistemic invisibility that enable such violent inequalities (Agarwal 2011).

### Care and Carnologistics

Capitalocene globalism means, for the French philosopher Bernard Stiegler, that we are bound by the urgent need to care: to live carefully and caringly. Due to accelerating technical mastery, prosthetic tools, oil capitalism, and rhizomic informational systems, human technical infrastructures exercise power to an ever-increasing degree over the planetary biosphere, inducing, amongst other effects, climate change, accelerating rates of deforestation and habit loss, and mass extinction. Yet this mode of living is accompanied by dependence upon prosthetic existence – this is the state Stiegler terms ‘exsomatization’ – meaning, in simple terms, that we cannot simply give it all up. We are enmeshed in a logic of metabolic acceleration. To the extent that we cannot live without it, prosthesis is out of our control: it is controlling us too. Our source of power is also our powerlessness. Given that this situation has taken us close to, or beyond in some cases, the limits of key planetary biosystem thresholds, this means the need for care, and for thinking the complexities of care, is urgent. Yet what would caring and careful living entail? Writing on the etymological and philosophical link between care (*panser*) and thought (*penser*), Stiegler notes, in various places, that (2017, 398–399):

These histories of *panse*, which would undoubtedly have delighted Nietzsche, call for *an organology of pansée, inasmuch as it is also written as – and hence ‘thinks itself’ (so to speak) as – pensée*, and as the act of *taking care firstly by nourishing*, this question of nourishment being a question of assimilation, on which Nietzsche would both meditate and ruminate. [...].

The word *panseur* is ‘found in the fifteenth century in relation to those who care for a horse and after 1623 in medicine (*panseurs de vérole*, pox dressers).’ *To think* would always be *to exert therapeutic activity: hubris*, which as we will see Heidegger names both violence (*Gewalt*) and in-quietude (*Unheimlichkeit*, uncanniness) (Heidegger 2000; Boehm 1960) is what, as the *excessiveness of exosomatization*, generates *pharmaka* that *require panseurs*.

What is needed, for Stiegler, are *panseurs* – those who think care, who recognize the need of exercising the power from which we cannot withdraw with care. Yet, like so many philosophers, anthropocentric assumptions seem to shape Stiegler’s *panser*. It is notable, for example, that many of the examples of *panser* that Stiegler references describe agricultural care for animals. *Panser* is in these examples something potent humans do to impotent animals – it locates active (human) and passive (nonhuman animal) roles. Yet a telos of usage, of caring for animals that will become meat or produce dairy, circumscribes animal agriculture. Agricultural care makes instrumental use of that which it supposedly cares for, so there is necessarily a kind of dominion assumed in this care – mastery and compassion bound together in the production of commodities. Though Stiegler’s overwhelming philosophical influence is Derrida, and he concedes that ‘[t]o care-fully think [*panser*] the Anthropocene in the twenty-first century is to think at the limit of the thinkable’ (Stiegler 2017, 390), he seems not to draw deeply from Derrida’s work on animals, nor to recognize the anthropocentric control of agricultural husbandry or stewardship as limitation or closure of the logic of *panser*, in the way that Derrida’s deconstruction pursues the ‘carnophallogocentric’ trace of the nonhuman as the limit that closes logocentric thought.

For this reason it is useful briefly to consider Stiegler’s care alongside Timothy Morton’s ecocriticism. For Morton, the control that agriculture exerts upon biosystems, by practices of breeding and enclosure, is positioned as involving various symbolic degrees of closure, which ultimately seek to divide humans from biology: ‘agrilogistics is precisely a sever-

ing of human-nonhuman ties' (Morton 2017, 74). Morton argues that the seeds of the human transcendence that for so many philosophers connote the absolute difference between humans and nonhumans in so many diverse (and self-serving) formulations are planted in this work of division: 'agricultural religion is one of the most basic ways in which agricultural society talks about itself [...] Our very image of solidarity is predicated on never achieving solidarity with nonhumans!' (Morton 2017, 25). From this perspective, the kind of stewardship that Stiegler draws from *panser*, albeit it well intended, would seem to annul the possibility of solidarity, involving a perpetuation of the abyssal divide separating human and nonhuman (Morton 2017, 25):

Solidarity with nonhumans becomes radically impossible: it *mustn't* be achieved, otherwise something very basic will fall apart. You can't get there from here – so 'stewardship' and other varieties of command-control (ultimately religion-derived) models of human relationships with nonhumans are also no good for ecological solidarity.

For Morton, agrilogistics and stewardship involves principally the denial of cross-species solidarity. Yet we might also question the conceptual target agrilogistics as an unhelpfully broad object of critique. Does not Morton's critical energy seem misplaced and disconnected from any possible meaningful praxis? What would be the alternative to agrilogistics, one might ask – to give up farming? To resort to paleo hunter-gathering? Rather than the condemning all horticulture, which indigenous cultures have developed in various sustainable forms (Kimmerer 2013), might not a more nuanced ecofeminist position specifically confront the most destructive and violent element of agrilogistics, that is to say, industrial livestock? Aside from its interminable violence to the flesh, and its perpetuation of sexist and colonialist hierarchies, Capitalocene meat is responsible for 'Ocean dead zones. Fisheries depletion. Species extinction. Deforestation. World hunger. Food safety. Heart disease. Obesity. Diabetes,' and around 30 percent of global greenhouse gas emissions (Hyner 2015). What I am terming the 'carnologistics' of Capitalocene meat are the reason why the world is on track, for example, to consume nearly a trillion chickens in the next decade, most of whom will live and die young in terrible conditions (Torella 2023).

In approaching carnologistics, I place an emphasis on Stiegler's *panser* because it helps to chart the perverse and uncanny violent telos of care

deployed strategically in contemporary carnologicalistics. Take undercover anthropologist Alex Blanchette's evocative description of the desperate attempts of migrant workers to save vulnerable piglet life at a concentrated animal feeding operation (CAFO) after the uterus of a sow prolapses during delivery of her litter. First of all, the migrant workers shoot the mother (Blanchette 2020, 152):

as the bullet bounced around in her brain, involuntary spasms of her legs began thrusting her torso across the ground as we tried to splay out her legs and hold her powerful twitching body steady so Felipe could safely work with his bolt cutters around her belly. 'Fifteen seconds!' shouted Francisco as Felipe appeared to be tearing through layers of flesh. 'Thirty seconds! Hurry up!' Felipe must have lost his grip on the bolt cutters, which fell into the sow's belly; he started ripping layers with his hands to get at the womb. Pints of blood pooled out around his knees and rubber boots.

'One minute! Focus!' Felipe pulled out the first of the piglets, unmoving and covered in placenta. He passed it to the women, a gendered division of labor forming on the spot around death and life, killing and nurturing. 'Too late – they're dead,' rang out several times as piglets were passed from the puddle of red. 'Give them air!' I glanced over at the women and saw them blowing into the piglets' tiny mouths, flexing the piglets' front and hind legs together to resuscitate them, their hands covered in the sow's blood.

In this intensive scene of multi-species care, which due to the genetic hybridization that selects for large litters is an increasingly normalized part of industrial pork production, Blanchette witnesses the complex relationality of Capitalocene entanglement: the violent processing of the flesh alongside the production and capitalization of care within the factory system. Compassion is rendered a tool of the industrial system, placed as industrial symbiosis under the aegis of full vertical integration because of the seemingly instinctual care of female workers for the piglets, a gendered impulse exploited and put to productive use in the factory systematized labour division. This involves activating a gendered recognition of contiguous cross-species flesh vulnerability, or 'surplus affect' as Blanchette puts it, that is embedded within and, more specifically, deployed as an essential component of increased efficiency in the production of meat. This is care in the name of the slaughter-to-come. As Nancy Fraser describes, capitalism is a 'guzzler of care' – cannibalizing, in her



simile, currents of anti-capitalist impulse as ‘integral parts of the capitalist order’ (Fraser 2014, 70). Rather than the vague hope of justice *à-venir* that is marked by the Derridean trace, *panser* is here the systematized telos of surplus relational affect that is extracted from female migrant labourers in order to accelerate the efficient production processes of cheap meat.

### ‘Bloodchild’

One astonishing quality of Butler’s ‘Bloodchild’ is the extent to which it anticipates and draws narrative urgency from a form of exploitative multi-species relationality of the flesh comparable to the full vertical integration of the factory system’s violent telos of surplus affect. In the story, a group of humans, who are named Terrans, have fled Earth to start a new life on a distant planet. They have formed a symbiotic relationship with a large insect species, the Tlic, who are inhabitants of the planet, and with whom they can communicate linguistically. The Terrans have agreed to allow the Tlic to lay their eggs in Terran bodies, parasitically using Terran flesh as hosts, in return for being allowed to live in relative peace in a compound named The Preserve. At one point in the story, the central protagonist Gan observes a Terran, Lomas, receive emergency surgery from a Tlic named T’Gatoi after grubs hatch from the eggs in Lomas’s body and begin killing him (Butler 2005, 15):

His body convulsed with the first cut. He almost tore himself away from me. The sound he made [...] I had never heard such sounds come from anything human. T’Gatoi seemed to pay no attention as she lengthened and deepened the cut, now and then pausing to lick away blood. His blood vessels contracted, reacting to the chemistry of her saliva, and the bleeding slowed. I felt as though I were helping her torture him, helping her consume him. I knew I would vomit soon, didn’t know why I hadn’t already. I couldn’t possibly last until she was finished. She found the first grub. It was fat and deep red with his blood – both inside and out. It had already eaten its own egg case but apparently had not yet begun to eat its host. At this stage, it would eat any flesh except its mother’s.

The emergency evacuation of Tlic grubs in Butler’s story weirdly anticipates the surplus affect of contemporary piglet evacuation in the industrial-livestock-carnologistics described in Blanchette’s *Porkopolis*. Certainly, the care of T’Gatoi for the Tlic grubs, devoid of the telos of slaughter, is quite unlike the carnologistic care extended to the piglets

in Blanchette's report. Yet aspects of the symbiosis of cross-species care are similar: the Terran is functional flesh for T'Gatoi, just as the care is extended to the piglet litter in Dixon in the name of their meat. As Gan perceives, in aiding T'Gatoi as she attends to Lomas, it feels 'as though I were [...] helping her consume him' (Butler 2005, 15). Though the sow with the prolapsed uterus is killed and the Terran is not in this instance, we later learn that humans in similar situations have been killed by the Tlic. Gan's brother Qui states of a similar emergency surgery: 'I saw them eat a man [...] The man couldn't go any further and there were no houses around. He was in so much pain, he told her to kill him. He begged her to kill him. Finally, she did. She cut his throat. One swipe of one claw. I saw the grubs eat their way out, then burrow in again, still eating' (p. 20). Certainly, Terrans have more input into the cross-species relation than hogs do in industrial pork production. The man that Qui describes seeing begs for his own death: which is to say, the Tlic are less parasitically dominant over Terrans in Butler's tale than meat factories are over the swine in their charge. No pig ever begs for death – yet all industrial swine end up being killed in the factory system, unlike most of the Terrans in Butler's story. Nevertheless, despite these differences, and despite the already large critical attention the story has received, there is yet a strong case to be made that Butler centrally addresses the power dynamics of carnologistics.

Several subtle details in Butler's writing encourage this reading. Early on we are informed that Gan has a particular way of sleeping enfolded in the spiny limbs of T'Gatoi. At one point he observes his mother sleep this way: 'She lay down now against T'Gatoi, and the whole left row of T'Gatoi's limbs closed around her, holding her loosely, but securely. I had always found it comfortable to lie that way, but except for my older sister, no one else in the family liked it. They said it made them feel caged' (Butler 2005, 6). In this early passage, Butler seems to foreground an agricultural reading. The dominant insects are holding pens for human flesh: they farm Terrans, while their bodies describe both the biopower of animal agriculture, and the control of the flesh exercised by industrial agricultural holding crates. They care in the manner of Stiegler's *panser*, as livestock farmers, for the productivity of the flesh, for that value they can extract. Fahim Amir writes: 'The whole apparatus of fences, cages, pens, and surveillance and monitoring systems is an answer to the monstrous agency of animals and a testament to their world-forming power' (Amir 2020, 20). Carnologistic infrastructures enclose animal agency, normal-

izing conceptions of passivity by strictly regulating all bodily behaviour.

Just as normative violence regulates the natural flesh resistance of livestock animals, so too the Tlic determine the Terrans' normative comprehension of the range of spatial agency. In another instance, Gan is told by T'Gatoi 'Thinness is dangerous' because for the Tlic, Terrans are principally flesh. It has been common since Haraway's influential remarks to read Butler in relational terms, as describing and allegorizing the mutual symbiotic intersection of species. However, as recent work in black studies has made all too apparent, too often a new materialist approach evades iniquities of power (see also Weisberg 2009, 22–62). As Zakiyyah Iman Jackson asks, 'What if we read the story in light of and with an eye for the politics of species?' (Jackson 2020, 40). Despite this important question, and despite the fact that Butler in the later part of her life practiced a vegan diet due to the fact that she 'could not stomach the torture of animals' (Due 2020, 276), and depicted her conception of the visceral bodily refusal to consume flesh as a central plot and character motif in her Oankali trilogy *Lilith's Brood*, to my knowledge no critic has yet considered the specific power dynamics and the use of the flesh in 'Bloodchild' as allegorizing animal farming.

One subtlety of the story is that its first-person narrator and central protagonist, Gan, is largely unaware of the carnologicistic systems of control that he lives within, which has been naturalized for him from an early age: 'I'm told I was first caged within T'Gatoi's many limbs only three minutes after my birth' (Butler 2005, 8). We see, in following the forced habituation to a 'caged' existence from birth, Gan normalizes his entrapment. Educated within the Tlic cage, as unreliable narrator Gan is habituated to this treatment, so the story becomes centrally about the misrecognition of carnologicistic power. In effect, Butler combines in Gan the enclosure suffered by livestock with the all-too-common human failure to perceive that enclosure as suffering. As Carol J. Adams writes, 'Everywhere animals are in chains, but we image them as free' (Adams 2010, 19). Criticism has not generally recognized this centrally important element of the story. This is unfortunate, as Butler foregrounds the skewed and distorted worldview of Gan early in the story (Butler 2005, 4):

When I was little and at home more, my mother used to try to tell me how to behave with T'Gatoi – how to be respectful and always obedient because T'Gatoi was the Tlic government official in charge of the Preserve, and thus the most important of her kind to deal

directly with Terrans. It was an honor, my mother said, that such a person had chosen to come into the family. My mother was at her most formal and severe when she was lying.

Gan recognizes the flesh as signifying power, but he has been cut off from the meaning it invokes by the normalization of the Tlic cage that he has been raised within. Gan's mother functions as warning that Gan's viewpoint is limited and distorted, epistemically beholden to Tlic uses of Terran flesh. Gan asserts, 'I had no idea why she was lying, or even what she was lying about. It was an honor to have T'Gatoi in the family' (Butler 2005, 4). His subject position is constructed within the normative infrastructures of carnologistics, and not able to conceive his mother's apparent revulsion for the Tlic's parasitism. The story is tricky, a slippery exercise in recognizing misrecognition, because Gan must be felt as wrong, an unreliable narrator, failing to understand, even as we learn the situation of the story only from his words. At another point he notes the apparent frustration that his mother expresses about the continual presence of T'Gatoi: 'My mother made a wordless sound of annoyance. "I should have stepped on you when you were small enough," she muttered. It was an old joke between them' (Butler 2005, 7). Gan's limited view understands this desperate desire to be free of the Tlic presence as a dark joke, but does not seem to recognize the sincere impotent frustration of his mother at the dominion of carnologistics wielded by the Tlic over Terran life. Gan's mother offers a powerful yet submerged alternative perspective, a warning concerning Gan's narrative voice.

### **Posthuman Animals and Free-Range Horror**

A carnologistic reading of Butler's story focuses on the story's horror. Reversing conventional carnologistics, it is Terrans – humans – who are farmed. In this reversal lies the story's uncanny horror. In her afterword, Butler expresses particular interest in the reversal of conventional power dynamics in the story's motif of male birth (generally male Terrans are used by the Tlic to host eggs), and a non-imperial vision of human encounters with other life. She also specifically notes the story is not about slavery. A carnologistic reading, which recognizes the manner in which the story positions humans as farmed creatures, is consistent with Butler's over-arching aims of reversing conventional power relations. The possibility of the Tlic industrially farming the Terrans is also briefly described in the story (Butler 2005, 9):

Back when the Tlic saw us as not much more than convenient, big, warm-blooded animals, they would pen several of us together, male and female, and feed us only eggs. That way they could be sure of getting another generation of us no matter how we tried to hold out. We were lucky that didn't go on long. A few generations of it and we would have been little more than convenient, big animals.

This industrial-livestock-carnologistic reduction of life remains hypothetical in the world of the story, due to T'Gatoi's innovation of the Preserve, a compound where the Terrans are allowed to live in relative freedom, on the condition that their males agree to host Tlic eggs. The 'free-range' Preserve thus enables Terrans to retain some degree of bodily autonomy, while individual Terrans are taught to internalize the power dynamics of Tlic carnologistics. Gan's brother Qui refuses the benign understanding of the Preserve. Horrified by the Terran acceptance of entrapment, Qui critiques his own stupidity: 'Stupid. Running inside the Preserve. Running in a cage' (Butler 2005, 9).

In fact, Butler aligns acceptance of this exploitative use of Terran flesh with Gan's unreliable point of view, and also a narcotic condition that T'Gatoi and the other Tlic attempt to propagate among the Terrans. The Tlic eggs fed to the Terrans have a tranquilizing effect, so that it is significant that Gan's mother refuses these. At the very least, Gan's mother and brother offer a submerged alternative perspective. Gan feels he chooses the male pregnancy of positive symbiotic relationality, as in Haraway's sense of ecology as 'sympoiesis': 'Nothing makes itself; nothing is really autopoietic or self-organizing' (Haraway 2016, 58). Yet there is alternative anti-productive and feminine resistance: one that is not ready to consume T'Gatoi's eggs. Gan cannot understand why his mother will not eat these, and nor can T'Gatoi. 'Why are you in such a hurry to be old?' (Butler 2005, 5), she asks. As a new materialist, Gan's perspective aligns with T'Gatoi's, internalizing the logistics of Terran control, while his mother wants to hold firm to an outside, or merely stage a form of resistance to the narcotic agrilogistic relationality of the Tlic farming. Though powerless, she nevertheless resists Tlic carnologistics.

In these moments of resistance, the story maintains a subtle devaluing of Gan's point of view. This is also to be found in Gan's fight with his brother Qui, who has lived further from the Tlic and despises them. Qui expresses frustration at the manner in which Gan internalizes Tlic views: "Don't give me one of her looks," he said. "You're not her. You're just her

property” (Butler 2005, 18). Relational critique based on the work of Haraway understands Qui, Gan’s brother, as expressing the destructive misrecognition of self-autonomy. Yet Gan’s brother also questions the invisible power of carnalogistics. ‘Qui’ is he who questions: the Latin root *qui* used in question, quest and inquiry. Gan expresses, rather, unquestioning acceptance – doped on Tlic eggs. The etymology of Gan is less certain, but possibly suggests Latin for his willing consumption of Tlic framings of symbiosis, and Tlic narcotics: gluttonous (*ganeo*), the basis for ‘gannet.’ T’Gatoi gives a narcotic to Gan to calm him after the traumatic incident of the larvae: ‘I felt the familiar sting, narcotic, mildly pleasant’ (p. 27). This means the entire positive discussion at the end, of the posthuman symbiotic-sympoiesis that so inspires new materialist relational critics, is conducted while Gan is drugged by Tlic narcotics. To read this forced symbiosis merely as positive mutuality is to miss power relations and the coercive caging, drugging, emotional self-sacrifice (Gan giving himself to save his sister Hoa).<sup>1</sup> This is not precisely mutuality, but rather drug-induced carnalogistic parasitism – and in Butler’s self-consciously upside-down presentation (‘my pregnant man story’), the Tlic are the farmers, the alien carnalogistic dominators. The Tlic, that is to say, are what humans must look like to livestock animals – except Tlic do not slaughter humans in the story at the rate of 200,000 deaths per second. This makes ‘Bloodchild’ a story about existent power relations exercised upon nonhumans, but seen differently because human protagonists are the ones who suffer this power.

It is also a story about the misrecognition of political power, such as wielded in industrial animal agriculture, as benign symbiosis. Uncanny flesh horror is the stylistic that Butler employs to depict this reversal. Butler states in her Preface: ‘I found the idea of a maggot living and growing under my skin, eating my flesh as it grew, to be so intolerable, so terrifying that I didn’t know how I could stand it if it happened to me’ (Butler 2005, 30–31). It is a similar reaction that she replicates in Gan, who is deeply traumatized by seeing Terran flesh: ‘The whole procedure was wrong, alien [...] Finally, I stood shaking, tears streaming down my face. I did not know why I was crying, but I could not stop. I went further from the house to avoid being seen. Every time I closed my eyes I saw

<sup>1</sup> In the story, the central dilemma involves Gan’s growing discomfiture concerning his imminent role as providing with the flesh of his body a home for T’Gatoi’s grubs. Ultimately, he decides to accept this duty so that his sister Hoa will not be compelled to instead.

red worms crawling over redder human flesh' (p. 17) – this is the feeling of horror peeking through Gan's narcotic acceptance of symbiosis: the unsettling alternative to Gan's naïve unreliable perspective. Normalized carnologistics are upset, cracked open for a moment, so that the suffering flesh becomes disturbingly visible. For this reason, we should read 'Bloodchild' as a horror story, a story of flesh terror, not primarily about the positive 'living with' of relationality, but about the coming to terms with the self-deception necessary to 'live with.'

In fact, one might argue that with Gan the story narrativizes the struggle to face the uncanny poetics of Capitalocene meat. As Gan watches the bloody grubs 'ooz[e] to visibility in Lomas's flesh,' he questions his future role as a surrogate: 'I had been told all my life that this was a good and necessary thing Tlic and Terran did together – a kind of birth. I had believed it until now.' (Butler 2005, 13). This is Gan, the indoctrinated one, seeing the flesh ooze to the extent that it threatens the normative epistemes that have organized his life, so that the story is about whether uncanny awareness can break epistemic normalization in a person who has internalized carnologistics.

This means the horror aesthetics of Butler's carnologistics undoes from within arguments, such as Haraway's, that claim unambiguously positive accounts of human-nonhuman relationality, even in the most violently exploitative contexts, such as to be found in Haraway's attempts to justify vivisection: 'What happens if experimental animals are not mechanical substitutes but significantly unfree partners, whose differences and similarities to human beings, to one another, and to other organisms are crucial to the work of the lab and, indeed, are partly constructed by the work of the lab?' (Haraway 2008, 72). The answer to Haraway's question, from the point of view of the vivisectioned animals is of course: *nothing at all* changes for the vivisection animal if we change the way we signify the metaphysics of their exploitation. Rather than seeking material change in the deployment of capitalist power, Haraway's elaborate theorizations of sympoiesis centrally concern themselves solely with the way the human operatives of the Capitalocene think about the power they wield. Given that Haraway's smooth new materialist words function as palliative, justifying the status quo with a calming soporific effect, and also due to the fact they have in many cases a readership who might in practice be open to questioning the power that capital inflicts upon nonhuman creatures, the likelihood is that Haraway – like the Tlic eggs – defuses the possibility for anti-exploitative praxis, functioning as an agent that sustains

traditional Capitalocene carnologicals. As Fahim Amir states: ‘when it comes to animals the left goes right’ (Amir 2020, 6).

As an example of relationality in respect to ‘Bloodchild,’ Laurel Bollinger (2007) suggests that the Terran-Tlic relation involves love and ‘connectedness,’ reading the partnership between Gan and T’Gatoi as maternal. It is notable that the other dominant critical tradition reads the story as a parable for slavery (a reading that Butler’s preface specifically denies). Despite Butler’s denial, Donna Donawerth describes ‘Bloodchild’ as a tale of ‘exploitation’ (Donawerth 1997, 40), while Amanda Thibodeau describes a ‘parasitic’ partnership (Thibodeau 2012, 270), and Marty Fink perceives a ‘violent physical invasion’ and ‘alien appropriation of human bodies’ (Fink 2010, 417–418). Something about the tale either compels the reading of connectedness or violent exploitation. One might dwell on the apparent incompatibility of these two dominant traditions of reading: the exploitative reading of the story as a slavery allegory reads violent domination of Terrans, whereas relationality reads symbiotic togetherness. I believe my carnological reading of the story fits both these critical traditions together, and allows them to speak to one another in new ways, because the violence of carnologicals is both symbiotic and largely unseen. Carol J. Adams’s ‘absent referent’ is the missing element here, which enables symbiotic love to be perceived in the place of violent exploitation. Reading with carnologicals helps draw together ‘Bloodchild’s’ presentation of relationality as both violently exploitative and normative relationality.

One important recent attempt to link these two manners of reading comes from Zakiyyah Iman Jackson’s rightly celebrated study *Becoming Human*. Jackson’s states of Butler, ‘her oeuvre is not an unqualified endorsement of symbiosis, as some feminist posthumanists have claimed but rather a complex meditation on the promise and perils of symbiogenesis, symbiosis, and parasitism under conditions of unequal power’ (Jackson 2020, 129). Aware both of the inescapability of ecological symbiosis and violently exploitative forms of Capitalocene biopower, Jackson aims at a position between posthumanism and unconditionally positive accounts of relationality. Where I would want to dialogue a little further with Jackson is the way her antihumanist reading of Butler might seem to downplay the horror of flesh exploitation: “‘Bloodchild’ re-establishes fleshly embodied subjectivity as a multispecies processual environment characterized not by Self-control but the transfer of control rather than a sovereign “I” (p. 122). For Jackson, the flesh must firstly be consid-



ered always-already, 'a multispecies processual environment.' While this certainly is true with regard to complex networks of shared ecologies (including those of intensive animal agriculture), the absence of a truly 'sovereign "I"' in ecological networks ought not to be taken as shorthand for the irrelevance of flesh as ethically fraught substance. As with Haraway, Jackson seems less concerned with the carnologicistic uncanny horror of using flesh as an instrumental commodity form that Butler centralizes, which is arguably the central tonality of the fiction. If the story undoes the 'sovereign "I,"' it also associates uncanny horror with the forms of parasitism involved in this undoing.

This also means, while the most uncanny and gripping moments from the story describe the exploitative use of human flesh, for Jackson, "Bloodchild" is a meditation on the embodied mind's encounter with other species, particularly insects, parasites, bacteria, fungi, protozoa, and viruses, which are the dominant forms of life composing our world and bodies' (Jackson 2020, 134). Notable in all the species encounters that Jackson proposes here is the fact that none deploy carnologicistics the way the Tlic use Terrans. Arguably, the use of industrial livestock much more closely parallels the Tlic's use of humans in Butler's fiction than fungi symbioses, yet livestock remain absent from Jackson's consideration. Moreover, the distance between the *umwelt* of fungi and humans arguably reduces the uncanniness involved in the symbiotic use of one and the other. In this way, Jackson arguably perpetuates the Humanist desire to divide human and nonhuman life by expressing a mode of relationality between safely dissimilar lifeforms, employing the strategy that Derrida terms the 'general singular' of 'the animal,' which is repeatedly used by western philosophers to evade confronting in their own reasoned arguments the actual flesh of the animals that they are cutting open (Derrida 2008, 41). Notably, a similar strategy is used by the Tlic themselves, in order to justify their parasitic symbiosis: 'You know you aren't animals to us' (Butler 2005, 24). If one believes the Tlic here, as Gan does, and as various posthumanist critics do, this might seem to mean that, as a radically different lifeform that recognizes the abyssal difference of humans, the Tlic in fact legitimates the carnologicistic use of animals. Yet the story is interesting (and tonally uncanny) because it also continually questions this assumption, by disrupting the believability of the Tlic, placing in doubt Gan's ability to understand, and by showing carnologicistic care, as in Stiegler's *panser*, as also violently exploitative.

Yet, what is also strange and forceful in Butler's tale is the way Tlic and

Terran are brought so close together. For Jackson, the Tlic's insect basis makes the story about the disassembly of subjectivity effected by parasitical microorganisms: 'Through their relation, Butler reveals that parasites and microorganisms mark the limit of liberal humanist conceptions of subjectivity characterized by autonomous agency and consent' (Jackson 2020, 142). But surely, the way that the story places human life into a systematic and exploitative parasitism in which coercive and unequal social arrangements structure the relation of two symbiotically interlinked species, asks us to recognize a more uncanny mode of parasitism? The failure of consent is not limited to microorganisms, but is central to the parasitic human uses of livestock flesh in systems of Capitalocene meat.

As an ethically oriented mode of posthumanism, the carnologicistic reading understands Tlic as expressing something about human farming, and the story's Terran as a critical expression of the position of livestock. In this reading, Butler's story demonstrates how the qualities celebrated by Cartesian humanism, such as autonomy, agency and consent, are themselves fuelled by the symbiotic domination of other species. It is not simply, or even centrally, that humanist subjectivity is undermined by symbiosis – as in the posthumanist reading of the tale. 'Bloodchild' goes further than this, describing how Tlic subjectivity, as an allegory of humanity, is dependent on carnologicistic power and its own unrecognized and violent parasitism of Terrans.

### **Conclusion: Parasitism and Conceptual Larvae**

The dissolution of the subject is celebrated in many classic anti- and posthumanist analyses of the story. What Butler troubles, in the ethical dilemma ingeniously arranged by the story, is the way that such a dissolution is aligned with the violent carnologicistic parasitism of vertical integration, such as to be found in the most intensive factory farming. By reading from the position of exploited flesh, relationality is not the overcoming of impermeable humanism, but rather its very foundation.

Staying with the flesh, there is something conceptually disarming about the story's parasitism. Butler's 'Preface' has been much considered by feminists and black studies scholars for its discussion of male pregnancy and its denial that the story is an allegory for slavery. Yet perhaps less attention has been turned to the botfly that Butler describes, that filled her with fear on a visit to South America. Botfly lay their eggs in human flesh and thus supply the model for the Tlic and their parasitical symbiosis with Terrans. Yet Butler here perhaps also makes a reference to her occluded

zoē-politics. In Plato's *Apology for Socrates*, he reports Socrates's notable speech, delivered before the Athenian citizens in an attempt to save his own life (Plato 1966, 124):

[I]f you kill me you will not easily find another like me, who, if I may use such a ludicrous figure of speech, am a sort of gadfly, given to the State by the God; and the State is like a great and noble steed who is tardy in his motions owing to his very size, and requires to be stirred into life.

As Hannah Arendt comments: 'The role of the philosopher is not to rule the city but to be its 'gadfly,' not to tell philosophical truths but to make citizens more truthful [...] Socrates did not want to educate the citizens so much as he wanted to improve their *doxai*' (Arendt 1990, 81). It is notable that the botfly that preoccupied Butler is a species of gadfly, and it is unlikely that this escaped Butler's attention. Her work, like Socrates' overturning of *doxa*, is an annoyance, and a weirdly uncanny frustration that does not quite resolve into a satisfying celebration of symbiosis, despite so many brilliant and ingenious critical efforts, because it is at the same time a refusal of the *doxai* of carnologicistic power and the industrial use of livestock flesh – a position that Butler's own veganism also turned to quotidian praxis. The story troubles because it offers the dialectic of two partial answers: horror at flesh parasitism and (narcotized) posthumanist relationality. Notably, too, the egg parasite of the botfly and of Butler's Tlic is more disarming than the mere sting that Socrates describes, also involving a sneaky burrowing within, an implanting, and a reorganizing of self-knowledge based on an alienating vision of the flesh. Recognition of one's flesh as an ecosystem, contiguous with the world, involves examining one's place in the uniquely accelerated systems of parasitism that constitute Capitalocene modernity. The Tlic, like botflies, undo human transcendence by developing the Socratic gadfly sting – planting conceptual larvae, introducing a bug into the cultural ecology of carnophallogocentric humanist transcendence.

'Poetry is invasion not expression,' Amy Ireland writes (Ireland 2017). Yet this bug is also a debugging (the most fraught and dramatic moments in the story involve taking these grubs out of human flesh), so that one might position the story's aesthetic force as involving a debugging of industrial carnism – one that shifts the meaning of the human away from both transcendent otherness and narcotized symbiosis with industrial meat, towards worldly contiguity – our fleshy continuum with those be-

ings whose flesh we harvest. Recognizing the inevitability of symbiosis, as the story's horror-ambiguity insists, does not need to imply unquestioning ethical approval of carnologicistic parasitism. As a discomfiting detournement via uncanny poetics to a firmer sense of embodied solidarity, the Terrans Gan and Qui are fundamentally of the Earth, but must travel great distances away from the known to discover the contiguity of their flesh with our planet's exploited livestock.

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