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“Your Body Has Made a Different Choice”: Cognition, Coercion, and the Ethics of Consent in Octavia E. Butler’s *Lilith’s Brood* and *Fledgling*

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Biography

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“Your Body Has Made a Different Choice”: Cognition, Coercion, and the Ethics of Consent in Octavia E. Butler’s *Lilith’s Brood* and *Fledgling*

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Abstract

Power is a common theme in Octavia E. Butler’s novels and short stories. The majority of the unequal power relationships are initiated and sustained through sex, sexual attraction, biochemical addiction, and mind control via biochemical influence and/or pheromones. The emphasis on coercion and subterfuge, as well as the association between sex and brain chemistry, allows for a critical consideration of Butler’s work as bearing upon debates over rape, medical ethics, and consent. Situated within a framework that includes a discussion of Kant’s the formula of the end in itself as well as of informed consent in bioethics, this article attempts to address features of Butler’s work which have gone largely unexamined within a philosophical context.

Keywords

Ethics, Coercion, Consent, Rape, Cognition, Kant, Bioethics, Science Fiction, Octavia E. Butler

All struggles are essentially power struggles. Who will rule? Who will lead? Who will define, refine, confine, design? Who will dominate?
—Octavia E. Butler, *Parable of the Sower*¹

I began writing about power because I had so little.
—Octavia E. Butler, Interview with Carolyn S. Davidson, “The Science Fiction of Octavia Butler”

1. Introduction

Emphases on power are prevalent in Octavia E. Butler’s work. Butler is concerned, even obsessed, with issues of control, coercion, and consent. *Wild Seed’s* Doro demands that Anyanwu produce children with him, lest he harm the children she already has. In “The Evening and the Morning and the Night,” Lynn, who lives with Duryea-Gode disease, realizes that her particular pheromones allow her to draw men with the disease to her and influence them to follow her commands. The protagonist of *Kindred* travels

1. This quote appears as the introductory parable of Chapter 9 in Butler’s *Parable of the Sower*.

back in time, only to find out that her great-great-grandmother was the product of rape. Anyanwu's granddaughter, Mary, can – somewhat like Lynn – attract and compel her relatives to do her bidding. The colonized humans of “Bloodchild” incubate alien children in return for an elixir which makes them young again, but are also never quite free of the aliens' seductive power; nor are the humans free from the power dynamics associated with being colonized.

Various treatises on Butler address power struggles across time and space in Butler's fiction. Sandra Govan addresses Doro's coercion of Anyanwu in *Wild Seed*, and in particular Doro's use of the “time-encrusted masculine ploy” to get Anyanwu pregnant, “the most immediate method he can use to control” her (1986, 85-86). Theri Pickens observes that “Butler's oeuvre stresses the impact of hierarchical relationships” (2014, 33), and Erin M. Pryor Ackerman notes that “[t]he issues of power and agency in Butler's writings have produced a wealth of criticism,” (2008, 35). Some of the scholarship on Butler explicitly addresses power and desire in *Lilith's Brood* and *Fledgling*. Frances Bonner, for instance, links the relationship between desire, power, and consent in *Lilith's Brood* (1990, 58) as well as discusses both rape and forced reproduction. Marty Fink posits that “[a]s in ‘Bloodchild’ and *Dawn* ... [in *Fledgling*] physical need and erotic transcendence preclude the possibility for escape,” asking if “consent might not be plausible because of the factors informing [their] decisions” (2010, 418). Florian Bast suggests that “the possibility of agency is called into question when [Butler's characters are] confronted with biological realities rather than social constructions” (2010).

In this paper, I fully articulate the strategies that Butler's powerful characters utilize to control the less powerful, as they extend beyond “biological realities,” desire, and sex. I show that far from relying exclusively on sexual coercion and drug addiction, Butler's powerful characters rely on a number of very human strategies to establish the unequal power dynamics. I also aim to make Butler's associations between sexual coercion, the ethics of consent, and medical ethics explicit, thereby further exposing the relevance of Butler's work for discussions on rape culture, women's reproductive rights, and bioethics. The following paper contextualizes Butler's treatises on the ethics of consent through a philosophical grounding. I first situate readers by providing a brief summary of Butler's work on the ethics of consent – namely, *Lilith's Brood* (2000) and *Fledgling* (2005) in section 1.2. Next I discuss how Butler explicitly and implicitly considers the ethics of consent in *Lilith's Brood* and *Fledgling* (sections 2 and 3), situate Butler's work in a larger discourse of consent and cognition (section 4), and explain the relevance of Butler's work to a discussion of rape culture, women's reproductive rights, and bioethics (section 5). In section 6, I conclude with a brief consideration of the relevance of the ethics of consent in

Butler's work, both in the body of existing scholarship on Butler, and for public discourse on rape, women's reproductive rights, and bioethics.

1.2 *Lilith's Brood and Fledgling*

Octavia E. Butler's two works to deal most prominently with the ethics of consent are *Lilith's Brood* and *Fledgling*. *Lilith's Brood*, originally published in 1989 as *Xenogenesis*, consists of *Dawn* (1987), *Adulthood Rites* (1988), and *Imago* (1989). The trilogy commences with Lilith's realization that she has been held captive by the alien Oankali for over two hundred years. The Oankali have periodically woken Lilith from suspended animation in order to determine her fit for her new roles – teaching the other humans how to survive on the post-apocalyptic Earth, and bearing the first Oankali-human hybrid, or construct. Once the Oankali decide that Lilith is indeed the human that they want, they begin to prepare her. What follows is a Cold War of sorts between Oankali and human resisters – humans who have been altered by the Oankali so they cannot have children on their own, but refuse to breed with the Oankali. Over the next thirty years, Lilith's children – human and Oankali hybrids, or constructs – must convince the Oankali to let human resisters have a separate colony and human children. Lilith's children must also find mates among the few willing humans left unclaimed by the older Oankali.

In *Fledgling*, Shori Matthews fights for her life against the old and influential white vampires who comprise the entrenched power system of the hidden vampire society and who feel threatened by a black vampire who can walk in the sun. *Fledgling*, as with *Lilith's Brood*, begins *in media res*. Its protagonist, like Lilith, awakes confused and alone, and questioning her sanity. The similarities end between Lilith and *Fledgling's* protagonist end there, however. Shori has awakened with amnesia, but soon learns that she is a 53-year-old Ina (Butler 2005, 70-72), or vampire. Shori appears to be a young black child, but she is much more like the Oankali than like Lilith. She holds most of the power in her relationship with her symbionts, the humans that she utilizes for sustenance and sex. It is Shori who withholds information, seduces, and coerces. As Shori attempts to find out who killed her family and left her with amnesia, her symbionts become pawns in a battle between the Ina factions.

Once the alien Oankali and the vampire Ina decide they want something, they take it. In this case, what they want are humans, who provide sexual release for both Oankali and Ina. Humans are also breeding partners in the case of the Oankali, and sustenance and servants for the Ina. The Oankali and Ina are not opposed to using force to subdue their "trade" partners (Butler 2000, 289) or "symbionts" (Butler 2005, 69), the Oankali

and Ina's respective terms for the humans that they use. They are also not opposed to literally altering the humans' brain chemistry; indeed, it is their primary way of keeping the humans invested in the relationship. The Oankali inject humans with a biochemical substance which has the ability to calm humans (Butler 2000, 191 & 619) as well as encourage a human's body to "secrete specific endorphins" (Butler 2000, 512). The bite of an Ina serves the same function (Butler 2005, 79). Moreover, repeated exposure to an Ina's saliva means death if the human no longer has access to the saliva for a prolonged period of time (Butler 2005, 79-80). Human symbionts are addicted to, and dependent upon, the biochemical in the saliva (Butler 2005, 76 & 79).

2. Cognition, Coercion, Force, and Consent in *Lilith's Brood*

Though the Oankali's release of a human is not a death sentence, the Oankali pose many other dangers. The Oankali control humans through one of five strategies: they "read" human body language and scents, use physical force, present the humans with dichotomous "choices" in order to ensure an outcome favorable for the Oankali, omit information, and drug the humans. The first strategy, that of utilizing their extrasensory abilities to know human fears and desires, is one that the Oankali use often.

2.1 "They Know Our Bodies Better than We Do":

"Reading" Humans in *Lilith's Brood*

The Oankali are particularly threatening because they perceive all that humans do not perceive about themselves. The Oankali are so perceptive that some humans think that the Oankali can read minds (Butler 2000, 25). The Oankali can even tell when humans are lying; because of their incredible senses, they "'can't help knowing'" when a human lies (Butler 2000, 619). The Oankali also perceive the humans' sexual attraction to and biochemical need for the Oankali:

"You said I could choose. I've made my choice!"

"You have, yes." It opened its jacket with its many-fingered true hands and stripped the garment from him. When he would have backed away, it held him. It managed to lie down on the bed without seeming to force him down. "You see. Your body has made a different choice." (Butler 2000, 189)

The Oankali's incredible extrasensory perception is ultimately only a foil for force. The Oankali routinely resort to physical force, which they invariably justify by saying that they only did what the humans wanted them to do.

2.2 "When he would have backed away, it held him":

Forced Sexual Encounters and Reproduction between the Oankali and Humans

Physical force is, with few exceptions, a precursor to seduction for the Oankali. The Oankali assert that the humans want to be intimate with the Oankali, though their actions would seem to say otherwise. Lilith says, "They know our bodies better than we do" (Butler 2000, 169). The Oankali's defense of their sexual coercion of the humans is eerily similar to the arguments of rape apologists. Indeed, some of the men in the novel feel as though they have been raped by men or at least that they have been raped *like* women when they have intercourse with the third sex ooloi (Butler 2000, 192 & 203). As Rachel Pollack notes, rape is central, and apparently acceptable, in *Dawn*, the first book of *Lilith's Brood* (Pollack qtd. in Bonner 1990). Meanwhile, human women bear the brunt of the Oankali's efforts to transform the human species, with the Oankali again relying on their ability to "read" humans. Lilith tells Tino, a human resister who becomes her mate, her discomfort at failing to give her words meaning and impact:

"They forced you to have kids?" the man asked.

"One of them surprised me," she said. "It made me pregnant, then told me about it. Said it was giving me what I wanted but would never come out and ask for."

"Was it?"

"Yes." She shook her head from side to side. "Oh, yes. But if I had the strength not to ask, it should have had the strength to let me alone."
(Butler 2000, 274)

It is Nikanj who impregnates Lilith and produces the first Oankali-human construct. Nikanj makes Lilith pregnant without her verbal consent, or even her knowledge, and it uses force to make her listen to its reasoning:

"Is it an unclean thing that I have made you pregnant?"

She did not understand the words at first. It was though it had begun speaking a language she did not know.

“You ... what?”

“I have made you pregnant with Joseph’s child. I shouldn’t have done it so soon, but I wanted to use his seed, not a print. I could not make you closely enough related to a child mixed from a print. And there’s a limit to how long I can keep sperm alive.”

She was staring at it, speechless. It was speaking as casually as though discussing the weather. She got up, would have backed away from it, but it caught her by both wrists.

She made a violent effort to break away, realized at once that she could not break its grip. “You said—” She ran out of breath and had to start again. “You said you wouldn’t do this. You said—”

“I said not until you were ready.”

“I’m not ready! I’ll never be ready!” (Butler 2000, 246)

Again Nikanj justifies its invasion of Lilith’s body with its supersensory knowledge and utilizes force in order to accomplish its goal, both echoing and alluding to its treatment of Joseph:

“You’ll have a daughter,” it said. “And you are ready to be her mother. You could never have said so. Just as Joseph could never have invited me into his bed—no matter how much he wanted me there. Nothing about you but your words reject this child.” (Butler 2000, 247)

In impregnating Lilith, Nikanj utilizes both its privileged information about Lilith’s body, and force, in order to control the outcome of the situation.

2.3 “You know you must accept me or Ooan”: Dichotomous “Choices” in *Lilith’s Brood*

Only occasionally do the Oankali appear to offer a choice. This choice is always a very narrow one; either it is between two options, neither of which are very favorable for the

human, or it is a statement disguised as a question, intended to lead the human to the option the Oankali prefer. Lilith asks why she cannot have Jdahya as her teacher. Jdahya and his mate, Tediin, ask Lilith a series of questions that confirm for Lilith that there is no real choice:

“... [I]f you and Nikanj weren’t supposed to be teaching each other, you would be learning from Kahgyaht.”

Lilith shuddered. “Good god,” she whispered. And seconds later, “Why couldn’t it be you?”

“Ooloi generally handle the teaching of new species.”

“Why? If I have to be taught, I’d rather you did it.”

His head tentacles smoothed.

“You like him or Kahguyaht?” Tediin asked. Her unpracticed English, acquired just from hearing others speak was much better than Lilith’s Oankali.

“No offense,” Lilith said, “but I prefer Jdahya.”

“Good,” Tediin said, her own head smooth, though Lilith did not understand why. “You like him or Nikanj?” (Butler 2000, 71-72)

Lilith admits that she prefers Nikanj, adding, ““You people are manipulative as hell, aren’t you?”” (Butler 2000, 72).

Lilith is again forced to choose between two unfavorable options when she learns that, no matter her wishes, the Oankali intend to make changes to her brain that will result in enhanced memory and nearly effortless language learning. Lilith is against the idea, saying, ““[N]o part of me is more definitive of who I am than my brain”” (Butler 2000, 76). Nikanj convinces Lilith to submit to the changes by telling her that surprising her would be “wrong” (Butler 2000, 78-79). Rather than preventing its ooloi parent, or “oan,” Kahguyaht, from altering Lilith’s brain, Nikanj says that it will not surprise her, but ““you must trust me or let Oan surprise you when it’s tired of waiting”” (Butler 2000, 79). Lilith confronts Nikanj’s hypocrisy when it says, ““We were bred to work with you ... We should be able to find ways through most of our differences.”” “Coercion,”

Lilith replies with rancor. “That’s the way you’ve found” (Butler 2000, 81-82). Lilith knows that when force or coercion do not work, the Oankali resort to subterfuge.

2.4 “It should have told you”:

Sex and Deceit in *Lilith’s Brood*

The Oankali control access to the information humans have in a number of ways. The first way in which they alter human knowledge is to block human survivors’ access to memories of being captured by the Oankali: “Humans who were allowed to remember their rescue became uncontrollable,” sometimes killing themselves or others (87). The other ways in which the Oankali control human knowledge are much more insidious and much less altruistic. By denying Lilith information about how Oankali bonds function, the Oankali trick Lilith into accepting Nikanj as her mate. First they pair her with Nikanj as her Oankali teacher while it is still a child. Lilith thinks of Nikanj as a child, “no more responsible for the thing that was to happen to the remnants of humanity than she was” (Butler 2000, 72). Nikanj also tells Lilith that it is not, and cannot be, aroused by her (Butler 2000, 82). Butler associates the changes Nikanj makes to Lilith’s brain with sexual coercion and deceit; Lilith learns, for instance, that Nikanj’s performance of the brain “surgery” has left her bound to Nikanj:

There was a faint odor to the hand—oddly flowery. Lilith did not like it and drew back from it after a moment of looking.

Kahguyaht retracted the hand so quickly that it seemed to vanish. It lowered the sensory arm. “Humans and Oankali tend to bond to one ooloi,” it told her. “The bond is chemical and not strong in you now because of Nikanj’s immaturity. That’s why my scent makes you uncomfortable.”

“Nikanj didn’t mention anything like that,” she said suspiciously.

“It healed your injuries. It improved your memory. It couldn’t do those things without leaving its mark. It should have told you.” (Butler 2000, 110)

Soon after, Lilith becomes Nikanj’s sexual partner (Butler 2000, 242). Lilith’s ooloi children are even more duplicitous than is Nikanj, for they are able to change their appearance at will to appear more attractive to humans (Butler 2000, 604 & 630). Lilith is eventually

complicit in the deceit, deliberately withholding from her ooloi child's potential human mates that if they choose to stay with Jodahs through its metamorphosis, they will never be able to leave (Butler 2000, 659-660).

Oankali subterfuge depends upon limiting the humans' access to the truth and dampening their perceptions. Nikanj admits that its pairing with Lilith was entirely premeditated, saying, "You were being prepared for me, Lilith. Adults believed you would be best paired with me during my subadult stage. Jdahya believed he could bring you to me without drugs, and he was right" (Butler 2000, 186).

2.5 "It would have outsold any illegal drug":

Oankali Sex as Pharmacon

Humans who pose too much of a threat are drugged. As Nikanj notes, "We dull your natural fear of strangers and of difference. We keep you from injuring or killing us or yourselves. We teach you more pleasant things to do" (Butler 2000, 191-192). Nikanj also admits that the Oankali drugged "newly awakened Humans much more than was good for them ... because we saw ... that we were damaging Lilith and the others" who had not been drugged, making them the target of their own people because the other humans perceive undrugged humans as having submitted willingly, even eagerly, to the Oankali (Butler 2000, 300).

Sexual pleasure is also a powerful drug in Butler's work. Lilith observes the trap of Oankali seduction: "Nikanj could give her an intimacy with Joseph that was beyond ordinary human experience. And what it gave, it also experienced. This was what had captured Paul Titus ... This, not sorrow over his losses or fear of a primitive Earth" (Butler 2000, 161). Lilith's partner, Joseph, says of sex with the Oankali, "If a thing like that could be bottled, it would have outsold any illegal drug on the market" (Butler 2000, 169). Lilith, too, is addicted, as she more or less admits when Joseph asks why she has allowed the Oankali to have sex with her:

"To have changes made. The strength, the fast healing—" He stopped in front of her, faced her. "Is that all?" he demanded.

She stared at him, seeing the accusation in his eyes, refusing to defend herself. "I liked it," she said softly. "Didn't you?" (Butler 2000, 169)

Lilith makes similar statements to Tino, her mate after Joseph, in describing to him his conditioning by Nikanj when he was young and the reason he is so drawn to the Oankali:

“Nikanj touched you when you were too young to have any defenses. And what it gave you, you won’t ever quite forget—or quite remember, unless you feel it again. You want it again. Don’t you.’ It was not a question” (Butler 2000, 294). Lilith is convinced of the power of the Oankali drug – the physical sensations that come with stimulation via the ooloi’s sex organ – to win over most anyone who has felt it. This is why Akin, Lilith’s construct son, says to one of the human resisters, “You wanted to [stay with the Oankali] ... You still do” (Butler 2000, 363).

2.6 The Irresistibility of Alien Control

As Lilith says to another of the human resisters, “We’re all a little bit co-opted, at least as far as our individual ooloi are concerned” (Butler 2000, 240). It is not *just* the ooloi sex, though; it is the way in which the humans first experience ooloi sex. It is the lack of information about what an ooloi’s touch will do to them. It is that, knowing most humans would never agree to sexual contact of their own accord, the first contact is almost always forced or done under the guise of some other action. It is the juncture of desire, force, deceit, limited agency, and sex that has made the humans so malleable and integrated them into the folds of the Oankali.

3. Cognition, Coercion, Force, and Consent in *Fledgling*

The Ina can, and do, dominate humans just as the Oankali do. They also use their extrasensory abilities to choose and to influence their symbionts, resort to physical force when necessary, prevent early symbionts from knowing the Ina’s identity, offer humans limited options so that the Ina can determine the outcome, and utilize drugs. In addition, the Ina’s use of the drugs means that they can compel humans under their influence to answer questions, remember information, and perform tasks. As with the Oankali, there is a strong sexual component to the Ina’s relationship with their symbionts. Indeed, most of the Ina have sexual intercourse of some form or another with most or all of their symbionts. Like the Oankali, the Ina are able to determine whether or not a human is likely to be receptive to their sexual advances.

3.1 “I didn’t imagine that loneliness had a scent”:

The Ina’s Extrasensory Perceptions

Even without her memory intact, Shori relies on scent to tell her which humans to approach and try to convert to her symbionts. Her first convert, Wright, smells “really interesting” (Butler 2005, 15). Shori meets Wright by chance, but she chooses Theodora more carefully; Theodora’s “aloneness was good, somehow ... I got the impression that no one had touched her in a long time” (Butler 2005, 30). Shori tells Theodora, “[Y]ou smell open, wanting alone.... longing, needing.” Theodora asks, “Do you mean that I smelled lonely? ... I didn’t imagine that loneliness had a scent.... I am lonely” (Butler 2005, 98). In at least some fashion, Shori’s choice of Theodora is completely calculated. Another Ina discusses the concept of a “good symbiont,” and Shori’s choice of Theodora, with Shori:

“... [S]he loves you absolutely. She’s exactly the kind of person I would expect to be able to resist one of us—older, educated, well-off—but she couldn’t wait to get to you.”

“She was lonely,” I said. (Butler 2005, 207)

Because Theodora is lonely, Shori knows that Theodora will want to join Shori, Wright, and Shori’s Ina family: “She’ll want to come. She doesn’t have to, but she’ll want to” (Butler 2005, 93).

Shori also listens to voices and other cues to determine whether or not a human is scared or lying (Butler 2005, 251-252). Moreover, and perhaps more importantly, the Ina can influence humans and other Ina through their scent, both unconsciously and deliberately (Butler 2005, 216 & 222).

For some reason, though – perhaps to emphasize lack of consent – Butler never writes a character that is converted or seduced through scent alone. Force is always integral to Oankali and Ina dominance.

3.2 “I lay down beside the woman and covered her mouth with my hand...

I held on to her with my other arm”: Forced Sexual Encounters in *Fledgling*

Even after Shori bites Wright for the first time, she has to take his hand and forcibly keep it between hers while he tries to shake her off. Wright shakes Shori so vigorously that he lifts her “into the air a little.” He continues to attempt to get away, but Shori is determined: “I didn’t let go.” Eventually Wright stops struggling (Butler 2005, 17). This

pattern follows for all of Shori's symbionts and other humans that she bites (Butler 2005, 49 & 117). When Shori first bites Theodora, the force Shori uses is intense and extended:

I lay down beside the woman and covered her mouth with my hand as she woke. I held on to her with my other arm and both my legs as she began to struggle. Once I was sure of my hold on her, I bit into her neck. She struggled wildly at first, tried to bite me, tried to scream. But after I had fed for a few seconds, she stopped struggling. I held her a little longer, to be sure she was subdued; then, when she gave no more trouble, I let her go." (Butler 2005, 31)

Shori is stronger than all of her symbionts, including Wright (Butler 2005, 16). She uses force with abandon in each first bite.

3.3 "I can't leave you. I don't even want to leave you":

Dichotomous "Choices" and Symbionts' inability to revoke consent in *Fledgling*

Once that contact is made, once a human is exposed to the Ina biochemical, it is difficult for that human to give up the pleasure. Wright tells Shori that it was impossible for him to choose to give her up, particularly given that she offered him the choice in a time of danger: "... [Y]ou think I could have just gone away and not come back? I had to leave you lying on the ground bleeding. You insisted on it. How could I not come back to make sure you were all right?" (Butler 2005, 89). Wright points out the futility of Shori's offer when she asks him if he wants to leave:

"Why bother to ask me that?" he demanded. "I can't leave you. I don't even want to leave you."

"Then what do you want?"

He sighed and shook his head. "I don't know. I know I wish I had driven past you on the road eleven nights ago and not stopped." (Butler 2005, 90).

Wright is so certain that he cannot have given consent once being exposed to Shori's drugged saliva that he wishes he had not met her at all. But save for the children of symbionts, no potential symbiont is ever offered the choice to be or not be a symbiont *before* exposure to the drug.

3.4 “I never really had a chance. I didn’t have any idea what I was getting into”:

Ina Omission and Deceit

Wright says that humans let the Ina take them over “because we have no choice. By the time we realize what’s happened to us, it’s too late.” Brook, another symbiont, counters Wright: “It’s not usually that way ... Iosif told me what would happen if I accepted him, that I would become addicted and need him. That I would have to obey. That if he died, I might die” (Butler 2005, 167). Martin Harrison, however, disagrees with Brook’s more generous assessment:

“It doesn’t seem to matter to most humans what our lives were before we met you. You bite us, and that’s all it takes.... He bit me, and after that I never really had a chance. I didn’t have any idea what I was getting into.... I wasn’t physically addicted. No pain, no sickness. But psychologically ... Well, I couldn’t forget it. I wanted it like crazy.” (Butler 2005, 210)

Though Brook suggests Shori’s deceit is unintentional and “probably because of her memory loss,” and Wright says Shori has “shown herself to be a weirdly ethical little thing most of the time” (Butler 2005, 168), Shori is deceitful in other ways. In converting Theodora, perhaps anticipating Theodora’s negative reaction to her skin color and apparent youth (Butler 2005, 95), Shori deliberately prevents Theodora from seeing her (Butler 2005, 31 & 94). Shori is deceitful repeatedly and intentionally in order to ascertain her symbionts’ addiction and compliance.

3.5 “What I told them to do, they would try to do, once I had taken their blood”:

Pheromones, Biochemical Influences, and Sex in *Fledgling*

Deception is more closely tied to addiction in *Fledgling*. The limitations on human agency, also, are much more inextricably linked to biochemical drug addiction in *Fledgling* than in *Lilith’s Brood*. Indeed, in *Fledgling*, the drug is more powerful. The drug’s consequences for humans are more powerful as well. Not only can the addiction lead to death for human symbionts that lose their Ina, the biochemical affects *any* human who is bitten even once. For this reason an otherwise unaffected human can be led to give an Ina money or goods, divulge to an Ina privileged information, and even fight other symbionts in his or her family. Human symbionts must follow all orders given to them by their own Ina, and it is literally impossible for them to forget an order. Shori is aware of the power of her venom: “What I told them to do, they would try to do, once I had taken their blood” (Butler 2005, 110). The sexual pleasure inherent in the bite is also literally

compelling. After first being bitten, Wright says he isn't sure he should allow Shori to do it again. Immediately after, he says, "Shit, you can do it right now if you want to" (Butler 2005, 24). The humans Shori bites ask, even beg, her to do it again (Butler 2005, 58 & 180), equating the experience of pleasure and addiction to cocaine (Butler 2005, 187). The humans truly feel that they need continued exposure to Ina venom, and the Ina take advantage.

3.6 "[T]reat your people well":

Ina Control and (Lack of) Responsibility

Advanced sensory awareness, combined with superior strength and addictive venom, means that Shori, and the other Ina, can ostensibly have complete control over humans. Some of the Ina respect humans as autonomous beings, to an extent, as when Shori's father Iosif cautions her to be fair:

"...[T]reat your people well, Shori. Let them see that you trust them and let them solve their own problems, make their own decisions. Do that and they will willingly commit their lives to you. Bully them, control them out of fear or malice or just for your own convenience, and after a while, you'll have to spend all your time thinking for them, controlling them, and stifling their resentment." (Butler 2005, 79)

Though he counsels her to be fair, Iosif sees the Ina as humans' "more gifted cousin" (Butler 2005, 73). Other Ina regard humans as no more than "tools;" weapons for murdering Ina or other symbionts (Butler 2005, 284-285). Even Shori admits, to one of her symbionts, that she "won't always ask" (Butler 2005, 289). For the Ina, asking for and receiving consent is an option, not a necessity.

4. Kant on the Ethics of Consent

In order to better articulate the implicit and explicit associations between the ethics of consent in Butler's work and rape culture, women's reproductive rights, and bioethics, a brief discussion of Kant's The Formula of the End in Itself follows. Kant is particularly relevant because Kant is clear on why deceit and coercion on the one hand, and consent on the other, are mutually exclusive. Kant is also clear that it is the lack of consent and of treating a person as an end in themselves that makes any particular course of action acceptable or not, rather than any products of that action, whether the products are for good or for ill.

4.1 Kant's The Formula of the End in Itself

Kant writes that one person should never treat themselves or another person as *merely* a means:

[T]he human being, and in general every rational being, *exists* as end in itself, *not merely as means* to the discretionary use of this or that will, but in all its actions, those directed toward itself as well as those directed toward other rational beings, it must always *at the same time* be considered as an *end*." ([1785] 2002, 45)

Onora O'Neill extrapolates that "[t]o use someone as a *mere means* is to involve them in a scheme of action to which they could not in principle consent. Such situations include deceit:

One person may make a promise to another with every intention of breaking it. If the promise is accepted, then the person to whom it was given must be ignorant of what the promisor's intention (maxim) really is.... Successful false promising depends on deceiving the person to whom the promise is made about what one's real maxim is. And since the person who is deceived doesn't know that real maxim, he or she can't in principle consent to his or her part in the proposed scheme of action. (1980, 287)

A second situation in which consent is impossible, O'Neill elaborates, is when coercion is involved. For instance, "[i]f a rich and powerful person threatens a debtor with bankruptcy unless he or she joins in some scheme, then the creditor's intention is to coerce; and the debtor, if coerced, cannot consent" (1980, 287).

4.2 Kant on Morality and "Rational Beings"

Kant also notes that not only humans are subject to these maxims against using a person as a mere means; rather, moral laws are applicable not only to human beings ([1785] 2002, 21), but all "rational" forms of life ([1785] 2002, 21 & 49). Thus, the Oankali and Ina are responsible for their treatment of human beings, and should be held accountable.

4.3 Humans as *Mere Means* in *Lilith's Brood* and *Fledgling*

Through unequal power dynamics, limiting the humans' options, deceit, force, and drugs/sex, the Oankali and Ina consistently treat the humans as a mere means rather

than as ends in themselves. Because the humans are subjected to multiple and sustained constraints on their agency, they are unable to give consent. The other aspects of the relationship – better health, long lives, communal living, etc. – have very little or no bearing upon the morality of the Oankali’s and Ina’s actions because the humans did not enter into the beneficial aspects of the relationship with prior knowledge or willingness.

5. Rape Culture, Women’s Reproductive Rights, and Bioethics

There are startling similarities between the Oankali’s and Ina’s treatment of the humans and the discourse of rape culture, women’s reproductive rights, and bioethics. Like the humans in *Lilith’s Brood* and *Fledgling*, victims of rape, women seeking abortions, and others in medical care situations, are often subject to reduced agency. They are told that their perceptions are inaccurate and/or that someone in a position of power has a greater access to the truth. They are forced into situations to which they do not want to and/or cannot give consent. They are presented with only a limited range of options, and they are tricked or drugged. What follows is a discussion of how *Lilith’s Brood* and *Fledgling* apply to a discourse of rape and rape culture.

5.1 Rape and Rape Culture in *Lilith’s Brood* and *Fledgling*

One must differentiate between the way Butler’s work eroticizes and even romanticizes lack of consent in sexual intercourse, and actual rape culture. In other ways, however, there are a number of correlates between lack of consent in Butler’s work and the ways in which lack of consent is discussed in other venues. Three of the Oankali and Ina strategies bear most closely upon the dynamics of a discussion of rape culture through *Lilith’s Brood* and *Fledgling*: force, coercion, and drugs. The ways in which the Oankali and the Ina take advantage of humans are strikingly like the ways in which rape victims are first raped and then blamed as if though they entered into the sexual intercourse willingly. In both *Lilith’s Brood* and in *Fledgling*, sexual relationships are initiated through force or through deceit. Joseph, for instance, is laid down on the bed against his will by Nikanj. Lilith’s first sexual encounter with Nikanj is under the guise that it is *only* making changes to her brain.² Tino is too young to have defenses against the Oankali’s sexual

2. Nikanj notes before this encounter that it is too young to make the experience pleasurable for Lilith. Frances Bonner posits that the omission of the first physically pleasurable, and purely sexual, activity between Lilith and Nikanj is telling: “Butler presents this scene [the sexual encounter between Joseph and Nikanj] with the male rather than the female human and indeed does not show us the scene where Nikanj first rapes/seduces Lilith at all. It occurs between the first and second sections of *Dawn* and is not even

coercion. Shori surprises Wright when she first bites him, and literally has to hold down Theodora.

A 2000 study by the U.S. Department of Justice found that fifty-four percent of the rape victims surveyed were under 18 at the time of the assault (Thoennes and Tjaden 2000), and sexual assault is often a feature of domestic abuse (“Victims and Perpetrators” 2010). The humans in *Lilith’s Brood* and *Fledgling*, like actual rape victims, are often in vulnerable situations.

The humans in *Lilith’s Brood* and *Fledgling* are also drugged, as is often the case with actual rape victims, and particularly those who experienced sexual assault while attending university. The National Institute of Justice Campus Sexual Assault survey (2007) found that though “[m]ore women experienced forced sexual assault before college than during,” it was more common for college students to be sexually assaulted while incapacitated, whether through drugs or alcohol (Krebs et al. 2008, 5-1 – 5-3). Men who participated in this study and who had been sexually assaulted reported higher rates of incapacitated sexual assault than forced sexual assault (Krebs et al. 2008, 5-5). There is a strong correlation between Butler’s human characters and these victims of sexual assault because, as with human “trade partners” and “symbionts,” the college students reported being “unable to provide consent” (Krebs et al. 2008, 5-2).

Another way in which Butler’s human characters are like rape victims is their inability to say “no” and have that statement respected as truth. This inability to effectively dissent is particularly true of the humans in *Lilith’s Brood*. Joseph says he doesn’t want to have sex with the Oankali. He tells Nikanj, “Let go of me.” Nikanj says, “Be grateful, Joe. I’m not going to let go of you.” Nikanj explains, “Your body said one thing. Your words said another” (Butler 2000, 190).

The disconnect between a rape victim’s words and their other actions is often a feature of the discourse surrounding rape and rape culture. Linda A. Bell notes that “judges and jurors might look at a perpetrator’s intention, worrying about the injustice of punishing one who ... really believed his victim was consenting (Bell 1993, 176). Posters from Project Unbreakable, in which rape victims write what their rapists said to them just before or after the assault, include these statements: “I know you want it.” “You know you want it.” “We both know you don’t really mean it when you say no.” “You said no,

recalled in memory.... With Lilith there to assure the reader that the sexual experience is pleasurable and something she is all too willing to engage in herself, rape more easily masquerades as seduction. Her own first encounter, devoid of any such commentary, would be difficult to present convincingly as a desirable experience” (1990).

but your body told me yes” (Koehler 2013). A consent infographic circulating in various forms and originally based on a tumblr post discusses consent and the lack thereof in detail:

NO means NO.

STOP means NO.

TURNING AWAY means NO.

PUSHING AWAY means NO.

‘LEAVE ME ALONE’ MEANS NO.

PASSED OUT means NO.

‘I’M NOT READY’ means NO.

‘I DON’T FEEL LIKE IT’ means NO.

INTOXICATED means NO. (“_____ means _____” 2014)

The statements and actions above, and the ones which follow on the original, all represent the statement “no.” However, rape is legally defined in most states as sexual intercourse “when the offender purposely compels the other person to submit by force or threat of force” (Tuerkheimer). Both Joseph’s and Lilith’s first sexual encounters with the Oankali could be considered as rape by such standards, as could Wright’s and Theodora’s with Shori. All of the sexual encounters in *Lilith’s Brood* and *Fledgling* are preceded by force. However, like a rape victim who has been drugged or is otherwise intoxicated beforehand or during, the humans in *Lilith’s Brood* and *Fledgling* would not have the ability to give consent, even if offered the opportunity. Butler’s work lends nuance to portrayals of sexual intercourse that do not truly involve consent.

The Oankali and Ina, like rapists, fail to see their victims as ends in themselves. The Oankali and Ina emphasize the symbiotic nature of the relationship they have with humans, as well as their own needs – for the Oankali, to “trade ... [o]ur genetic material for yours” (Butler 2000, 40) and for the Ina, to “find several people to take blood from” (Butler 2005, 21). As Lilith says to Joseph, of Nikanj, “I doubt whether it really cares what either of us wants” (Butler 2000, 170). The Oankali and Ina, as Michele

M. Moody-Adams writes of rapists and rape apologists, do not “respect the integrity and *separateness* of the victim” (1990, 203). Similarly, Lilith’s pregnancy occurs because of the lack of respect for Lilith as an end in herself, and the way her pregnancy is made known to her functions as an illumination of women’s reproductive rights.

5.2 Women’s Reproductive Rights in *Lilith’s Brood*

Lilith’s pregnancy is forced upon her. Years later, Nikanj still insists that the pregnancy is what Lilith wanted:

Tino turned toward Lilith but spoke to Nikanj. “Did you make her pregnant against her will?”

“Against one part of her will, yes,” Nikanj admitted. “She had wanted a child with Joseph, but he was dead.... In the first children, I gave Lilith what she wanted but could not ask for.” (Butler 2000, 300)

When Lilith thanks Nikanj for making Akin appear to be human, Nikanj says, ““You have never thanked me before.... And I think you go on loving them even when they change”” (Butler 2000, 254).

In both instances, Nikanj insinuates that Lilith needed only to get used to the idea of being pregnant (with an alien). Such an insinuation is not so different from the coercive tactics of those who are against abortion, or pro-lifers. In particular, Nikanj’s action resembles the pervasive laws in the United States that require women to receive counseling, wait anywhere from 12-72 hours (“An Overview of Abortion Laws” 2015), and view - or at least be offered the chance to view - an ultrasound before undergoing an abortion procedure (“Requirements for Ultrasound” 2015). In Canada, there are no such laws regarding restrictions on abortion; however, there are approximately 200 (as opposed to 4000 in the United States) Crisis Pregnancy Centres which also aim to prevent abortions through the use of misinformation and coercion (Khandaker 2014). Moreover, two bills introduced in Canada in recent years – Bill C-484 and Bill C-510 – also relied on the premise that women would realize the value of pregnancy and motherhood either during or after the pregnancy, with Bill C-484 suggesting that “women are incapable of understanding the mother-child relationship they are forfeiting until they see their child born” (Davies 2009 13) and Bill C-510 “protecting against coerced abortion but not coerced childbirth” (Davies 2011 1).

Such tactics, like Nikanj’s in impregnating Lilith without her knowledge and then using force and coercion in order to gain her cooperation, again do not respect the right

of a woman to be an end in herself. Such tactics ignore that, like Lilith, many women who are pregnant have not freely given their consent to participate in a sexual relationship (Bell 1993, 21 & 26) or had the opportunity to prevent conception (Bell 1993, 26) in the first place. They are also indicative of the general tendency for institutions of medicine, whose representatives are largely male, to make decisions for women and to “coerce women into seeing an unwanted pregnancy through” (Sherwin 1989, 66-67). The deceitful and coercive tactics and acts used by anti-abortion activists also suggest that, just as the Oankali and Ina believe of humans, women who seek an abortion are incapable of reasoning and acting on their own.

5.3 Bioethics and Consent in *Lilith’s Brood* and *Fledgling*

Butler makes the association between medical care, especially neurological changes, and sexual coercion and deceit, when Lilith learns that Nikanj’s changes to her brain have also resulted in a sexual connection with and addiction to Nikanj. That association persists more subtly throughout *Lilith’s Brood* and also *Fledgling*, and is underscored by the Oankali and Ina assumption that humans must be led. While the link between sexual coercion and medical care is plausible, it is also tenuous, though performing certain examinations without informed consent could be considered “extreme battery” – for instance, in the case of a patient who unwillingly undergoes a testicular cancer exam (Eyal 2011, 10).

The link between the overall coercion of humans in *Lilith’s Brood* and *Fledgling* and the rising concern with bioethics, however, is more substantial. Nir Eyal observes that concern for informed consent as a predominant feature of bioethics grew in the twentieth century, especially “in medical research on human subjects ... in reaction to abuses” (2011, 1). A patient who has given informed consent must be competent, as well as be aware of and understand the treatment procedures (Eyal 2011, 3). Eyal posits that informed consent is important in order to avoid abusive contact (2011, 11-12) and domination (2011, 15), as well as preserve trust (2011, 12-15), self-ownership (2011, 14-15), and personal integrity (2011, 15-17). For a patient to truly give informed consent, interactions with the physician must be free of “[l]ies about pertinent matters,” “non-lying deceit,” and “partial disclosure” (Eyal 2011, 19-20). Informed consent practices must also be free of “coercion” (Eyal 2011, 24-25); “undue inducement,” or an offer “that is alluring to the point that it clouds rational judgment” (Eyal 2011, 25); and “so-called no choice situations” (Wertheimer 1987 qtd. in Eyal 2011, 26). Since “medicine is rife with potential to become hierarchical, given the utter dependency of patients and research

participants on physicians” (Levine 1988 qtd. in Eyal 2011, 15), informed consent is necessary.

In *Lilith’s Brood* and *Fledgling*, the Oankali and Ina lie, trick humans through various means, and disclose only partial information or no information at all. Coercion and undue influence both occur also, though it is mainly inducement via biochemical addiction that spurs the humans to continue to serve the Oankali and the Ina. Lilith’s choice between brain alternations made by either Nikanj or Kahguyaht can be seen as a “no choice situation.” In all cases, the humans in these novels are in situations where they have very little or no agency.

6. Conclusion

Lilith’s Brood and *Fledgling* do not ever clearly equate the Oankali and Ina’s treatment of humans with rape and rape culture, women’s reproductive rights, and bioethics. Rather, *Lilith’s Brood* and *Fledgling* trace associations between rape, women’s reproductive rights, and bioethics to show the ways in which constraints on agency via access to privileged information, force, deceit, limited choice, and drugs can result in nearly complete control of a subject. What is clear is that the humans in the two novels do not have the right to choose, any more than do rape victims, women coerced into initiating or sustaining a pregnancy, and many medical patients. They are not respected as ends in themselves, and as such, cannot give consent. More thorough examinations of Butler’s work promise to continue to illuminate the ethics of consent, contribute to a growing body of scholarship on agency in Butler’s work, and initiate nuanced but responsible public discourse on rape, women’s reproductive rights, and bioethics.

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Riley

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