

LITERARY GEOGRAPHIES

Ahmed, Žižek and the Willful Subjectivities of Octavia Butler's *Fledgling*

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Abstract:

This paper provides a critical reading of the willful and speculative subjectivities of Octavia Butler's final novel, *Fledgling* (2005). It does so by reading the story in the space between Sara Ahmed's theory of affective economies and Slavoj Žižek's Lacanian psychoanalysis. Thinking through the experiences of the novel's protagonist (Shori), both in terms of her symbiotic relationship with humans and how her willfulness is resisted by other vampires, helps clarify the normative implications of Ahmed's and Žižek's disagreements about multiculturalism. Broadly speaking, the development of Shori's subjectivity in the face of overt racism can be read as the non-performativity of multiculturalism, as Ahmed puts it, rather than its hegemonic status, as Žižek would have it. This observation is reinforced in view of the novel's reproductive afro-futurism, which is characteristic of much of Butler's work, in the sense that futurity is both a point of tension and a symbolic ideal to which our desires are oriented. This paper thus uses the novel to spatialize an important theoretical debate about liberal politics, and uses that debate to analyze the social context that renders the novel intelligible.

Keywords: speculative fiction; Slavoj Žižek; Sara Ahmed; Octavia Butler; multiculturalism; reproductive futurity.

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Introduction

Sara Ahmed begins her *Willful Subjects* (2014) with an excerpt of a nineteenth century Grimm story called *The Willful Child*, in which a young girl is punished by God for disobeying her mother. Struck dead by illness, her corpse repeatedly reaches out from her grave, forcing her poor mother to beat the girl's arm back down into the grave with a rod, until its willfulness is finally broken. As an entry into her theorization of willfulness, Ahmed describes the story in terms of the grammar of power and authority it evokes: while superficially this appears as a battle of wills (the girl versus God-qua-mother), they differ drastically in terms of how they speak towards the other. The girl's will falls under the sign of 'willfulness,' punishable by death, as dictated by the power behind the iron rod, whereas the mother's and God-figure's act of punishment does not fall under the same sign. The former strives to enable, the latter to disable; the former is individual, the latter signifies what is willfulness and what is authority. Both wills are thus embedded within a historically accumulated social fabric quite differently, and it is this fabric that Ahmed seeks to excavate through her investigation of literary texts and narratives. Ahmed's approach is thus to seek what the Grimm story 'knows' (Saunders 2010) about power and space – a central concern of literary geographers.

This paper takes a similar approach to Octavia Butler's final novel, *Fledgling* (2005). As one of the foremost American authors of speculative fiction, Butler is often credited as redirecting Science Fiction's considerable power of social critique towards issues of race, gender and the body (Hampton 2010). The noted Afrofuturism of Butler's work 'knows' its social context in the sense that it foregrounds the alternative histories that were subjugated (Morris 2012) by the very grammar of willfulness discussed above. Afrofuturism can be described generally as a genre of speculative fiction that 'examines the current problems faced by blacks and people of color more generally and critiques interpretations of the past and the future' (153). Lundberg (2015) argues that *Fledgling*, in particular, offers a vision of political action despite the limited form of agency held by the characters. *Fledgling* is the story of a 53 year old vampire named Shori, who for all appearances resembles a ten year old black girl. Shori is part of a ten thousand year old species of vampire called the Ina who live in a symbiotic relationship with humans. Each Ina has seven or eight human 'symbionts' who have agreed to live as part of a family, and from whom the Ina feed on a rotating basis. In return the human symbionts live up to 200 years old, never get sick and never experience old age. Both human and Ina derive extreme pleasure from the sucking of human blood; the Ina's venom also holds a form of mind control over their human symbionts, allowing them to direct every human action as they please. Most humans in the book accept this, whether volitionally or not. It is also why symbionts never reveal the existence of Ina to other humans, thus ensuring Ina secrecy. Ina are very powerful but vulnerable because they cannot stay awake during the day, let alone move about society. Shori, however, is the product of a recent series of experiments in genetic modification of the Ina, and because she has been bred with human (specifically black) pigmentation she is able to survive during the day.

Shori thus represents for many Ina the hopes of an old Ina prophecy that a new leader would help them become stronger as a species. Many of the Ina, however,

consider her genetic mix to be an abomination, and much of the novel is her struggle to stay alive and seek justice against those who attempt to destroy her, her family, and her human symbionts. Her transformative capacity represents the post-humanism that Haraway (1991) identifies as novel about Octavia Butler's work. The Ina and particularly Shori could also be read as 'inappropriate/d others', subjects that exceed humans' taxonomic domination (Haraway 1992). They are not fixed in a categorized hierarchy located in the pre-modern, modern, or post-modern. Rather the Ina 'insist on the amodern' (299) and allow new modes of thinking about human/nonhuman relationality. Still, though, Shori is oriented towards a reproductive futurity in that she offers a potential generative future for the Ina. It is a reproductive *Afrofuturism* since it is her blackness that opens up this possibility. This reproductive *Afrofuturism* relies on an inversion of the dominant taxonomic structure and a rebuke of a return to origin, a return to an imagined previous pure state of being. Ultimately, it is the desire of the Ina to return to a kind of racial purity that comes up against the willfulness of Shori's inappropriate/d body.

We have two purposes for this paper. One is a critical reading of the willful and speculative subjectivities of *Fledgling* in order to read its social context. The other is to situate that reading within, and better inform, a broader theoretical debate between two prominent scholars of the relationship between subjectivity and market society – Sara Ahmed and Slavoj Žižek. Albeit in different ways, Ahmed and Žižek both link psychoanalysis and Marxism (one might suggest, though, that Ahmed combines Freud and Marx toward her own theory of affect and anti-racist politics [following Lipman 2006], while Žižek reads Marx *through* Lacan, a distinction to which we will return later). Their theories overlap but also have significant differences. Much of what Ahmed introduces with the Grimm story is the argument that 'public culture is saturated with "will talk"' (2014: 84) to the extent that social problems are problematically attributed to the internal fortitude of subjects. Žižek's notorious critique of multicultural tolerance sees it as an extension of liberal notions of the subject that work to naturalize exploitive systems and structures (as if there is nothing more radical than simply 'tolerating' each other).

Their differences are perhaps clearest in Žižek's (2011) rebuttal of Ahmed's claim that he takes multicultural tolerance too literally, as if its injunction actually performs what it claims to. She instead identifies it as non-performative, or that which does not produce the effect that it names (Ahmed 2006). Žižek agrees with this in principle, except to say that it is in fact a performative which does something *other* than what it claims – this is an evasive word game on Žižek's part. He also agrees with Ahmed that multiculturalism is only hegemonic as an ideology, not as a reality, but disagrees on the form of the ideology. Ahmed claims that multiculturalism as a liberal ideology masks systemic racism by locating racism in the individual morally transgressive body, thus providing ground for racists to claim that their freedoms (of speech, typically) have been impinged upon (Žižek 2011). Žižek counters that the real ideological work of multiculturalism is not to promote a form of monoculturalism, in the sense of the injunction for immigrants to assimilate, but to promote a form of cultural apartheid.

Racist demands for assimilation are a superego displacement mechanism designed to prove that immigrants cannot in fact assimilate, that they are inherently different (this distinction does not effectively counter Ahmed's point, but it is relevant to the ensuing analysis of *Fledgling*).¹ Žižek concludes his rebuttal of Ahmed with the brazenly absurd claim that the only thing hegemonic about patriarchy is the very claim of its hegemony, and that patriarchy has long been 'torn asunder' simply because Marx and Engels said so in *The Communist Manifesto* of 1848.²

This paper will argue that the marketability of the optimistic Afrofuturism of *Fledgling* reflects the non-performativity of multiculturalist discourse much more than any sort of hegemonic multiculturalist ethos, be it actual or ideological. The following section explicates more thoroughly the theoretical differences between Ahmed and Žižek that lead to such drastically different readings of multiculturalism. The final two sections use these differences to inform a critical reading of the affective structures and willful subjectivities of *Fledgling*, while also reflecting on how such a reading of literature reflexively clarifies and spatializes this theoretical debate.

From Ahmed to Žižek

What theoretical differences between these two thinkers inform their ontological and normative readings of liberal multiculturalism? We suggested that Žižek reads Marx through Lacan in the sense that he supplements the positive, materialist dialectics of Marx with a negative dialectics of subject formation taken from Lacan. Materialist dialectics in a Marxist sense would posit the abstraction of exchange value from the physical act of exchange, and that exchange value comes to rule as the dominant logic of market society. The negative dialectics taken from Lacan involve not the interaction of material elements, but the irreconcilable chasm (or 'parallax gap' [Žižek 2006]) between subject and object within which a symbolic order is created. From a Lacanian perspective, the 'Real' refers to the chaotic impossibility of unity of subject and object and thus the inevitable frustration of the Freudian superego. The Symbolic refers to the systems of meaning created to soothe and make sense of this frustration. While for Lacan this might imply separation from the womb or the child's first encounter with a mirror image, for Žižek capital is the Real of the modern age (Wilson 2013) from which the modern subject emerges. Dialectics is thus 'not higher modes of being emerg[ing] out of lower modes', (Žižek 2015: 28) but the constitution of the modern subject vis-à-vis the historically accumulated conditions of its emergence. Rather than focusing on the subjective encounter with objects, Žižek suggests that 'the subject does not come first; it is a predicate-becoming-subject, a passive screen asserting itself as First Principle, i.e., something posited which retroactively posits its own presuppositions' (29).

Žižek (2015) thus posits a subject guided by attachments of the Real but also has competing innate drives which foreclose the completion of that attachment. One of Žižek's chief theoretical contributions has been his recognition of the drive for *jouissance*, or enjoyment, as an important political factor. *Jouissance* is part of that Freudian superego; it is a desire for the completion of a fantasy in which the self and the Real become whole

again (Žižek 1992). This fantasy is never completed, however, and is thus experienced as a loss – in the terms used above it is the impossibility of immigrants assimilating, of ‘them’ being ‘us.’ And it is in the space of that loss that ‘the birth of the master signifier’ (9) occurs, wherein subjects orient themselves to whichever ideological structure represents subjective wholeness, be it American exceptionalism, free markets, communism, or some other belief system. Such ideologies thus operate as master signifiers to make symbolic sense of the subjective relationship with the capitalist Real. This is why, for Žižek, politics is always inherently contentious, and there can be no reconciliation. He instead advocates the creation of political institutions that account for inevitable antagonism (as do others, such as Mouffe (2005) and Wilson and Swyngedouw (2015) who see politics as structured on such an absent foundation).

Sharpe and Boucher (2010: 13) argue that it is this foregrounding of *jouissance* as a political element that led Žižek to abandon any attempt to ‘traverse the fantasy’ and instead ‘love your symptoms.’ The former approach to politics would suggest the exposure of all forms of ideology as exploitive of human psychic drives, such that subjects would satisfy their need for symbolic completion through a positive, genuinely performative form of liberal multiculturalism. But arguing that this is impossible because subjects are hard-wired for political antagonism, Žižek suggests we love our symptoms, or the very loss we feel when the fantasy inevitably fails to complete. Ahmed’s Freudian approach to ideology and materiality both differs from and dovetails with this. For example, Ahmed (2005) uses the claim of a particular hate group that it is motivated only out of love of its own race, not hatred of other races, to demonstrate that ‘the alignment of some bodies with some others and against others takes places in the physicality of movement’ (54) and that ‘hate does not originate within an individual psyche’ (44). In other words, it is not that an internal drive toward hatred (nor even the Freudian ‘death’ drive) is projected onto others, but rather that the love of which they speak is the desire for symbolic completion that can never be complete. Ahmed describes this as similar to a boy whose fear of horses is actually a displaced fear of the loss of his father; the loving presence of the father is stipulated upon his possible absence, and since the boy can control whether he is among horses but not whether he can be one with his father, his fear is displaced. For the hate group, something like national territory is the master signifier to which desire is oriented. The fact that symbolic identification is never completed, and the national territory remains a contingent object, is what they experience as immigrant threat. Ahmed’s theorization thus has a more spatial element than Žižek’s.

The major normative difference between Ahmed and Žižek is the politics that flow from such observations. While for Žižek this means that antagonism is inevitable (the absent foundation of politics as it were), for Ahmed the issue is not the individual psyche but the historically positioned objects to which we orientate our desire. Hers is a theory of ‘how the social is arranged through the sharing of deceptions that precede the arrival of subjects’ (Ahmed 2010: 165). Her anti-racist politics suggest ‘traversing the fantasy’ (though she does not use this expression) inasmuch as this sharing of deceptions can be exposed. Where Žižek situates the link between the psyche and the capitalist order within subject-object dialectics, for Ahmed (2005) there is a political economy of emotion (what

she terms 'affective economies') metaphorically akin to Marx's M-C-M' model of commodity exchange. In other words, just as the change in quantity of money (M to M') as it transitions through the commodity form (C) suggests that individual acts of exchange are not by definition equivalent, the connection between affect and objects of their attachment is also not a simple, one-to-one relationship. Objects of emotion circulate spatially and temporally, and for Ahmed what matters is how that emotional contact is 'read' – a reading which resides in neither subject nor object. Žižek's ontological assumptions are arguably more situated in the individual psyche (as opposed to subject), which is why he loses some of the spatiality that Ahmed provides.

Emotion is thus neither psychic nor material – 'happiness does not reside in objects; *it is promised through proximity to certain objects*' (Ahmed 2008: 11; emphasis in original). Thus Žižek may be right that the injunction to enjoy (*jouissance*) is an important political driver, but there is no inherent reason why, for example, the family is so frequently the object of the desire for happiness (or paternal affection or the national homeland for that matter). Happiness does not reside in a dinner table, as Ahmed argues, but the injunction to be happy orientates us to dinner tables as symbols of the family. And thus it is also with the trope of reproductive futurity commonplace not only in Octavia Butler's literature, but in science fiction in general. Ahmed (2010) reads this as part of the ideology of the 2009 film *Children of Men* (Cuarón 2009), which depicts the civilizational breakdown that occurs in the midst of 18 years of human infertility. The film's protagonist, Theo, begins the story as emotionally disinvested, but when he finds himself in position to deliver a miraculous newborn baby from chaos to safety, his life is given purpose, his affective registers renewed. Ahmed cites Žižek's claim that the ideology of *Children of Men* resides in its focus on individual pursuits of happiness at the expense of the misery that surrounds Theo. In contrast, Ahmed suggests that children in the future are the object to which the film's viewers' happiness is directed, as children symbolize future compensation for present psychic pain. The film's ideology is thus that the family and/or reproductive futurity as an object of happiness is necessary to envision any alternative possible world (without this Theo had given up). Canavan (2015) also argues that this is true of the broad corpus of Octavia Butler's work, and that she intentionally re-wrote initial drafts of her work with more optimistic endings to try to create bestsellers. Thus, The Afrofuturism for which Butler is so well known at least partly reflects the market conditions within which it is consumed.

This is also in contrast to Žižek's characterization of multiculturalism as the hegemonic ethos (even ideologically speaking) of our time. His argument as such is that political subjects are directed to love thy neighbor above all else, despite the grossly unequal power structures that surround this neighborliness. But as Ahmed argues, 'if higher forms of happiness are what you get for being a certain kind of being, the being of happiness would certainly be recognizable as bourgeois' (2010: 12). It is the way in which happiness is said to be possible that she feels gives the lie to the notion that multiculturalism is a hegemonic ethos. Žižek's orientation toward the psyche leads him to focus on what popular culture tells people to think, whereas Ahmed's focus on the political economy of emotion, that is what happens between the psychic and the material,

directs her focus toward what actually happens as bodies move through and interact in space. For example, she argues that this movement and interaction produces a form of friction which induces the various emotions that give the feeling of bodily surface in the first place. Weaver (2014) extends this theory to Feinberg's (1993) important novel about transgender life, *Stone Butch Blues*. Weaver points out that heteronormative bodies navigate through space relatively unscathed, especially relative to the novel's central character, Jess, whose very bodily positionality finds its reference point relative to the disproportionate friction she experiences. In this context, then, Žižek's claim that liberal multiculturalism is hegemonic appears as a very partial claim. The claim is both heteronormative and aspatial in that it cannot account for how bodily difference is shaped by, and shapes, the space around them. It belies that multiculturalism is a relational and spatial project. It is with this debate in mind that we now turn to similar themes in *Fledgling*.

Desiring, Allowing and Normativity in *Fledgling*

Even before *Fledgling* was published, much of Octavia Butler's fiction illustrated many of the above themes; 'Characters in Butler's novels violate the relative stability of the body, sometimes psychically, sometimes through willed transformation of the literal body, and sometimes through violent transgression of the skin boundary' (Sands 2003: 3). This is evident in the first few lines of *Fledgling*, as Shori awakes in a cave with significant burn scars and a head wound leading to amnesia: 'I awoke to darkness. I was hungry – starving! – and I was in pain. There was nothing in my world but hunger and pain, no other people, no other time, no other feelings' (Butler 2005: 1). Suffering from amnesia, Shori has no past, and being temporarily blind she senses nothing but her internal needs. From the outset of the story, then, Shori is a blank slate, a psyche with internal drives but not yet a subject.

The first few pages can be read as the emergence of Shori's subjectivity from the objects of her immediate surroundings, or as Žižek puts it, she is a 'predicate-becoming-subject' (2015: 29). Her first external sensation is of the hard surface on which she lies and a burning fire; her reaction is to move away, and her attention is directed immediately to her physical wellness. She examines her own head wound and the pain from her burns. Her pre-subjective psychic drives force her to kill and eat a human (not knowing he was a loved one) and several deer, and she is able to instinctively navigate to the charred ruins of her former community, burned to the ground by her (as yet unknown) attackers. But her sense of who she is comes in reference to the things she encounters. She first meets Wright, a man in his twenties who picks her up alongside the road in his car. She enjoys his smell, his conversation, and she is surprised to discover that she cares what he thinks of her; she sees Wright not simply as object, but herself as an object of affection through him. Their relationship is consummated as she bites Wright and makes him her first symbiont. Later in his apartment, the two of them look at themselves in a mirror:

I touched my face and the short fuzz of black hair on my head, and I tried to see someone I recognized. I was a lean, sharp-faced, large-eyed, brown-skinned person – a complete stranger. Did I look like a child of about ten or eleven? Was I? How could I know? I examined my teeth and saw nothing startling about them until I asked Wright to show me his. (Butler 2005: 18)

As her subjectivity emerges Shori is thus becoming whole again, developing a sense, if perhaps an unstable one, of self, and is orienting herself to a symbolic field to make sense of her chaotic emergence (affect, physical difference, the various objects in Wright's apartment and so forth). In the context of this emergence Shori pursues her own *jouissance*, or symbolic closure, by merging both physically and affectively with Wright. She continues to draw blood from Wright for sustenance and pleasure, and sex ensues (as is characteristic of Gothic vampire literature). The dialogue leading to these exchanges implies an unequal grammar of power. The sex and feeding are consensual, but the terms on which they are negotiated are not: 'In this conversation sex is framed as something Wright desires and Shori allows, in the same way that feeding is presented as something Shori desires and Wright allows' (Lundberg 2015: 566). Shori is driven by biological need, and because Wright has already been bitten he can no longer fully control his decision making.

The relation between *allowing* and *desiring* approximates to the modalities of willfulness described by Ahmed (2015) in the Grimm story. Affect in *Fledgling* can be understood in much the same way. For example, when Wright later has qualms about the freedom he has sacrificed for love, Shori asks him if he wants to leave her. He replies, 'Why bother to ask me that? [...] I can't leave you. I can't even really want to leave you' (Butler 2005: 84). He is happy and feels pleasure with Shori, but is frustrated psychically because affect and desire trump his will. He conceives of wanting, or will, as his own internal choice-making, but in the world into which Shori has brought him his desire is no longer his. Similarly, when they discuss how and whether Shori is going to ask her second symbiont, Theodora, to join them in their new home (their previous homes had been attacked and burned down), Wright asks:

Are you going to tell her to join us... or ask her?

Ask her. But she'll come.

Because she's already fallen so far under your influence that she won't be able to help herself?

She'll want to come. She doesn't have to, but she'll want to. (Butler 2005: 87)

Asking Theodora for her choice is a mere formality. Shori allows Theodora's *choice*, but knows that in this case it is only symbolic as, psychically speaking, she has no real *will*. What makes Theodora happy belongs to Shori. Another human symbiont, Brook, describes her decision to join with an Ina (Iosif, Shori's father, who has died at this point in the story) a bit differently:

God, I loved him. And I thought it meant I would never be alone. My father died when I was eight. I had a brother who drowned when he was seven. And my sister's husband died of cancer when they'd been married for only two years. I thought I had finally found a way to avoid all that pain – a way never to be alone again. (Butler 2005: 110)

Brook does not mention that she had already been bitten, but even so her love of Iosif appears as inseparable from her need to avoid the pain of loss. She later says 'they just take over our lives and we let them for pleasure' (Butler 2005: 161). That human action is understood in the novel as entirely libidinal can easily be understood in Žižekian terms, as part of a superego drive for symbolic completion ('love'). The fact that fully satisfactory completion is impossible is marked by Wright's identification of fear with love: 'It scares me how much I love you, Shori' (157).

Or, following Ahmed (2010), would such an analysis presume a priori that happiness (or avoidance of pain in Brook's case) is the master signifier to which desire is oriented? This was, after all, integral to Ahmed's critique of Žižek's reading of *Children of Men*, that he assumed happiness a priori as a natural goal, ignoring ideological context in which reproductive futurity was positioned as a signifier of happiness. Posing the question this way focuses the reading of the text on the space between the psychic and the material, not so much on the fact that subjects create a symbolic order but rather on why it takes the form it does. Families in *Fledgling* typically consist of one Ina and seven to eight human symbionts of mixed gender, who may themselves engage in sex and have their own families. One symbiont, Celia, refers to it as 'the closest thing I've seen to a workable group marriage' (Butler 2005: 127). So while far from heteronormative, the function of the family as a symbol of a contented life and social reproduction is assumed. As Shori puts it: 'I wanted that – a home in which my symbionts enjoyed being with me and enjoyed one another and raised their children as I raised mine. That felt right, it felt good' (127). The will to be happy is thus *allowed* when it proceeds in ways that reproduce family life and children.

This conditioning of the willfulness to be happy can also be said of the nonperformativity of multiculturalism. For the sake of analysis, we can temporarily take family life as a proxy for a multicultural society. Family life has been shaped as a biological and spatial project about how bodies can and must be orientated towards each other to secure social reproduction. In *Fledgling*, people are well aware of their bodily relationships with the Ina, but yet have little to no control over it. When read alongside Ahmed and her idea of affective economies, the novel recognizes that families are not made up of discreet bodies entering into a normative social contract with each other. Will is not just a question of deciding to participate in normativity or not, but about how it *feels* to have your body orientated towards another. Desiring and allowing are secured through affective economies that locate will in the blood, skin, teeth, and mutual touching of becoming subject/symbiont.

Likewise, our critical reading of *Fledgling* helps show the flaw in Žižek's argument that multiculturalism fails because of its very hegemony. Multiculturalism is not simply

the injunction to tolerate as Žižek implies, but is similarly shaped by a historical reading of contact with objects (following Ahmed). In the same way that what counts as willfulness depends on the social position of the one who wills, the notion of tolerance depends on the social position of those who tolerate and the object of toleration. It is also based on an intersubjective relationship where will can be located in the friction with which different bodies move through space (as in Weaver's analysis of *Stone Butch Blues*). Shori's subjectivity emerges in the context of struggle for survival, taking on a very different meaning of tolerance. Multiculturalism is nonperformative because it equates all forms of tolerance. The Ina-symbiont relationship in family life shows the futility of such an equivalence, as the satisfaction of desire depends on a relinquishment of autonomy that itself is experienced as loss; compared to Ahmed's, Žižek's critique of multiculturalism is oblivious to this spatiality of power.

Racial Politics in *Fledgling*

The manner in which racial politics are represented in *Fledgling* can also be understood in terms of Žižek's psychoanalytic approach and Ahmed's notion of affective economies. Twice in the novel it is mentioned that Ina do not care about racial differences between humans. Ina not 'seeing race' could be read as a form of the post-racial liberal tolerance Žižek and Ahmed both rail against, but only within a narrow reading of the text. While human and Ina are both persecuted and persecuting in certain ways – Ina must conceal their existence from humanity but have absolute power over their symbionts – the Ina are racist towards humans as a whole. This is obvious when it comes to those Ina who see Shori as an abomination because she contains human genes, and would be identifiable within Žižek's understanding of racism as psychically based. During the trial of the Silk Family (which is found guilty of the murders of Shori's family), an Ina elder who loathes Shori shouts 'we are Ina, you are nothing!' (Butler 2005: 272). Racial purity can be understood as the master signifier to which she seeks union, and her hatred of Shori is the projection of her frustration over its ultimate impossibility. But when understood in terms of the ideological mediation of the psychic and the material (Ahmed's affective economies), a more systemic, less individualized form of racism is apparent – the master-slave dialectic between Ina and humans. Ina only reveal themselves to humans they have already bitten. One symbiont, Martin, describes the ten months between when he was first bitten and when he decided to finally join an Ina community: 'The whole thing was too weird for me. Worse, I thought it sounded more like slavery than symbiosis. It scared the hell out of me' (204). At that point he was psychologically addicted to Ina venom to the extent that it overrode his desire for freedom. He gave in. The Ina also require human touch for their own survival, even if they hate humans. Thus the difference between symbiosis and slavery in the Ina-human relationship in *Fledgling* is tenuous at best.

The mutual touching of Ina and humans itself reflects the location of racism in systems of power rather than morally transgressive bodies. Brook attempts to draw equivalence between Ina and humans: 'And we need to be touched. It pleases us just as it

pleases you. We protect and feed you, and you protect and feed us. That's the way an Ina-and-symbiont household *should work*' (Buttler 2005: 177, italics in original). Lundberg explains the two roles of touch in *Fledgling* as 'enactment, repetition, and working through of trauma' (2015: 578) and a form of bonding in which the individual becomes identifiable with family. Physical contact reminds us of our subjective wholeness, our 'thereness,' and for the Ina it is almost as important as blood. The logic of exchange upon which Brook bases her notion of family is a system for creating bodily surfaces as markers of objective being, and it is how those surfaces move through space that defines systemic racism. More importantly, the master-slave dialectic between Ina and humans is such that the Ina are made whole by humans, whereas humans yield their agency to the Ina. Ina venom and human blood are not commodities traded equally in a 'free market' any more than the child and the mother in the Grimm story exchange wills: they both *desire* but only the Ina *allow*. In other words, it is not simply that Shori suffers numerous injuries at the hands of racist Ina or that Theodora is murdered to make Shori suffer that reflects racism, but the way their family structure and bodily interaction is read within an unequal grammar of power. This was explained initially via Ahmed's (2015) discussion of the Grimm story.

Both Ahmed's and Žižek's theoretical outlooks, then, help deconstruct the novel. The more relevant question, however, is which outlook provides a productive way forward, either for Shori, or for Butler's audience *through* Shori's adventure as a literary event. The ostensible answer provided in the narrative is the use of the justice system to adjudicate racial injustice, as it culminates in the Silk Family's trial (what the Ina call a Council of Judgement). Young (2015) makes the point that even if the punitive function of the trial is minimal, its broader purpose is performative, as it enables the aggrieved to emote their suffering and become whole again. For Žižek (2011), the trial would, at best, represent an institution created to account for the impossibility of reconciliation, or at worst, represent the flimsy multicultural tolerance he resents as standing in for systemic change. But Ahmed provides a reason to be skeptical of this interpretation. The Council of Judgement constructs a space to air Ina grievances and justify their hatred of, and violence towards, humans and Shori. It operates as a staging ground for making claims about the equality of injustices without recognition of the unequal grammar of power, and therefore reflects Ahmed's critique of 'wound politics' (2005: 32). She argues that mobilizing the emotional wound as a form of identity is problematic because the wound quickly becomes de-historicized, allowing all forms of injury to be rendered equal. The space of the court attempts to flatten out the hierarchies of the Ina and human landscape by becoming a free-market for commodified wounds, exchangeable for each other. Put in terms of debates about multiculturalism, it locates intolerance in the heart of the individual, rather than social structures. Russell Silk, responsible for the slaughter of Shori's family, finds a space to air his grievance:

We are vastly outnumbered by the human beings of this world. And how many of us have been butchered in their wars? They destroy one another by the millions, and it makes no difference to their numbers. They breed and breed and breed,

while we live long and breed slowly. Their lives are brief and, without us, riddled with disease and violence. And yet, we need them. We take them into our families, and with our help, they are able to live longer, stay free of disease, and get along with one another. We could not live without them.

But we are not them!

We are not them!

Children of the great Goddess, we are not them! (Butler 2005: 291-2)

If we, like Ahmed, can turn our attention to what is actually happening in the space of the trial, how wounds and bodies are oriented to erase difference, then we see that the justice system is not a hegemonic ethos or shallow multiculturalism, but a specific geography of power. To understand willfulness in the novel would then be to understand how bodies move within and away from that place.

Understanding the subjective wills to *become* and the wills to *allow* or *disallow* in *Fledgling*, particular in terms of minor theory (see Katz 1996), perhaps provides another way forward. In fact Ahmed argues as much, stating that 'the will might even describe the relative value of not staying in the right place,' (2014: 12) meaning it might be better to leave the right place than to stay there because one is supposed to. Shori and her symbionts move throughout the novel in ways both literal and metaphorical. Their literal movement is out of necessity, and they seek a permanent home. But as Robinson (2015) describes, their becoming minor is a matter of their persistent movement away from the heteronormative, and away from traditional Ina ways, including the place of community and the space of the trial. Not only does Shori never recover her memory (her link to the past), but she consistently challenges Ina authority, particularly those who challenge her behavior amongst Ina elders and what it means for her to be properly Ina (she does not show proper grief about the loss of her family, for example). Robinson further points out that this becoming-minor is inherent to the Afrofuturism of much of Butler's work.³ Ahmed's argument that being happy is 'recognizable as bourgeois' (2010: 12) suggests that happiness is part of the grammar of power that orients us toward particular institutions – like the family and the justice system – as modalities of our fulfillment. For Ahmed, then, the right to be unhappy has more revolutionary impact than does access to the institutions of happiness. It follows that resistance to happiness as an ideology is part of becoming-minor, the not staying in the right place.

So what to make of Octavia Butler's intent regarding the politics of normativity so prevalent in the novel? At times Butler has been clear that her work reflects her personal belief that humans have a genetic need for hierarchy (Butler, Mehaffy and Keating 1997). The Afrofuturism she portrays is ostensibly a positive vision of how black people might transcend this hierarchy. Based on his research in the Octavia Butler archives in San Marino, California, Canavan (2015) claims that *Fledgling* was originally to have ended not with Shori as the savior of the Ina, but with her power throwing the Ina's symbiotic relationship with humans out of balance. This would certainly be one way to depict an inappropriate/d other (Haraway 1991), so much so that innate hierarchy would be the source of humanity's very undoing by compromising a reproductive future. The more positive resolution of Shori's adventure may well reflect a version of post-humanism and

inappropriate/dness that Butler felt intuitively would tap into the psychic needs of her readership. And after all, how the narrative intersects with the market that consumes it is an important aspect of the story it 'tells.' Perhaps the structure of the human-Ina family is how 'queerness is re-purposed in *Fledgling*' (Lundberg 2015: 576), in the sense that they find happiness through a queer family structure.⁴ But as we have argued, it is the trope of reproductive futurity through the family as happy ending that makes for a more consumable narrative. Rather than a becoming-minor, the market rewards the reproduction of a bourgeois ideology of happiness (Ahmed 2010) in which the major is necessary for fulfillment and for the temporary deferment of present psychic pain. The social fabric of *Fledgling's* consumption thus hardly reflects a hegemonic multiculturalist ethos, let alone a patriarchy torn asunder by capitalism, as Žižek (2011) would have it. It reflects the non-performativity of multiculturalism.

Conclusion

The relationship between power and will in *Fledgling* is mediated by both systemic and embodied processes deeply embedded in the institutions and material practices of Ina traditionalism. The Ina and their symbionts are engaged in a mutual yet unequal power relationship that orients their desires towards the same end. The development of their subjectivities in relation to each other illustrates the intersubjective nature of desire, willfulness and affect. As discussed previously, this observation trends against the notion, following Žižek, that a hegemonic multicultural ethos fails because of its incongruence with Freudian psychic drives, and toward the notion, after Ahmed, that it fails to perform and to account for the unequal grammar of power within which subjects find themselves positioned. In other words it is an aspatial concept in a spatially coded world. Thinking through the nature of the Ina-symbiont relationship helps illustrate this point.

Their desires sustain and reproduce the Ina way of life, a way of life that is both threatened but also potentially saved through Shori's reproductive Afrofuturism. Like the pregnant teen in *Children of Men*, Shori represents a threat to the systemic and symbolic order of racial purity and unity through her blackness and through her physical abilities that surpass others of her kind. Yet, these same qualities also embody perhaps the only way forward for the 'race'. Put simply, the fact that reproductive Afrofuturism makes *Fledgling* more marketable suggests that multiculturalism (in any form) is far from hegemonic, and lends credence to the idea that it is a nonperformative discourse which serves the power structure precisely because it fails to perform. This is a big part of our point, though clearly the queer and subversive elements of the novel make it difficult to discount its positive ending entirely as the result of hegemonic structures.

Like Ahmed's non-performative multiculturalism, the trial system of the Ina does not address injustice as it claims, but rather gives those who are already in power a space to use a discourse of justice to further the dominant ideology. In the space of the trial, all are rendered equal and thus all deserve the same treatment and space to be heard. Yet, as we know, not all are materially or institutionally equal in capitalist society, or in Ina society. Therefore, like Ahmed's reading of multiculturalism, the trial does not perform

what it purports to accomplish. Indeed, it works to further alienate Shori who has already been dispossessed of all material and familial possessions by those in control of Ina tradition. Thus we can see the economy of desiring and allowing as operating both within the relationship among the symbionts but also between Ina deemed appropriate and those deemed inappropriate. This economy is not based on individualized psychic drives but on historically embedded orientations and subjectivities.

Therefore, the task must be to confront the historically conditioned ways our desires are oriented, as well as how affective structures shape spaces that reproduce these desires. We must, like Ahmed, acknowledge how the rendering of us all as 'equal', through the wound politics of the Ina trial, or through the ideology of multiculturalism, is a non-performative discourse. It is a product of patriarchal relations and capitalist affective structures, not an *a priori* hegemonic ethos. It operates through affective economies, not strictly individual psyches, and it operates in grounded ways that are capable of being shaped and reshaped by bodies. The goal is not to attack multiculturalism per se, but the very historical and systemic structures, and the particular ways in which they organize space, that continue to reproduce post-racial liberal ideology.

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Notes

¹ To put this perhaps more clearly, Žižek (2015) makes the problematic claim that Islamic fundamentalists hold no real religious conviction, for if they did they would not be 'offended' by a well-known Danish cartoon depicting the prophet Muhammed. He argues that this is a displacement of the 'real' source of their frustration – the deep down notion that they are in fact no different than Westerners. He thus suggests that 'politically correct' injunctions to assure them that Islam is a peaceful religion only make fundamentalists angrier. Žižek knows his psychoanalysis, but this reflects his tendency to shoot from the hip, so to speak. He offers no evidentiary support. Nevertheless, this reflects an important ontological and political difference with Ahmed's staunch anti-racism.

² The passage in question reads: "The bourgeoisie, wherever it has got the upper hand, has put an end to all feudal, patriarchal, idyllic relations" (Marx and Engels 1998 [1848], 53). Even if one were to take *The Communist Manifesto* as gospel, there is no reason to believe that feudal patriarchy displaced by capitalism is the same reality falling under the sign of patriarchy existing today. Žižek shoots from the hip again; his critique of Ahmed can be found on pages 43-53 of *Living in the End Times* (2011).

³ 'Butler is a philosopher-poet of minority as a way of life, minority as health, and becoming-minor as the only course of survival...' (Robinson 2015: 484).

⁴ Ahmed (2010) does point out, after all, that the first best-selling novel about lesbian life, Vin Packer's *Spring Fire* (1952), had a sad ending so as not to endorse homosexuality. The question would then be whether *Fledgling's* happy ending shows that things have changed since the 1950s, or something else entirely. This paper illustrates the latter.

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