

Appropriated Bodies: Trauma, Biopower and the Posthuman in Octavia Butler’s “Bloodchild” and James Tiptree, Jr.’s “The Girl Who Was Plugged In”

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This article approaches science fiction using the strategically powerful perspectives of Trauma Studies and the posthuman in conjunction with Foucault’s notion of biopower, paying special attention to the deep investment of these discourses in notions of embodiment and agency. In order to do so, I will consider Octavia Butler’s 1984 short story “Bloodchild” (Hugo and Nebula Awards) and James Tiptree, Jr. (Alice Sheldon)’s 1973 novella “The Girl Who Was Plugged In” (Hugo Award). Both stories explore dystopian futures—in their focus on coercive extraterrestrials and life on an inhospitable planet, on the one hand, and on oppressive consumer culture and corporate technoscience, on the other—and point back to our posthuman present through metaphoric characters that illustrate and invite comment upon the articulation of power and the construction of the embodied posthuman. The main issue at play in the two stories, I will contend, is the identification of biopower with the traumatic appropriation of the human body and the articulation of posthuman forms of resistance to it.

Keywords: trauma; the posthuman; biopower; science fiction; James Tiptree, Jr.; Octavia Butler

Cuerpos apropiados: trauma, biopoder y poshumanidad
en “Hijo de sangre,” de Octavia Butler y “La chica enchufada,”
de James Tiptree, Jr.

Este artículo se centra en el género de la ciencia ficción, recurriendo a las perspectivas críticas que proporcionan los estudios de trauma y las teorías de poshumanidad, así como el concepto

de biopoder de Michel Foucault. Se presta especial atención a cómo se articulan en dichos marcos teóricos los conceptos de “fiscalidad” y agencia. Con este fin, el artículo analiza dos relatos breves: “Hijo de sangre” (1984), de Octavia Butler, ganadora de los premios Hugo y Nebula, y “La chica enchufada” (1973), de James Tiptree, Jr. (Alice Sheldon), galardonada con el premio Hugo. Ambos textos exploran futuros distópicos: el primero mediante la representación de la vida en un planeta inhóspito habitado por extraterrestres hostiles, y el segundo a través de su visión de la cultura de consumo y de la tecnociencia corporativa. Ambas historias, además, apuntan a nuestro presente estatus posthumano mediante personajes metafóricos que ilustran e invitan a comentar la articulación del poder y la construcción del ser posthumano encarnado. La cuestión principal en ambos textos es la identificación del biopoder con la apropiación traumática del cuerpo humano y la articulación de formas posthumanas de resistencia.

Palabras clave: trauma; posthumanidad; biopoder; ciencia ficción; James Tiptree, Jr.; Octavia Butler

1. INTRODUCTION

Some of the terms of critical currency for the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, such as biopower, trauma and posthumanism, as well as their objects of analysis—the body, subjectivity, freedom and agency, the cyborg, hybridization, technoscience—have a familiar resonance for science fiction (SF) readers and writers. Indeed, in the last few years, many critics have pointed out the dialogic relationship between SF and contemporary critical thought. After all, both conceptualize issues of technoscience, power and embodied subjectivity, and both are concerned with definitions of the human and its Others. In addition, as Stefan Herbrechter argues, SF's reliance on the principle of extrapolation and its amalgamation of fiction and reality, present and future time, justify viewing it as the quintessential posthumanist genre (2013, 113; see also Hayles 1999, 247). As Istvan Csicsery-Ronay, Jr. pertinently put it, "SF has ceased to be a genre of fiction per se, becoming instead a mode of awareness about the world" (1991, 308).

This article approaches SF using the strategically powerful perspectives of Trauma Studies and the posthuman in conjunction with Michael Foucault's concept of biopower, paying special attention to the deep investment of these discourses in notions of embodiment and agency. In order to do so, I will consider first Octavia Butler's 1984 short story "Bloodchild" (Hugo and Nebula Awards), which allows for a comprehensive introduction of some of the key critical notions that will be relevant for my discussion. Section four will build on those concepts to explore James Tiptree, Jr. (Alice Sheldon)'s 1973 novella "The Girl Who Was Plugged In" (Hugo Award). The combination of conceptual complexity and emotional power that characterizes both texts makes the two stories excellent examples of literature that bridges the gap between "high" and popular culture in a complex and unique manner. Furthermore, both stories explore dystopian futures—in their focus on coercive extraterrestrials and life on an inhospitable planet, on the one hand, and on oppressive consumer culture and corporate technoscience, on the other—and point back to our posthuman present—see Hayles (1999, 6)—through metaphoric characters that illustrate and invite comment upon the articulation of power and the construction of the embodied posthuman.

The main issue at play in the two stories, I contend, is the identification of biopower with the traumatic appropriation of the human body and the articulation of forms of resistance to it.¹ Like those movies that Kelly Hurley classifies as "body horror,"

¹ It is important to point out at this early stage that the two human bodies that are appropriated in the short stories happen to be subjected to appropriation as a result of their gender. While I am fully aware that the term "human" runs the risk, as it often has, of acting as a blanket concept erasing difference, a careful review of the literature dealing with the two stories confirms that the significance of the two protagonists' gender for the stories' ideological and political implications has been widely discussed and convincingly established by previous scholarship—see Helford (1994), Hicks (1996), Hollinger (1999), Melzer (2006), Stevenson (2007), Thibodeau (2012) and Lillvis (2014). These critics have focused on Butler's reversal of traditional gender roles and criticism of patriarchal oppression in "Bloodchild," and on Tiptree, Jr.'s critical attitude towards gendered power structures and the performance of femininity in "The Girl Who Was Plugged In." This comes as no

Butler's and Tiptree, Jr.'s texts confront readers with a "human subject dismantled and demolished: a human body whose integrity is violated, a human identity whose boundaries are breached" (1995, 205). Yet the stories leave some room for hope in these traumatic violations, in the evolution towards a posthuman subjectivity, a posthuman understanding of embodiment and a posthuman form of agency. Indeed, as my analysis will attempt to prove, the two texts explore the dystopian dangers of the discourses of biopower and trauma, and the hopeful potential of the imbrication of notions of embodied subjectivity, agency and the posthuman.

2. TRAUMA, BIOPOWER AND THE POSTHUMAN

Although it is still a rather new critical pursuit, a number of critics have, in the last few years, cogently pointed to an imbrication of the paradigms of trauma and posthumanity and begun to explore their influence on present understandings of human existence as represented by contemporary (science) fiction—see Collado-Rodríguez (2016, 229) and Luckhurst (2014, 159). SF literature has long used the figure of the posthuman being to represent consciousness beyond the constraints of humanism and its reliance on the concept of an autonomous self. As a result, SF has been the genre of choice for most critics who contributed with their theories to the discourse of posthumanity—see, for example, Haraway ([1985] 1991), Hayles (1999), Badmington (2000), Graham (2002) and Herbrechter (2013). On the contrary, trauma theory has tended to completely ignore SF, probably because, as Roger Luckhurst explains, SF texts do not rely on "what is considered to be an appropriate aesthetics for the representation of trauma" (2014, 159). Furthermore, the discourse of trauma has often been "suspicious of the investment in narrative pleasure often equated with mass cultural forms like SF" (159).

The object of prominent philosophical and critical attention in the last decades of the twentieth century, the theories of trauma and the posthuman have become key frameworks to approaching contemporary culture and its artifacts. The discourse of posthumanity, characterized by its opposition to, and transcendence of, humanism (Herbrechter 2013, 41), foregrounds questions regarding what constitutes the human, exploring the boundaries of subjectivity and the body. As for trauma theory, in its exploration of what Kirby Farrell and Mark Seltzer have suitably termed, respectively, "posttraumatic culture" (1998, 3) and "wound culture" (1997, 3), it focuses on how psychological trauma affects human consciousness and is inscribed in the body, leading to diverse interpretations and redefinitions of being.

surprise given the fact that both Butler and Tiptree, Jr. are renowned New Wave SF writers with an openly feminist agenda—see Hollinger (2003, 131) and Melzer (2006, 7). More specifically, Elyce Helford (1994) and Veronica Hollinger (1999) have successfully discussed and clearly proved the connection between the two protagonists' gender and their subjection to gender exploitation. As a result, and to avoid unnecessary overlaps with previous scholarship, this paper focuses more generally on the effects of trauma and biopower on the human and on the articulation of forms of resistance to it in the two short stories.

The relationship between human and Other dominates the discourses on both trauma and the posthuman. For the former, the Other represents a threat to the subject's internal equilibrium, potentially generating traumatic stress—one of the very few psychopathologies to result from an external stimulus. From a neurobiological perspective, it is believed that while “all experiences change the brain [...], traumatic events disrupt homeostasis” (Perry and Pollard 1998, 45). From a philosophical perspective, following Levinas, Derrida claims that “being affected by the other is always a trauma, which is not simply wounding in the bad sense—which it is as well. It is something which affects me in my body, in my integrity” (Derrida 1997, 15; quoted in Winstone 2004, 149). Interestingly, Winstone further defines trauma as an event that suspends the terms “self” and “other” (27). From the perspective of posthumanity, human subjectivity and identity are transformed as a result of the encounter with the Other, of the assimilation of the Other within the self, leading to hybridization and the dismantling of the concept of the human, which, let it be said, may potentially be a traumatizing prospect for some—see Luckhurst (2014, 160). Indeed, as the quotation from Kelly Hurley mentioned earlier suggests, the discourses of trauma and the posthuman are congruent in that both focus on shatterings of existing structures of self, on the fragmentation of the self.

A similar shattering results from the subjection of the self to biopolitical regulations. In his seminal work *The History of Sexuality*, Michel Foucault documents the shift of sovereign power towards biopower, a “technology of power centered on life” ([1976] 1978, 144) whereby the system exerts its control over all the biological processes with the purpose of achieving “the subjugation of bodies and the control of populations” (140). Biopower focuses on “the species body, the body imbued with the mechanics of life [...] effected through an entire series of interventions and *regulatory controls*” (139; emphasis in the original) which aim at fostering the health and well-being of certain citizens so that they may live and be useful to the system—i.e., as human resources to produce, consume and reproduce—for longer. Meanwhile, those who are deemed superfluous are left to die through neglect or intention. Biopower, therefore, operates at the level of the body, which is constructed and inscribed by its exercise.

The body is also the locus of trauma and a key element for a certain branch within posthuman theory inaugurated by Katherine Hayles's shocked reaction to the celebration of disembodiment that characterizes much modern cybernetics (1999, 1). These three discourses speak, thus, of the critical importance of the physicality and materiality of bodies. Key cultural manifestations of the connection of trauma, biopower and the posthuman are the figures of the cyborg, the zombie and the surrogate, which undermine key dualisms of the Western philosophical tradition. In her seminal essay “A Cyborg Manifesto,” Haraway famously introduces the concept of the cyborg as “a cybernetic organism, a hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction” ([1985] 1991, 149) whose existence derives from the dissolution of three traditional boundaries: human vs. animal, organism vs. machine

and physical vs. non-physical (151-153). As for the zombie, this figure of fascination and horror represents the liminality between life and death; it is the epitome of the deprivation of freedom and agency and evokes our culture's deepest fears—see Lauro and Christie (2011). The figure of the surrogate, on its part, foregrounds reproductive technologies, recalling the appropriation of the (female) body and posthuman reproduction—see Squier (1995). Additionally, these posthuman tropes symbolically point to the ills of globalization, consumerism and late capitalism; they evoke the new conditions of traumatic enslavement under technoscience, offering some hope for ironic reformulation.

Where these theories diverge is precisely at the consequences that the aforementioned shatterings of the self are understood to have for the individual subject. In that sense, as cultural discourses, they may be read as the two sides of the same coin, as opposed but complementary: both trauma and posthuman theory attempt to conceptualize the fragmentation of the subject and of culture which began in the times of postmodernism; yet the fracture that trauma provokes is usually read as negative, and hence the self seeks re-integration, while the fragmentation and hybridization that result from the assimilation of the posthuman is potentially liberating, and the discourse of posthumanity rejoices at the opportunities that this shattering of structures may afford the individual subject. As I will contend, both “Bloodchild” and “The Girl Who Was Plugged In” foreground this tension: in both stories, posthuman embodiment entails an empowering act of boundary transgression that allows bodies to resist, if feebly, unequal power relations, and to overcome the shatterings that traumatic living conditions under a biopolitical regime produce.

3. THE ALIEN WITHIN: “BLOODCHILD”

Octavia Butler's short story, “Bloodchild,” opens with the first-person narrator's foreboding reference to his “last night of childhood” ([1984] 2005, 3), as Gan awakes to the traumatic reality of his species' submission within the biopolitical regime of the so-called Preserve. The story is set in the near future, in a distant extrasolar planet where a group of human Terrans, who have escaped the threat of enslavement and death on Earth, have sought to take refuge. As the narrative progresses, we learn that after their early attempts to subdue the natives and colonize, the planet had been permanently thwarted by the host species—the intelligent but monstrous and physically superior Tlic—the Terrans were enslaved and exploited because they had something that the Tlic desperately needed: these giant insect-like beings depend upon warm-blooded animals to survive as a species, and so, use male Terrans as surrogate “mothers” for the implantation of their eggs, which constitutes a serious threat to their lives.²

² As Patricia Melzer has aptly noticed, the figures of the pregnant male and the impregnating female create a reversal of familial sexual difference and prove the “natural” construction of gender categories to be a chimera. It is her contention that the short story invites readers to reconsider their understanding of the construction of

A few generations later, within the narrator's lifetime, the situation seems to have improved for some of the humans, who are allowed to lead a relatively peaceful, safe and independent life within the Preserve in exchange for their unresisting availability to act as incubators. Hence, in contrast to classical SF narratives of space conquest, humans in "Bloodchild" have had to make certain accommodations with the host species, thereby dramatically changing them not only as individuals and as a community but also, as I will attempt to prove, as a species.

To begin with, as this brief summary already suggests, life for the Terrans in "Bloodchild" is portrayed as extremely traumatic. On the one hand, although neither the implantation of the eggs nor the extraction of the grubs is supposed to be painful in optimal conditions, the procedure is extremely dangerous for the Terrans and can easily lead to a horrible death. Knowledge of this has deeply affected Qui (Gan's brother), who is traumatized by having witnessed as a child a man being eaten from the inside ([1984] 2005, 20). The night on which the story takes place, Gan is forced to assist T'Gatoi—the Tlic government official in charge of the Preserve and a family friend—during her in-vivo emergency intervention on the Terran Lomas to remove the grubs that have started to poison him, and will soon begin to eat him. The experience of witnessing what presumably awaits as T'Gatoi's chosen partner for implantation is extremely traumatic for the protagonist who, despite being convinced that "this was a good and necessary thing Tlic and Terran did together" (16), is profoundly shocked by the savagery of the visceral procedure (15-17): "Finally, I stood shaking, tears streaming down my face. I did not know why I was crying, but I could not stop. [...] Every time I closed my eyes I saw red worms crawling over redder human flesh" (17). The experience is so utterly traumatic that he even considers taking his own life with his father's clandestine gun (24).

If the sacrifices Terrans have had to make in exchange for living at the Preserve appear excessive, they are assumed to be justified by the danger that lurks outside. As Gan explains, "I had lived outside with her [T'Gatoi], I had seen the desperate eagerness in the way some people looked at me. It was a little frightening to know that only she stood between us and that desperation that could so easily swallow us" (5). This makes reference to the fact that T'Gatoi and her political faction are the only ones that can protect the Terrans from "the hordes who did not understand why there was a Preserve—why any Terran could not be [...] in some way made available to them" (5). A great number of desperate Tlic, it is implied, wished to return to earlier practices that included breaking up Terran families (5), "penning" a male and a female so that they reproduce and thus provide another generation of "big, warm-blooded animals" to act as incubators (9), and forced implantation of Tlic eggs, which led some Terrans to commit suicide or to kill N'Tlic—implanted Terrans—(12). Terrans thus live in a

gender and its interconnection with issues of power. As Melzer puts it, "Butler reminds us that the reproductive function of women does not produce 'natural' social structures, but that these structures are constructed by power configurations under patriarchy" (2006, 85).

climate of ongoing threat, a situation now widely recognized by medical professionals as potentially traumatizing. Proof of that is the publication in 2013 of a special issue of the APA affiliated journal *Peace and Conflict: Journal of Peace Psychology* that focuses on so-called “Continuous Traumatic Stress” (CTS). The concept was originally developed in the 1980s by a group of mental health professionals working in apartheid-era South Africa (Stevens, Eagle, Kaminer and Higson-Smith 2013, 75). CTS constitutes a diagnostic tool to describe the psychological impact of living in conditions in which there is a realistic pervasive threat of danger (75).

To make life more bearable, Terrans have not only been placed under the supposed protection of a powerful political faction within the Preserve. They are also regularly fed sterile eggs, which have therapeutic properties, extend their lives and provide psychotropic pleasure. The relationship is, indeed, presented as symbiotic: “‘The animals we once used began killing most of our eggs after implantation long before your ancestors arrived,’ [T’Gatoi] said softly. ‘You know these things, Gan. Because your people arrived, we are relearning what it means to be a healthy, thriving people. And your ancestors, fleeing from their homeland, from their own kind who would have killed or enslaved them—they survived because of us’” (Butler [1984] 2005, 25). Butler herself has made the point in an interview to Larry McCaffery that what she was writing about in the short story was, among other things, symbiosis (2010, 12). While this may well have been the writer’s intention, there is undoubtedly a more sinister side to Tlic-Terran relations. This is precisely the point that was made by a number of early critics who found parallelisms with the practices of slavery in the US—see Kenan (2010, 30) and McCaffery (2010, 12). A decade after the publication of the short story, Elyce Helford, for instance, read the power relationship between the two species as a re-encoding of master-slave and human-animal relations (1994, 269). While there is evidence in the text to support such an analysis, it is my contention that the political regime that governs the lives of the Terrans within the Preserve may be more profitably understood as biopolitical.

At the Preserve, human life is shaped and determined by technologies of power that control the population and subjugate the body through their designation of ways of living and dying. The sovereign’s right to “*foster* life or *disallow* it to the point of death” (Foucault [1976] 1978, 138; emphasis in the original) that according to Foucault shapes the modern era of biopower is unequivocally evoked by the Tlics’ attitude towards Terran families. Their power is exerted at the level of Terran life, since they too endeavor to “administer, optimize, and multiply [life], subjecting it to precise controls and comprehensive regulations” (137). Firearms, for instance, are strictly forbidden. In addition, the sterile eggs that the humans are regularly given, and which improve their health, in effect ensure their suitability as incubators and their ability to carry the eggs until they hatch, as T’Gatoi’s concerned probing of Gan’s flesh suggests (Butler [1984] 2005, 2). In the same way, the extension of life that the eggs provide also increases the likelihood that a human may be implanted more than once, as in the case of Gan’s father (22). Finally, there is the policy of avoiding the use

of women for implantation as far as possible, so that they are left free to “bear their own young” (21). In contrast, those who refuse to accept the rules of the Preserve or attempt to rebel would presumably be expelled and left to the mercy of “impatient” or “desperate” Tlic (5)—that is, left to die.

The health of the Terran population within the Preserve is, therefore, the object of good Tlic governance, and their subjection to technologies of biopower maximizes the availability of their Terran bodies as breeding resources. Tlic biopolitical practices, therefore, inscribe and mark the human body and consciousness. Yet, importantly, in so doing these technologies dramatically alter the Terrans, who, to borrow the writer’s own words, “survive as a species but not unchanged” (McCaffery 2010, 20). This alteration is both figurative and literal. From a humanist perspective, the Terrans’ very humanity appears to have been somehow diminished: for one thing, they are no longer rationally self-determining and autonomously self-defining beings endowed with agency and freedom. To this I will return presently. On the other hand, after years of Tlic-Terran relations, Gan is the product of the inevitable contamination of the human by its inhuman Other—in this case, the alien—providing us with an image of the human being’s posthuman condition. In other words, the distinctions between the human and the alien have started to become blurred as a result of the accommodation of the posthuman. This is not just a physical transformation—characterized by life extension and elimination of disease—but also, and more importantly, it is a transformation at the level of consciousness. After all, the story is in very specific ways about the effects of alien physical appropriation and invasion of human bodies.

This is not a new theme for Butler; as Gregory J. Hampton aptly puts it, “the central fact of Octavia Butler’s fiction is an ambiguous and elaborate configuration and reconfiguration of the body, human and otherwise” (2010, xi). Indeed, Donna Haraway, who in her seminal essay “A Cyborg Manifesto” acknowledges her indebtedness to Octavia Butler (among other writers) as a “theorist for cyborgs” ([1985] 1991, 173), argues that “Butler has been consumed with an interrogation into the boundaries of what counts as human and into the limits of the concept” (226). In “Bloodchild,” this preoccupation is negotiated through the evolution of Gan’s attitude towards the idea of acting as surrogate “mother” for T’Gatoi’s eggs—see footnote one. As mentioned above, his initial response after witnessing the gory process of grub removal is sheer horror. Interestingly, he refers initially to the procedure as “alien” (Butler [1984] 2005, 17). Yet, during an intense and emotionally-charged exchange with T’Gatoi, Gan finally willingly consents to bear her eggs, thus indicating that his subjectivity is increasingly distanced from the human as he overcomes the horror of bodily invasion and hybridization by the alien. Indeed, the figures of the parasite, the host and the symbiont, which as Maria Ferreira explains are present in much of Butler’s fiction (2010, 401), constitute in “Bloodchild” a literal representation of the understanding and assimilation of otherness and the incorporation and negotiation of hybridity as decisive for the survival that Haraway’s cyborg speaks of.

Importantly, by embracing the Other within, Gan also embraces the disruptive potential of posthumanity. First, his posthuman condition constitutes a further threat to the unified and independent humanist subject who is defined in opposition to the Other that he is not (the masculine pronoun is used advisedly here). Indeed, Haraway has claimed that Butler carries out in her fiction an interrogation of the “practices of claiming ‘property in the self’ as the ground of ‘human’ individuality and selfhood” ([1985] 1991), 226). On the other hand, by embracing the posthuman, Gan also succeeds in breaching to a certain extent the power of the Tlic, opening up cracks in T’Gatoi’s seemingly superior position. For one thing, he gains a degree of control over his future: he can choose to shoot himself with his father’s gun, shoot T’Gatoi, send her to implant her egg in his sister Xuan Hoa, or agree to bear her young. In addition, as Raffaella Baccolini has put it, “the intense exchange between Gan and T’Gatoi, shows negotiation as the first step of resistance” (2008, 302). First of all, he demands from the Tlic that she formally ask for his consent (Butler [1984] 2005, 24). Secondly, he convinces her to let him keep the forbidden firearm saying: “If we’re not your animals, if these are adult things, accept the risk. There is risk, Gatoi, in dealing with a partner” (26), that is, dealing with an equal. Thus, by accommodating the posthuman, Gan proves that he is more than simply a victim, and in so doing he recovers a form of agency for himself and his species that allows him to overcome his earlier traumatic shock and to influence, to a certain extent, future Tlic-Terran interaction.

4. THE CYBORG WITHOUT: “THE GIRL WHO WAS PLUGGED IN”

James Tiptree, Jr.’s novella, “The Girl Who Was Plugged In” (1973), envisages a similarly dystopian and traumatic world—though in a more pessimistic manner—characterized by a biopolitical, late-capitalist regime. In it, despite a ban on advertising, aggressive megacorporations manipulate, and are in control of, every single aspect of human existence. This proto-cyberpunk story takes place ten minutes into the future of technoscientific innovation, where it is possible for a human mind to operate a flesh-and-bone, but brainless, body through “eccentric projection or sensory reference” (Tiptree, Jr. [1973] 2002, 551). The main protagonist is Philadelphia Burke, a grotesquely deformed girl of seventeen who, after a suicide attempt, is resuscitated by the megacorporation GTX and taught to remotely power and control a perfect genetically-engineered body named Delphi. Her assignment appears simple and exciting enough—to attend parties, go to fashionable places and meet other celebrities while consuming products in front of the cameras of the pervasive holographic broadcast and, thus, inspire the public to buy certain goods. In return, P. Burke is given Delphi’s body, and with it access to a previously banned realm of experience and human contact. Against her corporate owners’ interests and, conspicuously, against the design of her circuits, P. Burke’s reincarnation also affords her

the opportunity to experience genuine love, which rather unsurprisingly leads to her death and to the recycling of the Delphi body to be remotely controlled by a new mind.

To begin with, as was the case with the Terrans in Butler's short story, "The Girl Who Was Plugged In" suggests that life for P. Burke has been rather traumatic. On the one hand, the story's commercialized technoscientific society of the near future is characterized by a disproportionate cult of the body within the context of the ubiquitous, consumer-driven culture of the spectacle. The story opens with a crowd of people who are mooning over three young "gods" (546-547). Although neither we nor P. Burke know at this point, these dreamy, beautiful figures that the protagonist blindly adores and idolizes are not what we might call "normal" humans, but presumably custom-made, brainless "waldos," "grown" (551) to appear in certain places and within the field of vision of a "holocam" while using certain products. These products, corporate strategy presumes, will be bought by their zombie-like fans in the hope of being like their idols, becoming them, because "what gods have, mortals desire" (557). Attaining this ideal is, nevertheless, always one product away, since new necessities are constantly being created: "Years, the industry sweated years to achieve an almost invisible enzymatic filter. So one day a couple of pop-gods show up wearing nose-filters like big purple bats. By the end of the week the world market is screaming for purple bats [...] Multiply that by a million consumer industries and you can see why it's economic to have a few controllable goods" (557). At the same time, the system sustains itself by making people painfully aware of the unbridgeable gap that exists between themselves and these godlike beings, between their own mortal and worthless bodies and the sheer perfection of the disguised "waldos." Awareness of this distance, while painful for most, is deeply traumatic for those who stand at the margins of society, such as the deformed P. Burke, who is described by the narrator as "the ugly of the world" (547), with "body-parts you'd pay not to see" (548).

As a result of her monstrousness, the protagonist has always been barred from the social network; because of her grotesque form, she is excluded from the realm of the human, shunned and despised by others.³ The only response that her body elicits is disgust, which the narrator seizes every opportunity to emphasize. In short, P. Burke is the monstrous abject body relegated to beyond what generally constitutes the human, the epitome of which in Tiptree, Jr.'s vision is ironically represented by the godlike but "inhuman" beings that everyone loves and admires (546). It is precisely after watching them as they walk out of a shop—significantly called "Body East" (546)—that P. Burke decides to commit suicide, an act which incidentally generates only a "tepid" response from bystanders (548). It is worth adding that before her re-embodiment in Delphi, the only form of physical contact that P. Burke has known was an extremely violent and

³ Veronica Hollinger was the first to draw attention to the fact that P. Burke's exclusion from the realm of the human is closely connected to the fact that she fails to fulfill the requirements of what conventionally constitutes the feminine, being as she is "about as far as you can get from the concept *girl*" (1999, 31; emphasis in the original).

traumatizing gang rape: “[F]or her, sex is a four-letter word spelled P-A-I-N. She isn’t quite a virgin. You don’t want the details; she’d been about twelve and the freak-lovers were bombed blind. When they came down they threw her out with a small hole in her anatomy and a mortal one elsewhere” (556).

Interest in P. Burke only arises after her suicide attempt: it turns out that the GTX computers have determined that she meets certain criteria, so she receives a visit from an executive who offers her the aforementioned arrangement (548). From then on, her life is to be determined by biopolitical technologies of power that are market-oriented and seek to conserve life through its regulating in order to guarantee that the individual follows patterns of consumption that, beyond affecting him/her individually, impact society as a whole. First of all, biopower, in conjunction with technology, is inscribed onto P. Burke’s body by disposing of it and replacing it with a new one—the flawless shell that is Delphi. As the locus of her brain, however, P. Burke’s body needs to be kept alive at all cost. A crisis soon arises when he, blissfully engrossed in the joy of “finding herself a [...] star girl” (559), stops eating or sleeping, and “they can’t keep her out of the body-cabinet to get her blood moving, there are necroses under her grisly sit-down” (558). Therefore, guarded by an army of doctors, nurses and engineers, she gets periodic medical and technical exams and eventually ends up wired to life-supporting medical equipment, the better to fulfill the economic aspirations of her corporate owners.

It is worth adding that, once again, the deal offered to P. Burke, which she willingly accepts, might appear on the surface to be beneficial for both parties, that is, symbiotic. This is partly the contention of Melisa Stevenson, who cogently argues that, embodied in Delphi, P. Burke has the chance to connect with other people in a way that she could never have had through her own body (2007, 95-100). Yet, as was the case with the Terrans and the Tlic in “Bloodchild,” the relationship between P. Burke and the megacorporation GTX is undoubtedly unequal in terms of power within the biopolitical regime of late capitalism that the story depicts, and all the risks are assumed by only one of the parties. Proof of this is the fact that the executives at GTX do not hesitate to punish her physically when she starts acting against the economic interests of her corporate owners, who could easily turn her (Delphi) off and let her (P. Burke) die (Tiptree, Jr. [1973] 2002, 569-572), but restrain themselves to avoid the risk of accidentally killing the Delphi body. In addition, it is made clear in the text that P. Burke had not understood when she consented to work as a “remote” that “the bargain she made was forever” (565), and that there are several veiled threats to what could happen to P. Burke if she stops being profitable or docile (557). In short, “The Girl Who Was Plugged In” is to a great extent about corporate use of biopower in conjunction with technology as a form of appropriation and subjugation of the body for economic gain, which in Tiptree, Jr.’s vision is literal rather than symbolic.

The most evident result of the entanglement between biopower and technology in P. Burke’s body is that humanity seems to be drained out of her. One aspect of this is that it leads to the shattering of the subject, which is literally split into two separate

and separated entities, body and mind. This fragmentation and hierarchization affords several readings: on the one hand, the story is critical of the traditional humanist emphasis on reason being superior to matter whereby the body is decentered and understood as subjugated to the preeminence of the mind. In the same vein, P. Burke's fragmentation seems to critically evoke the strand of posthumanism which, as Hayles explains, expands the prerogatives of humanism in that it views the body as disposable, and which is epitomized by Hans Moravec's dream of downloading human consciousness into a computer and reaching immortality (Hayles 1999, 287).⁴ On the other hand, the P. Burke-Delphi "being" may be more profitably read through Haraway's metaphor of the cyborg. Tiptree, Jr., let it be said, was another "theorist for cyborgs" that inspired Haraway's theory ([1985] 1991, 173).

Indeed, as a creature of science fiction, P. Burke-Delphi is shown to be literally a hybrid of organism and machine that disrupts the traditional boundary between the physical and the non-physical: "eighty-nine pounds of tender girl flesh and blood with a few metallic components" that has "her brain in an unusual place. A simple real-time on-line system with plenty of bit-rate" (Tiptree, Jr. [1973] 2002, 555).⁵ More importantly, however, in contrast to the techno-powerful, hyper-masculine traditional cyborgs of classic SF, Tiptree, Jr.'s representation of the cyborg—like Butler's depiction of the incorporation of the alien Other—is potentially liberating in its subversion of existing binary hierarchies: P. Burke-Delphi—a being both organic and machinic, both physical and non-physical—embodies a state of consciousness that undermines and blurs the boundaries of the human, threatening the self-containment of the humanist subject and disrupting an understanding of the body as the receptacle and necessary limit of human essence. In other words, the cyborg in "The Girl Who Was Plugged In" upsets what Elaine Graham calls humanity's "ontological hygiene" (2002, 20). Melisa Stevenson has remarked that P. Burke-Delphi is the necessary splice of which Katherine Hayles speaks, "the interaction between flesh and technology that renders each more than they were before" (Stevenson 2007, 98-99).

The liberating potential of the liminal nature of P. Burke-Delphi is, nevertheless, undermined by her incontestably limited agency, which renders the figure of the cyborg in the novella as neither utopian nor celebratory, as Haraway would have it. After all, the protagonist's freedom is curtailed by GTX's ownership of Delphi and the company's

⁴ As Hayles explains, the roboticist Hans Moravec argued that human identity is essentially an information pattern which, in his view, can be demonstrated by downloading human consciousness into a computer (199, xii). This is also the kind of fantasy found in classical cyberpunk projects.

⁵ It is worth acknowledging that, as a number of critics have rightly emphasized, the P. Burke-Delphi being is not merely a cyborg, but a *gendered* cyborg. In this light, both her disempowerment in the context of a late capitalist biopolitical regime and her exploitation as a marketing tool whose effectiveness relies on her sexual appeal acquire even darker undertones. It might well have been the intention of the author to write an anti-utopian cautionary account of the effects of technoscience on the bodies of women. Indeed, Tiptree, Jr.'s writing is generally characterized by a pessimistic approach to gender and sexuality. As Hollinger aptly notes, "The Girl Who Was Plugged In" constitutes a "politicization of gender" (1999, 32) in that it "examines the pressures on women to replicate the ideal of femininity" (29), which is nothing but a "performance" (32).

contractual biopolitical rule over P. Burke. P. Burke-Delphi is now a “controllable good” (Tiptree, Jr. [1973] 2002, 557), a “corporate asset” (568), compelled to do as she is told. Critics such as Scott Bukatman (1993, 316) and Heather J. Hicks (1996, 75) have similarly foregrounded the degree to which P. Burke renounces agency in exchange for the Delphi body, rendering herself a “pathetic and even stupid” figure (Bukatman 1993, 319). However, her re-embodiment in Delphi reshapes P. Burke’s consciousness, her identity, and it endows her with a new sense of power that inspires her to defy GTX. First, she refuses to use products that she considers unsafe and, despite much anger and outrage from GTX executives, “the offending products vanish” (Tiptree, Jr. [1973] 2002, 562). Secondly, disregarding her corporate owners’ forceful insistence (568), she resolutely refuses to break off with her beloved Paul and tries to run away with him to escape her guardians and marketing duties (571). Most notably, in defiance of the cybernetic rules that make possible and govern her re-embodiment, she succeeds in merging with Delphi, so strong is her desire and determination to “fuse with Delphi [...] *To become Delphi*” (566; emphasis in the original). Proof of this is the fact that she manages to utter words while the connection between P. Burke’s brain and the Delphi body is turned off ([1973] 2002, 560) and, like an undead zombie, her consciousness lives on in Delphi for a few hours after the death of P. Burke’s body (575-576). Thus, despite the tragic ending, P. Burke-Delphi succeeds in pushing the megacorporation into a corner and regaining a degree of agency thanks to her newly-acquired cyborg identity.

5. CONCLUSION: TOWARDS A POSTHUMAN AGENCY

As I hope my analysis has proved, “Bloodchild” and “The Girl Who Was Plugged In” both feature posthuman embodiment—in, respectively, the figures of the surrogate and the cyborg/zombie—as a form of boundary shattering that gives the two protagonists the chance, albeit a slim one, to resist bodily appropriation, undermine unequal power relations and prevail over traumatic living conditions that emerge from biopolitical technologies of self. Both Gan and P. Burke-Delphi are complex and contradictory characters whose resulting identities and bodies are inseparable from their encounters with trauma, biopower and the posthuman. Furthermore, despite their seemingly restricted agency, both manage to find a space to direct their efforts towards their own goals: on the one hand, while the Tlic in “Bloodchild” are, no doubt, going to continue to hold a position of dominance, Gan has succeeded in forcing T’Gatoi to acknowledge the subordinated position of the Terrans and the traumatic and exploitative nature of the biopolitical arrangement in the Preserve. On a more pessimistic note, in “The Girl Who Was Plugged In” P. Burke’s reward for standing up for herself is her own death and the recycling of the Delphi body, and yet, through the sheer force of her willpower, she succeeds in fusing with Delphi for a few hours, in defiance not only of GTX policy but also of cybernetic laws, thereby becoming “the greatest cybersystem” to have ever existed (Tiptree, Jr. [1973] 2002, 576).

Naomi Jacobs makes the valid point that much of the fascinating and repelling force of classic dystopia results from its depiction of a world where there is no agency (2003, 92). By representing the individual as totally deprived of the right to choose and act upon his or her choices, classic dystopian fictions are set against, and thus reinforce, the humanist premise that self-determination, individuality and freedom are essential features of a truly human life and essence (92-93; see also Hayles 1999, 286). Yet, such a premise is nothing but a utopian, though fatal, fantasy that whitewashes over the fact that if those are indeed the features that separate the human from his inhuman Others, this would exclude all marginalized collectives—in terms of gender, race, sexuality, class, religion, etc.—from humanity, as was in fact literally the case for a long time and may still be in a certain sense.

Perhaps sensing this—Octavia Butler being an African-American, and both she and James Tiptree, Jr. being women writers in the traditionally masculine world of SF—it comes as no surprise that the two might have felt an impulse to create protagonists who, against all odds, succeed in finding gaps in the system within which to exert their will. However, this is not the kind of individual agency within which the autonomous, unified humanist subject has traditionally been defined. Rather, it is a posthuman form of agency that is based on resistance, on indirection, on relativity and multiplicity, and which emerges from the embracing of hybridity, of the trace of the inhuman within the self. In *The History of Sexuality*, Michel Foucault famously claimed that “where there is power, there is resistance” ([1976] 1978, 95). In his view, the world is not divided into those who have the power and those who lack it, but he rather proposes that “points of resistance are present everywhere in the power network” (95), and everyone attempts to affect others while everyone resists the effects of these others to the best of their ability. In a similar vein, “Bloodchild” and “The Girl Who Was Plugged In” show both the humanist association of humanity and freedom and the unidirectional nature of the dystopic understanding of power and agency to be chimeras. The traumatizing forces that shape life in times of biopower challenge the notion of the self-determining and autonomous self, while the posthuman and the technology of living that it endows raise hopes of resistance.

To conclude, the two stories can be said to evoke the current globalized and potentially traumatizing biopolitical regime of western neoliberal capitalism, whereby individuals, just like the protagonists, are valuable to the system only as long as we are able to produce, consume and reproduce (physically and culturally speaking), and where we have a limited agency. Our only hope seems to be to strive for a posthuman form of agency. Such a reading confirms the relatively recent premise that SF is a tool not only to speculate about the future but also to explain the present. Furthermore, as the New Wave in general, and the two stories analyzed here in particular, demonstrate, SF is a mode of cultural production that has the potential to resist Western power structures and traditional representations of identity and subjectivity. These dystopic but hopeful posthuman futures point to our dystopic but hopeful posthuman present under the sign of trauma and biopower.

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