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Sparks from the Tail of a Comet: Historical Materialism and Genetic Imperialism in Octavia E. Butler's *Xenogenesis* Novels

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***Abstract*:** Through a close reading of Octavia Butler's *Dawn* (1987), *Adulthood Rites* (1988) and *Imago* (1989), this article examines how implicitly decolonialist science fiction is shaped by the socio-historical context of the Cold War. Writing against notions of American exceptionalism, Butler's tacit critique of settler colonialism argues against social systems that assign value based on identity. The structure of this argument glosses Frederic Jameson's critique of the limits of utopian structures in science fiction, mostly drawn from his critical tome *Archaeologies of the Future*. Butler uses characterization, particularly of the protagonists—Lilith, Akin and Jodah—in the three novels to produce a critical model for understanding the limitations and potential of narratives about alien colonization as a means of exploring the radical potential of human collaboration as a means to end identity-based oppression. The novels work in tandem to produce a unified transformative narrative that frames subjugation, difference and subjectivity as problems to be solved within a nationalizing system, which reveals how the series is complicated by the late capitalist world system into which it was published.

Octavia Butler wrote science fiction that directly protested notions of American exceptionalism, and in her *Xenogensis* series she crafts a tacit critique of settler colonialism and the social systems it produces, which assign value to human subjects based on their socially hieararchized identities. This critique marks the texts of all three novels—*Dawn* (1987), *Adulthood Rites* (1988) and *Imago* (1989)—as utopian explorations of human potential. In considering how fiction that stages such explorations might work to imagine future cultural

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shifts, critic Frederic Jameson argues that "one cannot imagine any fundamental change in our social existence which has not first thrown off Utopian visions like so many sparks from the tail of a comet" (*Archaeologies of the Future* xii). Those visions, in spite of their inextricability from the limited present, are perhaps best represented as the possibilities for which writers of science fiction often attempt to speak. Butler speaks to those possibilities through characterization, particularly of the protagonists—Lilith, Akin and Jodah—in the three novels to produce a critical model for understanding the limitations and potential of narratives about alien colonization as a means of exploring the radical potential of human collaboration as a means to end identity-based oppression.

Butler's novels work in tandem to produce a unified transformative narrative that frames subjugation, difference and subjectivity as problems to be solved within a nationalizing system, which reveals how the series is complicated by the late capitalist world system into which it was published. Like all the best works in the genre, Butler's imagined utopia provides flickering speculations in response to the unanswerable questions: Are difference and domination intrinsically linked? Are personal freedom and collective action mutually exclusive? Can intellect be separated from the will to power? Can human empathy be detached from human cruelty? In beginning to posit a few germinal answers, Butler shares some insights about the contradictory nature of human intelligence, which, in the series, is tied specifically to the material and cultural realities of the world in which she composed it. As Jameson suggests, the imagined changes to human culture and society are necessarily bound to the conventions of social existence in that time and place, namely the end of the 20th Century in the United States. In spite of the limitations this late Cold War context places upon Butler's utopian vision, the novels are distinct from much of the science fiction Jameson critiques; the writer permutes

individual human identity across each of the three installments to imagine what any fundamental shift in social experiences might need to accomplish in order to fully represent an end to oppression by (if not of) human beings.

Because Butler, as a woman of color writing in a field that is dominated by European and American men, is also living the experiences of that oppression, she crafts her protagonists' struggles during the fundamental shift in social existence as both the product of settler colonialism and the solution to the hierarchical inequity produced by that colonizing impulse. This seeming contradiction is grounded in the Cold War mentality of the United States under the Reagan administration, when fears of mutually assured destruction and innate distrust of the Soviet Union and its satellite nations are ubiquitous in American imaginations and cultural productions. The first installment, *Dawn*, begins with a nuclear holocaust, the result of a human war, which prompts an alien race, called the Oankali, to capture human beings for a genetic exchange called "the trade." This catastrophe, a consequence of conflicts caused by global capitalism, presents a new form of domination at the hands—or tentacles, as it were—of a superhuman extraterrestrial race.

The Oankali intervene to disrupt the nuclear devastation of Earth, but not out of altruistic intent; they do so to satisfy their biological need for "the trade," a generations-long cohabitation between the Oankali and their human captives to integrate human genetics with Oankali genetics to form hybrid "constructs." In her characterization of these post-apocalyptic humans, their Oankali overlords and the newly-engineered constructs, Butler tacitly considers the potential of biologically derived subjectivity, as it is mediated by late capitalism, and seeks to envision a culture that can value identity difference and eliminate hierarchy. Identity and hierarchy, as anyone familiar with Marxist literary criticism can attest, are intimately linked with modes of

production; those with identity-based privilege create and maintain stratified class systems so as to exploit the labor of those without it. The colonial system that Butler fictionalizes in her speculation reveals this Jamesonian truism; although the Oankali are communal, they are also "powerfully acquisitive" (*Dawn* 33). Their intervention to save the genome responsible for human intelligence is predicated on the elimination of the biological tendency for hierarchical thinking, which, according to the Oankali, is to blame for the innate violence of human subjectivity. In order to possess the coveted trait and to excise the undesirable one, the Oankali, like American and European colonizers of human history, offer the humans they have rescued a choice that is not a choice: assimilate or perish.

The metaphor of the trade as a transcultural invective is clear, as is the repossession of geographic space—the Oankali intend to reform Earth to make it more habitable on the condition that two of their cultural groups, one purely Oankali and the other hybrid constructs, will live on the planet with the surviving humans. To reject this offer is to accept death; to accept it is to acquiesce to either infertility or interbreeding with the colonizer. The conditions of the trade mark a clear shift in ownership, not just of material goods, but also of the biological and industrial future of the human race.

The genetic manipulation of the world, proscribed by the Oankali, replaces mechanistic human industry, and the genetic union of Oankali with human to produce constructs replaces human reproduction. These shifts in production and reproduction stage a tenuous utopian response to the Cold War. Modes of production shift, but the subject only becomes further commodified through alien colonization. This commodification is a feature of both the trilogy and the cultural moment in which Butler writes it. As such, an historical materialist perspective on the text illuminates some of the ways in which the functions of late capitalism may either

inhibit or encourage the progressive potential of human collaboration—both in the speculative world of trilogy and in reality of the coming 21st Century.

Much scholarship on *Xenogenesis* reads the novels as a utopian progression from post-apocalyptic turmoil to an anti-hierarchical utopia. Many scholars, like Laurel Bollinger and Michele Osherow, interpret the centrality of black characters—like Lilith, the first human mother selected for Oankali breeding—to the narrative as a revision of racial hierarchies that overturns the project begun by Euro-american colonial practices. Aparajita Nanda contends that Butler's deployment of "the theme of colonial oppression and subjugation" works to present readers with "a set of aporias built on several inevitably linked discourses on power, genetics and evolution," and that those discursive devices "confound the limitations of the traditional discourses [about identity and difference] by acknowledging the ambiguity at the heart of the colonial project" (773). This ambiguity is perhaps the result of the limitations on utopian vision that are produced by the historical and material conditions of American exceptionalism in the late 20th Century.

Some critics, like Deliah Bratass, Theodora Goss and John Paul Riquelme, also interpret Butler's depiction of the Oankali—who are non-violent, tri-gendered and symbiotic—as an attempt to represent a society in which domination is not requisite for development. This perspective, of course, overlooks the ways in which humans who wish to deny the Oankali their trade are criminalized and punished in the texts. Other critics, like J. Adams Johns, find in *Xenogenesis*, a radical form of biological essentialism that "strip[s] optimistic liberal humanism" from scientific discourses on genetic determinism in order to "consider the end of humanity, whether that end is simply annihilation or the beginning of a biologically new post-humanity with new ideas and new institutions" that are necessarily "oriented toward death (or evolution) for the sake of life" (398). This perspective, while bleak, does seem to account for some of the

ambiguity other critics praise as potentially radical in its imagining of posthumanism. The tension between the scholarly interpretations of the Oankali and their interactions with humans might be distilled into a singular disagreement about whether Butler intends to frame the trade as an act of alien aid or of alien domination. In either case, critics seem to conduct utopian readings of the novel that consider those questions with which this article begins.

Each critic seems to endorse (or critique) a utopian hope in the fiction; that hope (or hopelessness) is an imagined redress to domination as the necessary catalyst for progress. The crux of the debate above seems to be the question of whether or not Butler imagines that this sort of redress is possible. What remains unexamined in this conversation is the way in which human impulses aid or dominate others often work in tandem, as was certainly the case during the Cold War, when both foreign aid and defense spending dramatically increased as the competition between the USSR and the USA escalated (Arrighi 137).

Any imagined redress to domination, is, of course, the hallmark of utopian science fiction as a genre; Jameson famously catalogues "the failures of utopian thinking" and in doing so, stresses that utopian concepts can only circumvent representational failure if "the utopian imagination protects itself against a fatal return to just those historical contradictions from which it was supposed to provide relief" ("World-Reduction in [. . .]"). Jameson is not suggesting that authors working in the genre should refrain from the use of allegories to their own situation, but rather he calls for critical examination of particular historical and ideological contexts for the fiction and its historical referents. In the preface to his monograph on speculative fiction and late capitalism, *Archaeologies of the Future*, Jameson notes that "Utopian form is itself a representational meditation on radical difference, radical otherness and on the systemic nature of the social totality" (xii). For Jameson, the utopian impulse in speculative fiction must conduct

some reorganization of social hierarchies. In Butler's novels, this utopian reorganization begins with an act of domination as the necessary precursor for diffusing emphasis on racial and gender-based difference. Perhaps, the series even imagines a new emphasis by juxtaposing the human protagonists with the Oankali, and rather than setting up a clear hierarchy. Butler asks readers to forgo the epideictic judgment that many utopian narratives implicitly request in favor of an extended consideration of possible relations between subjects and subjugation that do not produce a power differential. The human characters begin, as most human characters in speculative fiction must, in the 'real' world of differences. The Oankali spacecraft arrive trailing the sparks of an imagined utopia of radical difference without hierarchy that might work to produce an altered social existence. But the union of the two cultures, embodied not just by the constructs but also by the humans and the Oankali who are altered by transcultural forces, seems to be more than the sum of these two parts. The novels are obviously utopian; the question that remains then is whether or not the trilogy succeeds in imagining a fundamental change that throws off those sparks that mark the fiction as a kind of utopian vision.

HISTORICAL MATERIALISM

The Time and Place of Imagining and the Times and Places Imagined

> "Utopia would seem to offer the spectacle of one of those rare phenomena whose concept is indistinguishable from its reality, whose ontology coincides with its representation. Does this peculiar entity still have a social function?" (Jameson, *The New Left Review*)

> "I got my idea for the *Xenogenesis* books from Ronald Reagan because he was advocating [building the U.S. nuclear arsenal]. I thought there must be something basic, something really genetically wrong with us if we're falling for this stuff." (Butler, *In Motion Magazine*)

As the real world that Butler inhabits as a writer forms the basis of the reality that she speculates from, the old Jamesonian invective to "always historicize" seems crucial to any

analysis of how the human characters' interesting traits—intelligence and aggression—manifest in the opening of the trilogy and in the cultural moment from which the book departs. The historical context of the late 1980s significantly informs the content of the trilogy's utopian vision. That context must determine how Butler's ambivalence about the possibilities of human social development is interpreted.

The author adapts the conditions of the late Cold War by describing the nuclear devastation the Oankali invasion interrupts. Butler's use of these conditions serve as evidence the fiction may work as a kind of cautionary tale for present-day readers, as well as a speculation about an imagined future. Those two contradictory impulses—to warn and to predetermine—mirror the Oankali's reductive bifurcation of human nature as intelligent because of the social incentives to collaborate and as destructive because of the hierarchical impetus to exploit. In Lilith's earliest interactions with Jdaya, the male Oankali sent to awaken Lilith after her capture/rescue, contradictions are framed as historical and biological—a material manifestation of a genetic trait. Jdaya tells Lilith, "You are hierarchical. That's the older and more entrenched characteristic. We saw it in your closest animal relatives and in your most distant ones. It's a terrestrial characteristic" (39). The Oankali see culture as a manifestation of biological essence and the violence of the nuclear war as only the most recent example of the destructive destiny that humans carry in their genes.

The novel implicitly asks if humans are naturally collaborative or oppressive by weighing those two contradictory traits. Butler's formal choices reveal that she is grappling with this question, and her use of nuclear war as a catalyst for invasion creates space for a materialist interpretation that considers this justification for colonial intervention—that the colonizer had to act to rescue the primitive culture from its own violent tendencies—as not just a trope to

rationalize dehumanizing (literally in this context) domination, but also as a means of rethinking the colonial impulse in a late capitalist context. Nanda argues that "Butler was thinking seriously about a 'third' form of colonialism in the 1980s, in the wake of Ronald Reagan's arms race with the Soviet Union: the colonization of nuclear weapons and the potential self-destruction of humanity" (774). Such a destruction would both fulfill the purpose of colonial enterprise by destroying that which could not be retrieved for the use of the dominant culture and by demonstrating a technological superiority of that culture over those who it seeks to colonize.

When asked about her creative process in writing the trilogy by interviewer Joshunda Sanders, Butler noted that she set the first book "after the big war because it's kind of an example" that illustrates the two characteristics that the Oankali admire and reject. In 1987 a nuclear war that renders most of the world uninhabitable is a timely conceit. The year the first novel was published, not only did Ronald Reagan hold the U.S. presidency, but Margaret Thatcher, every bit Reagan's equal in terms of conservative preoccupation with defense budgets and national security, won a third term as the Prime Minister of the U.K. The U.S. military completed its last atomic test on continental American soil, as tensions between NATO and the Soviet Union remained a political and cultural preoccupation for most Americans—despite the growing infirmity of the Soviet economy and its waning status as the singular hegemon in the Eastern half of the global North. Even now, decades after the publication of the final installment in the series, fears about nuclear proliferation to non-NATO allies are pervasive in international news cycles and defense spending grows each year despite a long-term trend of domestic joblessness and poverty in almost every industrialized nation. The fear of a "big war" (although perhaps now that war is "on terror" or against refugees rather than between superpowers armed with atom bombs) looms large in the collective psyche.

Present geopolitical conditions serve as an excellent example that while humans are capable of incredible ingenuity, the ingenious products are, perhaps, most likely to be put to use in dominating and subjugating other humans. However, Butler also frames human capacities for nurturing one another as an important trait, and one valued by the Oankali. For instance, before conversing with Jdaya, Lilith is subjected to a behavioral experiment. She awakens in a room with no doors with a five year old child that she has never before interacted with. Lilith almost immediately acts as the child's caretaker, and delights in his presence. As soon as the Oankali are satisfied that she is capable of forging an emotional attachment to the child, they complete the experiment and remove the child from her enclosure. Lilith is chosen for the breeding program not because she demonstrates an excess of the prized trait (social intelligence) but because she displayed a maternal drive that the Oankali hoped to be able to use in repressing the contradictory trait (hierarchical aggression). Butler here points out that even in a period in which the contradiction in human drives is so clearly manifest in the threat of nuclear war, the pedestrian nature of parental love seems to, in some small way, mitigate the violence the Oankali fear is endemic to human genetics.

Because the books are set at the crest of neo-liberal faith in the free market in the late 80s, at a time when the prevailing mentality is resolute in its condemnation of utopian alternatives to capitalism, readers might be wary of a didacticism in *Xenogenesis* that often marks speculative realism in general and science fiction written during and about the Cold War in particular. Although he does not specifically examine Butler's work, Jameson's commentary on Olaf Stapledon's *Star Maker* (1937) examines this sort of didacticism. Jameson writes, "It is indeed ironic, but perhaps significant, that the best of all alien representations [. . .] should have been composed in a resolutely Cold War spirit, and designed to preach an unremitting vigilance

and hostility to the newly discovered alien species as a scarcely disguised foreign policy lesson" (*Archaeologies of the Future* 132). Though Stapledon's novel is produced during the historical moments preceding the primacy of the U.S.-Soviet Conflict and Butler's novels are produced in the moments in which that conflict is becoming tertiary, the Cold-War mentality of xenophobic self-interest fueled, and was fueled by, the spread of Western economic interests through an increasingly global structure after the Second World War (Arrighi 70). The mentality is reified confluently with that spread, and, understandably, permeates Butler's representations (although in a less obviously didactic and conservative way than other works of science fiction at the time—Card's 1985 novel *Ender's Game*, for example).

The series provides a cautionary tale about the consequences of emphatic self-defense and the advantages of extending trust across differences. For instance, some emphasis on the importance of free choice is clearly presented in the second novel. *Adulthood Rites* is principally concerned with the founding of a human colony on Mars. This colony is intended to house humans who have rejected the trade and had their reproductive functions restored. The colony is established through the work of one construct, Lilith's son Akin, who persuades the Oankali that denying humans the right to fulfill their self-destructive genetic destiny is unethical. This plotline establishes that the precondition of the trade must be acceptable according to human values as well as Oankali ones, and provides an illustration of productive transculturation in which compromise becomes a viable alternative to violent oppression.

Unlike Stapledon (and even more unlike Card), one could argue that Butler does not give way entirely to the xenophobic tendencies of the period in which she writes; instead, her novels trouble the simplicity of fears of difference. The series' utopian vision is based upon the construction of characters and situations that demonstrate the necessity of identification without

consumption and community without hierarchy. The tension between that fear and that necessity drives all three plots and ultimately makes the narrative an ambiguous, perhaps even ambivalent, interrogation of the possibility of posthuman consciousness. After Akin succeeds in securing permission and materials for the Mars colony, he admits that his hope is that the most violent of the colonists will be killed off during the establishment of the settlement and that the colonists will be able to breed out the contradiction through natural selection, as the harsh terrain of Mars should require them to cooperate to survive. This admission demonstrates that Akin accepts the biological determinism of the Oankali but rejects the predictive logic that asserts the inevitable doom of human social existence. Butler closes the series without telling readers what fate the Mars colony meets, so the humans, and their genetic contradiction, remain both as a threat and a hope for the newly hybridized group of constructs, humans and Oankali living together on Earth. This ambivalence is perhaps the most obvious symptom of late capitalist culture, and the fragmentation of Butler's focus sometimes undermines the utopian vision in the texts as the trilogy progresses.

In an earlier interview, Butler explains her attempt to focus on the antithesis of the fear Jameson accuses Stapledon of recreating,

> I was writing about an alien species that was xenophilic. And when I began working on the novels, I thought 'xenophilic' must be a word [. . .] But in the dictionaries that I had, which were a few years old, I couldn't find it. [. . .] What I found instead was 'xenophobic,' a fear of strangers, and 'xenomaniac,' a person who has an unnatural liking for strangers. ("A Conversation with . . .")

The polemic between "fear of" and "an unnatural liking for" difference seems to suggest that there is no conception of a natural liking or an indifference to strangers, or that such sentiments are so rare as to make the use of a linguistic symbol for that state of mind unnecessary. In the cultural landscape of the US in the late 80s, any alternatives to the xenophobic prerogatives of a capitalist world-system, dominated by a cultural and economic core, are viewed as utopian. Therefore, Butler's attempt to represent such an alternative fuels a narrative about overcoming humanity that is, in some ways, trapped by the social system in which the writer lives.

The ambivalence Akin feels about the human colony he advocated for is just one example. Lilith also chooses not to resist her attraction and affection for Nikanj, the ooloi member of her combined Oankali family, which seems to be an endorsement of the Oankali flexibility about sexuality and acceptance of difference. For the other humans in her community—and her lover Joseph, in particular—this acceptance is a betrayal of her humanity. Even early in their life together, Lilith "did not pretend outwardly or to herself that she would resist Nikanj's invitation—or that she wanted to resist it" (161). Her desire for the sexual joining with Nikanj, as a conduit for sex with Joseph, is still active even after she learns that "after they mated through an ooloi, they could not mate with each other in the Human way—could not even stroke or handle one another in the Human way" (297). Joseph on the other hand declares that he will "never let that thing touch [him] again" after their first experience. Because both Joseph and Lilith are sympathetic characters with whom readers are encouraged to identify, their contradictory responses to the physical demands of "the trade" demonstrates the ambiguity about the sexual component of the xenophilic drive Butler's work thematizes.

Jameson notes the ambivalence about the possibilities of a new future is shared by all utopian writers precisely because their readership is likely to fall into that same trap of being

unable to render judgments about the unfamiliar without relying upon the ethical apparatus of the familiar: "Utopia is just unimaginable, its images always reflecting a kind of anthropomorphic projection which we may now limit by recognizing them as projections of our own society and its parochial obsessions" (*Archaeologies of the Future* 128). Nanda too notes that this section of the text intentionally asks readers to consider the boundaries of their tolerance of difference; "[w]hen Lilith enjoys sex with the ooloi, she introduces a contraband desire that rebukes Cold War domesticity and procreative sex by reveling in infamous forms of pleasure" (779). Joseph, who would enjoy sexual privilege as a man in that same schema of Cold War domesticity, rejects that pleasure even as he is forced to participate in the sexual act. In fact, even when he chooses death over assimilation at the end of *Dawn* his cells are still used against his intentions, as Nikanj saves sperm from that singular encounter and uses it to impregnate Lilith. Because Butler's imagining of the "unimaginable" extension of xenophilia in the novels is predicated on her sensitivity to the emergent possibilities (including a mitigation of patriarchy in domestic desire) of the historical moment in which she writes, her example in *Xenogenesis* is crafted as a commentary about the identity politics that shape the present, rather than a representational crafting of an improved future. Surely Nikanj's actions deny the need for Joseph's consent just as the normativity of procreative sex and the submission of wives to their husband's desires might mitigate married women's abilities to consent in the domestic sphere Nanda suggests Butler critiques. In this way, Butler assesses, rather than commends, emergent notions of subjugation and subjectivity that function within the Cold-War worldview. The author presents her critique through a radical adaptation of the genre of utopian science fiction.

The ways that Butler imagines subjectivity adapting suggests that the inherent contradictions of the system to which she proposes an alternative can be resolved in that

alternative. If utopian possibilities cannot be systemically inscribed in her fiction (as Jameson has suggested is relatively impossible in his readings of Stapledon, Heinlein and Le Guin), then Butler's characters may seek to interrupt the ideology of Cold-War conservatism in the world of *Xenogenesis*. The novels work to revise late capitalist logic and to implicitly question the biological impetus to secure power through domination through an examination of genetic, rather than colonial, imperialism.

GENETIC IMPERIALISM

(Re)Production and Trade as an Intergalactic Colonial Imperative

> "[I]deology is not something which informs or invests symbolic production; rather the aesthetic act is itself ideological [. . .] with the function of inventing imaginary or formal 'solutions' to unresolvable social contradictions." (Jameson *The Political Unconscious* 21)

> "We *must* do it. It renews us, enables us to survive as an evolving species. [. . .] We acquire new life—seek it, investigate it, manipulate it, sort it, use it. We are as committed to the trade as your body is to breathing." (Butler *Dawn* 40-1)

Butler's radical adaptation of the science fiction genre begins with her reimagining of the human social order. If, as she indicates in interviews, she is predominantly concerned with how difference becomes reviled by the conflation of distinctions with hierarchies, then it stands to reason that she does not simply construct the Oankali in diametrical opposition to humanity, as doing so would create another dichotomy in which one term is privileged. In creating a utopian alternative to human culture, Butler explores the difference in applications of adaptive intelligence in an individualist system and a communal one. Although she does not generate a simple dichotomy between Jeffersonian libertarianism and vulgar Marxism, Butler does use the

different subjective orientations of the humans and their Oankali rescuers/captors to represent some differences in social organization that are based upon differences in modes of production. As a highly symbiotic species, the Oankali reproduce and generate capital by manipulating the life around them and adapting those biological specimens to their needs. The humans, situated in postmodernity before its overproduction is abruptly halted by nuclear winter, compete for resources that they can cull from their environment and process using machine-based technology. The two modes of production are not so very dissimilar, as only specialized Oankali—the neuter-sexed ooloi—can manipulate the specimens, which is a situation not unlike the specialization created in an industrial and increasingly automated system of manufacturing. But the differences that do exist—like the distinction between private property of human producers and the collective ownership of the unified Oankali family aboard the ship—are enough to account for ideological disagreements. However, the ooloi are rather like captains of industry, since they control the means of production they do enjoy elevated status even in their highly communal family system.

Instead of those differences producing tension, it is the captivity of the humans and the results of the genetic manipulation of construct children that become the engine driving conflict in all three novels. Joseph's resistance to colonization and Akin's advocacy for human separatism are only two examples. In *Imago*, two of Lilith's construct children—Jodahs and Aoar—become ooloi, even though the Dinso (which is what first-generation constructs are called) Oankali hope to wait several generations before producing third-sexed hybrids. Because they are the first of their kind, these human ooloi become liminal figures negotiating between the two cultures. In fact, Jodahs' first experience of attraction illustrates that the very liminality of identity actually renders the subject mutable according to the social demands of the situation it

finds itself in. On discovering a desire to mate with Joao, a human separatist hiding from the Oankali in an extended family on earth, Jodahs finds itself slowly morphing into the figure of a human woman in order to match Joao's preferences for sexual partners. This development simultaneously brings self-awareness, as Jodahs recognizes its own desire, and self-doubt, as Jodahs worries about how little control it has over these shifts in its body, "My body wanted him. My body sought to please him. What would happen to me when I had two or more mates? Would I be like the sky, constantly changing, clouded, clear, clouded, clear?" (598). Here Butler crafts a character who defies differentiation; immediately after Joao condemns ooloi as unnatural, and in fact predatory, the ooloi character adopts the appearance of a sexed rather than neuter individual. Jodahs, however, has no control over the biological "passing" that his physiology produces and, in fact, worries that the ability will "cloud" any "clear" sense of self it might hold on to. This complete loss of identity is what Aoar suffers when it does not find a mate after pubescence when its body becomes featureless, a protean blob that threatens to separate into microbes. The fact that the "alien" qualities of the other construct ooloi are mitigated and adjusted by mutual attraction and acceptance seems to craft a clear didactic purpose for the third novel about the need for a more radical acceptance of difference to remove hierarchies from socio-cultural institutions.

In Jameson's model of utopian fiction, any ideology, including those that establish hierarchies based on difference (although for Jameson that difference is primarily classed, rather than raced or gendered) is manifest materially and regimented culturally. Jameson notes that "Utopia poses its own specific problems for any theory of the postmodern or any periodization of it. [. . .] Postmodernism is at one with the definitive 'end of ideologies'" (*Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic* [. . .] 50). He described his "particular theorization of ideology" in postmodernity

(with regard to mass culture and literary studies) as "intrinsically imbedded within the reality, which secretes its own structure" (69). Of ideology in the late 1980s, he wrote that "Thatcherism and its cultural counterrevolution were founded fully as much on the delegitmation of welfare state or social-democratic ideology as on the inherent structural problems of the welfare state itself" (263). The combination of the dominant ideological formation (Thatcherism in Jameson's example) and those cultural formations that react against it (counterrevolution) are a part of the same self-reifying system. Just as Jodahs and Aoar protest a binary and hierarchical system of gender identity by producing a literal third sex in social arrangements, so must they face the same worries about the subjugation of the self and the mutability of the body that plagued human patriarchy before the Oankali's arrival. Similar to resistance posited in the political realm, utopian fiction risks becoming intrinsic to the reification of the system the utopian structure purports to reform. Hence, Butler conceives of a mechanism that posits a dialectical shift away from that oppositional relationship by ending the third novel, and the series, with Aoar and Jodahs successfully reintegrating the terrestrial human separatists (but not those on Mars) into the community of Dinso Oankali, constructs and human survivors. In that end, both ooloi constructs are mated and working proactively to end congenital and microbial disease on earth one sexual act at a time. This dénouement stages an interruption of the sexual norms and domestic arrangements of the time and place into which Butler writes. This interruption works as a response to the concern Jameson poses about reification; Jameson explains that utopian thinking breaks down because of a tendency to refuse a new future in favor of a redressed past. *Imago*, written at the very end of the 80s, seems to contest one of the key arguments about the "failed Soviet experiment" often made by neo-liberal thinkers—that it replaced the feudal hierarchy of the Czars with a fascist hierarchy organized for the benefit of top party officials. By

having ooloi, who were privileged by the Oankali and disadvantaged in human culture as unnatural and predatory, work to achieve an equal status to the other genders in the newly formed Dinso culture, Butler seems to suggest that dismantling one hierarchy does not require the substitution of another.

Perhaps because of the time in which Butler writes, she never refers to the Oankali as a communist culture, but her rendering of their collective concern and interdependence suggests a social emphasis on shared capital. For example, Butler imagines Oankali policy-making as a literal building of "consensus" via biotechnologically produced telepathic communications. This mechanism, rather than the extensive committee structure of the Soviet regime or the representative democracy of the United States, is perhaps meant to suggest a difference in ideological structure, in political statecraft and in the boundaries for the individuated subject in the utopian society she envisions. Butler comments here on the way that the self slips into the pre-symbolic collective for full-blooded and fully grown Oankali—the "consensus" is built through a melding of separate subjects into one. Although the constructs are part Oankali, they do not participate in the "consensus," not because their input is not valued but the experience is painful. In *Adulthood Rites*, Akin, in making his case for the humans, tries to enter the unified state with the other Oankali,

> The Akjai spoke to the people for Akin. [. . . .] It spoke through the ship and had the ship signal the trade villages on Earth. It asked for a consensus and then showed the Oankali and construct people what Akin had shown. As soon as the experience ended, people began objecting to its intensity, objecting to being so

> overwhelmed, objecting to the idea that this could have been the experience of a such a young child. (158)

The Akjai, a group of Oankali whose descendants will remain unaltered by the trade with humanity to preserve the Oankali species in its state before the encounter on Earth, is one of three distinct familial units among the Oankali. The other two—the Toaht and the Dinso—will produce children augmented by human genetic material. The Toaht will be biologically constructed, but will retain Oankali cultural traditions and live aboard the space craft upon which the Oankali arrived with the Akjai. The Dinso will also produce construct children with human genetic components and will live on Earth's surface with the remaining humans so as to incorporate some amount of human culture into the new community until the ships they've planted there ingest the entire world and they set sail to search out another new trade partner. These three cultural groups are yet another manifestation of the celebration of difference and the extension of possible permutations of self with other that the Oankali value.

Akin, the first human-born male construct-child (and the son of Lilith, the protagonist of *Dawn,* and her three Oankali mates), has approached the Akjai to demand that the human resisters be allowed to form their own Akjai group, so as to be spared the integration with the Oankali. Because the Akjai can use telepathy to experience Akin's distress at the potential fate of the human resisters directly, it is swayed into presenting Akin's idea to the collective Oankali and their Dinso and Toaht constructs. By sharing its experience in talking to the collective with Akin, the Akjai points out two issues that mark Oankali perception and subjectivity as distinct from construct perception and subjectivity. The Oankali's reason for doubting the experiences Akin shares point to the emotive quality of human experience; his feelings are are too intense,

too urgent, too overwhelming. This rationale for rejecting his perspective risks assigning a value to human experiences that is somehow beneath Oankali experiences. The tension between the genetic imperialist values of the Oankali culture and ability to participate in a shared subjectivity seem irresolutely at odds with the value the humans place on individual subjectivity and self-determination.

The separation of Oankali experiences—as just potent enough but never intense, urgent or overwhelming—from the experiences Akin shares serve to further demonstrate the risk of assigning value to difference. However, the individual will and insistence on freedom of choice are also key components in the intelligence that the Oankali are attracted to in humans, which makes them susceptible to Akin's rhetoric. These experiences of empathetically transmitted distress framed within a decolonial logic shared by a construct child may be Butler's way of suggesting that encounters between divided ideologies—under a posthuman experience of subjectivity that allows one to have an unnatural love for strangers while simultaneously perpetuating a xenophobic insistence on a "pure" *a priori* genetics—can result in transcultural permutations rather than the subsumption of one ideological pole by another. The equal size, power and status of the Dinso, Toaht and Akjai communities seems to show that Butler wishes to dissuade readers of any notion that the "pure" group has any more status. However, the limitation that has heretofore prohibited the formation of human Akjai groups that will refuse the trade reveals a collective judgment about the humans, which is reinforced by the Akjai's critique of human aggression. The fact that it is to this group of Oankali that Akin makes his plea is telling. Their advocacy for his position illustrates that even those who will not trade genes value transcultural contact. Ultimately, despite objections, the Oankali are swayed by Akin's pleas, demonstrating that the synthesis of the two perceptual and subjective modes is not defined by the

reigning principles of either. The constructs are a third-term in the dialectic between human and Oankali rather than a compromised and unified distillation of their combined essences. The communal orientation of the Oankali and the self-interest of humanity remain intractably opposed, which defies consensus unless the Oankali are willing to validate the intensity of human experiences, thus abandoning their own privileged status.

Imagining an anti-hierarchical social structure while living in a rigidly hierarchal one is rather like imagining a color outside the spectrum the eyes are capable of recognizing. To conceive of such a thing is difficult enough; to render it comprehensibly in text is the particular challenge with which Butler struggles here. As Jameson notes, in such conceptions of the unknown and unknowable, "[w]hat is crippling is [. . .] the universal belief, not only that this tendency is irreversible, but that the historic alternatives have proven unviable and impossible, and that no other system is conceivable, let alone practically available" (*Archaeologies of the Future* xii). Butler might be deferring the conception on an alternative system and instead focusing on a possible permutation of the reality in which she lives. The future imagined in *Xenogenesis* might also be productive not in its imagining of a distinct socio-cultural system, governed by a new politics, but in its conceptualization of alternative systems of subjectivity without subjugation. Jameson argues that "there is no alternative to Utopia" when such a reconceptualization of the human condition is speculated through a transformed politics in literature (*Archaeologies of the Future* xii). However, Butler imagines an alternative to singular, static and coherent identity. Her characters are narrated with a consciousness, and a bodily experience, that supersedes biological determinism in ways that are distinct from the fragmented subject in postmodernity, but that retain some of postmodern subjectivity's complex valences that deny the possibility of direct agency.

Taking that late capitalist moment as the point of departure for her fiction's speculation, Butler renders humans as both enormously resistant to and collaborative with the Oankali. As humans are forced to adapt to deal with the Oankali, who have inserted themselves as a ruling class that controls the humans' production (both in terms of their ability to manufacture and reproduce), their perceptual filters and self-conceptions change. The fact that Butler rhetorically situates these changes within the deliberative narrative of her novel makes them even more radical in terms of the potential for considered shifts in material, cultural and subjective developments.

The catastrophic nuclear war and the occupation of Earth by the Oankali radically change human modes of production—by forcing a return to a farming-based economy among humans and a new genetic marketplace where specimens become capital for exchange with their alien colonizers. The conceptualization of what counts as human in the world of the novels changes reciprocally. The Oankali, in their fetishization of difference and desire to merge with the humans, embody this essential human mutability. The humans, in their adaptation to both the nuclear holocaust and to the intergalactic colonization of their world, demonstrate how shifts result from material conditions as well as predilections like those of the Oankali. The constructs, who combine human and Oankali traits, show that synthesis destroys the homogeneity of both thesis and antithesis and creates new possibilities for systemic change without the risks Jameson ascribes to utopian thinking in his critique.

Such a combination of these traits marks the dynamism of the protagonists of all three novels. In *Dawn*, Lilith's manipulation at the hands of Nikanj allows her to become superhuman—stronger, faster, smarter than the other humans she trains with in preparation for rehabitation—and this difference also marks her as different from the other survivors. The other

humans mistrust her and attempt to kill her; though Lilith survives to return to a resurrected Earth, where she is infamous among those who have returned as a traitor who helped deliver humanity to the Oankali. Akin, who is the hero of a utopian bildungsroman in *Adulthood Rites*, is a construct of both Oankali and human origins, but he is also different from the humanized members of his society. His status as the only human-born male construct in the first generation of Oankali-Human Dinso culture makes him an object of fascination—a kind of simulated specimen—for the Oankali, a source of jealousy for other human mothers who have been denied sons and a site of derision for humans resisting the Oankali occupation. Though Akin is no more superhuman than any other construct, his intense identification with human resisters—who are fearful and suspicious of his difference—marks him as distinct from other constructs because of his human allegiances. Jodahs and Aaor, the first ooloi construct children, are chronicled by the final novel, *Imago*, to similar affect. The immature siblings surprise their ooloi parent Nikanj, who has constructed them to form an opposite sex pair for procreation with an Oankali ooloi, by developing not the parity secondary sex traits of heterosexual coupling but the genderless sexual function of an ooloi after their first metamorphosis. In all three cases, characters "expand outward" and rethink the boundaries of the body within their cultural space "without necessarily rupturing these bounds" (Bakke 64).

Butler's ambiguously utopian fiction explores how these boundaries are constructed and expanded through perceptual concerns. Jameson argues that any "new quality already begins to demand a new kind of perception, and thus ultimately a new kind of body. [. . .] The representationally productive questions [are] not whether we as readers are able to imagine the new color, but whether we can really imagine the new sense organ and the new body that corresponds to it" (*Archaeologies of the Future* 120). In her imagination and textual

representation of the Oankali, Butler pays particular attention to the issue of perception and to the experiences of interacting in separate and mixed cultural groups. Differences within the three categories are as important in these novels as the differences between them. Lilith's difference from the other humans, Akin's difference from the other constructs and Jodahs' difference from the other ooloi are what mark them as particulary transformative and mitigate the reificatory impulse Jameson warns readers of science fiction about.

In Jameson's words, "The Utopian dimension [. . .] is a ritual celebration of the renewal of the social order and its salvation, not merely from divine wrath, but also from unworthy leadership" (*Signatures of the Visible* 12). Butler does disparage leadership as unworthy—both in her fiction and in her estimation of the historical moment she writes that fiction in. In her last interview before her untimely death, Butler admitted,

> I feel so unhopeful. I recognize we will pay more attention when we have different leadership. I'm not exactly sure where that leadership will come from. But that doesn't mean I think we're all going down the toilet, I just don't see where that hope will come from. I think we need people with stronger ideals than John Kerry or Bill Clinton. I think we need people with more courage and vision. It's a shame we have had people who are so damn weak.

This sentiment seems to echo what the Akjai who helps Akin achieve his consensus for an unconstructed and fertile human population relocated to Mars, who suggested that "in the end, it would all be for nothing. Their genetic conflict had betrayed and destroyed them once. It would do so again" (*Imago* 7). Butler's intent may not be to indulge in feeling so unhopeful in the novels. Her characters are not "damn weak;" they share her courage and vision. Akin's identification with the human resisters provides them with an opportunity to disprove the Akjai

warning that an unaltered humanity will inevitably self-destruct. Lilith finds a way to adapt to a new situation and overcomes her initial xenophobia. Jodahs and Aaor integrate themselves into a dying human community that will become a new Dinso sect. In all three novels hybrid communities of Oankali, constructs and humans emerge with differing relational structures and loci of control and power. The permutations that Butler's depictions of organizing social relationships present to readers are variable and diverse, and in each novel the social order is revised rather than renewed and the mechanisms of perception and intra/interspecies identification are imagined possible. These three novels provide the kind of brief sparks of illumination—of possibility, progress and potential—that announce the shift in thinking Jameson finds essential to "fundamental change" in human society. It is only in tracking such sparks as these that the comet portending an end to oppressive systems might be discovered.

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