

Becoming-Posthuman:  
The Sexualized, Racialized and Naturalized Others of  
Octavia Butler's *Lilith's Brood*

By

Kitty Dunkley

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## Abstract

This thesis explores the extent to which Octavia Butler's use of the Other, in her trilogy Lilith's Brood, problematizes the construct of the Human subject as established under Humanism. Adopting the protean field of posthuman theory as a framework, I advocate for a specifically anti-Humanist reading of the series; indeed, I posit that Butler's re-imagination of the posthuman functions to empower subjectivities marginalized under this ideology — specifically, sexualized, racialized, and naturalized Others. The thesis argues that Butler confronts these forms of oppression as intersecting and overlapping issues that stem from a common location — myopic Humanism — and require similar remediation — destabilizing the monolith of normativity that constitutes 'humanness'. I promote the reading of Butler alongside posthuman theory, in elucidating her radical rethinking of unitarian subjectivity and her celebration of the more expansive embrace of vital, diverse intersubjectivity. In reimagining who "we" are (or could be), I contend that Butler is not dependent on a binaristic ontology of *either/or*, but an expansive ellipsis of *and... and*. I argue that the series, in this way, underlines the unifying potential of a heterogeneous understanding of life's multiplicities.



## Introduction

### I.

‘Human beings fear difference,’ Lilith had told him once. ‘Oankali crave difference. Humans persecute their different ones, yet they need them to give themselves definition and status. Oankali seek difference and collect it. They need it to keep themselves from stagnation and overspecialization. If you don’t understand this, you will. You’ll probably find both tendencies surfacing in your own behaviour.’ And she had put her hand on his hair. ‘When you feel a conflict, try to go the Oankali way. Embrace difference. (*Adulthood Rites*, 329)

From the onset of Lilith’s Brood, Octavia E. Butler establishes her science fiction trilogy as deeply invested in the question of the Self and the Other — how such a binary is indexed, and the implications of gauging oneself against a spectral figure of alterity. In the above passage, from the second novel of the series, *Adulthood Rites* (1988), Butler articulates the violence of our quest for self-definition as capital-H Humans. In her authorial eyes, the figure of the Human is percolated through imperial aggression, and the quashing of difference. As is made evident in this paragraph however, her fictive alien species, the Oankali, are ostensibly constructed so as to invert our Humanistic egocentrism — not only is difference not considered the source of fear for the Oankali, but they are physiologically engineered to hunger for it. Butler, in this way, utilizes her narrative and the figures of the Oankali to imagine a posthuman future in which our most injurious flaws may be eradicated. Simultaneously, however, her narrative questions, how might such an inversion of Humanism impact our interpersonal, social, and environmental relations? Who and what is implicated when the boundaries that separate mind from body, Human from animal, and male from female are dissolved? What does such a posthuman becoming-Other look like? Examining the three novels — *Dawn* (1987), *Adulthood Rites* (1988), and *Imago* (1989) — that constitute the trilogy, I will spend this thesis exploring how exactly Butler interrogates the Humanist subject and its relationship with the Other. Employing posthumanist theory as a guiding framework, I will refer to Rosi Braidotti’s definitions — as provided in *The Posthuman* (2013) — of the sexualized, racialized, and

naturalized Others, in order to elucidate Butler's engagement with the subjectivities marginalized under the reign of Humanism. Throughout the ensuing three chapters, I hope to investigate the ways in which Butler confronts these differing forms of oppression as intersecting issues, stemming from a common location (prescriptive Humanism) and requiring similar remediation (the destabilization of the hegemonic monolith that constitutes 'Humanness'); indeed, I am convinced that such an enterprise is close to her heart, as a working-class, chronically ill, African American woman, whose own sexuality has been the source of contention. Science fiction becomes a subversive mode through which Butler reimagines the myriad of diverse embodiments that might be emancipated if we free ourselves from our ideological shackles to Humanism.

Comprised of three novels, *Lilith's Brood* (also known as *Xenogenesis*) begins with *Dawn* — a narrative in which, following Earth's devastation by nuclear war, Humankind is on the cusp of extinction. An alien race, known as the Oankali, retrieve the remaining Humans on Earth, who are sustained under controlled sleep on the Oankali ship for centuries. *Dawn* starts with the awakening of the novel's protagonist, an African American Human woman in her late twenties called Lilith Iyapo. To Lilith, the Oankali are initially repugnant; with their tentacle-like appendages in lieu of sensory organs, three genders (male/female/ooloi), and seemingly telepathic capacity to 'read' the Humans, the Oankali are wholly foreign in their otherness. The Oankali, however, present themselves as benevolent gene traders, eternally searching for new life with which to merge and evolve — hence their investment in salvaging and caring for Humankind. In the ensuing years since the war, they have repaired Earth to a habitable condition. However, in exchange for their return to Earth, the Oankali ask to interbreed with the Humans — a compromise the Oankali perceive as mutually advantageous. With their superlative perception, even on the microscopic level, the Oankali observe and are desirous of the Human capacity for cancer — a biological tendency they perceive as a talent, and one they know to hold manipulable potential for their perpetual evolutions. The Oankali also advertise the gene trade as beneficial for the Humans, promising them genetic mutation that will ameliorate their propensity for hierarchical thinking; this habit the Oankali conceive of as the Human Conflict, and to which, they argue, the downfall of the *anthropos* is attributed. Lilith, as the first awakened Human, is burdened with the task of waking up the other Humans, and preparing them for their future encounters with the Oankali and for life back on Earth. Construed as a pawn of

the Oankali and their mission, the awakened Humans mutiny over Lilith's alliance with their alien captors, and a fight — in which Lilith's Human mate, Joseph, is murdered — breaks out. Nevertheless, the dissenters are returned to Earth, while, unbeknownst to Lilith, she is impregnated with her slain partner's DNA by her ooloi mate Nikanj. *Dawn* concludes with Lilith's recognition that she is to give birth to the first Human-Oankali hybrid — or construct — child.

*Adulthood Rites* takes place back on Earth, and follows the protagonist Akin — Lilith's son, and the first male construct born to a Human. While Akin lives in a village contentedly occupied by Humans, their Oankali mates and their construct children, the rest of Earth has not been settled so harmoniously; some dissenting Humans, referred to as “resisters”, have repudiated their coupling with Oankali and any subsequent assimilation. Instead, these resisters have colonized outskirt villages, and — rendered infertile by the Oankali's genetic manipulation — occasionally kidnap particularly Human-appearing construct children to rear as their own. Outwardly, Akin passes as completely Human, apart from his long tentacular tongue; for this reason, he is stolen by resisters as an infant. His captors, however, are unaware of the profound intelligence, perception and linguistic facility of the baby, and Akin is forced to conceal these traits so as to ensure his safety. During this prolonged period of alienation from his Oankali family, Akin is deprived of the crucial bonding stage with his paired sibling and future mate. When Akin is finally reunited with his family, this absence makes itself apparent, and troubles both siblings enormously. In order to repair this deficient bond, Akin and his sibling are sequestered aboard an Oankali ship, so as to compensate for missed time cementing their relationship. Aboard the ship, Akin spends time alongside Akjai — an Oankali people without any Human DNA, who have never been to Earth. With the capacity to tap into both Oankali and Human sides of his subjectivity as a construct, Akin recognizes inequity in that the Oankali accommodate a people unadulterated by contact with humanity — a privilege denied to the Humans; in this way, Akin reaches a revelation in which he realizes that Humans too deserve an opportunity to maintain their distinctness, like the Akjai. Having exhorted such to the Oankali, Akin returns to Earth to inform the resisters that, if desired, they may have the opportunity to colonize Mars, which has been altered by the Oankali so as to sustain life. Although the Oankali — Akin included — understand that the Mars colony is also ill-fated on account of their pathological Human Conflict, it is nevertheless offered as the ethically virtuous

resolution. *Adulthood Rites* ends with the Humans being informed of the option to restore their fertility before settling Mars.

The last and shortest novel of the series, and the only narrative told in first person, *Imago* tells the story of Jodahs — also Lilith’s child, and the first ever ooloi construct. As the first of its kind, Jodahs’ metamorphosis into adulthood is uncharted, and feared for this reason. Anxious that Jodahs, unknowingly, will detrimentally mutate other beings or their environment with its newfound genetic skill, both it and its immediate family endure self-imposed isolation — mitigating any potential injury. The rest of the novel follows Jodahs through its treacherous metamorphoses, and its search for Human mates to ground its relentless shapeshifting propensity; indeed, a successful transition into adulthood is necessary if Jodahs is to avoid becoming a peril, jeopardizing the future of both Human and Oankali. In its isolated project in the wilderness, Jodahs discovers a village of fertile Humans, proving the fallibility of the Oankali’s mission. Inbred, and subsequently nursing many impairments and deformities, Jodahs heals the villagers, and finds a pair of Human siblings to couple with. *Imago* closes with Jodahs planting a town for both Oankali and now-healed Human villagers alike; a conclusion pregnant with optimism for their shared future together.

## II.

In order to argue for the installation of posthumanity through the annihilation of humanity, it is firstly necessary to determine the extent to which Humanism, as an ethos, functions to stifle the inherently exploratory vigor of life. Establishing the parameters of such a protean branch of philosophy, however, poses an onerous task; after all, the hallmarks of Humanism have always been contentious. Since the Enlightenment of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, Humanist doctrine has been, in part, upheld by the same Cartesian logic that maintains a belief in the hermetic separation of mind and body, and human from machine. Cultural theorist Stuart Hall, in reference to Descartes, declares, “[a]t the centre of ‘mind’ he placed the individual subject, constituted by its capacity to reason and think. ‘Cogito, ergo, sum’ was Descartes’ watchword... Ever since, this conception of the rational, cogitative and conscious subject at the centre of knowledge has been known as ‘the Cartesian subject’” (282). Cartesian dualism, as follows, has been co-opted and expanded to impose a dichotomous hierarchy upon the

the metaphysics of natural sciences — an ontology that has enabled its exploitation for the subjugation of the hierarchically underprivileged. On the most fundamental level, Humanism functions to mythologize a set of assumptions regarding the quintessence and universality of the nature and condition of being ‘Human’ — a blueprint that, not only inadequately captures, but actively excludes the Other against which humanity is extrinsically measured. In his 1996 overview, *Humanism*, Tony Davies insists,

On one side, humanism is saluted as the philosophical champion of human freedom and dignity, standing alone and often outnumbered against the battalions of ignorance, tyranny and superstition [...] On the other, it has been denounced as an ideological smokescreen for the oppressive mystifications of modern society and culture, the marginalization and oppression of the multitudes of human beings in whose name it pretends to speak, even, through an inexorable ‘dialectic of enlightenment’, for the nightmare of fascism and the atrocity of total war. (5)

While the precise criteria for inclusion in such a category remains elastic, Humanism functions on the apotheosis of the *anthropos*, and a belief in its inherent worth, autonomy, rationality, and capabilities — qualities intended to affirm our status at the pinnacle of the Cartesian hierarchy, above animals, machines, and the Other. Yet, agreeing upon what precisely constitutes a Human is a slippery enterprise that continues to confound categorization; as Davies attests, it is “precisely this protean adaptability and serviceable vagueness that gives the word its rhetorical power and range” (24). The ultimate plasticity of life is troublesome to Humanism, in this way, for troubling the singular frame within which the multiplicity of human subjectivity is to be reconciled. An archetype of the Human subject is fabricated, in order to maintain the exclusiveness of the category and impose order around the blurry parameters of the *anthropos*. As Rosi Braidotti, in *The Posthuman* (2013) claims, “the human of Humanism is neither an ideal nor an objective statistical average or middle ground. It rather spells out a systematized standard of recognizability – of Sameness – by which all others can be assessed, regulated and allotted to a designated social location” (26). Within this framework of hegemonic normativity, the Human is discursively produced against its antithetical Other; who and what qualifies as this Other, however, is socioculturally ordained and shaped according to hegemonic ideology. In this way, the Western

prototype of the Human subject is informed by prevailing rhetoric regarding gender, sexuality, race, and species. As Braidotti continues,

The dialectics of otherness is the inner engine of humanist Man's power, who assigns difference on a hierarchical scale as a tool of governance. All other modes of embodiment are cast out of the subject position and they include anthropomorphic others: non-white, non-masculine, non-normal, non-young, non-healthy, disabled, malformed or enhanced peoples. They also cover more ontological categorical divides between Man and zoo-morphic, organic or earth others. All these 'others' are rendered as pejoration, pathologized and cast out of normality, on the side of anomaly, deviance, monstrosity and bestiality. This process is inherently anthropocentric, gendered and racialized in that it upholds aesthetic and moral ideals based on white, masculine, heterosexual European civilization. (2013, 68)

Bodies that fail to epitomize these universalized touchstones — cisgender masculinity, heterosexuality, and whiteness, just to name a few — are therefore declassified from Human status, and do not sufficiently qualify for a claim to subjectified selfhood. Noreen Giffney and Myra J. Hird, in their introduction to the posthuman companion *Queering the Non/Human*, assert the authoritative sanctions of Humanist boundary keeping; they argue, “[t]he Human, invoked as it is through a web of discourses and norms, operates not just descriptively but also prescriptively and proscriptively” (7). Access to this denomination is not presumed, and may only be earned through vigilant self-policing in displays of gender, sexuality and race. As the specular inverse of the *anthropos*, the marginalized Other is not necessarily considered the “figure to whom rights and citizenship are granted” (Luciano and Chen, 190) — potentially rendering them inhuman, nonhuman, subhuman. Desubjectified, the subordination of these Others is not deemed in apropos, then, considering their nonhuman status. Davies, arguing for the structural interdependence of imperialism and Humanism, notes

The first humanists scripted the tyranny of Borgias, Medicis and Tudors. Later humanisms dreamed of freedom and celebrated Frederick II, Bonaparte, Bismarck, Stalin. The liberators of colonial America, like the Greek and Roman

thinkers they emulated, owned slaves. At various times, not excluding the present, the circuit of the human has excluded women, those who do not speak Greek or Latin or English, those whose complexions are not pink, children, Jews. It is almost impossible to think of a crime that has not been committed in the name of humanity. (131)

The nebulosity of Humanism, in this way, has the capacity to be co-opted as justification for endless acts of violence, alienation, and dehumanization. Indeed, many acts of atrocity — ranging from colonialism, slavery, disenfranchisement, to hate crimes, and rape — may partially derive motive from the Humanist compulsion to expel the Other. As Davies maintains, our “humanness is mortgaged to the suffering and labour of the innumerable ‘Other’” (132). Accordingly, the Other — in all of its manifold iterations — becomes the spectre against which the *anthropos* is produced via repudiation.

With the onset of the Women’s Liberation, Black Civil Rights, and Gay Rights movements of the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Humanism began to be challenged in the streets by forces exposing the duplicity of the ‘Human’ order. This growing recognition that Humanism’s claim to universality proves fallacious, therefore, has culminated in the theoretical turn towards posthumanism within the academy. As with the doctrine of Humanism, the boundaries and definitions of posthumanism are amorphous and many-sided. On the most fundamental level, however, we can affirm that posthumanism objects to the limits of traditional Humanism, and advocates for an expansion of subjectivity beyond Cartesian guidelines. It is for this reason that I turn to Rosi Braidotti, and her 2013 book *The Posthuman*, for guidance.

Italian-born and Australian-educated, a great deal of Braidotti’s academic career has been dedicated to continental philosophy, with particular emphasis on feminist theory. Her ongoing engagement with subjectivity and nomadism, however, is exhibited in *The Posthuman* (2013) — a text which exists in the interstices of feminist/critical race/ecophilosophical theories of cultural studies. In *The Posthuman*, Braidotti presents an interpretation of posthumanism that, at its heart, is fuelled by a desire to ameliorate Humanism’s continued marginalization of women, queer people, people of colour, and nonhuman matter; issues engaged with identity politics that coalesce neatly with Butler’s own sociocultural investments. In this way, Braidotti’s own theory of the posthuman is inextricable from anti-Humanist ideology — a branch informing various

transhuman, and post-anthropocentric iterations; branches concerned with biotechnologically mediated Human enhancement, and the obsolescence of humanity respectively. Braidotti claims that the term ‘Human’, rather than being an inclusive term for unified Human existence, is ideologically contingent on the subject in question’s access to power — a privilege oftentimes dictated by birth. She explains that “[s]ome of us are not even considered fully human now, let alone at previous moments of Western social, political and scientific history. Not if by ‘human’ we mean that creature familiar to us from Enlightenment and its legacy” (2013, 1). ‘Human’, as follows, fraudulently implies universality, when, in reality, the term encodes prescriptive normativity that penalizes wayward and deviant bodies. Indeed, much of her argument presented in *The Posthuman* is founded on the statement that there is nothing neutral about the category ‘Human’ — a charge deeply distrustful of the legacy of classical Humanism. Instead, she contends that the category is not impartial, but imperially construed as a pawn of hegemonic ideology. In this way, Braidotti critiques the prescriptive ‘sameness’ of Humanism’s alleged universality.

The second branch of posthumanism that Braidotti closely follows up is the school of thought known as post-anthropocentrism. As with the anti-Humanist branch of posthumanism, post-anthropocentrism is concerned with “the serious de-centring of ‘Man’, the former measure of all things” (Braidotti 2013, 2). However, while Braidotti’s rendition of anti-Humanism fundamentally deconstructs the exclusion and marginalization of minority subjectivities, her post-anthropocentrism essentially problematizes the notion of Human exceptionality altogether. Braidotti affirms that the anthropocentric belief in our supremacy as a species has spelled out dire repercussions for our environment. She elaborates,

if the crisis of Humanism inaugurates the posthuman by empowering the sexualized and racialized human ‘others’ to emancipate themselves from the dialectics of master-slave relations, the crisis of *anthropos* relinquishes the demonic forces of the naturalized others. Animals, insects, plants and the environment, in fact the planet and the cosmos as a whole, are called into play. This places a different burden of responsibility on our species, which is the primary cause for the mess. The fact that our geological era is known as the ‘anthropocene’ stresses both the technologically mediated power acquired by

*anthropos* and its potentially lethal consequences for everyone else. (Braidotti 2013, 66)

Her conceptualization of post-anthropocentrism, as a result, imagines the dethroning of man from his self-apotheosis, and the demise of the *anthropos* as it stands. Within the anthropocentric matrixes of Humanism, both animals and the environment — denied any degree of autonomy or subjectivity — are rendered helpless to subsumption by Humans. Braidotti frames this as “the dominant human and structurally masculine habit of taking for granted free access to and the consumption of the bodies of others, animals included” (2013, 68); the same mentality used to justify the violence of colonialism. In what she deems “the human subject’s supreme ontological entitlement” (2013, 68), animals have been used as a sort of “zoo-proletariat” (2013, 70), occupying the same subjugated and commodified position as othered minorities. The implication is that, without significant ontological restructuring of our place within a larger environmental schema, any attempt to rectify our understanding of who and what constitutes humanity, qualifies as a mere repackaging of neo-Humanism. After all, in such circumstances it will be the naturalized Other, rather than the racialized or sexualized Other, who will continue to bear the brunt of our self-elected authority. What is necessary to amend our hierarchy of violence, Braidotti suggests, is a total rehaul of how we conceptualize the otherness of nonhuman matter.

In *The Posthuman*, Braidotti also confronts the ways in which the critical condition of humanity is exacerbated in our current biotechnologically mediated climate; an epoch in which we are hurtling unabatedly towards the transhuman advancements of artificial intelligence, cybernetics, robotics, and machine sentience — developments that ultimately upset the Cartesian dualistic separation of the *anthropos* from machines. With the rapid speed of this progression, anxiety is burgeoning that the status of the *anthropos* as a species, as masters of our solipsistic universe, will be toppled. This fear, Braidotti posits, is rooted in the potentiality of our being outmoded and replaced by superlative intelligence; a concern regarding our possible redundancy, and even extinction. The concern that the limitless proliferative potential of artificial intelligence will demand that “the old organic human body needs to be relocated elsewhere” (Braidotti 2013, 97) has generated a defensiveness of identitarian politics. Braidotti interrogates what is implicated in this apprehension that “we are an endangered category”. Indeed, she questions who this “we” is, and whose rank will be

disturbed in this displacement; for whom is this prospect so threatening? In imagining a unified “we”, there is the assumption of a universal experience of humanity — a conceit that neglects to acknowledge the minority subjects traditionally excluded from this label, and who may not have quite so far to fall should their rank be hijacked. In this way, Braidotti actively rejects the notion of a unitarian subjectivity — while we may be together on this, she contends, we are not one. Braidotti inserts an intersectional cognizance rare in debates regarding transhumanism; indeed, she explores the dilemma of posthumanism’s implicit rejection of identity politics altogether when some identities have — historically and still currently — been excluded from acquiring personhood; specifically, referencing women, queer people, and people of colour.

In rejecting unitarian politics of humanity for its elision of the dynamics of power and privilege, Braidotti instead venerates a nomadic intersubjectivity. While traditional Humanism (and its contemporary iterations) superficially appears to proclaim universality, it is done so through blindness and exclusion. Braidotti’s recomposition of an inclusive subjectivity, however, unites through a celebration of vital diversity. While she argues that we are “together” in our cosmic existence, we are together in different ways, and not as an integral one. The disparate subjectivities represented in this “we” exist in the world with varying degrees of access to power and privilege; indeed, she posits that “[w]e are all humans, but some of us are just more mortal than others” (2013, 15). Her conceptualization of a subjectivity of wholeness, in this way, is not constituted by sameness or homogeneity; rather, it is a reverence of the plurality of existence, and the manifold manifestations that all life encompasses. In reimagining who “we” are, Braidotti’s definition does not rely on a binaristic ontology of *either/or*, but an expansive ellipsis of *and... and*. She argues for the unifying potential of a heterogeneous understanding of life:

This humbling experience of not-Oneness, which is constitutive of the non-unitary subject, anchors the subject in an ethical bond to alterity, to the multiple and external others that are constitutive of that entity which, out of laziness and habit, we call the ‘self’. Posthuman nomadic vital political theory stresses the productive aspects of the condition of notOne, that is to say a generative notion of complexity. (2013, 100)

As opposed to imagining difference — and, by extension, otherness — as inherently negative, rupturing the uniformity of the whole, Braidotti esteems it for offering vitality, fluidity, heterogeneity. The integrity of humanity is not contingent on stasis and uniformity; rather, advocating for a Deleuzian interpretation, she argues, “[m]y position is in favour of complexity and promotes radical posthuman subjectivity, resting on the ethics of becoming” (Braidotti 2013, 49).

Braidotti’s understanding of the crucial deficiencies of Humanism, as discussed, segue seamlessly into more nuanced engagement with theories surrounding the disenfranchisement of the sexualized, racialized, and naturalized Others she delineates in *The Posthuman*; in this way, Braidotti intersectionally summons the intelligence of feminist, queer and cyborg theory, critical race and borderland politics, and the wisdom of ecophilosophy and human-animal studies, to function cooperatively in the dismantling of the exclusionary Humanist subject. For Braidotti, the posthuman becomes an expansive umbrella term under which such identity politics can be called into play. Her position, as exhibited in *The Posthuman*, proves itself as a perfectly germane fit in application to Octavia Butler and *Lilith’s Brood*; after all, the series does explicitly corroborate Braidotti’s exhortation that “[w]e need more ethical accountability in dealing with the legacy of Humanism” (2013, 15). Nevertheless, despite the felicitous suitability of such coupling, the mutuality of Braidotti and Butler’s ontologies has, surprisingly, not been seized upon within extant scholarship. Undeniably drawing upon similar extensions of critical theory — insofar as their ostensibly shared investments in sexual, gender, race, and environmental politics are concerned — such a connection between the two thinkers proves fertile grounds for sowing; an enterprise this thesis will attempt to bridge.

### III.

As the only book dedicated to Butler and her legacy, *Octavia E. Butler*, by Gerry Canavan (2016), upholds the responsibility of providing a thorough overview of the author’s life and her career. Delving deeply into her most prominent works — as well as referencing her numerous unpublished drafts and rewrites — Canavan’s book reveals Butler to be a tireless and self deprecating writer, with a fantastical imagination and a remarkable capacity for social critique. With the chronological structure of the book aligning events of Butler’s own biography alongside the work produced during each

period, Canavan is able to explore the progression of themes — and the precipitation of such literary developments — throughout her lifetime. His discussion of Lilith's Brood, however, presents an argument that, while I can understand, I nevertheless find somewhat misdirected. His primary thesis asserts that the Oankali (and the futures they present for the remaining Humans) do not merely fail to achieve utopic designs, but are actively, *harmfully*, dystopic. Canavan maintains,

The events of the trilogy similarly suggest a sort of gaslighting narrative on the larger level of philosophy or (if you prefer) on the level of galactic imperial ideology. Put simply, the Oankali exacerbate a neocolonial situation in which humans are radically disempowered, and then step in to provide 'assistance'. When we strip the novel's events of their specific science fictional context, they become a plain retelling of the brutal history of imperialism. (Canavan, 106)

Without the hubris of declaring such as reflective of Butler's own ethical position as an author and thinker, Canavan suggests that her obfuscation of the Oankali motives in 'salvaging' humanity instead deliberately engages readers in a constant dialectical struggle regarding the attainability of utopias. While I also assume this stance, Canavan nevertheless presents a reading of Lilith's Brood that I believe ultimately overlooks Butler's adroit origination of a species that exemplifies an inversion of many of Humankind's most injurious traits. Nevertheless, his biographical ode to Butler provides a fascinating, comprehensively-researched text, proving her brilliant mind as deserving of greater critical attention and acclaim.

Momentously — for cementing Butler's status within canon-forming literary and theoretical circles — in both *Primate Vision* (1989) and *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Women* (1991), Donna Haraway has cited Butler as an influential thinker for the burgeoning fields of cyborg/posthuman theory. While Haraway commends Butler for her faculty in dismantling identitarian singularity in favour of miscegenation and flux, she does contend that Butler does not progress sufficiently in her deconstruction of sexual politics — noting what she reads as the reinforcement of compulsory heterosexuality within the Oankali relationship structures. Although lauding her inversion of these grand narratives of Humanist-inflected hegemony, she believes Butler's failure to wholly *queer* her Oankali future is an erroneous mistake. Haraway argues,

Heterosexuality remains unquestioned, if more complexly mediated. The different social subjects, the different genders that could emerge from another embodiment of resistance to compulsory heterosexual reproductive politics, do not inhabit this *Dawn*. In this critical sense, *Dawn* fails in its promise to tell another story, about another birth, a xenogenesis. Too much of the sacred image of the same is left intact. (1989, 380)

As follows, Haraway reasons that, with the infinite potential the series has to annihilate such embedded ideology, Butler does not seize upon this opportunity as radically as may have been possible. Indeed, such a position emerges as a trend within literary criticism of Lilith's Brood — a qualm that has raised the question of Butler's own ideological stance, and the ambiguous intentions at the heart of the Oankali mission.

While I can acknowledge the ways in which Butler seemingly evades explicit engagement with dynamics of compulsory heterosexuality, however, I nevertheless side with Jim Miller's position in "Post-Apocalyptic Hoping: Octavia Butler's Dystopian/Utopian Vision" (1988). Opposing Haraway's argument, Miller instead asserts that Oankali sexuality is inherently, radically, transcendently queer. Indeed, Miller testifies that the union of the Humans with the nonhuman Oankali is queer beyond existing conceptions of queerness. He claims,

It is my contention that this critique misses the fact that the inter-species sex in *Xenogenesis* goes beyond traditional notions of sex and gender. First of all, sex with the ooloi puts the male in a passive position, a fact not missed by Joseph who finds himself struggling against his desire to be "taken" by an ooloi. (344)

The notion of a sexuality removed from traditionally normative and intelligible frameworks evokes queerness for Miller, especially for its capacity to overturn the rigidly coded associations between gender and passivity. Taking this position further, I believe that Haraway's assertion of a heteronormative arrangement within Oankali sex implies an existing heterosexual desire between participants — a claim that overlooks the utilitarian pairing of siblings, detached from any notion of shared sexual or romantic affinity. Avoiding any overt incestuous implications, while the

Oankali experience sensual satisfaction through sex, the male and female partners' bliss is derived from their nongendered ooloi mate, rather than their sibling. Repulsed by one another's physical touch, the union of siblings, therefore, fulfills mere reproductive purposes, while their ooloi partner is the subject of their attraction and erotic fascination. As follows, such couplings are not founded upon the hegemony of compulsory heterosexuality and heterosexual desire; rather, a queer desire directed towards and channelled through the ooloi in order to fulfill the physiological pragmatics of reproduction.

Throughout his article, Miller also does not express concern about attempting to reconcile Lilith's Brood within the binary classifications of utopian or dystopian genre, as much literary criticism on Butler revolves around (Brataas 2006; Melzer 2002; Phillips 2002). As he suggests, Butler deliberately chooses to explore this exact dialectical tension throughout her narratives; "Butler's aliens are both colonizers and a utopian collective, while the captured/saved humans are both admirable survivors and ugly xenophobes. Lilith Iyapo, the main character in *Dawn*, is both the mother of a new race and a Judas to humanity" (Miller, 339-340). Rather than presenting the Oankali-driven future as utopic and optimistic or dystopic and pessimistic, therefore, Miller very diplomatically acknowledges, "[t]here are no 'bad guys' in the *Xenogenesis* trilogy, only bad ways of thinking. The Oankali, human-imals, and others interested in domination are not shown as inherently bad but as ignorant or ideologically deluded" (343). The thesis presented by Miller acknowledges the complexity of Butler's treatment of SF, as she eschews the simplicity of binary oppositions, in favour of a more fully fleshed exploration of ideological biases.

Michelle Erica Green also broaches the slipperiness of Butler's engagement with utopian rhetoric in her 1994 article, "There Goes the Neighbourhood: Octavia Butler's Demands for Diversity in Utopias." In the article, Green refers to *Dawn* as "an angry utopian novel, a scathing condemnation of the tendency of human beings to hate, repress, and attach differences they do not understand" (166). Arguing against a critical current that has interrogated Butler's ambiguity and supposed pessimism, Green offers a reading of Lilith's Brood that rejects such reductionism. While acknowledging the violence and tyranny demonstrated by the Oankali in their treatment of Humans, Green nevertheless argues for the bleak optimism of the

narrative, in their implicit desire to overcome the oppressive tendencies of Humanism. She contends,

Butler is not interested in creating a utopia of human beings who seem too gentle to be believed [...] Her works border on the dystopia because she insists on confronting problems that have occurred so often in human communities that they seem almost an unavoidable part of human nature, such as greed, prejudices based on appearances, oppression of women, and might-makes-right ideologies. Rather than create utopians in which these problems have simply ceased to exist, Butler demonstrates time and again in her fiction that they must be worked through — even if that process involves the use of dangerous human tendencies like aggression and coercion to counter similar dangerous human tendencies like violence. (170)

While the Oankali do undeniably exhibit some quarrelsome behaviours — specifically, their looseness regarding consent — Green argues that Butler’s aliens are ultimately invested in a vital heterogeneity and difference that undermines the rigid structures of Humanism. In this way, the position adopted by Green demonstrates both acknowledgment of their ideological flaws, and concurrent celebration of their ideological successes.

For Hoda M. Zaki, the disjuncture between the Oankali’s positive and negative attributes is ultimately too discordant to harmoniously resolve. In her oft-cited “Utopia, Dystopia, and Ideology in the Science Fiction of Octavia Butler” (1990), Zaki acerbically critiques what she perceives as Butler’s suggestion that humankind is ultimately doomed. As she argues, Butler presents too dark an image of humanity, referencing the ‘Human Conflict’ as demonstrative of an implicit tendency towards biological essentialism — a flaw rooted in genetics, incapable of being surpassed by determined ideological intervention. As Zaki asserts,

Another characteristic of human nature as Butler sees it is its static quality, evinced in a human incapacity to change in response to radically altered conditions. The force by which humans are wedded to their biologically-determined natures and their inability to transcend it she makes clear in her “Xenogenesis” series. Even when extraterrestrials initiate change, humans

continue to manifest the same qualities of violence, cruelty, and domination over others. (242)

Ultimately for Zaki, Butler's message is not optimistic enough so as to infer the possibility of humanity's improvement and progression beyond these reductive ideologies; after all, we are very well moored by biology to these hierarchical flaws. Rather, Zaki argues that her narratives present a tepid iteration of utopian dreaming — a “muted critique of the current political order” (247). As follows, instead of intimating the potential for humanity's salvation in the ego death of anthropocentrism, Zaki argues that Butler pins her idealism onto the fictive Oankali. This, Zaki views as “an essentially retrogressive view of politics (i.e., of collective human action), which she never sees as offering the solution to social or political problems”, and is troublesome because “[h]er conditions for fundamental social change are such as to postpone it indefinitely” (242). While she has henceforth become a foundational proponent for critical discussion of Butler's fiction, I believe that Zaki's position overlooks Butler's own rejection of canonical utopianism — Canavan (2016) quotes Butler as saying “I don't write utopian science fiction [...] because I don't believe imperfect humans can form a perfect society” (120) — and exemplifies her own desperate adherence to ‘Human’ as an imperial category that the narratives problematize.

Jessie Stickgold-Sarah, in her 2010 article “‘Your Children Will Know Us, You Never Will’: The Pessimistic Utopia of Octavia Butler's *Xenogenesis* Trilogy”, also recognizes these essentialist implications in *Lilith's Brood*. For Stickgold-Sarah — whose interest in Butler stems from the use of genetic lexicon in her fiction — this series also depicts a certain level of despondency towards Humankind. Her argument cites the connection between the Oankali notion of the Human Conflict and biology, and suggests that such a correlation can easily be subsumed within larger discourses regarding biological determinism and essentialism. Unlike Zaki, however, Stickgold-Sarah perceives a glimmer of hope in Butler's narrative; while she does read Humanity as genetically yoked to such oppressive traditions and ontologies, she notes that the Oankali are capable of manipulating Human DNA, therein repairing these hierarchical flaws and offering the potential for salvation. Stickgold-Sarah does not view the relationship between these deficiencies and science as inert and passive, but lively and malleable — if only we are to concede their reductiveness to our own livelihood and actively initiate amelioration; this suggestion of Butler's, she views as pregnant with

optimism. Indeed, she queries, “[w]hat is this process but the work of a social utopia? To recognize the self that produces violence, manage it, reexamine it and make day-to-day solutions, this is the goal for which societies born from ‘human agency’ strive [...] the need to accept the material oppressions and limitations of the world in which we live, and yet to find room for change” (Stickgold-Sarah, 428-429). Instead of reading the series as a resigned acceptance of our ill-fated prospects as Humans, Stickgold-Sarah reads Lilith’s Brood as a rumination on how we may address these defects of humanity in order to secure a more stable, egalitarian future.

While dialogue on Butler’s place within SF and utopian genres offers valuable contribution to scholarship surrounding her, I have found the insertion of materialist and phenomenological theory into such criticism the most rewarding; specifically, for their potential to explore the ontological status of identity politics when they are revealed to be insufficient categories for encapsulating the breadth of possible existence. For this reason, “Displacing Darwin and Descartes: The Bodily Transgressions of Fielding Burke, Octavia Butler, and Linda Hogan”, by Stacy Alaimo (1996), provides a fascinating resource for investigating the extent to which Butler constructs the traditionally othered body as “a crucial site for contestation and transformation, precisely because ideologies of the body have been complicit in the degradation of people of color, women, and nature” (62). Perhaps demonstrative of the sociocultural climate of the mid-1990s in which she was writing, Alaimo establishes women as the sexualized Others to the normative, hegemonic Human; parameters that I extend further to include queer identities as well. Nevertheless, Alaimo provides an astute introduction to Butler’s empowerment of abject or othered bodies, arguing particularly for the dynamism of liminal subjects on the margins of dominant identitarian categories.

Another notable piece of criticism is Nolan Belk’s 2008 article in *Utopian Studies*, “The Certainty of the Flesh: Octavia Butler’s Use of the Erotic in the Xenogenesis Trilogy”, in its inquiry into Butler’s preoccupation with the body as a site of both sensuality and knowledge. Belk’s analysis of corporeality is particularly compelling for its recognition of how Butler negotiates what Audre Lorde refers to as the erotic — that is, veneration of a deeply enfleshed knowledge. Belk claims, “[i]n essence, if we allow ourselves to feel this resource that reason has tried to bury or pervert, our bodies themselves will become our intelligence and serve to guide us to better and better answers” (376). Such an argument reveals its pertinence to Butler’s narrative, with her Oankali demonstrating a visceral knowledge removed from the

hegemony of the Cartesian mind/body split, thereby imbuing the body with an intelligence rarely acknowledged within Humanist traditions.

#### IV.

Regardless of the degree to which I agree with such perspectives, each of these pieces of scholarship fills an undeniable void in the acknowledgment of Butler's eminence, and the oft-neglected field of Black literary criticism. Discussion surrounding the ethical position of the Oankali, for example, is a necessary contribution in such a dialogue, and one I do not wish to downplay. As a species and substitute for humanity, after all, the Oankali are not apolitical and unproblematic in their actions or beliefs. Their campaign to 'salvage' humanity is suffused with ideological problems, specifically in the ethnocentric and neocolonialist notion of possessing the means by which to 'better' a people. Indeed, the Oankali conjure up a startling parallel to the master/slave dynamics of European colonialists in their unrelenting control over the Humans' lives — from their isolation of the newly awakened Humans, their denial of reproductive autonomy, their imposition of labour upon Lilith (in the form of awakening the other Humans), their initial declination of writing tools, to their indubitably quarrelsome relationship with sexual consent. Accordingly, as we have seen, some critics have been quick to refute the claim that the Oankali pose positive or aspirational presences in Butler's universe, instead spurning them as dystopic beasts. It is this resolute depreciation of the Oankali that troubles me most about such readings, however. While their status as paragons of equitable, benign egalitarianism is moot, I posit that Butler did not intend to classify her alien species as either consummately good or bad; notably, Butler, as quoted in Canavan (2016), is said to have proclaimed, "[o]ne of the things I've discovered even with teachers using my books is that people tend to look for 'good guys' and 'bad guys' which always annoys the hell out of me. I'd be bored to death writing that way. But because that's the only pattern they have, they try to fit my work into it" (42). With her eschewal of binaries in favour of the borderland and flux, it is unsurprising that Butler repudiates the diametric opposition of 'goodness' and 'badness' as dichotomies; as Canavan notes, "there are no easy answers, no manifestos or utopias to be found within her pages" (4). Indeed, this notion of utopias figures significantly into such arguments; accordingly, scholarship is split over the debate of Butler's authorial intentions in constructing her narrative and the Oankali

venture — whether she perceives of such as utopian or dystopian. Lyman Tower Sargent, in “The Three Faces of Utopianism Revisited” (1994), defines “the broad, general phenomenon of utopianism as social dreaming — the dreams and nightmares that concern the ways in which groups of people arrange their lives and which usually envision a radically different society than the one in which the dreamers live” (3). In this way, Butler obscures whether her fictive future depicts either a dream, a nightmare, or both, and the series concludes suspended in the ambiguity of this very question. Regardless of one’s own ideological response, it is evident that Lilith’s Brood does not function as utopian within normative frames of the genre, and Butler makes no pretense that the Oankali represent our aspirational, utopian future. Rather, the series presents an ontologically fraught struggle for the readers, as they grapple with their own ethics and how they might conceive of a better society. As follows, Lilith’s Brood operates as an ongoing dialogue on the dialectics of utopian ideation, and presents a much more emotionally complex narrative than I believe such scholarship gives Butler credit for.

This thesis, as follows, is not concerned with rhetoric of absolute utopianism or dystopianism; indeed, I do not believe that such concepts were significantly influential in the construction of Butler’s narrative. Discussion of how the series fits within the mutually exclusive binaries of utopianism and dystopianism, I believe, reductively simplifies what has the potential to become an exploration into the nuanced, complex ways Butler explores the implications of Humanism for those on its margins. Accordingly, this thesis will instead investigate how Lilith’s Brood opens itself up to an inspection of how the sexualized, racialized and naturalized Others are liberated when the structures upholding Humanism are suspended. After all, Butler’s narrative does explore the inversion of such Western, hierarchical, normative ideology, enabling a fictive space in which these traditionally othered bodies are granted more freedom of embodiment. Indeed, this thesis will argue that posthumanism provides a fruitful framework through which to read Butler’s analysis of marginalization and emancipation.

In critiquing these modes of oppression as all either borne out of, or at least scaffolded by Humanist ontology, the overlapping nature of such subjugation is made clear. Indeed, addressing such matters under the auspices of anti-Humanist posthumanism — as opposed to deconstructing the separate social justice issues of misogyny, trans- and homophobia, racism, and anthropocentrism — pinpoints the deep roots of Humanism as the sites for which intense excavation is needed. It is apparent in

Butler's work that she perceives these different systems of oppression as multilayered, intersecting, and mutually informing; rather than "subordination as disadvantage occurring along a single categorical axis", as critical race theorist and law scholar Kimberle Crenshaw critiques in her 1989 conception of the notion of intersectionality. Butler's deliberate selection of traditionally marginalized subjectivities in some of the series' most prominent Human roles — Lilith (African American), Joseph (Chinese American), Tino (Mexican), Marina (Filipino), Jesusa and Tomas (Latino) — proves her commitment to broadening beyond what Crenshaw refers to as "[t]he authoritative universal voice — usually white male subjectivity masquerading as non-racial, non-gendered objectivity" (154). For Butler, such marginal figures epitomize the posthuman Other in the threat that they pose to the hegemonic Human subject by merely existing — all people of colour, for whom access to an unquestioned selfhood is contested oftentimes through aggression (Lilith, Jesusa and Tomas), sexual violence (Lilith, Marina), and even murder (Joseph, Tino). In fact, such dynamics of violent othering are hyperbolized further through her incorporation of a distinctly queer alien species. For fundamental posthuman thinker Donna Haraway, the cyborg is an apt substitute for the posthuman Other — a liminal subject existing in the indeterminate margins of hegemonic intelligibility. Like Braidotti, Haraway employs the cyborg as a symbol of the sexualized, racialized and naturalized Other; a coupling that has aroused much theoretical excitement. As within Butler's narrative, Haraway and Chicana theorist Chéla Sandoval (1994) both describe non-white and non-male subjectivities as potentially occupying this posthuman position; as Haraway states, "'women of colour' might be understood as a cyborg identity, a potent subjectivity synthesized from fusions of outsider identities" (1991, 174). In this way, in "Cyborg Feminism: The Science Fiction of Octavia E. Butler and Gloria Anzaldúa" (2002), Catherine S. Ramirez commends the posthuman/cyborg figure, in that it

interrogates the stability of social categories, such as 'woman,' 'white' and 'black,' and exposes them as social 'fictions' (i.e., regulatory ideals.)

Furthermore, it calls for the construction of coalitions based not on 'identity' as essence, but on position(s) and affinity [...] In addition, their unique physical qualities [...] defy the notion of the stable and closed subject as they assume and/or are catapulted into various social and subject positions and as they blur the boundaries of consciousness. (385)

Cyborg subjectivities, therefore, will figure usefully in reading the ways in which Butler explores those on the peripheries of these normative categories. Indeed, in *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Women*, Haraway unequivocally accredits Butler for enabling such theoretical thought; indeed, she lauds, “I am indebted in this story to writers like Joanna Russ, Samuel R. Delaney, John Varkey, James Tiptree, Jr, Octavia Butler, Monique Wittig, and Vonda McIntyre. These are our story-tellers exploring what it means to be embodied in high-tech worlds. They are theorists for cyborgs” (173). In this way, not only does Haraway offer a germane reading of Butler, but in fact, has actually drawn significant influence from Butler as a pioneering thinker — so groundbreaking are her narratives. Like Haraway, the iteration of posthumanism as presented in this thesis is inflected with the intersectional cognizance of feminist, queer and critical race theories. However, guided by posthuman theory, these social justice issues reach a more metaphysically cosmic scale when also operating with an awareness of Butler’s ecophilosophical engagement with the planet and its nonhuman matter as a whole. Indeed, as Braidotti insists, any attempts to undercut Humanism while also, even unconsciously, privileging the supremacy of the *anthropos*, merely “reinstate universal humanist values” (2013, 87). Many counter-hegemonic movements that function within singular frameworks (i.e., white, bourgeois feminism), she argues, still index their reconstituted notion of subjectivity against the spectre of an Other; oftentimes, this Other includes animals, plants, and nonhuman matter. In such circumstances, Humanism still exerts its anthropocentric primacy in neglecting to ordain nonhuman matter with any claim to subjectivity or agency. Referring to such neo-Humanism, Braidotti critiques,

the limitations of an uncritical reassertion of Humanism as the binding factor of this reactively assumed notion of a pan-human bond. I want to stress that the awareness of a new (negatively indexed) reconstruction of something we call ‘humanity’ must not be allowed to flatten out or dismiss all the power differentials that are still enacted and operationalized through the axes of sexualization/racialization/naturalization, just as they are being reshuffled by the spinning machine of advanced, bio-genetic capitalism. Critical theory needs to think simultaneously [about] the blurring of categorical differences and their

reassertion as new forms of bio-political, bio-mediated political economy, with familiar patterns of exclusion and domination. (2013, 87-88)

In this way, for true reimagination of the racialized and sexualized Other to take place, Humanism must be entirely unrooted, and the naturalized Other must also be liberated. Failing to acknowledge the naturalized Other in one's reformulated conceit of inclusivity, after all, still leans on the blind universality of Humanism, and puts weight in the same systems of oppression that, for centuries, overlooked the sexualized and racialized Others. Looking to the Oankali's explicitly ecophilosophical sense of union with all naturalized matter, it is in no way inappropriate to apply such a cosmology to Butler's narratives. As such, employing posthuman theory to read Lilith's Brood enables a much more thorough, nuanced exploration of the Others of Humanism than singular usage of feminist, queer, critical race or ecophilosophical theories would have facilitated; indeed, I believe that Butler consciously had the sexualized, racialized *and* naturalized Others in mind while constructing the series. While the reading this thesis advocates for is not intentionalist — in no way necessitating Butler's own conscious, authorial corroboration of my argument — I do nevertheless believe that her series is profoundly infused with this commitment to the Other. Referring to the traditional exclusiveness of the Human subject, Haraway queries, “who counts as ‘us’ in this rhetoric? Which identities are available to ground such a potent political myth called ‘us’, and what could motivate enlistment in this collectivity?” (1991, 155) — a question I regard as at the heart of Lilith's Brood. The expansion that posthumanism facilitates is praised by deleuzian cultural theorist Claire Colebrook, as she claims, “[l]ife itself would neither be that which requires the imposition of norms, nor a domain from which normativity would follow, but would be that creative, queering, divergent, and transposing power that would open up relations beyond those of the thinking or acting subject” (33). The posthuman veneration of diverse intersubjectivity, this thesis argues, is an enterprise with a poignant salience for Butler and her fiction.

While, for logistical purposes, each will be addressed in its own chapter for this thesis, androcentrism and cis/heteronormativity, Eurocentrism, and anthropocentrism must be understood as inherently interlocked structures of oppression. bell hooks reminds us, “we cannot change one aspect of the system without changing the whole” (xii). However, with respect to the economy and structure of the thesis, the three chapters will explore the sexualized Other with reference to *Dawn*, the racialized Other

with reference to *Adulthood Rites*, and the naturalized Other with reference to *Imago*. The first chapter, as follows, will address the intelligibility of the simultaneously non-male and non-female ooloi, the phallic nature of the Oankali's sensory organs, and the Humans' homophobic and transphobic rhetoric. It will then investigate how the Oankali's relationship structures expand beyond the possessive intimacy of heteromonogamy, and discuss the transcorporeality of Human-Oankali sex, and the notion of feminine sexual perversion. The second chapter will analyze how Butler's narrative demonstrates Bhabhian mimicry, the ways in which the character Akin occupies an ontologically interstitial position, and contrast Human and Oankali conceptualizations of difference. Following this, I will examine Butler's narratological choice to employ Akin as her protagonist, how fiction can operate as an agent of the posthuman, and finally the notion of the alien as foreigner and extraterrestrial. The third chapter engages with Braidotti's theories of *zoe* and not-Oneness, the function of Jodahs' first person narration, and the symbiotic relationship that the Oankali nurture with the natural environment. Next, I broach the opportunistic exploitation of animals by Butler's Human characters, and how racialized Others are branded as animals in order to justify their dehumanization and objectification. After this, the notions of body-knowledge, corporeality and touch are comprehensively explored, with specific emphasis on their disruption of Cartesian dualism. Finally, the Oankali metamorphoses are used to delve into the deleuzian idea of becoming-Other, and the extent to which flux functions to undermine Humanism's claim to stasis and cohesiveness. Recognizing the homogeneous whiteness and maleness of the canons of critical theory and literary criticism, it would be hypocritical to insist upon reading Butler's overtly subaltern narratives through such hegemonic lenses. In this way, throughout this thesis I have attempted to foreground, wherever possible, the voices of women, queer people, and people of colour for intersubjective guidance. While feminist, queer, and critical race theories, borderland politics, ecophilosophy and Human-animal studies all factor significantly into the arguments provided here, the more esoteric poststructuralism of Gilles Deleuze is also utilized in order to further elucidate these phenomenological and new materialist concepts.

## V.

Despite eventually achieving acclaim with the acceptance of Nebula, Hugo, Langston Hughes, and MacArthur Foundation Fellowship awards, Butler nevertheless suffered as a result of her positioning as an Other in the primarily white and male field of science fiction. Her 1980 essay “Lost Races of Science Fiction”, as republished in Canavan (2016), chronicles the strife of her efforts to be taken seriously as a black, female writer in the later half of the twentieth century, and the unabated laziness of the science fiction canon to accommodate such subjectivities within its narratives. She contends,

A lot of people had a chance to get comfortable with things as they are. Too comfortable. SF, more than any other genre, deals with change — change in science and technology, social change. But SF itself changes slowly, often under protest. You can still go to conventions and hear deliberately sexist remarks — if they speaker thinks he has a sympathetic audience. People resent being told their established way of doing things is wrong, resent being told they should change, and strongly resent being told they won’t be alone any longer in the vast territory — the universe — they’ve staked out for themselves. I don’t think anyone seriously believes the present world is all white. But custom can be strong enough to prevent people from seeing the need for SF to reflect a more realistic view. (1980, 185)

Butler, one could then extend, may observe the persistence of such oppression as a vestige of Humanism — a habit borne out of tradition, and one we are reluctant to let go of out of fear of the unfamiliar; as she asserts in *Adulthood Rites*, “[h]umans were most dangerous, most unpredictable when they were afraid” (482). Acknowledging the valid fear of unfamiliarity, Butler nevertheless exhorts writers to solicit guidance from marginalized subjectivities in order to start including these overlooked voices in their fiction; indeed, she urges us to bridge the chasm that has, for so long, divorced the Self from the Other in order to recognize, celebrate, and no longer disregard difference. In this way, Butler encourages us to remember our shared affinity, while also venerating our heterogeneity. Such a reminder, she believes, is crucial in preventing writers who do not “get comfortable with their racially different characters” and therefore “wind up creating unbelievable, self-consciously manipulated puppets; pieces of furniture who exist within a story but contribute nothing to it; or stereotypes guaranteed to be

offensive” (Butler 1980, 186). In 1980, Butler already understood the cultural ramifications of demanding visibility and representation in fiction. Only now, as I write in 2017 and 2018, might we truly feel that such a moment is almost upon us. We are, after all, in an epoch in which posthumanism and its myriad iterations are reaching a pivotal crescendo — not only in the proliferation of Descartes-defying artificial intelligence, but in our own awakening as active consumers of narratives in the media. Witnessing the imminent triumph of Marvel’s Afro-Futurist “Black Panther” film (2018), we are finally arriving at a cultural climate in which the homogeneity of whiteness, maleness, heteronormativity and cisnormativity in media is no longer the unquestioned status quo. The vital import of fictional narratives as modes for social dreaming and self definition, in this way, is finally being recognized on the mainstream scale. As African American anthropologist Faye V. Harrison argued in 1993 in “Writing Against the Grain: Cultural politics of difference in the work of Alice Walker”,

fiction writing has freed Black women from the burden of pressures to write like (White) men, and from epistemological and methodological strictures which suppress, subjugate and colonize their Blackness and femalenesss, disfiguring them into raceless and desexualized distortions of self. Fiction encodes truth claims - and alternative modes of theorizing - in a rhetoric of imagination, which accommodates and entertains the imaginable. Fiction resists, protests and works against the grain of those constructs of validity and reliability that, in practice as well as in ideological representation, privilege elitist White male representations and explanations of the world. (409-410)

Fiction, however, is not only radical for allowing minority subject positions to narrate their own stories, desires and objections; we are also realizing the transcendent capacity for narratives to bridge disparate perspectives, potentially granting readers insight into vastly subaltern points of view, and traversing the cognitive dissonance of the Self/Other divide. With the visceral carnality, disgust and confusion that Butler arouses in such a literary experience, Lilith’s Brood is a wholly, *posthumanly* immersive narrative, with readers are entirely absorbed in their becoming-Lilith, becoming-Oankali, becoming-book.



## 1.

**The Sexualized Other in *Dawn***

Butler configures the ooloi so as to play a quarrelsome figure in the lives of the awakened Human men, occupying an ontologically ambiguous role on the outskirts of intelligible binaries, while also performing significantly in the men's sexual and romantic relationships. In such alien surroundings, once awakened, the Humans defensively gravitate towards the familiar; the familiarity which Butler aligns with the ideology of Humanism and the Cartesian dualisms it apotheosizes. In this way, the gender binary is reflexively turned to as a familiar means by which to render the Oankali coherent; very early in her first encounter with an Oankali, Lilith “glanced at the humanoid body, wondering how humanlike it really was. ‘I don’t mean any offense,’ she said, ‘but are you male or female?’” (*Dawn*, 13). Blueprints of familiarity, however, have lost their pertinence in this posthuman future and limit, rather than enable, the Humans’ conceptualization of the Oankali and their ship. Throughout the novel, their grappling with the ooloi, and the intermediacy of their borderland gender, remains a vital hindrance in their acceptance of the Oankali and their mission. Indeed, their inability to conform to a (specifically Western) two-sex model so far exceeds the horizons of imagination that the Humans find it too inconceivable, even for an alien species; what Butler refers to as “a kind of deliberate, persistent ignorance” (*Dawn*, 89). In fact, the ontological danger that the ooloi pose to the system of Humanism is most acutely felt by the men, for whom the ooloi come to represent rival figures. After all, the ooloi are regarded as neither male enough for the men to perform allyship with, nor female enough to conceptualize as potential sexual partners. Rather, the ooloi, as a gender unto themselves, threaten to usurp the men’s position at the pinnacle of a gendered hierarchy; especially calamitous given their role as sexual penetrator — an ideologically loaded function, connoting uniquely masculine traits of power, virility and strength. Queer posthumanist Judith Halberstam and Ira Livingston assert that “the Other is... the matrix against which the self is made to appear and from which it can never be extricated” (5); as follows, the ooloi are particularly perilous because the Human men are implicated within them, as they are forced to see their specular selves reflected through these alien figures. In regards to the notion of sexuality and gender formation, sociologist Michael Kimmel (2008) explains that,

Women and gay men become the ‘other’ against which heterosexual men project their identities, against whom they stack the decks so as to compete in a situation in which they will always win, so that by suppressing them, men can stake a claim for their own manhood. (66)

Within our systematic, institutionalized heteropatriarchy, these sexual Others have remained easy targets, forcefully rendered prostrate in their subordination. In this narrative, therefore, the ooloi are constructed so as to disrupt this hegemonic reign, with their posthuman queerness dramatizing incoherencies, and focussing on apparent mismatches of desire (Jagose, 3). This is particularly quarrelsome because the ooloi, in fact, possess an inexplicable carnal allure to the men — a feminized attraction that is alarming because it does not necessarily follow molar lines of heterosexuality. In this way, the Human men foster a sort of reluctant fascination with the ooloi, quashing outward displays of sexual fondness, and homophobically internalizing this attraction as a perversion undermining the authority of their heterosexual identification. For this reason, the men resort to relying on other, more aggressive means by which to bolster their own sense of gender — and sexual — identity. The Oankali are implicated in the men’s image of themselves, and become the object of their violent vitriol as the men attempt to suppress the aspects of their identity that the Oankali expose.

Indeed, throughout *Dawn*, the presence of the Oankali’s’ tentacular sensory organs is particularly troublesome for the Human males and their conception of heterosexuality. While the Humans almost unanimously respond to the organs with horror, at least initially, the repulsion towards them appears more acutely expressed by the men. For them, the tentacles are not only so repugnant only in their foreignness, but most crucially for the fact that they — both in appearance and in use — resemble penises. Indeed, the image of the organs, as painted by Butler, is undeniably phallic — pale grey, compared to sea slugs (*Dawn*, 26), and with the innate capacity to animate themselves, becoming erect or flaccid. The organs’ active use for penetration during sex, therefore, is particularly vexing for hegemonic masculinity in engendering their male sexual partners’ passive, and violable; effectively, and most problematically, feminized — in the same way that, for queerness, “anal eroticism threatens to explode [the] ideological body” (Waldby, 272). During sex with an ooloi, its tentacles may perforate the body at any point of conjuncture — an intercourse detached from genitality; such an image rendering the body, in its entirety, pervious and open for

colonization. Construed as such, its availability for sex figuratively transmutes the whole body into a vagina, while, concurrently, removing genitality from the entire equation of sexuality. This paradox, therefore, is perceived as an ontological affront against the heteronormative “assertion not just of the woman’s penetrability but of the man’s impenetrability, the exclusive designation of his body by its seamless, phallic mastery” (Waldby, 272). With knowledge of some men’s sex with ooloi, their Human peers seize upon this image so as to question the veracity of their claims to heterosexuality. Despite Joseph, Lilith’s Chinese-American mate, being targeted with homophobic rhetoric himself, he nevertheless conveys anger and contempt for the phallic symbolism of the ooloi’s sensory organs: “Joseph shuddered visibly. ‘I... I don’t think I could let you touch me’” (*Dawn*, 157), “I don’t really understand what it is you do with those... those tentacles” (*Dawn*, 158); and, “[t]hat thing will never touch me again if I have anything to say about it” (*Dawn*, 169). In this way, the men’s vulnerability to the phallus (sensory organ) fundamentally explodes the Humanist assertion of the fully integrated man, and the porous, passive woman. Indeed, the ooloi act in the same way that queer theorist Karen Saunders (2010) argues that queer subjectivities do: as “shape shifters, altering the contours of space and destabilizing the very foundations upon which a unified, individualized identity and heterosexual order is built” (116). Through the ooloi, the body is made rhizome. Within deleuzian theory, the rhizome is regarded as an open system of interconnection, spreading horizontally with no point of origin or no specified endpoint (Stivale, 50). Therefore, instead of sex being structured and hierarchized to localizable regions of eroticism (penis, vagina), “the rhizome, on the other hand, is a liberation of sexuality not only from reproduction but also from genitality” (Deleuze & Guattari 1988, 18). It is for this reason — its rhizomatic potential — that, what is symbolized by the sensory organs, is the source of such repulsion, and is ultimately radical in rupturing the body of Humanism.

As mentioned, throughout *Dawn*, Joseph becomes a sexualized Other against whom the awakened men gauge their own masculine standing — an othering undeniably suffused with racist and orientalist implications, as a gentle Chinese-American man of small build. It has already been established that the patriarchal hegemony of Humanism depends on the binary opposition of masculinity and femininity; as follows, femininity represents the inverse of desirable masculine qualities. Saunders (2010) posits that “masculinity presents its bodily self much like a suit of armor and becomes the body which penetrates/colonizes both spaces and other

bodies” (91); as its dichotomous inverse, femininity is connoted by penetrability, and “males who open their bodies to penetration are associated with effeminacy” (Saunders, 80). In *Dawn*, however, the interspecies pairing of an ooloi mate with a heterosexual human couple troubles the simplistic heteronormative discourses which designate man as penetrator and woman as penetrated. As penetrated men, the Human men’s experience of masculinity is threatened because, by opening their bodies to their ooloi mates, they risk feminization; as Leo Bersani, in his iconic 1987 AIDS-era essay, “Is the Rectum a Grave?” states, “to be penetrated is to abdicate power” (212). Constructed by Butler as exemplars of this hegemonic masculine complex, the Human men become reliant on the violent and homophobic derision of an easier target — Joseph — in order to reassert their own gender identity. Just as is the case with any Other that acts as a measure for an in-group, sociologist Cheri Jo Pascoe (2005) argues that

the fag is an ‘object’ position, a position outside of masculinity that actually constitutes masculinity. Thus masculinity, in part, becomes the daily interactional work of repudiating the ‘threatening specter’ of the fag. (342)

This masculinist preoccupation with warding off the image of the ‘fag’, therefore, proves the extent to which male heterosexuality is contingent on such homosocial rhetoric — reifying the very identity from which it hopes to disidentify. In the novel, Joseph is thus burdened with occupying the role of the sexualized Other - the cautionary figure through whom the men performatively defer their own sexual guilt. For these men, gender is not a stable category intrinsic to them, but a meticulously constructed bravado that they must continuously defend against a repudiated Other. Haunted by the specter of homosexuality, their sense of ‘manhood’ is, in part, derived through a “*stylized repetition of acts*” (Butler 1988, 519) — specifically, the repetition of homophobic epithets. The epithet “faggot” (*Dawn*, 159, 160) becomes a performative insult for Joseph amongst these men, ultimately stemming from insecurity regarding the transience of their own gendered identity. Pascoe describes this flippant use of the term amongst men as “a verbal game of hot potato, each careful to deflect the insult quickly by hurling it toward someone else” (Pascoe, 60). Homophobic discourses, even when fictitiously fabricated (as is the case with Joseph), act as disciplinary mechanisms for policing gender normativity. In internalizing the slipperiness and fluidity of the ‘fag’ discourse, the Human men become althusserian ideological state apparatuses,

desperately invigilating their peers for dissidence so as to avoid being cast out as Other themselves. In doing so, Butler interrogates the fragility of gendered discourses under Humanism; ironically so, considering the ontology of Humanism mythologizes such dualisms as the gender binary as essentialized and natural.

The way in which Lilith, and the humans and general, fixate on attempting to locate and understand the Oankalis' sex organs is indicative of this reductive manner in which Western beliefs in Humanism limit the scope of queer embodiment. Throughout *Dawn*, the overall alienness of the Oankali — the overwhelming sense of their illegibility, the dearth of human narratives to make sense of them — is ostensibly distressing for the humans. When Lilith is initially introduced to Jdayah, for example, he is the first Oankali she has seen. With Lilith as our narratological entry to the narrative, Butler suspends the readers' conception of the Oankali alongside her, ensuring our shared confusion by delaying providing a fuller image; we are introduced to Jdayah as Lilith's eyes adjust in the darkness — the vague silhouette of “a tall, slender man [...] humanoid, but it had no nose [...] just flat, gray skin” (*Dawn*, 13), before finally noticing his tentacles. Confronted by what she perceives as his sheer monstrosity, and yet conflicted by his seeming benevolence, Lilith grapples to fit Jdayah within a frame of coherent recognition, through which to both understand and accept him. Instinctively, Lilith gravitates towards gender as a tool of identification, signalling its primacy within the Humanist schema. Without overt clues with which to read an Oankali's gender, she attempts to find intimation of it through the sensory organs; later on, looking out upon a mass of Oankali, she notices arms and legs, “but none with anything she recognized as sexual organs”, and wonders, “[p]erhaps some of the tentacles and extra arms served a sexual function” (*Dawn*, 36). In this way, Lilith forms a preoccupation with deciphering these nonhuman appendages, and how they may relate to an Oankali's gender and/or sexual habits. Comprehending the relationship between the sensory organs and genitality, therefore, becomes a crucial mode by which Lilith initially attempts to fully fathom their species. Early on, she wonders, “[h]ow [...] did these people manage their sex lives, anyway? Were its arm-sized tentacles sexual organs?” (*Dawn*, 51). This drive to quantify identity through essentialist modes draws a pertinent similarity against narratives through which cisgender people injuriously attempt to apprehend the anatomical ‘reality’ of a trans person's sex. Trans activist Julia Serano, in her book *Whipping Girl* (2007), describes this phenomenon, whereby cisgender individuals “assume that they are infallible in their ability to assign genders to

other people, [therefore] they can develop an overactive sense of *cissexual gender entitlement*” (118). This entitlement begets the routine dependence on genitalia to either verify or invalidate a gender nonconforming person’s gender identity or presentation, often with violent consequences — especially for trans people of colour, for whom another level of otherness interferes. Fellow trans theorist Talia Mae Bettcher (2009) calls this transphobic discourse “the Basic Denial of Authenticity” (99). She explains that this Western ontology of gender essentialism (combined with a sense of entitlement) gives rise to the unwavering belief that cisgender people can query trans people about their genitalia, pursuit of hormones or surgery, and sex life in order to ratify their gender (106). This culture of invalidation ultimately establishes a myth of trans people as deceptive, “where genitalia play the role of ‘concealed truth’ about a person’s sex” (Bettcher 2007, 48). With or without overt cognizance of the burgeoning trans discourses of her era, Butler’s narrative is undeniably critical of the essentialistic tendencies rife within Humanism to quash difference and multiplicity. In this way, Lilith, before her philosophical awakening, clings to this polemic of biological determinism. She believes that, if only she can determine the Oankalis’ sexual organs, she will better grasp them, and quantify them within a neat and stable gendered category. In doing so, Lilith demonstrates what new materialist feminist Elizabeth Grosz critiques as the implicit trust in the Humanist assertion of the gendered body as, “mired in presumptions regarding its naturalness, its fundamentally biological and precultural status, its immunity to cultural, social and historical factors, its brute status as give, unchangeable, inert, and passive” (Grosz 1994, x). Violent transphobia, in this way, functions through the apotheosis of sex as solely the property of cis/heteronormative hegemony to dictate and legitimize.

While Lilith and the other Humans tend towards invalidating or dehumanizing the ooloi on account of their gendered flux, the Oankali assume a more deleuzian position, celebrating their enigmatic fluidity as a source of power. With their propensity towards Humanism, the matter of the ooloi’s liminal position within conventional gendered structures is the source of ontological distress for the awakened Humans; a perceived affront against customs which — adopting Judith Butler’s words — dictate “what does and does not count as recognizably human” (2004, 31). The humans conceive of the ooloi’s queerness as abject, in the Kristevian sense, in order to “maintain or reinforce boundaries that are threatened” (Phillips, 19) — that is, the rigid partition between male / female. The implication of such suggests distrust of the ooloi’s

supposed incompleteness, or instability — their failure to wholly embody either binary category. Yet, viewing the ooloi's gender nonconformity through this deficit model — as absence, as opposed to abundance — does not capture the ways in which Butler frames it as vibrant, creative and expansive. Furthermore, throughout *Dawn*, Butler alludes to the transgressive, political power that the ooloi possess precisely *because* of this indeterminacy; not as *less* but as *more* than man or woman. Iconically, existentialists Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari conceive of liminal existence as truly radical. In *A Thousand Plateaus*, they proclaim

the middle is by no means an average; on the contrary, it is where things pick up speed. Between things does not designate a localizable relation going from one thing to another and back again, but a perpendicular direction, a transversal movement that sweeps one and the other away, a stream without beginning or end that undermines its banks and picks up speed in the middle. (Deleuze & Guattari 1988, 25)

Assuming this ontological position, the borderlessness of the ooloi's gender resists containment to molar lines of masculinity or femininity. Intermediacy, in this way, does not connote lack or deficiency. Rather, Butler conceives of it as a transcendent capacity to navigate multiple subjectivities, blurring the confines of Humanist identity politics. A hybridized, borderland identity — *mestizo* (as Chicana feminist Gloria Anzaldúa [1987] calls it) — is capable of delegitimizing Humanism's claim to essentialism and stasis. Gregory Jerome Hampton, in his 2010 book *Changing Bodies in the Fiction of Octavia Butler: Slaves, Aliens, and Vampires*, also argues for the radical strength of borderland existence. He defines hybrid (or *mulatto*) beings as a “paradox of likeness and difference, a miscegenation resulting in something stronger and potentially more powerful than the ‘normal body’” (80). For the Oankali, the ooloi's difference is worthy of veneration — a reverence that accounts for their name, literally translating to “*treasured stranger*” (*Dawn*, 106). Their singularity is the root of the union between their Oankali mates; the ooloi *otherness* the source of the Oankali *oneness*. The deleuzian celebration of intermediacy, therefore, provides a fruitful frame through which to interpret Butler's anti-essentialist philosophy. Butler depicts flux, in this way, as not merely

disruptive, but ultimately uniting — eroding the walls that bolster the hegemony of division and exclusion.

The discomfort surrounding the ooloi's gender ambiguity is made manifest through routine dehumanization of their status as Other to the rigidly gendered Humanist self — a dehumanization exhibited linguistically. Early on in *Dawn*, Lilith senses an aura of masculinity from the Oankali Jdayah, which renders him intelligible to her; despite his foreignness, she has at her disposal one lens through which to classify him — a blueprint of human maleness. In this way, learning of his conceivably 'male' identity, she finds comfort in resorting to the binarized rhetoric of masculine pronouns — “Good. ‘It’ could become ‘he’ again. Less awkward” (*Dawn*, 13). Conversely, as an ooloi, Kahguyacht's gender presentation is ephemeral to Lilith, thus planting her in a psychic knot. Lilith, when confronted with the monstrosity of otherness that she perceives Kahguyacht as, gravitates towards dehumanization — “she took pleasure in the knowledge that the Oankali themselves used the neuter pronoun when referring to the ooloi. Some things deserved to be called ‘it’” (*Dawn*, 49). The implication of such is that, within the vector of otherness that the Oankali represent to humans, the ooloi are superlative in their alterity. At this stage, Lilith is reticent in accepting concepts that deviate from her instinct towards Humanism - an ontology contingent on binary classifications, such as those between Human/nonhuman, and male/female. Kahguyacht and the other ooloi, as follows, represent a queer destabilization of identitarian politics in their failure to be captured by these hallmarks of humanity. Thus, the ooloi's incoherency within this gendered dogma renders it ultimately inhuman. In ‘Has the Queer Ever Been Human?’ (2015), Dana Luciano and Mel Chen argue that,

the form of the “human” remains with us partly as a means of disciplinary dehumanization and regulation, exclusion, and/or marginalization... The mattering of the body is not, then, inherently a posthuman condition, insofar as humanness and its constitutive parts remain a material as well as ideological force. (191)

Lilith's reflexive instinct towards dehumanizing the sexualized Other, in this way, is a very literal manifestation of the Humanist abjection of difference — a concept Julia Kristeva discusses in *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (1982). Therefore,

Lilith initially deems the connotations of desubjectification associated with the pronoun “it” as suited to the inhumanity of the abject ooloi. While Jdayah remains recognizable enough to be regarded worthy of a more agentive pronoun (he), Kahguyacht diverges too greatly from her facsimile of human subjectivity to warrant such. Pronouns become a barometer of acceptance of the Oankali Other — a phenomenological reality for many trans or gender nonconforming individuals; such resonates for Susan Stryker’s (1994) experience navigating her trans body. She expresses, “[a]s in the case of being called ‘it,’ being called a ‘creature’ suggests the lack or loss of a superior personhood” (240), and, “[l]ike the monster, I am too often perceived as less than fully human due to the means of my embodiment” (Stryker, 238). Indeed, this line of flight emerges significantly in posthuman cyborg theory too. Notably, in *Simians, Cyborgs and Women*, Donna Haraway equates the cyborg, as creatures of mixity, with the monstrosity of sexual otherness. She argues, “[c]yborg monsters in feminist science fiction define the quite different political possibilities and limits from those proposed by the mundane fiction of Man and Woman” (Haraway, 180). Furthermore, Luciano and Chen regard the placement of queerness within humanity as flux. They argue, “[w]e might see the “yes/no” humanity of the queer less as an ambivalence about the human as status than as a queer transversal of the category. The queer, we could say, runs across or athwart the human” (188-189). Although Lilith’s conception of gender expands to accommodate the multiplicities of the Oankali, her instinctual response to invalidate Kahguyacht demonstrates the ways in which boundary figures hold a tenuous place within cis/heteronormative frameworks; after all, “[m]onsters have always defined the limits of community in Western imaginations” (Haraway, 180). Indeed, Butler ensures that Lilith’s vilification ultimately exemplifies how the prescriptiveness of Humanism is invested in quashing diversity and variation that exceeds neat categorization.

Along slightly different, but no less fascinating lines of sexual thought, Butler raises the construct of monogamy through the depiction of intimacy and relationships in *Dawn*. In reality, monogamy naturalizes jealousy as an inherent liability of romantic commitment — a myth that facilitates the perpetuation and reinforcement of male possessiveness and control over female sexuality. As an institution, monogamy codes desire as a limited resource, establishing physical and emotional intimacy as having the capacity to be sufficiently satiated by one romantic partner; a notion referred to by authors Janet Hardy and Dossie Easton in their polyamorous bible *The Ethical Slut* as a

“starvation economy” (36). Within the framework of a patriarchal capitalist economy, this ontology implicitly functions to maintain the structure of the nuclear family, and the backbone of feminized oppression that results from such; indeed, Athena Tsoulis (1987) goes so far as to proclaim that, “[m]onogamous love, eulogized in our society, is the tool by which women are controlled” (25). She elaborates that the apotheosis of heterosexual marriage in Western culture necessitates the procurement of a husband as the solution to all of a woman’s (financial/emotional/romantic) needs — “It leads us to making men the centre of our world, re-directing our energies and severing ties with others in an all-consuming fashion” (Tsoulis, 25). As follows, masculine jealousy has been reified as a controlling mechanism policing female acquiescence to this dictum. Feminist theorist Toril Moi (1987) explores the ways in which experiences of jealousy may vary; for women acculturated into passive and nurturing roles, jealousy is experienced as loss. Conversely, for men socialized within our culture of hyperbolic masculinity, jealousy is predominantly experienced as anger. Moi claims that, “when jealous women do express their aggression, they tend to attack their rival, whereas men are inclined to kill the unfaithful partner. In other words, in the jealous triangle, it is always the woman who gets killed” (62) — a tactic for policing women willfully violating the normative mandate of sexual passivity. Thus, in *Dawn*, when Joseph discovers that Lilith has been engaging in sex with Nikanj and its mates without him, his jealousy manifests as fury. In some ways, Lilith’s perceived infidelity is construed as an assault against Joseph’s masculinity, and his capacity to sufficiently provide for her. Personalizing the situation as an indictment of himself, Joseph attempts to restabilize the equilibrium of his masculinity by channeling his grief into anger, dictating control over Lilith’s sexual autonomy. He commands, “I don’t want him here again... Don’t let him touch you! If you have a choice, keep away from him!” (*Dawn*, 170). This unexpectedly dictatorial power that Joseph exerts over Lilith makes her recall the brute force of Paul Titus, her attempted rapist. While Joseph is typically temperate and mollifying in his characterization, his distortion of jealousy into ire incites a latent misogyny that Lilith does not anticipate. Butler, in this way, explores the notion that male sexual entitlement is so intrinsic to the construct of masculine culture, that even clement Joseph is not impervious. Pertinent in application to this narrative, Toril Moi declares that,

For the jealous man, the crime of the woman consists not so much in infidelity... as in the fact that she is irredeemably Other, whether she asserts that alterity or not. Men kill the unfaithful woman in order to claim their complete ownership of her. (64)

The patriarchal investment in jealousy as a hallmark of monogamy programmes Joseph to regard his outlash as an appropriate reaction — disciplining his partner for the wayward breach of the implicit codes of monogamy.

Whereas Joseph's jealousy stems from the understanding — preached in discourses of monogamy — of desire as finite, Lilith, over time, learns to accept the potential expansiveness of her desire, as opposed to “an absence, lack, or hole, an abyss seeking to be engulfed, stuffed to satisfaction” (Grosz 1995, 177). Within heterosexual matrixes, it is argued that desire can be tamed and domesticated — as exemplified by the cultural weight with which the institution of monogamous marriage is endowed. In *A Thousand Plateaus*, however, Deleuze theorizes desire as fecund and capacious, “a process of production without reference to any exterior agency, whether it be a lack that hollows it out or a pleasure that fills it” (154). Discontent with prevailing narratives equating desire with lack, such as those espoused in the Freudian psychoanalytical model, deleuzian theory explores dynamic and innovative manifestations of desire as the source of all life. In this way, Deleuze offers a positively queer emancipation of desire from the deficit model imposed in a heteronormative ontology, and, as I shall argue, a novel lens through which to read Lilith's departure from monogamous convention. In submitting herself to the queer Oankali structure of polyamory, Lilith's shared pleasure and intimacy with her mates capacitates the broadening of her horizons beyond those made immediately visible by Humanist narratives. While initially a reluctant participant in such an arrangement, Lilith rapidly learns to expand her image of love to accommodate multiple emotional, romantic and sexual partners — her love for and commitment to Joseph in no way diluted by her sexual relationship with Nikanj and its mates. When Joseph finally cedes to Nikanj, Lilith watches contentedly, sharing in the pleasure of their union. Indeed, rather than witnessing this new partnership with envy, she notes that “she trusted Nikanj completely” (*Dawn*, 189). Furthermore, Lilith's geniality is not merely on Joseph and Nikanj's behalf; instead, she is lustful and desirous of their union herself, deriving erotic pleasure in beholding them. Mid-coitus, Nikanj, physically and psychically inhabiting Joseph's body, summons his voice to

speak to Lilith, inviting her to join them. She notes that “[s]he thought there could be nothing more seductive than an ooloi speaking in that particular tone, making that particular suggestion”, abruptly undresses, and “sandwiched Nikanj’s body between her own and Joseph’s” (*Dawn*, 161). Such lustful desire for this queer, plural sex demonstrates a radical repudiation of containment to avenues of heteronormative intelligibility. Uninterested in appeasing dominant structures of heteromonogamy, and “normalising the self by subjection to convention and recognition” (Nigianni & Storr, 20), Lilith empowers herself to experience desire as a queer and proliferative force, irreducible to a singular target.

The inter-species family structure shared by the Oankali and humans can be viewed as a uniquely queer anarchy, antithetic to the rubric mandated by Western paradigms. The convoluted structure of these familial arrangements dictate the presence of a heterosexual Human couple, their ooloi mate, and the ooloi’s male and female siblings. The ooloi of this quintuplet partnership acts a conduit of sorts, enabling the reproduction of both the heterosexual Human couple, and the male and female Oankali siblings. Offspring born to the Oankali couple and the Human couple share an ooloi parent, and are reared as siblings. In this way, children are brought up by five parents — their biological mother and father (whether Human or Oankali), their ooloi parent, and the other, non-biological mother and father pair. The Human pair, presumably, couple initially out of attraction, yet are only capable of consummating with the presence of their ooloi mate; the Human couple also have no sexual partnership with their Oankali couple. The Oankali couple, as siblings, utilize their ooloi sibling for procreation, yet do not retain a sexual relationship between themselves; after all, “[a]n ooloi needed a male and a female pair to be able to play its part in reproduction, but it neither needed nor wanted two-way contact between that male or female” (*Dawn*, 220). As follows, these relationship structures queer the hegemony of heteromonogamy — a construct that codes a nuclear family revolving around a monogamously committed heterosexual couple and their biological offspring. Throughout *Dawn*, the humans cling desperately to these normative traditions of partnership in order to preserve any semblance of Human (read: Western, heteronormative) custom; indeed, at one point, the Human Curt decrees, “[w]e pair off! ... One man, one woman” (*Dawn*, 176). In the Western world, heterosexual monogamy is harnessed by a capitalist economy to prioritize the fiscally lucrative nuclear family - a mentality that has imposed a restrictive hierarchy on how relationships are structured, and which type of relationships are esteemed. After all,

“[c]ompulsory monogamy is a concept that’s pervasive in our laws and institutions, where the expectation and pressure to conform to monogamy is awarded by material and social gain” (Song, 9). Within this framework, heterosexual couplings that engage in normative (e.g.: procreative) sex are apotheosized as the pinnacle of these relationship structures. In Butler’s narrative, conversely, the Oankali conceive of and experiment with desire and intimacy in diverse ways — exploding the assumption that emotional or physical closeness can only be garnered from one sexual/romantic partner. While, within a familial clan, the human couple and Oankali siblings do not share a sexual bond, they nevertheless possess an intimate, platonic sort of relationship that queers Western understandings of kinship and partnership. When Lilith witnesses Jean’s kin network comfort her, she senses that, “the first signals Jean received were olfactory. The male and female smelled good, smelled like family, all brought together by the same ooloi. When they took her hands, they felt right. There was a real chemical affinity” (*Dawn*, 196). Their iteration of polyamory is, in this way, inherently queer. We can imagine polyamory in similar terms as Sara Ahmed, in *Queer Phenomenology*, conceptualizes heterosexuality; if monogamy, like heterosexuality, is a straight line imbued with the social value of goodness and tradition, then nonmonogamy, just as with queerness, is an intransigent perversion of this linear path established by patriarchal capitalism.

The ooloi also play a fundamental role in the functioning of the Humans’ couplings — an involvement that confounds the myth of a natural heterosexual union. Once a Human couple has copulated with their ooloi mate, sex without it is impossible. This fact — that ooloi are made essential in order for sex to occur — is ultimately so problematic because it confuses the narrative of heteromonogamy; their presence in a Human coupling creates a pseudo-polyamorous, queer triad, rather than a monogamous male/female dyad — what Lilith learns to conceive of as a “powerful threefold unity that was one of the most alien features of Oankali life” (*Dawn*, 220). Yet, not only is the ooloi’s presence mandatory for the sake of procreation - Nikanj explicates, “[t]hey need us now. They won’t have children without us. Human sperm and egg will not unite without us” (*Dawn*, 245) — but also because the Humans are no longer able to transmit sexual pleasure between themselves; in fact, the prospect of touch alone becomes utterly repulsive. This new revelation shocks Lilith; thinking of Joseph, she observes that now, “[h]is flesh felt wrong somehow, oddly repellent. It had not been this way when he came to her before Nikanj moved in between them” (*Dawn*, 220). Contrastingly, the

ooloi's presence during sex amplifies the pleasure for their human mates, offering "an intimacy... beyond ordinary human experience" (*Dawn*, 161). In this way, the concept of engaging in sex with the ooloi results in a certain amount of cognitive dissonance; while allowing an ooloi to guide a sexual encounter evokes disgust, they nevertheless possess a strange, alluring power over the Humans. The simultaneous revulsion and arousal that they inspire displaces sexual attraction from the realms of (hetero)normative intelligibility, and elicits an erotic anxiety in their mates. While, undoubtedly, the inclusion of an ooloi mate into an otherwise heterosexual couple perturbs the women as well, the men are more invested in disavowing their involvement on account of the inextricability of masculine gender identity from a claim to heterosexuality. For Lilith, and, later, for Joseph, attraction is derived from a certain body-knowledge — a visceral, carnal desire that cannot be reduced to cognitive understanding, and that liberates the individual from the repression of sexual hegemony. Along these lines, Fox and Alldred (2013) assert that, "[t]erritorialized by molar, aggregating relations that codify and organize affective flows, desire is channelled into specific capacities and identities, to produce a very limited range of sexualities and sexual desire" (780). Willingness to accept deviation from the sexual norm, and allowing oneself to admit pleasure in this ooloi-Human sex, however, appears to be significant in bridging the enmity towards the Oankali species. In opening themselves up to non-normative — non-heterosexual, and nonmonogamous — avenues of sexual relations, the Humans are able to experience a transcendent, posthuman connection with their mates. Audre Lorde proclaims the psychic significance of embracing erotic pleasure, stating, "[t]he sharing of joy, whether physical, emotional, psychic, or intellectual, forms a bridge between the sharers which can be the basis for understanding much of what is not shared between them, and lessens the threat of their difference" (56). Butler's conception of sex in the narrative confounds the structures of compulsory heterosexuality and monogamy that inform our Western model of reproduction; the denaturalization of such constructs from procreation, therefore, pose an irksome problem for the Humans, resentful of their newfound sexual dependence on the Oankali.

If Humanism is established on a Cartesian foundation proclaiming the stasis of selfhood, Butler's depiction of ooloi-Human sex in *Dawn* is markedly *posthuman* in affirming the leakiness of corporeal-bound subjectivity. Deleuze and Guattari proclaim that "the self is only a threshold, a door, a becoming between two multiplicities" (1988,

249) — an assertion that resonates with Butler’s description of the expansiveness of human-ooloi sex. Butler depicts sex between an ooloi and its Human mates as ephemeral, nebulous in the insufficiencies of Humanist-inflected discourse to imagine; it may be, in this way, considered ontologically posthuman in rupturing the integrity of a singular self for the becoming of a multi-self. During sex, the ooloi both physically and psychically inhabit their mates’ bodies; they feel what their mates feel, and transmit sensation between the two — a certain conduit of a sorts. Even without the Human mates maintaining tactile contact, the physical sensation of touch is imaginatively fabricated; Lilith, in the throes of passion with Joseph and Nikanj, “never knew whether she was receiving Nikanj’s approximation of Joseph, a true transmission of what Joseph was feeling, some combination of truth and approximation, or just a pleasant fiction” (*Dawn*, 162). Sex, in this way, elevates the individual to a sort of hive-mind collectivity in which pleasure is not experienced distinctly by each person, and cannot be reduced to a singular corporeal locus — an experience paralleling Haraway’s query, “[w]hy should our bodies end at the skin, or include at best other beings encapsulated by skin?” (Haraway, 314). Indeed, there is a quality wholly deleuzian about Butler’s interpretation of ooloi-Human sex; during the encounter, all parties, fuelled by pleasure, form a sort of machinic assemblage of desire, wherein the Self is indistinguishable from the Other. Nikanj explains to Lilith, “[y]ou had your own experiences and his. He had his and yours. You both had me to keep it going for longer than it would have otherwise” (*Dawn*, 163). Erotic sensation, in this way, is dispersed between the Humans and their ooloi mate. This intermutual experience of sex is “too much for the specific slab of enfleshed existence that constitutes single subjects” (Braidotti 2013, 131); an understanding that invites Nikanj’s phrase, to “share sex” (*Dawn*, 99) — as an encounter in which subjectivity is distributed and deterritorialized from singular bodies. In this way, Oankali-amplified sex pushes against a Humanist conception of physicality, in illustrating the interactive quality of subjectivity. Rather than designating sexual pleasure to a single localizable region or body, an intersubjective experience of sex is mutually co-constructed through connection — a Deleuzian machine insofar as it is “a nontotalized collection or assemblage of heterogeneous elements and materials” (Grosz 1994, 120). Sex, therefore, opens the metaphorical door of subjectivity, shattering the ideal of a hermetic, integral self. In doing so, it enables the self to be reimagined as porous, not only in the physical logistics of intercourse, but also through the psychic connection it facilitates between those involved; invoking a “oneness” that Nikanj

suggests we yearn for (*Dawn*, 89). Butler's illustration, as follows, is a hyperbolized portrayal of the transcendent capacity of sex to connect, and release us from our singular experience of existence.

There is, too, something uniquely queer about the depiction of sexuality removed from genitality. Within heterosexual paradigms, procreation is a significant impetus in formulating notions of normative fornication — a motivation that naturalizes penile-vaginal intercourse as the primary design of sex. Once liberated from the pressure to perform sex for reproductive purposes, the sheer creativity with which one can summon sexual pleasure is broadened beyond what are traditionally considered erotogenic surfaces. A sufficiently queered approach to sex, in this way, uproots the myth that one's penis or vagina is "the privileged locus where sexuality happens" (Fox & Alldred, 770). As follows, the depiction of Oankali-Human sex, as rendered by Butler, offers a queer expansion of carnal desire and pleasure from these limited loci. Deleuze argues that a corporeal body is an inherently libidinal body, a body fuelled by desire. Erotogenicism, therefore, cannot be reduced to singular sites; rather, it inundates the "entire surroundings that it traverses, the vibrations, the flows of every sort to which it is joined" (Deleuze & Guattari 1983, 292). In descriptions of this Oankali-Human sex, therefore, the ooloi's tentacles penetrate the Humans' whole body, and the communal pleasure, felt by all parties, is both psychic and corporeally experienced, removed from direct genitality. Deleuzian in this way, Butler's portrayal of sex is wholly immersive, transcending the Cartesian division of mind and body, and involving total immolation of the hermetic self. Indeed, during Lilith and Nikanj's first joint encounter with Joseph, "[i]t seemed to her that she had always been with him. She had no sensation of shifting gears, no 'time alone' to contrast with the 'time together'. He had always been there, part of her, essential" (*Dawn*, 162). Alphonso Lingis imagines the erotic pleasure of sex:

They are surface effects. They occur at the point of conjuncture between a hand and a breast, a thigh and another thigh, lips and another's lips, lips and the pulp of fruit, toes and sand. They do not occur on a pre-given surface, but by occurring they mark out a surface, make skin, hair, vulva, exist for themselves and not for the sake of the interior of the whole. (Lingis 1985, 75)

Adopting a similar position, new materialist feminist Elizabeth Grosz (1995) also argues that it is the act of interconnection between these surfaces, organs, and limbs that steeps these zones in carnality, as opposed to being intrinsically ordained sexual through heteronormative narratives. The carnal union of any two surfaces, she asserts, “produces a tracing that imbues eros or libido to both of them, making bits of bodies, its parts or particular surfaces throb, intensify, for their own sake and not for the benefit of the entity or organism as a whole” (Grosz 1995, 182). Without genital entitlement to one another’s bodies, therefore, Lilith and Joseph are still embraced wholly by libidinal pleasure for one another and Nikanj. Desire, in this way, metamorphosizes both body and mind, in their entirety, into erogenous zones capable of producing libidinous satisfaction. Butler’s queer image of posthuman sex, therefore, asks “how might a self desire, what might count as the object of one’s desire, what relations or events might the couplings of bodies produce and enable” (Nigianni & Storr 20). The sexuality depicted, as follows, is a celebration of the vitality and ephemeral pleasure of connection — unable to be intellectualized, rationalized, or physically pinpointed.

Lilith’s engagement in and enjoyment of sex with her Oankali mates is the source of much chagrin for her Human counterparts; indeed, she is vilified for this sexual deviance and perversion, insofar as “perverse means not pathological but rather non-heterosexual or non-normatively heterosexual” (De Lauretis, xiii). While the other Humans are reticent regarding their sexual relationships with their Oankali mates, Lilith is more publicly demonstrative in her affection for Nikanj — an openness that piques their already-resolute hostility towards her. Disdainful of the Oankali, the awakened Humans are reluctant to relinquish their traditions and cede to the Oankali desire for miscegenation. This, coupled with her ostensibly brazen reclamation of female sexual agency, casts Lilith’s intimacy with Nikanj as a depraved and unnatural predilection. Sara Ahmed conceives of perversion as “also a spatial term, which can refer to the willful determination to counter or go against orthodoxy, but also to what is wayward and thus ‘turned away from what is right, good and proper’” (78). Normative sex, in this way, is established as that which is heterosexual and procreative — a teleological narrative that proclaims morally decorous sex as solely reproductive. Indeed, Ahmed goes on to describe how “any acts that postpone the heterosexual union are perverse, which thus includes heterosexual practices that are not ‘aimed’ toward penetration of the vagina by the penis. The postponement or ‘delay’ threatens the line of heterosexuality, insofar as it risks ‘uncoupling’ desire and reproduction” (78). While

union with Oankali is, in fact, essential for reproductive purposes, the sexual ambiguity of the ooloi mate with whom Lilith engages, unsettles the humans' acceptance of this non-heterosexual yet simultaneously potentially procreative coition. Lilith's sex, without Joseph but with Nikanj and its mates, however, is purely pleasure-oriented; in this way, engaging in sex for sheer gratification, especially with one or more non-males, makes Lilith a target for the Humans, used to self-policing for regulatory sexual habits. Foucault reflects on the social utility of maintaining the grand narratives that equate sex with procreation; he wonders,

All this garrulous attention which has us in a stew over sexuality, is it not motivated by one basic concern: to ensure population, to reproduce labor capacity, to perpetuate the form of social relations: in short, to constitute a sexuality that is economically useful and politically conservative? (1978, 37).

The desperation with which the Humans grasp onto any vestigial customs is evident in the sanctimonious shaming of what they perceive to be the non-normative sex between Lilith and Nikanj. This prompts Gabriel to lash out, yelling, “[s]trip and screw your Nikanj right here for everybody to see, why don’t you. We know you’re their whore! Everybody here knows!” (*Dawn*, 214). Lilith, in turn, calls attention to the hypocrisy of Gabriel’s judgment, reminding him, “[a]nd what are you when you spend your nights with Kahguyacht?’ She believed for a moment that he would attack her” (*Dawn*, 241). Similarly, Joseph holds Lilith in contempt for her sexual relationship with Nikanj, and attempts to demean and humiliate her for enjoyment of the sex. As follows, Lilith’s enjoyment of the sex is ostensibly of greater moral concern for the humans than her clandestine involvement in such a union. Grosz, in *Space, Time, and Perversion: Essays on the Politics of Bodies*, remarks on the transgressive power of women admitting to sexual pleasure — a blatant inversion of the Freudian assertion that men must occupy the role of the active lover. She notes, “insofar as the woman occupies the feminine position, she can only take up the place of the object of desire and never that of the subject of desire; and insofar as she takes up the position of the subject of desire, the subject who desires, she must renounce any position as feminine” (1995: 178). It is, in part, for this reason that Joseph responds to the discovery of Lilith and Nikanj’s intimacy with such umbrage. Joseph, in many ways, already occupies a precarious station in the echelons of masculinity. Apprehensive of further emasculation by the

Human men, Joseph attempts to recalibrate this gendered equilibrium through shaming Lilith for transgressing feminine decorum. Accusatively, Joseph commands, “[t]hey’ve done it to you before?”, and “[w]hy do you let them... touch you?” (*Dawn*, 169). Unconvinced by her utilitarian response, citing the physiological changes offered through union with an ooloi, “[h]e stopped in front of her, faced her”, before demanding, “[i]s that all?” (*Dawn*, 169) — a requisition indicting the ostensible pleasure that catalyzed their sex.



### **The Racialized Other in *Adulthood Rites***

The Bhabhian notion of mimicry comes to the fore throughout *Adulthood Rites*, especially in the extent to which some Oankali-Human constructs are simultaneously venerated and distrusted for their performance of Humanness. In “Of Mimicry and Man”, postcolonial theorist Homi Bhabha explicates the colonial phenomenon of mimicry, as “the desire for a reformed, recognizable Other, as a subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite” (126). As he argues, mimicry can occur when a colonized group are interpellated by hegemonic culture to enact performative assimilation into the dominant culture. Rather than merely replicating these signifiers with identical exactitude, however, colonial mimesis involves a degree of disjuncture between the mime and its object. Bhabha elaborates, “[a]s Lacan reminds us, mimicry is like camouflage, not a harmonization or repression of difference, but a form of resemblance that differs/defends presence by displaying it in part, metonymically” (1984, 131). In this way, colonial mimicry is enforced due to the colonizer’s belief in its incontrovertible capacity to better the culture of the colonized, while desiring to maintain a distinction against its Other. The notion of Bhabhian mimicry aligns neatly with the depiction of the ways in which Humans negotiate dynamics with the Oankali-Human constructs throughout the novel. As the premise of *Adulthood Rites*, the Humans — although without the same access to authority as a colonizer, yet nevertheless possessing the urge for the supremacy of the *anthropos* — have significantly greater preference for constructs who, primarily in phenotype but also in behaviour, resemble them. Indeed, most Humans glean a degree of comfort in discovering construct spawn who emulate Humanness in conceding perceived affirmation of their supremacy over the Oankali. Most notably, this predilection is exemplified in the apotheosis of Akin as a paragon of idealized hybridization for the Humans; in fact, Aparajita Nanda, in her article “Rewriting the Bhabhian Mimic” (2010), argues that Akin is founded upon a postcolonial image of a mimic man (115). His intensely policed concealment of the more Oankali facets of identity, alongside his overwhelmingly Human appearance, however, prove him almost too skilled at mimesis; indeed, his performance of Humanness is convincing enough to seamlessly ‘pass’ as such in many interactions. Akin, after all hones his ability to minimize superficial signifiers of otherness, reducing

his immediate phenotypic displays of difference. Upon discovering aspects of his nonhuman identity, however, Akin incites anger amongst some Humans, who are vitriolic at his perceived deception. Indeed, his tongue is the feature that gives him away to the Humans — many of whom feel resentment at being fooled by his outward appearance; this is a threat that Akin is cautious to monitor. Meeting his captors, Akin frets over how his appearance might enable his ‘passing’ as fully Human. He wonders

Did they know how intelligent he was? Did they know he could talk? If not, how would they react when they found out? Humans reacted badly to surprise. He would be careful, of course, but what did he know of angry, frightened, frustrated Humans? He had never been near even one person who might hate him, who might even hurt him when they discovered that he was not as Human as he looked. (316)

Mimicry, or the mimesis of ‘passing’, therefore, becomes a double-edged sword in the hands of hegemonic powers; one is expected to performatively enunciate the valued qualities of the dominant group, but without eliding the essential differences that forbids their membership. This concept of racialized passing parallels the ways in which Butler demonstrates how the phenomenon functions within queer — and specifically trans — narratives, as explored in the last chapter; the overlap between these two forms of passing, in this way, exemplifies the pressures placed onto marginal identities to co-opt dominant culture or risk castigation by hegemonic forces. Nevertheless, the Humans in the novel esteem the constructs who affirm their sense of supremacy while still being recognizably distinct from their in-group; after all, they will never quite be Human according to the essentialistic maxims of Humanist thought. Bhabha refers to this ambivalence of colonial mimicry as “not quite/not white” (1984, 132) in its ability to replicate the colonial power, yet never fully embody it. He explains, “mimicry emerges as the representation of a difference that is itself a process of disavowal. Mimicry is, thus, the sign of a double articulation; a complex strategy of reform, regulation, and discipline, which ‘appropriates’ the Other as it visualizes power” (Bhabha 1984, 126). Just as Kate Davy, in “Outing Whiteness: A Feminist/Lesbian Project” (1997) asserts is the case within the interstices of race and class, for the Humans, the Human-like constructs are “assigned a status that is always, already, only honorary, contingent, itinerant, and temporary” (217); acceptance, therefore, is determined by the credibility

of the performance of mimesis, and still does not guarantee absolute approval. Although this phenomenon consolidates the authority of the hegemonic power (read: colonizer), the slippage of this ambivalence also has the capacity to be harnessed for transgression and subversion by its actors.

Despite the demand for its requirement by hegemonic authority, agents of mimicry make space for subversion while, concurrently outwardly ceding to colonial powers. In *Gender Trouble* (1999) — a fundamental opus on identitarian performances — Judith Butler suggests that performatively queer mimesis of gender can draw attention to the artificiality of the construct. She states, “in imitating gender, drag implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself — as well as its contingency” (138). Not dissimilarly, Bhabhian colonial mimicry also has the capacity to reify the hollowness of race as a cultural category through its enunciation by an actor. Bhabha refers to the transgressive potentiality of mimicry as a “process by which the look of surveillance returns as the displacing gaze of the disciplined, where the observer becomes the observed and ‘partial’ representation rearticulates the whole notion of identity and alienates it from essence” (1984, 129). Throughout *Adulthood Rites*, Octavia Butler highlights the ambivalence of many of the customs upon which Akin’s survival is dependent. His freedom to ‘pass’ as Human, therefore, is only contingent on the verisimilitude of his performance — evidencing the superficiality of the distinction between Human and Other, when the essential differences upon which the binaristic separation are based can be so readily concealed in replication. When Akin boasts of Humans liking him for his appearance, his older sister Margit instructs him on the conditions necessitated for successful mimesis; she advises him to eschew crucial modes of Oankali perception (i.e., tasting) for more normatively Human modes of perception (i.e., sight), even though it will muffle and obscure his senses — such is the repressive requirements of Humanist supremacy. Margit warns Akin, “[j]ust remember to look at them with your eyes when they talk to you or you talk to them. And be careful about tasting them. You won’t be able to get away with that for much longer. Besides, your tongue doesn’t look Human” (*Adulthood Rites*, 264). The distinction between an essential inner humanity (as argued by the Humans) and a performative iteration of humanity as a construct (as enacted by Akin) is rendered uncertain. Katrin Sieg’s discussion of racialized and sexualized mimesis, in her 2002 text *Ethnic Drag*, becomes overtly pertinent reading alongside *Adulthood Rites*. Just as with the identity politics of Butler’s novel, Sieg asserts that, “[i]t is that very appeal to the visual that makes

mimesis such a problem for theorists of identity endeavoring to challenge the intuitive, ‘natural’ congruity of inner/anatomical truth and outer/social ‘proof’ of gender, race, or sexual orientation” (230). Indeed, she argues, in the ambivalence of such distinctions, “‘race’ [read: Humanness] emerges not as a property of particular bodies, but as the spectatorial activity of decoding (and thereby producing) difference” (257). In the novel, Margit, having communicated to Akin the preconditions for his passing, elaborates upon the advantages that his mimicry will enable — advising, “[d]on’t show them everything you can do. But... hang around them when you can. Study their behaviour. Maybe you can collect things about them that we can’t” (*Adulthood Rites*, 264). For Margit, Akin’s imitative facility is propitious for the Oankali. By convincingly replicating Human infancy, Akin’s Oankali-enhanced intelligence is overwhelmingly underestimated by the Humans, ignorant of the extent of his intellectual, psychic and feeling aptitude, and treating him accordingly; this ensures his capacity to effectively infiltrate Human communities unnoticed and less informed by the observer’s paradox, in order to garner vital information from his captors that could be valuable for his mission. Akin’s masquerade of the hegemonic forces represented (and often unnoticed) by the Humans, therefore, facilitates his ability to acquire similar access to power — or at least information — as them. On account of his superficial likeness to them, Akin is able to win over more moderate Humans through his performance of Humanness, assisting to neutralize their contempt for the Oankali by presenting them with a familiar, Human-like face and bridging the fissure of irreconcilable otherness that separates them. Mimicry, in this way, is a simulation that reveals the artifice of the caricatured group, ultimately unrooting the axiom of an essentialized identity politics. This subversive potential is also noted by Stacy Alaimo in her article “Displacing Darwin and Descartes: The Bodily Transgressions of Fielding Burke, Octavia Butler, and Linda Hogan” (1996). Assuming the position that, within frameworks of hegemonic normativity, the racialized body is deemed abject, she asserts

Occupying the space of the abject body [...] offers the potential for disrupting this constellation of ideologies. Precisely because the body has been so intimately associated with racially, sexually, and environmentally destructive ideologies of nature, it offers a potent site for contestation and transformation. (Alaimo, 51)

Alaimo's description of subversive assimilation will also prove germane to the discussion of racial liminality later in the chapter. However, there are, of course, political implications for Butler suggesting such throughout the novel; mimicry, after all, is a phenomenological reality oftentimes required not least for survival, but indubitably for success, for many people of colour in white-dominated spaces — African American individuals, for example. In such strict circumstances — as demanded by oppressive hegemonic powers intent on exhorting their superiority — therefore, forging room for insurgence becomes an underhanded tactic for marginalized groups. Butler, in this way, hints at the potential for radicalization in appropriating one's tools of oppression in order to explode the narrow constructs of hegemonic ideology.

Akin's position in the interstices between the world of Humans and that of Oankali grants him a unique, composite perspective, allowing him to shift between subjectivities — such is the flux of inhabiting a liminal body. Within theoretical territories, liminal or borderland subjectivities have increasingly become vital knots for the poststructuralist interrogation of identity politics, in their capacity to erode the hermetic divisions that scaffold them. As protagonist of *Adulthood Rites*, Butler deliberately assigns Akin an aggregate identity — a synthesized blend of Human and Oankali, masculine and feminine traits, and European, African American and Chinese phenotypic attributes; his insight into these disparate, often-clashing groups thereby proffering him a more complex understanding of the reductive nature of Humanist essentialism. For Bhabha, this is where the notion of 'thirdness' or the 'third space' emerges — a notion he frequently returns to in his 2011 Hegel Lecture, "Our Neighbours, Ourselves: Contemporary Reflections on Survival"; he asserts that, "The realm of the paradoxical [...] belongs neither to the one nor the Other. It is an interstitial realm of the in-between—a space and time of "thirdness" (6). Indeed, like many other poststructuralist theorists, Bhabha's work has always deemed this 'third space' to be an inherently politicized zone, pregnant with radical potential. In *Location of Culture* (2004), he affirms

The stairwell as liminal space, in-between the designations of identity, becomes the process of symbolic interaction, the connective tissue that constructs the difference between upper and lower, black and white. The hither and thither of the stairwell, the temporal movement and passage that it

allows, prevents identities at either end of it from settling into primordial polarities. This interstitial passage between fixed identifications opens up the possibility of a cultural hybridity that entertains difference without an assumed or imposed hierarchy. (5)

The image of the stairwell is pertinent for its interconnective, constituent role in linking two separate spaces, only to reveal the partition as fundamentally tenuously constructed. Throughout *Adulthood Rites*, Akin inhabits this metaphorical stairwell; his miscegenate belonging to both the Humans and Oankali enables him to navigate these spaces as cognate zones, rather than incontrovertibly divorced. This bridging capacity of Akin's is integral for his mission to unify the hostile resister Humans with the Oankali in order to liberate them. For many Humans, a significant barrier to their coalescence with the Oankali can be attributed to the perception of them as "aliens who don't even understand how we see things" (*Adulthood Rites*, 393). However, Akin's position as "the posthuman other that admits residence in the liminal zone demarcated between an advocate and an opponent", as Hampton (2010) argues, grants him acuity into the enigma of 'the Human experience' — albeit somewhat peripherally — which might otherwise be unattainable for Oankali unfamiliar to the Human psyche. Rather than being overwhelmingly foreign in his otherness, though, Akin has — as he contends to the Human Gabe — phenomenological familiarity with Humanness; imploring "I'm Human like you — and Oankali like Ahajas and Dichaan" (*Adulthood Rites*, 403). As argued in relation to the paradox of mimicry and passing, this potential sway that Akin has over his Human counterparts, however, is dependent on his perceived affinity with them — a relation that is ultimately presumed on superficial terms, despite much deeper ontological connection. Unfortunately, such is the reality for many individuals on the margins of dominant culture. While shared affinity or consanguinity is deeply rooted in a psychic, intangible sense of belonging, acceptance of these third-space dwellers is oftentimes frivolously determined on the basis of their ability to outwardly assimilate into dominant culture. After all, acceptance of Akin, regardless of his experience of intermutual kinship or affinity, would be ultimately disregarded if his phenotypic displays of culture appeared too alien — a narrative that echoes the lived realities of many liminal and immigrant Humans today. Such, in this way, exemplifies Humanism's tendency to simplistically reduce the scope of interconnection in favour of more

essentialistic identity politics, and the way in which it overlooks the nuanced ways identity formation can function.

Throughout the novel, the constructs occupy an ontologically knotty place within Humanist matrixes of essentialist identities. As third-space hybrids of Human and Oankali parentage, the constructs — like Akin — possess a certain double consciousness. As previously mentioned in reference to Bhabhian thirdness, this access to multiple points of view has an ultimately unifying power for Akin — particularly propitious for his specific mission. Yet, the sole nature of such liminality, in and of itself, is fundamentally incendiary to the bedrock of binary categorization which scaffolds Humanism. The mere act of existing outside of these dichotomies — with or without an overarching peace mission — assists in crumbling these feeble foundations; living proof of the instabilities of Humanist ontology. To a certain extent, this is a concept that recalls 20th Century cultural anthropologist Victor Turner’s exploration of liminal stages in rites of passage; he posits,

The attributes of liminality or of liminal personae (‘threshold people’) are necessarily ambiguous, since this condition and these persons elude or slip through the network of classifications that normally locate states and positions in cultural space. Liminal entities are neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial. (*The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure*, 95)

Butler, herself on the margins as a racialized Other, esteems such liminality. The dominant narratives within canonical science fiction, of course, being overwhelmingly masculine and Eurocentric, Butler’s celebration of a multiplicity of novel subject positions is vanguard; indeed, it is an explicit refusal to participate in a literary tradition that routinely reduces diversity down to its lowest common denominators by consciously eliding the overlap of racialized/sexualized blindness in science fiction. In building Akin as inhabiting these two, distinct worlds, Butler engenders the divisions between Human and Oankali as negligible; effectively, he cannot be othered by either group when, instead, he nomadically weaves between both. Negotiating multiple fluid subject positions, Akin, as with his fellow constructs, embodies Gloria Anzaldua’s term *mestiza* — a “mixture of races, [that] rather than resulting in an inferior being, provides hybrid progeny, a mutable, more malleable species... a consciousness of the

Borderlands” (77). As a lesbian Chicana feminist, Anzaldua is familiar with peripheral existence — traversing the terrains of dominant culture and her own phenomenological experience of otherness in the literal and metaphorical borderlands that grant their name to her book; these contestations with construct liminality, as represented by Butler, are, after all, quotidian circumstances for Chicax individuals on the border between Mexico and the United States. Anzaldua’s *mestiza* consciousness becomes an apt analogy for the Oankali pursuit of a more expansive and intersubjective people; she argues,

By creating a new mythos — that is, a change in the way we perceive reality, the way we see ourselves, and the ways we behave — *la mestiza* creates a new consciousness. The work of *mestiza* consciousness is to break down the subject/object duality that keeps her prisoner and to show in the flesh and through the images in her work how duality is transcended. The answer to the problem between the white race and the colored, between males and females, lies in healing the split that originates in the very foundation of our lives, our culture, our languages, our thoughts. A massive uprooting of dualistic thinking in the individual and collective consciousness is the beginning of a long struggle, but one that could, in our best hopes, bring us to the end of rape, of violence, of war. (80)

In this way, for Anzaldua, as for Butler, subjects of mixed-heritage occupy a powerful threshold in the matrix of Humanism — with both actively working to denaturalize the myth of a simplistically essentializable identity. Rather, their *mestiza* hybrids must constantly renegotiate the limits of identitarian politics, forging space to accommodate the multiplicities within themselves. Having blended lineage, therefore, does not dilute one’s allegiance to either line. Instead of quantifying their parentage, Anzaldua and Akin both inhabit their composite identities wholly — not as *either/or*, but as *and/and*. The threshold, as follows, is reimagined not as a phase or passage toward a singular localizable destination, but as a choate zone — valid and powerful in and of itself.

Arguably one of the most crucial overarching motifs of the series, the Oankali reverence for diversity is paralleled against narratives of race throughout *Adulthood Rites*. For Butler, otherness, rather than being an external measure to gauge selfhood, sometimes recalls the deleuzian notion, as argued in *Difference and Repetition* (1994),

of *difference-in-itself* - that is, difference as internal and self-actualized, as opposed to existing between and with reference to a comparative exterior; difference as prior to identity. If life is enacted and made because of difference, then the binaristic ontology of a Self/Other divide is ultimately redundant. Political theorist Hannah Arendt spots a similar position in her posthumous *The Life of the Mind* (1978). Arendt argues that “wherever there is a plurality — of living beings, of things, of ideas — there is a difference and this difference does not arise from the outside but is inherent in every entity in the form of duality, from which comes unity as unification” (184). Both Deleuze and Arendt’s deconstruction of the politics of difference, however, pose a troublesome dilemma for Humanist ontology. Indeed, as Braidotti argues, “[c]entral to this universalistic posture and its binary logic is the notion of ‘difference’ as pejoration” (2013, 15). The Humans of Butler’s series, as follows, find the prospect of diversifying Humankind wholly unfavorable, threatened by the unfamiliarity of their potential Oankali cohorts. After all, as Halberstam and Livingston posit in their introduction *Posthuman Bodies* (1995), as a category, “[t]he human functions to domesticate and hierarchize difference within the human (whether according to race, class, gender) and to absolutize difference between the human and the nonhuman” (10). Lilith, despite her Human parentage, understands and critiques their fear of the Other, and that “Humans were most dangerous, most unpredictable when they were afraid” (*Adulthood Rites*, 482); indeed, she warns Akin,

Human beings fear difference... Oankali crave difference. Humans persecute their different ones, yet they need them to give themselves definition and status. Oankali seek difference and collect it, They need it to keep themselves from stagnation and overspecialization... When you feel a conflict, try to go the Oankali way. Embrace difference. (*Adulthood Rites*, 329)

While the Humans of *Adulthood Rites* are resistant to embrace the abject otherness represented by the Oankali and the constructs, the Oankali are enticed precisely by the Humans’ difference; after all, their biological foreignness seduces the Oankali, intrigued by what this diversity will mean for their gene trade. Through the Oankali, Butler rejects the Humanist myth of a monolithic subject, in favour for an intersubjective embrace of being as inherently imbued with variation. The web that connects Butler to intersectional writers is made abundantly clear by Catherine S. Ramirez, in her 2002

chapter “Cyborg Feminism: The Science Fiction of Octavia E. Butler and Gloria Anzaldua”. Ramirez suggests that Butler’s celebration of difference is demonstrative of an ethical commitment to a women-of-color feminism — a philosophy neglected by many waves of social justice that still exclude an outsider. Drawing upon Haraway’s image of the cyborg, Ramirez assembles parallels between Butler and Anzaldua’s investment in deconstructing the singular subject position — specifically for its tendency to brazenly overlook the perspectives of femmes of colour. She contests,

For Butler, the cyborg is the raced and gendered subject; for Anzaldua s/he is also queer. Occupying a multiplicity of social locations, the queer woman of color is able to forge alliances across differences. However, at the same time, she is unable to escape history and, as I argue below, essence. Butler’s black heroines are located within specific African American narratives of slavery, resistance, and migration (to and through the New World), while Anzaldua’s queer mestiza subject is located in the history of struggle along and over the U.S.-Mexico border, between racist Americans and the racialized others who inhabit the United States, and within the Chicano-Mexican culture. Indeed, their subjects are cyborgs because they interrogate the stability of social categories, such as ‘woman,’ ‘American,’ and ‘human,’ and because they exemplify the construction of coalitions based on position and affinity, as opposed to identity and essence. (394)

For this branch of feminist thought, difference-in-itself is foundational in firstly conceiving of the plurality of perspectives encapsulated within an intersectional intersubjectivity; as follows, this stance is required to understand that inherently, being is difference. The implication of such, is that any social movement that recuperates the Humanist subject is thereby invested in perpetuating an ontology of difference as abject. Indeed, Ramirez asserts the unique embrace of women-of-color feminism, arguing that, “[i]n general, feminism for, by, and about women of color emphasizes position, plurality, constructedness, and coalition. At the same time, it is grounded in difference and specificity (e.g., the specificity of a particular time, place, body, community, or narrative)” (394). Within this frame of feminist thought, seemingly endorsed in Butler’s narratives, one limited standpoint (read: white, cisgender, heterosexual) cannot be naturalized or neutralized; rather, difference is considered a condition of being, with or

without external referents of normality. With life regarded as intrinsically heterogeneous, Butler's Oankali treasure difference as the vitality of interconnection and growth. When Akin ventures into new Oankali realms, his Human contrast is readily welcomed — “They could see themselves in him and see his alien humanity. The latter fascinated them, and they chose to take the time to perceive themselves through his senses” (*Adulthood Rites*, 449). The Oankali, in this way, come to embody a certain utopian ideal of panhuman (or, that matter, *panposthuman*) intersectional feminist politics — an image of potential social dynamics that disengages from the hierarchically inclined politics of imperialism and colonialism. Rather than perceiving the Other as a threat to established ideology, the Oankali nurture difference for motivating potential expansion and growth of subjectivity and selfhood. These contested zones of difference become fruitful territory for Butler to explore and excavate, in order to synthesize the notion of a volatile heterogeneity into a unified celebration of multiplicity.

This pursuit of plurality is also exemplified in the ways in which Butler depicts Akin's curiosity regarding his own Human racial heritage. Throughout the novel, Akin's desire for exploring the multiplicities of Humankind is a source of frustration for his family; indeed, much of his adolescence is spent venturing to and immersing himself within the culture of distant resister villages, often for months at a time. When he and his sibling, Dehkiaht, are sequestered away onto an orbiting ship for the sake of rebuilding their distant and fractious relationship, Akin feels that his pilgrimage amongst the Humans has been prematurely aborted — an unnecessary obstruction not only for his mission, but also his appetite for discovery. He rues,

Time was being stolen from him. He knew the people and languages of a Chinese resister village, an Igbo village, three Spanish-speaking villages made up of people from many countries, a Hindu village, and two villages of Swahili-speaking people from different countries. So many resisters. Yet there were so many more. He had been driven out of, of all things, a village of English speaking people because he was browner than the villagers were. He did not understand this, and he had not dared to ask anyone in Lo. But still, there were resisters he had never seen, resisters whose ideas he had not heard, resisters who believed their only hope was to steal construct children or to die as a species. (*Adulthood Rites*, 434)

In this way, Human racial and cultural diversity is ultimately captivating for Akin. While Akin desires to explore branches of his own Human lineage — mother Lilith’s Afro-American heritage, biological father Joseph’s Chinese heritage, father figure Tino’s Mexican heritage — his yearning to delve into diverse communities transcends mere familial affinity; rather, Akin wants to explore the manifold complexities of difference specific to the multiplicities of Humankind. Racialized difference is, after all, a novel construct for the Oankali, especially for its facility as a tool of exclusion. Paradigmatic of the Oankali fascination with difference, however, Akin cultivates genuine interest in the construct of race — not to reify it as a cultural category with inherent taxonomic properties, but as emblematic of the plasticity of being. Rather than conceiving of difference as intrinsically threatening, as is the Humanist tendency, Akin esteems the vibrancy of variation, exemplifying Chicano activist Carlos Fuentes’ claim that “[c]ultures only flourish in contact with others; they perish in isolation” (346). The Oankali desire to experience this manifold difference is so overwhelming, it is even sought at the expense of potential physical detriment. Indeed, Nikanj warns of the perils of seeking out difference within Human villages wary of difference; it cautions, “[r]esister villages — especially widely separated ones — are dangerous in different ways [...] Human diversity is fascinating and seductive, but we can’t let it destroy them — or us” (*Adulthood Rites*, 279). Yet the Oankali longing for variation of being is rapacious, with Butler describing the thirst with an almost sensual intensity; more than merely desirable, but ultimately *seductive*. Beyond just a design to observe Human contrast, Akin longs to immerse himself in, taste, and savour it. The urge for difference, in this way, is visceral and all-consuming, and the Oankali long for it as an essential necessity of life and growth and being.

As mentioned, the social construct of race holds a fascinating appeal to the Oankali, no doubt enthralled by the arbitrary parameters of inclusion and exclusion within Human society. Transcendent of such arbitrary divisions, the Oankali perceive of difference as potentiality; intra-specific differences are regarded merely as varied manifestations of their own plurality — whether emblematic of their mosaic lineage, or composite future. Indeed, exploring, intermingling and procreating with non-Oankali, they are engorged with the otherness of multiplicities without ever allowing disparity to dilute their sense of oneness. This veneration of *alteritas* — the inherent distinctness of being (Arendt 1958, 182) — is even extended to ancient ancestors, with the Oankali

treasuring a kindred affinity with more distant primordial species. On the ship, Taishokaht introduces Akin to a primitive being — a prehistoric, unspeaking and unhearing, caterpillar-like creature — from whom extant Oankali had evolved; Akin notes that,

Yes it was as Oankali as Dichaan or Nikanj. It was as Oankali as any intelligent being constructed by an ooloi to incorporate the Oankali organelle within its cells. As Oankali as Akin himself.

It was what the Oankali had been, one trade before they found Earth, one trade before they used their long memories and their vast store of genetic material to construct speaking, hearing, bipedal children. Children they hoped would seem more acceptable to Human tastes. The spoken language, an ancient revival, had been built in genetically. The first Human captives awakened had been used to stimulate the first bipedal children to talk — to ‘remember’ how to talk.

*(Adulthood Rites, 453)*

As follows, there is no real sense of a racialized consciousness of otherness within the Oankali, despite the diverse variations of beings embraced by this category. Rather, they appear to cultivate a more cohesive understanding of togetherness despite (or in fact, *because of*) difference — a spatiotemporally-diverse cognizance of identity as encompassing both past ancestral forms and future potentialities. The Oankali, in this way, are perfect deleuzoguattarian assemblages: “complex constellations of objects, bodies, expressions, qualities, and territories that come together for varying periods of time to ideally create new ways of functioning” (Parr, 18), fuelled by an insatiable desire for interconnection. Haraway, in probing the ontological boundaries of humanity, ponders, “[w]hich identities are available to ground such a potent political myth called ‘us’, and what could motivate enlistment in this collectivity?” (1991, 155); Butler, however, formulates the Oankali as having a much more capacious sense of who and what is constituted in the embrace of “us”. Despite vastly disparate physical manifestations, the Oankali and their partner species will evolve together, simultaneously — be one and be multiple. Akin, fretting that humanity will be merely subsumed by the Oankali, must be reminded by Dichaan of their hybrid future:

‘Then it will be an Oankali species,’ Akin said softly. ‘It will grow and divide as Oankali always have, and it will call itself Oankali.’

‘It will be Oankali. Look within the cells of your own body. You are Oankali.’

‘And the Humans will be extinct, just as they believe.’

‘Look within your cells for them, too.’ (*Adulthood Rites*, 442)

The capacity to recall from a more expansive and collective biological memory enables the Oankali to nurture a deeper concept of kinship, and a sense of themselves as “[a] people, growing, changing” (*Adulthood Rites*, 443). By broadening the notion of the Oankali subject, Butler invokes Braidotti’s image of an intersectional, non-unitarian posthumanity, as outlined in her 2006 article, “Affirming the Affirmative: On Nomadic Affectivity”; she asserts that “[a] sustainable ethics for a non-unitary subject proposes an enlarged sense of inter-connection between self and others, including the non-human or ‘earth’ others, by removing the obstacle of self-centred individualism” (par. 36). In this way, the Oankali gravitate towards a more intersubjective embrace of collective belonging — the kinship of *difference-in-itself* - in actively seeking to explore differentiation.

The manner in which Butler focalizes the narrative through Akin is a crucial stylistic mechanism that negotiates the readerly response to the novel’s engagement with discourses of racialized otherness. Notably, *Adulthood Rites* differs from its predecessor in the series, *Dawn*, in how the third person narration is oriented; *Dawn* introduces readers through the eyes of Lilith - a Human initially encountering the shocking foreignness of the Oankali as ultimately monstrous. In *Adulthood Rites*, however, Akin functions as our narrative entry to the novel, through whom Butler filters the third person narration - a hybrid being of mixed Oankali-Human parentage, whose more neutral perspective is detached from notions of identitarian allegiance. As a focalizer of the novel, Akin orients the reader who is privy to glimpses of his internal monologue, even without the need for explicit dialogue. Indeed, at several points throughout the novel, readers are granted access to Akin’s subjective responses to his encounters with Humans; we discover the extent of his interior contestations with repressive Humanist ideology, and his fear of demonization under it:

Akin was afraid to speak, afraid to show the raiders his un-Human characteristics... Would these things make them let him alone or make them kill him? (*Adulthood Rites*, 308)

Akin looked at the man, tried to understand his new expression of revulsion and hatred. Did he feel these things toward Akin as well as toward the Oankali? (*Adulthood Rites*, 328)

How could he embrace Humans who, in their difference, not only rejected him but made him wish he were strong enough to hurt them? (*Adulthood Rites*, 329)

Percolated through Akin's peripheralized vantage point, Butler's third person narration is facilitated in enabling more explicit criticism regarding the flaws (and racialized rhetoric) of Humanism, without appearing overtly didactic or biased; such, after all, is the benefit of utilizing focalization in third person narration. While functioning under the veneer of objective narratological neutrality, the use of third person can still have the capacity to orient our reading experience and prompt a sympathetic affinity for a potentially marginalized viewpoint through such a mechanism. Upon understanding the anguish of our familiar — yet alien — protagonist, readers may be subtly shaped to adopt the perspective of the Other in also noting deficiencies and inconsistencies in patterns of traditional Humanist logic. In presenting Akin's thoughts without a preface of quotations or contextualization, Butler imbues that which is partial with the authority of objective truth; in truth, we may more readily accept, for example, that "Humans [are] so quick about everything. Quick and potentially deadly" (*Adulthood Rites*, 331). Thus, in *Dawn*, Lilith functions to ontologically acclimatize readers to the Oankali Other within the familiar matrixes of Humanism, only for the narrative style to slowly transition into an interrogation of these maxims under Akin's orientation. Butler, in this way, is demanding ethically quite different work from the reader in *Adulthood Rites* than she did in *Dawn*, by expecting greater congeniality for an anti-Humanist vantage point. Yet, rather than experiencing this as a cognitive disjuncture, Butler has eased her readers into embracing this outlook by familiarizing the drastically unfamiliar, and thereby mitigating for the contrariety of this shift.

In the sense of embodying the perspective of the Other, it could be said that narratives can function as agents of the posthuman. During the reading experience —

assuming that the narrative point of view has been made sufficiently accessible — the boundaries that bifurcate the Self/Other divide are momentarily broken down, as the author calls upon the reader to imaginatively assume alternative subjectivities. This phenomenon evidently operates throughout *Lilith's Brood* as an entirety, but very noticeably in *Adulthood Rites*, with Butler rendering Akin's literally alien standpoint, as an Oankali/Human construct, wholly appreciable. Indeed, this proves the extent to which fiction can function as such a crucial tool when employed by people of colour (PoC) or other marginalized subjectivities; after all, when non-white and/or hegemonically normative individuals read these narratives, the chasm separating these disparate groups is imaginatively bridged. This is the position assumed by anthropologist Faye V. Harrison in her discussion of the intersection of literature and race, as argued in "Writing Against the Grain: Cultural Politics of Difference in the Work of Alice Walker" (1993). Harrison affirms the faculty of reading fiction as potentially enabling a metamorphosis for the reader — allowing an ontological shift in how social commentary is both parted and received; she claims, "[f]iction encodes truth claims — and alternative modes of theorizing — in a rhetoric of imagination, which accommodates and entertains the imaginable" (410). Extending past Wallace's parameters, however, I purport that fiction has the capacity to entertain the *unimaginable*, in granting insight to previously inconceivable angles of being. For queer, Black, femme voices like Octavia Butler's, the potential to transmogrify readers to perceiving society through such unimaginably othered eyes, may have transformative and transcendent results. Yet, rather than exhorting readers to only imaginatively occupy the mind of the (Oankali) Other, Butler's wholly embodied narrative voice enunciates a sense of urging the readers to corporeally occupy their very enfolded, sensual experiences of being. Indeed, such is exemplified aptly through the illusive Oankali/Human sex scenes in *Dawn*, but also in the descriptions of Akin's enigmatic connection with other beings:

Ahajas usually held him after Lilith. Ahajas was tall and broad. She carried him without sensing to notice his weight. He had never felt weariness in her. And he knew she enjoyed carrying him. He could feel pleasure the moment she sank filaments of her sensory tentacles into him. She was the first person to be able to reach him in this way with more than simple emotions. She was the first to give

him multisensory images and signaling pressures and to help him understand that she was speaking to him without words. (*Adulthood Rites*, 261)

While the imaginative work required by readers to cognitively digest such unfathomable and somatic passages is significant (but not insurmountable), Butler nevertheless proves the capacity for readers to traverse the rupture between Self/Other in the process of reading. This enables Akin's uncredited wariness of the Humanist tendency towards hierarchy — the so-called Human Contradiction — to be psychically transmitted to the reader with ease. Through the act of reading, the boundaries of selfhood can be rendered permeable as subjectivity is deterritorialized from the singular bounds of the body and shared in a posthuman assemblage between book and reader. Such exemplifies the radically interconnective potential of the deleuzian phenomenon of *becoming* — “the self is only a threshold, a door” (Deleuze and Guattari 1988, 249) as Butler's readers, via Akin, become-Other. In this way, Butler's narrative style is artfully negotiated so as to render subjective interiority as externalized, shared, and made collective.

In addition, her decision to interweave her science fiction narrative with philosophical criticism evinces the way in which literature can be embraced by marginalized subjectivities in order to grant voice to traditionally sidelined perspectives. While, as a form, the novel functions as a crucial mode of storytelling and social commentary, when employed against hegemonic culture, it proves its greatest dynamism. Indeed, such is Faye V. Harrison's main thesis — attesting that fiction operates as a powerful political enterprise for subaltern subjectivities to reclaim agency over dictating their own narratives, and forging space to talk b(l)ack. Focussing primarily on the work of African-American author Alice Walker, yet more broadly engaging with discussions of the place of women of colour (WoC) in the literary canon, Harrison argues that writing fiction is one of the few modes through which to articulate the phenomenological experience of WoC. She states,

Fiction, it appears, has served as a sanctuary, a refuge, offering greater freedom for the imagination and for critical explorations of the cultural, psychological and historical dilemmas of the Black and human experience. In some respects, the concealed, coded articulations that fiction allows seem to be opaque inter-references to social science's exclusive and monopolistic claims to the verification of social/cultural knowledge and truth [...] Fiction resists, protests

and works against the grain of those constructs of validity and reliability that, in practice as well as in ideological representation, privilege elitist White male representations and explanations of the world. (Harrison, 409-410)

Harrison, throughout the article, also makes reference to historian James Clifford's 1986 book *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*; while taking issue with Clifford's blindness to the silencing of WoC within the tradition of ethnography, Harrison seizes upon his dialectic of ethnography as fiction / fiction as ethnography. For Harrison, the capacity for non-white, non-male subjectivities to actively narrate their own phenomenology is crucial for rewriting a cultural script that has actively muted such conversations.

For Butler, especially working within the domain of science fiction — in which, Ramirez (2002) notes, Butler has claimed that people of colour are “simultaneously represented and substituted by the figure of the alien” (388) — her decision to infuse her narratives with explicitly racial contention demonstrates her commitment to ameliorating this cultural dearth. Not content with merely using the Oankali as a metaphorical image of the racialized Other (although the parallels are blatant), this allegory runs adjacent to more explicit conversations regarding race — note: Akin's mixed African-American/Chinese heritage, the overt racial undertones in the murder of his Chinese-American biological father, and his racist ousting from white resister communities. Indeed, African American feminist and cultural critic Michele Wallace, in her 1990 book *Invisibility Blues: From Pop to Theory*, has affirmed the potency of literature for shrouding underhanded expressions of non-white reality — stating, “black women [...] have been forced to conceal their best contemporary articulations of the self under the cloak of fiction” (182). Startlingly pertinent in application to Butler's work, Harrison then goes on to contend how fiction functions in lieu of more candid cultural criticism for WoC writers, for whom this task may prove rather perilous. She masterfully argues that,

For Black women to engage in creative writing is perhaps less threatening than for them to theorize about literature, society and the world. In a hegemonic scheme that attributes to Blackness and to femaleness the natural ability to create and to be aesthetically expressive, and that elevates a masculinist science to the most privileged and rewarded echelons, writing fiction is an acceptable

behavior for a token few Black women. According to the popular imagination, Black women are more likely to be able to sing, dance, perform, entertain and stimulate imagination and sensibilities than their white counterparts [...] The sad reality is that if a Black woman cannot sing, dance or entertain in some fashion, she has very few outlets and critical mass bases of support for publicly expressing her humanity. In this context, for Black writers and other artists to work effectively against the grain, they must convert the narrow spaces within hegemonic cracks into places where dissent and rebellion can take root and grow. (411-412)

As such, while critical anti-Humanist discourse may have been an implausible option for Butler, when ensconced within a greater, more complex narrative form, Butler is nevertheless able to impart an implicit message on the degree to which Humanism actively others people of colour, and specifically women of colour. Speaking from the “radically unspeakable position of the ‘other of the other’” (Wallace, 227), Butler nevertheless manages to engineer a narrative voice that engages with a tradition of literary criticism that has systematically rendered subjectivities such as hers mute; rather, Butler actively repudiates “a scheme in which black women ... are systematically denied the most visible forms of discursive and intellectual subjectivity” (Harrison, 411), in order to finally imbue the voices of women of colour with agency and subjectivity.

‘Alien’ is a loaded term, teeming with connotations from the illegal immigrant to the extraterrestrial; in our contemporary cultural imaginations, in fact, each informs the image of the other. Butler’s explicit preoccupation with image of an alien Other, therefore, is scaffolded by the ambiguity of these contradistinctive meanings — a double-entendre comprised of both foreign and other-worldly applications. Indeed, it is not incidental that the term ‘alien’ was co opted for reinvention in science fiction, with its etymological roots in Latin — *alius*, meaning *other*. After all, in frameworks of binary oppositions, what is more antithetic, more foreign to the Human than the alien? For Lilith’s Brood, operating in a fiction of interstellar proportions, the image of the extraterrestrial Oankali might be the most literal interpretation of the ‘alien’ figure; Butler’s nuanced exploration of racially liminal or marginalized subjectivities, however, grants the second definition significant sway for the series as well. Her narrative investment in the duality of the alien, in this way, ratifies the reading of *Adulthood Rites*

alongside Anzaldúa's *Borderlands / La Frontera*, in which, the racially loaded discourse of othering that surrounds the United States/Mexico border debate is scrutinized. This comparison is similarly drawn by Ramirez (2002), who interweaves her sociocultural criticism of anti-immigration rhetoric with parallels against Butler's posthuman Other and Haraway's cyborg. As Ramirez contends in her article, this equivalence is palpable; Fundamentally, after all, each is entrenched in the oppressive schema of what constitutes a 'normative' Human. Quoting Haraway's "Cyborg Manifesto", she states

As *Borderlands / La Frontera* illustrates, one need not turn to texts designated 'science fiction' to read about 'aliens'. In fact, one need only glance at a mainstream American newspaper, such as the *Los Angeles Times*, and chances are, one will find stories about alien invasion and alien conspiracies to sabotage American culture and society. Of course, I am referring to anti-immigrant discourse and xenophobia in the United States. As the official term, 'illegal alien' renders many of the men, women and children who enter the United States without papers ('passports') criminal outsiders and transforms them into dangerous monsters. Just as Butler and Anzaldúa equate the 'alien' with the 'other', Haraway notes that "[m]onsters have always defined the limits of community in Western imaginations'. (Ramirez, 396)

Both Butler and Anzaldúa's aliens, therefore, are figures ultimately rendered nonhuman. Their unwelcomed invasion of Human (read: white) society, is considered dangerous in undermining the supposed universality of the Human (read: white) subject, as touted by ethnocentric Humanist discourse. In downplaying their claim to subjectivity by reducing them to mere aliens, hegemonic culture can still reify these figures as cautionary spectres of Otherness — abject figures that exists beyond the Human, but which actually externally constitute the Human. For Ramirez, traditional science fiction, and its narratives of intergalactic expansion, undeniably demonstrate a literary glorification of Western imperialism; the same ethos that condones the American tyranny over the Borderlands and its dwellers, as illuminated by Anzaldúa. The co-opting of the term 'alien' (meaning foreign) for science fiction purposes essentially proves this explicitly racialized gravity to the word. Each, after all, might be considered "a site of complexity, heterogeneity, flux, exchange, struggle, and, above all, contradiction and ambiguity. It

is home to the *mestiza* (i.e., the mixed race)” (Ramirez, 388). Indeed, Butler explores a similar persecution of the otherness and plurality of the *mestiza* consciousness in *Adulthood Rites*, in which the Oankali are maligned as monsters (258), mongrels (321), “aliens who don’t even understand how we see things” (393), and asked, “[w]hat the hell are you?” (327) — all potentially racialized derogations, not implausibly equally heard of against Anzaldua’s Borderland dwellers. In fact, such recalls that in *Dawn*, Lilith even notes her visceral fear of the Oankali as “a true xenophobia” (23). Such comparisons, teeming with double-entendre, are suffused with connotations of illegality, inhumanity, invasion and monstrosity. Butler intentionally toys with the semantic ambiguity of the alien, therefore, extending the alien archetype beyond the bounds of science fiction trope, and exploring the implication of such discourses in application to racialized Borderland politics. Propitiously, Haraway makes reference to Octavia Butler as one science fiction writer who actually facilitated in sparking her iconic argument of the cyborg as racialized/sexualized Other; in acknowledging the part Butler played in enabling such novel modes of thinking, Haraway cites *Lilith’s Brood*, noting that, “[i]n a fiction where no character is ‘simply’ human’, human status is highly problematic” (179). As follows, not only does Butler simply exemplify Haraway’s theory through inspiration and emulation, but is a critical figure in materializing such theory to begin with. Through imbuing these alien figures not only with agency, but with the capacity to vocalize against the modes of their oppression, Butler — and Anzaldua, for that matter — “transforms the ‘alien’ from object to subject and, in doing so, redefines the subject” (Ramirez, 393). She goes on to attest that

As Octavia Butler and Gloria Anzaldua have illustrated, science fiction is more than mere escapism. It provides the ‘aliens’ and passport-less of the New World with the opportunity to narrate histories of colonialism, conquest, and resistance; to explore alternative epistemologies and ontologies (and all their contradictions); and, subsequently, to redefine the boundaries of subject and community. (397)

As also defended by Ramirez, Butler’s treatment of the quintessential alien beckons in a wave of science fiction more overtly conversant with the sociopolitical repercussions of the regulatory mechanism of othering. For Butler, the image of the alien, as coded by

dominant science fiction, need not merely be an amalgam of nebulous otherness and monstrosity — a neutral instrument for eliding the reality of phenomenological differences. Rather, Butler demonstrates the ways in which the alien figure can be used as a vessel to test the ontological and ethical implications of Humanism, while also existing adjacent to more explicit discussions more firmly rooted outside of metaphor and allegory.



## 3.

**The Naturalized Other in *Imago***

For Braidotti (2013), the concept of *zoe*, “the non-human, vital force of Life” (60), functions as an inclusive umbrella term, embracing the diversity of matter on the planet. The capaciousness of this definition — expanding the limits of subjectivity to “life beyond the ego-bound human” (Braidotti 2013, 131) — provides an interesting lens through which to read Butler’s celebration of an enlarged intersubjectivity in *Imago*. Throughout the series, Butler expends significant narrative energy in establishing the Oankali’s ethos of oneness; this is made most evident in *Imago* through Jodahs’ narration, granting unparalleled access to this novel interiority. Throughout the narrative Oankali individuals possess the inherent capacity to progress beyond the solipsism of the Humans’ worldview, widening their horizons of belonging to encompass a multitude of ways of being. While Butler sets up the Humans as having an almost hyperbolically narrow conceptualization of affinity with other nonhuman life, the Oankali are presented as fostering an aggregate union with all interplanetary inhabitants. When prompted by the character Tomas, after all, Ahajas declares the Oankali relationship with spirituality: “[w]e believe in life [...] ‘When I’m dead [...] I will nourish other life” (*Imago*, 662). She continues,

If I died on a lifeless world, a world that could sustain some form of life if it were tenacious enough, organelles within each cell of my body would survive and evolve. In perhaps a thousand million years, that world would be as full of life as this one [...] Our ancestors have seeded a great many barren worlds that way. Nothing is more tenacious than the life we are made of. A world of life from apparent death, from dissolution. That’s what we believe in. (*Imago*, 662-663)

By mere virtue of existing — whether currently, historically, or potentially — all organic matter is granted equitable clout in the Oankali definition of intersubjectivity. Not bound by the molar blueprint of life as belonging solely to the *anthropos*, the Oankali have a more expansive understanding of the plurality of being. *Zoe*, in this way, applies pertinently to Butler’s narrative in evoking the Oankali’s belief in the vital force

of life, transcendent of individual being. The parameters Braidotti establishes with regards to *zoe*, herein vividly recall Jodahs' description of intersubjectivity. She attests,

In my vitalist materialist view, Life is cosmic energy, simultaneously empty chaos and absolute speed or movement. It is impersonal and inhuman in the monstrous, animal sense of radical alterity: *zoe* in all its powers [...] *Zoe* is always too much for the specific slab of enfleshed existence that constitutes single subjects. The human is a step down for pure intensity, or the force of the virtual. It is a constant challenge for us to rise to the occasion, to be 'worthy of our times', while resisting them, and thus to practise amor fati affirmatively [...] Death is the ultimate transposition, though it is not final, as *zoe* carries on, relentlessly. (Braidotti 2013, 131)

With her focus on materialism, in this way, Braidotti understands life as an assemblage of heterogeneity. Similarly, unlike Butler's Human characters — for whom the primary objective is egocentric self-preservation — the Oankali cultivate a symbiotic devotion to their natural landscape as a whole. For Jodahs, its ship *Lo* is not solely land, or, in postcolonial theorist Dipesh Chakrabarty's words, the "silent and passive backdrop to their historical narratives" (204); rather, according to Jodahs, it is "parent, sibling, home. It was the world I had been born into [...] woven into its genetic structure and my own was the unmistakable *Lo* kin group signature" (*Imago*, 554). While the Humans are preoccupied with forging distance from the Oankali on the basis of difference as abject, the Oankali fixate on the common bond of all inhabiting the universe. The embrace of the Oankali "we" reaches cosmic proportions, as they conceptualize the myriad of potential connections that could be made with various lifeforms; within these terms, the naturalized Other can not truly ever exist, when the Oankali believe them to be fated for future kinship.

The expansiveness of the Oankali's worldview also parallels what Braidotti (2013) coins "not-Oneness" (100) — the notion of unification *because* of difference, as opposed to *in spite* of difference. As an ontology, Humanism has always advocated for a repressive and prescriptive universal for who and what qualifies as Human — a norm that routinely bolsters itself against the spectre of a naturalized

Other. Both Butler and Braidotti, on the other hand, dismantle these dogmatic conventions in *Lilith's Brood* and *The Posthuman* respectively, by celebrating a posthuman ethos of heterogeneity and flux. Braidotti conceives of the plurality of Human/nonhuman/bacterial/animal/ insect/plant matter as demonstrative of the sheer vitality of a *zoe*-centred universe, and ultimately unifying for this reason. She argues,

This humbling experience of not-Oneness, which is constitutive of the non-unitary subject, anchors the subject in an ethical bond to alterity, to the multiple and external others that are constitutive of that entity which, out of laziness and habit, we call the 'self'. Posthuman nomadic vital political theory stresses the productive aspects of the condition of notOne, that is to say a generative notion of complexity. (Braidotti 2013, 100)

As opposed to imagining difference — and, by extension, otherness — as inherently negative, rupturing the uniformity of the whole, Braidotti esteems it for offering vitality, fluidity, heterogeneity. Implicit in this message, is that the integrity of humanity is not contingent on stasis and uniformity. Rather, advocating for a deleuzian interpretation, she argues, “[m]y position is in favour of complexity and promotes radical posthuman subjectivity, resting on the ethics of becoming” (Braidotti 2013, 49); and, after all, “becoming lacks a subject distinct from itself” (Deleuze and Guattari 1988, 238). In this way, Braidotti, once again, paints a picture of intersubjectivity akin to that provided by Butler’s Oankali — roaming the universe, expanding their sense of self through connection to other multiplicities of life. With their temporally-transcendent collective memories, the Oankali are capable of bridging time in order to summon an image of difference in kinship. Having received genetic memories from its ooloi parent, Nikanj, Jodahs is intoxicated by the infinitude of life’s variation; it notes, “[t]here was immense newness. Life in more varieties than I could possibly have imagined — unique units of life, most never seen on Earth. Generations of memory to be examined, memorized” (*Imago*, 693). For the Oankali, the Humans’ exclusive and unitarian politics are startlingly myopic — severing potential bonds of kinship and safety with them in order to reify the supremacy of the unadulterated *anthropos*. As follows, the subject is deterritorialized from the narrow Humanist bounds that deny agency to nonhuman matter. In contrast, the Oankali transform the subject into a deleuzian and nomadic

assemblage of zoetic alterity — the interconnection of notOne. The physically and psychically nomadic Oankali, in this way, epitomize Braidotti's posthuman ethos of a porous intersubjectivity; the Oankali are what posthumanist Robert Pepperell might refer to as “a ‘fuzzy edged’ entity [...] profoundly dependent into its surrounding” (20), always in the process of becoming-animal/plant/Other.

The sheer multiplicity of life is a notion that emerges consistently throughout the entirety of Lilith's Brood as a series, and is most prominently exemplified through Jodahs' narrative voice in *Imago*. The first novel of the series to be narrated in the first person, in *Imago* we are privy to the extent to which Oankali and constructs perceive the vital plurality of all life. Deliberately choosing to acknowledge and celebrate the autonomy and vibrancy of nonhuman life/matter is an enterprise integral to anti-Humanist post-anthropocentric ontology. Butler's decision to divest her Oankali characters of the reductionist rhetoric of Humanism further implicates her in a mission to expand the scope of subjectivity. Not only do the Oankali diverge from the atomity of Humanist conceptions of subjectivity, but their inclusive embrace of life's minutiae represents an altogether antithetical point of view — a charge fortifying my claim in aligning her with the ethos of posthumanism. The concept of the multiplicity plays a significant role in a great deal of post structuralist theory, in enabling a disidentification from the grand narratives of singularity enforced in neoliberal capitalism; indeed Deleuze and Guattari's *A Thousand Plateaus* is deeply vested in what they call “the dream of multiplicity” (30). Deleuzoguattarian thought is involved with elevating the individual to the assemblage — renouncing the rhetoric of Human exceptionalism, so ubiquitous in traditional Humanist design, and instead celebrating the relentless power of “multiplicities of multiplicities forming a single assemblage, operating in the same assemblage: packs in masses and masses in packs” (1988, 34). Wolfpacks, in this way, are emblematic of their notion of collectivity, in that “each element ceaselessly varies and alters its distance in relation to the others” (Deleuze and Guattari 1988, 30). Wolves, after all, eradicate the self in order to come together and function as a totality. Frida Beckman, in *Between Desire and Pleasure: A Deleuzian Theory of Sexuality* (2013), further explicates Deleuze and Guattari's wolf analogy.

They live in packs and as such their existence is only partly individual. A pack of forever variable intensities, wolves express the way bodies are continually composed and recomposed through desire [...] To become-wolf is to surrender

the unity of the supreme self to the multiplicities that make the subject but one intensity in a larger pack. Held together and fuelled by desire, such packs are fluent and irreducible to the One. (125)

Wolves, in this way, form an assemblage, nullifying the individual as priority. This description of Beckman's — with reference to irreducibility and collective existence specifically — sparks a vital connection with Butler's Oankali and their deleuzian, hive-mind understanding of the world. Jodahs, at one particularly volatile stage during its metamorphosis, collects dead wood to sleep on, so as not to inflict damage to its land, Lo; yet, Jodahs notes,

Lo ate the wood. It was not intelligent enough to reason with — would not be for perhaps a hundred years. But it was self-aware. It knew what was part of it and what wasn't. I was part of it — one of its many parts. It would not have me with it yet so distant from it, separated by so much dead matter. (*Imago*, 554)

Lo is conceived of as a living entity; while Lo is earthly matter — albeit sentient — it nevertheless is embraced within the Oankali's enlarged sense of animate life. In fact, Jodahs' apprehension of shared affinity with Lo as an organism allows it to intuit the notion of a collective kinship that bridges the vast chasm between the two. Oankali and subjects of Oankali heritage, therefore, are gifted an almost omniscient cognizance of all the branches of potential interspecific interconnection with their surrounding environments. When Jodahs realizes it may need to be siphoned away to the ship, Chkahichdahk, for its metamorphosis, it laments separation from Earth itself — “No more forests or rivers. No more wildness filled with things I had not yet tasted. The planet itself was like one of my parents” (*Imago*, 608). Anguished at the thought of losing this totemic bond with Earth as a whole, Jodahs seemingly exemplifies Braidotti's positioning of the posthuman subject “within an eco-philosophy of multiple belongings, as a relational subject constituted in and by multiplicity, that is to say a subject that works across differences” (2013, 39). Jodahs, possessing this capacious sense of planetary kinship, hungrily yearns for infinite connection, with “the vitality of their bond [...] based on sharing this planet, territory or environment on terms that are no longer so clearly hierarchical, nor self-evident” (Braidotti 2013, 71). Like Haraway's cyborg, Butler's Oankali share a dispersed, aggregate intersubjectivity that

accommodates vital diversity, in a “disassembled and reassembled, postmodern collective” (163).

Within this scopic expansion of subjectivity to all zoetic lifeforms, the Oankali nurture a deep symbiotic relationship with their natural environment — an ontology that instills within them a greater sense of ethical accountability regarding their treatment of the land. Most prominently throughout *Imago*, the Oankali “ship”, Lo, is lovingly nurtured and tended to, and regarded within their broadened sense of kin. Referred to by Jodahs as a “living platform” (*Imago*, 554), Lo is the ship via which the Earth-dwelling Oankali transplanted themselves on the planet. A plant-like sentient organism, Lo grows into a town and morphs according to its inhabitants needs — prompted to generate huts, food, and plants from its own substance, and trained to reabsorb the waste produced; microcosmically emblematic of Earth itself, Lo is the source of new Oankali life while it resides on this planet. Unlike the Humans who exploit Earth as a passive receptacle, the Oankali regard Lo as agentive, and revere its altruism in caring for them in such a way. When Jodahs considers inadvertently inflicting pain upon Lo, it is inconsolable —

And all that I did to Lo, I also did to myself. But it was Lo that I felt guilty about. Lo was parent, sibling, home. It was the world I had been born into. As an ooloi, I would have to leave it when I mated. But woven into its genetic structure and my own was the unmistakable Lo kin group signature. I would have done anything to avoid giving Lo pain. (*Imago*, 554)

In this way, Jodahs and its Oankali peers, understand the reciprocity involved in living within a natural environment; while Lo — and Earth as a whole — supply it with nutrients, shelter and amenities, they are, therefore, morally obligated to ensure its ongoing welfare. Such veneration for the environment, as espoused by Butler, in this way recalls the ideology of eco-belonging presented by environmental scientist — and controversial cultural theorist — James Lovelock, in his Gaia hypothesis (2000). Lovelock contends, “[t]he concept of Gaia, a living planet, is for me the essential basis of a coherent and practical environmentalism; it counters the persistent belief that the Earth is a property, an estate, there to be exploited for the benefit of humankind” (2007, 135). Accordingly, like many involved in ecocriticism, Lovelock advocates for a recalibration of our understanding of symbiotic and synergistic interdependence, and a destabilizing of anthropocentric egoism. He urges readers to regard Earth as an animate

and generative being — eccentrically coined Gaia — and our position within it as situated within a vital network of mutual support. Indeed, Lovelock implores, “[u]nless we see the Earth as a planet that behaves as if it were alive, at least to the extent of regulating its climate and chemistry, we will lack the will to change our way of life and to understand that we have made it our greatest enemy” (Lovelock 2007, 17). Lovelock, in this way, demonstrates the compensatory, “two-faced” Humanist agenda that Braidotti warns us abounds within some ecological theory (2013, 86); nevertheless, the urgency with which he reminds readers of their culpability regarding environmental degradation, still resonates poignantly with Butler’s cautioning message regardless. After all, this myth of our entitlement, as Humans, to the planet is also explored by Butler early in *Imago*; Human raiders are discovered to have ransacked the outskirts of Lo, and in a vitriolic frenzy, pillage the vegetable garden Lilith had cultivated and tended to — for both Oankali ally and resister consumption. Jodahs describes the indiscriminate violence of their plunder, noting

This time almost everything that had not been stolen had been destroyed. Melons had been stomped or smashed against the ground and trees. The line of papaya trees in the center of the garden had been broken down. Beans, peas, corn, yams, cassava, and pineapple plants had been uprooted and trampled. Nearby nut, fig, and breadfruit trees that were nearly a century old had been hacked and burned, though the fire had not destroyed most of them. Banana trees had been hacked down. (*Imago*, 560-561)

The portrayal of such mindless destruction of living matter is a disconcerting image, in reminding readers both of the arbitrary, quotidian abuse of our natural landscapes, and also in paralleling the gratuitous violence enacted in recent colonial history. Humanism, as follows, is depicted as solipsistically revolving around the *anthropos*, with minimal regard for how this self-aggrandizement profits from the abuse of the natural environment. Braidotti elaborates upon the inextricability of anthropocentrism from such systems of subordination; she explains,

if the crisis of Humanism inaugurates the posthuman by empowering the sexualized and racialized human ‘others’ to emancipate themselves from the dialectics of master-slave relations, the crisis of *anthropos* relinquishes the

demonic forces of the naturalized others. Animals, insects, plants and the environment, in fact the planet and the cosmos as a whole, are called into play. (2013, 66)

Acknowledging the answerability Humans must shoulder in order to ameliorate our mistreatment of Earth, Braidotti then asserts, “[t]his places a different burden of responsibility on our species, which is the primary cause for the mess. The fact that our geological era is known as the ‘anthropocene’ stresses both the technologically mediated power acquired by *anthropos* and its potentially lethal consequences for everyone else” (2013, 66); this sentiment, in this way, mirrors the social remorse that Butler evidently bears in regards to looming environmental decline, and deliberately brings to her narrative. The starkness of these two ontologies, as presented by Oankali and Humans respectively, is explicitly didactic on Butler’s behalf. The message is that, once more, the Humanist ego has bolstered its own supremacy through the relentless subjugation of an Other, and that the planet will continue to pay for our anthropocentric narcissism.

Similarly, Butler also frequently explores the dynamics that arise between the Earth-dwelling Humans and animals, and the extent to which they exhibit the Humanist desubjectification of the naturalized Other. Indeed, Butler establishes the Humans as having a deepseated sense of entitlement to nonhuman matter — a sense that abuse/exploitation/consumption of such life is not too ethically burdensome for them. As already discussed, this very sense of dueeness to the naturalized world makes allowance for Humans to ravage their environments beyond repair — an undertaking that is suggested to have expedited the desecration of Earth in the first place. Prominently in *Imago*, however, the concept of meat-eating is one such Human-naturalized Other interaction that Butler chooses to critique. As has been explored in relation to eco-criticism and Lovelock, a proportion of feminist- and vegan-inflected eco-criticism retroactively reasserts anthropocentric rhetoric (Griffin 1978; Warren 2000) — a tendency that Braidotti benevolently refers to as “a well-meaning form of residual anthropomorphic normativity, applied to non-human planetary agents” (2013, 86). With this in mind, I refer — cautiously — to foundational vegetarian-feminist theorist Carol Adams, for much of whose work such a caveat applies. Nevertheless Adams, in her 1990 book *The Sexual Politics of Meat: A Feminist-Vegetarian Critical Theory*, pertinently claims that, as Humans, “meat eating is the most frequent way in

which we interact with animals' (51); in *Imago*, Butler depicts such as the case. Late in the novel, Aor protests to Jodahs about its Human mates, Jesusa and Tomas, slaughtering animals for meat, despite already being sufficiently tended to nutritionally. Jodahs reminds Aor,

'When you have Human mates [...] you have to remember to let them be Human. They've killed fish and eaten them all their lives. They know we hate it. They need to do it anyway — for reasons that don't have much to do with nutrition [...] Sometimes they need to prove to themselves that they still own themselves, that they can still care for themselves, that they still have things — customs — that are their own.'

'Sounds like an expression of the Human conflict,' Aor said.

'It is,' I agreed. (*Imago*, 696-697)

Meat eating, in this way, is linked by Butler to a reassertion of this Human conflict — the tendency towards (anthropomorphically) hierarchical behaviour. Although Jesusa and Tomas are entirely sustained by the Oankali and the fruit and vegetation that Lo is prompted to generate specifically for Human consumption, they still rely on hunting to supplement their diet. Jodahs, in this passage, attributes this habit to their desire to remind themselves — and who they perceive to be their Oankali captors— of their capacity to fend for themselves, and reassert their capacity for self-sufficiency and independence. Such an explanation, however, does not get to the root of the violence inherent in such an action. Rather, the power dynamics implicit in their act of hunting expose their desperation to reclaim supremacy over another being. Consuming the meat of other animals, in this way, is not merely the Humans providing sustenance for themselves, nor is it an act of individuation. Sensing that their status has been jeopardized by the Oankali, instead, eating meat expresses a violent attempt to apotheosize the *anthropos* at the pinnacle of this Humanist hierarchy by quashing a spectral Other; it becomes demonstrative of how, in the words of queer posthumanist Judith Halberstam, “we reinvest so vigorously and so frequently in the scaffolding that props up our flailing humanity” (2008, 266). Once again, animals come to represent the naturalized Other of Humans, against which we externally measure our own humanity; in thus way, they denote our inverse: nonhuman, subhuman, inhuman. Philosopher Cora Diamond even goes so far as to claim, “[w]e learn what a human being is in — among

other ways — sitting at a table where WE eat THEM. We are around the table and they are on it” (470). Through inflicting violence upon this Other, therefore, we tilt the species hierarchy in our favour, reinstating master/slave dynamics that desubjectify these naturalized victims in order to claim power for ourselves. Conversely, the Oankali conceive of their relationship with animals as a much more symbiotic network — consciously nurturing their naturalized Others so as to facilitate a harmonious and mutually beneficial rapport. Aaor’s horror at the prospect of Jesusa and Tomas eating the animals’ flesh, therefore, proving the aberrance of such behaviour from the perspective of the Oankali. In Oankali eyes, consuming a living being is even beyond conception; far exceeding the disapproval of it as morally reprehensible, within their broadened, zoetic view of life, rather, they merely understand that “*a person is not something to eat*” (Diamond, 468). The Oankali, in this way, do not identify with any notion of a hierarchy of species; as follows, Butler’s portrayal of this rhizomatic embrace of all living matter denaturalizes the hegemonic myth of animals existing for Human benefit.

In the same vein, the Humans of Butler’s narrative routinely participate in the dehumanization of the specular counterparts in order to — metaphorically or literally — rob these Others of any semblance of agency. For the resisters in particular, acts of dehumanization intend to microcosmically dethrone the perceived ascendancy of an Other, and reinstate the *anthropos* at the peak of the species hierarchy. In this way, such dehumanization demonstrates their unyielding preoccupation with otherness as inherently abject. While the Oankali conceptualize of an interplanetary *zoe* as the foundation of shared affinity among matter, the Humans routinely reduce their counterparts down to their lowest common denominators. Primarily, this veneer of in-/non-/subhumanity functions as a pretext to absolve the offender of ethical accountability regarding the injustice perpetrated against their victim. Indeed, this is evident in *Imago*, in which a Filipino Human — Marina Rivas — is violently abused by other (presumably white) Humans under the pretense of her inferiority as a racialized Other. Employing bestial epithets and imagery in order to further curtail her humanity, Marina’s abusers demonstrate a heedless entitlement to her body in a manner that explicitly parallels their license to animal bodies. She recalls to Jodahs, “[t]he men kept me shut up in an animal pen and they raped me. The women spat on me and put dirt or shit in my food because the men raped me” (*Imago*, 580). In this way, the Humans excavate Marina’s humanity in order to condone her rape; after all, if she is denied any

claim to agency, reason or rationale as a naturalized Other, then this performative and compensatory reassertion of their authority is not nearly so opprobrious. Indeed, Noreen Giffney and Myra J. Hird, in their introduction to *Queering the Non/Human*, remind us that

Recognizing the trace of the nonhuman in every figuration of the Human also means being cognizant of the exclusive and excluding economy of discourses relating to what it means to be, live, act or occupy the category of the Human [...] This has real material effects. For every ‘livable life’ and ‘grievable death’ [...] there are a litany of unmentionable, unassimilable Others melting into the space of the nonhuman. (Giffney and Hird, 7)

Accepting such a thesis, we can reasonably hypothesize that Butler’s narrative is deeply vested in illuminating this black hole containing the Others ostracized from and forgotten by hegemonic Humanism. Her persistent assailing of the parameters separating Human from nonhuman — and other such analogous binaries — exhibits this profound commitment to denaturalizing the myth of the hermetic Human and its naturalized Other. Exemplifying such, another similar interaction takes place in *Imago*, in which a resister explains his motivation for desecrating Lilith’s vegetable garden. The following exchange takes place between the resister and Ahajas:

‘We thought your animals shouldn’t have real Human food.’

‘Animals...?’

‘Those!’ He waved a hand toward Lilith and Tino.

Ahajas had known. She had simply wanted to know whether he would say it. He looked with interest at Oni and Ayodele. Since my metamorphosis, they were the most Human-looking members of the family. Children born of Lilith-the-animal. (*Imago*, 575-576)

With their perplexing status on the margins between Human and Oankali, Lilith and Tino are troublesome enough for unitarian Humanist politics that the resisters resort to enervating them as animals in order to imaginatively incapacitate them. After all, the Oankali, the constructs, and their allies — and their propensity for post-anthropocentric rhetoric — do threaten to unsettle what Humanist narratives have established over

centuries as the ‘natural order of things’. As a system of classification and othering, therefore, the term ‘Human’ is pregnant with sociocultural implications for those it both accepts and rejects; indeed, referring to various iterations of Humanism over time, historian Tony Davies suggests that “[t]heir embrace suffocates those whom it does not ignore” (131). Likewise, Judith Halberstam and Ira Livingston contend that, as a category, “[t]he human functions to domesticate and hierarchize difference within the human (whether according to race, class, gender) and to absolutize difference between the human and the nonhuman” (10). The tenuous, fuzzy parameters of ‘Human’ as a category in this way epitomizes its frailty as a concept. Rather than having firm semantic foundations of what constitutes a Human, it is instead retroactively defined by who/what the term excludes. ‘Human’, as follows, has come to repudiate everything that is not privileged within a Western, Eurocentric, patriarchal hegemony. The supposed universal embrace of Humanism, in this way, is a cruel fallacy that blinds people to the exclusive, exclusionary and oppressive nature of such an ontology for those existing on the peripheries.

Another deeply troublesome conceit for the Humans, as explored in *Imago*, is the Oankali sense of body knowledge, specifically for its capacity to undermine Cartesian epistemology. Under the rubric of post-Enlightenment Humanism, it is accepted that the mind is the seat of knowledge — a maxim that is rooted in the ontological separation, devaluation and desubjectification the physical body. This abstraction of intelligence from physicality has been seized by new materialist feminists, as a means by which to problematize the proverbial relationship between rationality and masculinity. As follows, Elizabeth Grosz, in her eminent *Volatile Bodies*, argues for the disembodied influence Descartes has effected upon Western metaphysics; she posits,

Descartes distinguished two kinds of substances: a thinking substance (*res cogitans*, mind) from an extended substance (*res extensa*, body); only the latter, he believed, could be considered part of nature, governed by its physical laws and ontological exigencies. The body is a self-moving machine, a mechanical device, functioning according to causal laws and the laws of nature. The mind, the thinking substance, the soul, or consciousness, has no place in the natural world. This exclusion of the soul from nature, this evacuation of consciousness from the world, is the prerequisite for founding

a knowledge, or better, a science, of the governing principles of nature, a science which excludes and is indifferent to considerations of the subject.  
(1994, 6)

As Grosz therefore contends, regarding this metaphysical estrangement under Humanism, the body “is what the mind must expel in order to retain its ‘integrity’” (3). The liberal Humanist subject, in this way, has been ontologically constructed as in possession of a body, as Katherine Hayles (2008, 4) argues, rather than as a body. Through the Oankali, therefore, Butler questions what the implications will be if the hegemonically-reinforced bifurcation separating the *res cogitans* and the *res extensa* is blurred, and knowledge is understood as wholly diffuse. Throughout the series, Butler goes into significant detail describing the viscerally corporeal ways in which the Oankali ‘perceive’ the world around them. This notion of *perceiving* — also referred to with derivations of “knowing”, “feeling” and “sensing” — as opposed to *thinking*, is purposeful for Butler, in dissociating perception from words inflected with connotations of cognition and cerebralism in favour of somaticism. At one stage in the narrative, for example, Jodahs is asked by a Human woman if she constructs *think* of themselves as Human; in response, it corrects her, “[w]e feel our Humanity” (*Imago*, 531). In this way, the Oankali’s bodies are depicted as particularly sentient and knowing, experiencing emotionality and consciousness. As Nolan Belk, in “The Certainty of the Flesh: Octavia Butler's Use of the Erotic in the Xenogenesis Trilogy” argues, “it is the truth of the flesh rather than the mind that matters” (374). With their sensory tentacles — through which they carnally penetrate and read their peers — and this bodily awareness, Butler engenders the Oankali with transcendent and superlative insight; far superior to the knowledge gleaned through Human apprehension. In one such instance, through touch alone, Nikanj is able to share in Jodahs’ experience of metamorphosis; Jodahs notes, “Nikanj’s body ‘understood’ what mine was going through - what it needed and did not need [...] It knew exactly what would disturb me and what was safe. Its body knew, and no one would argue with that knowledge” (*Imago*, 545-546). Human language systems and modes of communication, therefore, are rendered ineffectual for comprehensive expression, compared to the Oankali’s acute alertness to body knowledge. In this way, Butler inverts two normative scripts of Humanism: not only are the Oankali elevated above the Humans, but the body is also granted greater authority than the mind. Accordingly, the Humans — confounded by their incomprehensibly

advanced capacity to discern and critique Human behaviour — remain threatened by the Oankali and the implications they may hold for the reign of the *anthropos*. Indeed, Jodahs observes, “[t]here had always been a fear among Humans that we could read their thoughts [...] Most never understood that it was their bodies we read — inside and out” (*Imago*, 729). Butler’s use of *reading*, however, does not evoke the traditional narratives of bodies as socially inscribed palimpsests, to be passively read; but, instead, agents capable of both communicating, and being interpreted. Bodies, therefore, are depicted as complex assemblages that the Oankali alone are astute enough to decode. Inspired by Audre Lorde’s empowerment of erotic knowledge, Belk also affirms the power of the body for self-awareness; he argues, “[i]n essence, if we allow ourselves to feel this resource that reason has tried to bury or pervert, our bodies themselves will become our intelligence and serve to guide us to better and better answers” (376). By depicting the Oankali as deeply cognizant of both themselves and also their Human/nonhuman peers, Butler implicitly endorses liberating knowledge from the singular locale of the mind.

Existing corporeally, after all, it makes sense that our bodies are more insightful than they have been given credence within Humanist epistemology. Bodies, are, ultimately, the means by which we experience the world — a maxim at the heart of new materialism and theoretical interest in phenomenology. For many involved in such enterprises, acknowledging the vitality of bodies is a crucial step in overturning the Cartesian mind/body split; and, ultimately, rescinding the lethal implications that Cartesian dualism has extended upon sexualized, racialized, and naturalized Others — rendered wholly somatic, and lacking cerebralism. In “The ‘Virtual’ Body and the Strange Persistence of Flesh: Deleuze, Cyberspace and the Posthuman” (2011) Ella Brians attests,

Developments in microbiology, genetics, and neurobiology increasingly reveal the Cartesian model to be insufficient to explain the complexity of relations, the mutual feedback loops and differential processes of individuation in a bacterium, a gene, or a neural network. In neurobiology, for instance, we find that the mind is not free of the flesh, but the result of a sublimely complex series of material processes, electrical impulses, chemical reactions, and the ongoing formation of neural networks, which both are influenced by behavior and influence it in turn. The brain is in the body, the body is in its environment, and the boundaries

between are porous and engaged in a continual process of mutual informing.  
(139)

By empowering the body as more agentic than a mere fleshy vessel, Brians facilitates my claim to a new materialist reading of Butler's Oankali; a coupling that further consolidates a posthuman interpretation of Lilith's Brood. Through *Imago's* first person narrative, as readers we are privy to several instances in which Jodahs' is somewhat surprised after mentally discovering that which its body already knew. In one such situation, Jodahs is expressing to Nikanj surprise at internalizing a potential Human mate's unspoken preferences, and its body subconsciously accommodating them; eternally wise, Nikanj reminds Jodahs, "[h]is body told you. His every look, his reactions, his touch, his scent. He never stopped telling you what he wanted" (*Imago*, 607). Even without verbal communication or conscious awareness, Oankali bodies — with their innate reverence of the flesh — are depicted as significantly more advanced and knowing than their minds, and capable of acting of their own accord. Indeed, Jodahs acknowledges the acumen of its body, affirming, "[m]y body wanted him. My body sought to please him" (*Imago*, 598). The notion of Oankali bodies having both the sagacity and agency to act on the subject's behalf, therefore, is rather intriguing when contrasted against blind abstraction from the body, as experienced by Humans — both fictive, and as readers. With body knowledge a recurrent theme throughout the series, it is perhaps most notably evident in the (ethically cumbersome) seduction of recalcitrant Humans, unwilling to admit attraction to ooloi despite their longing flesh sabotaging their bluff. Referring to the Human Jesusa, Jodahs notices, "I touched her thigh, and her body flared with sexual feeling. This surprised and frightened her" (*Imago*, 634). Correspondence between mind and body, as follows, is depicted as profoundly deficient for Jesusa in her experience of this clandestine attraction — a suggestion that no doubt may resonate for many readers; indeed, such is demonstrative of the extent to which our minds reject, repress, or fail to catch up with our bodies. The keen intuition Butler imbues the Oankali's bodies with, therefore, cuts a stark difference to the image of it as established in somatophobic Humanist discourses; as new materialist Grosz (1994) describes, the body "is implicitly defined as unruly, disruptive, in need of direction and judgment, merely incidental to the defining characteristics of mind, reason, or personal identity through its opposition to consciousness, to the psyche and other privileged terms within psychological thought" (3). For new materialist scholar Stacy Alaimo,

Octavia Butler's — and Linda Hogan's — engagement with physicality and the flesh is one of her most significant triumphs as a thinker and author. She attests,

For this corporeal materialism to effectively challenge the system of dichotomies that sever nature from culture, it is important that the body be not only a place that has been inscribed by cultural forces [...] but a threshold where nature and culture dissolve, a rhizomatic place that connects 'desperate distances' through elemental relations to such things as brine, carbon, and the pull of iron. Not exactly abject and certainly not sublime, images of brine and carbon suggest another way of envisioning nature that neither engulfs it within a romantic vision nor severs it from humanity altogether. By refusing to divide nature from culture, body from mind, subject from object, Linda Hogan and Octavia Butler throw out the old maps and encourage us to find new ways of understanding the places we inhabit, the places we are. (Alaimo, 62-63)

Accordingly, the ways in which Butler legitimizes the body as a site of knowledge and a mode of worldly perception is ultimately subversive for Humanist ontology. By elevating corporeality via the Oankali, Butler urges readers to fully embody themselves in order to gain greater insight and self-awareness.

Butler's exploration of body knowledge becomes pertinent to the notion of the naturalized Other in the extent to which the Cartesian mind/body dichotomy simultaneously informs and is informed by the nature/culture dichotomy. If — as has already been discussed — the mind is considered the seat of rationality and rationality is a hallmark of humanity, then the notion of a dispersed, embodied knowledge exceeds beyond the conceivable realms of this category. In this way, *res cogitans* denotes both the mind and the Human subject, and *res extensa* denotes both body and nonhuman object; the repercussions of such a theory having had catastrophic implications for the naturalized Other. As follows, the Human/man/subject/mind/*res cogitans* is firmly rooted in the notion of culture, disembodied and quite divorced from nature; and conversely, the nonhuman/woman/object/body/*res extensa* is grounded in nature, fully embodied and overtly connoting physicality. After all, as Braidotti argues, "[s]ubjectivity is equated with consciousness, universal rationality, and self regulating ethical behaviour, whereas otherness is defined as its negative and specular counterpart" (2013, 15). If culture, framed by the Cartesian *cogito*, is perceived as something

alienated from nature, then Humanist rhetoric dictates that nature — “in need of direction and judgment” (Grosz 1994, 3) — can be dominated by culture. Throughout Lilith’s Brood, however, Butler inverts this nature/culture narrative by representing the flesh-driven Oankali — the archetypally naturalized Other — as both more rational and more embodied than the Humans. For Alaimo (1996), Butler succeeds in imbuing corporeality with cerebralism and nature with culture, dislocating Cartesianism from contemporary relevance; Alaimo acclaims Butler for her ability to

rewrite the body in ways that disrupt historically ingrained patterns [...] [To] invoke the body, not as a mute, passive, abject space that signifies the debased or inferior part of our natures, but as a place of liminality, connection, and knowledge [...] By inhabiting corporeality and emphasizing embodied perspectives, Butler [...] [erases] the social Darwinist hierarchy of life forms and the Cartesian split between mind and body. (51)

In her narratives, Butler does not render the body animalistic and subhuman for exhibiting its physicality and connection with the naturalized world — whether through carnality, injury, sickness, or death. Rather, Butler intimates that flesh can be both visceral and conscious. In one particularly germane instant in *Imago*, a comatose and mid-metamorphosis Jodahs unconsciously works to heal its wounded mate, Jesusa, who has just been violently attacked by resister Humans; Jodahs narrates,

I was literally unconscious now. There was nothing at work except my body’s knowledge that Jesusa was necessary to it, and that she would die from her wound if it didn’t help her. My body sought to do for her what it would have done for itself. Even if I had been conscious and able to choose, I could not have done more. Her right kidney and the large blood vessels leading to it had been severely damaged. Her colon had been damaged. She was bleeding internally and poisoning herself with bodily wastes. Fortunately she was unconscious or her pain might have caused her to move away before I could lock into her. Once I was in, though, nothing could have driven me off. (*Imago*, 653)

The naturalized body instinctively knows — even without conscious prompts — how to ameliorate this situation, and actively works to restore Jesusa to health. Evident in such

descriptions, therefore, is that nature and culture are portrayed as porous and overlapping processes, as opposed to dichotomous and hierarchically stratified binaries. As a nature-culture compound, like Haraway's cyborg, Butler organizes Jodahs so as to be capable of weaving mind and body together, and capacitating the ontologically-transgressive reinsertion of knowledge back into embodiment.

For the Oankali, this body knowledge is, in part, informed by the *yashi* — an agentive organelle that perceives and reads their own, and others', bodies. While, throughout *Lilith's Brood* as a whole, the Oankalis' tendency towards prioritizing body knowledge is frequently referenced, in *Imago* we are introduced to the *yashi* — located in between an Oankali's two hearts — for the first time. Jodahs explains,

Every construct had some version of it. Males and females used it to store and keep viable the cells of unfamiliar living things that they sought out and brought home to their ooloi mate or parent. In ooloi, the organ was larger and more complex. Within it, ooloi manipulated molecules of DNA more deftly than Human women manipulated the bits of thread they used to sew their cloth. (*Imago*, 543)

The *yashi*, in this way, is both the organ responsible for the ooloi's capacity for genetic manipulation, and for the Oankali reverence for vital diversity. This internal organelle, while existing inside their bodies and constituting a physical part of them, concurrently functions quite autonomously, possessing a sovereign prerogative of its own. At one stage, Jodahs explains, “[s]ometimes they talked about it as though it were another person. ‘I’m going out to taste the river and the forest. *Yashi* is hungry and twisting for something new’” (*Imago*, 544). Indeed, Jodahs refers to experiencing the autonomy of the *yashi* later in *Imago*, in which it describes being enticed by foreign crops growing in Jesusa and Tomas' village; it notes, “[t]hese were surprisingly distracting — new things just sitting and waiting to be tasted, remembered. *Yashi*, [...] did twist — or rather, it contracted like a long-empty Human stomach. Any perception of new living things attracted it and distracted me” (*Imago*, 701). Acknowledging this self-determination of the *yashi* demonstrates the extent to which Oankali conceive of the body as a multiplicity with varied and diverse impulses and desires. As follows, a subject is not regarded by the Oankali as one stratified, unified, whole, but an aggregate sum of agentive multitudes. For

postmodern literary critic Katherine Hayles, such heterogeneity is the crux of the posthuman subject; indeed, in *How We Became Posthuman* (2008) she asserts,

The posthuman subject is an amalgam, a collection of heterogeneous components, a material-informational entity whose boundaries undergo continuous construction and reconstruction [...] the presumption that there is an agency, desire, or will belonging to the self and clearly distinguished from the ‘wills of others’ is undercut in the posthuman, for the posthuman’s collective heterogeneous quality implies a distributed cognition located in disparate parts that may be in only tenuous communication with one another. (Hayles, 3-4)

In this way, the Oankali problematize the integrity of the liberal Humanist self through the recognition of the degree to which their impulses may be derived from divergent sources of this “distributed cognition”. The posthuman subject, therefore, is not motivated by a desire to “become coherent and unitary”, as queer posthumanists Judith Halberstam and Ira Livingston maintain (14); rather, as they contend, “the posthuman becoming-subject vibrates across and among an assemblage of semi-autonomous collectivities it knows it can never either be coextensive with nor altogether separate from” (14). The Oankali, as follows, oscillate in the flux of their own multiplicity, never concerned with regulating these disparate components into a fixed, cohesive totality; as such, recalling a Deleuzian wolfpack — assemblages of ever-proliferating multitudes. Cultural theorist Stuart Hall, in his 1992 article “The Question of Cultural Identity”, explains the flux of the postmodern subject in a way that profoundly resonates with Butler’s exploration of posthuman intersubjectivity. In regards to mapping the parameters of identity, Hall proclaims,

The subject assumes different identities at different times, identities which are not unified around a coherent ‘self’. Within us are contradictory identities, pulling in different directions, so that our identifications are continuously being shifted about. If we feel we have a unified identity from birth to death, it is only because we construct a comforting story or ‘narrative of the self’ about ourselves [...] The fully unified, completed, secure and

coherent identity is a fantasy. Instead, as the systems of meaning and cultural representations multiply, we are confronted by a bewildering, fleeting multiplicity of possible identities, any one of which we could identify with - at least temporarily. (277)

While the Humans in *Imago* struggle with the Humanist ‘narrative of the self’ — unable to reconcile their conflicting desires, especially for this naturalized Other — the Oankali foster a much more expansive understanding of the self that accommodates such disparity. This dynamic and non-individualist expansion of the subject propels Butler’s narrative firmly away from the hegemony of Humanism and into the welcoming embrace of posthumanism.

The yashi organelle, which longs for diversity and connection, also fuels the Oankali desire for touch — a yearning that transcends the mere dependence on it for perception. Touch, after all, is the mode by which the Oankali experience their world — their sensory organs penetrating their surroundings in order to fully perceive them; indeed, Jodahs informs a Human, “I perceive what I perceive. No one had to tell me how to use my senses any more than they had to tell you how to see or hear” (*Imago*, 530). Ultimately, however, Butler portrays the Oankali’s tactile experiences as much more covetous and lustful than their Human counterparts’; as Jodahs later expresses to its mate, Jesusa, “[w]e’re very tactile. We don’t just enjoy contact, we need it” (*Imago*, 633). The act of touch is an ultimately unifying act — necessitating, desiring, and connecting with an Other. Cultural theorist Erin Manning goes so far as to acclaim touch as an intrinsically posthuman enterprise — a “prosthetic gesture” (155). In her ode to tactility, *Politics of Touch: Sense, Movement, Sovereignty* (2007), Manning contends that,

Touch is a movement-toward that relates my body to the excess of your body. My body is always more than one. This relation cannot simply be thought of as a skin-to-skin encounter. Certainly, often I touch skin. But the untouchability inspired by my desire to touch is based on the fact that you are reaching from my body as I am reaching from yours. Together we become prosthetically entwined. [...] Touch is the prosthesis through which our bodies make contact. Touch is the manner in which I navigate from a subject position (an imagined stability) to an in-betweenness where the line

between you and me becomes blurred. To touch is to become posthuman.  
(Manning, 155-156)

Application of Manning's cosmology to Butler's narrative helps scaffold the interpretation of the Oankali touch-drive. Fundamentally, the Oankali yearn for linkage with alternate lifeforms — a desire that is made manifest through their fleshy, carnal appetite for embodying other corporealities. At one stage, Jodahs fervently craves the touch of Tehkorahs. Upon asking Jodahs how 'hungry' — or desirous of touch — it is, the two embrace one another. Jodahs narrates, "[i]t was a forest fire of curiosity, longing, and fear, and I stood comforted and reassured while it examine me with every sensory tentacle that could reach me and both sensory arms. We fed each other. My hunger was to be touched and its was to know everything firsthand and understand it all" (*Imago*, 558). The employment of words connoting consumption are, in this way, not incidental; it is explicated that, "[w]e called our need for contact with others and our need for mates *hunger*. The word had not been chosen frivolously. One who could hunger could starve" (*Imago*, 682). Almost adopting a new materialist metaphor here, the Oankali conceive of bodies as leaky and continuously overflowing, spilling out into one another. In this way, they thirst for their surroundings, longing to immerse themselves and imbibe this vital newness. Accordingly, Butler works hard to establish the Oankali as desiring touch with a visceral, consumptive urgency; submersion in — and exploration of — such heterogeneity being as crucial to Oankali existence as physical nourishment. When the neoliberal Humanist subject is established as hermetic and unitary, the degree to which the Oankali hunger for corporeal interconnection is radical — prioritizing a collective union over singularity.

Through the metamorphoses described in *Imago*, Butler paints a complex image of the naturalized Other. During the novel, both Jodahs and its sibling Aaor undergo two metamorphoses in the course of becoming-ooloi — physical transformations firstly marking the end of childhood and the onset subadulthood, and another marking the commencement of adulthood. Throughout these rites of passage, Oankali experiences physical developments in the process of maturation — a hyperbolic pubescence, marked by the acquisition of sometimes-markedly different traits. During this transitional period of becoming-Other, the ooloi oscillate in their phenotypic displays of alterity. With no concrete image of their appearance

by the final maturation, the pubescent ooloi ebb and flow. Upon the onset of metamorphosis, Jodahs allows its body to become, untethered to any expectation of a hegemonic terminus. At points throughout *Imago*, Jodahs describes the physical manifestations of various stages of his metamorphosis:

My fingers and toes became webbed on the third day, and I didn't bother to correct them. I was wet at least as often as I was dry. My hair fell out and I developed a few more sensory tentacles. I stopped wearing clothing, and my coloring changed to gray-green. (*Imago*, 591)

I had grown breasts myself, and developed an even more distinctly Human female appearance. I neither directed my body nor attempted to control it. It developed no diseases, no abnormal growths or changes. It seemed totally focused on Joao, who ignored it during the day, but caressed it at night and investigated it before I put him to sleep. (*Imago*, 601)

My body at this time was also covered with fingernail-sized overlapping scales. It was also inclined to be quadrapedal, but I had resisted that. Hands were much more useful than clawed forefeet. (*Imago*, 615)

While, with discipline, stability can be imposed upon the process, Jodahs allows its body exploratory freedom in its regeneration — organically and subconsciously permitting it to modify to suit its landscape, surroundings and desires. To Ayodele and Yedik, Jodahs explains, “I can change myself [...] But it's an effort. And it doesn't last. It's easier to do as water does: allow myself to be contained, and take on the shape of my containers” (*Imago*, 612). Possessing a belief in the rhizomatic egalitarianism of species, Jodahs does not begrudge any phenotypic transformations that may align it more closely with other living matter. Rather than curating their appearances so as to cohere to any established matrix of species supremacy, Oankali let external influences permeate through them without constraint, allowing change in surroundings dictate change in subject. This liberatory *carte blanche*, however, earns Jodahs Lilith's disapproval. She chastises Jodahs, “[w]hat are you doing? [...] Letting your body do whatever it wants to?” (*Imago*, 591). Lilith, still shackled to the hegemony of anthropocentric Humanism, is intensely discomfited by the notion of a becoming-

minoritarian; that is, by her part-Human child choosing to accept its transmutation into even ‘lower’ lifeforms, sabotaging its — already precarious — seat within a stratified species hierarchy. Some materialist theorists, however, advocate for our capacity as subjects to also become-Other, not unlike the Oankali. Although not experiencing the exaggerated physical freedom of metamorphosis through which to transubstantiate our bodies so drastically, materialists nevertheless proclaim our malleability as subjects, so open to biological manipulation. Indeed, Ella Briens (2011) posits that, “[t]he forms that life takes and the particular individuals and identities that arise are both determined to some extent and open to change or becoming other than what they are at any given moment. The self must be made, but it is always constituted in a context”; finally affirming that, “[t]his vision of subjectivity as emerging out of a process of becoming is resolutely materialist” (133). The Oankali, in this way, magnetically gravitate to the process of becoming and its intersubjective potential. Indeed, their dedication to becoming-Other, as follows, is demonstrative of their ontological opposition to what they perceive as the Human conflict of hierarchy — a deep-seated egotism regarding the primacy of the *anthropos*. Annie Potts, in *The Science/Fiction of Sex: Feminist Deconstruction and the Vocabularies of Heterosex* (2002), sees deleuzian becomings as powerfully transgressive. The pertinence of applying her thesis to Butler’s narratives is evident, reading that,

Becomings’ represent particular processes, movements, fluxes, and speeds which create difference. They manifest as a desire to escape the limitations of the body and thought. Whether the body is conceived as cultural or natural is not important; what matters, according to Massumi (1992), is the ‘counterdesire’ to leave the overcoded body behind. Becoming involves always making connections and transforming those things that are connected in ways which are radically other. (Potts, 251)

Becomings, in this way, transgress Humanism by eroding the politics of the self, and instead esteeming a dispersed, inchoate intersubjectivity. Throughout *Imago* in particular, therefore, Butler seems to query: when flux is default, what constitutes the norm?

These becomings are so ontologically troublesome because they shatter the Human as an idealized and integral self, impervious to external manipulation. Indeed, throughout the series, Butler demonstrates the extent to which we have endless capacity for self-othering. While, perhaps, less literally than through the metamorphoses of the Oankali, as Earth-dwelling subjects we are perpetually informed and influenced by other living matter. In *Imago*, during these periods of metamorphosis, stability and constancy are so foreign that Jodahs is perpetually becoming-Other, oscillating in an unrelenting state of transition. Understanding the sway of its partner's attraction in impacting it early in metamorphosis, Jodahs wonders, “[w]hat would happen to me when I had two or more mates? Would I be like the sky, constantly changing, clouded, clear, clouded, clear?” (*Imago*, 598). While Jodahs explains its equivalence to water — “allow myself to be contained, and take on the shape of my containers” (*Imago*, 612) — as so-called ‘Human’ subjects, we are also susceptible to falling under the auspices of exterior biological agents, and we can also be molded by these influences. Deriving inspiration from the notion of deleuzian assemblages, Alphonso Lingis (1998), argues for the otherness that unknowingly suffuses our bodies. He claims,

Human animals live in symbiosis with thousands of species of anaerobic bacteria, 600 species in our mouths which neutralize the toxins all plants produce to ward off their enemies, 400 species in our intestines, without which we could not digest and absorb the food we ingest [...] The number of microbes that colonize our bodies exceeds the number of cells in our bodies by up to a hundredfold. Macrophages in our bloodstream hunt and devour trillions of bacteria and viruses entering our porous bodies continually. They replicate with their own DNA and RNA and not ours. They, and not some Aristotelian form, are true agencies of our individuation as organisms. (195)

When the subject we conceive of ourselves to be is, in fact, revealed to be a complex assemblage of heterogeneous, naturalized otherness, we are confronted with the fraudulent claim of the ‘integral Human’. The ‘I’ we speak of, is revealed to be a ‘we’, and the self as a hermetic, singular being crumples. Becoming-Other, as follows, does not necessitate a specific period of liminality as in the pubescence of Oankali metamorphosis, because our bodies are, on the microscopic level at least, suspended in a perpetual, transcorporeal becoming with other bodies. While — in

order to scaffold the supremacy of anthropocentrism — traditional Humanism resists acknowledging our interdependence on these naturalized Others, Butler actively hyperbolizes these Oankali becomings; in this way, her descriptions of the metamorphoses — Aaor’s in particular — are visceral and abject in their foreignness. Jodahs narrates,

It changed radically: grew fur again, lost it, developed scales, lost them, developed something very like tree bark, lost that, then changed completely, lost its limbs, and went into a tributary of our river. (*Imago*, 674)

Hozh showed me what Aaor had become — a kind of near mollusk, something that had no bones left. Its sensory tentacles were intact, but it no longer had eyes or other Human sensory organs. Its skin, very smooth, was protected by a coating of slime. It could not speak or breathe air or make any sound at all. It had attracted Hozh’s attention by crawling up the bank and forcing part of its body out of the water. Very difficult. Painful. Its altered flesh was very sensitive to sunlight. (*Imago*, 675)

Its skin was deep gray. Patches of it glistened with slime. Aaor could not walk very well. It was bipedal [...] It was hairless [...] It could not speak aloud [...] Its hands were webbed flippers. (*Imago*, 681)

The Oankali, after all, are disinterested in having to reconcile their becomings within a coherent sense of Oankali-ness. In these passages, what is ultimately troublesome is the deterritorialization from what we consider qualifies as intelligibly Human. Elucidating this deleuzian term, Adrian Parr (2010) explains, “[d]eterritorializing movement strays away from the concept and state of molar identity and aims to force splinters to crack open into giant ruptures and cause the subsequent obliteration of the subject as he becomes ensconced within a process of becoming-multiple” (34). For the Oankali, however, the otherness of metamorphosis is only problematic when it threatens to wholly dissolve the subject beyond salvation. Only when “[i]ts body ‘wanted’ to be less and less complex” (*Imago*, 682), and was “trying to commit suicide” (*Imago*, 682) do Aaor’s peers impose structure upon its metamorphosis. Unlike the Humans, in this way, deterritorialization-becomings do not inherently evoke wariness for the Oankali; their metamorphoses, as follows, exaggerate the Humanist fear of ultimately losing — or sharing — their rigidly-defended claim to subjectivity.





## Conclusion

In her essay, “Positive Obsession” (2005) Octavia Butler speaks to her position as an African American woman writing science fiction. What good, she asks, is such a genre for Black people?

What good is any form of literature to Black people?

What good is science fiction’s thinking about the present, the future, and the past? What good is its tendency to warn or to consider alternative ways of thinking and doing? What good is its examination of the possible effects of science and technology, or social organization and political direction? At its best, science fiction stimulates imagination and creativity. It gets reader and writer off the beaten track, off the narrow, narrow footpath of what ‘everyone’ is saying, doing, thinking -- whoever ‘everyone’ happens to be this year.

And what good is all this to Black people? (Butler 2005, 134-135)

As abundantly evidenced in the above passage, Butler is fundamentally invested in expansion; growth beyond classification, beyond trope, beyond hegemony. The victim of categorical pigeonholing herself, Butler, in this way, catechizes the structures of power that systematically reduce horizons of imagination for marginalized subjectivities and deny them their own narrative voice. Fiction, we believe, has the capacity to liberate everyone. Yet, as we look to our science fiction heroes — Dick, Bradbury, Asimov — and to the startling homogeneity the literary canon as a whole, we must ask ourselves, does it? After all, as Butler interrogates, who is this ‘everyone’ being spoken of? And what subject positions are encapsulated or excluded by such a claim to generality? Theoretically, universality is an ambitious and beneficent ideation of inclusivity; in reality, it is a discursive fantasy that routinely neglects to recognize the subjectivity of sexualized, racialized, and naturalized Others. For Butler, prevailing notions of ‘universality’ are transparently fraudulent, as she perceives the hegemonic ideologies that work to quash true diversity. Such is apparent in her series Lilith’s Brood, and to which my project has been dedicated to exploring.

Through out the past three chapters, I have inspected how Butler artfully engineers her science fiction narratives so as to facilitate discussion of the sexualized,

racialized and naturalized Others so neglected — not only by SF canon — but by dominant culture at large. Her narratives, as follows, are committed to assisting us in accommodating the Other; the structure of her trilogy, and its deliberate choice of narrative voice, narrators and focalizers, all attest to such. Indeed, from the familiar Human Lilith, to the foreign Oankali Akin, to the wholly-alien ooloi Jodahs, it is undeniable that Butler has organized her series so as to facilitate a journey of familiarization and gradual acceptance of the Other. Difference, once abject and fearful, is eventually imbued with qualities of intimacy and fellowship. Regardless of whether or not we might conceive of the Oankali as ultimately aspirational and utopic figures, however, very few could finish Lilith's Brood comforted by Butler's portrayal of humanity; at least, not of our systems of thought under the hegemony of Humanism.

To Butler, the rhetoric of Humanism is too easily adopted as a mechanism of othering. As evident throughout the series, while categorical distinctions are a means by which we make sense of the world, when they are not also bridged by an understanding of our shared experiences of existence, they are readily transmuted into tools of hatred and exclusion; in Lilith's Brood, the tyranny of identity politics undergirds the sectarian violence between the Humans themselves, and as inflicted upon the Oankali. It is easy to identify, in Butler's narratives, her resounding critique of the neoliberal tribalism that reifies such divisive fragmentation of 'Us' versus 'Them'. Such an analysis, expressed in the late 1980s, still continues to hold significant weight in our current sociopolitical climate; indeed, we must only look to the tribalistic demagoguery of American politics under Trump's presidency, the ongoing persecution of Rohingya Muslims in Myanmar, the disproportionate rates of homicide for our trans sisters of colour, and the narratives of shame and humiliation through which we frame our beneficiaries in Aotearoa. The implication is that, without substantial mining and restructuring of the foundations of Cartesian Humanism, the chasm segregating the Self and the Other will remain bifurcated.

Butler's solution? *Expansion of selfhood*. Binary oppositions, she argues, offer a reductive and myopic lens through which to view the plurality of the universe; such tiny categorical boxes were never intended to be large enough to capture the immensity of life, but rather, to curtail its wayward heterogeneity. Unlike her inflexible and obstinate Humans, Butler's Oankali, instead of expelling the Other, see the Other within themselves, and actively choose to accommodate this disparity. Accordingly, her narratives foster a posthuman cosmology of inclusive mosaic belonging — necessitating

acknowledgment and exaltation, not elision, of difference. Butler, through the Oankali, implores readers to expand how we conceive of oneness; to bridge the empathy gap, and broaden our notions of concern, care, affinity, and connection. *Lilith's Brood*, in this way, prompts us to question how our relationships and sense of kinship with the racialized, sexualized and naturalized Other might look, if, like the Oankali, we chose to “embrace difference” (*Adulthood Rites*, 329); might we, as a result, now recognize the Other within us? The posthuman, therefore, comes to represent a reverence for intersubjectivity that consummately resonates with Butler’s eschewal of the unitarian Human subject.

*Dawn*, *Adulthood Rites*, and *Imago*, beckon in the downfall of the Cartesian *anthropos*. For those, like Butler, subordinated under the image of the Human subject, such atrophy is not to be mourned, but celebrated. Only now — almost twenty years after the trilogy’s publication, and ten years after her tragic death — might we observe our epiphanic moment of intersectional awakening, and see traditional Humanism finally receiving its comeuppance. Only now, might we discover that, perhaps, we are finally ready for Octavia Butler. With our ears and minds open, let us listen and learn.



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