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MYTHIC FERTILITY, IMPURITY, AND CREOLIZATION

IN THE WORKS OF OCTAVIA E. BUTLER

By

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## ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

### Mythic Fertility, Impurity, and Creolization

In the Works of Octavia E. Butler

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My dissertation focuses on how Octavia Butler's work intervenes in dominant conceptions of the human. The dualistic thinking that informs the notion of the human within Western discourse is attached to oppositional dichotomies that the genre of science fiction takes on as a human/nonhuman opposition in alien invasion contagion narratives. I connect Butler's overturning of binary thinking to the work of Black and women of color feminism. Part of my own intervention in this project is to fully situate Butler's work within the tradition of black feminist thought. I read her work through a creolizing methodology that brings together themes and discourses that disrupt oppositional binaries. The themes I weave together throughout this project and that I see as Butler herself also interweaving in order to overturn dualistic thinking include those associated with creolization, slavery, incest, black women's reproductive rights and politics, the retelling of mythical and biblical myths attached to monstrous and damned female archetypes, the altering of the alien with the genre of science fiction, shapeshifting and its reconfiguring of gender, aleatory matter, and the Cartesian mind-body duality.

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## **Introduction**

### **The Centrality of Octavia E. Butler's Black Feminist Thought**

My dissertation focuses on the different ways that Octavia Estelle Butler's work intervenes in dominant European conceptions of the human. The dualistic thinking that informs the notion of the human within Western discourse specifically within the United States is attached to the following oppositional dichotomies: black/white, free/unfree, civilized/savage, Christian/heathen, innocent/guilty, purity/corruption, miscegenation, contamination, and chaste white women/always sexually available Black women. This list is by no means exhausted but it indicates Butler's interventions into this vast body of thinking and literature concerned with what it means to be fully human. Within the genre of science fiction, through which Butler writes, these oppositional and hierarchal terms become a literalized confrontation between the human and the nonhuman in alien invasion contagion narratives. I connect Butler's overturning of this binary line of thinking specifically to the work of Black and women of color feminism. Indeed, part of my own intervention in this project is to fully situate Butler's work within the tradition of black feminist thought, which has not been done in a comprehensive way. I thus read her work through a creolizing methodology that brings together themes and discourses from various disciplines that disrupt the oppositional binaries highlighted above. The themes I weave together throughout this project and that I see as Butler herself also interweaving include those associated with creolization, slavery, incest, black women's reproductive rights and politics, the retelling of mythical and biblical myths attached to monstrous and damned female archetypes, the altering of the alien with the genre of science fiction, shapeshifting and its reconfiguring of gender, aleatory matter, and the Cartesian mind-

body duality. At its center, each of these discourses engage with a “politics of purity,” which is a term I employ in chapter one and throughout the dissertation and further borrow from Michael J. Monahan’s work in the philosophy of race. These politics inform what is understood as “the purest manifestation of the human,”<sup>1</sup> of which black women have never historically been a part. In Butler’s work, the human—past, present, and future—is configured through impurity, being, as it were, genetically crossbred with an alien difference.

The novels I analyze are primarily from Butler’s earlier works, some of which have not been given as much critical attention as her later works. The novels from her *Patternist* series, for example, which I examine here, have received relatively scant critical attention. They include *Patternmaster* (1976), *Mind of My Mind* (1977), *Wild Seed* (1980), and *Clay’s Ark* (1984).<sup>2</sup> In addition to these early works, my project also examines in-depth the novels from her *Xenogenesis* trilogy, later retitled *Lilith’s Brood*, which include *Dawn* (1987), *Adulthood Rites* (1988), and *Imago* (1989).<sup>3</sup> This trilogy has received more critical attention, although none of the scholarship has sought to tie this work to the earlier *Patternist* series in an engaged and critical way. One way I theoretically connect the two series, for example, is by arguing that Anyanwu, the black heroine from *Wild Seed*, is in fact an earlier configuration of the Lilith figure (from the Judeo-Christian tradition) that Butler explicitly draws from in the later *Lilith’s Brood*

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<sup>1</sup> Michael J. Monahan, *The Creolizing Subject: Race, Reason, and the Politics of Purity* (New York: Fordham, 2011), 84.

<sup>2</sup> Collected together under the Omnibus edition, *Seed to Harvest: Wild Seed, Mind of My Mind, Clary’s Ark, and Patternmaster* (New York: Grand Central Publishing, 2007).

<sup>3</sup> Octavia Butler, *Lilith’s Brood* (New York: Grand Central Publishing, 2000).

trilogy. I also read the figure of Jodahs from *Imago*, the last book in the trilogy as deriving from the same genetic and textual material inherited from the figures of Anyanwu and Doro in the earlier series. I primarily focus on Butler's first two main series in her body of work for a couple of reasons. One is that they are the only novels of Butler that partake of the alien invasion contagion narrative within SF. The second reason is that they are her only complete series, which showcases her thinking on the themes presented above in a comprehensive and sustained manner.

The texts I chose to not examine in this project bear mention. Butler initially sought to write another trilogy through her parable novels written in the 1990s, which are the *Parable of the Sower* (1993) and the *Parable of the Talents* (1998). While these two near future dystopic books have proven to be the most popular among her readership (along with *Lilith's Brood* and her earlier novel *Kindred*), they proved very difficult to write, as Gerry Canavan notes in his archival research of Butler. Butler reportedly planned to write a third book, the *Parable of the Trickster*, but abandoned the project after experiencing severe writer's block (from which she suffered throughout her writing career).<sup>4</sup> Instead, she ended up writing *Fledgling* (2005), which was published a year before her untimely death in 2006. *Fledgling* is about a "science-fictionalized, biologically rational version of the mythological vampire,"<sup>5</sup> and may in fact be one of her most philosophically complex works. As such, it deserves its own chapter, which given the time restraints of this project, I have not been able to include here. Within the larger

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<sup>4</sup> Gerry Canavan further reports that in her notes there were further books planned in the series, such as *Parable of the Teacher*, *Parable of Chaos*, and *Parable of Clay*. See his *Octavia E. Butler* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2016), 147.

<sup>5</sup> Canavan, *Octavia E. Butler*, 162.



book project, of which this dissertation is a draft, I plan to incorporate this work in a fifth additional chapter. Aside from *Fledgling*, her only other full-length work is *Kindred*, her most celebrated and taught novel, which is also her most non-science-fictional. In interviews Butler has stated that she does not see this work as part of the genre of SF but rather as a “grim fantasy.”<sup>6</sup> As stated above, in writing this project, I felt compelled to focus on the earlier and less popular works of Butler to mine their rich theoretical interventions related to the themes highlighted in the title of this project: mythic fertility, impurity, and creolization.

To talk of impurity is at once to talk about creolization, as the two go hand-in-hand, and these two terms in turn cannot be but regenerated through the cross-fertilization that Butler mythologizes in her retellings of the “First Mother” figure. There are two types of discourses that undergird my thinking of these themes in this project. Here I wish to highlight how the discourse of purity and impurity operates at different registers, one theoretical and the other historical and material, although all are governed by law. I begin with Jacques Derrida’s deconstruction of genre in his essay, “The Law of Genre,” which pertains to my analysis of the genre of SF in chapter one. For Derrida, the injunction of the law of genre requires that “genres are not to be mixed,” to which Derrida avers “I will not mixed genres. I repeat: genres are not to be mixed. I will not mix them.”<sup>7</sup> Of course through *différance* and repetition of the injunction of the law Derrida reveals the internal division within that appears as “impurity, corruption, contamination, decomposition,

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<sup>6</sup> John C. Snider, “Interview: Octavia E. Butler,” in *Conversations with Octavia Butler*, edited by Consuela Francis (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi), 216.

<sup>7</sup> Jacques Derrida, “The Law of Genre” (*Critical Inquiry* 7:1 1980), 55.

perversion, deformation, even cancerization, generous proliferation, or degenerescence,”<sup>8</sup> all of which Butler emphatically stresses in her creation of more evolved constructs of the human. Thus, “the law of the law of genre,” Derrida announces, is “precisely a law of contamination, a law of impurity, a parasitical economy.”<sup>9</sup> And yet it is a law whose orders call for absolute purity. For Derrida, the very word *genre* always already indicates a limit:

As soon as the word “genre” is sounded, as soon as it is heard, as soon as one attempts to conceive it, a limit is drawn. And when a limit is established, norms and interdictions are not far behind: “Do,” “Do not” says the “genre,” the word “genre” the figure, the voice, or the law of genre. And this can be said of genre in all genres, be it a question of a generic or a general determination of what one calls “nature” or *physis* (for example, a biological *genre* in the sense of *gender*, the human *genre*, a genre of all that is in general), or be it a question of a typology designated as unnatural and depending on the laws or orders which were once held to be opposed to *physis* according to those values associated with *techné*, *thesis*, *nomos* (for example, an artistic, poetic, or literary genre).

In the first chapter, I argue that the genre of SF by *de facto* violates at the same time it upholds the “law of law of genre” through its blending of two distinct disciplinary fields, science and fiction, with the former concerned about establishing a clear division between truth and falsity, and the latter, through its mythological lens, calls into question such clear-cut divisions. Because literary genre and the human genre are inextricably linked, as Derrida asserts, the mixed genre of science fiction likewise produces an illicit blending of the human genre with its nonhuman Other. Here, the genre of the human is linked directly to illicit mixtures such as those of the hybrid and cyborg that disrupt the mythos of the pure human, which itself is upheld through binary constructions of gender and race. Derrida’s inversion here, that the law of genre that mandates notions of purity is

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<sup>8</sup> Jacques Derrida, “The Law of Genre,” 57.

<sup>9</sup> Jacques Derrida, “The Law of Genre,” 59.

itself a law of impurity, is one that Butler exemplifies throughout the works examined here. There is, however, a different historical and material discourse on impurity that is at play within Butler's work and that speaks of the spoiling of the human genre as it pertains to whiteness. I frame the spoiling of whiteness and the violation of the law of genre as being an integral part of black feminist thought and praxis.

Historically, the law against mixture is most readily illustrated in the "one-drop rule" ingrained in the United States' social construction of race. Under this "rule," which was a social and legal aspect of racial construction, one drop of "black blood"—or having an ancestor of African ancestry—classified one as a black person, as being *all black*. It stripped one of the full privileges, rights, and immunity reserved for the white citizen of the United States. It is worth noting that this doctrine was set forth in *Plessy v. Ferguson*, the 1896 landmark supreme court case that upheld racial segregation through the dictate "separate by equal," which paved the way for Jim Crow laws. In this case, Homer Plessy, the plaintiff, could pass as white but was actually "seventh-eighths Caucasian and one-eighth African blood," (otherwise known as a "octoroon"), although the "mixture of colored blood was not discernible in him."<sup>10</sup> This mythic but legal construction of race is thoroughly based on the politics of purity, which is to say, on the all-or-nothing type of dualistic thinking regarding race and the human itself. Here one is either all white, or one drop of blackness contaminates and spoils the whole of whiteness. To preserve racial purity, white and Black must never mix. The processes of creolization itself, which *Plessy v. Ferguson* denied as a praxis of being human, can be read as the insertion of that one drop of blackness into various discourses and fields assumed to pertain to the white

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<sup>10</sup> *Plessy v. Ferguson*, 163 U.S. 537

realm. In *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*, I read Toni Morrison as precisely inserting that one drop of blackness and making integral to her analysis of canonical American literature. I thus read her work as creolizing the “body” of American literature, which is assumed to be white and male (predominantly male because of their canonized status). For example, she writes that “for the most part, the literature of the United States has taken as its concern the architecture of a *new white man*.”<sup>11</sup> Later she writes “what seemed to be on the ‘mind’ of the literature of the United States was the self-conscious but highly problematic construction of the American as a new white man.”<sup>12</sup> She also speaks of whiteness as “impenetrable” and “pointless, frozen, veiled, curtained, dreaded, senseless, implacable.”<sup>13</sup> All these terms speak to the fortress that the racialized white mind makes in order to halt and prevent the contamination of the racial other. Morrison’s work, then, highlights that the one drop of blackness is not only within the body of American literature, but it is in fact a central and constitutive aspect of it. She further writes that “Africanism is inextricable from the definition of Americanness—from its origins on through its integrated or disintegrating twentieth-century self.”<sup>14</sup> As such she a creolizing force *par excellence* in her spoiling of the “self” that constitutes itself as white, which then dismantles the politics of purity. She exposes racial purity in the metaphysical realm of the American mind as what it is, a myth that perpetuates itself through a “fabricated, mythological Africanism.” Like Butler, as I

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<sup>11</sup> Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (New York: Vintage, 1992), 14-15, emphasis in original.

<sup>12</sup> Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark*, 39.

<sup>13</sup> Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark*, 33/59.

<sup>14</sup> Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark*, 65.

assert in chapter three, she fights myth with myth, illustrating that both racial categories are an invention and if so, they can be reinvented.

Another essential way that the all-or nothing-dualistic thinking of racial purity maintains itself has to do with the denial and control of Black women's reproductive autonomy and freedom. Morrison alludes to this briefly when talks about the assumption made "that slave women are not mothers" and "are 'natally dead,' with no obligations to their offspring or their own parents."<sup>15</sup> The origins behind such an assumption can be traced back to the 1662 colonial regulation, *partus sequitur ventrem*, that proclaimed the child of an enslaved mother would likewise be enslaved, regardless of the ancestry or citizenship of the father. This, of course, absolved white slave masters from any legal and moral responsibility of the children they had with black slave women. They could and did treat their offspring as chattel. They could rape black women with abandon, and further increase their stock through procreation without morality getting in the way. The purity of race, as such, came by way of white women, who in being "free" also passed on this freedom to their offspring, no matter their color. Oftentimes during slavery, if a white woman had a child that looked black, the child, having been born free, was simply put to death. Post-Civil war, there was the threat of social ostracization and also a threat to her life and offspring. Lines were consistently drawn preventing women from having sexual and romantic relations with black men, which helped to define the parameters of the "cult of womanhood," as I discuss in chapter two.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark*, 21.

<sup>16</sup> See Hazel V. Carby, "'On the Threshold of Woman's Era': Lynching, Empire and Sexuality in Black Feminist Theory." *Critical Inquiry* 12 (1985).

What did this colonial regulation mean for black women's lives? That not only them but their entire line of descendants were damned in perpetuity, condemned to the status of nonhuman, which in the twentieth century further meant that their offspring, as Dorothy Roberts states, were seen as a "degenerate race with no future?"<sup>17</sup> The questions of black female reproduction, nonhuman and degenerate offspring, and the entire notion of a "pure human" are all things that occupy the mind of Octavia Butler, whose range of work, as this project makes clear, reflects these issues. Working within the genre of the science fiction and the speculative, Butler endows her black female protagonists, in both the *Patternist* series and *Lilith's Brood*, with mythic fertility. Anyanwu and Lilith in each respective series are both immortal and powerful breeders that give birth to entire new nations and races of mutant, hybrid, impure, and as such creolizing offspring that Butler poses as the only future for the human, however terrifying they appear to those who abide by a pure concept of the human.

In the first chapter, I examine an early influential golden age SF text, which proved to be formative in the ways in which Butler conceptualizes her alien constructs. Here I explore how John W. Campbell's novella, "Who Goes There?" offers a new type of alien invasion narrative through the figure of "contagion." This figure is represented by a shapeshifting alien, called "the Thing" that disrupts the (white) human and (black) nonhuman oppositional dichotomy. In my interrogation of race and the "politics of purity," I argue that the primary function of the shapeshifting and contagious alien-*qua*-black-surrogate in modern science fiction is to subvert dualistic thinking by rendering the

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<sup>17</sup> Quoted in Roberts, *Killing the Black Body: Race, Reproduction, and the Meaning of Liberty* (New York: Vintage, 1999), 9.

border between self and other porous and ambiguous. While the text itself, which depicts white males as the only human agents, is founded on racism and xenophobia, it offers new possibilities for fighting against the hatred of others through the opening of self and other that it renders possible. I read the notion of porous and ambiguous borders that the “Thing” helps to establish as a process of creolization, which instills fear into the heart of whiteness in Campbell’s text. I further argue that the genre of SF as a whole likewise calls into question such metaphysical borders and can itself be read as being alien onto itself in its ongoing creolizing and shapeshifting composition. As such, this chapter sets up the theoretical base of creolization through which I go on to read Butler’s work.

The second chapter turns to Octavia E. Butler’s *Lilith’s Brood*, which I term her “creolizing trilogy.” Establishing Campbell’s “the Thing,” as a catalyst for Butler’s own depiction and reconfiguration of the alien, I examine how Butler pounces all over that prior text in order to overturn its inherently racist hierarchical human/nonhuman divide. Reading her “Human-Oankali constructs” as both *mixed-species* and *mixed-race*, I argue how, as creolizing constructs, they stand in as intermediary “third figures” that alter the poles of dualistic identity without, however, erasing them completely. I further explore Butler’s intervention into racist scientific practices that insist on reifying notions of mythic purity. Here Butler follows real life scientific progress but makes amends along the way. I examine how the trilogy rewrites the story of Henrietta Lacks, which served as an inspiration for her work, in which Lacks’ genes, like Lilith in the story, were taken without consent. Butler reverses the unfair and non-egalitarian exchange that occurred between Lacks and her doctors and through Lilith gives her everlasting life, which coincides with Lacks’ own immortal cells. Additionally, the Oankali project narratively

inverts the trajectory of the “Human Genome Diversity Project,” in which scientists sought to extract genetic materials from indigenous peoples, trying to preserve the “purity” of indigenous groups for the sake of grasping “human origins.” In this real-life exchange on the taking of genetic materials, the indigenous peoples fought against the scientists, placing grievance on the fact they would get nothing in return (their quality of life would not be enhanced). In the Oankali project, quality of life is enhanced for the humans with whom genes are traded. The question of indigeneity and the assertion of the “right” of people not to be colonized is answered by the Oankali themselves who deny the existence of “purity” before colonization in that they themselves have never been a pure species. In this chapter, I also illustrate Butler’s creolizing and ultimately curative praxis in interweaving disparate discourses and disciplinary fields such as Afro-diasporic traumas with biblical and scientific discourses. I situate this lineage of discursive creolization as part of a black feminist theory and praxis.

The third chapter deals with Butler’s reconfigurations of the Lilith figure, the “First Mother” who prefigures the Fall of Man in the Hebraic tradition and is turned into a demoness. While scholarship on this figure has focused on *Lilith’s Brood*, few if any scholars have read Anyanwu, the immortal shapeshifter in Butler’s earlier novel *Wild Seed* as another configuration of Lilith. Here, I argue that Butler returns to this ancient, biblical archetype of a damned female figure in order to overturn its genesis narrative that reiterates systems of oppression for those who deviate from the hetero-patriarchal model of human reproduction. I read Lilith as aleatory matter and a “third figure” that functions as Adam’s and Eve’s repudiated demonic other, which places her in a site of double exclusion that eventually comes to designate the place of the black woman in the



diaspora. Through the figure of Lilith, there is, in Butler, a necessary becoming and embrace of monsters. I thus here also engage in monster theory. Examining Anyanwu as a powerful breeder within a biblical setting, I further discuss *inbreeding* humans as a patriarchal practice in the Old Testament and in slavery. I then discuss Butler's turn toward *crossbreeding* the human/nonhuman that results in the shapeshifting, third sex construct in the later *Brood*, who shares Anyanwu's powers of changing bodily forms which then aids in the disruption of oppressive founding narratives as they relate to gender and race.

The fourth and final chapter of my project explores Butler's earlier thought experiments on the Cartesian mind-body split in the *Patternist* series, which includes, along with *Wild Seed*, the novels *Mind of My Mind*, *Patternmaster*, and *Clay's Ark*. I examine how the mind-body split operates in early science fiction in which the human deviates from normal anatomy, diverging either into animal degeneration, which represents nature and the body, or into evolutionary ascension through mixtures with machines, which represent culture and the mind. In Butler, this division operates at various scales, starting in *Seed* with Anyanwu's shapeshifting representing the powers of the body and her counterpart Doro's transmigration of spirit representing the powers of the mind. At a broader scale, in the series as a whole, this duality is illustrated in the battle between the Clayarks and the Patternists. Ultimately these thought experiments lead Butler to incorporate speculative evolutionary theory through Lynn Margulis's work on symbiosis and symbiogenesis, which speaks of the openness to otherness at the biological level that leads to the creation of new forms and ways of being. I then link this biological discourse to the process of creolization set forth in earlier chapters.



**Chapter 1**  
**The Creolizing Genre of SF and the Nightmare of Whiteness**  
**In John W. Campbell's "Who Goes There?"**

The alien in science fiction has not often been seen as part of an imperial colonial discourse. By examining John W. Campbell's founding golden age SF text, "Who Goes There?" (1938) which has been hailed as "the first story of modern science fiction," and "the prototype for sf to come"<sup>18</sup> this paper explores the ways in which the alien adheres to an invisible mythos of whiteness that has come to be seen through a colonizing logic as isomorphic with the human. Campbell's alien-monster comes to disseminate and invade both self and world and as such serves as an interrogation of what whites have done through colonization. It is thus part and parcel of imperial domination and discourse and appears as the very nightmare of whiteness in the form of its liminal and estranged shadow side. Part of what has made Campbell's text so influential is that it offers a new type of alien invasion narrative in the figure of "contagion," which speaks "to the transition from colonial to postcolonial visions of modernity and its attendant catastrophes."<sup>19</sup> Isiah Lavender III has further examined the trope of contagion as a race metaphor in American SF, as the white man's fear of racial mixing that has a long and dehumanizing history. Through its threat of mixture, I read the alien as a creolizing figure that at once troubles and dismantles the white/black, human/nonhuman binary in science fiction, which is itself a creolizing, i.e., hybrid and plastic, genre. It should be noted, however, that this alien thread of contagion is just that, one thread. There are many types

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<sup>18</sup> Alexei and Cory Panshin, *The World Beyond the Hill: Science Fiction and Quest for Transcendence* (Los Angeles: Tarcher, 1989), 253/309.

<sup>19</sup> John, Rieder, *Colonialism and the Emergence of Science Fiction* (Middletown: Wesleyan UP, 2008), 124.

of aliens in science fiction, perhaps an infinite number of them. And yet the alien is all too often seen as the other to the self (Malmgren) and so one must interrogate who this self is and the type of “human” it stands in for. Gary Westfahl has stated that, “one can probe the nature of humanity with aliens that by contrast illustrate and comment on human nature”<sup>20</sup> and Brian Aldiss suggests that the “essential American obsession” with the alien is linked to that of “self-identity.”<sup>21</sup> Seeing “humanity” through the lens of white colonialist ideology helps us to understand the type of “human nature” that the alien helps to “illustrate and comment on,” which in this paper is linked to fear, hatred, and bigotry. The same goes for the notion of “self-identity” as it relates to the US, which is a national identity that historically has sought to safeguard a myth of purity linked to whiteness and what it means to be fully human.

### **Dualistic Thinking and Creolization**

I start by examining the dualistic nature of the SF genre in relation to the human and whiteness. In his book, *Alien Encounters: The Anatomy of Science Fiction*, Mark Rose proposes a fundamental dualism of the genre, arguing that the opposition of human versus nonhuman constitutes the very paradigm of science fiction. He writes that while “at the level of theme and motif, science fiction seems bewilderingly diverse,” at a more abstract level, “we can observe the way the concern with the human in relation to the nonhuman projects itself through four logically related categories: which I shall call

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<sup>20</sup> Gary Westfahl, Gary, “Aliens in Space,” *The Greenwood Encyclopedia of Science Fiction and Fantasy: Themes, Works, and Wonders*. (Westwood: Greenwood Press, 2005), 16.

<sup>21</sup> Brian W Aldiss, and David Wingrove, *Trillion Year Spree: The History of Science Fiction* (New York: Atheneum, 1986), 119.

space, time, machine, and monster.”<sup>22</sup> While the last term is what I primarily focus on here, “the nonhuman” located “within humanity,” Rose reads all four types of alien encounters, the temporal, the spatial, the manmade, and the monstrous as leading to “a metamorphosis of humanity.”<sup>23</sup> Such a metamorphosis, then, is brought on only through alien contact and the mixture that such contact entails. And yet, as Rose notes, SF does not merely sustain the “human versus nonhuman opposition” but “simultaneously and continuously” subverts it, “generating fables that transfigure both the idea of nonhuman and the idea of the human.” He goes on to state that “the space that the genre inhabits is not a prison, rigid and unyielding, but a flexible and dynamic field of semantic tension. It is this condition that makes a living genre possible.”<sup>24</sup> Rose, here, is attentive to the plasticity and dynamism of genre that shatters dualistic thinking—the *us vs them* way of thinking. In *Race in American Science Fiction*, Lavender III reads Rose’s human/nonhuman opposition as indicating a white/black dualism. He coins the term “background” in order to foreground “critical discussions of the black/white binary.”<sup>25</sup> He utilizes the binary as a way of “race-reading” science fiction in regards to the genre’s “extrapolations of slavery, segregation and contagion narratives” as well as specific concepts of his own invention like “ethnoscapes and technicities.”<sup>26</sup> Race and blackness in particular, he states, “is always in the background of this historically ‘white’ genre”<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Mark Rose, *Alien Encounters: The Anatomy of Science Fiction* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1981), 32.

<sup>23</sup> Rose, *Alien Encounters*, 33.

<sup>24</sup> Rose, *Alien Encounters*, 49.

<sup>25</sup> Isiah Lavender III, *Race in American Science Fiction* (Bloomington, Indiana UP, 2011), 6.

<sup>26</sup> Lavender, *Race*, 14.

<sup>27</sup> Lavender, *Race*, 19.

and he seeks to bring to the surface neglected issues of blackness in a seemingly monochromatic genre. While Lavender's work provides deep insight into the racial operations of science fiction, his approach to the genre, as he himself admits, "locks" him into "the classic white/black racial binary."<sup>28</sup> And yet the figure of alien as I read it not only blurs the division, but collapses it. Before my analysis of Campbell's text, however, the dualistic thinking proposed by Rose and Lavender must be understood more through a philosophical and creolizing lens that, in abstracting the notion of racial and cultural mixture and applying prescriptively to various discursive fields, offers a way of thinking about the world and self that erodes the purity of the Eurocentric notion of the human and the conceptions of reason associated with it.

In contrast to the common assertion of SF as a "historically 'white' genre" as Lavender III avers, and as I note in the introduction above, I read science fiction as a creolizing form that specifically arises out of the historical processes of colonialism. In "Creolization in the Making of the Americas," the Caribbean philosopher and poet Édouard Glissant asserts that, "The slave trade brought to the Caribbean the determining fact of the African population. This experience of diversity, and the long-unnoticed process it spawned, I label 'creolization.'"<sup>29</sup> In his seminal work, *Colonialism and the Emergence of Science Fiction*, John Rieder argues that science fiction emerges in the late 19<sup>th</sup> to early 20<sup>th</sup> century as an extension of colonialism and as such can be seen as part of what Glissant calls the "long-unnoticed process" of creolization that colonialism "spawned." The political theorist Jane Anna Gordon explains that, while "the word *creole*

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> , Édouard Glissant, "Creolization in the Making of the Americas," *Caribbean Quarterly* 54.1/2 (2008): 82.

dates back to the 1500s to name people of mixed blood, *creolization* emerged in its descriptive mode in the nineteenth century to explain what were seen as unique and aberrational human symbolic forms borne of plantation societies primarily in the New World.”<sup>30</sup> One can see how the “unique and aberrational human symbolic forms” are then transplanted as an extraterrestrial and existential threat in science fiction, the latter of which emerges within the same century as the former. Rieder’s work elucidates how SF from its coalescence as a genre is always already a mixture that arises from contact with the colonized and racialized other. He argues that for early English language science fiction, colonialism is a significant historical context, and explores the ways in which early science fiction “lives and breathes in the atmosphere of colonial history and its discourses,”<sup>31</sup> dissecting how “some of the racism endemic to colonialist discourses is woven into the texture of science fiction.”<sup>32</sup> One such example is how outer space is treated “as an infinitely extended ocean” separating “exotically diverse continents” instead of “radically different worlds.”<sup>33</sup> Rieder neither defines science fiction nor assigns it a specific origin or ur-text but instead focuses on the genre’s “emergence” by which he means the period roughly between 1870 and the start of WWII, which was when the genre was coalescing into what eventually “came to be named science fiction” in the 1920s.<sup>34</sup> It is during this coalescing period that racist colonial ideology governed by the evolutionary theory and anthropology of social Darwinism pervades early science fiction.

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<sup>30</sup> Jane Anna Gordon, *Creolizing Political Theory: Reading Rousseau Through Fanon*. (New York: Fordham, 2014), 169.

<sup>31</sup> Rieder, *Colonialism*, 2-3.

<sup>32</sup> Rieder, *Colonialism*, 97.

<sup>33</sup> Rieder, *Colonialism*, 147.

<sup>34</sup> Rieder, *Colonialism*, 15-16.

And it is through such ideology that the colonizing project can be seen as extending the realms of humanity, that is, bringing “humanity” to the colonized, however static, closed-off and so dehumanizing this concept is within its Eurocentric framing. As Frantz Fanon informs us in *Les damnés de la terre*, the flipside of the colonizing project indeed is one of utter dehumanization, allotting the damned colonized to a sub- or non-human level, which is what the strand of alien examined here is literally subjected to. Thus, Rose’s assertion that SF operates on a “human versus nonhuman opposition” takes on deeper signification as the operating logic of colonialism. And yet it is this binary that the creolizing genre of science fiction subverts through its own hybrid construction already indicated in its name alone as a cross-pollination of two distinct fields, science—which seeks to establish a clear division between truth and falsity—and fiction—which through its mythic lens and dynamic play of ideas calls into question such clear-cut divisions. The breakdown of the binary is moreover manifested in the genre’s (re)production of hybrids, cyborgs, and other forms of illicit mixtures that disrupt the mythos of whiteness and purity that have been linked to the human itself.

At the core of dualistic thinking, which is an essential and inextricable part of the operations of colonialism, is the question of purity, which extends beyond racial categories to the category of the human itself. More specifically it relies on what the philosopher Michael J. Monahan has termed the “politics of purity.” In his book, *The Creolizing Subject: Race, Reason and the Politics of Purity*, he examines the “pure” categories of race and racism vis-à-vis the category of the human, calling for an epistemic openness that more appropriately mirrors the indeterminate, dynamic and ambiguous nature of the human. At the conceptual level, Monahan writes, the politics of purity



“demands that every racial category have clear boundaries along with distinct and unambiguous criteria for membership. Each category must thus be *pure* in that it describes or captures all and only members of that category”<sup>35</sup> and so any instances of ambiguity that would put each category into question poses a problem that must be overcome. Monahan emphasizes that what he describes is not the *reality* of purity but its *politics* and points to how it polices the boundaries of the human as well

While the norm for all racial categories in the abstract is one of purity, in practice, the use (and abuse) of such categories is always in the service of *white* purity . . . whiteness has functioned, and continues to function, within a politics of purity, as at once a kind of universal human norm, and as a specific embodiment of the highest manifestation of human reason and virtue. It is, in other words, a specific and exclusionary moral, material, and aesthetic norm passing itself off as the universal truth of the human. Whiteness is thus pure not only as a category but also insofar as it describes the *purest* manifestation of the human—to be purely white is to be purely human, and to be less than white is to be less than human.<sup>36</sup>

All forms of racial mixture, then, are held by racist cultural practices to be, as Monahan asserts, “*morally odious*, but the highest levels of censure were reserved for the so-called pollution of the white race.”<sup>37</sup> So, protecting the white race in all its purity and exclusivity is tantamount to protecting the “virtue of humanity itself” in its highest and purest form. I can think of no other place in fiction where this plays out so vividly than in

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<sup>35</sup> Michael J. Monahan, *The Creolizing Subject: Race, Reason, and the Politics of Purity*, (New

York: Fordham, 2011), 79-80.

<sup>36</sup> Monahan, *The Creolizing Subject*, 84.

<sup>37</sup> Monahan, *The Creolizing Subject*, 84, emphasis added.

the genre of SF, specifically in invasion contagion narratives where what is at stake is the protection of humanity in all its white purity. In this SF trope, the human is seen as a form of epistemic closure, which is how racism, geared as it is towards dehumanization, is achieved.

Monahan dissects how racism closes off racial categories as being static and eternal rather than in “flux” and as a “manifestation of becoming,” the true nature of the human as a dynamic, evolving creature. Monahan argues that, “racial categories are ambiguous, describing what are best only ever tenuous and indistinct boundaries . . . individual agents can be of multiple categories simultaneously, yet, insofar as the categories themselves remain in flux, are never fully purely of any particular category.”<sup>38</sup> He emphasizes the ambiguity and plurality of racial meaning in an effort to move away from the discourse of the “all-or-nothing thinking of the politics of purity.”<sup>39</sup> Within this dualistic all-or-nothing discourse, even mixed raced people can be fixed to the category of “mixed raced” such as in the instance of the creole, which conforms perfectly within the politics of purity. You either belong to one category, including a fixed mixed one, or to none at all. For Monahan, however, not only are racial categories themselves dynamic and unstable, but so is racism itself, even if it does hold a sort of metastability: “Racism is dynamic and unstable insofar as the world cannot live up to the standards of fixity and stability it sets, but it is still itself *relatively* stable in a given time and place (or rather metastable), just as racial categories themselves, though always dynamic and in a process

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<sup>38</sup> Monahan, *The Creolizing Subject*, 136

<sup>39</sup> Monahan, *The Creolizing Subject*, 137.

of constant revision, are relatively stable in a particular moment and location.”<sup>40</sup> He further states that

Insofar as racism stands as a kind of commitment to epistemic closure, as an effort to define oneself and others essentially within a closed and fixed normative framework, when we are better understood as open-ended and dynamic, it is dehumanizing. Thus, racism stands as a kind of failure to more fully realize one’s humanity by turning away from confrontation with openness and ambiguity and instead clinging vainly to *purified* notions of humanity and value.<sup>41</sup>

Racism, in part, turns away from “openness and ambiguity” because “instability, ambiguity, and indeterminacy are so threatening that one throws oneself into these ossified systems of value.”<sup>42</sup> The real harm of racism, then, “lies not in its offering of content for interpretation and assignation of meaning and value, but in presenting those interpretations, meanings and values as fixed and given.”<sup>43</sup> The alien depicted in Campbell’s text, as I discuss in what follows, possesses precisely the traits of “instability, ambiguity, and indeterminacy” that pose a major threat to the white male scientists that indeed read the alien as “morally odious” since it calls into question “purified notions of humanity and value.” Thus, undergirding the (white) human/(black) nonhuman binary is the very discourse of the “all-or-nothing thinking of the politics of purity,” which posits one as being all human or not human at all; there is no in-between. I turn now to the text

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<sup>40</sup> Monahan, *The Creolizing Subject*, 152.

<sup>41</sup> Monahan, *The Creolizing Subject*, 152, emphasis in original.

<sup>42</sup> Monahan, *The Creolizing Subject*, 151.

<sup>43</sup> Monahan, *The Creolizing Subject*, 154.

itself to examine the ways in which the SF genre allows this racist, colonial discourse of purity to unravel and turn in on itself.

### **Who Goes There? The Nightmare of Whiteness**

Campbell's novella, "Who Goes There?" (1938), originally written under the pen name Don A. Stuart, has been adapted multiple times into film starting from *The Thing from Another World* (1951) to notably John Carpenter's *The Thing* (1982), and more recently as a prequel to Carpenter's version of the same name (2011). Its influence is also seen in other invasion contagion films such as *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1956) and the entire *Alien* franchise (1979-2017). The story is set deep within the icy and deadly white landscape of Antarctica, where a group of scientists on an expedition discover an ancient alien beast that has been frozen for "twenty million years." The biologist Blair makes the case that they should thaw out the alien to better examine it, but once they have, the taken-for-dead-alien-monster comes back to life and escapes. The scientists soon discover its psychic powers of telepathy and superhuman abilities to shape shift, indicating dynamism and plasticity. This being is contagious and through immediate contact can take over the protoplasm of any living creature, cow, dog, bird, even human, converting it into its own kind while still imitating the exact appearance and capabilities of the original. What its own kind *is* exactly remains a mystery; it is ambiguous at its core, but it imitates man perfectly, and its plasticity and indeterminacy poses a major threat to the group of scientific explorers and to the entire world if the "unearthly monster" makes it out of the deep and frozen wilderness and begins to proliferate itself endlessly with any species on earth. In other words, it must be contained within the very whiteness of the story's setting. Fearing the men that have been "absorbed" by the alien,

the scientists come up with a blood test to determine who is human and no longer is. The blood of the inhuman monster will hiss and flee when touched by a live wire, revealing the “absorbed” men who are then immediately put to death. In the end, the remaining scientists discover Blair, who initiated the thawing of the alien and had been isolated in a shed, transfigured into a hideous “thing” working on an anti-gravity and atomic power presumably to take over the world. We are told he was within a half hour of completing it and taking over the world before the scientists destroy it and save the planet and humanity itself from a complete (albeit invisible) alien invasion at the eleventh hour.

The story’s geographical setting alone already speaks to an important dimension of how science fiction generally and this “modern” invasion contagion narrative specifically employs the dualistic thinking of human/racial purity at the same time it deeply troubles it. Early in the story, when one of the scientists first discovers the “alien monster” on the white frozen tundra, we are told, “At the surface—*it was a white death*. Death of a needle-fingered cold driven before the wind, sucking heat from any warm thing. Cold—and white mist of endless, everlasting drift, the fine, fine particles of snow that obscured all things” and a short while later a reiteration: “*Cold white death . . .* streamed across the ground [and] blinded him in twenty seconds. He stumbled wildly in circles.”<sup>44</sup> What we have here is both a troubled and troubling whiteness. Death is depicted a white and cold (i.e., heartless), obscuring “all things.” It is within this setting that the white male scientists will turn on themselves and commit murder for the sake of some pure ideological construct of what it means to be human. Because it is not the cold

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<sup>44</sup> John W Campbell, “Who Goes There?” *The Best of John W. Campbell* (New York: Random House, 1976), 294, emphasis added.

white and deadly terrain itself that kills but the scientists themselves it can be seen as an apt racial metaphor: whiteness here indeed “blinds” the men through a and further “obscures all things” including the impure alien-other that has been held deep within the whiteness of the terrain for millions of years. In other words, whiteness has carried within itself an “impurity” that it has obscured all along since its very beginning when “Antarctica was beginning to freeze.”<sup>45</sup> And yet a close reading of the text indicates it is not the thing itself that is impure and abhorrent but rather the very act of obscuring and blinding that constitutes the corruption. As with most SF contagion narratives and as stated above, the notion of the human operates on the all-or-nothing notion of purity. Either one is purely human or the contamination of the Other places one in the category of the inhuman, which must then be wiped from existence. But in this deconstruction of the story’s white setting, one can see that the notion of “purity” holds a deeper impurity obscured within which reveals the purity of whiteness to be what it has always been: a myth. Further, the deadly whiteness of the text’s setting foreshadows the human agents that through their pseudo-scientific rationale are the ones that will act in a deadly, inhuman way.

More specifically, the scientists act through what Lavender III reads as racial paranoia as can be read by their “blood” test that proves the purity of human, which of course invokes the “one-drop rule” ingrained in the United States’ social construction of race. Such a hideously racist lens operates on the all-or-nothing mentality of racial purity and denies the creolizing praxis of the human. Lavender III has emphasized that the story cannot be divorced from the overt racism of Campbell, the story’s author. Despite being

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<sup>45</sup> Campbell, “Who Goes There?” 293.

an influential editor and writer “singlehandedly shaping science fiction in its golden years by editing *Astounding*, the most influential SF pulp magazine of the 1940s and 1950s,” his legacy has been tarnished by his being, “a racist, a bigot, a sexist, and an anti-Semite”<sup>46</sup> Lavender III further notes

Campbell’s often inflammatory editorials sometimes berated the intelligence of other races, particularly blacks, and probed his inflexibility as a person capable of changing with the social currents of mid-century America. In one column, for example, regarding the first *Brown* decision (1954), Campbell declares that men are not created equal by God, that they are separated by intelligence, that the white race has a higher allocation of intelligence and ability compared to the black race on a distribution curve...<sup>47</sup>

Campbell was not only in favor for “rigidly segregated schools” but also opposed the civil rights for African Americans in 1960s, going “so far as to support the infamous presidential bid of Governor George Wallace of Alabama.”<sup>48</sup> With this background in mind, Lavender III asserts that, “Campbell’s greatest fear is perhaps the demise of white humanity by exposure to a single drop of black blood. Such a fear is represented by the alien shape-changer, who can pass not only for human but for an American white male.” As such, the “presumed blood contamination by the thing can be and must be read as racism because the thing is decidedly not human. While the thing is an alien other, the thing must be reconfigured as the racial other if Campbell’s history is taken into

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<sup>46</sup> Westfahl quoted in Lavender, *Race*, 134.

<sup>47</sup> Lavender, *Race*, 134.

<sup>48</sup> Lavender, *Race*, 134.

account.”<sup>49</sup> Given that the thing’s contagion does not indicate a literal death of the body but rather death to a rigid way of being, the scientists’ paranoid reactions and methods of dealing with the alien are undoubtedly racist to the core, and yet the story as whole seems to remain conscious of its own white madness. One must question here what gives the scientists the moral authority to take the life of their colleagues based on the contamination of the alien’s touch. The answer seems to rely on the exteriority of the alien, or rather its initial first impression, which imprints the white male scientists with fear and hate.

Before discussing its initial exteriority, one important element needs to be emphasized from Campbell’s story that differs and in fact is effaced from Carpenter’s more popular film version, and this is that the alien-monster-thing is not hostile or violent in and of itself. As the hero McReady states: “It doesn’t fight. I don’t think it ever fights. It must be a peaceable thing, in its own—inimitable—way. It never had to, because it always gained its end—otherwise.”<sup>50</sup> And yet, in the story its threat is so great that there is never an attempt to scientifically investigate the nature and cause of its shapeshifting abilities. The racial hysteria associated with the myth of purity prevents the scientists from welcoming the alien and learning from its technology. The rejection of its impure—because-plastic form is also at once a dismissal of any higher intelligence it might possess; instead, to go back to Lavender’s assertion of Campbell’s racism, the characters must prove that the “white race has a higher allocation of intelligence” than its thingified, liminal other. If the alien stands in for the opposite side of Man—the other to the self—

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<sup>49</sup> Lavender, *Race* 134-5.

<sup>50</sup> Campbell, “Who Goes There?” 336.



then, it is “peaceable” in direct opposition to the brutality and violence of Man. In not having to “fight” to achieve its end, unlike Man and his countless wars, not to say his genocidal impulses evident in the text, the alien shows itself as possessing a higher form of intelligence that allows for a peaceful way of living through mere bodily contact, a persuasive touch that is neither violent nor hostile. Along with its malleability, there are its powers of telepathy, which is to say its indigenous praxis that transgresses set scientific limits and that is left not only unexplored but also dismissed under the racial colonizing logic of the scientists who only value their own form of intelligence and superiority. In the end, the scientists learn to organize and work together to defeat the lone monster alien. The group of scientists can only defeat the threatening yet peaceable alien via its isolating status as an anomaly, for the alien acts singular, in a *singular way* (“inimitable”) but also *singly*. The men, on the other hand, at least those that stayed alive, work *collectively*. As the Panshins note, in opposition to the humans, “the horrific alien, even though it might be both telepathic and originally one being, was not able to join its various parts together to take concerted action. Indeed its selfishness and egoism were . . . complete.”<sup>51</sup> Within the story the alien is repeatedly stated as being selfish because “every part of it is all for itself.”<sup>52</sup> What makes a monster a monster is both its singularity as well as its solitariness, the totalizing of the event as something utterly singular and alone, so of course the monster acts without help. One of the lessons that Mary Shelley’s classic monster text, *Frankenstein*—not coincidentally one of the ur-texts of the SF genre—so clearly imparts to us is that monsters have no friends. Monsters, and here is no

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<sup>51</sup> Panshins, *The World Beyond*, 456.

<sup>52</sup> Campbell, “Who Goes There?” 344.

exception, are read as selfish for simply wanting to live, to be allowed to live freely, which paradoxically humanizes them. In Campbell's story, there is something in the alien monster itself that is human in that it can imitate Man so flawlessly, which also suggests the *it might know Man better than Man knows himself*. Its powers over matter illustrate a more advanced and pliable technology that poses a threat to Man's supremacy and his own supposedly higher intelligence. But more specifically it threatens the "closed and fixed normative framework" of the human that Monahan links to racism's commitment to epistemic closure<sup>53</sup> and as such the "open-ended and dynamic" shapeshifting alien that troubles this framework must be annihilated at all costs.

In its true essence, the form of this powerful entity is nonexistent and yet, in order to explicitly establish its monstrosity marking it as something that is, to use Monahan's term, morally odious, it is given form at the beginning of the story in its frozen state: "Three mad, hate-filled eyes blazed up with the living fire, bright as fresh-spilled blood from a face ringed with a writhing, loathsome nest of worms, blue, mobile worms that crawled where hair should grow."<sup>54</sup> The initial appearance of the alien, which may or may not be its "natural form," is genuinely hideous in its Lovecraftian monstrosity (the connection here is not fortuitous as Lovecraft's racism is well established), and more importantly time and again we are told of the mad hate in its face: "If you can judge the look on its face—it isn't human so maybe you can't—it was annoyed when it froze. Annoyed, in fact, is about as close an approximation of the way it felt as crazy, mad, insane hatred."<sup>55</sup> Its deformed, impure, and angry exteriority helps to mark it as evil and

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<sup>53</sup> Monahan, *The Creolizing Subject*, 152.

<sup>54</sup> Campbell, "Who Goes There?" 301-2.

<sup>55</sup> Campbell, "Who Goes There?" 299.

malevolent toward the human species for both the scientists and the reader. Its three eyes mark a multiplicity that goes against the natural laws of nature. But why might it be so annoyed and angry—"Mad? It was mad clear through—searing, blistering mad!"<sup>56</sup>—is a question that remains unanswered and yet we can deduce a possibility through the description of its "mad, hate filled eyes" blazing up "with the living fire, bright as fresh-spilled blood." Blood, as stated above, plays a central role in the story, as it is through testing blood that the purity of "human" is proven. But in this description of "fresh-spilled blood" early on, we have an indication of a possible past wrong (done shortly before the alien froze); the beast is angry because of blood spilled, presumably that of its own kind. And this primordial anger is coming back to life with "living fire." The "crawling" blue worms-for-hair also indicates death and decay being reanimated. The reader is asked, then, to speculate briefly on a possible haunting and return, but not much more. After all, this is no ghost story, but the open-ended nature of the thing's origins speaks to how the SF genre allows for a conception of time that cannot be closed off. The alien's look inspires a conversation between Blair and Connant, another scientist, regarding its "evil nature." Blair tells Connant "just because its nature is different, you haven't any right to say it's necessarily evil," to which the latter, looking at the frozen thing, responds with "Haw! It may be that things from other worlds don't *have* to be evil just because they're different. But that thing *was*! Child of Nature, eh? Well, it was a hell of an evil Nature."<sup>57</sup> Despite Blair's argument against the thing's evilness, the team of scientists regard it as a malevolent entity of "an evil Nature" based on its hideous and

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<sup>56</sup> Campbell, "Who Goes There?" 299.

<sup>57</sup> Campbell, "Who Goes There?" 306.

impure looks alone. Its look, informed by underlying racial paranoia, is what gives the scientists the moral authority to kill. The initial exteriority of the alien monster soon gives way to a repugnant interiority in the men, which allows them to kill one another remorselessly all in the service of protecting all of “humanity.”

By the time the scientists manage to destroy the alien in its monstrous form, it has potentially taken over the shape of any number of the sled dogs or the men themselves, and from then on, the alien entity ceases to be *a physical perversion* and becomes something more akin to *a spiritual and metaphysical corruption*. Connant, the first person to notice the missing beast, is put into question as perhaps no longer being human and soon afterward, the men start to question one other’s humanity: “*Is that man next to me an inhuman monster?*”<sup>58</sup> The move from human to nonhuman is swift and automatic. Each man questions the other but also their own self: one man asks, ““Hey, Mac. Mac, would I know if I was a monster? Would I know if the monster had already got me? Oh lord, I may be a monster already.’ ‘You’d know,’ McReady answered. ‘But we wouldn’t,’ Norris laughed shortly, half-hysterically.”<sup>59</sup> The supposed death by contagion here is called into question in the men not knowing whether or not they would know if their humanity was killed off. The alien does not produce but rather disrupts and illuminates the corruption of the human genre when seen as a static and given genre. The fact is that in the end, fifteen men out of the thirty-seven personnel are killed because of this pseudo-scientific test of human blood purity. In their hysteria to be free of the

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<sup>58</sup> Campbell, “Who Goes There?” 343, emphasis in original.

<sup>59</sup> Campbell, “Who Goes There?” 331.

monstrous other the men become monsters themselves. Focusing on the look, Rieder reads Campbell's alien as a threat to individual identity:

Its mental broadcasts displace the self from within, and its imitation both destroys the self's uniqueness and undercuts any communal support for the embattled individuals. In this story the fundamental sign of the Other is the *look*. First in the alien's baleful glare, and later in the men's suspicious staring of one another, the look is the sign and vehicle of psychological aggression; it prefigures the savage violence against the alien which erupts at the story's resolution. Conversely, what *unites* the men and the alien is the look, for it also signals the paramount instinctual need in this story: self-preservation . . . the plot, then, can only take place on the ideological terrain of an atomistic, aggressive individualism.<sup>60</sup>

Writing on contagion in regard of the gaze of the Other, Lavender III states that

transference of fear occurs through the gaze. Fear of illness and death is replaced by a fear of difference and change because of the potential for harm that contact with the other represents—something, perhaps, unclean. A new truth is established as fear of the other becomes contagious through the perception of visual differences. Thus, to be contagious is to be feared as other.<sup>61</sup>

The men in the story fear the look and gaze of the alien-other, which is to say they fear that they themselves will be reflected in, and so *become* what they themselves have designated as evil and impure. Because the alien is bereft of speech, a mute thing, this becoming thus leads from an “unclean” exteriority to a *perverted* interiority through the

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<sup>60</sup> John Rieder, “Embracing the Alien: Science Fiction in Mass Culture.” *Science Fiction Studies*, 9.1 (Mar., 1982): 31-2.

<sup>61</sup> Lavender, *Race*, 121.

trope of “contagion,” which is to say that transference occurs by way of close proximity: *a mere look and a touch*. Further, the alien blood that tries to self-preserve when confronted by a deadly live wire mirrors the scientists that likewise self-preserve by seeking to halt the contagion, even if it means killing members of their own team, which suggests a weaving of the alien and the human rather than a clear-cut division. However, passed the beginning of the story, the alien has for all intents and purposes physically vanishes and all that remains are the men themselves. Thus, the human-nonhuman, self-other opposition collapses in on itself. All that is left in the end is the “atomistic, aggressive individualism” of the white, male scientists themselves.

I would like to return here to the story’s white geographical setting of Antarctica, which comments further on the nature of the all-or-nothing dualistic thinking of the human and race itself. The alien, we are told, is discovered at the point “exactly over the South Magnetic Pole of the Earth.”<sup>62</sup> The text, then, is set directly on the north/south opposition, which denotes extreme polarization, with the south part tellingly posing as a threat to the north part, i.e., the entire world, as it reflects back aspects of this world. Through its own deadly and blinding white terrain, the text is to a degree aware of its own situated polarization. Here, the whiteness of the setting is indeed extreme as is the binary thinking of the scientists themselves. The fact that women are completely effaced from the story (the only human agents are white males) further speaks to the text’s polarizing and rigid mentality. The plasticity of the thing’s materiality brings to mind the plasticity of the female body and its ability to engender racialized difference, which indicates that thing is not only racialized but also gendered as well. Moreover, the “south

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<sup>62</sup> Campbell, “Who Goes There?” 292.

magnetic pole” indicates a literal limit to scientific exploration to the self and the world. Interestingly, it is at the limits of human-cum-white understanding and knowledge of the world that the men encounter a limitless, ever expanding and ultimately indigenous entity that seemingly violates all scientific laws. One can draw from here that is at the borders that transgressions take place both in the story and the genre of SF in general, which bring us to those very borders and limitations only to transgress established “natural laws” imposed by Man. And yet, what the white men encounter in the alien is the liminal shadow side of their own humanity. When the men first encounter the alien they also find a spaceship that is accidentally destroyed but not before the men see silent and dead “black bulks,” and count “three other *shadow-things* that might have been—passengers-frozen there. Then the ice came down and against the ship.”<sup>63</sup> This description captures what the aliens-as-shadow-things represent—the shadow of blackness that whiteness casts and indeed needs in order to sustain itself. Here, I am of course drawing on Toni Morrison’s analysis of American literature and criticism in her book, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*. Morrison dissects how what she terms “a fabricated Africanist presence,” which is the “thunderous, theatrical presence of black surrogacy—an informing, stabilizing, and disturbing element” is crucial to the work of major American writers.<sup>64</sup> Speaking of this bound presence in the blinding white terrains of American fiction, she writes

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<sup>63</sup> Campbell, “Who Goes There?” 296, emphasis added.

<sup>64</sup> Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (New York: Vintage, 1992), 13.

Because they appear almost always in conjunction with representations of black or Africanist people who are dead, impotent, or under complete control, these images of blinding whiteness seem to function as both an antidote for and meditation on the shadow that is companion to this whiteness—a dark and abiding presence that moves the hearts and texts of American literature with fear and longing.<sup>65</sup>

For Morrison, the very concept of human freedom in the formation of American literature—and indeed of the entire nation—is inevitably tied to slavery, and she goes on to observe that, “Black slavery enriched the country’s creative possibilities. For in that construction of blackness *and* enslavement could be found not only the not-free but also, with the dramatic polarity created by skin color, *the projection of the not-me*. The result was a playground for the imagination.”<sup>66</sup> And as with the nation so with the concept of the human. This “projection of the not-me,” in canonical American texts takes on the shape of mystifying and terrifying alien forms as it migrates into the genre of SF, all the while continuing to be informed by the “dynamic polarity created by skin color.” As disturbing and fear-laden as it appears to be, this projection serves to inform and stabilize the notion of the human, *the not-alien*, in all its “mute, meaningless, unfathomable, pointless, frozen, veiled, curtained, dreaded, senseless, [and] implacable” whiteness.<sup>67</sup>

And yet the alien-shadow serves as a creolizing force that disrupts the whiteness of the human/text, calling into question set notions of the human and revealing the human/alien as in fact being two sides of the same coin; one containing the other: no

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<sup>65</sup> Morrison, *Playing in the Dark*, 33.

<sup>66</sup> Morrison, *Playing in the Dark*, 38, second emphasis added.

<sup>67</sup> Morrison, *Playing in the Dark*, 59.



extension but no separation either. In its own way, Campbell's text offers this warning: extreme polarization leads to extreme and blinding violence that is directly tied to white paranoia and the all-or-nothing myth of purity, which points to "what racial ideology does to the mind, imagination, and behavior of masters."<sup>68</sup> In the story the very idea of mixture with an alien form, no matter how powerful, is intolerable because it operates by the extreme polarization of the politics of racial purity and the logic of colonialism itself. Either one is completely free of alien blood and purely human, or the smallest amount of alien blood renders one a total "inhuman monster" that must be destroyed at all cost. There can be no sustained interaction between the two. And yet a close reading of the text flips the script and reveals the inhuman resides within the human, and vice versa, the human likewise resides in the inhuman. Through this reading, the genre of SF allows us the possibility to not only posit humanity in what we construe as fundamentally alien but also posit that dark and obscure alien element squarely within the human itself. With the unearthing of this "unearthly" alien that has been *bound* since the first arctic freezing of the planet, no matter how hard they resist it, Campbell's scientists must contend with the fact that division between self and other is no longer as clear cut as they might still wish it to be; the "contagious" alien has rendered such a border porous and ambiguous.

### **Creolizing the Genre(s) of Man**

One can well state that the primary function of the alien in science fiction is precisely this: to render the border between self and other porous and ambiguous. But the calling into question of scientific as well as metaphysical borders is also a function of the SF genre as a whole, which can be read as being alien onto itself in its ongoing creolizing

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<sup>68</sup> Morrison, *Playing in the Dark*, 12.

and shapeshifting composition. While white male authors historically may have taken dominance over the genre through much of the previous century, blanketing it with racist colonial ideology, the genre like the alien itself is “impure” through its hybridity and plasticity and thus subverts such ideology by turning it on its head. I believe this also helps to explain the division the US academy polices in its liminal assignation of the SF genre as “popular” as opposed to “literary” fiction not worthy of the same level of study as so-called high literature. As noted earlier, the name itself already indicates an illicit blending of science and literature, or fact and myth, which crosses multiple disciplinary lines, and as Gordon explains the “cross-fertilization of distinctive disciplinary developments” within the academy tends to be “averted by a repugnance” that treats “the products as crude, deformed impurities.”<sup>69</sup> The SF genre is treated as a “crude, deformed impurity” because of its hybridity and plasticity but also of the “crossbreeding and intermixture” of multiple disciplines that then gets read as a bastardization and so relegated to, as James Edward puts it, the “ghetto” of the literary establishment.<sup>70</sup> A look at the genre’s muddled and multiple beginnings reveals further cross-fertilization with a range of literary forms such as romance, fantasy, gothic fiction and horror, and other generic mixtures that SF continues forge in order to evolve. It is also multimodal, capable of traveling seamlessly from pulp magazines to novels to film, television and video games (for an examination of how the genre applies across the range of these cultural forms, see Milner 1-22). Such crossings mark the creolizing technological praxis of the genre that puts into play multiple categories at once while never privileging one

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<sup>69</sup> Gordon, *Creolizing Political Theory*, 4.

<sup>70</sup> Edward James, *Science Fiction in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1994), 6.

over another, meaning there is no hierarchy here, and no all-or-nothing thinking of “pure categories” (disciplinary or otherwise). Rather it calls into question dualistic ways of being in and perceiving the world. Such dynamic hybridity, moreover, creates ambiguity, which is why those who do study the genre have to deal with its contradictory definitions. Simply put, among many theories, there is no critical consensus on what science fiction actually is and the ambiguity seems to rest on its obscure origins.

Noting the disagreement and lack of critical consensus of the genre’s origin has led the scholar Paul Kincaid to declare that the genre is “indefinable” in its multiplicity. He argues in his influential essay, “On the Origins of Genre,” that SF is “not one thing, but many” and because “there is not one definition of science fiction but many . . . not one urtext [origin] but many” it is simply “indefinable.”<sup>71</sup> Because of the rhizomatic nature of its dynamic hybridity, although Kincaid does not name SF as such, “we cannot extract a unique common thread which we could trace back to a unique common origin.”<sup>72</sup> And yet there is unity; SF still coheres due to an “identifiable pattern” that is in a “state of constant flux” and that a definition would try to “fix,” but as he asserts, no definition of science fiction “has successfully managed to encompass all that it is, all that it has been, and all that it might be.”<sup>73</sup> This again speaks to the pliability and dynamism of not only the literary genre but also the human genre, that it is constantly “in flux” and cannot be “fixed” by any one definition. Kincaid further elaborates that SF is not one but

any number of things—a future setting, a marvelous device, an ideal society, an alien creature, a twist in time, an interstellar journey, a satirical perspective, a

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<sup>71</sup> Paul Kincaid, “On the Origins of Genre.” *Extrapolation* 44.4 (2003): 411,

<sup>72</sup> Kincaid, “Origins of Genre,” 413.

<sup>73</sup> Kincaid, “Origins of Genre,” 414.

particular approach to the matter of story, whatever we may be looking for when look for science fiction, here more overt, here more subtle—which are braided together in an endless variety of combinations.<sup>74</sup>

He sees science fiction itself as weaving together of disparate elements—“a series of strands” which when “braided together in any of a possibly infinite number of combinations, make what we have come to recognize as science fiction.”<sup>75</sup> In other words, science fiction is itself a dynamic mixture that further produces “endless” mixtures, creolizing everything in its path and along the way effing the law of purity and revealing itself to be contaminating as well as contaminated by the other it touches. Kincaid further asserts that “it is not in the heartland of science fiction that definitions, or family resemblances, are an issue, but on the borders, where science fiction is changing into something else, or something else is changing into science fiction.”<sup>76</sup> Kincaid here speaks to the open boundaries of the genre itself through which the alien element can enter and provide SF what it needs to mutate and evolve. The borders here are not erased but rendered porous—it is the place of contact with the other that transforms the essence of a thing perpetually, emphasizing an essential becoming. It is such ungovernable mutability of both genre and selfhood that greatly troubles the whiteness and “humanity” of Campbell’s text.

As with science fiction as Kincaid articulates it, creolization points toward what Monahan elucidates as “a *telos* without a terminus”. He further elaborates:

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<sup>74</sup> Kincaid, “Origins of Genre,” 417.

<sup>75</sup> Kincaid, “Origins of Genre,” 417.

<sup>76</sup> Kincaid, “Origins of Genre,” 415.

Just as liberation cannot be understood a *state* to be achieved, so too is creolization, in this prescriptive sense, never something that we may accomplish and refer to as a *fait accompli* but only ever be a kind of norm that conditions our efforts without determining them. The call for [creolization] . . . is not directed toward some static terminus as an end state but rather points toward the characteristics of methods and practices that at once recognize and foster the fundamental *human* practices of creolization. It is an intellectual framework that foregrounds the ambiguity and hybridity that is understood not as a weakness or obstacle to our political and epistemic efforts but rather as a condition for the possibility of human existence as *freedom*.<sup>77</sup>

The “*telos* without a terminus” of creolization must thus “entail the fostering of a more genuinely *human* world, where humanity is itself understood to be a hybrid, ambiguous, and dynamic process of ongoing creolization, but where each moment of creolization stands as the open possibility or even *invitation* to yet further such moments.”<sup>78</sup> Science fiction as an explicit creolizing and “living” genre that inhabits “a flexible and dynamic field of semantic tension”<sup>79</sup> and maintains open its borders as a necessary condition for its existence, allows us to envision alien worlds that help us to understand the “hybrid, ambiguous, and dynamic process of ongoing creolization” that more accurately reflects humanity itself. The genre’s ‘creolizing technological praxis,’ as I have termed it here, allows for new ways of being and interacting with others (and otherness itself) in a

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<sup>77</sup> What is Rational is Creolizing.” *Creolizing Hegel*, Edited by Michael Monahan, (Lanham:

Rowman and Littlefield International Ltd, 2017), 7.

<sup>78</sup> Monahan, “What is Rational is Creolizing,” 7.

<sup>79</sup> Rose, *Alien Encounters*, 49.

cosmos that is dynamically interwoven and future-oriented. As a “non-realist” genre what I believe gives science fiction its power and strength is its ability to mirror the world *not as it is, but as it can be*. And yet, through its creolizing construction and praxis, in its own way it more accurately mirrors the reality of self and world: that we are all “braided” together and constantly in “flux”: always in the process of becoming something other than what we are now. But specifically, it is through the reflection of the shapeshifting alien that humanity can be viewed as a “process” that resists epistemic closure and opens itself up to the possibility of liberation and the freedom to be other unto itself.

The common reaction to the alien in SF contagion narratives, set forth by Campbell’s founding and influential novella explored here, reflects on the darker side of human nature to annihilate and destroy different ways of being in the world. In fact, it reflects zero tolerance for difference in and of itself, since that is what the alien, in its capacity to endlessly shift shape, represents. And in the western world, difference has nowhere else been more marked than in the enslaved black body, which was, to use Morrison’s term, “visible to a fault.”<sup>80</sup> The fear of contagion, i.e., *dis-ease* spread by intermixture with the alien-ness of blackness in all its manifestations, is the fear of losing one’s grip of “humanity,” or what amounts to losing the hold on the “exclusionary moral, material, and aesthetic norm passing itself off as the universal truth of the human.”<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>80</sup> Morrison, *Playing in the Dark*, 49.

<sup>81</sup> Monahan, *The Creolizing Subject*, 84.

Through its dehumanizing politics of purity and colonial and egotistical all-or-nothing way of thinking, such zero tolerance of other forms of humanity also speaks to the incredible appetite and greed of Man, to his greediness in wanting to keep the category of the human all to himself and being unwilling to share the world with other “alien” beings. And whether these alien beings are of terrestrial or extraterrestrial origin, actual *Homo sapiens* or not, makes no difference. And yet, through the open borders of the SF genre, the alien persistently enters and reenters our dreams and our nightmares. As Campbell’s story illustrates, the alien inevitably surfaces, offering a reflection of aspects of our humanity that have been frozen, buried, and kept in suspension by an icy cold whiteness. And while the SF narrative of contagion is one that vilifies and demonizes the alien’s embodied difference, other narratives acknowledge such *alterity* as a benefactor of humanity, such as Octavia E. Butler’s trilogy *Lilith’s Brood*, which I explore in the next chapter. Such narratives posit the human not as a static and given genre, but as an open, living one capable of metamorphoses, and it is the alien difference that assists and is required for such profound transformation to occur. But this necessitates at the very least an openness to ‘creolizing technologies’ that can lead us to alien ways of becoming human and take us to where the genre of SF is meant to take us: into the unknown.

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## Chapter 2

### Octavia E. Butler's Creolizing Technologies of Selfhood in *Lilith's Brood*

#### Introduction

In the previous chapter I argued that John W. Campbell's founding SF novella decisively established a new type of "contagious" alien as part and parcel of colonial imperial discourse. The themes it set into motion include bodily alien invasion; the politics of racial purity related to contagion and the hysteria and policing that accompanies it; and the threat of collapse of the human/nonhuman binary. In his narrative, as I contend, these themes take on the form of the "Nightmare of Whiteness" and as they travel into film inform what Marleen S. Barr calls "the Hollywood grade-B science fiction monster movie."<sup>82</sup> While the approach to the alien that Campbell's text culturally establishes is one founded on racism and xenophobia, the story inadvertently also produces exciting possibilities for combatting these nefarious forces. Enter Octavia E. Butler, who follows those very possibilities throughout her work but especially in her trilogy *Lilith's Brood* (formerly *Xenogenesis*). This 'creolizing' trilogy, as I call it, which is her grand take on the alien invasion contagion narrative, is the object of analysis in this chapter. I thus read Campbell's "Who Goes There?" as indeed a founding text through which Butler manages to examine and ultimately overturn racist and sexist scientific tropes as well as depictions of monstrous alien beings who are for her all-too-human. As Barr argues, the alien in her and other feminist science fiction writers' portrayals tend to be "alienated women, not

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<sup>82</sup> Marleen S. Barr, *Lost in Space: Probing Feminist Science Fiction and Beyond* (Chapel Hill: Univeristy of North Carolina Press, 1993), 99.



interplanetary monsters” though some may argue that Butler’s Oankali aliens are very much the latter. Barr’s point is that “Women—especially black women—who are alien in relation to patriarchal society, alter fiction’s depiction of the alien.”<sup>83</sup> She further cites Robert Crossley, who notes that “As American women writers”—which include “the black woman,” “the Chicana,” “the lesbian,” and “the woman in poverty,” and so on—“have abandoned the character types that predominated in science fiction for a richer plurality of human images, they have collectively written a new chapter in the genre’s history.”<sup>84</sup> This chapter examines the ways in which Butler specifically alters the depiction of the alien and opts for a “richer plurality of human images,” through the overturning of dualistic thinking and its attendant hierarchy that structures not only conventional approaches to the Human and its Other within the genre of SF, but also to all racialized and gendered persons in our present world.

In brief, *Lilith’s Brood* consists of the novels, *Dawn* (1987), *Adulthood Rites* (1988), and *Imago* (1989), all of which explore the end of humanity as we know it through human contact and enforced crossbreeding with the Oankali, hideous slug-like, medusa-headed aliens who save a group of dying humans after nuclear war has destroyed nearly all life on earth.<sup>85</sup> The first novel begins with Lilith Iyapo, an African American woman, “awakening” from a state of suspended animation aboard an alien spaceship where she has her initial alien encounter with the gray, third-sex, nonbinary ooloi, the genetic engineers of the Oankali species. From it, she learns that humans have been in

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<sup>83</sup> Barr, *Lost in Space*, 98.

<sup>84</sup> Quoted by Barr, *Lost in Space*, 98.

<sup>85</sup> Octavia E. Butler, *Lilith’s Brood* (New York: Grand Central Publishing, 2000). Throughout this chapter I cite from this Omnibus edition, not each novel published separately.

suspended animation for 250 years while the Oankali studied and allowed them, as well the earth itself, to heal with the help of their bio-technology. She further finds out that the Oankali have three sexes: male, female, and ooloi, and are otherwise known as “gene-traders.” This alien species has saved humanity from the brink of extinction for the sole reason of inter- or crossbreeding with humans in order to produce a new race of Oankali-human hybrid, which as “gene-traders,” is how they survive and thrive. As such, one of the ambiguities of the text is whether they have actually “saved” or “captured” humanity. Lilith is the first to be awakened, and after a two-year acclimation period with Oankali culture, she is put in charge of awakening and then leading a group of surviving humans through a training floor on the spaceship that recreates part of the Amazon, where the Oankali will eventually resituate humanity. The human group, however, reject the alien breeding plan, fearing their humanity will be absorbed and bred out of them, and turn on Lilith for becoming a “trader/traitor” of humanity. They resort to killing her partner and only ally, Joseph, a man of Chinese descent, before going after her too. The Oankali finally intervene and send this first human group back to earth but not before sterilizing them, for the difficult choice the Oankali give them is to either crossbreed or not breed at all, i.e., be incapable of reproducing humanity on its own “pure” terms. At the end of *Dawn*, Lilith stays alone aboard the ship, having been impregnated with her first species-mixed offspring, and awaits another group of humans to awaken in hopes that they will be more receptive to the Oankali offering.

The two other novels in the trilogy deal with her “brood,” or what I call her creolizing constructs who stand in as “third” figures. These “Human-Oankali constructs”

<sup>86</sup> are not only *mixed-species* but also *mixed-race*, and each has five parents (male and female human parents, male and female Oankali parents, and one ooloi parent in charge of mixing all the genes together). *Adulthood Rites* takes place half a century after the initial awakening and focuses on the protagonist Akin, the first *male* Human-Oankali construct (prior to this, Lilith only births female constructs) and *Imago* takes place fifty years after that and deals with Jodahs, the first *ooloi* Human-Oankali construct. All constructs are metamorphic, radically transitioning during puberty into a sex/gender—prior to this they are “Eka,” meaning neuter, “a child too young to have developed sex”<sup>87</sup>—and turning more Oankali if they were birthed by a human mother and more human if they were birthed by an Oankali mother, which makes them radically alien children. However, it is Jodahs, the ooloi construct in the last book, that attains real shapeshifting and regenerative powers and further represents “true independence—reproductive independence—for this species.”<sup>88</sup> Importantly, whereas Lilith, as the first intermediary between the Oankali and humans, fails miserably, her creolizing construct progeny, positioned as mediators and agents of change for all parties involved, ultimately fare much better.

In Butler’s theoretical framing of a creolizing humanity, I here read what has been termed the “post-human” as in fact a “return of the human” that has previously been bound and obscured by the colonial ideology of fixed racial purity explored in the previous chapter. As such, the “post-” in Butler is configured as a *turning back* that is at the same time a *looking forward* in time, which yields new possibilities of freedom in the

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<sup>86</sup> Butler, *Lilith’s Brood*, 359.

<sup>87</sup> Butler, *Lilith’s Brood*, 533.

<sup>88</sup> Butler, *Lilith’s Brood*, 742.

*here-and-now* from the tyranny of what Donna Haraway calls the “sacred image of the same.”<sup>89</sup> Butler consistently reworks biblical myth, not only in her re-envisioning of Lilith, the first wife of Adam in the Hebraic tradition, but also in her restaging and critique of her other half, Eve, the “First Mother” in the third book of trilogy. As Judith Lee observes, Butler’s trilogy is a revisionist myth in that it “is based on the biblical myth of the Creation (*Dawn*), Incarnation (*Adulthood Rites*), and Apocalypse (*Imago*).”<sup>90</sup> As such, Butler’s work indeed resists, as Haraway notes, “the imperative to recreate the sacred image of the same,” through her use of creolization that extends to the intermixture of “sacred” images with “profane” ones, reflecting back an upended image, a return of the same but with a difference, which helps uproot the dichotomy of sacred/profane through the process of transmogrification. Specifically, Butler’s confrontation with the loss of human “purity” inevitably entails a set of contradictions which establish dynamism, plasticity, and ambiguity as creolizing technologies of selfhood that do away with the tyrannical image of divine human reverence to sameness, enabling humanity to reach a new stage of evolution through the overturning of dualistic thinking that informs constructions of race, gender, and the nonhuman. This overturning applies further to racist scientific practices that persist in reifying notions of mythic purity, as I later discuss with respect to the stories of Henrietta Lacks and the “Human Genome Diversity Project” both of which are trajectories that Butler inverts.

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<sup>89</sup> Donna, Haraway, *Primate Visions: Gender, Race, and Nature in the World of Modern Science* (New York: Routledge, 1989), 226.

<sup>90</sup> Judith Lee, “‘We Are All Kin’”: Relateness, Mortality, and Human Immortality,” in *Immortal Engines: Life Extension and Immortality in Science Fiction and Fantasy*, edited by George Slusser, Gary Westfahl, and Eric S. Rabkin (Athens: University of George Press, 2006), 175.

Before proceeding further with a close reading of the books in the trilogy—a reading that directly engages with the specificity and richness of Butler’s language and imagery—in the following sections I examine some of the story’s main themes generally in relation to the discourses that I argue underpin much of Butler’s thought, which includes that of the individual versus collective; creolization as opposed to hybridity and miscegenation (the two terms through which Butler’s work is most often read); and on establishing tolerance for both contradictions and ambiguity, an emphasis that Butler shares with the thought of another “alien” border-crosser, Gloria Anzaldúa, in the latter’s classic text *Borderlands/La Frontera*.

### **On the Individual/Collective and the “Outsider Within”**

Butler’s intervention in depictions of and approaches to the “alien” is a call for overturning the colonial paradigm of racial/human purity, drawing on numerous discourses to achieve this end. As this chapter and the ones that follow make clear, Butler’s theoretical construction and thinking of the human and its futurity places into conversation as diverse and contradictory discourses as evolutionary biology and Judeo-Christian scripture. And yet it is also nonetheless deeply informed by her own embodied experience as a black woman. Patricia Hill Collins has examined how through their lived experience Black feminists inhabit an “outsider within status” that allows them to “see the simultaneity of oppression affecting Black woman,” and “be more sensitive to how the same oppressive systems affect Afro-American men, people of color, women and the dominant group itself.”<sup>91</sup> Indeed, when Butler thinks of “extraterrestrial life” she has in

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<sup>91</sup> Patricia Hill Collins, “Learning from the Outsider Within: The Sociological Significance of Black Feminist Thought,” *Social Problems* 33.6 (October-December,

mind the “at-home” variety, which includes “women, blacks, Indians, Asians, Hispanics, etc.” which in previous SF, “did not exist, existed only as occasional oddities, or existed as stereotypes.”<sup>92</sup> Collins further notes that “while Black feminists may work on behalf of black women, they rarely project separatist solutions to Black female oppression. Rather, the vision is one that...takes its ‘stand on the solidarity of humanity.’”<sup>93</sup> Such rejection of “separatist solutions” to their own oppression, as well as their solidarity with all of humanity, frees Black feminists such as Butler from thinking of the mere *preservation of life* (which begs the question, whose individual life specifically is being preserved and at what cost to other life?) and instead think of *the enhancement of life*—all life on earth and, with the space-faring Oankali, in the universe too. Whereas the former is static and controlled, the latter is open and dynamic, an ever becoming collective. In Campbell’s novella, as John Rieder argues and as noted in the previous chapter, “the paramount instinctual need [is] self-preservation” and as such the plot “can only take place on the ideological terrain of an atomistic, aggressive individualism.”<sup>94</sup> Campbell

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1986): 21. See also her book, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness and the Politics of Empowerment* (New York: Routledge, 2000), second edition.

<sup>92</sup> Larry McCaffery, “An Interview with Octavia Butler,” 87.

<sup>93</sup> Collins, “Learning from the Outsider Within,” 21. Black feminist’s stance on the solidarity of the not just all women but all of oppressed groups stands in sharp contrast to white women, who as Hazel V. Carby has argued in her discussion on the “Woman’s Era” at the turn of the century, “rarely exercised their power in sympathy with their black sisters” and instead sought to “secure gender and class interests at the expense of the rights of the oppressed.” Hazel V. Carby, ““On the Threshold of Woman’s Era’: Lynching, Empire and Sexuality in Black Feminist Theory,” *Critical Inquiry* 12 (1985): 226. For an extended analysis of this history see also Angela Y. Davis, *Women, Race and Class* (New York: Random House, 1983); and Ida B. Wells, *Southern Horrors and Other Writings*, 2nd edition, edited by Jacqueline Jones Royster (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin’s, 2016).

<sup>94</sup> John Rieder, “Embracing the Alien: Science Fiction in Mass Culture,” *Science Fiction Studies* 9.1 (1982): 31-2.

overemphasizes individual self-preservation and indeed self-interest, to the detriment of group-preservation and enhancement as evidenced by the fact that the entire group of scientists cuts itself down by almost half in order to halt the “contagion” of the Thing.

For Campbell, group survival seems to matter very little, while in Butler this is all that matters; so much so, that as a sustained group of mutating organisms, the Oankali are themselves open-ended collectivities. As they tell Lilith early on, “we divide into three,” (just as they also multiply by three). The three groups are the Dinso, who stay on earth to crossbreed with humans across generations until they again take to the stars with part of the earth as their ship; the Toaht, who stay on the ship orbiting earth and eventually continue their space travel with genetic imprints of all humankind to crossbreed with elsewhere and at a later time; and the Akjai, who leave on a new ship and do not mix with humans at all in case the Dinso and Toaht unions fail.<sup>95</sup> While the Oankali share similar features to the Thing, such as a slug-like appearance and shapeshifting abilities, the Oankali’s collectivity is in opposition to the depiction of Campbell’s lone alien. As noted in the previous chapter, the Thing “was not able to join its various parts together to take concerted actions.”<sup>96</sup> While the Thing acted alone, appearing as an anomaly, the Oankali appear in concert, a crossbreeding alien “race” that is collectively united, however broadly, and in turn it is the human that gets flipped and turned into an anomaly by doing what the Oankali take to be a highly abnormal and unethical approach toward life: self-destruction. Butler provides a reason for such unethical behavior in the form of the “Human Contradiction” which entails pitting “intelligence” against “hierarchal

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<sup>95</sup> Butler, *Lilith’s Brood*, 35/378.

<sup>96</sup> Alexei and Cory Panshin, *The World Beyond the Hill: Science Fiction and the Quest for Transcendence* (Los Angeles: Tarcher, 1989), 456.

behavior.”<sup>97</sup> This “contradiction” is part of the reason why, after saving the humans, the Oankali halt at allowing the “immoral and antilife thing” of letting humans continue to reproduce on their own only to eventually annihilate themselves and all life surrounding them, all in the name of the self-interest of a select group of humans looking to win a war.<sup>98</sup> There is no self-interest or self-preservation in the Oankali at the individual level, and the only characters that exhibit them are the human “resisters” who refuse to join the alien social collective, and in the third book instead opt for a literal *inbreeding*, the inverse mirroring and only alternative to *crossbreeding* that Butler proposes, much to their own physical detriment.

Collins examines three main features that uphold Black feminist thought and that further situate Butler work within this tradition: “the meaning of self-definition and self-valuation, the interlocking nature of oppression, and the importance of redefining culture.”<sup>99</sup> Throughout the trilogy, Butler consistently redefines and reevaluates the human self through her creolizing, ever shifting hybrid constructs as she also redefines society and culture on earth via an inverted historical lens that focuses on the experiences of African American and Afro-diasporic women via the figure of Lilith, who is ever “interlocked” with the nature of oppression as she also is within the Hebraic mythic tradition from which her name is taken. In regards to the redefinition of culture, and correlating with Monahan’s analysis of racial ideology as the “all-or-nothing thinking of the politics of purity,”<sup>100</sup> Collins, borrowing from bell hooks, writes of “Either/or

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<sup>97</sup> Butler, *Lilith’s Brood*, 442.

<sup>98</sup> Butler, *Lilith’s Brood*, 475.

<sup>99</sup> Collins, “Learning from the Outsider Within,” 24.

<sup>100</sup> Michael Monahan, *The Creolizing Subject: Race, Reason and the Politics of Purity* (New York: Fordham, 2011), 137.



dualistic thinking” or what she herself refers to as “the construct of dichotomous oppositional difference” that is “a philosophical lynchpin in systems of race, class, and gender oppression.”<sup>101</sup> I quote at length the characteristics she describes:

One fundamental characteristic of this construct is the categorization of people, things, and ideas in terms of their difference from one another. For example, the terms in dichotomies such as black/white, male/female, reason/emotion, fact/opinion, and subject/object gain their meaning only in *relation* to their counterparts. Another fundamental characteristic of this construct is that difference is not complementary in that the halves of the dichotomy do not enhance each other. Rather, the dichotomous halves are different and inherently opposed to one another. A third and more important characteristic is that these oppositional relationships are inherently unstable. Since such dualities rarely represent different but equal relationships, the inherent unstable relationship is resolved by subordinating one half of each pair to the other...Dichotomous oppositional differences invariably imply relationships of superiority and inferiority, hierarchical relationships that mesh with political economies of domination and subordination.<sup>102</sup>

This chapter examines the ways in which Butler articulates and develops a non-separatist solution not only for Black women’s oppression, but for all groups suffering under “systems of race, class, and gender oppression,” as well as ultimately, for “the dominant group itself,” which through her inversions point to the “resisters” in the story advocating

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<sup>101</sup> Collins, “Learning from the Outsider Within,” 20.

<sup>102</sup> Collins, “Learning from the Outsider Within,” 20, emphasis in original.

for the maintenance of a “pure race,” and are spearheaded by heterosexual cis men. Specifically, Octavia Butler’s saga of aliens crossbreeding with humanity overturns “dichotomous oppositional difference” by remaking the relationship of human/nonhuman and self/other, through a process of creolization that is complementary in that it literally *enhances* the lives of all parties involved, all the while seeking to overcome the hierarchical structure of “political economies of domination and subordination.” As an example, part of the “life trade” of the Oankali involves giving humans a prolonged (almost immortal) life free of the diseases that inflicted them pre-nuclear war, such as cancer. This is a literal enhancement of life, while the aliens gain regenerating, shapeshifting powers as well as even longer lifespans through the attainment of Lilith’s human cancer cells. As noted above, when the Oankali study their human captives, they discover a “mismatched pair of genetic characteristics” which Butler poses as “intelligence and hierarchical behavior” with intelligence, the newer characteristic of *Homo sapiens* being in service of hierarchical behavior, its older characteristic. Thus, Butler biologically places humanity as a site of contradiction and contestation, in which “hierarchical relationships that mesh with political economies of domination and subordination” which for Butler are ingrained in our very DNA, do not match up with our intelligence, our newer though still ingrained “genetic characteristic.” Ultimately, the trilogy’s central question, as one scholar notes, is: “Are humans so irretrievably hierarchal and violent as a species that it is necessary to abandon or alter the human to

create a more ethical society?”<sup>103</sup> This chapter answers this question in the affirmative and explores the ways in which such “altering” occurs through a process of creolization.

With regard to revaluating and redefining the self, the other two features that Collins proposes, one can read these moves already in the two titles of Butler’s trilogy. The proper title of the saga has two names: *Xenogenesis* and *Lilith’s Brood*. The latter arrives with the publication in 2000 of all three novels in an omnibus volume and does not negate the former. Dissecting the first title, Cathy Peppers writes that “Xenogenesis means the ‘production of offspring different from either of its parents’; this is a reproduction of a difference, the (re)production of difference.” She further notes that “the ‘xeno’ of this genesis comes from the Greek *xenos*, which in its original bivalence meant both guest/friend and alien/stranger. As an origin story, this trilogy tells about the genesis of an alien humanity...”<sup>104</sup> This “(re)production of difference” however, as Collins notes, is always *relational*, and the hard line that divides self and other also intimately binds them. In Butler this is achieved through symbiotic mutualism (always at odds with parasitism), which I explore in greater depth in subsequent chapters. As such, the reproduction of an alien difference might well be read as a revaluation of what has been part of the (human) self. The trilogy deals with the reproduction of the human with a noticeable (alien) difference. It is significant that this difference, in the form of “xeno,” comes in its original Greek as an ambiguity: it can mean friend and/or stranger. In our contemporary world, can what the self holds to be the most alien/strange to itself ever

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<sup>103</sup> Dagmar Van Engen, “Metamorphosis, Transition, and Insect Biology in the Octavia E. Butler Archive,” *Women’s Studies* 47.7 (2018): 735.

<sup>104</sup> Cathy Peppers, “Dialogic Origins and Alien Identities in Butler’s *Xenogenesis*,” *Science Fiction Studies* 22.1 (March, 1995): 47.

appear as friendly and not hostile and monstrous? Is the ‘human,’ shrouded as it is by a myth of (racial) purity, able to *willingly host* its ‘nonhuman’ other without completely devouring it? These philosophical questions arise primarily out of the genre of science fiction and remain open-ended. Here we can only follow Butler’s *brooding*, which takes us the second title, *Lilith’s Brood*. As a noun, “brood” refers to “offspring” that, in the trilogy, is radically “different from either of its parents,”<sup>105</sup> a mutation and departure from what has been. The word also refers here to a new “breed, species, group, or *kind*,” linked to the figure of Lilith, the first name in the title that refers not to extraterrestrials but to a maligned Biblical female figure later morphed into a female demoness. As Peppers explains:

Originally a Sumero-Babylonian goddess, [Lilith] was assimilated into the Biblical genesis by Hebraic tradition as Adam’s first wife; however, because she refused to submit to his rule (in particular, would not lie beneath him in sex), she was repudiated and cast out of Eden. Her ‘fate’ was to couple with ‘demons’ and give birth to a monstrous brood of children.”<sup>106</sup>

Peppers reads this as part of the “‘already known’ stories of the origins of race and gender” and notes how the trilogy places “the origin story of African diaspora and slavery into dialogue with Biblical discourse.”<sup>107</sup> (I explore in detail the implications of Lilith for black women in the third chapter, when I discuss Butler’s other configuration of Lilith in her previous *Patternist* series). Here, Butler can be read as a *revisionist* and her trilogy as

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<sup>105</sup> Peppers, “Dialogic Origins,” 47.

<sup>106</sup> Peppers, “Dialogic Origins,” 49.

<sup>107</sup> Peppers, “Dialogic Origins,” 50.

that of a *group of outsiders* bred out of Paradise/Earth who nonetheless *return as insiders* to repopulate a new Eden in an “awakened” planet risen from the ashes of Man’s greed and life-halting philosophy. Enabling such a move is the “outsider within status” of Black feminists who “stand on the solidarity of humanity.” Such human solidarity must be considered in the “brood” of Butler’s title, which also means to “incubate” and “ponder.” I thus read the trilogy as Butler’s revisionist, philosophical pondering, as her antiracist philosophy of life and meditation on the alien-ness that arises from within humanity via the black female body collective, which transmutes and expands the very notion of the human and all that it can be.

### **On the Creolization of Butler**

The scholarship on Butler’s work, especially with regard to the trilogy, has focused on two critical terms that point towards the discourse of racial mixture underlying her fiction: hybridity and miscegenation. I here propose creolization as a more apt theoretical framework that gets to the heart of Butler’s humanist vision of a *post-apocalyptic*, which is to say a *post-white(ning)* world. While hybridity and miscegenation are at play within her narratives, these are already enfolded within the term “creolization.” Critics have tended to read the politics of Butler as a “postcolonial politics of cosmopolitan hybridity” capable of leading either a “cosmopolitan utopia” or a dystopia, both of which Butler’s creolizing praxis renders moot.<sup>108</sup> The problem with hybridity is that in its very theorization, it has been assigned as static and unmoving (and thus utopic) and as such does not in itself advance Butler’s project of going beyond the limits of the stagnant dualistic thinking of racial ideology that also governs dominant notions of the human.

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<sup>108</sup> Gerry Canavan, *Octavia E. Butler* (Urbana: U of Illinois Press, 2016), 107.

Feminist scholar Patricia Melzer has noted that “Lilith’s negotiations represent the conflicting and painful relationship that exists between oppressor and oppressed: they deny the binary of black and white” and she goes on to observe that in Butler’s trilogy “the conflict between self-determination and survival (often presented as the only options for the colonized) results in enforced hybridity.”<sup>109</sup> Butler’s saga indeed denies the black/white binary through enforcing a hybridization of the human/alien, self/other, which disrupts the politics of purity that itself imposes a mythic purity (of black, white and every other racial category). In doing so, however, it also rejects all binary thinking including the utopic/dystopic discourse. Rather, such an imposition is geared specifically towards a political, decolonial praxis of being human. With the term “hybridity” cited above, however, as Jane Anna Gordon asserts, such a political praxis has been wholly absent in regards to its discourses. She asserts that the term associated with Homi Bhabha (1994), among others, emerged with the institutionalization of postcolonial studies in the US and Western Europe as well ethnic studies in the US and goes on to state that

Although the insights borne of this position were thought to extend more generally to illuminating the process of disavowing the constructed nature of membership and belonging and the disciplining and repressive capacities of both, hybridity often became more closely associated with the angst of specific individuals whose mediating role ironically reassert the logic of pure, distinct groups through which they moved as a go-between. While the existential insight produced by this homelessness or permanent in-betweenness made for rich

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<sup>109</sup> Patricia Melzer, “Cultural Chameleons: Anticolonial Identities and Resistance in Octavia E. Butler’s *Survivor* and *Dawn*,” in *Alien Constructions: Science Fiction and Feminist Thought* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2006), 56.

literary and philosophical reflection, it often was pitched against the spirit and forms of anticolonial and progressive politics that required, however open-endedly, defined collectivities through which people could struggle for more democratic conditions.<sup>110</sup>

By way of contrast, she further notes, “creolizing as a process leaves none of the poles that ‘in-betweenness’ negotiates intact.”<sup>111</sup> This means that in regards to the white/black, human/nonhuman binary that Butler’s creolization sets spinning out, as it were, into outer space, both terms cannot not stay intact but must be mutually transformed, and with it the concept of the human that “while still retaining its original character will, in being resituated and recombined, remain itself by becoming something new and distinctive.”<sup>112</sup> Such is the aim of Butler’s creolizing constructs through which the genre of science fiction is itself constructed: to transform both black and white, male and female, the human and its other—neither leaving these binary terms in a permanently static state nor, however, erasing their difference either. Such a metamorphosis moreover requires not only hybridity but also ambiguity and dynamism, but not as some postmodern ethos of hybridity for hybridity’s sake or ambiguity for ambiguity’s sake, etc. Butler’s vision of metamorphosis is a specific political call for freedom and liberation from the ongoing production of a “exclusionary moral, material, and aesthetic norm” of the human that depends on the dehumanization and enslavement of others as a necessary condition for its existence.<sup>113</sup> In the “resituating and recombining” of the human genre to become

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<sup>110</sup> Jane Anna Gordon, *Creolizing Political Theory: Reading Rousseau Through Fanon* (New York: Fordham, 2014), 6.

<sup>111</sup> Gordon, *Creolizing Political Theory*, 6.

<sup>112</sup> Gordon, *Creolizing Political Theory*, 5.

<sup>113</sup> Monahan, *The Creolizing Subject*, 84.

“something new and distinctive” what we see in Butler’s creolization is a return of the same, the return of past tropes, traumatic slave histories, and ways of being, but with a future oriented difference. She puts *what has been* in direct confrontation with *what is yet to be*, placing the reader directly in this revolutionary interstitial and temporal space precisely to break the hold of dualistic thinking, not reinforce it.

Butler’s illustration of the call to overturn the colonial paradigm of racial/human purity through a creolizing praxis cannot be separated from one of its essential ingredients, blackness, which hybridity also de-specifies (in a utopia-like state where racial matters no longer matter). This has led some critics to instead frame her hybrid discourse in terms of “miscegenation.” In his essay on “The miscegenate fictions of Octavia Butler,” Roger Luckhurst aims to find a link that connects all of Butler’s works and finds that the “notion of hybridity” is unable to “help explain both the thematics of inter-racial and inter-species relations as well as Butler’s slippage into the strictly demarcated sets of science-fiction, African-American fiction, and post-coloniality.”<sup>114</sup> He instead prefers the term “miscegenation.” He admits to it being problematic, citing Stephanie Smith who writes that “this term not only trails a violent political history in the United States but is also dependent on a eugenicist, genocidal concept of illegitimate matings.”<sup>115</sup> Luckhurst finds that the concept of illegitimacy *is* the point of Butler’s works and thus takes up “miscegenation” as what

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<sup>114</sup> Roger Luckhurst, “‘Horror and Beauty in Rare Combination’: The Miscegenate Fictions of Octavia Butler,” *Women: A Cultural Review* 7.1 (1996): 30.

<sup>115</sup> Quoted by Luckhurst, “Horror and Beauty,” 31. See also Stephanie A. Smith, “Morphing, Materialism, and the Marketing of *Xenogenesis*,” *Genders* 18 (Winter 1993): 67-86.



links the slave narrative of *Kindred* to the far-futures of *Patternmaster*,  
 “Bloodchild,”

and *Xenogenesis*; it motors her concern with political history and evolutionary theory. It also retrieves ‘hybridity’ from its de-specified historical vacuity and returns it from an automatic utopianism, for Butler’s work if anything, addresses the historical horror, dubious complicities, responsibilities and desires of the always ‘inappropriate’ miscegenate.<sup>116</sup>

Butler indeed “addresses the historical horror” of the “inappropriate” cross-pollination that has been disavowed as part of the diasporic black experience but she universalizes it as inevitable process of human evolution, thus turning the “historical horror” related to it on its head. More specifically, in her analysis of the trilogy, Amanda Boulter astutely observes, “The narrative representation of this inter-species reproduction is framed by the context of historical miscegenation, but it does not repeat its value.”<sup>117</sup> While the term miscegenation does mark racial history more than hybridity does without indeed repeating its value (as with all things, Butler reevaluates its prior value), I find it a bit too historically limiting and US legal-centric for Butler’s global futuristic vision, especially as she populates her worlds with characters from all nationalities. Like hybridity it also does not sufficiently theorize the constancy of transmutation, metamorphosis and openness that is essential for Butler’s re-valuations of self and others (and culture broadly). Perhaps Butler’s sustained focus on transformation is nowhere else more

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<sup>116</sup> Luckhurst, “Horror and Beauty,” 31.

<sup>117</sup> Amanda, Boulter, “Polymorphous Futures: Octavia E. Butler’s *Xenogenesis* Trilogy,” in *American Bodies: Cultural Histories of the Physique*, ed. Tim Armstrong, (New York: NYU Press, 1996), 178.

directly stated than in the religious mantra of Lauren Oya Olamina, the protagonist in her later *Parable* series: “God is Change...God exists to shape and be shaped.”<sup>118</sup> Hybridity in all its “automatic utopianism” thus becomes too broad and dissolvent while miscegenation suffers from the opposite problem, being too legally rooted in a specific time and place. Both terms also rely on a fixity that denies the dynamic “changing” that flourishes throughout her works.

Creolization as I am reading it in and through Butler holds on to the notion of hybridity and miscegenation, thus marking race, historical violence, and illicit mixtures leading to ongoing metamorphosis all at once, without remaining either too broad or too specific in its praxis of being human. As Gordon makes clear, the concept of creolization emerged “out of the violent displacement of plantation societies of early global modernity.”<sup>119</sup> Butler is very much attentive to this “violent displacement” and the ways in which, as Gordon writes, “Out of such violent ruptures, new perspectives based largely on reinvention and recontextualization began to take shape...Perhaps most significantly, what resulted were *illicit blendings* or those that, unlike other instances of cultural mixture, referred to symbolic creativities combining contributions from those thought incapable of it *and* from those with greater power.”<sup>120</sup> Butler’s “reinvention and recontextualization” of the human via her own “illicit” mixtures with the alien indeed requires creatively “combining contributions” of human and nonhuman, white and black, male and female, self and other. Melzer asserts that in Butler’s trilogy, “The familiar order of power relationships based on dualisms” becomes unsustainable, and “Instead,

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<sup>118</sup> Octavia E. Butler, *Parable of the Talents*, (New York: Warner Books 1998), 92.

<sup>119</sup> Gordon, *Creolizing Political Theory*, 11.

<sup>120</sup> Gordon, *Creolizing Political Theory*, 10, emphasis in original.

the other becomes inseparable from the self, thereby threatening clear distinctions and ideological territories. The other, the alien, takes up the position of normative existence while the self becomes other.”<sup>121</sup> This constant movement and upheaval, as well as rendering clear-cut borders between self and other porous and ambiguous, allows Butler to inversely mirror such “violent displacement” as she works with rather than against the dynamism of the regenerating, shapeshifting alien. Constant movement and reinvention (which shapeshifting exemplifies) allow for both sides of the self/other binary to stay in flux and to remain flexible in relation to one another throughout her tale, rather than in state of “purity and stasis”<sup>122</sup> within a hierarchal structure. Butler does bring us to Bhabha’s “interstitial passage between fixed identifications”<sup>123</sup> of the human/nonhuman, white/black binary but not for long, for in the end she ultimately privileges the nonhuman’s way of being human, the Oankali way of craving, not fearing, difference.<sup>124</sup> As an inverse mirroring of whiteness alone that, as Toni Morrison argues is “mute, meaningless, unfathomable, pointless, frozen, veiled, curtailed, dreaded, senseless, [and] implacable,”<sup>125</sup> the fluidity of the “nonhuman” points instead to a vital and potent blackness that, freed from its shackles, breathes new life into an open and dynamic notion of humanity.

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<sup>121</sup> Melzer, *Alien Constructions*, 65.

<sup>122</sup> Boulter, “Polymorphous Futures,” 181.

<sup>123</sup> Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 4.

<sup>124</sup> Butler, *Lilith’s Brood*, 329.

<sup>125</sup> Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*, (New York: Vintage, 1992), 59.

Even though the term creolization emerges as a process and methodology of Caribbean thought,<sup>126</sup> it is nonetheless part and parcel of Black feminist thought in the U.S., relating directly as it does to what Barbara Christian describes as the theme of the “tragic mulatta” that “reveals the conflict of values that blacks faced as a *conquered* people.”<sup>127</sup> Writing specifically about African American literature in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> Century, Christian goes on to state that

In her very being, the mulatta called up the illicit crossing between cultures. She is American in that she emerges out of the sexual relationship between a black slave mother and a white slave master, a sexual relationship denying the most basic philosophical concept of slavery—that blacks were not human beings. Do humans mate with nonhumans, and if they do, what is the product, human or nonhuman? As the white slave master entered the bodies of countless black women, he knew of her being, her humanness.<sup>128</sup>

The notion that by entering (and raping) the “bodies of countless black women” the white slave master “knew” of her “humanness,” is highly questionable, especially giving the important distinction that Hortense Spillers makes between the “body” and the “flesh.” I further elaborate on Spillers thought later in this chapter. Here, I highlight the philosophical inquiry that Christian ponders, which could not be more aptly applied to Octavia Butler’s speculative thought as Marlene Barr so astutely observes. Indeed, what

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<sup>126</sup> See Edouard Glissant’s, “Creolization in the Making of the Americas,” *Caribbean Quarterly* 54.1/2 (March 2008): 81-89;

<sup>127</sup> Barbara Christian, “Images of Black Women in Afro-American Literature: From Stereotype to Character,” in *Black Feminist Criticism: Perspectives on Black Women Writers*, (New York: Pergamon Press, 1985), 3, emphasis in original.

<sup>128</sup> Barbara Christian, “Images of Black Women,” 3. Also quoted in Barr, *Lost in Space*, 100.

is the “product” of human-nonhuman mating? As Barr notes in discussing *Dawn*, the first book of the trilogy, Butler is concerned with a “new biological something, the third kind resulting from black women’s close encounters with aliens.” This figure of “the third kind” which indeed is the “child born of black and white—or human and extraterrestrial—parents,”<sup>129</sup> is examined thoroughly in my analysis of both *Adulthood Rites*, and *Imago*, the second and third books in the series, as creolizing construct offspring that alter the poles of dualistic identity without, however, erasing them completely.

Beyond establishing creolization as a theoretical framework through which to read the content of Butler’s work, throughout this project I am also attentive to her creolizing praxis in interweaving disparate discourses and disciplinary fields. Butler places Afro-diasporic histories, traumas, and tropes not only “into dialogue with Biblical discourse”<sup>130</sup> but also into dialogue with scientific discourse, as she re-envisions and intervenes in racist real-life scientific practices such as those highlighted by Henrietta Lacks’ infamous story of an expropriated cell line. In addition to this, she adds to the mix generic science fiction discourse, which includes, as Rojer Luckhurst notes, her “sly rewriting of science-fiction tropes.”<sup>131</sup> Abstracting these discourses, we find that she simultaneously puts into play clearly demarcated disciplines that range from history and religion to science and literary genre studies, without privileging one over the others. Rarely has scholarship on Butler’s trilogy tried to integrate all of these disparate disciplinary discourses to get a more comprehensive grasp of her creolizing praxis in

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<sup>129</sup> Barr, *Lost in Space*, 100.

<sup>130</sup> Peppers, “Dialogic Origins,” 50.

<sup>131</sup> Luckhurst, “Horror and Beauty,” 30.

envisioning an ethical human being that is not divided and reduced into its many disparate parts, but rather who contains them all. Using creolization as a methodology allows me to grapple with both the breadth and depth of her work; that is, with all the different discursive threads she weaves together to form a cohesive whole that includes all three novels, rather than engaging with the work in a fragmentary and separatist way. In the following section, I further place Butler's creolizing project in direct conversation with Gloria Anzaldúa's call for a *new mestizaje* consciousness and the necessity of developing tolerance for ambiguity as we "illicitly" cross set borders.

### **On Tolerance for Ambiguity and Developing a New Consciousness**

One constant evident in my engagement here with the criticism of Butler's work is that there is an ambivalence in the images she depicts that in turn produce ambiguity for her readers. Butler never provides an easy way out, or right or wrong clear-cut answers in her *otherworldly* worlds, as the various interpretations of the trilogy explored in this chapter demonstrate. As I later examine, what the Oankali think is right, to end the human reproduction of sameness that will inevitably lead to self-destruction, is very much contested in the second book of the trilogy. Through the intermediary figure of Akin, the protagonist of that story, the Oankali come to change their mind on sterilizing all the "resisters," while still, however, slyly turning them into literal extraterrestrials. This praxis of embracing ambiguity at all levels of the text, from generating contradictory interpretations of the text to producing (gendered and racially) ambiguous characters, speaks further to overturning Collins' "construct of dichotomous oppositional difference" that coincides with Gloria Anzaldúa's call for embracing ambiguity in order for a

“massive uprooting of dualistic thinking” to take place.<sup>132</sup> In *Borderlands/La Frontera*, Anzaldúa, like Butler, thinks deeply about “racial, ideological, cultural and biological cross-pollination” which for her results in an “alien consciousness” present in the making of what she calls “a new *mestiza* consciousness, *una conciencia de mujer*. It is a consciousness of the Borderlands.”<sup>133</sup> Anzaldúa plays off the earlier work of the Mexican philosopher José Vasconcelos, who called for a cosmic mixture of races that results in “hybrid progeny, a mutable, more malleable species with a rich gene pool,” which is exemplified throughout Butler’s work.<sup>134</sup> The term *Mestizaje* indicates racial and biological miscegenation and crossbreeding as well as a general fusion and blending of ideologies and cultures and it arises from the contemplation of crossing set national, cultural and sexual borders; in other words, from the lived experience of Anzaldúa herself. Both Collins and Anzaldúa emphasize women of color feminism as specific sites for the uprooting of dualistic thought. Anzaldúa specifically links aliens and women of color, as does Marleen Barr’s discussion of SF feminism in the introduction to this chapter. Importantly, Anzaldúa argues that “the new mestiza copes by developing a tolerance for contradictions, a tolerance for ambiguity,”<sup>135</sup> which is what is needed for

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<sup>132</sup> Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1987), 102. Of peculiar interest, both Butler and Anzaldúa were grappling with creolizing concepts and alien progeny at the same time as both *Dawn* and *Borderlands* were published the same year. For an excellent comparison of *Borderlands/La Frontera* and Butler’s other novels, *Wild Seed* and *Parable of the Sower*, see Catherine S. Ramírez, “Cyborg Feminism: The Science Fiction of Octavia E. Butler and Gloria Anzaldúa,” in *Reload: Rethinking Women + Cyberculture* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2002).

<sup>133</sup> Anzaldúa, *Borderlands*, 99.

<sup>134</sup> Anzaldúa, *Borderlands*, 99. See also José Vasconcelos, *La Raza Cósmica: Misión de la Raza Ibero-Americana* (México: S.A. de Ediciones, 1961).

<sup>135</sup> Anzaldúa, *Borderlands*, 101.

such massive uprooting to occur; and this could also well be the definitive statement on Butler's trilogy and every other one of her other works. Anzaldúa further argues that "in attempting to work out a synthesis, the self has added a third element which is greater than the sum of its severed parts. That third element is a new consciousness—a *mestiza* consciousness—and though it is a source of intense pain, its energy comes from continual creative motion that keeps breaking down the unitary aspect of each new paradigm."<sup>136</sup>

By creating a new mythos—that is, change the way we perceive reality, the way we see

ourselves, and the ways we behave—*la mestiza* creates a new consciousness. The work of the *mestiza* consciousness is to break down the subject-object duality that keeps her a prisoner and to show in the flesh and through 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.<sup>137</sup>

In this chapter, I read Butler as "*la mestiza*" par excellence, indeed as practicing the tenets of third world feminism by being inclusive of all her oppressed sisters. This is borne out most in *Imago*, the third book of the trilogy, in which Butler not only casts the majority of the human resisters as being of Latin American descent, but re-envision the

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<sup>136</sup> Anzaldúa, *Borderlands*, 101-2.

<sup>137</sup> Anzaldúa, *Borderlands*, 102.



story of the “First Mother” as a Mexican woman who endured abominable gang-rape and miraculously gives birth to a child named “Adan” or Adam. The exact ways in which Butler reimagines this formative Judeo-Christian myth of genesis is examined in the following chapter where I situate *Imago* alongside her earlier work, *Wild Seed*, and discuss Butler’s first configuration of Lilith in the figure of Anyanwu, the immortal shapeshifting heroine of *Seed*. Within the trilogy as a whole, I further explore how Butler incorporates and envisions Anzaldúa’s “third element” in the creation of a “new mythos” that leads us away from the mythos of whiteness (and the hierarchal white/black binary), which moreover entails *trans*/formations that move beyond the binaries of gender and sex, categories that further mark the boundaries by which the “human” is standardized. Throughout the rest of this chapter and beyond, I further follow the ways in which Butler works through such changes in “the way we perceive reality, the way we see ourselves, and the way we behave” by specifically showing us “in the flesh and through images” how duality can be transcended within the ever-mutable genre of SF.<sup>138</sup> I argue that she achieves these changes through depicting creolizing technologies of selfhood that develop a tolerance of ambiguity that then sustains a dynamic, and shapeshifting notion of self that can conceive of the human elsewhere, in a different spatial site of embodiment, becoming a “Human Other,” who is then reconstituted within the human self. What regulates the two poles of self and other is the third alien consciousness that arises from their crossbreeding that produces a new third biological “kind,” different from and thus alien to either of its “parents.”<sup>139</sup> Butler’s saga suggests that it is only

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<sup>138</sup> Ibid.

<sup>139</sup> Cathy Peppers, “Dialogic Origins,” 47.

through this “third alien kind” of progeny that a revaluation of self and other can take place, as well as lead us to a new way of life that is free “of rape, of violence, [and] of war.”<sup>140</sup> I turn now to explore how Butler’s creolizing images that, in constructing a “third kind,” alter the depiction of both the Human and its Other, and in doing so moves us beyond dualistic ways of thinking about these two relational terms.

### **On the Alien Encounter: Setting the Stage**

I begin at the start of Butler’s first book *Dawn*, under the section titled “Womb,” which describes an “Awakening” of the main protagonist, and then lay out how she stages her protagonist’s first encounter with the terrifyingly nonhuman, *the out of this world*, which turns out also to be *part of this world*. The opening lines of the novel read:

Alive!

Still alive.

Alive ... again.<sup>141</sup>

So begins Butler’s grand take on the alien invasion contagion narrative, with the word “alive” thrice repeated. This brief three-line opening already foreshadows her story of survival, of intermixture with living plastic beings and their equally living and pliable technology, of birth and rebirth, and of a repetition of the same but with a difference (*an exclamation mark, a period, an ellipsis*), that also speak to the story’s ambiguity and contradictions —*still* alive and alive *again*—and lastly, it speaks of the trilogy itself, of a story with three reverberations, a story that with three strikes of the hammer reveals a new stage in human evolution through metamorphosis and mutation. Butler also begins

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<sup>140</sup> Anzaldúa, *Borderlands*, 102.

<sup>141</sup> Butler, *Lilith’s Brood*, 5.

with a trinity of life itself, impossible life after nuclear holocaust, after apocalypse, and so *defiant life*. Directly thereafter we are introduced to Lilith, the heroine of the tale, “gasping, shaking with the force of her effort” to awaken, and her heart beating too fast, as “she curled around it, fetal, helpless. Circulation began to return to her arms and legs in flurries of minute, exquisite pains.”<sup>142</sup> The image here is of birth pangs, something being born, reanimated, and awakened, the “dawn” of a new humanity founded on the “exquisite pains” of a black female body. After being “reconciled to reanimation” Lilith looks around to find a “room dimly-lit” with light-colored walls, “white or gray, perhaps.” Here, she remains “sealed” in a “windowless, doorless cubicle” with voices that “came to her from above like the light...The entire ceiling seemed to be a speaker and a light—and perhaps a ventilator since the air remained fresh. She imagined herself to be in a large box, like a rat in a cage.”<sup>143</sup> The last telling detail is of a long scar across her stomach that she mysteriously acquired in previous “awakenings” leading her to think that, “she did not own herself any longer. Even her flesh could be cut and stitched without her consent or knowledge,” though it resulted in no “pain or disability.”<sup>144</sup> This “cut” we later find out, refers to the removal of her cancer cells and is the main reason for the Oankali’s interest in cross-pollinating with humanity. The first chapter ends with Lilith wondering who or what her captors are. There is no alien encounter yet and no indication of just what kind of story this is: from the opening pages of the text, “genre” itself is called into question. What we have here is an indeterminate beginning, and to analyze it in more depth, the stage for the encounter with the alien must fully be set.

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<sup>142</sup> Butler, *Lilith’s Brood*, 5.

<sup>143</sup> Butler, *Lilith’s Brood*, 7.

<sup>144</sup> Butler, *Lilith’s Brood*, 6-7.

The alien encounter begins after a long wait for Lilith, when finally a voice nearby speaks her name, an “unusual, quiet, androgynous voice.” Lilith looks around and “in one corner she found the shadowy figure of a man, thin and long-haired.” But looks, or rather *shadows*, can be deceiving and when the heroine asks the “man” who “he” is, the answer is: “I’m not a man. I’m not a human being.”<sup>145</sup> This *non-man, non-human* then tells Lilith, it does not come from “some other world” but “from a number of other worlds.” As the lights brighten in the closed-in room, we get the first description of the alien: “What had seemed to be a tall, slender man was still humanoid, but it had no nose—no bulge, no nostrils—just flat, gray skin. It was gray all over—pale gray skin, darker gray hair on its head.”<sup>146</sup> *Contra* the “dramatic polarity created by skin color” that Morrison dissects as allowing for the projection of the “not-me” from the “not-free,”<sup>147</sup> the grayness of this alien, its “gray skin,” denotes a color outside of the constructed racial poles of the human and marks the illicit mixture of black and white (where the colors blend in the middle) that within the politics of racial purity is set outside the boundaries of humanity, which Butler here illustrates as a monstrosity. This gray bodily image prefigures the “enforced hybridity” to come in Butler of the human/nonhuman,<sup>148</sup> and also indicates where Butler the storyteller suspends her reader: in a gray zone, an ambiguous intervening space. The alien’s description continues with “hair [that] grew down around its eyes and ears and at its throat.” But on closer inspection Lilith gasps when she notices the hair move, which comes with a realization: “Medusa. Some of the

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<sup>145</sup> Butler, *Lilith’s Brood*, 11.

<sup>146</sup> Butler, *Lilith’s Brood*, 12.

<sup>147</sup> Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (New York: Vintage, 1992), 38.

<sup>148</sup> Melzer, *Alien Constructions*, 56.

‘hair’ writhed independently, a nest of snakes startled, driven in all directions.”<sup>149</sup> The alien explains that “They’re not separate animals... They’re sensory organs. They’re no more dangerous than your nose or eyes... We need them in the same way you need your ears, nose, and eyes.” Then another important detail emerges

The tentacles were elastic. At her shout some of them lengthened, stretching toward her. She imagined big, slowly writhing, dying night crawlers stretched along the sidewalk after a rain. She imagined small, tentacled sea slugs—nudibranchs—grown impossibly to human size and shape, and obscenely, sounding more like a human being than some humans.<sup>150</sup>

These snake-like tentacles that are really “sense organs” exposed and turned inside out are what make all Oankali so repulsive to humans, and I read them first and foremost through what the black feminist scholar, Nicole R. Fleetwood, calls “excess flesh” and “hypervisibility.” Fleetwood is interested in how black women artists and cultural producers deploy the notion of “hypervisibility” as a strategy in their practice, with the term referring to “a racialized construct with gendered implications and particularities,”<sup>151</sup> which can well define the alien examined here that Lilith first encounters. Fleetwood notes how “the black female body as excessive body” has been widely explored in scholarship and larger cultural debates on race, gender, and representation, and goes on to cite Daphne Brooks who writes,

Black women’s bodies continue to bear the gross insult and burden of spectacular

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<sup>149</sup> Butler, *Lilith’s Brood*, 13.

<sup>150</sup> Butler, *Lilith’s Brood*, 14.

<sup>151</sup> Nicole R. Fleetwood, “Excess Flesh: Black Women Performing Hypervisibility,” in *Troubling Vision: Performance, Visuality, and Blackness* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 114.

(representational) exploitation in transatlantic culture. Systematically overdetermined and mythically configured, the iconography of the black female body remains the central urtext of alienation in transatlantic culture... Yet there are ways to read the viability of black women making use of their own materiality within narratives in which they are the subjects.<sup>152</sup>

Is it such a coincidence that Lilith, at the moment of coming face to face with the excessive flesh of the Oankali, is herself suffering from extreme alienation and is the most estranged human alive in the universe? This enactment of excess alien flesh on Butler's part seems very much to correspond to the "the strategic use of hypervisibility" that Fleetwood describes as part of black women artists' cultural throwing into relief the historical terror of gendered, anti-black violence. In the initial encounter with the *non-man, non-human* highlighted above, one can thus read Lilith as coming face to face with an estranged version of herself as "systematically overdetermined and mythically configured": from *Lilith* to *Medusa*, which is to say, from one monster to another. Her eventual acceptance of linking into the excessive, hyper-visible tentacles of the Oankali suggests an overture of making peace with and healing from the generational violence inflicted on black women's exploited bodies.

The hypervisibility of writhing organs turned inside out also brings to mind Hortense Spiller's important distinction, in her celebrated essay, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," of "the body" and "the flesh." Spiller imposes such distinction "as the central one between captive and liberated subject-positions. In that sense, before the 'body' there is the 'flesh' that zero degree of social

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<sup>152</sup> Quoted by Fleetwood, "Excess Flesh," 105.

conceptualization that does not escape concealment under the brush of discourse or the reflexes of iconography.”<sup>153</sup> The flesh serves as the site of vulnerability and violation in the captive subject, which for Spillers is the primary narrative under which the enslaved is unmade during the Middle Passage (or *vestibule*) prior to entering American culture. I will return to Spiller on this latter point when I engage with criticism of the Oankali spaceship as a slave ship, but for now I would like to stay with the “flesh,” and its distinction from the “body.” In Spiller’s conceptualization, the body represents legal personhood. In other words, a liberated person “has” a body insofar as they are a legal subject with rights that a state recognizes. The enslaved person, on the other hand, is designated as “flesh” rather than someone who has a body, and as such is one that is deprived of the basic necessities of humanity. In analyzing the processes through which enslaved people are transformed into flesh, and then analyzing how they are subjected to the pleasure of the legally recognized person, Spillers shows how “the flesh” entails the interweaving of liberated and captive subjects, the reverberations of which continue into the 21st century and with Octavia Butler, far beyond. For some humans to enjoy and have access to personhood, other humans must be designated as and be reduced to flesh. Such ensnarement of the body and the flesh and the liberated and captivated body, is at once a crisscrossing and compromising of the white/black and human/nonhuman polarities, which further ties back to the alien’s “gray skin” as well as the gray zone in which Butler’s futuristic vision places the reader and in which dualistic thought is

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<sup>153</sup> Hortense J. Spillers, “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book,” in *Black and White and in Color: Essays on American Literature and Culture*, (2003), 206. Fleetwood’s analysis of excess flesh explicitly develops out of Spiller’s seminal essay.

suspended or at the least called into question. Furthermore, Spillers notes that for the captive, “this body whose flesh carries the female and male to the frontiers of survival bears in the person the marks of a cultural text whose inside has been turned outside.”<sup>154</sup> I believe one can read the so-called colonizing Oankali as hypervisible figures of excess flesh, inverted to the extent that they appear as a liberated collective body and carry the captivated “humans” to “the frontiers of the survival,” all the while bearing the marks of the “cultural text” of imperialism, colonization and domination that has been turned inside out, which is to say *overturned*. The process of turning not just “cultural texts” but also the polarity of black and white skin color and its associated and entrenched narratives inside out cannot be extricated from the status of the “Outsider Within” of black feminist thought proposed by Collins. Throughout this chapter I reconfigure such a *turning out* as “inverse mirroring,” which reflects back “images of the same” but with an excessive, hyper-visible and upended difference.

The chapter on the alien encounter ends with the alien whose name turns out to be “Jdahya” informing Lilith they are in its home, which is a ship “in orbit around your Earth, somewhat beyond the orbit of Earth’s moon” and it is holding all the humans who survived the destruction of nuclear war: “We collected as many as we could. The ones we didn’t find in time died of injury, disease, hunger, radiation, cold... We found them later.”<sup>155</sup> In other words, every surviving human, humanity itself, is onboard the ship being kept in “suspended animation” and thus *under total alien control*. Lastly, Jdahya tells Lilith how long she has been asleep: “About...two hundred and fifty of your years”

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<sup>154</sup> Spillers, “Mama’s Baby,” 207.

<sup>155</sup> Butler, *Lilith’s Brood*, 14-5.



because, he reasons, “you were like your world. You needed time to heal. And we needed time to learn more about your kind.”<sup>156</sup> So, the “alien” objective of this two hundred and fifty intervening-year period, of this *momentary suspension of worldly time*, is for the healing of both human self and human world; healing as well as understanding of another “kind,” of the alien difference of the human, for humans are initially just as alien to the Oankali as they are to us. The difference of this difference is the *approach to* what is other to the self, which is marked here by understanding and then improving the state of a deeply wounded, self-annihilating other: *humankind*.

With this introduction to Butler’s trilogy, we can begin to answer the question one must pose when dealing with SF alien encounters: what type of “alien” is at work in the text and what aspects of humanity does it “illustrate and comment on”?<sup>157</sup> While Butler takes her time in revealing all the aspects of the Oankali (each hybrid offspring in subsequent books reveals something new), we can surmise from the opening pages that these androgynous, gray-skinned, multi-tentacled beings of excess flesh, not from one origin but multiple ones (“from a number of other worlds”) are in and of themselves already open, creolizing, as well as nonbinary figures. They furthermore foreshadow the human-alien creolizing construct offspring in the second book of the trilogy, which Butler more directly links to racial mixture and its attendant monstrosities. After her ordeal in the first book—being rejected by the first group of humans who turn on her as a “traitor” of humanity for accepting the Oankali’s breeding plan and thus becoming a “trader” of genes—Lilith stays aboard the alien ship, made of, like all Oankali

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<sup>156</sup> Butler, *Lilith’s Brood*, 18

<sup>157</sup> Gary Westfahl, “Aliens in Space,” in *The Greenwood Encyclopedia of Science Fiction and Fantasy: Themes, Works, and Wonders* (Westwood: Greenwood Press, 2005), 16

technology, “living matter.”<sup>158</sup> There, bereft of any human companions as she was at the start of the novel, she finds out that Nikanj has impregnated her by surprise with the seed of Joseph, her human partner of Chinese descent who was killed by the other humans in rebellion against the trade. With advanced genetic engineering, the sperm Nikanj collected from Joseph (and mixed with that of the Oankali) will go on to produce generations of creolizing constructs, long after the physical body of the man has died, suggesting a type of immortality in *an everlasting seed*. In the last moments of the novel, however, Lilith is left in an initial state of horror at the thought of the alien half-breed growing in her womb, fearing that what is inside her “will be a thing...not human...A monster.”<sup>159</sup> Such a “monster” becomes the protagonist of *Adulthood Rites*, where racial mixture becomes more explicitly marked, and later the hero of *Imago*.

### **On Inverse Mirroring**

While critics of Butler have previously grappled with her use of reversals and inversions, the overturning of colonial paradigms of mythic purity is rarely examined in depth. Peter Sands has notably commented on Butler’s rhetorical use of “doubling and reversal” via the figure of the “chiasmus” and most prominently “her inversion of narrative point of view from colonizer to colonized” in order to create “narrative tension” and analyze her many otherings.<sup>160</sup> While she certainly achieves these things, her use of hyper-visible inversions, as I read it here, has a much more political dimension and revolutionary thrust than merely creating narrative tension, and it is achieved by a mirroring that is at once

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<sup>158</sup> Butler, *Lilith’s Brood*, 142.

<sup>159</sup> Butler, *Lilith’s Brood*, 247.

<sup>160</sup> Peter Sands, “Octavia Butler’s Chiastic Cannibalistics,” *Utopian Studies* 14.1 (2003): 11/9.

turned on its head, which allows for the possibility of a different trajectory of history to unfold rather than an estranged parallel journey. It is also an intervention, as I noted in the previous section. The mirroring of the slave trade offers is one such example, one which has troubled some of Butler's critics, in which she curatively inverts a historical trauma and trope in order to re-value it, and steer us towards a world different from both slavery and, to borrow Saidiya Hartman's phrase, from "the afterlife of slavery," which is slavery's enduring presence in the now.<sup>161</sup> Jeffrey Tucker notes that some critics read Lilith's two hundred and fifty-year suspended state of animation as a "temporal distortion" similar to the "experience of enslaved Africans who endured the Middle Passage."<sup>162</sup> Tucker goes on to state that

The 'slavery' hypothesis allows readers to view race not as essence but as a culmination of historical events; that is, the trilogy's white characters live a history comparable to that which contributed to the production of African-American identity. Such readings support a view of the Oankali programme [*sic*] of interbreeding with humanity as a form of 'coerced miscegenation,' comparable to the rape of black slave women by white owners and overseers, which would increase their owners' stock.<sup>163</sup>

He further alludes to the interpretations of Lilith's enforced pregnancy to which she gave no consent and experienced as an "invasion of her body echo[ing] the ambivalent feelings

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<sup>161</sup> See Saidiya Hartman, *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route* (New York: Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux, 2007).

<sup>162</sup> Jeffrey A. Tucker, "'The Human Contradiction': Identity and/as Essence in Octavia E. Butler's 'Xenogenesis' Trilogy," *The Yearbook of English Studies* 37.2 (2007): 172.

<sup>163</sup> Tucker, "Human Contradiction, 172.

of these women slaves whose pregnancies were the result of forced matings or rape.”<sup>164</sup> Lilith initially does echo “ambivalent feelings” related to the project of gene trading but in the course of the story comes to be at peace with it, as when she states in the last book, “Now I feel as though I’ve loved Nikanj all my life. Ooloi are dangerously easy to love.”<sup>165</sup> Tucker ultimately reads the “slavery hypothesis” as overdetermined by the author’s race, citing Butler herself as stating “The only places I am writing about slavery...is where I actually say so” like, for example, in her book *Kindred*.<sup>166</sup> This is also supported by her opening pages where she imagines herself to be in a “large box, like a rat in a cage,” which brings to mind scientific experimentation on animals more than it does tightly packed human cargo or sexual exploitation.<sup>167</sup> Tucker rightly notes that “there is an anticolonial approach to the human side of Butler’s contact narratives, [though] the author’s aliens...are not necessarily figures for white owners and overseers”<sup>168</sup> and that “despite the limitation of the slave hypothesis” that allows for the interpretation of “the Oankali as slave masters . . . race still matters.”<sup>169</sup>

Race indeed matters to Butler, as do the historical conditions of slavery, but such matters she serves to us through inverse mirror imaging, such that they *return* at the same time that they *overturn* these *inhuman* histories and ongoing practices; with Butler’s *inversions* come *conversions*. If we are to contemplate the spaceship in which humans are ontologically suspended as echoing the Middle Passage, it is an echo or a repetition with

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<sup>164</sup> Quoted by Tucker, “Human Contradiction, 172-3.

<sup>165</sup> Butler, *Lilith’s Brood*, 671.

<sup>166</sup> Quoted by Tucker, “Human Contradiction, 173. See also,

<sup>167</sup> Butler, *Lilith’s Brood*, 7.

<sup>168</sup> Tucker, “Human Contradiction, 173

<sup>169</sup> Tucker, “Human Contradiction, 174

a major difference in that for Butler that gestation period does not lead to a parallel slavery and enclosure of blackness (or its opposite) that stabilizes and secures the “purity” of humanity, but rather to an opening up of these fixed racial categories, which is to say an opening of the category of the human itself. As I noted earlier, such suspension serves the purpose of healing a wounded humankind, not perpetually inflicting more pain on it. In Butler, the human passengers-*qua*-slaves are not dying by the thousands in a miserable state of existence but are instead merely peacefully at rest, awaiting their time of resurrection, a second chance at life. Furthermore, the 250 year-period of resting in a healing suspended animation matches the 250 years during which black people suffered under slavery. I further read her work as taking up the challenge that W.E.B. Du Bois took up decades before of not only geographic and linguistic remapping but also, as Amy Kaplan notes, of rewriting historical narratives by imagining “counter-histories...that gesture toward alternative futures of *what might have been and might yet be*.”<sup>170</sup> Butler imagines such “counter-histories” by first situating the human in a suspended space in which both its unmaking as well as re-making takes place. I turn again to Spiller’s seminal work that analyzes such suspension and with which Butler’s project is closely aligned.

Those African persons in “Middle Passage” were literally suspended in the oceanic, if we

think of the latter in its Freudian orientation as an analogy of undifferentiated

identity: removed from the indigenous land and culture, and not-yet “American”

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<sup>170</sup> Amy Kaplan, “The Imperial Cartography of W.E.B. Du Bois” in *The Anarchy of Empire in the Making of U.S. Culture* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002), 209, emphasis added.

either, these captives without names that their captors would recognize, were in movement across the Atlantic, but they were *nowhere* at all. Because, on any given day, we might imagine, the captive personality did not know where s/he was, we could say that they were the culturally “unmade,” thrown in the midst of a figurative darkness that exposed their destinies to an unknown course. Often enough for the captains of these galleys, navigational science of the day was not sufficient to guarantee the intended destination. We might say that the slave ship, its crew, and its human-as-cargo stand for a wild and unclaimed richness of *possibility* that is not interrupted, not counted/accounted, or differentiated, until its movement gains the land thousands of miles away from the point of departure.

Under these conditions, one is neither female, nor male, as both subjects are taken into account as quantities.<sup>171</sup>

Such African captives went through a process of “ungendering” that affectively stripped them of all their individuality as well as humanity as both male and female became a quantity translated into monetary terms. Such unmaking of the human and its concurrent metamorphosis, it must be emphasized, happens in a vestibular, womb-like and in-between space of the *middle* that is neither Africa nor the “New World” but *an eclipsed center* that is effectively “*nowhere* at all.” For Spillers, the slave ship and everyone aboard is in a suspended state of animation that represents the rich and untapped possibilities of what the human can become, a powerful site of exploration, before the captive and enslaved are differentiated upon reaching the land “thousands of miles away from the point of departure.” It is this rich conceptual middle space that enables Butler to

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<sup>171</sup> Spillers, “Mama’s Baby,” 214-15, emphasis in original.

forge speculative subjectivities and brood over the many possibilities of human embodiment and ways of connecting with one another. It is also an interstitial space of turning things inside out, turning the historically constituted human liberated subject into its captive nonhuman other and vice-versa, the previously “nonhuman” comes to take the central position of the human. Such overturning inevitably changes the trajectory of the historical slave ship to a literal “New World” built on the destruction of the previous historical one. Butler does more, however, than merely evoke this notion of an eclipsed “middle” space in the setting of the Oankali ship orbiting earth; she also depicts its embodiment in the figures of the creolizing construct of Akin and as I go on to argue of the shapeshifting final ooloi construct, Jodahs, who has two hearts and an eclipsed alien organ in between them.

As to a dominant critique of the ending of the first book, *Dawn*, of Lilith having no consent to being initially impregnated, she was nonetheless already complicit with the entire Oankali program of genetic trading and what her role was to be in it. It indeed comes as a surprise but here it is a question not of *if* but *when* she was going to get impregnated. Here, there is also a mirroring of *what has been* in regards to the “American obsession with ‘pure blood,’”<sup>172</sup> the inevitable coercion of white women specifically to submit to and uphold notions of the human undergirded by a myth of purity without which patriarchal (read also: national) structures could not maintained. Extending Spiller’s discussion on the “ungendering” that happens during the Middle Passage, Hazel V. Carby has thoroughly analyzed how historically in the afterlife of slavery (post-Civil War), black women have been “relegated to a place outside the ideological construction

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<sup>172</sup> Carby, “On the Threshold of Woman’s Era,” 231.

of ‘womanhood’” a term that “included only white women.”<sup>173</sup> Speaking of “miscegenation laws” in the first half of the twentieth century, Carby goes on to assert that in practice, they “were directed at preventing sexual relations between white women and black men. The miscegenation laws thus pretended to offer ‘protection’ to white women but left black women the victims of rape by white men and simultaneously granted to these same men the power to terrorize black men as a potential threat to the virtue of white womanhood.”<sup>174</sup> As such, (White) Man could not continuously repeat himself and sustain his dominance through the (re)production of sameness without a difference, without some level of coercion and complicity of white women in the sexual reproductive regulation of their bodies. The strict and lethal regulation of the bodies of white women for the procurement of replicating the free white male body, while the regulation of black women was solely to reproduce the (nonhuman) slave, amounts to nothing less than a national and legally sanctioned breeding project for whiteness. Lilith, however, as a refiguring of the original primal mother, fits very much within the construction of “womanhood” historically allotted to white women only. In her futuristic *otherworld*, Butler maintains this *has been* of coercion and complicity only to invert it and in doing so open up its teleological endpoint—in a way, *reprogram* the technological hold of a woman’s reproductive system that maintains the division of the color line—and thus halt the reproduction of a pure, uncontaminated notion of the human. Such a conception necessitates that it be free from such monstrosities as those imposed on racialized, gendered, and sexualized bodies. Woman is thus led into following a

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<sup>173</sup> Carby, “On the Threshold of Woman’s Era,” 229.

<sup>174</sup> Carby, “On the Threshold of Woman’s Era,” 228.



trajectory of cross-pollination and mixture with radical alterity rather than coerced into maintaining a mythic ‘purity’ in order to upend patriarchal structures and break the cycle of repetition by which the genre/genus of Man continues to uphold itself as the only legitimate form of the human.

This reading of Butler further goes against a certain anti-Oankali strand of criticism of the novel that includes such scholars as Hoda M. Zaki, Frances Bonner, and Gerry Canavan, among others, who read the Oankali as directly mirroring imperial colonists/white rapists. Canavan has expressed “deep discomfort” about both the Oankali and the creolizing constructs as well as the ending of a series he “genuinely loves.” The following questions he asks suggest a strong identification with the “resisters” of the story rather than the “traders” as well as the main protagonists of books 2 and 3: “How might *humans* improve their situation? How might *humans*, in a human context, become better—without the cheat of divine intervention?”<sup>175</sup> Such scholars, I believe, fail to interrogate the very notion of the human and in fact take it as a historical given and set genre. One cannot help but ask, what “sacred image” of the human are they seeking to uphold? What *kind* of human can improve the situation on a deeply wounded and fractured earth? It certainly cannot be the kind who has historically held power and through the misuse and abuse of such power sought the earth’s destruction and all the beings in it, and who further held the power to define who counted as human in the first place and who fell short. Butler’s work suggests that it is only the liminal “Human Other” who can “improve” things without so called “divine intervention,” a term which Canavan also fails to seriously interrogate. There is no divinity as we know it in Butler; there is

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<sup>175</sup> Canavan, *Octavia E. Butler*, 121, emphasis in original)

instead a transmogrification of the divine through the very monstrosity of the Medusa-head Oankali, just as there is a transmogrification of the human. There seems to be in such criticism a fixation of a monolithic and static notion of humanity as the only way towards salvation, despite the fact that with every one of her works, Butler powerfully calls into question the very notion of what it means to be human. The trilogy in fact can best be read as an intervention into biblical salvation stories and their concurrent notions of purity. Such close attachment to history and its uses and abuses, furthermore, precludes the very idea of upending its very trajectory, which I argue is the revolutionary thrust of Butler's world-making.

Tucker observes in the passage cited above that the Oankali are not "necessarily figures for white owners and overseers," but they do, I argue, reflect them in inverse ways and thus serve an opposite function: instead of maintaining the self/other *divide*, the Oankali cross-pollinate and endlessly *multiply*. Further, as noted in the first pages of Butler's story, the aliens are not white but literally "gray," creolizing figures who ontologically call whiteness-*qua*-humanity itself into question, though that does not preclude that they nonetheless partake of that whiteness. Here we again come to that ambiguous "gray zone" discussed above in which Butler situates her readers and that Dowdall reads as an "ambivalence" on the author's part that "allows Butler to illuminate the history of the control of black women's reproduction while also promoting the transformative possibilities of alien encounters."<sup>176</sup> Such illumination accompanied by transformation requires a certain level of detachment from and letting go of an absolute

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<sup>176</sup> Lisa Dowdall, "Treasured Strangers: Race, Biopolitics, and the Human in Octavia E. Butler's *Xenogenesis* Trilogy," *Science Fiction Studies* 44.3 (November 2017): 510.

certainty and truth of the past (especially as it has been recorded and handed down by the “victors”) that allows for reinvention in the future, in the *yet to be*, in order to then intervene in the *what is* of the present. Neither right or wrong, true or false, where Butler consistently situates her reader-*qua*-creolizing subject is in the inherently ambiguous middle pass(age) that comes with an interweaving of history and futurity, as well as the dynamic and “transformative possibilities” of plasticity itself, which Butler exemplifies in the shapeshifting figure of “Jodahs” of the final book of the trilogy.

Thus far I have shown how the Oankali inversely mirror the Human and its Other through the historical colonial enterprise and its abuses of power. Now I would like to examine how the Oankali inversely mirror and thus alter prior depictions of the alien in what Luckhurst calls Butler’s “sly writing of science-fiction tropes.”<sup>177</sup> This includes the figure of the shapeshifter that in Campbell’s text had to be annihilated in order to uphold and secure the white/black, human/nonhuman divide that the Thing crossed so easily. As I already argued in the second section of this chapter, Butler inverts Campbell’s The Thing in reassigning its lone individual status into one that encapsulates a collective, but she achieves much more than this. The scholar Eric White, in his reading of Butler’s trilogy and John Carpenter’s *The Thing* (1982), the film based on Campbell’s story, has noted further parallels and reversals in these texts via what he reads as Campbell’s and Butler’s “import of evolutionary theory.”<sup>178</sup> White’s reading of Butler’s trilogy is that of, as Luckhurst avers, “race-blind science fiction”<sup>179</sup> and indeed he largely avoids any

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<sup>177</sup> Luckhurst, “Horror and Beauty,” 30.

<sup>178</sup> Eric White, “The Erotics of Becoming: *Xenogenesis* and ‘The Thing,’” *Science Fiction Studies* 20.3 (November 1993): 399.

<sup>179</sup> Luckhurst, “Horror and Beauty,” 31.

mention of race, shying away from the white/black binary and supplanting it with that of nature/culture. However, it is worth following his close reading of the two texts, in which he argues:

Both of these narratives interpret biological evolution as a process of limitless becoming or metamorphosis that deprives every putative finality of ontological warrant. "Humanity" is a historically contingent, transitional phenomenon rather than the apex of biological possibility. But the responses to this scenario in *Xenogenesis* and *The Thing* are antithetical. Where the Thing powerfully registers the anguish and horror occasioned by the recognition of human subjection to evolutionary process, in *Xenogenesis* Butler attempts to work through trauma in order to affirm becoming.<sup>180</sup>

As with Butler's response to the painful past of African American history, here we have a curative response to the "anguish and horror" of being biologically subjected to "evolutionary process." White further states that because "the loss of human specificity entailed in hybridization with the irreducibly other is, in the last analysis, depicted affirmatively...the Thing has become the hero of [Butler's] tale."<sup>181</sup> Through affirmation, rather than negation, the shapeshifting alien returns here but with a difference: *not as villain but as hero*. What we have here is an about-face, yet another *turnabout* through the *reevaluation* of the other that comes to take the place of the human and vice versa.

Butler, moreover, makes further alterations to Campbell's alien, all the while keeping its "monstrosity" front and center. White observes how in Campbell's text, the

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<sup>180</sup> White, "Erotics of Becoming" 399.

<sup>181</sup> White, "Erotics of Becoming, 402.

Thing is described as a “face ringed with a writhing, loathsome nest of worms, blue, mobile worms that crawled where hair should grow” and similarly Butler’s Oankali aliens have, as mentioned above, a “Medusa” like appearance with “hair” that “writhed independently, a nest of snakes.”<sup>182</sup> It is not only the look of the alien that Butler maintains throughout her tale, which diverges from Campbell who makes the alien physically disappear halfway through his narrative. White further notes that Campbell’s scientists speculate that the alien-monster must be “a member of a supremely intelligent race, a race that has learned the deepest secrets of biology and turned them to its use” and likewise the Oankali are “masters of genetic engineering...able to manipulate DNA within their bodies.”<sup>183</sup> As stated at the beginning of this chapter, Campbell’s text serves as a catalyst for Butler’s own depiction and re-articulation of the alien, but as with all things, she pounces all over that text in order to overturn its hierarchal human/nonhuman divide. Recall that in Campbell’s text, the alien-thing is found frozen, in suspended animation, but is then “thawed out” and reanimated, and in Butler’s text, as I mentioned in the staging of her alien encounter, it is the humans who are found and placed in a state of suspended animation and awakened one by one—a slow thawing out. She replaces Campbell’s scientific agents, standing in as the whole of humanity, with the Oankali scientists who are the third-sex ooloi in charge of genetic manipulation. In her story, humans occupy the inhuman assignation of the mute Thing that is bound by troubled whiteness, being as they are under total Oankali control. In Butler, all of humanity has been reduced to a bound inhumanity, again recalling slavery and its afterlife, but hers is

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<sup>182</sup> Quoted by White, “Erotics of Becoming, 402.

<sup>183</sup> White, *Erotics of Becoming*, 402-3.

no mere reversal; through inverse mirroring, Butler flips her own reversal and gives this bounded state a new valuation, turning the static, *eternal* place of damnation (in Campbell the Thing has been frozen for twenty million years, which is by all human standards an eternity), into a *temporary* place, not of enslavement and white cruelty, but of healing. Additionally, she remaps the setting of Campbell's story from the troubled white terrains of the bitter icy polar regions of Antarctica to the Amazon, that is, to the warmth and heat of the earth's tropics, where the returning humans must forge a new life. She thus takes her readers through her own literal "middle passage" of earth.

### **On Gene- Taking Trading and Fair Exchange**

Through inverse mirroring, Butler further intervenes in unethical scientific practices as they relate to medical gene-trading practices that take the form of an unfair rather than complimentary exchange. In probing two real-life examples of unfair gene-taking between scientists and indigenous/black persons that the trilogy closely follows, I situate Butler as a bioethicist in her intervention in contemporary ethical issues in biology and medicine related to notions of mythic purity that oppose egalitarianism and reciprocity. The Oankali enterprise closely follows and seems to intervene on the "The Human Genome Diversity Project" as dissected by Joanne Barker in her essay of that name. This scientific "diversity project" occasioned a great deal of debate in the 1990s and its reverberations are still felt today. Barker notes that the goals of Human Genome Diversity Project (HGDP) included "the collection, preservation, management and study of a worldwide sample of human genetic variation."<sup>184</sup> She cites the supporters of the

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<sup>184</sup> Joanne Barker, "The Human Genome Diversity Project: 'Peoples,' Populations,' and the Cultural Politics of Identification," *Cultural Studies* 18.4 (2004): 574.

project as stating that “the potential intellectual benefits of understanding human diversity and its origins are striking. By intense scrutiny of human diversity, we will make enormous leaps in our grasp of human origins, evolution, prehistory, and potential.”<sup>185</sup> All in all, the scientists sought to obtain DNA samples from 722 distinct and “isolated” or in other words “pure” and “uncontaminated” indigenous groups around the world. While a full account of the nuance and complexity of the argument surrounding this scientific experiment and its responses is beyond the scope of this chapter, I want to highlight a few key issues regarding the nature of this “experiment” as well as the response by indigenous peoples, all of which are inversely mirrored by Butler.

First, there is the false scientific claim to purity and the distortion of what the scientists take to be diversity. Barker notes that for the scientists, diversity is implied to be “achieved by comparing groups with the highest degree of isolation and seclusion. Unwanted *populations* are those that are mixed, dispersed and assimilated. These characterizations are troubled immediately by their discursive links to racialized notions of biology, culture and identity...”<sup>186</sup> She goes on to cite a molecular anthropologist, Jonathan Marks, who argued against these claims to the HGDP, stating that “other cultures are not ‘frozen in time’” and that there are virtually no populations in the world that are culturally and genetically isolated, and yet “the geneticists insisted on the ‘purity’ of the group.”<sup>187</sup> The connection here between the notion of “purity” and seeking to fully grasp “human origins,” which the HGDP supporters repeatedly appeal to, cannot be disavowed, as there is an important and intrinsic link. Recall that in Butler the ooloi

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<sup>185</sup> Quoted by Barker, “The Human Genome,” 574.

<sup>186</sup> Barker, “The Human Genome,” 576, emphasis in original.

<sup>187</sup> Quoted by Barker, “The Human Genome,” 576.

geneticists of the Oankali, who inversely mirror human scientists, are seeking the direct opposite of these real-life geneticists in order to further propagate the species: ongoing mixture, dispersal and assimilation rather than stasis and purity. They are moreover *against* the seeking of origins, as they tell Lilith when she asks if they would return to the home of origin if they wanted to: “Go back? No, Lilith, that’s the one direction that’s closed to us.”<sup>188</sup> The Oankali, in their persistent proliferation, are figures of openness, indeterminacy, and ambiguity, and as we saw in the last chapter on Campbell, these are qualities that both scientists and racists tend to abhor, for different and maybe not so different reasons. For, to understand the human under such terms means to reject epistemic closure which necessarily includes dismissing the notion of genesis and completion, the birth and death of humanity as foretold, for example, in biblical genesis and apocalypse. Finding the origins of any scientific object of inquiry means you find the root of the problem as well as its solution and end. But when the object of inquiry is the human itself, and the human is an ongoing evolutionary project—to use Monahan’s term, a “*telos* without a terminus”<sup>189</sup> that Butler illustrates so well with her illicit creolizing constructs—then one cannot have a determinative beginning and origin; not if the future is to remain wide open, which is what her antiracist philosophy of life insists on. Thus, to seek any “true” origins of humanity is no other than to place epistemic closure on the human as well as to foreclose its future, which is where both scientist and racist go

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<sup>188</sup> Butler, *Lilith’s Brood*, 36.

<sup>189</sup> Michael Monahan, “What is Rational is Creolizing” in *Creolizing Hegel*, edited by Michael Monahan (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield International Ltd, 2017), 7.



wrong, both seeking and insisting on an absolute knowledge and clear-cut limits as to what is and what it means to be human.<sup>190</sup>

And yet, as Barker recounts, with regard to the HGDP, the indigenous peoples and their various advocacy groups fought back and fought hard. The grievances that were brought forth range from exclusion of indigenous representatives in planning meetings about the project (for that would amount to the object of inquiry also becoming the subject doing the inquiry, which is reserved for the scientists alone), to issues of biodiversity and intellectual rights, to the methodology and discursivity set forth by the supporters. It is the last of these that I wish to focus on here, as it pertains to the language and attitude the geneticists demonstrated toward indigeneity. Barker cites an interview conducted by Leslie Roberts and the founders of HGDP where they discuss how

[i]ndigenous peoples are disappearing across the globe victims of war, famine, disease, or simply what Cole Porter called the ‘urge to merge’. As they vanish, they are taking with them a wealth of information in their genes about human origins, evolution, and diversity . . . And time is of the essence, according to Cavalli-Sforza, who views humans as an endangered species in terms of genetic diversity.<sup>191</sup>

As such what the scientists “needed to do” was “collect DNA samples from members of indigenous groups immediately and *preserve* them.”<sup>192</sup> Such preservation is not,

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<sup>190</sup> To be clear, I do not oppose the scientific search for human origins, which could yield rich speculations on our understanding of the human condition. What I find alarming, however, is the hubris of asserting that such origins can ever be definitively grasped and known.

<sup>191</sup> Quoted by Barker, “The Human Genome,” 584.

<sup>192</sup> Barker, “The Human Genome,” 584, emphasis added.

however, of life itself but of genetic information that will enhance the lives (and livelihoods) of the scientists themselves, but not the indigenous groups they were extracting from. It is important to note Barker's reading that "the rhetoric not only reconfigured indigenous peoples as mere fodder for genetic research/industry but completely disregarded the impact of the very real social forces of oppression that were not merely undermining indigenous rights to governance, territorial integrity and cultural autonomy but actively carrying out programmes of genocide, dispossession and assimilation against indigenous peoples."<sup>193</sup> The HGDP participants showed they were not capable of "any critical reflection on its consequences for living indigenous peoples,"<sup>194</sup> which bred distrust among the latter, leading to the scientists being characterized as "blood sucking vampires swooping down into remote villages, sucking the blood of unsuspecting victims and callously leaving them to die while flying off to far away labs and patent offices where monsters and biological weapons were being designed in the dark and under-the-table financial deals were being made."<sup>195</sup> Witnessed here is an instance of science and fiction being interwoven to get at some truth behind the "histories of colonialism and racism for indigenous peoples and advocacy groups."<sup>196</sup> As exaggerated as they are, they nonetheless illustrate the ways in which the objectification of humans towards other (non)humans, in the name of "science," creates Frankensteinian and parasitic monstrosities that reflect on the inhumanness of the creator scientist that suffers from a lack of critical reflection and further points to great moral deficiencies.

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<sup>193</sup> Barker, "The Human Genome," 584.

<sup>194</sup> Barker, "The Human Genome," 586.

<sup>195</sup> Barker, "The Human Genome," 583.

<sup>196</sup> Barker, "The Human Genome," 583.

Ultimately, the groups of indigenous peoples on the list of the HGDP stood together behind a letter sent by Chief Leon Shenandoah of the Onondaga Council of Chiefs, which begins by “demanding that the HGDP ‘cease and desist’ all activities related to the collection and storage of indigenous DNA.”<sup>197</sup> Shenandoah indicts the project as *unethical, invasive, and even criminal*, and closes the letter with *an appeal to egalitarianism*. As Barker notes

Without the applicability to the quality of life for their communities or contribution to their struggles for sovereignty, Shenandoah implies that the willing participation of indigenous peoples is unlikely. Informed by the conviction that many studies about indigenous peoples produce cursory or auxiliary information never directly beneficial to the indigenous peoples though lucrative to the scientists, institutions and industries that fund them, Shenandoah implores HGDP participants to take heed of indigenous priorities for applied health studies.”<sup>198</sup>

In another exchange between the World Council of Indigenous Peoples and the HGDP, the former state that “We’re not opposed to progress. For centuries indigenous peoples have contributed to science and medicine, *contributions that are not recognized*. What upsets us is the behavior of colonialism.”<sup>199</sup> Ultimately the HGDP was halted and many industries funding it backed out, but Barker notes that it still has an active website and suggests the project has continued to operate by other means. I have cited this project at length to further illustrate Butler’s inverse mirroring where indeed the Oankali “colonists” and their geneticists recognize the contributions of the peoples they

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<sup>197</sup> Barker, “The Human Genome,” 591.

<sup>198</sup> Barker, “The Human Genome,” 592.

<sup>199</sup> Barker, Barker, “The Human Genome,” 593, emphasis added.

experiment on (i.e., all of us humans collectively), and not only recognize but have a direct “applicability to the quality of life” for the community of surviving humans. The fact that the human “resisters” in Butler’s story reject this new quality life matters little, for ultimately, she includes egalitarianism and reciprocity in the “life trade” of one group of persons to another group, which has never been a part of actual colonial/scientific history and practice.

While the HGDP debacle just slightly postdates *Dawn* and the other novels in the trilogy, Butler explicitly draws on a more concentrated and contemporaneous example of *gene-taking* (very much tied to the HGDP) as inspiration for her narrative: Henrietta Lacks, the second real life example I draw from.<sup>200</sup> Here Butler turns the notion of unfair, non-egalitarian exchange inside out by revising Lacks’ story and in the process making amends. In the story, the cutting off of Lilith’s cancer cells, of something malignant from the past, which also suggests a cutting off of painful bodily legacies, is then transformed by the Oankali geneticists into something self-renewing and life-enhancing. Such conversion parallels the ever so valuable and transformative cancer cells of Lacks, which were cut out of her without her consent. Lacks’ story was brought to public attention by Rebecca Skloot’s *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks* (2010), and while again, an in-depth exploration of all the ethical issues associated with her story is beyond the scope of this chapter, I wish to outline what is at stake in a real life “gene/life trading” praxis of the human. In January 1951 a young, black woman enters a “colored” ward at John Hopkins Hospital suffering from cervical cancer. Nine months later she dies, suffering

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<sup>200</sup> See Dagmar Van Engen, Jayna Browne, and Canavan

from “excruciating pain” at the age of 31. A journalist from the *New York Times* continues on with the rest of this fantastic but true story

Neither Mrs. Lacks nor any of her relatives knew that doctors had given a sample of her tumor to Dr. George Gey, a Hopkins researcher who was trying to find cells that would live indefinitely in culture so researchers could experiment on them. Before she came along, his efforts had failed. Her cells changed everything: *they multiplied like crazy and never died*. A cell line called HeLa (for Henrietta Lacks) was born. Those immortal cells soon become the workhorse of laboratories everywhere. HeLa cells were used to develop the first polio vaccine, they were launched into space for experiments in zero gravity and they helped produce drugs for numerous diseases, including Parkinson’s, leukemia and the flu. By now, literally tons of them have been produced.<sup>201</sup>

Additionally, “many scientific landmarks have since used her cells, including cloning, gene mapping, and in vitro fertilization.”<sup>202</sup> Canavan notes the parallels with Butler’s story: “Lilith’s own body produces a particularly attractive, HeLa-style form of very aggressive cancer, the cancer that killed her mother and would have killed her without Oankali intervention.”<sup>203</sup> Butler’s science fiction follows real life scientific progress, but in the process makes some necessary reparations and amends. First it behooves us to pay

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<sup>201</sup> Dennis Grady, “A Lasting Gift to Medicine That Wasn’t a Gift,” *New York Times*, accessed June 24, 2018, emphasis added, <https://www.nytimes.com/2010/02/02/health/02seco.html>

<sup>202</sup> Sarah Zielinski, “Cracking the Human Genome: Henrietta Lacks’ Immortal Cells,” *Smithsonianmag.com*, accessed June 24, 2018, <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/science-nature/henrietta-lacks-immortal-cells-6421299/>

<sup>203</sup> Canavan, *Octavia E. Butler*, 99.

attention to the contradiction, hypocrisy, and utter nonsense of the fact that Lacks was admitted, during the Jim Crow era, into a “colored” ward meant to prevent the contamination of blackness to white people trying to preserve their “purity.” Ironically enough, it was a black women’s dynamic, never-ending cells that ended up contaminating everything and everyone, literally saving humanity from deadly diseases, extending the life of the human, and advancing scientific progress. Butler’s “Dawn” of a new humanity founded on the “exquisite pains” of Lilith, then, rewrites and re-rights (makes right again) the “excruciating pain” of Lacks herself, situating her as the proper (black) mother of a new phase in human evolution.

Both Lilith Iyapo and Henrietta Lacks as black women share the status of the human twice negated, which is to say they inhabit the double negative, not white and not male, so double the nonhuman. With Lilith, however, there is a fair “gene trade” in that the aliens enhance her body with eidetic memory and increased physical strength, and give her the ability to control Oankali technology, as well as prolong her life, the latter of which they do to all humans.<sup>204</sup> Also, as stated, her cells are the main reason for the Oankali’s interest in “trading” and crossbreeding with the human species, ensuring the continuation of both species, however mixed and unpurified that continuation is. With Lacks’ story, there was not even a recognition of her impact on humanity as her family “didn’t even know that tissue had been taken or that HeLa cells even existed until more than twenty years after [her] death” and only found out by accident. Her family remained poor, sick, and almost entirely forgotten, while her cells generated “millions in profit.”<sup>205</sup>

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<sup>204</sup> Butler, *Lilith’s Brood*, 120.

<sup>205</sup> Grady, “A Lasting Gift.”

This further echoes the statement of the World Council of Indigenous Peoples to the HGDG that contributions by indigenous and here black people, are indeed never recognized. Further, the scientific coding of her full name into “HeLa” mirrors the operation of concealment that is inherent to the maintenance of white supremacy and domination, at the same time it visually and phonetically calls to mind that which causes everlasting torment and misery: Hell itself. One can well see here that with Lacks there was no fair trade, in fact, there was no trade at all. As Denis Grady notes in his *New York Times* article, her cells do not even constitute a proper gift, freely given. All it was, was *an endless taking*. In Butler, there is a “taking” of the human, just as there is initial impregnation without consent, which very closely follows the entire history of not just black women under slavery and its aftermath, but all women under patriarchy. But there is simultaneously a *giving back* in the recognition of contributions that is proper to creolization itself, which goes against the veiling and covering up of white racial ideology that seeks to keep humanity bound under its tight control—just there for a perpetual taking. And however small of a contribution such a recognition may seem, it goes a long way in making reparations.

What we see in this reading of Butler’s trilogy is a return of Afro-diasporic histories, traumas, and tropes, but with a difference: she incorporates fairness with notions of trade and exchange. As Boulter notes, Butler “invokes African-American history, but her representations of these experiences are curative, a homeopathic response to a painful past.”<sup>206</sup> This “curative, homeopathic response,” is ultimately what I believe is most instructive about Butler’s inverse operations in that it is a response to not only

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<sup>206</sup> Boulter, “Polymorphous Futures,” 182.

black women's oppression but all oppressed groups. Lisa Dowdall has observed, "Lilith's situation with the eugenics program pursued by the Oankali directly recalls the exploitation of the biological labor of poor black and brown bodies, from slave breeding to contemporary organ markets."<sup>207</sup> Butler indeed "recalls" but at the same time reworks what Harriet A. Washington explains as the "experimental exploitation of African Americans." Washington notes how "Dangerous, involuntary, nontherapeutic experimentation upon African Americans has been practiced widely and documented extensively at least since the eighteenth century."<sup>208</sup> Butler resituates this unethical trajectory and history by supplanting the historically determined racial and gendered "homogenous group" of white, male "American medical researchers" that Washington critiques<sup>209</sup> with an ambiguously racial ("gray") and gendered (nonbinary) heterogenous (shapeshifting) group of ooloi medical researchers, that turn out to be highly ethical in their treatment and enhancement of all life in the universe. The Oankali themselves represent both a preservation as well as enhancement of life. The only caveat is their adamant stance on what life means, which is not a continuation of sameness, i.e., the ongoing (re)production of one kind of human, but rather an ongoing mutation and becoming of the species as a whole in all its heterogeneity.

In her operation of inverse mirroring that reconfigures the unfair exchange of colonial praxis via alien encounters, Butler always turns back as she looks forward in constructing her future worlds. This is a return, a revisiting of the "same"—the same

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<sup>207</sup> Dowdall, "Treasured Strangers," 509.

<sup>208</sup> Harriet A. Washington, *Medical Apartheid: The Dark History of Medical Experimentation on Black Americans from Colonial Times to the Present* (New York: Doubleday, 2006), 7.

<sup>209</sup> Washington, *Medical Apartheid*, 13.



history and trauma that black people share across the diaspora—with a future-oriented difference. This *turning back* indicates a *retracing* of one's footsteps as well as a *turning away*; it leads us back to Afro-diasporic histories as crucial sites for opening up the future. Along the way, her "curative" responses to both serve as ethical interventions in the treatment of all life under "systems of race, class, and gender oppression."<sup>210</sup> To fully grasp the "solution" she proposes for uprooting all dualistic thinking that maintain human oppression, however, I turn now to examine the creolizing "construct" progeny of Lilith in the rest of the books of the trilogy, which represent "figures of the third" that shift the poles of dualistic thought.

### **Creolizing Construct: Akin as the Relative Third**

As mentioned above, in *Dawn* Lilith partners with Joseph, a man of Chinese descent who is one of the first people she awakens but is later murdered by the mob of other humans on the spaceship. Before he dies, however, their ooloi, Nikanj, collects and safeguards his sperm. Akin, the protagonist of the second book *Adulthood Rites*, is one of their offspring and also a product of Nikanj's genetic engineering, as well as the first human male construct to be born in the fifty-year lapse between the first and second book. He is both mixed-species and mixed-race, half Black, half Chinese on the human side while being half human, half Oankali on all sides. Akin's name in Yoruba means "hero" or "the brave boy,"<sup>211</sup> and he is indeed a hero of sort for the human resisters, those advocating for a pure, uncontaminated humanity. More than being a hero, however, he is also a Christ figure, mirroring, as Judith Lee notes, "Christ's dual divine-human nature" in being able

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<sup>210</sup> Collins, "Learning from the Outsider Within," 20.

<sup>211</sup> Butler, *Lilith's Brood*, 351

to experience “both human and ooloi perceptions.”<sup>212</sup> Further, just as Jesus Christ himself—a human-god hybrid—mediates between humanity and God Almighty, so too does Akin mediate between humanity and the Oankali. Akin’s name, of course, denotes a literal likeness between self and other, similar in a *general*, and so *inexact* way. The name also refers to, as Lee further notes, a “kin of both races.”<sup>213</sup> which within a familial matrix functions as an immediate relative of both human and alien. This *relative third* stands as an intermediary that, positioned at midpoint between human and nonhuman, also serves as the axis point around which both terms regenerate and reawaken from their state of “suspended animation” or stasis and purity, which is where Akin diverges from Christendom.

Akin is kidnapped as a small child before his metamorphosis, which all constructs go through during the equivalency of puberty when they drastically transition and change form. In this book, humans, having recolonized the Earth, are now divided between “trading villages” and “resister villages” with the former living together in big human-alien hybrid families, and the latter living separately bereft of children, unable to sexually reproduce. Desperate human resisters longing for children with a semblance of their own kind capture “construct” children in hopes that they will *not* grow up to transform into “monsters,” (a futile cause). These humans from resister villages nonetheless call such constructs “mongrel bastards”<sup>214</sup> a pejorative that is used for mixed-race children. In this text such a derogatory epithet gets transposed from black/white racial mixture to human/nonhuman intermixture. The resisters take to Akin, however, because as a child

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<sup>212</sup> Judith Lee, “We Are All Kin,” 175.

<sup>213</sup> Judith Lee, “We Are All Kin,” 175.

<sup>214</sup> Butler, *Lilith’s Brood*, 341

he, as Gregory Hampton notes, can “pass” as human.<sup>215</sup> Although it is a passing “pass,” meaning temporal, for once Akin is past metamorphosis, when his tentacles have fully developed, by the end of the book he will have past the point of passing as human. Also, this being the middle story in the trilogy, another, more evolved construct will pass Akin as a new relative third in the third book, *Imago*. As a creolizing figure he is thus a *transitory subject*, one that passes but is then passed on. Akin lives up to his name as “hero” as he is the one who advocates for the resisters to the rest of the Oankali, after spending time with them during childhood, arguing that humanity should be allowed to continue to reproduce its own kind. By the end of the story the Oankali reluctantly accept his argument, despite being biologically certain that they will eventually again annihilate themselves (which they regard as unethical and “antilife”). They agree with Akin that humans should be allowed to sexually reproduce on their own, but not, however, on earth. The reasoning, which they keep secret from the resisters, is that after the new Oankali-Human union achieves reproductive species maturity and is ready once again to start searching the stars for other species with which to creolize, they will take part of the earth as their spaceship, and what is left of the planet will be nothing but barren rock. Therefore, the Oankali come up with a plan to send the human resisters to terraform Mars (with the help of their bio-technology), where they will be free to breed sameness. Such a move places those humans abiding by racial ideology and its politics of purity as Martians. Ironically, for humans to stay “fully human” they must become literal extraterrestrials. For the human (self) to stay the same, it must become alien (other), just

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<sup>215</sup> Gregory Jerome Hampton, *Changing Bodies in the Fiction of Octavia Butler: Slaves, Aliens, and Vampires* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2010), 75).

as for the alien to inhabit the place of the human, it likewise must become other than its previous otherings. Butler here illustrates how creolization “as a process leaves none of the poles that ‘in-betweenness’ negotiates intact.”<sup>216</sup> What the creolizing construct Akin represents, as a temporal embodiment of an “in-betweenness that negotiates” is nothing less than a complete transformation of the “poles” of human/nonhuman, self/other. As a figure of creolization, he leaves none of these ‘identities’ intact without, however, abolishing them altogether.

Akin, moreover, is not the only literal as well as metaphoric creolizing construct in this story. During his captivity in the resister village (leading up to his metamorphosis), he encounters a pair of Oankali-born twin construct girls who were also kidnapped. When four-year old Shkaht and Amma arrive not knowing how to speak English and tied up together, they are described as “brown girls with long, thick black hair and dark eyes” and with alien tentacles:

The bigger of the two girls...had a few body tentacles around her neck and shoulders, and confining them was probably blinding, itching torment. Now all her small tentacles focused on Akin, while the rest of her seemed to go on concentrating. The smaller girl had a cluster of tentacles at her throat, where they probably protected a sair breathing orifice...it might also mean the girl could breathe underwater.<sup>217</sup>

Speaking the Oankali language they tell Akin that they don’t speak English but “French and Twi,” their human father being from France, and their human mother from a village

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<sup>216</sup> Gordon, *Creolizing Political Theory*, 6.

<sup>217</sup> Butler, *Lilith’s Brood*, 370.

in Ghana. Here again we have a displacement of black and white mixed-race children posing as human-alien constructs. But these brown construct girls have the all too disturbing hyper-visible presence of tentacles—a physical manifestation of their manifold nature—momentarily absent from the male Akin (construct girls mature faster than their male counterparts). The presence of excessive flesh leads Neci, a woman resister who wants the girls as her children, to start scheming to cut off the “little worm things”:

“They’ll learn to do without the ugly little things if we take them off while they’re so young...They’ll learn to use their Human senses. They’ll see the world as we do and be more like us.”<sup>218</sup> Despite her partner’s warning that they have no proper anesthetics and that it constitutes torture of children, the hysterical Neci remains adamant about making them look more human, eventually forcing the girls to make their escape, using their ability to breathe under water to flee down the river. But Neci’s wish is that of all the resisters: “they’ll *see* the world as we do and *be* more *like us*.” Oankali and constructs see (and breathe, smell, touch, and taste) through all of their appendages, and thus they “see the world” simultaneously from different bodily and spatial viewpoints—shifting orientations—whereas the fixity of human forward-facing eyes, even if there are two eyes, not one, and have freedom of movement, too often leads to seeing the “world” from a single point of view. While the hyper-visible tentacles make the girls revolting to the resisters, what is at stake is more than just looks and bodily appearances; it is a way of seeing and perceiving the world via a stagnant, robotic, uniform way versus a fluid, multi-focal, creolizing way. As Akin later tells a human, “Trade means change. Bodies change. Ways of living change. Did you think your children would only *look*

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<sup>218</sup> Butler, *Lilith’s Brood*, 375.

different?”<sup>219</sup> Here Butler indicates how creolization goes beyond racial/cultural mixture to produce a new “way of living” that departs from the racial ideology by which Man and its constructed, colonized world is maintained. She achieves this all the while reworking slave narratives such as providing tethered creole characters with an alien difference that enables them to escape captivity from hysterical humans seeking an exact mirror image of their human sameness.

This reading of Butler’s constructs as creolizing figures is perhaps nowhere more in evidence than in the name of the alien species itself: as alluded to at the beginning of this chapter, one of the main meanings of Oankali is translated as “gene traders.” Nikanj, the ooloi mate of Lilith who by the end of the first book impregnates her without telling her first, explains:

We trade the essence of ourselves. Our genetic material for yours...We do what you would call genetic engineering. We know you had begun to do it yourselves a little, but it’s foreign to you. We do it naturally. We *must* do it. It renews us, enables us to survive as an evolving species instead of specializing ourselves into extinction or stagnation.<sup>220</sup>

This species of alien is against “extinction” and “stagnation” and thus inversely mirror Man who has come all too close to extinction through “over-specializing” himself in the racial ideology man, of the repetition of the “human” without a visible difference. For these aliens, “hybridization” as Melzer notes, “is the goal of their colonizing project”<sup>221</sup> and as such it is a “colonizing project” that departs from our historical one, where

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<sup>219</sup> Butler, *Lilith’s Brood*, 260, emphasis in original.

<sup>220</sup> Butler, *Lilith’s Brood*, 40.

<sup>221</sup> Melzer, *Alien Constructions*, 65.

crossbreeding was an unwelcome side-affect rather than the actual target. The Oankali aliens call their creolizing praxis a “trade” despite Lilith insisting that “it is crossbreeding, no matter what you call it.”<sup>222</sup> Specifically, what makes “Humanity such a valuable trade partner”<sup>223</sup> to the Oankali are, as previously discussed, the cancer cells found in Lilith’s body, which prove to be a rich and regenerating source for the Oankali. In the story’s opening pages Lilith looks at a scar on her stomach and wonders whether she owns “herself any longer” in that her “flesh could be cut and stitched without her consent.”<sup>224</sup> What had been cut were her cancer cells that the ooloi, the geneticists of the species, had experimented with inside their complex bodies and discovered the many possibilities they yielded:

*Regeneration of lost limbs. Controlled malleability.* Future Oankali may be less frightening to potential trade partners if they’re able to reshape themselves and look more like the partners before the trade. Even increased longevity, though compared to what you’re used to, we’re very long-lived now.<sup>225</sup>

Indeed, the goal that is achieved by the third book, *Imago*, is exactly “controlled malleability” and the ability to “reshape,” which is to say, *shapeshift* at will. But it is Lilith’s cancer that enables what Nikanj calls a “rebirth of your people and mine,”<sup>226</sup> thus prescribing the creolization of the human and nonhuman as a mutually positive exchange. The humans are indeed coerced into “trading” their valuable genes but in exchange the aliens reciprocate and make humans resistant to all previously deadly diseases and give

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<sup>222</sup> Butler, *Lilith’s Brood*, 42.

<sup>223</sup> Butler, *Lilith’s Brood*, 294.

<sup>224</sup> Butler, *Lilith’s Brood*, 6.

<sup>225</sup> Butler, *Lilith’s Brood*, 41, emphasis added.

<sup>226</sup> Butler, *Lilith’s Brood*, 43.

them prolonged (almost immortal) lives and an array of new living technologies. While to some people this would seem like utopia, it is not to the group of “resisters,” who after Lilith awakens, turn on her, refusing the “trade” fearing that humanity (and its unstated but accompanying whiteness) will be bred out of their crossbred children. They see mating with aliens as indicating the death of humanity: “when they finish with us there won’t be any real humans left...what the bombs started, they’ll finish.”<sup>227</sup> Here, Butler presents us with characters working all too well within a politics of purity who want nothing less than to preserve an uncontaminated human race in all its stagnant, bigoted, and dying state. Given their options, they prefer a slow literal death (no longer being able to sexually reproduce but still having extended life) to an ideological death: the death of an idea of what the human should *look* like as well as how the human should *see* the world. Thus, through her creolizing construct, Butler intervenes on the look as well as common understanding and perception of the human by bringing hyper-visibility to an outdated mode of being and perceiving others and the world at large.

*Adulthood Rites* ends with the humans that had originally kidnapped Akin setting fire to their village called Phoenix. As Akin begins his transition through which he will end up looking more Oankali than human, most of the people turn their backs on him. Incapacitated in his transition, his life is in serious danger though he is rescued by a few good humans who will carry him back to the Oankali, where they ask to travel to the Mars colony. As with the story of incarnation, he too is backstabbed by the village as a whole, and when he is being carried away, he looks back “to see the smoke cloud behind

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<sup>227</sup> Butler, *Lilith’s Brood*, 92.



them and Phoenix still burning.”<sup>228</sup> With the following book, another “phoenix” will rise in another Human-Oankali construct that is a more a radical figure of the third but like Akin functions as an intermediary of sorts.

### **Turning Back Before Moving Forward**

Before concluding my analysis of the *Xenogenesis* trilogy with the last book *Imago*, which features Butler’s other creolizing construct, the shapeshifting Jodahs, I must here make a detour and turn back to another shapeshifter within Butler’s oeuvre. I speak of Anyanwu, the heroine of *Wild Seed*, the first book in her *Patternist* series, who shares almost the exact shapeshifting qualities of Jodahs. Speaking of the earlier Anyanwu, Butler has stated in an interview that, “when I wrote her, I felt insecure about what I was having her do. I tried to make it seem logical, but I felt uncomfortable about it and then when I got to the *Xenogenesis* books, I understood more of what I was trying to get at.”<sup>229</sup> Thus, to understand the end of the *Brood* trilogy, in the following chapter I examine the genesis of her thought which ultimately culminates in *Imago*. Following Lee’s reading of Butler’s “revisionist treatment” of biblical myth, which places Akin as a figure of the Incarnation and Jodahs as a representation of the Apocalypse in his being “the monster that has for humans symbolized the apocalyptic ending of the human species,”<sup>230</sup> in the next chapter I examine Butler’s revisionist treatment of biblical genesis through the figure of Lilith. This figure poses the threat, much like Jodahs, of overturning of the hierarchal gender/sex binary, which within patriarchy and indeed the western imaginary of “Man” stands in as

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<sup>228</sup> Butler, *Lilith’s Brood*, 517.

<sup>229</sup> Octavia Butler, Marilyn Mehaffy, and AnaLouise Keating, “‘Radio Imagination’: Octavia Butler on the Poetics of Narrative Embodiment,” *Melus* 26.1 (Spring 2001): 45-76.

<sup>230</sup> Judith Lee, “We Are All Kin,” 176.

Supreme God, while his “Other,” specifically the black female, represents the ultimate fallen demonic figure who can only spawn an equally demonic race. This discourse further engages with creolizing images of the sacred and the profane.

**Chapter 3**  
**Regenerating the Lilith Figure:**  
**Shapeshifting and Aleatory Matter in Octavia E. Butler's *Wild Seed* and *Lilith Brood***

**Introduction**

In the previous chapters, I examined two different approaches to the loss of human purity connected to the fear of absorption by the impure/non-human alien other in science fiction narratives. The contagious-alien-*qua*-black-surrogate in modern SF initiates racial hysteria by its threat of creolization and troubles the notion of the racially “pure human,” through which scientific discourse makes a mythos of Man. Such racial hysteria is illustrated by the scientists in John Campbell’s novella, “Who Goes There?” and by the resisters in Octavia Butler’s *Lilith Brood* trilogy, the latter of whom direct their anger of bodily/genetic invasion toward Lilith, the black female protagonist, scapegoat, and “First Mother” of the trilogy. To further combat the mythos of Man based on notions of racial superiority and white hegemony, I argue that Butler enacts a necessary reconstruction of the myth of Woman that refigures the site upon which the black woman is rendered nonhuman. This chapter thus explores the politics and discourse of human purity through reading Anyanwu, another “First Mother” figure and the protagonist of Butler’s novel *Wild Seed* (1980),<sup>231</sup> as an earlier retelling of biblical Lilith.

I will further develop the discourse of purity through Butler’s dismantling of the binary construction of the sacred/profane. I do so through reading the figures of Eve and Lilith as prototypes for the “Madonna/Whore duality,” which derives from mythic representations of women in Judeo-Christian theology in order to establish “women’s

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<sup>231</sup> Octavia Butler, *Wild Seed*, in *Seed to Harvest: Wild Seed, Mind of My Mind, Clary’s Ark, and Patternmaster* (New York: Grand Central Publishing, 2007). Hereafter, I *Seed*.

subservience to men.”<sup>232</sup> Siegmund Hurwitz, in his historical and psychological examination of Lilith—a “dark feminine,”—notes indeed that she contains the dual aspect of “*divine whore* or...*terrible mother*.”<sup>233</sup> While scholars of Butler have analyzed the Lilith figure through the *Brood* trilogy, none have explored the ways in which Anyanwu is an earlier configuration of this mythic figure.<sup>234</sup> In this chapter, through examining their interconnections, I situate both Anyanwu of *Seed* and Lilith in the *Brood* trilogy, as well as Jodahs, the latter’s offspring, as different configurations of biblical Lilith who herself is a splitting off from Eve, “the mother of all living” (Genesis 3:20), and thus serves as her liminal, shadow side. And yet, as Adam’s original repudiated other half, Lilith is split off *twice* in being both Adam’s and Eve’s disavowed *other*, a double exclusion and othering that makes her as one of the most liminal figures in biblical mythic discourse. As such she corresponds with Teri Ann Doerksen’s reading of Anyanwu’s identity as “a liminal figure” who is simultaneously positioned “on the threshold between many different dualities.”<sup>235</sup> This liminal site of multiple exclusions is important for Butler because it eventually comes to designate the place of black women in the diaspora, which is also the site of a demonic impurity upon which the human is rendered nonhuman.

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<sup>232</sup> Clarice Feinman, *Women in the Criminal Justice System* (Westport: Praeger Publishers, 1994), 3-4.

<sup>233</sup> Siegmund Hurwitz, *Lilith—The First Eve: Historical and Psychological Aspects of the Dark Feminine*, translated by Gela Jacobson (Einsiedeln: Daimon Verlag, 1992), 31, emphasis in original.

<sup>234</sup> Sarah Wood comes the closest toward this reading in “Subversion Through Inclusion: Octavia Butler’s Interrogation of Religion in *Xenogenesis* and *Wild Seed*,” *Femspec* 6.1 (June 2005).

<sup>235</sup> Teri Ann Doerksen, “Octavia E. Butler: Parables of Race and Difference,” *Into the Darkness Peering: Race and Color in the Fantastic*, ed. Elizabeth Anne Leonard (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1997),” 32

As in my previous reading of Akin from *Adulthood Rites*, here I read Lilith likewise as a “figure of the third” who is effaced from the canonized text of the bible and the category of the human for being in excess of the initial male and female division and its attendant “compulsory heterosexuality,”<sup>236</sup> all of which disrupts western dualistic thinking about human purity and reproduction at the very moment of its “genesis.” Butler reconstructs the story of the exiled, silenced, and ultimately demonic Lilith figure from the Judeo-Christian tradition by injecting her with a strong dose of the African myth of the “Trickster” figure as well as invoking the myth of Medusa from the Ancient Greek tradition. This amalgamation and cross-pollination of myths from across cultures, highlights how the monster, as Jeffrey Cohen argues, “is difference made flesh, come to dwell among us.” Cohen further writes that

In its function as dialectical Other or third-term supplement, the monster is an incorporation of the Outside, the Beyond—all of those loci that are rhetorically placed as a distant and distinct but *originate Within*. Any kind of alterity can be inscribed across (constructed through) the monstrous body, but for the most part monstrous difference tends to be cultural, political, racial, economic, sexual.<sup>237</sup>

Lilith is indeed a monstrous figure that “originates within” the text of genesis and who through Butler’s crosspollination of her with other cultural, racial, and sexual mythic female monsters all point to her as the figure of creolization par excellence. Butler further highlights how Lilith is a “mixed category,” and a monster figure that “resists any classification built on hierarchy or a merely binary opposition, demanding instead a ‘system’ allowing polyphony, mixed response (difference in sameness, repulsion in

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<sup>236</sup> I borrow the term from Adrienne Rich, “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Experience,” *Signs*, 5.4 Women: Sex and Sexuality (Summer 1980): 631-660.

<sup>237</sup> Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, “Monster Culture (Seven Theses),” in *Monster Theory: Reading Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 7, emphasis added.

attraction), and resistance to integration.”<sup>238</sup> She is one of the woman that Cohen names who, by overstepping the boundaries of her gender role, “risks becoming a Scylla, Weird Sister, Lilith (‘die erste Eva,’ ‘la mère obscuré’), Bertha Mason, or Gorgon.”<sup>239</sup> As Barbara Koltuv notes, the monstrous figure of Lilith is known throughout the world by a range of appellations including “Blood Sucker, Woman of Harlotry, Alien Woman, Impure Female, End of All Flesh, End of Day, *bruha*, *strega*, witch, hag, snatcher, and enchantress.”<sup>240</sup> It seems like no mere coincidence, then, that Butler reconfigures Lilith as a shapeshifter, who can shift into any gender, race, or species, thus underscoring her ability to cross many boundaries and utterly disrupt binary thinking, which further renders her status as demonic and a monster. Her disruptive ability further connects her to the feminine aleatory monstrosity that is developed by Aristotle, who is the Western source of the *metaphysical-ization* of monsters. I utilize Emanuela Bianchi’s critique in the wake of this metaphysics to highlight the potentially liberatory power within this figure.<sup>241</sup>

My central argument in this chapter is that Butler reworks the myth of Lilith and other ancient archetypes of impure and monstrous female figures in order to disrupt their founding narratives that reiterate systems of oppression, specifically as they historically pertain to black women. The reworking of myth has of course long been an imperative within feminist discourse. In her seminal text, *Beyond Accommodation: Ethical*

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<sup>238</sup> Ibid, emphasis added.

<sup>239</sup> Jeffrey Cohen, “Monster Culture,” 9.

<sup>240</sup> Barbara Black Koltuv, *The Book of Lilith* (York Beach: Nicholas-Hays Inc., 1986), xi, emphasis in original.

<sup>241</sup> Emanuela Bianchi, *The Feminine Symptom: Aleatory Matter in the Aristotelian Cosmos* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2014).

*Feminism, Deconstruction, and the Law*, Drucilla Cornell writes of how “the reinterpretation and recreation of mythical figures can also help us to give body to the dream of an elsewhere beyond patriarchy and the tragedy imposed by a gender hierarchy.”<sup>242</sup> Cornell examines how French feminist philosophers such as Luce Irigaray, Hélène Cixous, and Julia Kristeva all engage with mythic figures and the retelling of myths as a way out of patriarchy. Elaborating psychoanalytically on what she terms “artificial mythology,” Cornell also notes how writers like Christa Wolfe and Carol Gilligan seek to recover

the feminine as an imaginative universal, which in turn feeds the power of the feminine imagination and helps to avoid the depletion of the feminine imaginary in the name of the masculine symbolic. This use of the feminine as an imaginative universal does not, and should not, pretend to simply tell the “truth” of Woman as she was, or is. This is why our mythology is self-consciously an artificial mythology; Woman is “discovered” as an ethical standard. As she is “discovered,” her meaning is also created.<sup>243</sup>

A central problem within this feminist discourse is the need to “give specificity and, indeed, mythological significance to the unique experience of Afro-American women,”<sup>244</sup> which Cornell goes on to do by reading Sethe from Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* through the Medea myth. Concerning feminist decolonial discourses about “spirituality and sexuality in the Americas,” Irene Lara likewise emphasizes the need to retell the story of Sycorax from Shakespeare’s *The Tempest* as a commitment “to decolonial feminist social transformation in the Americas and beyond” and in doing so participate “in the creation of non-binary third literacies for the stories of the racialized, sexualized, and witched

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<sup>242</sup> Drucilla Cornell, *Beyond Accommodation: Ethical Feminism, Deconstruction, and the Law* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 1999), 173.

<sup>243</sup> Drucilla Cornell, *Beyond Accommodation*, 178.

<sup>244</sup> Drucilla Cornell, *Beyond Accommodation*, 186.

women who she represents to be spoken and heard.”<sup>245</sup> I thus situate Butler’s retelling of the myth of Lilith as also giving new “mythological significance” to not only Sycorax, but to all condemned “witches,” the world over. However, in order to understand the problem of mythological exclusion of African American women with greater clarity and further grasp the context in which Butler retells her myth, I turn to Audre Lorde’s “Open Letter to Mary Daly” (1979), which was published a year before Butler’s *Seed*.

Lorde published the famous letter after waiting and never receiving a response from Daly, and it represents an account of a radical black feminist asking a radical white feminist for accountability in the silencing and erasure of mythical figures of significance for black women. Daly here seems to have arrived at a “‘truth’ of Woman as she was, or is” that was in no way universal, a move that mirrors how religion deploys the Madonna figure, for example. The letter begins by Lorde giving praise to Daly for her work on myth mystification in the latter’s book *Gyn/Ecology*, and how “Your words on the nature and function of the Goddess, as well as the ways in which her face has been obscured, agreed with what I myself have discovered in my searches through African myth/legend/religion for the true nature of old female power.” But then immediately afterward, Lorde wonders,

so...why doesn't Mary deal with Afrekete as an example? Why are her goddess images only white, western european, judeo—christian [*sic*]? Where was Afrekete, Yemanje, Oyo, and Mawulisa? Where were the warrior goddesses of the Vodun, the Dahomeian Amazons and the warrior—women of Dan? Well, I thought, Mary has made a conscious decision to narrow her scope and to deal only with the ecology of western european women.<sup>246</sup>

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<sup>245</sup> Irene Lara, “Beyond Caliban’s Curses: The Decolonial Feminist Literacy of Sycorax,” *Journal of International Women’s Studies* 9.1 (November 2007), 92.

<sup>246</sup> Audre Lorde, “An Open Letter to Mary Daly,” 90.



Lorde goes on to ask Daly to be aware of how destructive it is to assume that “the herstory and myth of white women is the legitimate and sole herstory and myth of all women to call upon for power and background, and that nonwhite women and our herstories are noteworthy only as decorations, or examples of female victimization.”<sup>247</sup> Butler’s intervention into this discourse involves blending, as Thelma J. Shinn asserts, “her Judaic-Christian cultural heritage to African myth, particularly of the Ibo and Yoruba tribes to which most African Americans could trace their beginnings, to identify the God/dess and learn again the language of nature.”<sup>248</sup> In other words, through her creolizing praxis, she interweaves myths from both white women (Eve/Lilith from the Old Testament) and African women (Lorde’s “Afrekete” trickster figure) in her development of Anyanwu, an empowering figure who nonetheless suffers female victimization under Doro, her masculine (and black) counterpart. Only through such creolization does Anyanwu serve to “establish mythological significance to the unique experience” for all Afro-diasporic women.

Importantly, the lack of positive representations of mythic black females has very dire material repercussions for black women, to which Butler, I argue, is very attentive. It helps to explain, for example, why, as Dorothy Roberts writes in *Killing the Black Body: Race, Reproduction, and the Meaning of Liberty*, “American culture is replete with derogatory icons of Black women—Jezebel, Mammy, Tragic Mulatto, Aunt Jemima, Sapphire, Matriarch and Welfare Queen.”<sup>249</sup> Roberts further explains how “over the

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<sup>247</sup> Audre Lorde, “An Open Letter,” 92.

<sup>248</sup> Thelma J. Shinn, *Women Shapeshifters: Transforming the Contemporary Novel* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1996), 74.

<sup>249</sup> Dorothy Roberts, *Killing the Black Body: Race, Reproduction, and the Meaning of Liberty* (New York: Vintage, 1999), 8.

centuries these myths have made Black women seem like ‘nothing more than the bearers of ‘incurable immorality.’”<sup>250</sup> This scapegoating of black women through a “degrading mythology of Black mothers” is, as Roberts asserts, “one aspect of a complex set of stereotypes that deny Black humanity in order to rationalize white supremacy.” The Lilith figure, who prefigures the fall of Adam and Eve in the Hebraic tradition, is also part of a “degrading mythology” and may be the first figure in Western discourse to truly bear the title of “incurable immorality.” As such she can be seen as a prototype of all the “derogatory icons of Black women” that Roberts mentions. Indeed, in her study on religious iconography, Sondra O’Neale explains how in the 16<sup>th</sup> century art that “was created to accommodate the emerging slave trade” started to present black women “as icons of evil...rather than divinity” and “the black woman was introduced as Lilith...made responsible for [Adam’s] sin.”<sup>251</sup> Examining this figure in the works of Toni Morrison and Alice Walker, Kathryn Lee Siedel notes how the recuperation/reclaiming of Lilith can be “a corrective to stereotypical images of African-American women,”<sup>252</sup> which would threaten the patriarchal structures that uphold white supremacy. As alluded to above, in her oeuvre, Octavia Butler *twice* reclaims and in doing so seeks to regenerate Lilith—in *all her reiterations*. I turn now to my reading of Butler’s first retelling of this biblical “First Mother” figure.

### **Butler’s *Seed*: The First (In)Breeding Project**

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<sup>250</sup> Ibid. Roberts cites the term, “incurable immorality” from Herbert G. Gutman’s work, *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom 1750-1925* (New York: Pantheon, 1976), 541.

<sup>251</sup> Quoted in Cathy Peppers, “Dialogic Origins and Alien Identities in Butler’s *Xenogenesis*,” *Science Fiction Studies* 22.1 (March, 1995), 50.

<sup>252</sup> See, Kathryn Lee Seidel, “The Lilith Figure in Toni Morrison’s *Sula* and Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple*,” *Weber Studies* 10.2 (1993).

<http://weberstudies.weber.edu/archive>. Accessed January 1, 2020.

Butler's *Wild Seed* is a revisionist slave history that also serves as the prehistory of the Patternists within the larger series. The novel begins in 1690 and spans over a period of 150 years, with the characters traveling from Africa, to a colony in New England, then to Louisiana, before ending, in the epilogue, in California in the mid-nineteenth century. It tells of Anyanwu (later in the series known as Emma), a West African woman who is a three-hundred-year-old Onitsha priestess of the Igbo people and Doro, a four-thousand-year-old Nubian satanic entity with a eugenic plan to harvest other mutants and create a master race that eventually become the telepathic Patternists. In contrast to the Oankali crossbreeding project, here Doro seeks to create a new species of the human through inbreeding mutant strains, of which Anyanwu, as "wild seed" is the most potent kind. Butler here utilizes a creolizing strategy of inbreeding difference to attack notions of purity, and further acts a creolizer herself by drawing from African myths. Doro is also known as a "body-snatcher" who is modeled after the *Obganje*, an evil child spirit from Igbo mythology, who through his power of taking bodies doubles as the ultimate slave master. Specifically, Doro as a seemingly all-powerful entity is able to live forever by consuming another person's mind and spirit and then "wearing" their bodies, whether they be white or black, male or female, using them up until he is ready to don a new body. He is in other words, a monstrous consuming, obliterating other, with cannibalism acting as a boundary crossing. Unlike Anyanwu's own boundary crossing, however, his is much more nefarious. Upon accidentally discovering Anyanwu Doro convinces her to be part of his mission to breed mutant humans by promising her that he

can give her something she has never had— “children who will live,”<sup>253</sup> meaning immortal offspring like themselves. Prior to meeting Doro Anyanwu has had 47 children in her long life, all of whom had natural human lifespans. All the offspring that Doro has engendered have likewise been mortal. Their different ways of shapeshifting and engendering offspring are highlighted in an exchange they have about birth, in which Anyanwu tells Doro that he fathers or gives birth “to children who are no blood kin to you. They are the children of the bodies you wear, even though you call them your own.” When he tells her she only has one body, she responds with “and you have not understood how completely that one body can change. I cannot leave it as you can, but I can make it over. I can make it over so completely in the image of someone else that I am no longer truly related to my parents. It makes me wonder what I am—that I can do this and still know myself, still return to my true shape.”<sup>254</sup> Doro can never return to his true shape, as his original body died at the age of 13 when his powers awakened and he started to transfer bodies. Yet his essence and sense of identity, remains like Anyanwu, intact. Their different modes of shifting, which enables their immortality, point to transcendence in Doro and immanence in Anyanwu, which Butler seeks to bring into balance.

Here, I argue that through Anyanwu Butler implicitly revisits the formative Judeo-Christian myth of Lilith that she later makes explicit in the *Brood* trilogy, as discussed in the previous chapter. As with her later character, Lilith Iyapo, Butler associates her

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<sup>253</sup> Octavia Butler, *Wild Seed*, 23. Throughout this project, I cite from the omnibus edition, *Seed to Harvest: Wild Seed, Mind of My Mind, Clary's Ark, and Patternmaster* (New York: Grand Central Publishing, 2007), while still referring to specific titles within this collection.

<sup>254</sup> Octavia Butler, *Wild Seed*, 198.

African-American heroine, Anyanwu, with the role of Adam's first wife in the Hebraic tradition who was repudiated and exiled from Eden for refusing to "lie below" Adam and submit to his rule—and was subsequently condemned to give birth profusely only to watch all her newborn children die. Butler reconfigures the Black-woman-as-demonic-figure to highlight and intervene in the ways in which African American women, along with their monstrous "brood," continue to be maintained in states of oppression. Corresponding directly with the story of Lilith's newborn children being destined to die, Roberts notes how blacks in the new world have been viewed as "a degenerating race with no future."<sup>255</sup> Butler's intervention further encapsulates the mythic discourse that associated slave women and later black women in general with the biblical figure of Jezebel, King Ahab's wife who herself is a (canonized) reiteration of Lilith.<sup>256</sup> As Roberts notes, "Jezebel was a purely lascivious creature: not only was she governed by her erotic desires, but her sexual prowess led men to wanton passion."<sup>257</sup> Roberts further states "This construct of the licentious temptress served to justify white men's sexual abuse of Black women...[and] also defined them as bad mothers."<sup>258</sup> In the next chapter, I specifically focus on the ways in which Butler associates black women and blackness itself with the body. Further discussing the present social and political conceptions of black women, Roberts examines how this view of slave women transferred into the 20<sup>th</sup> century via "the myth of Black promiscuity" that with its "innate hyperfertility" held "the belief that Black women

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<sup>255</sup> Quoted in Roberts, *Killing the Black Body*, 9. See George Frederickson, *The Black Image in the White Mind* (Middletown, Mass: Wesleyan University Press, 1971).

<sup>256</sup> Jezebel and Lilith have obvious links between them, such as Jezebel being cast as a "false prophet" while Lilith was a "false" mother of humanity. Both figures are also tied to being "lascivious" creatures who lead men astray.

<sup>257</sup> Dorothy Roberts, *Killing the Black Body*, 10-11.

<sup>258</sup> Dorothy Roberts, *Killing the Black Body*, 11.

procreate with abandon.”<sup>259</sup> In Butler’s revisionist, neogenesis myth, Anyanwu and Lilith Iyapo of the later trilogy mirror each other in being cast as First Mothers who emerge as powerful, prolific, and seemingly immortal “breeders.” These two characters indeed “procreate with abandon” but also birth powerful new races into existence that, by the end of the *Brood* trilogy, are destined to live on and change our understanding of the entire cosmos.

Through her theoretical thought experiments playing with both monstrosity and the role of “hyperfertility” in both Anyanwu and Lilith as immortal First Mothers, I read Butler as participating in what Emanuela Bianchi terms “aleatory feminism,” in her book, *The Feminine Symptom: Aleatory Matter in the Aristotelian Cosmos*. From Aristotle’s founding Western metaphysics, Bianchi mines the notion of matter, which is always linked to the feminine, “as disruptive, as disobedient, as compulsive, as aleatory, as harboring manifold movements *against nature*.” She further asserts that in Aristotle’s work, “this disagreeable aleatory matter gives rise as such to the female offspring, a being that is nonetheless *teleologically required*.”<sup>260</sup> The figure of Anyanwu as well as biblical Lilith herself, can be read as being disruptive and disobedient but also “teleologically required,” for Doro’s explicitly inbreeding plan in the former, and God’s own implicitly inbreeding plan for humans in Genesis in the latter. The aleatory is inherently creolizing in that it cannot be deliberately planned, as is the case with creolization. Butler’s aleatory feminism allows for creolizing figures that generate new forms of the human without being tied to any specific telos. Because Butler places sexual reproduction in its hyper-mode front and center, she

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<sup>259</sup> Dorothy Roberts, *Killing the Black Body*, 12.

<sup>260</sup> Emanuela Bianchi, *The Feminine Symptom*, 223, emphasis in original.

inevitably draws from the aleatory. Anyanwu and Lilith of the later *Brood*, spawn offspring who never quite go according to plan and as such are related to accidental causes, chance, mischance and the unpredictable—precisely because the emphasis here is on the genesis of life itself. Here, however, I also read Butler’s aleatory as being the text itself that in its reworking of mythic representations of Woman disrupts and disobeys entrenched narratives of oppressions and runs errant of the unjust rules for women that they set forth. Aleatory matter in Butler’s texts thus serves to regenerate Lilith’s bloodline, giving new life to her damned (read: Afro-diasporic) descendants and opening up the future for all a creolizing humanity, not just a “pure” one.

While Anyanwu shares the status as “First Mother” with Lilith of *Brood*, she appears to share more similarities with biblical figure of Lilith, who within the canonized biblical text is actually never named. As Dan Ben-Amos observes, “her story seems to hover on the edge of literacy with sporadic references,” further explaining that

Isaiah mentions her name at one point, but not her mythic identity, referring to a demonic female in the desert: “Wildcats shall meet hyenas, goat-demons shall greet each other; there too the Lilith shall repose and find herself a resting place” (Isaiah 34:14). Later in the post-Biblical period, the sages identify the Lilith several times, not by name, but as “the First Eve,” indicating that her full story was well known in the oral tradition, yet barred from the canonized Biblical text.<sup>261</sup>

In most translations of the passage from Isaiah, however, the name of Lilith is replaced simply with “night-creature” or “night-monster.” Having fallen into the sublunary realm with wild and savage animals that roam the night, Lilith prefigures the Fall of Man, and the “original sin” of disobeying Adam/God. The apocryphal work of the tenth century

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<sup>261</sup> Dan Ben-Amos, “From Eden to Ednah—Lilith in the Garden,” *Biblical Archeology Review* 42.3 (May/June 2016), 55.

C.E. known as *The Tales of Ben Sira* further fills in the story of the enigmatic and liminal figure:

After God created Adam, who was alone, He said, 'It is not good for man to be alone' (*Genesis* 2:18). He then created a woman for Adam, from the earth, as He had created Adam himself, and called her Lilith. Adam and Lilith immediately began to fight. She said, 'I will not lie below,' and he said, 'I will not lie beneath you, but only on top. For you are fit only to be in the bottom position, while I am to be in the superior one.' Lilith responded, 'We are equal to each other inasmuch as we were both created from the earth.' But they would not listen to one another. When Lilith saw this, she pronounced the Ineffable Name and flew away into the air...<sup>262</sup>

As her punishment she then agreed to "have one hundred of her children die every day. Accordingly, every day one hundred demons perish..." Since then she is known to seduce men at night and has become one of the most analyzed and explored demonesses.<sup>263</sup> Importantly, Ben-Amos further notes, "In their sexuality and fertility, Lilith and Eve are inversions of each other: Lilith has pleasure without children, and Eve delivers children not simply without pleasure but in pain."<sup>264</sup> Ben-Amos suggests that this splitting of Woman establishes Eve as a Madonna figure and Lilith as her counterpart, the Whore of Satan. *Dawn* specifically begins the *Brood* trilogy not with the figure of Adam but, as Cathy Peppers notes, "with one of Adam's others, Lilith."<sup>265</sup> *Wild Seed*, on the other hand, begins with "a black Adam and Eve" meaning that the text begins with not one but two *shadow sides* of Adam. In Butler's retelling of Lilith in *Brood*, whose fate, as Peppers notes, "was to couple with 'demons' and give birth to a monstrous brood of children,"<sup>266</sup> Lilith concedes to coupling with the Oankali, although fears giving birth to

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<sup>262</sup> Ben-Amos, "Lilith in the Garden," 56.

<sup>263</sup> Ibid.

<sup>264</sup> Ibid.

<sup>265</sup> Cathy Peppers, "Dialogic Origins, 49.

<sup>266</sup> Ibid.



“Medusa children” who will have “snakes for hairs” and “nests of nightcrawlers for eyes and ears.” Peppers observes there is an echo here of “the serpent-like demon children of the Biblical Lilith”<sup>267</sup> and it is an echo that further positions Lilith herself as “night-creature/monster” in the majority of biblical translations. The reference to having each of her children die, however, pertains much more directly to the Anyanwu in the earlier book, *Seed*. After entering into a “covenant” with Doro, her sole immortal counterpart, Anyanwu wonders, “Could she give Doro what he wanted—what she herself had wanted for so long—*children who would not die*?”<sup>268</sup> Ultimately, however, it is not the inbred descendants of the *Patternist* universe that achieve immortality but the creolizing constructs of the *Brood* trilogy such as Jodahs who also shares the same exact shapeshifting powers as Anyanwu, explained there through scientific language. While in *Brood*, the “serpent-like” Oankali whom Lilith couples with are aliens, in *Seed*, Anyanwu couples with Doro who recalls the ultimate demonic figure: Satan himself.

As a shapeshifter, however, Anyanwu blurs the boundary between Eve and Lilith, the godly and demonic, and the Madonna and the Whore. Following Sandra Y. Govan’s reading of the two characters as “a black Adam and Eve” who beget children that in turn will “beget a new race,”<sup>269</sup> I read the two figures inversely as the shadow sides of Adam and Eve, or in other words, as their demonic Others. Anyanwu is often mistaken for a “witch,” while Doro considers himself a “breeder of witches,”<sup>270</sup> who some of his people

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<sup>267</sup> Cathy Peppers, “Dialogic Origins,” 50.

<sup>268</sup> *Seed*, 83, emphasis added.

<sup>269</sup> Sandra Y. Govan, “Connection, Links, and Extended Networks: Patterns in Octavia Butler’s Science Fiction,” *Black American Literature Forum* 18.2 (Summer 1984), 84.

<sup>270</sup> *Wild Seed*, 29.

have called “the devil himself.”<sup>271</sup> It is important to note that Lilith in the later *Brood* is seen by the human resisters in that story, as she states, “as though I were *a second Satan or Satan’s wife*.”<sup>272</sup> There is a direct correlation between Doro as a “breeder of witches,” and Anyanwu herself as a mother witch, and indeed in the last book of *Seed* Anyanwu ends up “raising witches” of her own.<sup>273</sup> This further points to how complementary these two figures are; they are properly matched on an even playing field with regards to breeding. On the flipside of the demonic, throughout their centuries-old (and with Doro, Millenia-old) lives, both of them have also been seen as figures of divinity, with Doro’s people believing him to be a “god”<sup>274</sup> and Anyanwu’s people believing her to be an “oracle” who speaks “as the voice of god”<sup>275</sup> though both characters themselves do not believe in any god. Again, this represents complementary if distorted energies of the divine masculine and divine feminine coming together ultimately, at the end of *Seed*, to establish harmony and balance, whereas the human-founding and god-fearing Adam and Eve perpetually represent an imbalance of gender dynamics: a binary that is hierarchical, oppositional and never complementary. In another instance, moreover, after Doro has been away from his New England Village, he comes home to find a portrait of Anyanwu that was “extraordinary...the portrait was a black Madonna and child right down to Anyanwu’s too clear, innocent-seeming eyes. Strangers were moved to comment on the likeness...Others were deeply offended, believing that someone actually had tried to

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<sup>271</sup> *Wild Seed*, 41

<sup>272</sup> Octavia E. Butler, *Lilith’s Brood* (New York: Grand Central Publishing, 2000), 297, emphasis added.

<sup>273</sup> *Wild Seed*, 196.

<sup>274</sup> *Wild Seed*, 44/46.

<sup>275</sup> *Wild Seed*, 20/48.

portray the Virgin and Child as ‘black savages.’”<sup>276</sup> Anyanwu then clearly blurs the division between Madonna/Whore and concomitantly the White/Black, Civilized/Savage, and a whole range of binaries. Butler consistently creolizes her protagonists to overturn the oppositional and dichotomous differences put in place through Western dualistic thinking.

The biblical structure of the novel further indicate how not only reinvents mythical themes but also intervenes in its oppressive narrative structures. I further read the biblical structure as part of Butler’s revisionist speculation of the “night-creature” making her way through the fables of the Old Testament that originally erases Lilith and banishes her to demonic grounds. Like the *Brood* trilogy that “is based on the myth of creation (*Dawn*), Incarnation (*Adulthood Rites*), and Apocalypse (*Imago*)”<sup>277</sup> *Seed* also has its own biblical structure. The text, like the trilogy, is divided into three books, spanning 150 years, with biblical titles taken from Genesis and Exodus: Book I, Covenant, 1690; Book II, Lot’s Children, 1741; and Book III: Canaan, 1840. With regard to the first book of *Seed*, Teri Ann Doerksen explains that “Covenant refers to the agreement struck between God and Abraham in Genesis, in which God promises to make Abraham “a father of many nations” (Genesis 17:5) and to give his descendants the land of Canaan,”<sup>278</sup> which mirrors the agreement made between Doro and Anyanwu. As John R. Pfeiffer further notes, “The female Anyanwu replaces the spurious patriarchal

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<sup>276</sup> Octavia Butler, *Wild Seed*, 131.

<sup>277</sup> Judith Lee, “‘We are all Kin’: Relatedness, Mortality, and the Paradox of Human Immortality,” in *Immortal Engines: Life Extension and Immortality in Science Fiction and Fantasy*, edited by George Slusser et al., (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1996), 175.

<sup>278</sup> Teri Ann Doerksen, “Parables of Race and Difference,” 30.

maleness of the Hebraic Abraham in Butler's reinvention of the biblical fable. *Seed* sets up a matriarchal genealogy, and Anyanwu is assigned the fabulous longevity and fertility of a biblical patriarch."<sup>279</sup> This bears out in the Epilogue of *Seed*, when Anyanwu, speculating on just how many descendants she has and how widely they are scattered across time and space after centuries of mutant inbreeding, asserts that "they would no doubt make a fine nation."<sup>280</sup> Shinn, connecting *Seed* to the subsequent book of the *Patternist* series, *Mind of My Mind*, further reads Anyanwu and Doro as being "equally linked with the Old Testament Abraham and the New Testament Virgin Mary" in that "Anyanwu's role will indeed pass to a Mary, who then gives birth to the pattern that saves and nurtures her community at the cost of personal sacrifice...Anyanwu marries both Father and sacrificial Son, both Doro and Isaac (whose name identifies Doro as Abraham as well). She is the Holy Spirit of this Trinity, linking the two by her love."<sup>281</sup> While the structural framing of each section does serve as an analogue to these biblical tales, with the notion of Doro as God and Anyanwu as Abraham (and the entering into a covenant with one another), they do not match up evenly. Since Doro is Isaac's father, this situates both Doro and Anyanwu as stand-ins for Abraham, which again suggests a fungibility of these highly gendered figures. Butler does indeed set up a matriarchal genealogy, although Anyanwu was "fruitful" well before her encounter with Doro with her 47 children (unlike the encounter between God and the aging Abraham and his wife, Sarah).

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<sup>279</sup> John R. Pfeiffer, "Octavia Butler Writes the Bible," *Shaw and Other Matters*, edited by Susan Rusinko (London, Associated Press, 1988), 143.

<sup>280</sup> Octavia Butler, *Wild Seed*, 252.

<sup>281</sup> Shinn, *Women Shapeshifters*, 79.

Upon reaching Doro's village in the new colony, the initial agreement or "covenant" between Doro and Anyanwu of begetting a new immortal race immediately leads to Anyanwu's discontentment, for the devil, as we well know, is full of tricks. After crossing the Atlantic on Doro's slave ship, which was a relatively smooth trip other than Anyanwu being forced to transform into a Leopard kill rape-prone Lale, one of Doro's deranged telepathic sons, Doro takes Anyanwu to Wheatley, a New England village he owns. There he tells her that he will be leaving her there while he attends his other seed villages and that he is giving her to Isaac, his other son that also traveled across the Atlantic with them and is his most successful creation to date, a beautiful adult mutant with powerful telekinetic powers. Specifically, Doro tells her, "I want children of your body and his." Enraged, Anyanwu calls foul, "But he's your son! How can I have the son when his father, my husband, still lives? That is an abomination! ...How is it here? Do sons lie with their mothers also? Do sisters and brothers lie down together?" To which Doro replies, "Woman, if I command it, they lie down gladly."<sup>282</sup> In utter revulsion, Anyanwu thinks of "incest, of mating her own children together with doglike disregard for kinship" and softly tells him, "you have been telling me lies from the day we met...I came here to be your wife... 'Let me give you children who will live,' you said. 'I promise that if you come with me, I will give you children of your kind,' you said. And now, you send me away to another man. You give me nothing at all."<sup>283</sup> The stinger of it all comes with Doro's reply, "I have not lied to you...you will bear my children as well as Isaac's."<sup>284</sup> The rift that this creates between Doro and Anyanwu lasts for over a

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<sup>282</sup> Octavia Butler, *Wild Seed*, 113.

<sup>283</sup> Octavia Butler, *Wild Seed*, 114-15.

<sup>284</sup> Ibid.

century. After Doro tries to reason with Anyanwu that this is the way things must be done in order for her to have the children she desires, and then resorts to physical violence by striking her down, Isaac intercedes and manages to persuade her submit to Doro's rule given that he cannot die but can ultimately drive away her spirit and inhabit her body. Valuing her own life, and not having "the courage to die," Anyanwu accepts patriarchal rule and comes to know for the first time in her long life "how slaves had felt as they lay chained on the bench, the slaver's hot iron burning into her flesh. In her pride, she had denied that she was a slave. She could no longer deny it. Doro's mark had been on her from the day they met."<sup>285</sup> Over the next fifty years (the span of Book II) she settles down in Wheatley and develops a strong and loving partnership with Isaac, who proves a worthy mate, and has children with him and, through coercion, with Doro and with whomever Doro brings to her to mate. Isaac mates outside his marriage to Anyanwu, and further within the community, all virgin daughters "usually saved themselves for husbands, or for Doro."<sup>286</sup> While this no doubt harks back to the degenerate conditions under which black slaves were forced to live, it is worth noting how Butler reaches farther back in time to explicitly mark the biblical discourse on incest and inbreeding.

Butler draws from the incest taboo, here as in many of her other works, in order to further mine the politics of purity. In Book II, *Lot's Children*, we are graphically introduced to what Doro's (in)breeding project for a superior race entails: incest. Through the biblical framing of book two: "*Lot's Children*," incest becomes, as Ingrid Thaler

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<sup>285</sup> Octavia Butler, *Wild Seed*, 122-3.

<sup>286</sup> Octavia Butler, *Wild Seed*, 139.

asserts, “the central paradigm for the control over reproduction in patriarchy.” She explains the reference directly:

In the Old Testament, Lot lives with his two (unnamed) daughters in a cave near Zoar after the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. In the cave, the two daughters decide to have sexual intercourse with their father in order to “preserve the seed of our father” (Genesis 19:32). “Lot’s Children” are the products of these incestuous encounters, which the Old Testament God does not punish and which are, like a number of other incestuous acts in the Old Testament, not commented on but (*morally*) *licensed*. Lot’s two (grand)sons, Moab and Bennami, become fathers of two great tribes, the Moabites and the Ammonites.<sup>287</sup>

Not only does the Old Testament “morally license” incest and inbreeding, but it also has decrees against crossbreeding. In Genesis 6:4 it speaks of wicked giants (or fallen angels) coming to mate with the “daughters of men.” In the non-canonical *Book of Enoch*, the offspring are referenced as monstrosities, literally terrifying giants. Thaler further notes that novel “defines the patriarchy outlined in the Old Testament as an analogy to the family structure of enslavement...Once these structures are established, subordination to the patriarch is naturalized as the slave-offspring’s desire. The novel thus aligns the willingness of Lot’s daughters to engage in incest in the Old Testament with the desire for the patriarch in Doro’s people.”<sup>288</sup> As both a devil figure and God/Adam’s own shadow-side, Doro still represents patriarchy-*qua*-slavery in being constructed through biblical archetypes whose “morally licensed” narratives perpetuate systems of oppression across time and space. These systems of oppression rely on inbreeding to maintain themselves, while abhorring crossbreeding, which the direction Butler consistently heads towards.

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<sup>287</sup>Ingrid Thaler, *Black Atlantic Speculative Fiction: Octavia Butler, Jewelle Gomez, and Nalo Hopkinson* (New York: Routledge, 2010), 30, emphasis added.

<sup>288</sup> Thaler, *Black Atlantic*, 31.

In African-American literature of the late twentieth century, however, Butler is not alone in writing about incest. As Aliyyah I. Abdur-Rahman avers, texts written by African Americans, especially in “contemporary black women’s literature” highlight incest, especially “father-daughter incest” as an emerging “literary trope” and contends that it functions as “a *figurative* sexual arrangement that epitomizes black family ruin in the post-civil rights period.”<sup>289</sup> Analyzing realists texts such as Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye*, Gayl Jones’s *Corregidora*, Sapphire’s *Push*, and ending with Octavia’s science fictional text, *Imago*, Abdur-Rahman powerfully argues that the representations of incest here “bespeak racism’s profound and incessant injuries to black children and black women, epitomizing the disintegration of the black family under the pressures of civil rights entrenchment, reinvigorated black patriarchy, dwindling communal supports, negligible economic resources, and urban decay.”<sup>290</sup> Interestingly enough, however, Abdur-Rahman bypasses the biblical incest discourse embedded in *Seed*, to focus solely on *Imago*, the last book in the *Brood* trilogy, as a “way forward” and away from “racism’s profound and incessant injuries” to black women and their children. Her contention in the latter is that “sibling incest is figured as a faulty but innovative circuit of desire that carries the possibility of a fierce familial cohesion and effort toward racial preservation.”<sup>291</sup> I believe such reading can also be applied to Butler’s first attempt in *Seed* to first recover and then preserve a race that, stemming from the fallen and exiled Lilith, was never given a chance at life to begin with. At the very least, the incest trope in

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<sup>289</sup> Aliyyah I. Abdur-Rahman, *Against the Closet: Black Political Longing and the Erotics of Race* (Durham: Duke University, 2012), 116.

<sup>290</sup> Abdur-Rahman, *Against the Closet*, 116-7.

<sup>291</sup> Abdur-Rahman, *Against the Closet*, 118.



*Seed* certainly speaks to “the power of literary incest to upset conventional narrative possibility.”<sup>292</sup> On another level, incest can be linked to the theme of monstrosity from which Butler never fully departs. Cohen notes that “as a vehicle of prohibition, the monster often arises to enforce the laws of exogamy, both the incest taboo (which establishes traffic in women by mandating that they marry outside their families) and the decrees against interracial sexual mingling (which limit the parameters of that traffic by policing the boundaries of culture, usually in the service of some notion of group ‘purity’).”<sup>293</sup> I propose that Butler returns again and again to the issue of incest precisely in order to fight against notions of “group purity” by which anti-black racism is upheld. She incorporates monstrosity and shapeshifting as prohibitive vehicles through which to creolize all discourses that seek to stabilize notions of purity.

In contrast to Doro’s way of breeding, the novel presents us with how Anyanwu brings communities together to continue breeding. Book III: Canaan opens with Anyanwu having established her own matriarchal breeding village in Louisiana in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century. At the end of book II, after Isaac dies trying to save Nweke, a powerful daughter of Doro and Anyanwu who cannot control her powers during transition into adulthood and also dies, Doro decides he will take possession of Anyanwu, as she no longer seems useful to him. Sensing this beforehand, she flies away as a bird and then turns into a dolphin, joining a beautiful community of dolphins and eluding Doro’s grasp for the next fifty years. One of the limits of Doro’s powers is not he cannot track Anyanwu when she is in animal form, a secret he keeps to himself and that Anyanwu

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<sup>292</sup> Abdur-Rahman, *Against the Closet*, 127.

<sup>293</sup> Jeffery Cohen, “Monster Culture,” 15. See also Mary Douglass, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (New York: Routledge, 1966).

soon learns. Doro eventually finds her after she has established her Louisiana village. The reference to “Canaan” in this section highlights a contradiction in terms. Thaler explains that “As the biblical promise of utopia for God’s chosen people, Canaan is ‘a land flowing with milk and honey’ (Exod. 33:3)” but ironically enough, the name also “refers to another typological reading of the Old Testament: Noah’s cursing of his son Ham and his descendants, the Canaanites, was wildly used in the slave-holding South in the nineteenth century to justify chattel slavery by identifying Africans as the descendants of Ham.”<sup>294</sup> Thaler further notes that

In contrast to Wheatley, which is based on the systematic “breeding” of people, Anyanwu does not define family as blood relations. As the archetypical “Great Mother”, Anyanwu “gathered people to her and cared for them and helped them care for each other.” Her sense of community opposes the patriarchy, colonialism, and slavery the novel ascribes to Doro...Anyanwu’s commune, which is based on consensus, appropriates the name “Canaan” for a matriarchal counter-concept to Doro’s patriarchy.<sup>295</sup>

We, however, only get a small glimpse of the possibility of such a “commune,” before Doro enters it only to wreak havoc and reassert his patriarchal rule. Initially, he still plans to kill Anyanwu but when he finds out how well her mutant children are growing and making it past their transitions into adulthood, he decides she is still valuable to him. After again losing her matriarchal authority, Anyanwu finally gets “the courage to die,” she lacked in the first book of *Seed* and prepares to commit suicide, one of only two ways she can die (the other is through Doro’s possession of her body). Doro finds, however, that he cannot bear to live without Anyanwu and her suicidal threat forces, as Govan notes, “to salvage what humanity he has remaining, and that is no small victory.”<sup>296</sup>

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<sup>294</sup> Thaler, *Black Atlantic*, 32-3.

<sup>295</sup> Thaler, *Black Atlantic*, 33.

<sup>296</sup> Govan, “Connections, Links, and Extended Networks,” 81.

Building on Govan's reading, J. Andrew Deman observes that more than needing "his female counterpart for her ability to heal, and to guide the children through "transitions"... Doro needs Anyanwu in order to be human, real. Much of the novel's development depends upon Doro's growth towards understanding the true value of the woman that he has marginalized..."<sup>297</sup> Ultimately, Doro does learn the real value of Anyanwu, which indeed saves his humanity for the reader within, at least, the first novel in that series. In the following section I examine how the biblical discourse tied to incest and inbreeding is resituated in *Imago*, the third book in the later *Brood* trilogy and the ways in which the main shapeshifting "construct" there serves as a direct descendant of both Doro and Anyanwu.

### **Imago**

Recall that in the second book of the *Brood* trilogy, the Human-Oankali male construct and hero, Akin, achieved his goal of restoring humans' reproductive rights as long as they accept to leave planet earth and move to the new Mars colony. In the third and final book, *Imago*, the new ooloi-construct, Jodahs, is a more radical "figure of the third" than this predecessor Akin in being neither male or female but a "different sex altogether,"<sup>298</sup> thus placing it beyond the gender/sex binary. Such placement is the first clue that points us back to the original Lilith, the original "third figure," who is also beyond the gender and sexual binary/hierarchy founded by Adam and Eve. The narration in this text shifts from the third-person perspective of the prior two novels (of Lilith, a female, and Akin, a male) to a first-person perspective that is nonbinary and that replaces

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<sup>297</sup> J. Andrew Deman, "Taking Out the Trash: Octavia E. Butler's *Wild Seed* and the Feminist Voice in American SF," 6.2 *Femspec* (2005): 11.

<sup>298</sup> Butler, *Lilith's Brood*, 524.

the pronoun “It” for “I” rather than She/He, meaning we readers are similar placed within this “third” subject position. Also, unlike prior male/female constructs, Jodahs must undergo not one but two transitions, the first one being what kicks off the story. Given Butler’s penchant for threes, it is unsurprising that this story, like *Seed* and the *Brood* trilogy as a whole, is itself subdivided into three parts: I: Metamorphosis, II: Exile, and III: Imago. The hero’s dilemma here is that in order to make it past its second transition, Jodahs as an ooloi-construct, needs to bond with both a human male and female partner, which is to say, polar opposites within a sexual binary. He is, however, exiled from the Lo trading village by the Oankali for being an unexpected, untested and so a potentially dangerous ooloi construct. In his exile—another clue linking it to biblical Lilith—however, he finds the essential binary figures he needs in the form of kinship: Tomás and Jesusa, a grotesque and disfigured brother and a sister who come from a colony of fertile humans who have managed to evade the detection of the Oankali’s occupation of earth and have been inbreeding their own.

Through the siblings’ “origin” story, which they tell to Jodahs, Butler explicitly revisits the biblical discourse of Adam and Eve. Like the initial founding mythic story of Genesis, theirs is a tale of inbreeding, but it is a tale that ultimately, cannot repeat in the same way on an “awakened” earth. The exiled Jodahs first finds the sibling coupling in the mountain when they are running away from their people who, as they tell Jodahs, “have been breeding brother and sister and parent to child for generations” like people had done “in the past. Like the children of Adam and Eve. There was no one else.”<sup>299</sup> Later they further elaborate on how it came to be: the “First Mother,” María de la Luz,

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<sup>299</sup> Octavia Butler, *Lilith’s Brood*, 637.

who was originally “from Mexico,” had been travelling with a large group of people to live higher in the mountains when they were attacked.<sup>300</sup> Her own mother died and María was raped repeatedly by a band of men and left unconscious. When she awoke, she crawled back to her people only to later find out what “no one had thought it was possible”: she was with child. When the son “Adan” came the people kept mother and son away until he was thirteen years old when “they were able to put mother and son together. By then, both had been taught their duty. And by then everyone had realized the Mother was not only fertile but mortal—as they seemed not to be...The Mother bore three daughters eventually. She died with the birth of her second son” who came out grotesque and diseased.<sup>301</sup> This horrific story is one that is founded on the violence and rape of a “First Mother” figure who through inbreeding produced a generation of sick and diseased offspring. The entire village of “fertile” but degenerat(iv)e citizens is here constituted by a rape culture obsessed with biblical and patriarchal incest and inbreeding. The religiously perverse village people prefer their grotesque genetic disorder over receiving help through crossbreed with the Oankali because they see them as “devils and monsters”<sup>302</sup>: more like a projection of who they are themselves than the Oankali themselves. The disfigured and disabled siblings have been taught that the “alien thing” that the Oankali want from them, their human genes to cross-pollinate and enhance their own species, is “Un-Christian” and “Un-Human”: “*It’s the thing we’ve been taught against all our lives.*”<sup>303</sup> They turn away from such teaching, however, because they

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<sup>300</sup> Octavia Butler, *Lilith’s Brood*, 661.

<sup>301</sup> Octavia Butler, *Lilith’s Brood*, 661-2.

<sup>302</sup> Octavia Butler, *Lilith’s Brood*, 720.

<sup>303</sup> Octavia Butler, *Lilith’s Brood*, 648 emphasis in original.

refuse to have sex with one another and thus continue the re/production of inbred deformities, and they fear that if they are caught, they will be “locked up and bred!”<sup>304</sup> Later, Jodahs narrates how one of the founders of the inbred village “had been teaching children that people like me were devils, monsters, that it was better to endure a disfiguring, disabling genetic disorder than to go down from the mountains and find the Oankali.”<sup>305</sup> In this text there is no direct patriarchal Doro or God/Devil figure to oppress people, but rather, the reason for “hierarchical behavior” in humans lies in their genetical structure. These village people nonetheless hold on to notions of good/evil based on the Judeo-Christian tradition, which is the main cause for human disfigurement at the biological level.

In an inverse mirroring of her prior *Seed*, the humans here represent a deviation from the (new) norm that the Oankali establish. This indeed serves as a corrective to Doro’s own attempts at inbreeding that, without the “wild seed” or lost “bloodline” of Anyanwu,<sup>306</sup> produces grotesque and monstrous creations that never make it past their transitions into adulthood. When Jodahs first discovers the runaway siblings in the forest, they “smelled very strange. Wrong. Injured, perhaps.”<sup>307</sup> He comes to find out that they are diseased and grotesque looking: Tomás’s face “was half obscured by a large growth. He wore no shirt and I could see that his back and chest were covered with tumorous growths, large and small. One of his eyes was completely covered. The other seemed endangered.” Upon closer examination Jodahs notes how the genetic disorder had

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<sup>304</sup> Octavia Butler, *Lilith’s Brood*, 686.

<sup>305</sup> Octavia Butler, *Lilith’s Brood*, 721.

<sup>306</sup> Octavia Butler, *Wild Seed*, 44.

<sup>307</sup> Octavia Butler, *Lilith’s Brood*, 615.

“deformed even the bones of his face. He was deaf in one ear. Eventually he would be deaf in the other. His spine was becoming involved. Already he could not turn his head freely...This man was already dying.”<sup>308</sup> Jesusa is likewise diseased but not as advanced as her brother, although both come from an entire village that suffers from the disfiguring genetic disorder. That is when Jodahs discovers that “*They were fertile! Both of them...*I could see now that [they] were aging the way Humans had aged before the war—before the Oankali arrived to rescue the survivors and prolong their lives.” Jodahs then thinks “*I could mate with them!* Young Humans, born on Earth, fertile among themselves. A colony of them, diseased, deformed, but breeding! Life.”<sup>309</sup> But it is life that again is folding in on itself and slowly dying. Upon bonding and forming a mutually beneficial pact, Jodahs heals their genetic disorders and they in turn help him during his final transition to reach “reproductive independence,”<sup>310</sup> in which it attains control of its own shapeshifting and regenerative powers. Like the prior construct Akin, Jodahs serves as an intermediary between humans that specifically mediates, as Abdur-Rahman avers, “incestuous occurrence,”<sup>311</sup> a mediation not fully worked out in the prior *Seed* and indeed the rest of entire *Patternist* series, which I discussed further at length in the subsequent and final chapter of this project.

Jodahs’ power to mediate at the biological level such “incestuous occurrence,” needs further explanation, for it is where Butler interjects scientific, specifically biological, discourse into biblical narrative. What makes the ooloi a unique construct is

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<sup>308</sup> Octavia Butler, *Lilith’s Brood*, 617.

<sup>309</sup> Octavia Butler, *Lilith’s Brood*, 628, emphasis in original.

<sup>310</sup> Octavia Butler, *Lilith’s Brood*, 742.

<sup>311</sup> Abdur-Rahman, *Against the Closet*, 147.

its “yashi,” an alien organelle that is an essential aspect of its biological makeup. Since it is modelled after a real biological organ, thus making it scientifically plausible, it constitutes the science fictional “novum” or novelty/innovation of the *Brood* trilogy.<sup>312</sup> This organ called a “yashi” growing between two hearts is what the ooloi call their “organ of genetic manipulation.”<sup>313</sup> Oankali constructs of all sexes and genders possess two hearts—“double the Human allotment”—as well as the extra yashi organelle that is “not Human at all”<sup>314</sup> but the ooloi and ooloi-construct, as master genetic engineers, have a more complex version of it: “Males and females use 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...the organelle made or found compatibility with life-forms so completely dissimilar that they were unable to even perceive one another as alive.”<sup>315</sup> John Lennard has explored how this yashi organelle is modelled after the Mitochondrion. Breaking down the science, he explains that “An organelle is a self-contained structure within a eukaryotic cell—the kind that have a nucleus...containing within each cell the DNA of the whole organism.”<sup>316</sup> The eukaryotic cell, moreover, hosts within its nucleus the mitochondrion, which “takes in proteins the cell manufactures for it and in return

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<sup>312</sup> The “novum” is a term used by Darko Suvin to refer to a “new thing” in the genre of SF that is imagined to exist by scientific means rather than magic, and is brought on by the logic of “cognitive estrangement.” See Darko Suvin, *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction: On the Poetics and History of a Literary Genre* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979).

<sup>313</sup> Butler, *Lilith’s Brood*, 544.

<sup>314</sup> Butler, *Lilith’s Brood*, 543.

<sup>315</sup> Butler, *Lilith’s Brood*, 543-4.

<sup>316</sup> John Lennard, “Of Organelles: Octavia Butler’s Strange Determination,” in *Of Modern Dragons and Other Essays on Genre Fiction* (Humanities-EBooks, 2007), 163.



supplies energy.” Mitochondria, however, also have their own DNA, but since “there isn’t enough of it to contain the recipes for all the mitochondria need, they are dependent on the cell’s nuclear DNA...as an apparent incidental effect of the chemistry of fertilization, mitochondrial DNA was passed strictly down the female line, not in the same sexually dividing-and pairing fashion as nuclear DNA.”<sup>317</sup> Lastly, Lennard notes, mitochondria “are thought to have evolved c.4 billion years ago, alongside eukaryotic cells, and at some juncture the two entered symbiosis, *a mutually beneficial biological pact*. Eukaryotic cells hosted mitochondria, synthesizing for them proteins they needed; in return mitochondria delivered surplus energy to eukaryotic cells—and still do.”<sup>318</sup> In Lennard’s reading of *Brood*, he observes that for Butler the mitochondria, now imagined as a yashi organelle, “have their own DNA because they were once a distinct species.”<sup>319</sup> He further notes that within the story this “obviously matters because humanity might go the same way, absorbed, mitochondria and all, into an alien ‘Oakanli’ genome that has already incorporated scores of species.”<sup>320</sup>

The fear of absorption in the trilogy, however, is unfounded as Butler appeals to the symbiosis that is found at the molecular level and serves a “mutually beneficial pact,” which symbiotically *and* symbolically enables kinship relations with what appears as the most radically other to the (human) sense of self. As cited above, the yashi organelle can find “compatibility with life-forms so dissimilar” that they can appear to be dead, to not even exist at all, but through Oankali cross-pollination, can reanimate it. I am, moreover,

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<sup>317</sup> John Lennard, “Of Organelles,” 164.

<sup>318</sup> John Lennard, “Of Organelles,” 164-5, emphasis added.

<sup>319</sup> John Lennard, “Of Organelles,” 164.

<sup>320</sup> John Lennard, “Of Organelles,” 165.

interested in Butler's very embodiment of the ooloi construct, its sense of self, as mitochondria: "We were what we were because of that organelle. It made us collectors and traders of life, always learning, always changing in every way but one—that one organelle. Ooloi said we *were* that organelle—that the original Oankali had evolved through the organelle's invasion, acquisition, duplication, and symbiosis."<sup>321</sup> I here read the yashi organelle as standing in for an *alien third* that symbiotically regulates and is in turn regulated by *two internal hearts*. What Butler presents us with here is a speculative subjectivity in which the self contains within it not one but two centers. This further suggests that Butler's new creolizing and intermediating constructs represent a type of *elliptical sense of self*: a cryptic and oscillating being constituted by two heart centers linked into an alien third figure that itself lacks a center. As such it points to *an aporetic essence at work that is (re)productively eclipsed*. Even though life itself is "conceived" in the alien yashi organelle, the ooloi has "no reproductive organs at all."<sup>322</sup> After conception, they place the embryo in either human or Oankali mothers for gestation and birth, but beyond its genetic mixing that engenders and manipulates all life forms, the ooloi make "no genetic contribution to their children."<sup>323</sup> Furthermore, I read the "two hearts" as mediating the two poles of binary formations and dualistic thinking, further indicating that this construct of self contains within it a *singularity* that is itself embedded within a *multiplicity*, which results in an open totality that turns an *either/or* dichotomy into a *both/and*. Further upsetting a gender/sexual binary is the fact that Jodahs is, like Anyanwu, a shapeshifter, a gift it inherited from Lilith's cancer cells in the *Brood*, but is

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<sup>321</sup> Octavia Butler, *Lilith's Brood*, 544, emphasis in original.

<sup>322</sup> Octavia Butler, *Lilith's Brood*, 548.

<sup>323</sup> Octavia Butler, *Lilith's Brood*, 545.

also a gift, as I argue in the following section, from the earlier Anyanwu, and by extension from biblical Lilith as well.

### **The Ways of (Reading) the Shapeshifter**

Jodahs is the only other character in Butler's work that shares the exact same shapeshifting powers of Anyanwu, none of which the *Patternist* telepathic descendants in the rest of that series as a whole possess. I thus read Jodahs as the offspring that Anyanwu always wished for but never quite got with Doro's eugenic project. Like Anyanwu, whom at the start of *Seed* Doro encounters by "accident," so too in *Imago* does the text link Jodahs to the accidental (chance, luck, etc.) as well as to matter that shifts shape through its own volition, thus linking the figure of the shapeshifter to the aleatory. Initially, Jodahs (and later, its sibling Aaor) were expected to be "Human born male construct," like the Akin of *Rites*, but through an "accident" it become the first ever Human born ooloi construct. This occurrence is explained through Jodahs spending too much time with Nikanj, its ooloi parent, instead of bonding with one of its male or female parents, which indicates a becoming that is linked solely to proximity of the other. Even though Jodahs's third and potentially dangerous gender was accidental and unexpected, its ooloi parent Nikanj finds in the new construct "no flaw." Early on Nikanj explains to Jodahs that

You will be complete in ways that male and female constructs have not been... You'll be able to change yourself. What we can do from one generation to the next—changing our form, reverting to earlier forms or combinations of forms—you'll be able to do within yourself. Superficially, you may even be able to create new forms, new shells for camouflage. That's what we intended. <sup>324</sup>

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<sup>324</sup> Octavia Butler, *Lilith's Brood*, 538.

By the end of “Imago,” the third section of the third book of the same name, once having safely transitioned along with his sibling, Jodahs states, “We represented the premature adulthood of a new species. We represented true independence—*reproductive independence*—for that species, and this frightened both Oankali and constructs. We were, as one signaler remarked, frighteningly competent ooloi.”<sup>325</sup> “Reproductive independence,” suggests that the fusion between human and Oankali is complete and the new ooloi construct is now free to incorporate another species in its seemingly endless capacity to embrace and fuse with difference. This freedom is at once a central issue in the effaced biblical story of the Lilith-turned-demoness, and is likewise central to the “procreative freedom/reproductive autonomy”<sup>326</sup> that as Dorothy Roberts has documented, has been denied to women of color well into our present century. Ultimately for Roberts and Butler, “reproductive freedom is a matter of social justice, not individual choice.”<sup>327</sup> The fact that the shapeshifter is directly linked to reproductive independence indicates just what a powerful force this figure embodies, and as such the function of the shapeshifter needs further examination. Central to the operations of this figure is its ability to overturn the discourse on gender subordination and patriarchal control over sexual reproduction.

The ways of reading the shapeshifter are, like the figure itself, multifold. In the traditional mythological structure of fiction, the figure of the shapeshifter has always been associated with bringing a new understanding of gender and sex. In his analysis of the “elusive archetype of the Shapeshifter,” Christopher Vogler identifies different

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<sup>325</sup> Octavia Butler, *Lilith's Brood*, 742, emphasis added.

<sup>326</sup> Roberts, *Killing the Black Body*, 4/5.

<sup>327</sup> Roberts, *Killing the Black Body*, 6.

configurations of this figure in literature and film, noting that witches and wizards “are traditional Shapeshifters in the world of fairy tales.”<sup>328</sup> Another “type of Shapeshifter is called the *femme fatale*, the woman as temptress or destroyer. The idea is as old as the Bible, with its stories of Eve in the Garden of Eden, the scheming Jezebel, and Delilah...”<sup>329</sup> Butler’s Anyanwu fits neatly into this ancient understanding of the shapeshifter. With regard to its psychological function, Vogler explains that it expresses the energy of the Jungian animus and anima: “The animus is [Carl] Jung’s name for the male element in the female unconscious, the bundle of positive and negative images of masculinity in a woman’s dreams and fantasies. The anima is the corresponding female element in the male unconscious. In this theory, people have a complete set of both male and female qualities which are necessary for survival and internal balance.”<sup>330</sup>

Furthermore, Vogler goes on to note that “the Shapeshifter archetype is also a catalyst for change, a symbol of the psychological urge to transform. Dealing with the shapeshifter may cause the hero to change attitudes about the opposite sex or come to terms with the repressed energies this archetype stirs up.”<sup>331</sup> Since Doro and Anyanwu are both shapeshifters (referenced as witch and wizard), they can be seen as representing the animus and anima respectively. These two essences must come together and achieve harmony and balance to save the feminine principle (Anyanwu) from dying off on its own and save the masculine principle (Doro) from the literal self-annihilating self. Anyanwu, as biblical shapeshifting temptress, further serves as the “catalyst for the

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<sup>328</sup> Christopher Vogler, “Shapeshifter,” in *The Writers Journey: Mythic Structures for Writers* 3rd edition (Studio City: Michael Wiese Productions, 2007), 59.

<sup>329</sup> Christopher Vogler, “Shapeshifter,” 62, emphasis in original.

<sup>330</sup> Christopher Vogler, “Shapeshifter,” 60.

<sup>331</sup> Vogler, “Shapeshifter,” 61.

change” in Doro making him experience love for the first time in centuries. In *Imago*, the all-powerful shapeshifter is the third-sex Ooloi construct, Jodahs, who is also the first-person narrator and as such is the “catalyst for change” for the readers of the book, who are urged to transform their own thinking about the power structure of gender relations, and all other hierarchal relations within dualistic thought.

Within the genre of SF, the shapeshifter is additionally linked to transgender identities. Through queer reading of the recurring trope of the shapeshifter within the genre of SF, Patricia Melzer argues that it serves as “a symbolic function as possible androgynous identities outside the gender binary,” noting that in not being

bound to any stable form, the shapeshifter moves between bodies and is without an essence that defines the self as either woman or man. This ability to move between bodies—and ultimately between identities—lends the shapeshifter a distinctly transgender quality. The transgendered person, too, resists an “either/or” identity and often moves in and out of gendered categories. The unstable relationship of body to (gender) identity is threatening to the status quo, which relies on a dual gender concept; it enables transgressive forms of rethinking gender relations and challenges the structure of power between them.<sup>332</sup>

Picking up the notion that the shapeshifter is a seductress figure, Melzer specifically reads the figure of Jodahs as speaking to a “queer desire” in their ability to fluidly become any sex/gender they wish, which points to the instability inherent in gender identity.<sup>333</sup> Dagmar Van Engen goes further in reading Jodahs as a “nonbinary trans character,” and positions the *Brood* trilogy as “a work of trans futurism”<sup>334</sup> and “an

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<sup>332</sup> Patricia Melzer, “Beyond Binary Gender, 227.

<sup>333</sup> Melzer constructs her reading of Butler’s shapeshifters through Judith Butler’s foundational text, *Gender Trouble* (New York: Routledge, 1999).

<sup>334</sup> Dagmar Van Engen, “Metamorphosis, Transition, and Insect Biology in the Octavia E. Butler Archive,” *Women’s Studies* 47.7 (2018): 733.

intertextual site of queer, trans life,”<sup>335</sup> with the last book, *Imago*, serving as a trans coming out story (re: Jodahs having to deal with being an unexpected gender). Van Engen rightly emphasizes that despite how humans view them in the story, the nonbinary gendered ooloi are not androgynous characters, “not a mix of masculinity and femininity”<sup>336</sup> but as Butler insists throughout the saga, a different sex altogether, who “unlike other science fiction works about alien genders, like Ursula Le Guin’s *The Left Hand of Darkness*...do not lack of gender.”<sup>337</sup> Along with its shapeshifting abilities, Jodahs as a nonbinary trans character further places him on the side of monstrosity in overstepping the boundaries of its expected gender role (male or female), much like the mythical figure of Lilith. I further read him as deriving from a mix of Doro’s and Anyanwu’s trans genetic/textual material and while not being an androgynous character but a different sex altogether, he nonetheless possesses two heart centers governed by the yashi organelle that depends on oppositional binary poles to achieve genetic manipulation through “controlled malleability”<sup>338</sup> which is to say “conscious shapeshifting.”<sup>339</sup> Jodahs’ connection to the neurological—during mating it links its tentacles to the nervous system of its male and female partners to provide “a neurosensory illusion” of sex<sup>340</sup>— indicates an inheritance of Doro’s mind control powers, and its bodily shapeshifting point to

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<sup>335</sup> “The ooloi offer a trans-specific reimagining of invertebrate terrestrial creatures if we do not immediately assume that biology in literature equals essentialism, following feminist science scholars, and instead see biology in Butler’s texts as an intertextual site of queer, trans life.” Dagmar Van Engen, “Metamorphosis, Transition, and Insect Biology,” 738.

<sup>336</sup> Dagmar Van Engen, “Metamorphosis, Transition, and Insect Biology,” 736.

<sup>337</sup> Ibid.

<sup>338</sup> Butler, *Lilith’s Brood*, 43.

<sup>339</sup> John Lennard, “Of Organelles, 179.

<sup>340</sup> Butler, *Lilith’s Brood*, 161/168.

Anyanwu's biological inheritance and positions Jodahs as the main carrier of her bloodline.

The SF genre offers, of course, another trope of the shapeshifter courtesy of cyberpunk, a branch of SF that blends the human with machine. I refer to the morphing that occurs, for example, with the T-1000 liquid-metal android (played by Arnold Schwarzenegger) in the film *Terminator 2* (1991). With such morphing, as Stephanie A. Smith states, "physical, physiological shifts occur without the possible shearing incongruities that any (actual implementation of such morphological restructuring might entail."<sup>341</sup> While cyberpunk is most associated with the work of William Gibson and is typically male-driven, the term cyborg, from which it derives, has been co-opted by feminist thinkers such as Donna Haraway, who has read the cyborg as a "polychromatic girl" who is a "bad girl...a shapechanger whose dislocations are never free, who's trying...to remain responsible to women of many colors and positions."<sup>342</sup> Smith elaborates how the "polychromatic girl" is a "polyvalent trickster figure" who articulates "gender-b(l)ending politics." In her 1985 essay, "The Cyborg Manifesto," Haraway argues how the cyborg, a category under which Butler's Oankali constructs are included, opposes rigid boundaries that separate human/animal and human/machine.<sup>343</sup> The essay partly inspired another great feminist science fiction writer, Marge Piercy to write her

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<sup>341</sup> Stephanie A. Smith, "Morphing, Materialism, and the Marketing of *Xenogenesis*," *Genders* 18 (Winter 1993): 67.

<sup>342</sup> Quoted by Stephanie A. Smith in "Morphing," 68. See Donna Haraway, "Cyborg at Large," in *Technoculture* (Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis, 1991).

<sup>343</sup> Donna Haraway, "The Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist Feminism in the 1980s," *Socialist Review* 80 (1985).



cyberpunk novel, *He, She, and It* (1991).<sup>344</sup> Tellingly enough and unsurprisingly, here Piercy reinterprets myth, first through reimagining the monster from Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* as the Cyborg Yod who receives what is vehemently denied to Shelley's monster: romantic love. Additionally, Piercy reworks the older myth of the Golem from the Kabbalah in Jewish mysticism in order to reflect on the ethical implications of using the body as a weapon, which is what the cyberpunk human/machine hybrid is designed to do. Ultimately, the cyborg serves as a figure that disrupts notions of human purity, which ties in to Butler's anti-racist decolonial praxis of being human, along with its attendant contradictions which posits the purity of the human as "difference in sameness, repulsion in attraction."<sup>345</sup>

Another essential aspect of the shapeshifter stems from African and Indigenous cosmologies. While much ado has been made about the ways in which Butler reconfigures Judeo-Christian myth, much less has been said about her incorporation of African myth.<sup>346</sup> In an interview, Butler has stated that in creating Anyanwu, she drew from "the myth of Atagbusi, who was an Onitsha Igbo woman. She was a shapeshifter who benefitted her people while she was alive and when she died a market name was named after her..."<sup>347</sup> In his reading of Anyanwu through this myth, Christopher N.

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<sup>344</sup> See Marge Piercy's acknowledgements in *He, She, and It* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1991): See also *Women on the Edge of Time* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1976), sections of which anticipate cyberpunk.

<sup>345</sup> Jeffrey Cohen, "Monster Culture," 7.

<sup>346</sup> One major exception is Christopher N. Okonkwo's *A Spirit of Dialogue: Incarnations of Ogbanje, the Born-to-Die, in African American Literature* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2008), who reads Doro and Anyanwu through Igbo and Yoruba myth. I draw from his work below. See also "Homage to Tradition: Octavia Butler Renovates the Historical Novel," *Melus* 13 1.2 (Spring-Summer, 1986): 79-96.

<sup>347</sup> Randal Kenna, "An Interview with Octavia E. Butler," in *Conversations with Octavia Butler* (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2010), 32.

Okonkwo explains that “Traditional Onitsha society venerates powerful, mystical women such as Atagbusi as ‘prophets and as agents driving evil from the community.’ Yet it condemns them as *amusu* or ‘witches.’”<sup>348</sup> Nonetheless, he goes on to note that as divinity, Anyanwu is linked to other “Igbo gods and spirit entities” such as “‘Igwe,’ the sky god; ‘Amadioha,’ the god of thunder and lightning and, quite significantly, the most powerful, ubiquitous, and feared of Igbo immortals—‘Ala’—the Earth goddess and mother under whose jurisdiction and care lies ‘the field of morality.’”<sup>349</sup> As such, Anyanwu-*qua*-shapeshifter is “The Great Mother,” and “clearly the female principle of life itself.”<sup>350</sup> The figure of Doro, on the other hand, is drawn from the Igbo myth of the Ogbanje, who as Anyanwu is aware when they first meet, refers to “an evil child spirit born to one woman again and again, only to die and give the mother pain. A woman tormented by an ogbanje could give birth many times and still have no living child.”<sup>351</sup> But in Butler’s revisionist treatment of this myth, Doro is not a child but “an adult” who “did not enter and re-enter his mother’s womb. He did not want the bodies of children. He preferred to steal the bodies of men.”<sup>352</sup> Butler connects this original African myth in which a woman tormented by this spirit “could give birth many times and still have no living child,” to the Lilith figure who is condemned to “have one hundred of her children die every day. Accordingly, every day one hundred demons perish...”<sup>353</sup> Furthermore, Doro is able to shift shape through the transmigration of spirit. While Anyanwu’s powers

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<sup>348</sup> Christopher N. Okonkwo, *A Spirit of Dialogue*, 70.

<sup>349</sup> Christopher N. Okonkwo, *A Spirit of Dialogue*, 71.

<sup>350</sup> Thelma J. Shinn, “The Wise Witches,” 212.

<sup>351</sup> Octavia Butler, *Wild Seed*, 14.

<sup>352</sup> Ibid. As Okonkwo notes, this myth serves to explain the phenomenon of children being born with sickle cell disease, *Spirit of Dialogue*, 69.

<sup>353</sup> Ben-Amos, “Lilith in the Garden,” 56.

are linked to immanence, Doro's are connected to transcendence, both of which provide very different ways of not only shapeshifting but also achieving immortality.

There are moreover, aspects of Anyanwu and Doro that pertain to the "trickster" figure such as those underscored by Audre Lorde herself throughout her various poetic articulations of "Afrekete." Kara Provost, in her analysis of this figure in Lorde's memoir and poems, notes that Lorde specifically "highlights the trickster's association with unpredictability, abundant eroticism, and gender ambiguity."<sup>354</sup> Beyond the trickster's linguistic skills and "multivocality," Provost also notes that "his/her irrepressible eroticism and pansexuality provide another way to cross borders of external and internalized 'difference.'" The fluidity inherent in this figure, "is clearly an important concept for Lorde, whose gendered identity and sexual orientation cannot be easily accommodated by dualistic, normative roles. Drawing on the boundary-breaking expressions of gender and eroticism within the trickster models allows Lorde to recuperate both of these as sources of power, vitality, and creativity."<sup>355</sup> Given that both Anyanwu and Doro can and do swap genders and sex and can inhabit all racial categories, and are also associated with fertility and virility, they clearly function as trickster figures. Moreover, they are the shadow sides of Adam and Eve and, one needs only to observe their own shadow to know that shadows are natural shapeshifters and tricksters. In fact, Carl Jung defines the trickster as "the shadow [that] although by definition [is] a negative figure, sometimes has certain clearly discernible traits and associations which point to a quite different background. It is as though he were hiding

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<sup>354</sup> Kara Provost, "Becoming Afrekete: The Trickster in the Work of Audre Lorde," *MELUS* 20.4, *Masks and Tricksters* (Winter, 1995), 46.

<sup>355</sup> Kara Provost, "Becoming Afrekete," 50.

meaningful contents under an unprepossessing exterior.”<sup>356</sup> Shinn reads this as signifin(g) in Butler how “the enslaved African is the shadow of our American communal consciousness.”<sup>357</sup> As such, the shadow acts as that one drop of black blood that creolizes and spoils the psyche of the collective American body.<sup>358</sup>

Lastly, the discourse on the shapeshifter also involves monstrosity, specifically as it pertains to the myth of the Medusa from which Butler draws in her depiction of the Oankali. Appropriate for this discussion, one version of her story that comes to us from Antiquity is via Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*. In her tragic story, as Ovid tells us, Medusa

was at one time very beautiful, the hope of many suitors all contending, and her outstanding feature was her hair (this I have learned from one who saw her then). But it is said that Neptune ravished her, and in the temple of Minerva, where Jove’s daughter turned away from the outrage and chastely hid her eyes behind her aegis. “So that the action should not go unpunished, she turned the Gorgon’s hair into foul snakes; and she, to overwhelm her foes with terror, bears on her breast the serpents she created.”<sup>359</sup>

The shapeshifting that befalls Medusa is not an immanent one arising from within but rather comes from an imposing exterior force that oppresses her, transforming her from the beautiful into the terrifyingly monstrous, which turns the hearts of potential suiters into stone. Still, in Medusa’s tragic crossing and trafficking in desire, the plasticity of the body is not denied but affirmed. In his article on “Becoming Medusa,” in Butler, Adam

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<sup>356</sup> Quoted in Shinn, *Women Shapeshifters*, 76. See also, Henry Louis Gates Jr. *The Signifying Money: A Theory of Afro-American Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988).

<sup>357</sup> Ibid.

<sup>358</sup> Ibid. I understand such a “spoiling” of the psyche through Toni Morrison’s reading of the literature of the United States as “the architecture of a new white man.” See *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*, (New York: Vintage, 1992), 14-15.

<sup>359</sup> Ovid, *Metamorphoses* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2004), 155-6.

Students in my Introduction to Myth course have long noted how this establishes from Antiquity a “rape culture” still prominent in the present in which the victim is punished for being raped.

Johns writes that Freud's understanding of Medusa "as a figure of female genitalia and of castration" is reworked through the traditional gender roles in Butler being 'doubly confused.'" Johns observes how Butler here performs "a sly feminist inversion of Freud's reading of that myth."<sup>360</sup> Indeed, Butler enacts "feminist inversions" of readings of multiple myths across world traditions, interweaving mythical figures of damned females from Africa, Ancient Rome and Greece, and the Judeo-Christian tradition in order to disrupt conceptions of the feminine that are tethered to the either/or dichotomy of the pure Madonna and the impure Whore. In collapsing this *intra*-gender binary, the structures that uphold the scientific mythos of Man and his all-or-nothing dualistic thinking related to the politics of purity and anti-black racism may likewise begin to crumble. Butler works against what Haraway terms "the imperative to recreate the sacred image of the same"<sup>361</sup> through her shapeshifting and creolizing praxis that illicitly blends the "sacred" image with its "profane" opposite, reflecting back an upended image, a return of the same but with a difference. Butler's overturning ultimately results in the transmogrification of myths of Woman which contain within shadow figures that are themselves intimately related to monsters, aliens, and the demonic.

## Conclusion

In the next chapter, I further read the figures of Doro and Anyanwu, as well as the species division that occurs between the Patternists and Clayarks in the rest of Butler's *Patternist* series, through the Cartesian mind-body split. The discourse on this duality, as

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<sup>360</sup> J. Adam Johns, "Becoming Medusa: Octavia Butler's 'Lilith's Brood and Sociobiology," *Science Fiction Studies* 37.3 (November 2010): 387.

<sup>361</sup> Donna Haraway, *Primate Visions: Gender, Race, and Nature in the World of Modern Science* (New York: Routledge, 1989), 226.

I go on to highlight, is shot through with notions of purity and impurity. Here, however, I would like to close out the chapter by proposing one last reading of the Lilith figure through the notion of aleatory matter, which is itself linked to monstrosity. In *The Feminine Symptom: Aleatory Matter in the Aristotelian Cosmos*, the feminist philosopher Emanuela Bianchi examines how the feminine is linked to the aleatory right from Aristotle's foundational Western metaphysical system, which like the Old Testament, is "explicitly patriarchal, dominative, hierarchical, and oppressive."<sup>362</sup> Reading Aristotle as "first and foremost as a biological thinker,"<sup>363</sup>—which can be equally applied to Butler as well—Bianchi explores how "sexual difference and the phenomena of sexual reproduction turn out to be decisive matters for Aristotelian teleology,"<sup>364</sup> Within Aristotle's teleology, Bianchi notes that the feminine-*qua*-aleatory-matter is *a priori* linked to monstrosity, as a potential breeder of monsters, with her sexual difference itself—the deviation from the male form—constituting a mild form of monstrosity.<sup>365</sup> As aleatory matter, the feminine proves to be disruptive, disobedient, and unpredictable but also necessary to Aristotle's natural laws, and as such holds a potentially great liberatory power, much like Lilith is in relation to God's laws in Genesis. As Sarah Wood avers, "Lilith's figure encapsulates, and is emblematic of, the potential threat that an undisciplined femininity poses to patriarchal order. Lilith is monstrous, and must be constructed as such, precisely because she chooses to contest the authority of patriarchy—to challenge divine masculine right."<sup>366</sup> As such, the figure of Lilith can be

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<sup>362</sup> Emanuela Bianchi, *The Feminine Symptom*, 4.

<sup>363</sup> Emanuela Bianchi, *The Feminine Symptom*, 2.

<sup>364</sup> Emanuela Bianchi, *The Feminine Symptom*, 1.

<sup>365</sup> Emanuela Bianchi, *The Feminine Symptom*, 3-4.

<sup>366</sup> Sarah Wood, "Subversion Through Inclusion, 88.

seen as an embodiment of and mythological counterpart to Aristotle's notion of aleatory matter. In her revisionist myths from Antiquity, Butler deploys the disruptive feminine element delineated in Bianchi's study of Aristotle's cosmology and exemplified in the Lilith figure, in order to exploit its potential to either uphold or deny the "natural" hierarchical/teleological processes that literally and figuratively *conceives* of the "pure human."

In many ways, Aristotle's thinking on the feminine and matter itself reads as the very stuff of science fiction. "Aristotle tells us that the female appears as a result of a material mishap—there may be too much bulk and coldness at the scene of conception because of innumerable factors, for instance the youth and old age of the parents, an excess of fluid or femininity in the body, or simply due to winds in the south during copulation."<sup>367</sup> Bianchi further explains how the female figure appears here as a primary symptom in his work:

If these deviations are large there will be an obvious deformity in the offspring, a "monstrosity," but if they are small a female will result—a situation that is also, for Aristotle, teleologically necessitated because the species is such that it can only be perpetuated through sexual difference. Here, then, unpredictable exigencies in the material conditions of reproduction give rise to a fault, a misstep, a deviation in the teleological transmission from father to son. The female offspring arises because of the unpredictable and unaccountable, the aleatory motions of matter. And yet it—quite inexplicably—also plays a necessary part in the teleological unfolding of nature. It is exactly this inexplicable *confluence* of the aleatory and the teleological that I am calling "the feminine symptom." Aleatory mater—that is, matter that is apparently self-moving, disruptive, exterior to any teleological unfolding, indeed that acts *against nature*—poses continual difficulties for the Aristotelian cosmos. But it is insofar as this wayward and disobedient matter acts in concert with, at the same time as, and to the same ends as the teleology, that it appears as precisely *symptomatic*.<sup>368</sup>

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<sup>367</sup> Emanuela Bianchi, *The Feminine Symptom*, 3.

<sup>368</sup> Emanuela Bianchi, *The Feminine Symptom*, 3-4.

The perpetuation of the “species” here amounts exclusively to the “teleological transmission from father to son,” where the female is needed only to the extent that she is able to (re)produce the sacred image of the father onto the son. Anything that falls short of this transmission of a sacred image is read as a deformed and impure monstrosity. In Butler such cloning is operative in Doro’s eugenics project in which in one sense he seeks a “teleological transmission” of his essence onto his offspring. The difference is upended, however, in that the transmission takes place on bodies already read as impure deformities. Aristotle’s concern with reproducing the “correct” form of the human that does not act against nature indicates eugenics was *avant la lettre* central to western thought, and further indicates that this tradition serves as one of “cultural and historical pre-texts” that constitutes Thaler’s claim that the “universal truth claim” operative in *Seed* is about “the gendered and unequal power struggle for control over reproduction.”<sup>369</sup> Such control in the here and now involves “regulating Black women’s reproductive decisions” which constitutes “a central aspect of racial oppression in America.”<sup>370</sup> What originally applied to the engendering of women as a form of degeneracy has morphed into “black reproduction” being treated “as a form of degeneracy”<sup>371</sup> negatively representing the human through both gender and race.

Ultimately, Butler’s shapeshifting body serves, as Stacy Alaimo notes in her reading of *Seed*, “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,

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<sup>369</sup> Ingrid Thaler, *Black Atlantic*, 24.

<sup>370</sup> Dorothy Roberts, *Killing the Black Body*, 6.

<sup>371</sup> Dorothy Roberts, *Killing the Black Body*, 9.



and nature.”<sup>372</sup> Alaimo further argues that Butler “rewrites the body as a liminal, indeterminate space that disrupts the opposition between nature and culture, object and subject” while also conjuring “nature-body connections in which neither nature nor the body is fallen, denigrated, or exiled...[she] rewrites the body in ways that disrupt historically ingrained patterns.”<sup>373</sup> In resurrecting Lilith, whose body was “fallen, denigrated, [and] exiled,” Butler indeed disrupts the “historically ingrained patterns” that derive from and sustained by myths that literally demonize anyone who deviates from the hetero-patriarchal (in)breeding plan for the reproduction of a mythically pure human. By disrupting such ingrained patterns, Butler further participates in what Bianchi argues is “a feminist conception of aleatory politics” that embraces “monsters, hybrids, the mutant generativity of automatons, and the disfigurement and mortality of corporeal beings.”<sup>374</sup> In regenerating Lilith, Butler underscores her “*interruptivity*” that as Bianchi asserts, “signifies a capacity both *to be interrupted* and *to interrupt* existing orders.”<sup>375</sup> Butler points to the potential of aleatory matter, which arises immanently from within both the written text and the material body in order to upend the systems of oppression by breaking the reproduction of sameness through the refiguring of myths that have positioned the black woman and her children as the ultimate profane images. By doing so, she rightly gives us back the “Great Mother,” reminding us that only a few select humans in fact stem from Adam and Eve. The rest of us are the descendants of a feminine

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<sup>372</sup> Stacy Alaimo, “‘Skin Dreaming’: The Bodily Transgression of Fielding Burke, Linda Hogan, and Octavia Butler,” *Ecofeminist Literary Criticism: Theory, Interpretation, Pedagogy*, edited by Greta Gaard and Patrick D. Murphy (Champaign: University of Illinois, 1998), 136.

<sup>373</sup> Stacy Alaimo, “Skin Dreaming,” 126.

<sup>374</sup> Emanuela Bianchi, *The Feminine Symptom*, 241.

<sup>375</sup> *Ibid.*, emphasis in original.

Other who have inherited her disruptive powers to not only transform our bodily forms  
and but also reshape ingrained mythic narratives that oppress us all.

## Chapter 4

### Octavia E. Butler's Thought Experiments On the Symbiosis of Mind and Body

#### Introduction

The discourses I have so far examined on the politics of purity that govern the SF human/nonhuman binary have fallen along the lines of the interracial divide of the black and white races from which Man creates a scientific mythos of himself based on the notion of white racial purity and superiority. This mythos is further supported by the *intra*-gender divide created through the religious myth of Woman that bifurcates her into a sacred/pure/white virgin or a profane/impure/black whore. Only the former can conceive and birth the purely human while the latter births abominable monstrosities. Octavia Butler's work falls precisely at the point in which these systems of racial and gender oppression interlock and converge on the black female body. Butler's black feminist work within SF finds its origins, as the writers of the Combahee River Collective Statement assert, "in the historical reality of Afro-American women's continuous life-and-death struggle for survival and liberation. Black women's extremely negative relationship to the American political system (a system of white male rule) has always been determined by our membership in two oppressed racial and sexual castes."<sup>376</sup> In this chapter, I will continue my analysis of purity and impurity as it relates to Cartesian dualism, which posits the mind as a pure realm and situates the body in the zone of impurity. Through the genre of SF, Butler configures the mind and body as mutually exclusive terms that are at war with one another. She connects the body to blackness and

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<sup>376</sup> "The Combahee River Collective Statement," in *How We Get Free: Black Feminism and the Combahee River Collective*, Edited by Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2017), 15-16.

disease in the later books of the *Patternist* series in order to then indicate an openness to otherness at the biological level.

Butler's first series offers different ways to think through the self/other divide. In her examination of the boundary crossing of the human/animal that occurs in the Butler's novel, *Clay's Ark*, the last published book in the *Patternist* series, Sherry Vint examines how "Butler explores not only examples of racist and sexist stratifications in the futures she imagines, but also the structural constraints that produce such societies. Her work thereby works to challenge racism and sexism as well as the binary logic and Manichean thinking that provide support for racist and sexist discourses."<sup>377</sup> Vint here draws on philosophical animal discourses that "defines the human through an opposition to the animal,"<sup>378</sup> in order to argue the ways in which Butler, by providing "a new kind of hybrid human subjectivity"<sup>379</sup> disrupts this categorically pure concept of the human and the "logic of categorizing or boundary-making that structurally informs racist thinking."<sup>380</sup> Elsewhere, however, Vint argues that with regard to human subjectivity or the notion of "human identity" within strands of posthumanist thought "only the abstract mind has agency."<sup>381</sup> She takes issues with "the heritage of Cartesian dualism" which equates "self with only the mind," while ignoring the "relevance and specificity of

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<sup>377</sup> Sherryl Vint, "Becoming Other: Animals, Kinship, and Butler's *Clay's Ark*," *Science Fiction Studies* 32.2. (July 2005): 282.

<sup>378</sup> Sherryl Vint, "Becoming Other," 281. The theorists Vint draws from include Giorgio Agamben and his biopolitics, Jacques Derrida and his study on animals, and Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari and their notions of becoming.

<sup>379</sup> Sherryl Vint, "Becoming Other," 282.

<sup>380</sup> Sherryl Vint, "Becoming Other," 286.

<sup>381</sup> Sherryl Vint, *Bodies of Tomorrow: Technology, Subjectivity, Science Fiction* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007), 10.

embodiment.”<sup>382</sup> This chapter likewise examines the Cartesian dualistic heritage within the genre of SF, and how Butler’s *Patternist* series in particular works with such inheritance. This entrenched discourse that severs the body from the mind undergirds the racial and gender binaries examined previously, and like them depends on notions of a purified humanity in order to maintain itself.

The Cartesian dualism is a Western concept that privileges ideas and thinking itself over the actual, physical body and its lived experience. It seeks to elevate the mind into the realm of a transcendent god. In her analysis of Descartes’ *Meditations*, the philosopher Susan Bordo explains that Descartes’ “quest for purity of thought” depends on a clear-cut division between the mind’s thinking and an embodied life experience. She explains that “what seizes the Cartesian imagination is the possibility of *pure* thought, of *pure* perception” a perception that demands a separateness to ensure it is unhindered by the “distortions of subjectivity.”<sup>383</sup> Here objectivity revolves around “the imagery of purity,” while subjectivity is relegated to the bodily realm of the “unclean and impure.”<sup>384</sup> With Descartes, she asserts

What we are enabled to see, *in process* as it were, is a historical movement away from a transcendent God as the only legitimate object of worship to the establishing of the *human intellect* as godly, and as appropriately to be revered and submitted to — once “purified” of all that stands in the way of its godliness. Shortly, for modern science, God will indeed become downright superfluous . . . That Descartes’s strategy for exonerating God for error is *simultaneously* a strategy for purifying the understanding is suggestive of a merging of foci here. The godly intellect is on the way to becoming the true deity of the modern era. That Descartes employs an epistemological variant of a traditional solution to the “problem of evil” suggests that *purification* is not too strong a term to describe his project for certifying the perfection of the intellect. The project to conceptually

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<sup>382</sup> Sherryl Vint, *Bodies of Tomorrow*, 11.

<sup>383</sup> Susan Bordo, “Purification and Transcendence in Descartes’s Meditation,” *The Flight to Objectivity* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1987), 76.

<sup>384</sup> Ibid.

purify one realm, as noted earlier, necessitates a "relocation" of all threatening elements "outside." They become *alien*.<sup>385</sup>

Here the mind comes to represent the most "purified" concept of the human, which then supplants divinity, while the body is severed and estranged in its becoming *alien* to the realm of godly intellect. It poses as an impure and evil threat that needs to be exiled and expelled from this Edenic realm. [European philosophical and Christian tradition] Bordo, moreover, notes that Descartes' disdain for the body was nothing new, as "Platonic and neo-Platonic thought, and the Christian traditions that grew out of them, all exhibit such a strain." Nor, she writes, "was Descartes the first to view human existence as bifurcated into the realms of the physical and the spiritual, with the physical cast in the role of the alien and impure...[but] it is only with Descartes that body and mind are *defined* in terms of mutual exclusivity."<sup>386</sup>As two mutually exclusive terms, none can contain the other and it actually places both terms at odds with one another. In Bordo's reading of Descartes's *Meditations* as a guide for "training oneself in nonreliance on the body and practice in the art of "pure understanding,"<sup>387</sup> we can read the Cartesian heritage as a power struggle in which the mind seeks to overcome the impulses and disturbances of the body, which hinder its ability to think clearly and with godly objectivity. Since the genre of SF makes "literal what is figurative in other discourses"<sup>388</sup> the power struggle can become, as it does in Butler, an all-out war between different species, one with superpowers of the mind and the other with superpowers of the body.

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<sup>385</sup> Susan Bordo, "Purification and Transcendence," 81, emphasis in original.

<sup>386</sup> Susan Bordo, "Purification and Transcendence," 93, emphasis in original.

<sup>387</sup> Susan Bordo, "Purification and Transcendence," 91. Bordo reads this as Descartes' attempt at imparting "a kind of mechanistic yoga."

<sup>388</sup> Sherryl Vint, "Becoming Other," 282.

Speaking more broadly on the history of Western societies, Oyèrónké Oyèwùmí examines the gendered and political aspects of Cartesian dualism. In the *Invention of Women: Making an African Sense of Western Gender Discourses*, Oyèwùmí asserts that within this Western history

If bodies appear at all, they are articulated as the *debased side of human nature*. The preferred focus has been on the mind, lofty and high above the foibles of the flesh. Early in Western discourse, a binary opposition between body and mind emerged. The much-vaunted Cartesian dualism was only an affirmation of a tradition in which the body was seen as a trap from which any rational person had to escape. Ironically, even as the body remained at the center of both sociopolitical categories and discourse, many thinkers denied its existence for certain categories of people, most notably themselves. "Bodylessness" has been a precondition of rational thought. Women, primitives, Jews, Africans, the poor, and all those who qualified for the label "different" in varying historical epochs have been considered to be the embodied, dominated therefore by instinct and affect, reason being beyond them. They are the Other, and the Other is a body. <sup>389</sup>

The “debased side of human nature” again links the body to what is wicked and degraded and turns all that is different into embodied aliens that cannot be enfolded within. The denial of the body here serves the political needs of those conceived capable of rational thought, and is achieved a kind of magic trick in which the white male body simply disappears. Within this European thought, Oyèwùmí notes that “only women were perceived to be embodied,” while “men had no bodies” and were seen simply as “walking minds.”<sup>390</sup> Here the mind is not only in opposition to the body but both are also highly gendered. In this tradition as such, the direct opposition and threat to the rational mind appears as what is dark, feminine, and fully embodied.

### **Butler’s “Theory in the Flesh”**

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<sup>389</sup> Oyèrónké Oyewùmí, *The Invention of Women: Making an African Sense of Western Gender Discourses* (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 7, emphasis added.

<sup>390</sup> Ibid.

Butler's theorization of the Other is that of, as Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa assert, "theory in the flesh."<sup>391</sup> This conception of and intervention into theoretical discourse emphasizes knowledge that is produced through the physical realities of women of color's lives and it is through this bodily site of knowledge that Butler attends to the binary logic without which the "purity of thought" sought after by Descartes cannot come to be. Butler's Doro and Anyanwu from *Wild Seed* are classic examples of how Butler imagines and literalizes the gendered power struggle between the mind and body that Oyèwùmí describes. Doro exemplifies Descartes' masculine "Bodylessness" and is an all-powerful mind with literally "no body," which then allows him to take and inhabit *any* body. Anyanwu, on the other hand, represents the feminine principle and is fully embodied which also allows her to take the shape of any other body, while still however, retaining her own body. Stacy Alaimo puts it best when she states that *Wild Seed* "dramatizes a battle between two modes of knowing and being: the tyrannical force of an egotistical, disembodied mind and the transformative powers of an utterly embodied woman."<sup>392</sup> Expanding on Cartesian thought, she reads Doro as representing "a horrific Cartesian subjectivity":

Radically severed from his own corporeality, he exists as amalgam of mind and will that prospers by subjugating other human bodies...Although Doro often mates with women himself, using his body-of- the-week to impregnate them, it is his will that drives his plan to create a master race. As the metaphor "wild seed" suggests, he treats humans the way humans have treated nature, as a space evacuated of mind: "Cartesian thought declares nonhuman nature *terra nullius*, uninhabited by mind, totally available for annexation, a sphere easily molded to

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<sup>391</sup> Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa, eds. *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color* (New York: SUNY Press, 2015), 19.

<sup>392</sup> Stacy Alaimo, "'Skin Dreaming': The Bodily Transgression of Fielding Burke, Linda Hogan, and Octavia Butler," *Ecofeminist Literary Criticism: Theory, Interpretation, Pedagogy*, edited by Greta Gaard and Patrick D. Murphy (Champaign: University of Illinois, 1998), 126.



the ends of a reason conceived as without limits" (Plumwood, 192). Doro extends the Cartesian territory of *terra nullius* into human bodies, bodies that he can colonize, breed, and control with his disembodied mind. For Doro, both a Cartesian and a capitalist, bodies are nothing but vestments and investments.<sup>393</sup>

Anyanwu, on the other, serves as an alternative to the monstrous representation of Cartesian subjectivity by challenging "the oppositions between body and mind, nature and culture by creating bodies that know. Anyanwu's body 'reads' the information embodied in other creatures suggesting that corporeality, like culture, is coded and that bodies, not just minds, have the power to interpret these codes. By describing the body as a place that is not only written upon but an entity that also reads, Butler stresses the body's agency and "'mind.'" <sup>394</sup> Alaimo here refers to the fact that for Anyanwu to shapeshift into an animal, it must first taste its flesh, as when she first encounters dolphin flesh crossing the Atlantic and after tasting it, "she knew all she needed to know about the creature's physical structure—all she needed to know to take its shape and live as it did." <sup>395</sup> When Doro questions her about it, she tells him that her body can "read within the flesh of the fish...messages as clear and fine as those in your books." Privately, Anyanwu then thinks to herself that "flesh messages" were "even more specific than books" and critiques them by telling Doro that "It seems you can misunderstand your books...Other men made them. Other men can lie and make mistakes. But the flesh can only tell me what it is. It has no other story."<sup>396</sup> In this inversion of Cartesian duality, through her critique of books and written language, which speak to the life of the mind,

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<sup>393</sup> Stacy Alaimo, "Skin Dreaming," 127.

<sup>394</sup> Ibid.

<sup>395</sup> Octavia Butler, *Wild Seed*, 75.

<sup>396</sup> Octavia Butler, *Wild Seed*, 77.

Anyanwu situates “error” in the realm of the mind, while “pure perception” is attributed to the animal body and its flesh, making it a literal “theory in the flesh.”

The genre of SF contains a central motif of what John Rieder calls the “artificial human,” which establishes a division wholly infused by Cartesian thought, which is part of why Butler attends to this discourse directly at different registers. Noting the bounded pair of “the scientific genius and his monstrous creation,” such as Frankenstein and his monster, Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde, and Dr. Moreau and his Beast People, all of whom have been read as “divided expressions of a single individual,” Rieder asserts that

A similar governing principle appears to pertain to artificial or altered human beings throughout early science fiction, who tend to diverge or be forced in two directions away from normal human anatomy—one towards animals and the other towards machines. The logic that binds together these two groups is certainly that of evolutionary progress and degeneration. If the first, animalistic group obviously resembles the racialized, degenerate, savage other of colonialist ideology, doesn’t the other stand in contrast as the product of the “acquired factor,” the civilized human insulated from the vicissitudes of natural selection? And isn’t the cyborg inevitably, therefore, also a racialized figure? I propose that one of the most striking ways early science fiction handles the discourse of race is in these two repetitive, complementary figures of anatomical distortion, the hybrid and the cyborg.<sup>397</sup>

One can read Anyanwu and Doro as repetitive and complementary figures and the former as the hybrid who moves “towards animals” and the latter as a cyborg that moves “towards machines.” In Butler’s text, Doro serves as a cyborg figure in that he “stands for the dominant half of a number of hierarchical binary oppositions: the future as against the past, *the mind as against the body*, civilization as against savagery, the human as against the animal, the master as against the slave.” This figure, however, destabilizes these hierarchical binaries, as Reider further notes, “because the anatomical enhancement of

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<sup>397</sup> John Rieder, *Colonialism and the Emergence of Science Fiction* (Middletown: Wesleyan UP, 2008), 111.

their brains and prosthetic supplementation of their senses that gives them their power is simultaneously a mutilation of their bodies.”<sup>398</sup> Doro literally mutilates and destroys bodies after he is done wearing them, which serve as “prosthetic supplementation” to his bodyless self, and in his will to create a master race, he is also future oriented. He embodies all the dominant sides of the hierarchical binary oppositions that Rieder sets forth. He is most like Rieder’s cyborg in his being an “emotionless brain” that rules over “its atavistic organic servants, enacting the natural and inevitable result of evolutionary ‘progress.’”<sup>399</sup> Further noting the oversized brains of early SF with no bodies, Rieder analyzes how they cannot feel the mutilation of their bodies as “anything except another sign of their superiority...But at the same time, their physically determined inability to feel mercy—as spectacular display of anatomy as destiny—seems to exonerate them from moral responsibility for participating in that rationalization of cruelty, enslavement, eugenic purification, and even genocide.”<sup>400</sup> Instead of reading these bounded pairs as Rieder reads them, which is “a hyperbolic extrapolation of racial division”<sup>401</sup> for Butler there is equally an extrapolation of gender division, and is Anyanwu, as the shapeshifting feminine other, who maintains her humanity and helps Doro to at least feel, making him more human.

The cyborg-hybrid pair that alters human beings and forces them away from normal human anatomy in two separate directions is more fully exemplified within the larger battle that takes place centuries after the setting of *Wild Seed* within Butler’s

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<sup>398</sup> John Rieder, *Colonialism*, 115, emphasis added.

<sup>399</sup> Ibid.

<sup>400</sup> John Rieder, *Colonialism*, 117.

<sup>401</sup> John Rieder, *Colonialism*, 112.

Patternist universe. This is the battle between the telepathic Patternists and the Sphinx-like Clayarks in the last two books in the series, *Clay's Ark* and *Patternmaster*. In order to examine this species warfare and how Butler disrupts the logic of the mind-body duality, however, the series as a whole requires further contextualization, especially regarding its publication history, to which I now turn.

### **Butler's Species Division and Warfare**

Unlike the novels in the *Brood* trilogy, which were written and published in a successive, linear way from 1987-1989, the earlier *Patternist* series follow a nonlinear path, with *Patternmaster*, chronologically the *last* book in the series, published *first*, meaning she begins by first writing the end of the series. According to narrative Chronologically, the five books in the series are *Wild Seed*, *Mind of My Mind*, *Survivor*,<sup>402</sup> *Clay's Ark*, and *Patternmaster*. In their publishing order, however, the list reads as follows: *Patternmaster* (1976), *Mind of My Mind* (1977), *Survivor* (1978), *Wild Seed* (1980), and *Clay's Ark* (1984). One can see from the publishing order that *Patternmaster* and *Clay's Ark* serve as bookends of the series. They are at polar opposites to one another, like the Patternists and Clayarks in each respective text who are in

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<sup>402</sup> *Survivor*, it is important to note, is a standalone novel and one that Butler disowned, refusing it to be reprinted. As such it does not appear in the Omnibus edition, *Seed to Harvest*, from which I have been citing. While Butler has seldom discussed her reasons, Nicholas Birns ventures that it is because "it retains many of the conventional assumptions of 'Golden Age' science fiction, especially in its portrayal of extraterrestrial encounters...The division into 'good' and 'bad' aliens, and the implication that all humanity has to do in outer space is to bring on some of that old pioneer spirit, suggests why keeping this in print would stand in the ways of Butler's message in other books." See Nicholas Birns, "Octavia Butler: Fashioning Alien Constructs," *The Hollins Critic* XXXVIII.3 (June 2001): 1-14. In this project, I refrain from analyzing the novel following the respects of the dead.

opposition and at war with each other. A notable difference between the two texts is that while the Clayarks appear in *Patternmaster*, no Patternist appears in *Clay's Ark*, which is the origin story how the Clayarks's disease came earth. The fact that Butler writes and publishes this book last is significant in that it indicates the way in which Butler finds closure within the series as a whole. I thus begin by examining *Patternmaster* in order to establish how Butler first conceives and sets up the division and warfare between the two groups of mutated superhumans. I then turn to examine *Clay's Ark* and the ways in which she tells the origin story of animal-like humans who precede the Oankali "invasion," in the *Brood* trilogy.

Set in the distant future, *Patternmaster* tells the coming of age story of Teray, one of two legitimate heirs and sons of Rayal, the Patternmaster who controls the network of patternists. By the end of the novel Teray will assume his father's role as master of the pattern after beating his brother Coransee in battle. In this speculative future, humanity is divided not into two but three segments: the Patternists, the Clayarks, and the "mutes." The Patternists are powerful telepaths bred for their psychic/psionic abilities and are distant descendants of Doro, who is briefly referenced in the book but not by name. The Patternists battle the Sphinx-like Clayarks, mutated humans who have superhuman speed and strength. Mutes are normal humans with neither psychic powers nor superhuman strength and are the pawns/slaves of the Patternists that control their minds. While this pairing of patternist/mute is the more typical in SF narratives, Butler introduces a third group, the Clayarks, which disrupts convention. Teray succinctly explains the basic differences of the two supergroups:

Fortunately, Clayarks possessed none of the Patternists' mental abilities and had to depend entirely on their physical senses. Unfortunately, the Clayark disease,

which so mutated human genes that it caused once-normal mutes to produce children in the familiar sphinx shape, also placed the minds of those children beyond Patternist reach. Only Clayark bodies were vulnerable. As Patternist bodies were vulnerable to Clayarks.<sup>403</sup>

For all groups, the body is essential and “vulnerable,” but the methods of attack on the body are different, since the Patternists kill the body through a sort of mental death ray when their minds zero in on their prey, although they cannot track Clayarks like they can each other or “mutes,” similar to how Doro cannot track Anyanwu in her animal form. Clayarks attack the body through infection or sheer force. While the disease, as Teray notes, causes them to be immune to the Patternists’ mind powers, the Patternists are not immune to the Clayarks’ disease, which causes them to die. The Clayark body resists being dominated by the Patternist mind, which puts a check and limit on mind’s powers. The Patternists themselves are organized around “Houses” through a type of feudal aristocracy, a hierarchy that is based according to the telepathic strength of each Patternist, with a monarch holding the Pattern and controlling the network. After learning that his father Rayal, the Patternmaster, is about to die, the hero Teray sets out on a journey to see his father from the Redhill School he has been training in, while trying not to get killed by his brother Coransee, who initially has superior telepathic strength and is thirsty for power, and attempting to avoid getting killed by the hordes of Clayarks that stand in his way. While this is the only novel of Butler’s in which a man is the main hero, Teray finds and falls in love with Amber, a telepath with powerful healing powers, establishing a connection as a descendant of Anyanwu, and who serves as his sidekick.

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<sup>403</sup> Octavia Butler, *Patternmaster*, in *Seed to Harvest* (New York: Grand Central Publishing, 2007), 681

She is, however, instrumental in helping him fight the Clayarks and ultimately defeat his brother.

The novel's central theme is the quest for power. Across many interviews, Butler has discussed openly her fascination with power, which, as Gerry Canavan notes, originated "within her own childhood fantasies of power."<sup>404</sup> The stories in this series derive, as Canavan asserts, "directly from the 'superman' archetype in science fiction that was so popular during Butler's adolescence, as well as the similar superhero and supervillain stories she consumed as an avid comic reader."<sup>405</sup> Power here is imagined through Cartesian dualism, as it is categorized by either the abilities of a mutated superhuman body, such as super speed and strength, or the abilities of a mutated superhuman mind, such as telepathy and psychokinesis. In the first scene and prologue of the novel in which Rayal is proving a point to his sister-wife (incest remains a central issue throughout Butler's early work), we get a glimpse of what the superpowers of the mind entail:

Rayal jerked the Pattern sharply and Jansee jumped, gasping at the sudden disturbance. It was comparable physically to a painless but startling slap in the face.

"You see?" he said. "I've just awakened several thousand Patternists by exerting no more effort than another person might use to snap his fingers. Sister-wife, that is power worth killing for."<sup>406</sup>

Rayal's ultimate mind power in this scene is immediately linked to god status. After Rayal proves his point that his power is "worth killing for" (one of his sons will die for it), Jansee notices a group of mutes standing outside of the House to say "prayers" to

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<sup>404</sup> Gerry Canavan, *Octavia E. Butler* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2016), 43.

<sup>405</sup> Gerry Canavan, *Octavia E. Butler*, 32.

<sup>406</sup> Octavia Butler, *Patternmaster*, 628.

Royal. She then laments, “poor fools...they’ve come here because they think you’re a god...in fact, since you hold the Pattern, you’re even a kind of god to the Patternists, aren’t you?”<sup>407</sup> Mind power thus equals godly power, but it is not all-powerful as is shown by the end of the prologue. Standing some distance away and “holding an ancient gun of huge proportions,” we are told that the Clayarks’ “first shot smashed through the wall of the Patternmaster’s private apartment, beheading the Patternmaster’s lead wife and injuring the Patternmaster himself so severely about the head and shoulders...for all his power, he lay helpless.”<sup>408</sup> Thereafter, Royal contracts the Clayark’s disease from which he dies at the end of the novel. Right from the opening pages of the novel, we see that the Patternist hegemony over the world based on their mental powers is put in check by the animal-like Clayarks who are devoid of such powers but enhanced by the powers of the body.

The Clayarks themselves remain rather marginal to the story and are never given agency, save for one vital scene in which one of them approaches and speaks briefly to Teray. Through their marginalization, however, they represent Indigenous and conquered peoples throughout the world. What we learn about them is what Teray himself has learned through his education. Two passages cover the basics. First, we are that they have a “well-muscled four-legged body” and are “human headed,”<sup>409</sup> and shortly after there is an elaboration of their physical appearance:

What was it that the Clayarks called themselves? Sphinxes. Creatures out of ancient mythology, lion-bodied, human-headed. The description was not really accurate. The Clayarks were furless and tailless, and they did not possess hands. But they were much more sphinxes—creatures who were at least partly human—

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<sup>407</sup> Octavia Butler, *Patternmaster*, 630.

<sup>408</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>409</sup> Octavia Butler, *Patternmaster*, 640.



than they were the animals Teray had always considered them...No Patternist could read the mind of a Clayark directly. The disease Clayarks carried gave them at least that much protection from their Patternist enemies.<sup>410</sup>

The second passage sheds light on their ways of living:

They were nomadic, roaming in great tribes, settling only long enough to strip an area clean of food. They had been known to eat Patternists, in fact. But a Patternist was an expensive meal costing many Clayark lives. The eating was ritualistic anyway, done for quasireligious reasons rather than out of hunger. Clayarks consumed Patternist flesh to show, symbolically, how they meant someday to consume the entire race of Patternists.<sup>411</sup>

In being neither fully human nor nonhuman, but rather subhuman, and in their status as nomads and ritualistic cannibals, the Clayarks are regarded in the same way as all colonized and indigenous peoples were. They are, however, capable of speech and know the colonizer's language. When one approaches Teray as he is about to make his journey towards his father, they have an exchange in which Terays asks, "Why do you raid us? We wouldn't kill you if you left us alone." The "creature" answers with, "Enemies. Not People." Teray responds with "You know we're people," but the creature repeats, "Enemies. Land. Food."<sup>412</sup> This exchange speaks to how each group sees the other, as "not people," meaning not human and thus "enemies" of their own kind. It also bespeaks to how Indigenous peoples' lands were taken and their food supplies made extinct through settler colonialism. Later Teray reflects on this encounter, and how "Patternists almost never let Clayarks get close enough to them to hear them talk. Patternists and Clayarks stared at each other across a gulf of disease and physical difference and comfortably told themselves the same lie about each other. The lie that Teray's Clayark

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<sup>410</sup> Octavia Butler, *Patternmaster*, 641.

<sup>411</sup> Octavia Butler, *Patternmaster*, 679.

<sup>412</sup> Octavia Butler, *Patternmaster*, 681.

had tried to get away with: ‘Not people.’”<sup>413</sup> Canavan interprets the conflict here as a “replication of the colonial frontier in which the white settler has no restraint on the violence he inflicts on the colonized subject” and further asserts that “the arrival of the Clayarks thus ‘resets’ human history into the mythological time of frontier fantasy but introduces nothing new beyond mere revitalization of the past.”<sup>414</sup> In Butler, however, there is never a repetition without a difference, although it is a difference that is elaborated in the later book, *Clay’s Ark*.

The question of “disease and physical difference” that allows each group to not regard the other as “people,” circles around both notions of purity and impurity. This in turn is related to the Cartesian division of the mind and body as *mutually exclusive* terms. The Patternist are not physically different than “mutes” or normal humans, nor are they seen as diseased, which has strong connotations of impurity. These are the physical attributes of the Clayarks that render them “not people” in the eyes of the Patternists. What renders the Patternists “not people” to the Clayarks is that through their superior minds, as Rieder argues in his examination of the “emotionless brain” within the genre, they are physically unable to feel mercy, which exonerates them “from moral responsibility for participating in that rationalization of cruelty, enslavement, eugenic purification, and even genocide.”<sup>415</sup> Indeed, by the end of *Patternmaster*, Teray alone manages to seemingly wipe out all Clayarks. Prior to this, he learns from Amber how to use the “Clayarks own brains against them” as well as their “own energy to stimulate sudden, massive disruptions of their neural activities” which enables “the breathing

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<sup>413</sup> Octavia Butler, *Patternmaster*, 709.

<sup>414</sup> Gerry Canavan, *Octavia E. Butler*, 47.

<sup>415</sup> John Rieder, *Colonialism*, 117.

centers in their brains to be paralyzed.” In this way of killing, “their hearts ceased to beat and their blood circulation stopped. They died, almost literally, as though they been struck by lightning.”<sup>416</sup>[say some analytical intervention; why inspired of purity, its ethics; embodied language in intervention,in purity discourse] After defeating his brother using similar techniques, and taking control over other patternists, Teray projects his awareness over a wide territory and kills “hundreds, perhaps thousands” of Clayarks. “He killed until he could find no more Clayarks over all his wide range. He even checked the systems of underground tunnels. When he had finished, he was certain that there were no more Clayarks anywhere near enough to affect him or his party.”<sup>417</sup> Here, in the ultimate battle between a super mind and a super body, the mind comes out on top.

Chronologically, this is technically the “end” of the series, although it is the first one written and published, meaning Butler must have had a lot of time to rethink the outcome of the battle. In *Clay's Ark*, there are no Patternists, as it tells the origin story of the Clayark disease, which by the end of the book causes a pandemic and seems to take over the entire world. Since it is the last book published in the series, I read it as Butler giving not the Patternists, but the Clayarks the last word, thus handing the final victory to the agents of the body and not to the agents of the mind. While the body has not quite morphed into its Sphinx-like shape, its discourse there is all about impurity and disease. In this series, then, Butler’s intervention on philosophical discourse is that she is constantly configuring the battle of mind and body in terms of purity versus impurity, from which Western dominant binary oppositions stem.

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<sup>416</sup> Octavia Butler, *Patternmaster*, 707.

<sup>417</sup> Octavia Butler, *Patternmaster*, 762.

### Butler's Ark: Transformative Changes in and through the Body

*Clay's Ark* is Butler's most apocalyptic tale, an "apocalyptic Road warrior story,"<sup>418</sup> that contains some of the most gruesome and graphically violent scenes throughout Butler's entire work. Thematically, it prefigures the later *Xenogenesis* trilogy in being an alien invasion contagion narrative, albeit a much different one. The story is told in two strands, "Past" and "Present," which alternate from chapter to chapter. The "Past" narrative strand tells of how the Clayark extraterrestrial disease was brought to earth by Eli, the leader of an interstellar expedition to Proxima Centauri and the sole survivor of that expedition when its spacecraft crashes on earth. The "Present" narrative strand tells of a doctor named Blake and his two daughters Keira and Rane, who are 16 year-old "fraternal twins, different in appearance and behavior."<sup>419</sup> The family of three are abducted while driving across a desert by members of the isolated town that Eli has infected with his disease. Eventually all three are purposely infected with the alien organisms, whose only purpose is "to survive and multiply."<sup>420</sup> It is important to underscore the racial makeup of these characters. Eli is described as "a gray-skinned black man,"<sup>421</sup> gray-skinned by cause of the desert sands, though it brings to mind the gray-skinned Oankali. Blake is identified as white only through inference, by the reader learning that "his wife Jorah had been black," thus making his daughters bi-racial. Keira taking after her mother, looks black, while Rane taking after her father, passes as white.

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<sup>418</sup> Nicholas Birns, "Fashioning Alien Constructs," 7.

<sup>419</sup> Octavia Butler, *Clay's Ark*, in *Seed to Harvest* (New York: Grand Central Publishing, 2007), 459.

<sup>420</sup> Octavia Butler, *Clay's Ark*, 481.

<sup>421</sup> Octavia Butler, *Clay's Ark*, 465.

Another important difference between this twin splitting, which also thematically ties back to Lilith of the trilogy, is that Keira has cancer. Having “acute myeloblastic leukemia,” she is described as “ethereal, not quite of this world.” She also

wore a wig because the epigenetic therapy that should have caused her AML cells to return to normal had not worked, and her doctor, in desperation, had resorted to old-fashioned chemotherapy. This had caused most of her hair to fall out. She had lost so much weight that none of her clothing fit her properly. She said she could see herself fading away. Blake could see her fading, too. As an internist, he could not help seeing more than he wanted to see.<sup>422</sup>

Right from the beginning of the novel, then, the text presents us with the only two explicitly marked black characters, Eli and Keira, as diseased through the body. The former’s disease is extra-terrestrial while the latter’s is earthly, though still alien, as with case of Keira’s body, “not quite of this world.” Butler draws a direct correlation here between infection/disease/alien-ness with blackness itself. The twist is that by the end of the novel, only Keira survives the alien bodily invasion out of her whole family, first because the Clayark disease does what “epigenetic therapy” could not, cures her damaged cells and brings her back to earth from her fading ethereal self. And second, because she embraces the diseased people of Eli’s infected town in a way that her father and sister do not. In his research on Butler’s archival notes, Canavan states that Butler wrote *Clay’s Ark* “while a close friend was dying of cancer, and she shared chapters with the friend with the bleak sense that she might not live to see the book completed.”<sup>423</sup> Because Keira’s story further mirrors how the Oankali also cut out the cancer cells out of Lilith’s body, here we can see the origins of Butler’s interest in cell division and acquisition which later helps to inspire her to reimagine Henrietta Lacks’ story, as I discussed in

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<sup>422</sup> Octavia Butler, *Clay’s Ark*, 460

<sup>423</sup> Gerry Canavan, *Octavia E. Butler*, 86.

chapter two of this project. A closer look at how the alien organisms operate here throws further light on the evolutionary tropes via bodily transformations that run throughout Butler's work.

The alien organisms in *Clay's Ark* affect both the body and the behavior of a person, but severs any correspondence between mind and body. When Eli remembers his experience of first getting infected aboard the spaceship, he tells of how "he had been a prisoner within his own skull, cut off from conscious control of his body."<sup>424</sup> The body is read as a prison, which links it to how Descartes similarly "views the 'prison of the body' as the chief, if not sole, source of our inability to perceive clearly and distinctly."<sup>425</sup> Unlike Descartes—as well as Doro and his powerful psionic descendants—however, Eli's prison-body cannot be "transcended," because of the distortion of the alien organisms which ground themselves in and as an embodied subjectivity. Butler's text, then, literalizes what Descartes says about that body, that "it is always a hindrance to the mind in thinking."<sup>426</sup> The organisms are compulsive in nature but we are told they are not intelligent either. When Eli thinks of what would happen were he confined or isolated, he thinks

He would be prevented from doing the one thing he *must* do: seeking out new hosts for the alien micro-organisms that had made themselves such fundamental parts of his body ...[But] the organisms were not intelligent. They could not tell him how to keep himself alive, free, and able to find new hosts. But they became intensely uncomfortable if he did not, and their discomfort was his discomfort. He might interpret what they made him feel as pleasure when he did what was necessary, desirable, *essential*: or as pain when he tried to do what was terrifying, self-destructive, *impossible*. But what he was actually feeling were secondhand advance-retreat responses of millions of tiny symbionts.<sup>427</sup>

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<sup>424</sup> Octavia Butler, *Clay's Ark*, 480.

<sup>425</sup> Susan Bordo, "Purification and Transcendence," 89.

<sup>426</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>427</sup> Octavia Butler, *Clay's Ark*, 481, emphasis in original.

Even though the body and the mind are separated here, the notion of a “symbiont” indicates that there is something more at play than a clear Cartesian divide. Maria Aline Ferreira reads the alien organisms in this novel as fitting the “pattern described by Richard Dawkins in *The Selfish Gene* (1976) according to which humans are the hosts of genes whose interest it is to keep the former alive in order to survive and replicate.”<sup>428</sup> Butler, however, moves beyond this “selfish” discourse, for as Ferrerira notes, Butler throughout her works incorporates notions of symbiosis and symbiogenesis as propounded by the biologist Lynn Margulis.

Butler’s work has been read as sometimes illustrating symbiosis and other times symbiogenesis as is the case with *Clay’s Ark*. Ferreira cites Margulis explaining the difference:

Symbiosis is simply the living together in physical contact of organisms from different species...Symbiosis is an ecological relationship over time, such that a new feature can be recognized as a product of that symbiosis...a long-term symbiosis can lead to new organs, new tissues, new behaviors—and that is symbiogenesis.<sup>429</sup>

Indeed, the long-term symbiosis of the alien organisms and the human body will lead to “new order...a new species”<sup>430</sup> by the end of the novel, which is already illustrated in the figure of Jacob, the first offspring born of Eli and his first partner Meda, who comes out four-legged and cat-like as in *Patternmaster*. Laurel Bollinger further asserts that while “traditional Darwinian and neo-Darwinian models of evolution focus on competition, on

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<sup>428</sup> Maria Aline Ferreira, “Symbiotic Bodies and Evolutionary Tropes in the Work of Octavia Butler,” *Science Fiction Studies* 37.3 (November 2010): 405.

<sup>429</sup> Lynn Margulis “Microbial Planet” quoted in Maria Aline Ferreira, “Symbiotic Bodies,” 402.

<sup>430</sup> Octavia Butler, *Clay’s Ark*, 624.

‘survival of the fittest’ in reproductive terms, as the primary source of species’ mutability,” Margulis work instead proposes “that cellular evolution occurs through symbiotic incorporation of bacterial communities, suggesting that cooperation, not competition, provides the fundamental engine of biological change.”<sup>431</sup> Bollinger goes on to state that

beyond reshaping neo-Darwinian understandings of evolution, Margulis’s ideas also call into question identity itself. Rather than imagining myself as an *I*, Margulis’s research suggests that *I* am always *we*, always a product of fusion, whether with microbes currently at work generating essential vitamins and contributing to digestion in my intestines or, even more fundamentally, at the cellular level, where my mitochondria have separate DNA from my own, passed through the maternal line from generation to generation.<sup>432</sup>

The very idea that “*I* am always a *we*” means that we have to shift our understanding of individuality as being “fundamentally a plurality” which then “calls into question the very notion of a self/other split.”<sup>433</sup> More importantly, this really points an openness to otherness, and an openness to impure incorporation. This openness to otherness at the biological level, which allows for the creation of the new and for transformations to take place, links symbiogenesis directly to creolization. The fact that symbiogenesis suggests “the birth of something new through the fusion of two previously separate entities”<sup>434</sup> coincides with the processes of creolization that as Jane Gordon notes “in seeking to create viable forms out of what has been and is suddenly locally available, one assumes that each, while still retaining its original character will, in being resituated and

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<sup>431</sup> Laurel Bollinger, “Symbiogenesis, Selfhood, and Science Fiction,” *Science Fiction Studies* 37.1 (March 2010): 34.

<sup>432</sup> Laurel Bollinger, “Symbiogenesis,” 35.

<sup>433</sup> Laurel Bollinger, “Symbiogenesis,” 36.

<sup>434</sup> Laurel Bollinger, “Symbiogenesis,” 36.



recombined, remain itself by becoming something new and distinctive.”<sup>435</sup> Michael Monahan emphasizes the openness of creolization when he states that it engages with “the ambiguity, permeability, and plasticity of the distinction between the internal and the external, the self and to the other . . . [and] openly affirms and celebrates humanity as an ongoing and open process.”<sup>436</sup> The ambiguity inherent in creolization undermines the “pure thought” of the “godly intellect.” Butler moves away from this realm of thinking by bringing embodiment central stage throughout her works. By doing so, we more align ourselves more closely with indigenous ways of perceiving the world in which sight is not “privileged in the apprehension of reality” but rather by “a multiplicity of senses.”<sup>437</sup> This is indeed the way the Oankali function within the *Brood* trilogy, by using all their senses and being fully embodied and connected with all living things.

Butler’s reconfiguring of mind/body duality further speaks to her emphasis through her works of bringing together oppositional difference and blending them in illicit ways. Whether it is with human and aliens, or different embodiments of the human which mutate in opposite directions, her creolization of the human and nonhuman consistently overturns dualistic thinking based on purified notions of the human. Her work seeks to incorporate into a humanistic discourse what has been rejected from the realm of divine, what has been exiled and rendered monstrous, unintelligible, and demonic. In this way, she seeks to bring dignity back to marginalized people throughout

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<sup>435</sup> Jane Anna Gordon, *Creolizing Political Theory: Reading Rousseau Through Fanon* (New York: Fordham, 2014), 5.

<sup>436</sup> Michael J. Monahan, *The Creolizing Subject: Race, Reason and the Politics of Purity* (New York: Fordham, 2011), 190.

<sup>437</sup> Oyèrónké Oyewùmí, *The Invention of Women*, 9.

the world who embody racialized and gendered forms that have been used against them to oppress them across time and space.

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