A Posthumanist Neo-Slave Narrative: Dismantling the Humanist Subject in *Lilith's Brood*

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Introduction

Octavia Butler (1947-2006) published her first novel *Pattern-master* in 1976, breaking into the predominantly white, male world of science fiction. Instead of adopting the concerns of the New Wave science fiction authors of the sixties and seventies, however, Butler prioritized those issues that concerned her personally as an African American woman and a feminist. Whereas New wave science fiction writers were mainly concerned with amending the genre's rather pulpy reputation by implementing strategies of radical conceptual and literary experimentation, Butler never wavered far from literary realism and stuck to more traditional forms of narrative and plot, while still tackling conceptually complex issues (Birch and Hooper). Her work further distinguishes itself from the ostensibly colour-blind, sometimes naively utopian New Wave novels in its interrogation of the notions of power and agency as situated on the double axis of gender and race. Moreover, Butler's fiction deliberately recalls and recycles the plots and conventions of older genres in a manner that is characteristic of postmodernism. The genre that she harks back to most consistently and most emphatically is that of the slave narrative.

She was not the only African American author to pursue this line of thought in the seventies. Madhu Dubey writes of "the emergence of a new genre of African American literature – the fantastic neo-slave narrative" – in which the novelist "draws on nonrealist devices such as time travel and supernatural possession to revisit the history of slavery," allowing the past to literally intrude on the present (345). The objective of the neo-slave narrative is to expose the enduring legacy of slavery in America. Its emphasis on the continuity of trauma and the long-term consequences of subjection problematizes what Dubey writes were "the redemptive accounts of US racial history that began to gain sway in the decades following the civil rights movement" (345-46). "The figure of the slave was pivotal to the Black Power movement," but not all slaves were held in equal esteem: whereas

historical, rebellious slaves like Nat Turner were extolled "as inspiring models of a revolutionary, militarized identity," fictional, nonviolent characters like Uncle Tom were denounced as traitors and collaborators (Dubey 348).

Butler, by her own account, was troubled by the masculinist bias of the Black Power movement as well as by its polarization of the representations of slavery (Yaszek 1057). As a result, much of her fiction is dedicated to dismantling the dichotomy between the heroic, rebellious slave and the contemptible 'mammy', or house slave. One of the ways in which she pursues this goal is by dwelling on the complex power dynamics between master and slave, which she often reconfigures as "host/parasite interactions" (Shaviro 226). By reconfiguring and defamiliarizing the concept of slavery in this way, Butler controversially destabilizes and expands it, loosening it from its historical and racial moorings. In doing so she helps develop the genre of the neo-slave narrative, whose representations of slavery generally presume a historically "stable sense of their referent" (Dubey 345). At the same time Butler's fiction looks to the future just as much as it does to the past, with its fixation on nuclear or environmental apocalypse, humanity's quest for survival and the necessity of compromise. Because Butler peoples her novels with a multi-ethnic cast of characters, and often features black female characters in the lead, her work has also been considered part of the afro-futurist tradition (Donaldson 98).

No series of novels by Butler has been as disparately received as the *Xenogenesis* trilogy, consisting of *Dawn* (1987), *Adulthood Rites* (1988), and *Imago* (1989). Jerome Gregory Hampton, on the one hand, praises the series for its accurate portrayal of "African American experiences" as well as for considering "the perspective of a universal marginalized body" (Hampton 69); fellow writer Charles Johnson on the other hand takes issue with this universality in Butler's fiction (114), arguing that it "plunges so deeply into fantasy that revelation of everyday life … disappears" (115). Moreover, the *Xenogenesis* trilogy has

sparked an extended critical debate about the ostensible essentialism in Butler's work which, although fascinating, will not be the focus of this thesis (Zaki 1990, Peppers 1995, Michaels 2000, Tucker 2007, Lillvis 2010).[1] Despite, or perhaps due to its controversial character the trilogy was reissued in 2000 under the title *Lilith's Brood*.

The plot of the novels depicts a posthumanist dilemma in that it portrays a situation in which humanity is required to relinquish its humanist prerogatives to secure its own survival. After a nuclear apocalypse the African American protagonist Lilith finds herself imprisoned or rescued – *Lilith Brood* intentionally courts such ambiguities – by an alien species called the Oankali, whose "biological imperative" it is to find a partner species with whom to trade their genetic material in order to avoid stagnation, overspecialization, and species death (Gomel 137). The Oankali's third gender, called the "ooloi", are the ones who manage this exchange. Lilith must collaborate in this intuitively objectionable process of forced miscegenation, and accept that she will become the mother of demons, as her biblical name portends, or watch humanity face extinction. In doing so she comes to reconsider the humanist virtues of autonomy, authenticity, and rationality in favor of the posthumanist virtues of fluidity, adaptability, and liminality, qualities which are reconceived as means of access to power in a posthuman context.

Miscegenation and reproductive (un)freedom often feature as themes in Butler's fiction, but nowhere do they manifest themselves as contentiously as in *Lilith's Brood*. Butler's fiction itself has been characterized as "miscegenate," drawing from both familiar African American literary traditions such as the slave narrative, as well as speculative fiction (Luckhurst, qtd. in Tucker 165). In other words, *Lilith's Brood* is fully a *text* in the Barthian

[1] Butler has been accused of species' as well as gender essentialism in her work. The accusations of species essentialism in *Lilith's Brood* often focus on the "human contradiction," a genetic concern which seems to suggest humanity is predetermined to hierarchical behaviour which includes racism, misogyny etc. What tends to be overlooked in such accusations is that it is the Oankali who have coined this term, without having witnessed the ways that humanity struggles to resist its 'nature', sometimes successfully. Thus Butler sets up the notion of the human contradiction as uninformed and potentially biased. Criticism of gender essentialism in Butler's work, however is generally more justified.

sense: a "multidimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash" (Barthes 1324). Most criticism concerning *Lilith's Brood*, however, fails to adequately address the discursive tension in the work between two competing discourses: that of the slave narrative and that of posthumanism. For example, the alien invasion in *Dawn* is figured in highly contradictory terms. On the one hand it is cast in the historically grounded and emotionally charged, racialized terms of American slavery and oppression, on the other hand it is embraced as an occasion for a long overdue, radical transformation of the humanist subject into a posthuman one. This makes for a very conflicted reading experience. In the sequels to *Dawn* the register of oppression gradually gives way, and thus ultimately, despite the trilogy's obvious investment in the discourse of the slave narrative, *Lilith's Brood* argues for a posthumanist "reconceptualization and expansion of the humanist subject" that seeks to deconstruct the exclusionary markers of rationality, authenticity and self-determination on which it is built (Flanagan 13). The question of how these two discourses conflict and interact with each other is one that I will engage with at length.

In a sense the problem of the two competing discourses is similar to the one that Victoria Flanagan addresses in her examination of posthumanism and young adult fiction: "Underpinning much literature for children especially narratives that engage with the heroic or quest paradigm, is a construction of agency based on the principles of individualism, action and autonomy" (14). Young adult fiction even more emphatically traces an emancipatory narrative where teenagers are often depicted freeing themselves from the yoke of their family or community. The same principles undergird the traditional slave-narrative, where individualism, autonomy and often rationalism (closely associated with literacy) are presented to trump the bonds of slavery and racism. To what extent do these principles uphold in a posthumanist context? As I will argue below, the neo-slave narrative, drawing as it does on postmodernist theory, is more nuanced about potential means of resistance or agency within

networks of power. It acknowledges that the distinction between Nat Turner and Uncle Tom is a false one, and that agency, where it is made possible, can take many forms besides violent protest. In doing so the genre of the neo-slave narrative already establishes a kind of bridge between the discourse of the slave narrative and the discourse of posthumanism. *Lilith's Brood* takes this development one step further in thoroughly posthumanizing the genre of the slave-narrative by rejecting not its goals, which are admirable, but the foundational concepts of agency and subjectivity on which it is built.

This thesis will trace the reconfiguration of those concepts, agency and subjectivity, in *Lilith's Brood* in conjunction with the trilogy's themes of slavery and subjection in a posthumanist context. Considering the short intervals between the publication of each novel, this thesis is also based on the assumption that the trilogy is best analyzed as a whole, which its joint publication in 2000 facilitates. *Lilith's Brood* can be read as an extended argument in favor of a posthumanist reconceptualization of subjectivity based on what is not an outright rejection but rather a reconfiguration of three concepts that humanist philosophy posits are the foundations of selfhood: rationality, autonomy, and authenticity.[2] In *Lilith's Brood* these humanist virtues, which delineate a narrow and exclusionary concept of the human, are reconfigured in order to extend to non-human creatures as well. At the same time this reconfiguration of subjectivity also more accurately describes the human condition when it is exposed in the light of posthumanism and stripped of its humanist pretentions, demonstrating that the humanist subject has always been more of a fantasy, rather than an accurate description what human experience and subjectivity entails.

The first chapter of this thesis is dedicated to a contextualization of the two genres that Butler develops in her work –the neo-slave narrative and the critical dystopia. It will also expound on the rise of posthumanism in the late twentieth century and its special relationship

[2] By authenticity I mean the idea of an integral, original, and unchanging identity that would, for example, fail to apply to creatures with artificial intelligence or with composite and changing identities like the Oankali. The concept is further fleshed out in chapter three.

with science fiction. In the second chapter I tackle the humanist notion of autonomy and demonstrate how it is compromised in the first book of the trilogy: *Dawn.* Rather than valorizing self-determination *Dawn* demonstrates how intricately our freedom of choice is tied up with - and may come at the cost of - other species' freedom of choice. Thus the novel generates an awareness of the state of co-dependency in which we live, and makes it one of the principles of ethical living. With such an awareness also comes a new sense of self that undermines the authenticity of the humanist subject. In the words of Naomi Jacobs, "a relational self, unlike the self-contained humanist self, does not premise its free agency upon uniqueness or separation, and thus is capable of forming a posthuman autonomy" (7). This notion of the relational self as opposed to the authentic humanist subject is the topic of the third chapter which focuses in particular on *Adulthood Rites*. Finally, in chapter four, I will demonstrate that, instead of rationality, *Imago* posits a theory of knowledge and reasoning that is based on the logic of the erotic, or the "the certainty of the flesh," which anchors all thought in embodied experience (Belk).

This thesis thus tackles in three consecutive chapters the three novels of the trilogy, each of which is intent on deconstructing a specific humanist foundational concept, respectively: autonomy, authenticity and rationality. At the same time the themes of slavery and subjection run as a red thread throughout this thesis, at times corroborating *Lilith's Brood* posthumanist message, at times problematizing it. In keeping these themes foregrounded *Lilith's Brood* gives full expression to the struggle and danger that accompanies change, bravely acknowledging troublesome conclusions, for example, the inevitable inequality that haunts all power relations and the necessity of sacrifice.

Chapter 1: The Neo-Slave Narrative in a Posthumanist Context

According to Dubey, the neo-slave narrative as a genre is still in the process of being defined, although it has already been somewhat established by well-known exponents like Toni Morrison who cemented the genre's fantastic turn in the late eighties with her novel *Beloved*. Generally speaking the neo-slave narrative falls back on the "historically specific institution of American chattel slavery," which it aims to describe with historical and emotional accuracy and to which it attributes important physical, economic and psychological consequences for the lives of African Americans living in the present (345). Detailing the social, intellectual and political context out of which the genre was born, Ashraf Rushdy lists three major historical developments that were crucial for its emergence in the seventies. The first was the rise of the Black Power movement within the civil rights movement which drew attention to the persistence of systemic racism and the desperate poverty that continued to plague large numbers of African Americans, especially in cities, despite the achievements of the civil rights movement.

The second important historical development also sprang forth from the civil rights movement: the shift of consensus historiography to the more politically involved, less conservative historical research of the New Left which was initiated when young historians saw "history [being] made from the 'bottom up'" and thus "began to study it from the bottom up," thereby giving rise to a greater variety of research topics including the history of cultural minorities and women's history, as well as a whole host of new methods and sources that had previously gone unused (Rushdy 4). Most importantly for the study of American slavery this meant "a renewed respect for the truth and value of slave testimony, the significance of slave cultures, and the importance of slave resistance" (Rushdy 4). In the previous years of research these factors had been overlooked or grossly misread. Stanley Elkins, for example, argued in his controversial study *Slavery: a Problem in American Institutional and Intellectual Life* that

the closed system of slavery practiced in the U.S. produced a certain slave personality type which was docile but irresponsible, loyal but lazy, and humble but cunning (1959). What Elkins disregarded in his research was the plentiful evidence of slave resistance (archival but also in testimonial form), which proved the personality type to be a pose rather than an accurate character profile, a mask which hid a more complex and substantial slave subjectivity.

The third context for the emergence of the neo-slave narrative in the seventies was the publication of William Styron's novel *The Confessions of Nat Turner* in 1967 and the subsequent debate in which the emergent black intelligentsia launched a critical assault on the novel, denouncing it for its "uninformed appropriation of African American culture" and for persisting racist black stereotypes (Rushdy 4). Styron's novel adopts the formal conventions of the antebellum slave narrative, such as a first-person narrator, but African American intellectuals argued that the novel was hostile to the plight of slaves and that of their descendants. The neo-slave narrative is largely an attempt to "salvage" the genre for the benefit of educating people about slavery and its long-term consequences for an entire class of citizens (Rushdy 6). Most of its literary ire is therefore directed at people who deny, disregard, or otherwise distort the legacy of American slavery. This did not only apply to white authors, like Styron, who appropriated African American culture for their own advantage, as there was plenty of disagreement about how to remember and represent slavery among African Americans themselves.

In *Remembering Generations* Rushdy recounts how in the late 1960s American activist movements like the "ultra-black nationalist factions of the Black Power Movement" began to obsess about notions of purity, creating a political atmosphere "where activists were judged by the purity of their motives, the purity of their actions, even the purity of their descent" (100-101). The myth of race purity undergirded a new nationalist black subjectivity,

thus problematizing the position of mixed-race people within the movement. Rushdy also describes how the same factions within the Black Power movement began to foster a contempt for past generations of African Americans who had suffered through slavery and oppression, without, as the zealous, young activists were keen to think, putting up any kind of a fight. A much quoted anecdote by Butler from her college years demonstrates exactly the kind of attitude her peers were prone to with regard to their ancestors. She remembers one young man saying, "I would like to kill all these old people who have been holding us back for so long. But I can't because I'd have to start with my own parents" (Butler, "Interview" 51).

As a child Butler was similarly disturbed by and ashamed of her mother's complacency as a domestic worker (Butler, "Interview" 51). She resented the way her mother tolerated the disrespectful tone in which her employers talked about her, even when she was within earshot. As Butler grew older, however, she realized that the sacrifices her mother made in her working life guaranteed their livelihood and their independence. Therefore, in what was largely a reaction against the younger generations' shame and anger regarding their ancestors, she wrote *Kindred* (1979). In this her fourth novel Butler dives into the themes of family, sacrifice and complicity. *Kindred* poignantly and painstakingly contextualizes the experience of American slavery and makes its narrator and protagonist, the wilfully independent Dana Franklin, suffer through it by having her travel back in time from the 1970s to an 1850s Maryland plantation. There Dana is humbled as she has to learn "the rules of submission" that now govern her position as a black woman and a slave (Butler, "Interview" 51). At the same time, however, in what is a notorious time-traveller's paradox, she has to orchestrate her enslaved forbear's rape by her white master in order to ensure her survival in the present. Dana thus not only has to face the evidence of miscegenation in her family, but she has to ensure it happens.

The Black Power movement's highly selective memory of American slavery did not only express itself in its choice of heroes and villains – the Nat Turners or Uncle Toms that it either extolled or reviled – but it was also characterized by a refusal to acknowledge evidence of miscegenation in the past. Miscegenation constituted a problem because it complicated the stability and integrity of black subjectivity. The African American writer and historian Dorothy Spruill Redford, for example, admits that she was reluctant to trace her ancestors because she "could not bear the idea that [she] might have white blood in [her]" (Redford, qtd. in Rushdy *Remembering Generations* 104). At the same time, however, there were dissenting voices within the Black Power movement who "chose to emphasize the contingent nature of race and the processes behind racial identification," arguing that race is a social construction rather than an essence derived from the purity of one's bloodline (Rushdy, *Neo-slave Narratives* 21).

The neo-slave narratives of the seventies demonstrate a great sensitivity to the polyphony of the Black Power Movement by leaving room for different opinions about the ontology of black subjectivity. Moreover, Rushdy writes that neo-slave narratives " [insist] on intersubjectivity" (*Neo-slave Narratives,* 231). Their first-person narratives are never unambiguous first-person narratives, but always evoke the sense of speaking for a larger community, thereby rendering "rugged and autonomous individualism … suspect and reactionary" (231). For example, one of the reasons why Styron's *Confessions* was criticized so severely was because of his failure to attend to the omissions and silences in the historical document he used as a source: Turner's dictated confession recorded on the eve of his execution in 1831. This led Styron to believe and thus to represent Turner as a lone wolf, a man who disassociated himself from, and despised, his fellow slaves and whose romantic attachments were to white women only – despite the historical evidence that Turner was

married to a slave woman, whom he loved enough to entrust her with the documents that proved his complicity in the slave rebellion.

Lilith's Brood postdates the neo-slave narratives that Rushdy refers to in his analysis of the social context that inspired the genre, such as Ishmael Reed's *Flight to Canada* (1976), or Charles Johnson's *Oxherding Tale* (1982). Timothy Spaulding writes that to the more recent neo-salve narratives like Butler's trilogy "the discourse of postmodernism played as crucial a role in the development of the texts" as did black cultural nationalism for Rushdy's case studies (3). According to Spaulding, the fantastic or metafictional operations in these texts defamiliarize what have become stubbornly conventional representations of slavery, and question the authority of traditional, Eurocentric forms of historiography and historical fiction. The postmodernism of these postmodernist neo-slave narratives, however, needs some qualification. As Spaulding explains, "the postmodernist deconstruction of individual identity, cultural cohesion, and objective truth claims posed almost as great a challenge to black activism as Eurocentrism had" (14). Therefore, in order to salvage some of the authority – which much political activism continues to rely on and which white postmodernism threatens to undermine – black postmodernists advocated the authority of lived experience, which was capable of incorporating the many different voices in the black community, but also functioned as a tangible foundation for arguments in a political context.

Spaulding's notion of the postmodernist neo-slave narrative is essentially focused on history and historiography. How then can *Lilith's Brood*, a story set in the future, be included in the same category? As Spaulding demonstrates himself in his discussion of Samuel R. Delany's science fiction novel *Stars in My Pocket Like Grains of Sand* (1984), this need not be a problem. He argues postmodern neo-slave narratives can project the concept of slavery into the future, thereby defamiliarizing it, but not to the extent that we can no longer recognize it as historical. In the same way that Eileen Donaldson argues *Kindred* can be read

as a (afro)futurist text because it collapses the future into the present and the past, *Lilith's Brood* can be read as a historical text because it does the same thing: collapsing the distinctions between future, present and past (99). Cathy Peppers has argued convincingly that *Lilith's Brood* tells four alternative cyborg/feminist origin stories and that in doing so it gives a revised account of the history of the human species. Origin stories are important according to Pepper because "the kinds of identities we can imagine are dependent on the kinds of origin stories we can tell."

Lilith's Brood specifically revises the biblical origin story that creates men and women as male and female, the one subjugated to the other. Lilith, the name alone [3] demonstrates that there is an alternative account that exposes the misogynistic oppression intrinsic to the story of Genesis. Secondly, *Lilith's Brood* revises the sociobiological origin story that argues genetics determine identity. Rather, it suggests both nature and culture are inherently open to mutation and transformation and that identity is always contingent. Both the Oankali and humanity are genetically stereotyped in the novels (hierarchical vs. life affirming and altruistic), but both are also seen to break these stereotypes – Lilith in her acceptance of otherness, and the Oankali in their decision to approve of a human colony on Mars. Additionally, Butler disrupts "the usual origin story of the evolutionary rise to dominance of the heroic individual […] through the ruthless competition and survival of the fittest" by substituting a different theory (Peppers). This theory posits "that many of the microbiotic components of our cells, like the mitochondria, evolved from free-living species which later entered into symbiotic relationships." Finally, Peppers sees Butler applying this theory of symbiosis over competition onto the realm of the paleoanthropological by suggesting that there is an alternative to the "man the hunter" myth that assumes that human nature, and evolution, are unavoidably marked by violence, xenophobia and sexism. This

[3] In ancient Hebrew mythology Lilith was created alongside Adam to be his wife but she was exiled from Paradise for refusing to submit to her husband. As a punishment she was to breed with demons and create a demon spawn of her own.

alternative consists of the "woman the gatherer" theory, which argues human evolution is propelled by communality rather than competition.

Futurist postmodern neo-slave narratives function rather differently from neo-slave narratives set in the past or present. In a chapter titled "Beyond Postmodernity" Spaulding writes that,

> in their radical displacement of the experience of slavery into the future the slave and postslave experience these texts depict have less to do with the impact of slavery on black/white relations and more to do with the increased complexity of global and multicultural politics, expanded definitions of sexual identity, and vast advancements in science and technology. These texts create radical definitions of difference, otherness, and humanity in a way that other postmodern slave narratives, grounded in the slave experience as they are, cannot. (102)

It is this aspect of the postmodern neo-slave narrative, the "Beyond" of Spaulding's chapter heading, that that is both the subject of science fiction as well as a major theoretical occupation of posthumanism. This philosophical and literary movement can be described as a postmodern critique of humanism that takes issue with its conception of man as an autonomous, authentic and rational subject, and thus worthy of exceptional privilege with regard to other, supposedly lesser creatures. The posthumanist debate is a relatively recent one, dating back to the mid-nineties, although its roots can be traced further back to the anti-humanism of Michel Foucault, Louis Althusser and Martin Heidegger, as well as to the exploration of systems theory which occurred even earlier, and which was responsible for removing "the human and *Homo sapiens* from any particularly privileged position in relation to matters of meaning, information, and cognition" (Wolfe xii).

The humanist construction of subjectivity dates back to the Renaissance when it stood in opposition to the unfathomable and omnipotent power of the Christian God. Humanism

owes its longevity to its aspirations, which are grounded in the values of equality, freedom and the inherent value of (human) life and dignity. As Wolfe points out, however, the problem is that "those aspirations are undercut by the philosophical and ethical frameworks used to conceptualize them" (xvi). Humanism reproduces a "normative subjectivity—a specific concept of the human—that grounds discrimination against nonhuman animals and the disabled" (xvii). This normative subjectivity is derived from humanism's narrow delineation of "agency—the human subject's right to be self-defining and autonomous […]—and human consciousness or self-awareness" (Flanagan 13). The association between authenticity, rationality, autonomy, and agency or subjectivity excludes all those who lack these qualities from the prerogatives of the humanist subject, such as liberty and freedom from harm. Animals are good examples of those creatures that the humanist conception of subjectivity excludes, but the list also includes the disabled, children, the elderly as well as the more exotic cyborgs, aliens and robots.

Before I continue it is crucial to differentiate posthumanism from transhumanism as well as from the word "posthuman". "Posthuman" as a noun denotes the "the technologically mediated human subject," the figure of the alien, the cyborg, or the vampire (Flanagan 14). As an adjective it describes a world substantially marked by technology and peopled by posthuman characters. Posthumanism on the other hand is the name for the body of theory or the philosophical discourse that seeks to dismantle the humanist subject. Posthumanist literature often makes use of the posthuman as a tool but the two terms are not interchangeable. For example, transhumanism, a philosophical movement that developed almost simultaneously alongside posthumanism but which is nevertheless very different, is just as fixed on the figure of the posthuman even though its tenets are opposed to those of posthumanism. As Wolfe explains, transhumanism is "the best-known inheritor of the 'cyborg' strand of posthumanism" inspired (though not accurately) by Donna Haraway's

seminal work "A Cyborg Manifesto" (xiii). Transhumanism is at odds with posthumanism in its valorisation of the posthuman for all the wrong reasons. To view the intervention of technology in our subjectivity as an enhancement which, for example, could be mobilized to push those human capacities such as reason beyond their ordinary human limits is a transhumanist ambition. In the same category we find the use of technology to dramatically increase our lifespan or to create ways for us to upload our consciousness in order to achieve a kind of virtual immortality.[4] These ambitions are derived from "ideals of human perfectibility, rationality, and agency inherited from Renaissance humanism and the Enlightenment" (Wolfe xiii). Transhumanism is thus an "intensification" of humanism and not a branch of posthumanism proper, or critical posthumanism as it is also called, which is invested in the posthuman precisely because it assails those established humanist virtues of autonomy, authenticity, and rationality (Wolfe xv).

Another disambiguation is called for with regard to the term anti-humanism, which I used above to refer to the writings of Foucault, among others. Anti-humanism has more in common with posthumanism in that both movements launch an attack on the humanist conception of the human. The difference is rather more subtle: whereas anti-humanist scholars assume the ultimate 'death' of the current conception of man and the birth of an entirely new subjectivity, posthumanist scholars often define their project as an attempt to reconceptualise and expand the humanist subject to include those whose agency it had previously denied on the basis of its definition of those qualities that it perceives to make up the foundation of selfhood and subjectivity (Flanagan 11). In fact what a posthumanist critique intends to do is to subject the notion of humanism to the kind of rational criticism that humanism itself extols; it attempts a kind of deconstruction of the humanist, normative notion of man. Posthumanism

[4] In *Lilith's Brood* transhumanist tropes are certainly not absent. The Oankali offer the humans they pair with an increased lifespan, as well as increased strength and healing. However, these perks serve to facilitate the biological merging of the two species and thus rather than sustain or fortify humanist ambitions and privilege, they actually undermine them.

posits a revised conception of the human by undermining humanist beliefs and virtues: autonomy, authenticity and rationality. What this revision exactly entails is still subject to debate.

The notion of posthumanism that I adhere to in this thesis is closely associated with the genre of science fiction and thus with forms of narrative. Science fiction enjoys a special place in posthumanist philosophy as a kind of conceptual playground where theories or concepts may be developed and problematized. Posthumanist science fiction writing thus poses an "artistic challenge" according to Elena Gomel because it may involve representing the consciousness of a rational non-human creature (3). At the same time it is also an "ethical challenge" because it requires an approach to the non-human that does not end up corroborating humanist prerogatives (Gomel 3). The trouble with humanism according to Gomel resides in the golden rule that is endemic to its philosophy: do not do unto others, as you would not have done unto yourself. As an ethics of engaging the nonhuman other, the golden rule falls short since it "assumes essential similarity between the moral agents involved in the interaction because it presupposes the reciprocal transparency of their minds" (Gomel 23). The premise of most science fiction, however, is that alien minds are different from human minds, and their morality may not accord with our own. Whereas humanist ethics effaces difference, a posthumanist ethics tries to accommodate and engage with it, thus deploying the alien encounter as a potential site of transformation and improvement.

Gomel is generally pessimistic about most literary science fiction because it does not adopt the "poetics of radical alterity" that she deems crucial for doing justice to the otherness of non-human beings (28). For example, she denounces Butler's fiction for its adherence to traditional genres and plots like the bildungsroman and for not adopting the more numinous narrative strategies that she sees in, for example, in the work of Stanislaw Lem. I disagree with Gomel's conclusion, however, that Butler's portrait of alien difference only makes sense

from an allegorical perspective – where the aliens represent an alternative "non-violent, maternal, communalist utopia" (137). This understanding of the Oankali as maternal and non-violent demonstrates the shallowness of Gomel's reading. She completely disregards the more subtle, psychological forms of violence the Oankali practice on a daily basis. Moreover, Oankali family structure is so radically different from that of humans because of the existence of the third gender that to call them matriarchal reflects a highly simplistic and inaccurate interpretation of the text. However, Gomel's reading of *Lilith's Brood* as utopian does expose an element of hope and optimism in what otherwise reads like a highly dystopian piece of fiction with its themes of extinction, violence and oppression. Belk points out the genre of the critical dystopia allows for precisely such ambivalence, giving the reader both a warning as well as something to aim for. Quoting Bacolini he writes that critical dystopia's are "texts that maintain a utopian core at their center, a locus of hope that contributes to deconstructing tradition and reconstructing alternatives" (373). This alternative in *Lilith's Brood* is founded on a truly alien ethics which remains difficult for people to grasp – as Foster's account of his students' negative response to the trilogy attests (143). For one, we do not share the Oankali sense organs, and thus the knowledge on which grounds they make their moral choices remains mostly out of reach. And even when we are provided with this information by the construct focalizers of the sequels, there is still something truly different about the Oankali's respect for life and futurity that is fundamentally posthumanist in nature.

Chapter 2: Autonomy reconceived in *Dawn*

Autonomy is a quality unique to humankind and therefore one of our most sacred prerogatives, or so humanist philosophy would argue. At the root of this conceived sense of autonomy there is the notion that humankind is able to overcome its instincts, and to plan the course of its life based on the best possible rational choices that safeguard survival (itself of course, paradoxically, our most basic instinct). In *Dawn* this belief is thoroughly checked when humanity is faced with a situation that both reveals the state of interdependency in which all living creatures find themselves, as well as the difficulty of making rational choices if they go against the core humanist values of authenticity and self-determination.

After a disastrous nuclear apocalypse the protagonist Lilith finds herself waking up on an alien spaceship, rescued along with what remains of the human race. The aliens, called the Oankali, seem to be the living and breathing embodiments of Julia Kristeva's psychoanalytical concept of the abject in the sense that they defy the comfortable border between the self and what is familiar to us, and what is expelled from the self as indescribably other. The abject cannot be assimilated into this dichotomy, and as a result it is both repulsive and compelling. According to Kristeva, the abject "recalls – psychically – the moment of our separation from the womb, an occasion that is simultaneously bloody, painful, traumatizing, liberating and beautiful" (Buchanan). Significantly Butler's first chapter, which recounts Lilith's initial confrontation with the Oankali, is called "Womb." The Oankali seem neither male nor female, and their grey skin is covered in sensory tentacles that writhe uncontrollably and make them look like sea slugs. Yet they have roughly the limbs and proportions of a human being, having bred themselves to look humanoid to facilitate the first phase of what they call "the trade".

The Oankali inform Lilith that they have made earth habitable again, but before humanity is allowed to repopulate it, they first have to agree to trade with the Oankali.

"Slaves?" Lilith asks, perhaps because the demand for slave labor is one reason why humans have historically sought to make contact with foreign peoples (*Dawn* 24). Of course, being utterly non-human, the Oankali have never participated in a slave trade; instead they trade "the essence" of themselves, their genetic material (*Dawn* 40). With the help of the Oankali third sex, the ooloi, they genetically engineer their progeny to be better adapted, and more favorably evolutionarily equipped than their forbears. In order to do so, however, they need a constant supply of foreign genetic material and this is where the humans come in. "Your people will change," one of the aliens tells Lilith, "your young will be more like us and ours more like you [...]. That's part of the trade" (*Dawn* 42). Understandably, Lilith is overcome by visions of "grotesque, Medusa children" and objects vehemently (*Dawn* 42). Her desire for species purity is portrayed sympathetically at first, although ultimately it is dismissed as destructive and irrational, and contrary to the Oankali way of life.

The humanity that Lilith is so desperate to defend confirms again and again the Oankali verdict that it is beyond saving. According to the Oankali, humans suffer from "a mismatched pair of genetic characteristics," intelligence and hierarchical thinking (*Dawn* 38). Unfortunately the former is too often used to gratify the latter, the older characteristic. Such hierarchical thinking, it is understood, is inherently destructive, comparable with ignoring a malignant cancer and allowing it to grow. The war that consumed the world originated in this set of mismatched characteristics that the Oankali call "the human contradiction." It is what both scares them, and what they find so headily attractive about humans. "They had never before seen so much life and so much death in one being" (*Dawn* 26). Butler's notion of the human contradiction has served as a kind of lightning rod for criticism concerned with determinism and essentialism in her work. Are humans really genetically destined for extinction? The Oankali seem to think so, although Jhadya, the first Oankali Lilith meets, offers a much overlooked afterthought: if the human contradiction is like cancer, there is no

reason why humanity should not manage to grow to a venerable old age if it "remember[s] to re-examine [itself] periodically" (*Dawn* 38). According to Butler, self-scrutiny and self-criticism are crucial for humankind's survival, and being a writer she seems to have chosen literature as a preeminent site for such a means of critical self-reflection.

Despite the existence of this apparent way out of the human contradiction, its manifestations of xenophobia and sexism are as prevalent as ever among the remaining human beings that Lilith meets. This becomes painfully obvious when Lilith is almost raped by the first man she is allowed to see after her confinement. Moreover, when she agrees to the task the Oankali have set out for her, that is, to awaken a group of humans, convince them to agree to the trade, and to prepare them for resettlement, her plans are frustrated by their violence, racism, sexism and heteronormativity. She struggles to create unity in her group of settlers when some of the men target a Chinese-Canadian man because they have decided "he's something called a faggot" and that they "[dislike] the shape of his eyes" (*Dawn* 159). Additionally, she cannot get them to comply with the Oankali mating process because they feel emasculated when the ooloi, and not they, are perceived as being in charge during the process. They casually resort to rape and scapegoating, branding Lilith as a collaborator and a traitor. Why else, they ask, would the Oankali have given her special powers such as her increased strength and healing?

Thomas Foster notes that by portraying Lilith as a "judas goat" (*Dawn* 67), *Dawn* alludes to "figures from colonial history, specifically the figure of La Malinche or La Chingada, Cortes's native translator and mistress during the conquest of Mexico," who slept with the enemy in the midst of battle, just as Lilith is seen to do when Nikanj, her partner ooloi, is fatally wounded towards the end of the novel (145). In order to save it, she takes off her clothes and lies down next to it, allowing it to make contact with her body and channel her "talent" for cancer to regenerate its lost limb (*Dawn* 236). In doing so, Lilith loses the

confidence of the settlers and becomes something of a mythical figure to them, a locus of hate and blame like La Malinche. Lilith's choice to help the Oankali (despite her secret, half-formed ambition to turn on them in favor of the human cause) is deeply disturbing considering the way they have manipulated her into forming an attachment to them. The next section of this chapter focuses on the Oankali's means of manipulation and coercion that characterize the negotiation of the trade. Butler's choice to go into so much detail about human-Oankali interaction, which she purposefully likens to antebellum slave-master interaction is striking. It certainly nuances what would otherwise be a bland posthumanist sermon with an account of the difficulty, and the sacrifice that accompanies any change in our core value system. For the sake of structural as well as theoretical purposes I have made a distinction between two types of subjection. These two types are deprivation and the fostering of physical and emotional dependency. The first category is to be interpreted broadly and includes social, cultural and epistemic deprivation, as well as physical deprivation and the deprivation of futurity.

Trade or Extortion?

Conceptually, trade implies two equal parties whose interests and desires are equally benefitted through the proposed exchange. If one of the two parties benefits more because it exploits the latter, then we speak of extortion. One of the main questions that *Lilith's Brood* poses is whether the Oankali trade is in fact extortionist. The answer to this question lies in an examination of the power dynamics between the Oankali and the humans which are highly complex and defy our understanding of fairness. What is complex about the Oankali means of coercion is that they often alarmingly recall the subjugating practices of antebellum slavery, partly perhaps because they are focalized and negotiated by the African American protagonist. However, it would be rash to say that the references to antebellum slavery that permeate

Lilith's Brood are merely a kind of interpretive "reflex" on Lilith's part, as Thomas Foster suggests they are (150). Rather, the parallels drawn between the Oankali methods of subjection and those of antebellum slavery expose undeniable similarities, fundamentally problematizing the relationship between the humans and the Oankali.

Dawn opens with Lilith waking up aboard a space ship, confined in a cell, completely alone and disoriented. This cell has a bathroom, but Lilith remembers when she was not awarded that luxury and "had been forced simply to choose a corner" (*Dawn* 5). She is also given some clothes for a change. Peppers likens her awakening to "the African slave's Middle Passage," during which similar practices of physical deprivation and humiliation served to prevent slave rebellions. At this point in the narrative the aliens are nothing more than disembodied voices who question Lilith but remain mute when she asks them who they are or where she is. Their habit of drip-feeding humans information only when it suits them remains constant throughout the trilogy and can be interpreted as a kind of epistemic deprivation. It enables them to groom Lilith for the task they have in mind for her by acquiring her consent without informing her fully of the consequences.

Moreover, she suffers from agonizing social deprivation in the first stage of her captivity. In order to appease her and to relieve some of her loneliness while she is imprisoned (or with the more insidious purpose of testing her maternal instinct – once again the novel purposely courts ambiguity) the Oankali let Lilith socialize with a small boy who reminds her of the son she has lost. After she has taught him her language, however, they take the boy away without any regard for her agony at the separation. During antebellum slavery the disbandment of families was the result of buying and selling people as chattel. Specifically the separation of mother and child could count on familiar abolitionist denunciations. The Oankali's treatment of Lilith thus immediately rouses the reader's antipathy towards their goals and methods by evoking traditional slave narratives as well conventional tales of alien

abduction. Especially when Lilith finds that her bodily integrity has been breached – she has a scar running down her abdomen – she begins to wonder "what had been done to her. What had she lost or gained and why?" (*Dawn* 6). The openness of the question invites wild speculation on the part of the reader, speculation that quickly adopts a sexual, and gendered, dimension for Lilith. When one of the aliens reveals himself to her, her mind immediately considers him a sexual threat, as well as a threat to her sanity (*Dawn* 11). His name is Jdahya, and he is there to help Lilith transition from one stage of her captivity to the next.

Dawn is divided into four chapters: "Womb," "Family," "Nursery" and "The Training Floor". The chapter titles are ironic in the sense that all except the last one invoke feelings of familiarity and safety that do not in the least correspond to Lilith's experience of her captivity and exploitation. In "Family" Lilith is released from her "cage" and adopted by her alien host family, consisting of the male Jdahya, the female Tediin, the ooloi Kahguyaht and their ooloi child Nikanj, with whom Lilith is meant to mate once it comes of age (*Dawn* 30). The unfamiliar morphology behind the alien names is a science fiction trope which serves to flag their difference, but it has another use as well. In much the same way that H.P. Lovecraft's carefully crafted alien linguistic paradigm consists of unpronounceable consonant clusters and dark, guttural vowel combinations, the Oankali names avoid "terrestrialism" (Lovecraft, qtd. in Robinson 128). In the challenge they pose for human vocal organs these names hint at the physical otherness of the Oankali. Their difference is therefore not only represented in the text but also performed in the language.

Living with her Oankali family, Lilith finds that she has to familiarize herself with a whole list of other exotic practices besides their complicated nomenclature. She adopts their vegan diet and is encouraged to learn their language, and although she has left her cell she still has to cope with certain restrictions of her mobility. Because she cannot chemically manipulate the walls like the Oankali, she needs permission when she wants to leave, and she

is not to wander too far or she risks damaging the ship. In this way the Oankali choose to foster her physical dependency on them rather than, for example, letting her settle in one of the open spaces in the ship. Her confinement becomes highly dangerous when Lilith is allowed to meet another human for the first time. His name is Paul Titus and he has agreed to follow the Oankali into space instead of staying with the group which is to resettle on earth. In exchange he has been given the power to open and close the walls at will. "It's all trade with them," he warns Lilith, "[a]nd they know how to make you change your mind" (*Dawn* 92).

Titus has been negotiating a deal with the Oankali himself: he arranged for Lilith to be delivered to him to alleviate his social and sexual deprivation. The exchange presumably enables the Oankali to analyze the human reproductive process. When Lilith rejects Titus he tries to rape her. The Oankali intervene but they refuse to take responsibility for Titus' behavior; instead they put him back in cryogenic sleep because he attacked his family. Lilith counters, "[w]e haven't got any real family bonds […] He has nothing! He has no one to teach him to be a man, and he damn sure can't be an Oankali, so don't talk to me about his family" (*Dawn* 101). The Oankali practices of isolation and their disbandment of human families are arguably their worst offenses. In their defense, however, it should be noted that a lot of their initial mistakes may be derived from a lack of understanding. Nikanj, who is a second-generation ooloi, is of a different opinion than his parents when it comes to negotiating the trade but until he reaches maturity he cannot fully exert his influence.

Another technique the Oankali practice is cultural deprivation. Lilith is refused materials to write with, even when she argues that it will help her learn the Oankali language faster. "No. It will be done our way. Not yours," Nikanj responds. What it means is that they will alter Lilith's memory to make her unable to ever forget anything, never mind how precious the ability to forget may be to a traumatized individual like Lilith. Literacy is an important theme in slave narratives; it often marks a point of increased self-confidence and

empowerment because it allows (ex-)slaves to access the dominant cultural tradition and use it to author-ize their experience. Lilith needs to become literate in Oankali, because it is the hegemonic language, as well as the dominant cultural medium for record-keeping. Scholars of the slave narrative tradition have argued, however, that the empowerment that literacy affords the (ex-)slave is "ambiguous" (Barett 418). Valerie Smith maintains that, although literacy allows slaves to voice, disseminate and critique their experience of slavery, to celebrate it without qualification is to "pay homage to the structures of discourse that so often contributed to the writer's oppression" (Smith, qtd. in Barett 418). An unqualified celebration of literacy in the slave narrative, as I will explain below, reproduces the idea that illiterate slaves did not suffer as literate ones did, because they had no access to the hegemonic means of expression.

Frederick Douglass, for example, in contemplating his literacy writes that he sometimes "envied" his fellow-slaves "for their stupidity" (2057). "I have often wished myself a beast. I preferred the condition of the meanest reptile to my own. Any thing, no matter what, to get rid of thinking!" (2057). According to Douglass's reasoning here, illiteracy reduces a person to the status of a beast, a reptile, a non-thinking thing, incapable of true suffering. This argument is contrary to his prior valorization of slave songs as a cultural means of expression: "[t]he songs of the slave represent the sorrows of his heart" (2046). It would seem, therefore, that in pursuit of the hegemonic cultural tradition oppressed people risk turning their back on vernacular forms of cultural expression, although Lilith demonstrates that this need not always be the case. In the sequels to *Dawn* it is mentioned that she still writes, despite her phenomenal memory, and sometimes she disappears into the forest to escape the claustrophobically tightknit Oankali family structure, regardless of the neuro-chemical discomfort the separation of ooloi and mate causes them both. "She does that sometimes– insists on keeping Human customs" (*Imago* 528).

Lilith's Oankali literacy is a double-edged blade, but the Oankali manage other kinds of cultural deprivation that are less ambiguous. Not only do the Oankali (initially) not allow Lilith to keep records in her own cultural tradition, they have also destroyed the cultural records of humanity that remained on earth. The Oankali want humanity to "begin again," in places "clean of radioactivity and history" (*Dawn* 34). The notion that one can be "clean" of history is intriguing but also very problematic. The premise of the neo-slave narrative is that those who seek to be free of history will find it intruding on them in the present, and that it is better not to forget about the past, but to acknowledge its influence over the present. The Oankali tactic of eradicating human culture thus seems more like a self-serving way of closing the past to the humans, as their own past is "the one direction that's closed to [them]" (*Dawn* 36). Their destruction of earth's ruins can therefore be read as another way of coercing humanity into acceding to the trade.

Another method of coercion that the Oankali rely on is fostering physical dependency. Lilith's reliance on the Oankali for mobility pales in comparison to the bond she enters into when she aids Nikanj through his transformation into adulthood. Once again the Oankali have not informed her that in doing so she seals her relationship with Nikanj with neuro-chemical certainty. Once bonded like this, she cannot veer from his side for very long before experiencing intense discomfort. They become chained to each other, for lack of a better word. In *Imago* Lilith's ooloi child Jodahs is faced with a similar moral problem. Should it tell its potential mates Tomas and Jesusa that if they stay during the transformation they will never leave? They already feel threatened by its chemical influence over them. "It wants us to stay and I want to stay and so do you, *and we shouldn't*! Something is wrong" (648). In the end, however, Jodahs says nothing at all, knowing that one day his mates will "curse [it] for [its] silence" (*Imago* 647).

In an interview in 2001 Butler confessed that she is not sure she achieved what she set out to do in *Lilith's Brood*, which was to imagine an alternative society that is not founded on hierarchy. "I wound up with a somewhat different hierarchical system, chemically controlled as with DNA, but, instead, pheromonal" (Butler, "Radio" 54). Because humans are themselves not aware of the pheromonal impact they have on other species, only of the seductive threat the ooloi pose for them, they appear more vulnerable in the text, but this could be merely an illusion springing perhaps from our bias in sympathy towards them. Jhadya tells *Lilith* that the Oankali are long overdue for a partner species (*Dawn* 42). This sense of urgency would explain some of the force behind their strategies of coercion. Additionally, their need for this partner species far exceeds anything we could imagine, and it is just as crucial for the survival of their species as it is for humankind. Humans and Oankali are dependent on each other for survival. Such dependency requires the sacrifice, firstly, of the humanist conception of self-determination or autonomy. But it does not require us to relinquish the notion of agency entirely.

Flanagan writes that in extending the notion of agency to non-human subjects posthumanism transforms the way in which we think about those non-human subjectivities as well as the way in which we conceive of the notion of subjectivity itself. In her words,

> This broadening of the categories of subjectivity to which agency can be applied also involves an ideological reformulation, because humanism has always conceived of selfhood in highly individualistic terms. Posthumanism, on the other hand, views subjectivity as networked and collective. (21)

The ramifications of such a networked and collective subjectivity, derived from the reconfiguration of autonomy, are worked out in detail in *Lilith's Brood*. There is the fact that Lilith is singled out to mother the first group of humans to resettle the planet. Her actions therefore determine the life of an entire species. As such her autonomy is curtailed because

that responsibility narrows down her choices, but at the same time that responsibility gives whatever choice she does make profoundly more importance. The humanist principle of self-determination thus becomes the posthumanist principle of collective determination in *Lilith's Brood*, where one's choices are shown to affect the lives of other creatures, and vice versa.

Chapter 3: The Relational Subject in *Adulthood Rites*

So far I have written about the Oankali's means of coercion and manipulation. A quick summary of the their offenses lists physical and social deprivation, cultural impoverishment, and fostering physical dependency. On the topic of reproductive freedom and miscegenation (or hybridity) I have, however, remained silent, an omission which I will remedy in this chapter. It is important to realize that humanity's desire for species purity is derived from the humanist notion of authenticity. Of the three concepts of humanist philosophy that I discuss in this thesis authenticity is probably the most unclear. The notion of the authentic human subject is informed by ideas of wholeness, integrity, originality, and coherence. It is based on the presupposition that the human subject is unified, and singular, and not composite or derivative. Unsurprisingly, this conception of the human mind and consciousness is illusory. Our consciousness is always changing in response to its environment. Such a socially constituted subject is at the center of *Adulthood Rites*, but before elaborating on the ways in which Butler's science fiction epic challenges notions of authenticity, I will address the problem of miscegenation and reproductive freedom in the context of slavery.

In the second book of the Xenogenesis trilogy the Oankali follow up on their plans to create a hybrid society and a hybrid race, and to secure this hybrid future they punish all resister humans with sterility. According to their logic and their reverence for life, it would be a worse sin to allow humans to breed amongst themselves and thereby maintain a species that is doomed to extinction. "To them it's like deliberately causing the conception of a child who is so defective that it must die in infancy" (*Imago* 532). Sterility too can be conceived of as a kind of deprivation: the deprivation of futurity. The resister humans have different ways of responding to their situation: some, for example Lilith's new lover Tino, cross over to the trader villages where the Oankali and humans live alongside each other, some reciprocate by abducting human-Oankali offspring – so-called constructs – and others decide there is no way

out of the double bind and choose death instead. *Adulthood Rites* recounts the story of Akin, Lilith's construct son, who is abducted by resister humans as a baby. Growing up in their villages he comes to sympathize with their desire for independence. The novel ends with Akin's successful appeal to the Oankali to let the resister humans opt out of the trade and start their own colony on Mars, even though it goes against the Oankali's nature and ethics to do so.

In *Dawn* Lilith was told that the Oankali intend to mate with her and with the other remaining humans, but not until they consent to do so. Nevertheless, *Dawn* ends with Nikanj's revelation to Lilith that he has made her pregnant with her dead lover's child against her will, or at least, against her expressed volition. Nikanj tells Lilith that "nothing about [her] but [her] words reject this child," implying that he acted in response to a kind of non-verbal, bodily expression of her desire for a child (*Dawn* 247). The Oankali's presumptions about humanity's physical inclinations and desires (the prime example being the human contradiction) are highly problematic because they echo the racist, pseudoscientific biological theories that undergirded the subjugating practices of antebellum slavery, when miscegenation was an inevitable consequence of the institution of slavery in the United States. Because the children who were born to slave women, whatever their paternity, automatically became the legal property of their mother's owners, sexual abuse was both an accepted expression of slave ownership and an economically profitable pursuit. As Frederick Douglass' autobiography testifies, sometimes female slaves were kept as "breeders," and spared hard labor in order to bear children, increasing their owner's bio-capital (2067). Sadiya Hartman eloquently describes how the carefully truncated construction of the female slave's subjectivity was designed to eliminate the possibility of rape. Given the conceived lasciviousness of the black woman, sexual abuse never really amounted to rape, nor could it, since to give or refuse consent, slaves had to be in possession of agency that they were

routinely denied. Black female subjectivity was therefore culturally and legally constructed as "both will-less and always willing" (81). Nikanj's preoccupation with Lilith's willing flesh, as opposed to her spoken refusal echoes such a racist violation of her agency.

There is another parallel between Hartman's analysis of antebellum slavery's construction of black subjectivity and the Oankali's treatment of its partner species. In her discussion of a legal case in which a slave called Alfred was accused of the murder of the white man who had raped his wife Charlotte, Hartman points out that the defense focused on the husband's violated marital rights, rather than on the rape itself. Nevertheless the husband's rights were waived because the deceased was white. Hartman explains:

> on the one hand, the management of slave sexuality translated the rape of slave women into adultery or sexual intercourse; on the other, it refused to recognize or grant any legitimacy to relations forged among the enslaved. (Hartman 85)

A similar denial, or at least a similar refusal to acknowledge and respect inter-human romantic relationships characterizes the Oankali treatment of their partner species. In what is once again a perfect example of the way they carefully manage the flow of information, Lilith only finds out after she has slept with Nikanj and her human lover Joseph that she cannot touch the latter anymore. Forming the tripartite Oankali bond means giving up physical intimacy between male and female partners except when it is channeled and mediated neurologically by the ooloi. It is perhaps because of this requisite mediation that Lilith comes to think of the ooloi as "the head of the house" (*Dawn* 48), and it explains Titus's observation that the "ooloi let everyone know who's in charge" (*Dawn* 89).

There is no doubt the ooloi possess an inordinate amount of influence over both Oankali and humans because they govern the sexual lives of both species. The ooloi's talent for seduction is arguably the most effective Oankali method of coercion because it does not seem to be a method of coercion at all but rather one of persuasion. Still, Lilith is wary of the

ooloi's seduction as her allusion to their reproductive organs, a second set of arms which resemble elephant trunks, reveals. She likens them to a noose as they curl around her neck (*Dawn* 158). It seems that her sexual attraction to the ooloi is haunted by the threat of lynching – which was historically legitimated by the accusation of the rape of white women. The image serves as a warning that her willing miscegenation with the Oankali may cause trouble for her within a human cultural paradigm that cherishes race and species purity. And she does get into trouble for 'sleeping with the enemy.' Nevertheless,

> Nikanj could give [Lilith] an intimacy with Joseph that was beyond ordinary human experience. And what it gave, it also experienced. This was what had captured Paul Titus, she thought. This, and not sorrow over his losses or fear of a primitive Earth. (*Dawn* 161)

In *Lilith's Brood* the majority of humans succumb to the seduction of the Oankali which is centered around this mutual, erotic bond that the ooloi help establish between the mates of both species. The role of consent within the power structures that govern the reproductive landscape, however, needs to be considered closely.

Alys Eve Weinbaum reads Butler's work as a "*proleptic critique*" of the neoliberal reproductive landscape of the new millennium which is characterized by "self-disciplining and ultimately self-exploiting subjects," in other words, docile subjects who have interiorized authority and act as their own overseers, consenting to their own subjection (49). Weinbaum contrasts this new reproductive dystopia with the old one that played out according to "predictable racial hierarchies," where black women's reproduction and childrearing were "pathologized and devalued" (49). Butler's critique according to Weinbaum consists of exposing the historical continuities between both paradigms. In her own words,

> the emergence of the same self-governing neoliberal subjects who will be associated with the "new reproductive dystopias" of neoliberalism and thus that those whom

> Butler portrays as "consenting" to their exploitation exist side by side with those who are forcibly enslaved and rendered disposable. We discover, in other words, that there are no postracial reproductive worlds or "free" subjects. (Weinbaum 51)

Although Weinbaum does not discuss the trilogy specifically, many of her conclusions are relevant for a reading of *Lilith's Brood*, where humans are neither free to reproduce nor denied the right of reproduction; rather, reproduction is always controlled. Halfway through *Adulthood Rites* Akin spends some time on the Oankali ship that was the setting for *Dawn.* On the ship he learns more about his Oankali heritage and also about the reproductive prospects that he has to look forward to. Since the Oankali presume humans are a polygamous species, they have designed construct males to wander outside of the family unit too. Akin is aghast at this projected future for him. "He could not imagine such a life. It was not Human or Oankali. How could he be able to help the resisters if he were so solitary?" (*Adulthood Rites* 445). Here Akin makes an important realization: "You controlled both animals and people by controlling their reproduction – controlling it absolutely" (*Adulthood Rites* 447). This thought comes to him without any explicit judgement, and yet it reads like a condemnation of the Oankali's practices if we take Akin's sympathy for the resisters into account.

Nonetheless Butler is more ambivalent about this new reproductive dystopia than Weinbaum suggests. She never denounces it overtly, but only seems to do so implicitly by inviting a comparison between the former explicitly racist, and the new neoliberal, paradigms of reproductive culture. And yet the problems resulting from the neoliberal dystopia do not seem to be deal breakers for Butler because the Oankali also offer a way out of a desperate situation where humanity is headed for extinction. Foster writes with regard to the human-Oankali power dynamic that the "unevenness of this mutual dependence generates resentment, and that resentment results in a desire to escape the framework of the trade rather than to work within it to redress these inequalities" (144). Butler suggests that this is not the right way to

settle conflict, but that an ongoing engagement with otherness, even if it challenges one's sense of justice, may lead to a more equitable compromise.

Challenging Notions of Authenticity

Adulthood Rites challenges the humanist notion of authenticity through its close focalization via Akin, who defies the idea of a singular, coherent, unchanging subjectivity. As the resisters hide out in their rainforest strongholds on planet earth, they build entire villages without being able to populate them: "We die and die and no one is born" (*Adulthood Rites* 355). As a way out of the deadlock the resisters kidnap and trade fertile construct children in the hope of populating their villages. Akin is kidnapped because he looks startlingly human, and because boys born to human mothers are very rare; their birth was postponed by the Oankali because human males seem much more prone to the effects of the human contradiction than females (here Butler's gender essentialism rears its head). A small mistake by an ooloi could have disastrous consequences. Fortunately Akin turns out to be very similar to his sisters, having a human sense of individualism and an unquenchable thirst for otherness that is part of his Oankali heritage. Despite the hybridity of his species he makes for a very familiar focalizer; Gomel singles out this aspect of Butler's fiction as inimical to the posthumanist project, but scholars have argued that there are different ways of narrating posthumanity effectively. Nayar for example states that "fictional depictions of the posthuman subject [...] are generally confronting not because this subject is portrayed as an 'alien other,' but precisely because of its familiar, human shape" (Flanagan 60). Akin's familiarity hints that posthuman subjectivity is not inaccessibly alien, but that it is only a more accurate description of the human condition when we regard it without humanist goggles. Paradoxically, it is the human tendencies in Akin's character that baffle his Oankali parents,

demonstrating that even for a species with such a long, diverse history as theirs, the trade comes with its struggles and frustrations (*Adulthood Rites* 421).

Akin's abduction could not have come at a worse time. Like all constructs his mental development far outpaces his physical development and so he is like a full-grown child in a baby's body, helpless and conscious of it. Moreover when he is in the hands of his abductors he misses the birth of his sister by his Oankali mother, the sibling he was destined to be paired with as is the custom in Oankali (and now hybrid) society. At least, if he had grown up alongside her she would have matured into a female form to complement his maleness,but now that he is missing her he can no longer be sure. Constructs are extreme examples of relational subjects. Because siblings often pair with a non-related ooloi to form a new family unit, they grow up completing each other in terms of gender and sexuality. This does not mean that their sense of gender solidifies after transformation. Children remain in possession of both male and female sides no matter what sex they become (*Adulthood Rites* 314). As a result of the failure to bond with his sibling, Akin focuses his attention on the resisters instead, "a compensating obsession" that turns out to have species-wide consequences as Akin becomes a mediator between two species and a spokesperson for the resisters in much the same way that his mother was, determining their collective fate (*Adulthood Rites* 426). His bond with the resisters is just as constitutive of his subjectivity as his genetic inheritance. Akin explains that the constructs who were born aboard the ship and never interacted with the resisters "could have little reason to pay close attention to their own Humanity," but because he did he has become a perfect mediator between the two species (*Adulthood Rites* 471).

Hampton points out that *Adulthood Rites* reworks the "cliché of the tragic mulatto" and reconfigures hybridity as a means of access to power and possibility (67). He writes that "by forging such close ties between the hybrid and the tragic, [the cliché] forecloses other possibilities of a potentially utopian nature that might also be explored under the sign of the

hybrid" (67). In *Adulthood Rites* this trope is definitely overturned as Akin's hybridity serves to navigate and mediate conflict, and works towards forging mutually acceptable compromises. This does not mean his hybridity is entirely unproblematic, but it is made quite clear that these problems stem from humanity's cultural values that are derived from a humanist obsession with authenticity. Consequently *Adulthood Rites* steers clear from "[writing] tragedy onto the body of the mixed-race person," instead pointing to society as the source of the problem (Hampton 76). Despite Akin's deceptively human looks, his hybridity is registered in his highly contradictory emotional responses, for example when he is faced with the pain of one of his abductors, Damek, the one who attacked his surrogate father Tino. "One part of his mind screamed for an ooloi to save this irreplaceable Human [...]. Another part of his mind hoped Damek would die" (*Adulthood Rites* 357). Akin finds he constantly has to manage these conflicting parts of himself, human and Oankali, but as much as they cause him trouble, they also enable him to make better decisions, which is apparent from Lilith's advice to him: "When you feel a conflict, try to go the Oankali way. Embrace difference" (*Adulthood Rites* 329). In the end that is just what he does and what the Oankali seem to be incapable of doing. He embraces humanity including all its terrible traits and inclinations and he secures for it another chance at a future.

Akin's identity crisis can be figured in terms of W.E.B. Du Bois' concept of "double consciousness," a common theme in African American literature and art. Within an African American context the term refers to a kind of conflict within black subjectivity as the result of always having to view oneself through the prejudiced eyes of white others, generating tension between "a black identity and an American identity that seem incompatible" (Wallach 265). Akin, too, experiences this problem. Because of his Oankali heritage he can "see the conflict in [humanity's] genes," but because of his recent experience with sympathetic humans he also realizes that "they didn't have to destroy themselves. They certainly don't have to do it again"

(*Adulthood Rites* 378). He also addresses an unfairness that was blatantly ignored in *Dawn:* although the Oankali section off a group of their species – the Akjai – who never enter into the trade in order to secure the species' future should the trade fail, humans are not allowed this privilege, for no other reason than that the Oankali deem it unethical to let such a self-destructive species live. Akin resists this decision and dedicates his life to establishing the resisters as "Akjai Humans" (*Adulthood Rites* 467). He thinks that the Oankali may have been too hasty in their characterization of humanity as irrevocably flawed – and the trilogy suggests he is right, as *Lilith's Brood* focuses mainly on those humans who present the exceptions to the rule: humans who are self-sacrificing and tolerant of otherness and who form equally strong family ties as the Oankali are wont to do, for example Lilith's former friends Tate and Gabriel.

The last way in which Akin, and the Oankali more generally, defy the humanist notion of authenticity is by their way of communication. Despite Akin's human exterior he possesses the Oankali sense organs that allow him to pierce or "taste" humans and analyze their genetic make-up, as well communicate with other Oankali via "multisensory images" (*Adulthood Rites* 260). This ability to transmit feelings and images via an interlinking of the Oankali tentacles reminds of Teresa Brennan's work on human affect, *The Transmission of Affect* (2004), in which she critiques the modern, Western psychological notion that the self is characterized by "affective self-containment" (2). Brennan rejects this theory by suggesting that we are porous beings instead, whose affects may very well be derived from somewhere or someone else. She argues that we must become aware of the way that affects influence our lives by way of "discernment" or "living attention" (139).

> Extending attention into the flesh is simultaneously an exploration of the affects that have captured both individual souls as well as crowds of souls, and in this exploration there is an acknowledgement and a coming to terms with what the ages of reason and

> individualism have excluded from consciousness. This is the connection, affectively and energetically, to other living and dead things. (161)

The Oankali are masters of affective discernment. They are aware of their precarious place within an ecology and the complicated rules of interdependence that determine their survival. And one need only look at the way they live symbiotically with other creatures (their previous partner species, or the home entity Lo) to realize their affinity for connection.

Akin's story therefore presents a challenge for the humanist notion of authenticity because it shows that environmental factors (growing up on the Oankali ship or in Phoenix, the resisters' stronghold) exert a strong influence on the development of one's personality. Moreover Akin's species-hybridity plays a crucial part in his coming to understand the human plight. By embodying the human as well as the Oankali, Akin has come to a conclusion different from one that a full-blooded Oankali could come up with. In his address to the older generation of Oankali Akin says,

> If your flesh knows you've done all you can for Humanity, their flesh [that of human-born constructs] should know as mine does that you've done almost nothing. Their flesh should know that resister Humans must survive as a separate, self-sufficient species. Their flesh should know that Humanity must live. (*Adulthood Rites* 471)

This notion of the knowing flesh is an important concept that will be the subject of further scrutiny in the next chapter, but for now it suffices to say by embodying both human and Oankali subjectivities *Lilith's Brood's* constructs, or mulattoes, demonstrate that liminality and hybridity can be used as means of access to power, the power to bridge differences and to achieve change.

Chapter 4: Dismantling Mind-Body Dualism in *Imago*

The final concept discussed in this thesis is the notion of rationality as it is understood in humanist philosophy. Rationality is important because, as I explained in chapter two, it subtends humanism's faith in autonomy. Rationality is a quality that is thought to spring forth from the mind and enable humankind to transcend its base, animalistic instincts. It has therefore been traditionally conceived of as opposed to the body and emotion. The concept has also been both implicitly and explicitly gendered as Western and male, just as nature and the body have been traditionally associated with things female. Consequently, it may be argued that women and non-white people have never had full access to rationality or to the narrow category of the human that it delineates.[5] In *Lilith's Brood* this gendered notion of rationality is undermined by a thorough questioning of the mind-body dualism that provides a foundation for it. This chapter will focus on the third book of the trilogy, *Imago*, because it contains the most persuasive account of an alternative epistemology that is instead founded on embodied knowledge, as well as an erotic experience of the world.

The title *Imago* refers to the biological term for the final stage of an insect after its metamorphosis. The title is well chosen for a novel whose protagonist, an ooloi construct, embodies the final stage of the Oankali-Human trade. With the birth of the ooloi constructs, the new Oankali lifeform is able to procreate on its own without help from the previous generation's ooloi. Unlike *Dawn* and *Adulthood Rites, Imago* is narrated from a first-person perspective. There is both a practical reason for this choice of narrative strategy – keeping the use of the gender neutral pronoun "it" to a minimum – and a more compelling reason: creating a more immersive experience of posthuman subjectivity. The protagonist of *Imago* is

[5] Shelly Ortner accounts for the "pan-cultural second-class status" of women by positing that "women are being identified or symbolically associated with nature, as opposed to men, who are identified with culture. Since it is always culture's project to subsume and transcend nature, if women were considered part of nature, then culture would find it "natural" to subordinate, not to say oppress, them" (73). As for non-white people, Edward Said has argued extensively how they are feminized in imperial discourse for example by colonialists and missionaries – thus rendering their social status similar to that of women.

another child of Lilith's. Jodahs is expected to grow up male, as "the Human-born rarely change their apparent sex," but, as it turns out, it identifies most with its ooloi parent and thus it becomes ooloi itself (*Imago* 533). In order to contain this potentially catastrophic situation Jodahs and his family are exiled in the forest where Jodahs, who does not yet have full control over his powers, cannot hurt anyone or anything. Here Jodahs learns to use its talent for genetic manipulation and spontaneous regeneration (the most concrete result of the human-Oankali trade), and manage the intoxicating attraction that exists between it and the humans that cross its path, among whom are Tomas and Jesusa, siblings who belong to a group of humans who have managed to keep themselves hidden from the Oankali to procreate independently. Because of the small gene pool, however, Tomas and Jesusa both suffer from debilitating hereditary illnesses. Nevertheless they are forced by the "smooth-faced" elders (sterile resisters whose aging process has been slowed and who don't suffer from tumors) to have child after child in order to strengthen the numbers of the independent colony to which they belong (*Imago* 627).

Tomas and Jesusa are torn between their loyalty to their people and their love for Jodahs, who manages to persuade them to stay with it as it goes through its final metamorphosis. It does not say that afterwards they will not want to leave, nor indeed will they be able to; the neurochemical bond between the ooloi and its mates cannot be broken once it has been established. However, Ooloi who do not bond at all face an even worse fate, as is demonstrated by what happens to Aaor, Jodahs closest sibling. Without mates to balance its metamorphosis, Aaor's body wanders and slowly starts to disintegrate, becoming less and less complex until "Aaor as an individual would be gone. In a way then, Aaor's body was trying to commit suicide" (*Imago* 682). In order to save it, the party of four goes back to Jesusa's and Tomas' resister colony to try and find mates for Aaor, but also to save the people there from certain death, as staying on earth is simply not an option. Earth will be consumed

by the Oankali space ships after a couple of hundred years, whether or not the resisters are successful in defying the human contradiction. Once they arrive at the town Jodahs and Aaor ara imprisoned but gradually the ooloi substance works its magic and people are persuaded that life with Oankali or construct mates is not as repulsive as they had imagined it. The novel ends with Jodahs planting a new home, sensing "the tiny positioning movements of independent life" of the little seed, thereby securing the future for Oankali and human alike (*Imago* 746).

For a science fiction trilogy to launch an assault on the notion of rationalism is more significant than it may seem because science fiction has a reputation of being an eminently rational genre, a genre "whose impact is primarily intellectual rather than emotional" (Gomel 3). The reputation of science fiction as primarily expository, and conceptually daunting but not in the least affective, however, only seems applicable to a small selection of literature – so-called hard science fiction. Moreover the use of science in this subcategory of fiction is not neutral: "the master narrative of science has always been told in sexual terms, [representing] knowledge, innovation and even perception as masculine" (Attebery, qtd. in Donaldson 96). Technology is all too often coded as male, subjugating a dangerous, chaotic natural world that is habitually coded as female. There are good reasons, therefore, why female science fiction authors resort to different representations of technology, or choose to disregard it entirely. Instead of representing technology as a mechanical tool used to manipulate the natural world, *Lilith's Brood* represents it in terms of organic symbiosis, and the secret to the Oankali's technological success is not based on manipulation but rather on communication.

The Oankali are genetic engineers but their laboratories are their bodies. Consequently their manipulation of organic matter occurs not without risk for their own safety. This is one of the reasons why, arguably, it is done with a more ethical regard for its consequences for various different life forms. Additionally, the Oankali definition of progress is radically

different from the humanist notion of progress, which is closely intertwined with rationality. Sometimes these definitions clash in *Lilith's Brood* as when Tino first enters the trading village in *Adulthood Rites* and remarks with rage and disappointment: "You live like savages! ... *How can you live this way!*" (*Adulthood Rites* 280). Coming as he does from Phoenix, where the resisters pour all their energy into building towns, he is surprised to find the Oankali living in sober dwellings, using only the most basic tools. Little does he know the Oankali are creating a brand new species, and growing a spaceship right underneath their feet. The villages they live in are entities which will eventually mine the earth for all its resources and leave it barren and uninhabitable when they lift up into space and propel the Oankali into the future.

The Oankali's interaction with these entities is different from either a soulless manipulation of machinery or a heartless exploitation of their skills and capacities. In the words of Dichaan, Akin's Oankali father, "they're more than partners to us... We build them. They are us, too, you know" (*Adulthood Rites* 441). In fact even the word "symbiosis" does not cover the nature of the bond between the two species. The spaceship entities were mixed from Oankali DNA and communication is possible between the two life forms in the form of the multisensory images that the Oankali also use to communicate amongst themselves. In this way the Oankali can experience what it is like to hurtle through space, guided by gravitational forces and longing for "the wet, rocky, sweet-tasting little planet" called earth (*Adulthood Rites* 440). The kind of special appreciation for earth as an oasis of life in a desolate universe is intensified by this communicative bond. In the next section of this chapter I will argue how the affective, nature of Oankali communication may be employed to subvert the humanist notion of rationality using two theories of the erotic by Audre Lorde and Gilles Deleuze.

"A Certainty of the Flesh:" An Epistemology of the Erotic

There are two theories of the erotic that are relevant to the kind of experientiality that is portrayed in *Imago,* and to a lesser extent in *Adulthood Rites* and *Dawn* because of their slightly less immersive narrative structure. One stems from Audre Lorde's essay "Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power" (1984) which is remarkably accurate in describing the Oankali's cultural practices and politics as well as their idea of knowledge. In this rather polemical essay Lorde argues for a reconceptualization of the concept of the erotic that breaks with the way people have been taught to suspect and vilify it all their lives. She conceives of the erotic as a kind of creative energy, "a source of power and information" springing from a "deeply female and spiritual plane" (277). In patriarchal societies this source of power has been devalued and perverted to the direct detriment of women. A significant move in her argument is to expose the artificial separation of the erotic from all other areas of life except sex. Instead, her consideration of the phrase "It feels right to me" posits the erotic as an epistemological tool. In her own words, "The erotic is the nurturer or nursemaid of all our deepest knowledge" (280). Significantly, Lorde defines the erotic as a kind of deeply embodied, "nonrational knowledge" that functions in two important ways (278). Firstly, it provides "the power which comes from sharing deeply any pursuit with another person" (280). The power derived from sharing joy, sadness, or support builds an understanding which can serve to bridge even the most extreme differences. In Oankali culture this erotic sharing of affect and purpose between partner species is indeed inherent in the trade, for by entering into the trade both species come together in their pursuit of life and futurity, while at the same time opening the affective channels of communication between them.

The second function of the erotic according to Lorde is "the open and fearless underlining of [one's] capacity for joy," an experience which she describes as the stretching open of the body and becoming aware of its innermost rhythms (280).The political aspect of

this function is that with this intensification of one's capacity for joy, one expects nothing less of the world than to fulfill it. Hungry for joy, hungry for life, this is how the Oankali experience the world. Because they are much more sensitive to the potential of life, they are also more severe when its potential is betrayed. Lorde writes that humans, women especially, have been "raised to fear the *yes* within [themselves], [their] deepest cravings" (281), and this is demonstrated time and time again in *Lilith's Brood* when humanity says one thing but means another, as when Lilith's words reject her first child by Nikanj, but *only* her words. The Oankali channels of communication comprise other means besides language. This is responsible for much of their ostensibly reprehensible conduct, which is actually the result of a kind of miscommunication.

> [T]he ooloi perceived all that a living being said – all words, all gestures, and a vast array of other internal and external bodily responses. Ooloi absorbed everything and acted according to whatever consensus they discovered. Thus ooloi treated individuals as they treated groups of beings. They sought consensus. If there was none, it meant the being was confused, ignorant, frightened, or in some other way not yet able to see its own best interests" (*Imago* 553)

It is not surprising that humanity as a whole and on the level on the individual has difficulty to form a consensus considering the rigid mind-body dualism that subtends the humanist idea of the human, and which forecloses the knowledge of the erotic that comes so naturally to the Oankali.

As Nolan Belk has argued, however, it is not simple for humanity to survive in "a universe where in the hierarchy of experience logic is secondary to the power of the erotic" (370).This is mainly because the Oankali experience the world through a radically alien sensorium that enables them to know things with "A certainty of the flesh" (*Adulthood Rites* 478). Belk remarks how the Oankali experience the world with their entire bodies, and talk of

it in a highly sensual language, referring to it in terms of taste, smell and tactility where humans would resort to mere vision. The Oankali's specialized perception both problematizes and facilitates communication between the two partner species: because humans lack it, they cannot fully understand, let alone accept, many of the Oankali's decisions. When a construct desperately exclaims, "If they could perceive, they would know!" Akin responds bitterly, "If they could perceive, they would be us" (*Adulthood Rites* 377). *Lilith's Brood* accurately demonstrates that one's manner of experiencing the world determines the moral choices that one makes. All the Oankali can do is approximate the experience of their flesh, try to share it, in projected sensations as well as in words. Akin explains, "It isn't like reading words on a page. They feel it and know [the human contradiction]. They ... There's no word for what they do. To say that they know is completely inadequate" (502). Here Butler even interferes in the language we use to make epistemological claims. Elsewhere, in *Imago*, a resister asks Jodahs: "Do you ever think of yourself or your kind as Human?" Jodahs responds echoing Lorde, "We *feel* our humanity" (531, italics added). Questions of identity are thus not solved on the basis of rational thought but on the basis of feeling, sensual experience, and affect.

The second theory of the erotic is somewhat harder to pin down than Lorde's. It concerns what Eric White has called the "Erotics of Becoming," a Deleuzian, sensual delight in the constant flux of evolution. White looks at three evolutionist narratives – *The Island of Dr Moreau*, *The Thing* and *Lilith's Brood*, and argues that only Butler's *Xenogenesis* trilogy "can in fact be said to intervene in and reverse a tradition of paranoiac responses to evolution in which Nature in effect persecutes Culture," by depicting change affirmatively, even though it reserves a critical attitude with regard to the more controversial aspects that accompany the change (White). White astutely notes that, indeed, although Butler is fairly unforgiving of humankind's depravity, in the character of Gabriel, a former actor, she does imagine a "mechanism" whereby humans can be said to produce difference without Oankali help.

Acting and becoming other can be said to both occupy a space on the same spectrum of the erotics of becoming. Moreover, when Gabriel performs in front of Akin the latter draws a parallel between acting and nonverbal Oankali communication. He explains that acting, because it expertly conjures up specific feelings, can be understood as a cognitive tool. "Sometimes you have to remember a feeling you haven't had for a long time and bring it back so you can transmit it to someone else or use a feeling you have about one thing to help someone understand something else" (*Adulthood Rites* 409).

Ronald Bogue, who has written more explicitly about Deleuze and sexuality, argues that the concept of polysexuality that Deleuze and Guattari subscribe to in *Anti-Oedipus* is best explored in Butler's *Lilith's Brood*. This trilogy, he writes, undermines the same three common preconceptions about sex in psychoanalytical theory that Deleuze and Guattari seek to dismantle. Firstly, there is the notion that the sole function of sex is procreation and that heterosexual genital sex is therefore the norm; secondly according to psychoanalytical theory "the sexual and the social are separate domains" (the transgression of which can only be pathological); and thirdly, psychoanalytical theory supports the notion that human sexuality has nothing to do with the non-human world (Bogue 34). Although *Lilith's Brood* seems to be highly invested in sex because of its procreative function, this is actually not the case, for procreation – the planting of the fertilized ovum in the womb – need not occur during the sex act. Ooloi can fertilize females merely by establishing a physical connection with their sensory tentacle. Whether this already counts as sex is dubious because the same action is used for gathering information, communication and even administering the (non)lethal ooloi sting.[6]

The Oankali "deep touch" as it is sometimes referred to (*Imago* 535) is used for a whole host of functions, most of which occur in the social realm, like communication and

[6] Ooloi are the only sex that can choose whether to kill by stinging a target or merely to subdue it.

sharing information about new biological discoveries. This deep touch generates pleasure whether the ooloi are investigating something or healing someone, and this pleasure is looped via neurochemical connection between mates, thus becoming one shared resource. As Bogue writes,

> it is not clear that the healing pleasure is qualitatively different from the pleasure induced through sexual activity [...]. It would seem, then, that the distinction between sexual and non-sexual pleasure, at least in ooloi relations with humans and Oankali, is provisional at best. (40-41)

Moreover, Butler "[undoes] the privilege of genital over other erogenous zones;" "alien sex is polymorphously perverse. Erotic intensity is evenly dispersed across the surface of the body" (White). In its circumvention of genital focus, Oankali sexuality also manages to sidestep phallocentric conceptions of sexuality. Feminist ideas do not only inflect conceptions of sexuality, but also the representation of the transmission of knowledge in *Imago*. The organ that grants the ooloi their special talent for the manipulation of biological matter is called the "yashi." When an ooloi comes of age and has found its mates, its parent ooloi will transmit all the genetic information it has collected over the years to its child. This experience is entirely overwhelming and is explained using the analogy of a baby suckling on his, her or its mother's breast (*Imago* 693).

This experience of being inundated with information about former generations, which Jodahs compares to "having billions of strangers screaming from inside you for your individual attention," is according to Belk,

> a kind of race consciousness. Jodahs is able to see back through this race consciousness in ways which suggest that if humans understood the tremendous changes the species has already experienced in order to become the species, then we would not fear species-level changes, we would embrace them. Who wants to be

> trapped in the human shell on Mars when she could be traversing the universe and sharing her body with the stars? (380)

Belk foregrounds an important point: although the human colony on Mars has been established there is a reason why *Imago* is set on earth, where the Oankali and humanity live side by side. The trilogy is gruelingly pocked with instances of human cruelty and xenophobia. The last novel in the trilogy is something of a relief in its optimism. Whatever it is about *Lilith's Brood* that has led scholars to label it as utopian, it is surely to be found in *Imago*, where it becomes obvious that the Oankali, and to some extent the humans who have taken their lessons to heart, do not suffer because of a rigid mind-body dualism, and where what is conceived as feminine is not demonized or discarded as unproductive. As became evident from a passage quoted earlier, the Oankali treat others like groups. They both acknowledge multiplicity, or fragmentation, in themselves and others but they enable their constituent parts to engage in dialogue with each other in order to form a consensus.

Conclusion

I began this thesis by noting Butler's intentions to dismantle the dichotomy between the heroic slave and the contemptible house slave whose ostensible complicity with her master puts her beyond the pale of redemption. I think she has done just that by creating a narrative that demonstrates the manifestations and limitations of violent and non-violent resistance within complex networks of power. Moreover, in her defamiliarization of slavery she has created a more flexible understanding of it, unmoored from stubbornly conventionalized conceptions or visualizations of slavery that refer consistently back to the American antebellum kind. Although the historical knowledge of the specific kind of slavery that was practiced in antebellum America is without a doubt highly important, especially as the institution informs so many of the present-day's social problems, to delimit one's understanding of slavery in this way would blind us to ways in which its legacies operate more insidiously, more ambiguously, and more pervasively in society today in general. Butler's portrayal of slavery as an advanced case of domestication – as in the cultivation of Lilith's dependency and docility in *Dawn* – makes it highly relevant for animal studies. On the other hand, thinking of slavery as a form of parasitism, a thought that is certainly entertained in *Lilith's Brood*, leads to lines of thought that reverse the logic of dependence that imbues the notion of slavery as domestication, presenting the master as the one in need, relying on its host/slave body for sustenance and futurity.

Most importantly, however, what Butler has done in *Lilith's Brood* is expose the tension between the discourse of posthumanism and the discourse of the slave-narrative imbued as it is with humanist values. This is an intuitively dangerous step to make. Humanist values still engender ample respect and have led us to conceive of ideas like human rights. Posthumanism's conceptual daring, however, exists precisely in its challenge of such eminently received ideas. Posthumanist conclusions are never without a realistic

understanding of the necessity of sacrifice. Breaking down the familiar humanist understanding of subjectivity and agency constitutes an aggressive assault on some of our most commonplace values. Thus a reading of *Lilith's Brood* is anything but pleasant. *Lilith's Brood* shows how untenable autonomy is in a world where one person's freedom – say to refuse the Oankali's offer – compromises another person's freedom – to life and futurity. Instead *Lilith's Brood* proposes that we acknowledge our collective responsibility to other living creatures and the environment, and that we take action accordingly. Moreover, in terms of understanding the self and our subjectivity, *Lilith's Brood* does away with the humanist understanding of the subject as authentic: unique and uninscribed by its environment. Instead it proposes the example of Akin, who, because of his liminal status as a construct is both familiar and strange, and a vision of what humanity could mean if we were to acknowledge the myth of authenticity. It is not as if the posthuman characters in *Lilith's Brood* prefigure the next stage of humanity that is yet to be born, rather, they are vehicles of identification which enable us to perceive what being human really entails. In doing so they demonstrate that the notion of the humanist subject was from its inception an unfair abstraction, as well as a normative and exclusionary concept. Finally in foregrounding an alternative epistemology that grounds knowledge in the body, and in lived experience *Lilith's Brood* undermines the notion of rationality that serves as the last cornerstone of the humanist subject.

While a reconfiguration of the notion of the human can spell great good for people wanting to live a more connected, more sustainable, more ethical life, these same people are bound to be affected by the curtailment of Lilith's freedom and her consequent suffering throughout the series. Nevertheless this can be construed as necessary, the birth pangs that accompany every major transition or revolution – including a posthumanist one. Butler dwells on this pain and suffering, perhaps too long for those readers looking to entertain their transhumanist daydreams, but in dwelling on this pain Butler makes an important argument.

Change does not come easy. Change demands its martyrs. Ultimately, however, change is good. In *Adulthood Rites* when Akin is asked about his painful experience of connecting neurologically with the Oankali ship – an entity whose consciousness is entirely different from his own - he summarizes quite well what also seems to undergird much posthumanist thought: that despite the pain "It's worth what it costs, worth reaching for" (*Adulthood Rites* 444).

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