

**“Embrace Difference”: Womanist Extrapolation in Octavia Butler’s  
Xenogenesis Trilogy**

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Tutkielma tarkastelee afrikkalais-amerikkalaisen tieteiskirjailijan Octavia Butlerin Xenogenesis-trilogiaa. Luen trilogian ns. womanistisena tieteistrilogiana, joka korostaa yhteisöllisyyden, rakkauden ja perheen merkitystä ihmisen hyvinvoinnille. Tutkielman teoriaosuus jakautuu kahteen suurempaan teemaan: yhtäältä Yhdysvaltain mustien, valkoisten ja alkuperäisasukkaiden yhteiselon ja rotuennakkoluulojen historiaan sekä mustan feminismin syntyyn ja womanismiin, toisaalta tieteiskirjallisuuden historiaan, ominaispiirteisiin ja mahdollisuuksiin luoda vaihtoehtoisia tulevaisuudennäkymiä.

Womanismin käsitteen loi Alice Walker, ja se viittaa voimakastahtoisuuteen, intohimoon, vastuunottoon ja lähimmäisistä välittämiseen mustan feminismin hengessä. Mustaa feminismiä käsitellessäni tukeudun pitkälti myös bell hooksin näkemyksiin sukupuolten tasa-arvosta, patriarkaalisen yhteiskuntamallin huonoista puolista sekä turvallisen perheyhteisön merkityksestä yhteiskunnan perustana.

Octavia Butler on ehkä kaikkien aikojen tunnetuin afrikkalais-amerikkalainen naiskirjailija tieteiskirjallisuuden saralla. Hänen luomansa päähenkilöt ovat tyypillisesti vahvoja mustia naisia, jotka joutuvat taistelemaan olemassaolostaan erilaisten ristiriitojen keskellä. Hahmojensa kautta Butler ruotii kriittisesti Amerikan konfliktientäyteistä historiaa, patriarkaalista yhteiskuntaa, rotuennakkoluuloja sekä sukupuolen ja rodun määrittelyjä.

Hänen Xenogenesis-trilogiansa on löyhästi luomiskertomuksen kaavaa noudatteleva tarina Lilithistä, joka kohtaa ulkoavaruudesta tulleen lajin nimeltä oankalit, pariutuu heidän kanssaan ja saa lapsia, jotka ovat puoliksi avaruusolentoja. Ensimmäisessä romaanissa, joka on nimeltään *Dawn* (1987), päähenkilö on Lilith, toisessa nimeltä *Adulthood Rites* (1988) Lilithin poika ja kolmannessa, *Imagossa* (1989), Lilithin kolmatta sukupuolta edustava lapsi. Trilogia vilisee viittauksia orjuuteen, rasismiin, seksismiin ja rotujen puhtauteen, mutta tyylilaji on revisionistinen.

Tässä pro gradu -tutkielmassa luen Butlerin oankalit tieteiskirjallisuudelle ominaiseen tapaan peilinä, jota vasten heijastuu ihmishahmojen kyvyttömyys kommunikoida, välittää ja luoda toimivia yhteisöjä. Ihmisten ja oankalien kohtaamisen tulkitsen revisionistisena kertomuksena, joka heijastelee ihmisrotujen kohtaamisia Amerikan historiassa siten, että tällä kertaa mukana ei ole valkoisen miehen valloituspolitiikkaa tai ansaintalogiikkaa, vaan kahden lajin suhde perustuu arvostukseen, kumppanuuteen ja yhteiseen etuun. Lilithin hahmon esitän olevan womanistinen supernainen, joka ottaa kontaktin vieraaseen olentoon, huolehtii, välittää, rakastaa ja toimii sillanrakentajana.

Avainsanat: womanismi, tieteiskirjallisuus, abduktio, adoptio, Butler

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## 1. Introduction

In my pro gradu thesis I have chosen to have a closer look at the *Xenogenesis* trilogy (1987, 1988, 1989) which is a black and rather feminist science fiction trilogy by the African American writer Octavia Butler. As a woman reader of classical science fiction, I have paid attention to Butler's way of writing full and complex non-white characters and including mothers and children in her worlds. However, reading the trilogy was like grabbing a wet bar of soap; whenever one thinks one has grasped it, it slips away. The reader in me was hooked: I started scratching the surface to find out what was going on.

After reading, considering and rereading I now perceive the trilogy as a complex, layered and pronouncedly uneasy utopia with roots deep in the history of the USA and African Americans. Internal tensions in the characters and storyline are manifold, and although the overtone is emancipatory, not all the contradictions are indisputably solved. The trilogy heavily criticises the contemporary US society at large and places much of the blame on patriarchal order, religion and capitalism that grind down individuals, especially women and mothers. Through dwelling on the collision of cultures and irrational fear of the other, xenophobia, the *Xenogenesis* trilogy is extrapolating not only on genetics, the "science" part of this piece of science fiction, but on fear, misogyny and racism. In this thesis, my aim is to read the *Xenogenesis* trilogy as a distinctly African American, womanist origin story that preaches communality and companionship, as well as foregrounds family as the primary source of well-being.

For a start, I am going to say a few words on Octavia Butler and my research material, her *Xenogenesis* trilogy, and my own position as a female reader of science fiction and state my research questions. Then, in chapter 2, I will at first discuss race, gender and patriarchal order in the United States, and in particular black women's and mothers' place and agency in that social order

and after that, in 2.2, have a glance at the mechanisms of science fiction and place this study into context by shedding some light on the history of female sf and the emergence of black sf.

Octavia Estelle Butler (1947-2006) was the first African American woman writer to excel in the traditionally white and male dominated field of science fiction. She won several awards, including the Hugo Award in 1984 and 1985, and the Nebula Award in 1984 and 1999. In her works, she critically discusses complex themes such as sex, gender, race and species. In her novel *Kindred* (1979) for example, a young African American woman is whisked backwards in time to the ante-bellum South and slavery, and her *Patternist* series (1976, 1977, 1978, 1980) touches upon eugenics. Butler called herself a feminist, and in 1995, she described her disposition in the following manner: “I’m a fifty-three-year-old writer who can remember being a ten-year-old writer and who expects someday to be an eighty-year-old writer. I’m also comfortably asocial – a hermit in the middle of a large city, a pessimist if I’m not careful, a feminist, a Black, a former Baptist, an oil-and-water combination of ambition, laziness, insecurity, certainty, and drive. ...”<sup>1</sup>

In the *Xenogenesis* trilogy, Butler tells the story of a black woman with a Biblical first name and African surname: Lilith Iyapo. Alienated by the aggression, fear and xenophobia of her own people, Lilith ends up mating with an alien. The mixed-species family is fiercely persecuted by what is called Resisters, i.e. the Humans that wish to do away with the Oankali. The trilogy recounts the birth and tribulations of the emerging hybrid race through Lilith and her hybrid children and it consists of three novels: *Dawn* (1987), *Adulthood Rites* (1988) and *Imago* (1989). It has been republished as *Lilith’s Brood* in 2000, and it is this edition that I am using in this thesis.

The trilogy has been read and analysed by many critics, especially the first novel *Dawn*. For example, Donna Haraway compares Butler to Doris Lessing, Marge Piercy, Joanna Russ, Ursula LeGuin, Margaret Atwood and Christa Wolf in that they all create alternative worlds in which “the other (gender, race, species) is no longer subordinated to the same”.<sup>2</sup> She notes that Butler’s fiction

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<sup>1</sup> Butler 2000, p. 746.

<sup>2</sup> Haraway 1989, p. 378.

has an African American perspective with “strong tones of womanism or feminism”, but her analysis of the *Xenogenesis Trilogy* is limited to *Dawn* and *Adulthood Rites – Imago* was published the same year as Haraway’s book – and it concentrates on survival, power and interspecies communication, “the siblingship” of humans with aliens.<sup>3</sup> In this study, I am drawing on her research, but with an emphasis on a pluralistic world view informed by the womanism Haraway brings up but does not specify; that is, the ideals of communality, nurturing and inclusiveness, even (interspecies) love.

Another critic I am using in this study, Michele Osherow, an expert on Judaic studies, reads Lilith as a subversive Lilith-mother as opposed to the traditional image of Eve-mother, the “good” mother. However, Osherow is interested in the Lilith-character but not in the rest of the trilogy. I, as an accustomed reader of sf, am inclined to read the trilogy as a whole, as a trajectory of the humankind from navel-gazing xenophobes to an open-minded, civilized people. I regard the human characters through a science fictional lens, as representatives of the human race and reflecting its capabilities, hopes, fears, ambitions and sometimes contradictory tendencies, and the aliens as the humans’ others and mirrors. The coexistence of the humans and aliens, and, in the *Xenogenesis* trilogy, remarkably, also humans and humans – or the possible failure of it – thus comes to reflect human attitudes and anxieties related to their others.

In this study, I will read the *Xenogenesis* trilogy as a radical womanist revision of social relations on planet Earth which emphasises the importance of communality, family and companionship. In the trilogy, family is presented as the main source of security, stability and well-being, but Lilith comes to understand this only after having been bonded to an alien. The aliens, called the Oankali, are interstellar gene traders who want to engage the Human race in an intimate exchange of DNA. They regard themselves as symbionts, and with their sensory tentacles, they are able to connect to almost any living thing and start an exchange that benefits both parties. They

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<sup>3</sup> Haraway 1989, p. 378.

cherish life and emphasise the importance of communication and exchange, but they are also frighteningly ugly to the Human eye, bent on their Trade, and their touch will bring Humanity as the Human characters know it to an end. I will examine how the Oankali view on family and their reproductive system of three sexes, and indeed their sheer presence, challenge the patriarchal nuclear family, its gender roles and racialised sexual stereotypes and, how, by allying herself with the aliens, Lilith the black mother sets the human race on new course. As I am going to argue, the Oankali ways call for acceptance and cooperation across gender, colour and species lines, but such openness is quite impossible in the patriarchal social order, and therefore, with didacticism typical of science fiction, the trilogy pushes for a change.

At first I will concentrate on the relations between the humans and their alien others, the Oankali, and examine the attitudes towards otherness. As I am going to show, this encounter with space aliens is a novel kind meeting of two species in which the stronger party does not comply with the white man's logic. On the contrary, the Oankali are nurturing, family-oriented creatures through which Butler sets a rather womanist example of functioning human relations. Then I shall concentrate on the character of Lilith, a multiply depraved, co-opted and utterly human woman who, in the spirit of black feminism and womanism, makes "a way out of no way"<sup>4</sup> and becomes the legendary mother of a new race. Her biblical name is not insignificant as, regardless of the storyline loosely borrowed from the Bible, Christianity is alongside patriarchal order presented in the trilogy as a key ingredient in the system of prejudice and xenophobia that marginalises or rejects women, non-whites, non-heterosexuals and aliens alike. Finally, I will write about the role of Lilith's multiracial and multispecies brood that is, unlike hybrids in the history of the USA who have been pushed aside, given a key role in the integration of the two species.

As regards the theoretical framework of this study, I combine women's studies and science fiction studies. On one hand, I am looking back at American racial history and gender relations. I

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<sup>4</sup> King and Ferguson 2011, p. 11.

am drawing on Stuart Hall's theories on race and gender and how the most reductionist and essentialist views on the two are deeply enmeshed in fantasies of purity and control. Further, I will rely on bell hooks's views on black feminism and the significance of family and draw on Alice Walker's definition of womanism when reading the *Xenogenesis Lilith* as a feminist or womanist character. White feminism initially failed to see how black women were marginalised for both their race and their sex. Therefore, while white feminism has prioritised the right to work outside home, black feminism has foregrounded a wholesale struggle against sexism, racism and classism, and is – now globally – still engaged in the same struggle.<sup>5</sup> Womanism, its black spin-off with an artistic, celebratory twist, seems especially fitting here as it communicates a passion for life, something shared by Butler's protagonists and the aliens of the *Xenogenesis* Trilogy. On the other hand, I am treating the trilogy as American sf, grappling with specifically American concerns and fears in ways typical of the genre. I will make use of Darko Suvin's theories on *cognitive estrangement*, the science fictional technique of distancing that allows both the reader and the writer of sf to examine seemingly trivial everyday affairs at an arm's length and, ideally, to see them with new eyes. In race and gender issues and the political dimensions of sf I will mostly be drawing on Adam Robert's and Ursula Le Guin's views.

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<sup>5</sup> See *Sisterhood, Feminism and Power: From Africa to the Diaspora*, 1998. Ed. Obioma Nnaemeka.



## 2. Theorising Race, Gender and Otherness

As my research material, the *Xenogenesis Trilogy*, is a work of science fiction that explores sex, gender and power in a multiracial, even multispecies world, I am going to examine these themes in this theory part. Therefore, in this chapter, I am doing three things. At first, in 2.1, I am going to have a look at the history of the USA in attempt to delineate the American patriarchal, patriotic mentality and imagery that functions as the backdrop for the setting of the trilogy and also as the cultural background of the characters. I will discuss the cultural impact and ideology of the frontier, touch on the history of slavery and, with the help of Stuart Hall's theories, trace the legacy of racial stereotypes and race consciousness these have left. Moreover, I wish to show how race and gender are interconnected. Secondly, I shall trace the roots of black feminism and womanism and how these movements have reacted to the developments in American history. I shall shed some light on the ideology of struggle, communalism and inclusion that, as I am going to argue in chapters 3 and 4, come across in my research material, too. Here I am drawing on bell hooks's theories on race, gender and patriarchy. I will also map out the different roles, ideals and alternatives available for black women in general and mothers in particular. Thirdly, in 2.2 I shall concentrate on the workings of science fiction, its mechanisms, tropes and traditions. I shall set my research material into context by tracing the history of (white) feminist sf and black sf and consider the possibilities of the genre as an arena for exploring race and gender. I will also discuss the issues raised in 2.1 from the point of view of sf and show how many specifically American experiences, such as the frontier and racial politics, have found their expression in American science fiction.

## 2.1 Race, Gender and the Other in America

The USA has been called a “melting pot” of people and cultures; all kinds of people from a variety of ethnic backgrounds make up the population of the nation. However, the metaphor does not bear closer scrutiny. People are not made of metal so they simply do not “melt” together and seldom have they formed a homogenous whole either. Instead, they are social beings who come together and separate in groups, kinship groups and as individuals for a multitude of reasons and create a complex social reality. To quote Donna Haraway, “Reality is an active verb, and all the nouns seem to be gerunds with more appendages than an octopus”.<sup>6</sup> In America, the emergence of the nation has not been painless. In her work, Octavia Butler has been drawing on the history of slavery, racial tensions and especially black women’s experiences, which is the case in the *Xenogenesis Trilogy*, too. However, in the *Xenogenesis*, Human race comes into contact with an alien race, and this encounter bears resemblance to the relations between whites and non-whites in the history of the United States. Therefore, a brief history of race and racial relations in America is due. I will move from general issues towards more specific ones. After some general notions about cultural differences from Stuart Hall, I will trace the background and interactions of the three major ethnic groups that make up the population of the United States: Native Americans, African Americans and whites. As there is also an undercurrent of boundary crossing and interspecies desire as opposed to forced gene trade in the trilogy, I will pay special attention to the fears and tensions of the ethnosexual relations in the history of the USA.

In the analysis chapters I am going to argue that the *Xenogenesis Trilogy* is a womanist commentary on an ongoing discussion on gender and race relations in the USA. Therefore, in pursuit of a specifically American masculinity and racial consciousness, which in the *Xenogenesis* trilogy comes across in the difficulties Lilith has with some of the male characters, I am drawing on Joane Nagel’s analysis on the importance of the frontier and slavery and how these have shaped the

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<sup>6</sup> Haraway 2003, p. 6.

ethnosexual boundaries and sexual stereotypes that can be seen even today. Then I will move on to black feminism, womanism and black mothers struggles in particular.

To start from the history racial relations in America, Nagel points out that America came to be what it is today through colonisation, and by the time the New World was found, Europeans already had a century-long history of enslaving Africans.<sup>7</sup> According to Stuart Hall, Africa, the mysterious continent with dark-skinned peoples, had not always been seen completely negatively. After the Middle Ages, though, the situation gradually changed and black Africans became associated with the cursed children of Ham from the Bible. The Age of Enlightenment brought about a need to classify all things, and in the minds of Europeans, Africa came to represent barbarism as opposed to Europe that represented civilisation. By the period of European imperialism, Africa had become “a fetish land, inhabited by cannibals, dervishes and witch doctors”.<sup>8</sup>

Elaborating on the relations of cultural differences, Hall argues that in order to remain stable, cultures create symbolic boundaries. Things need to stay in their appointed place, and these boundaries keep them there, keeping the categories “pure”. This gives cultures their “unique meaning and identity”. Any “matter out of place” will break these unwritten rules, and it needs to be swept up and thrown away. Hall illustrates this with the metaphor of dirt – it is fine in the garden but out of place in one’s bedroom and it must be cleaned up to restore order. This same “process of purification” can be seen in many cultures’ “closure” against “others”: “foreigners”, “intruders” and “aliens”. Paradoxically, this makes the forbidden or taboo powerful and “strangely attractive” and the “socially peripheral” becomes often “symbolically centred”.<sup>9</sup>

Hall also examines the binary opposition white/black, stating that it is not based on any essential blackness or whiteness but on the contrast between these two, or rather, because we can contrast one against the other. Neither is this binary opposition a neutral one, but white is the

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<sup>7</sup> Nagel 2003, p. 91.

<sup>8</sup> Hall 1997, p. 239.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 236-237.

dominant part, the one that actually includes the other in its field of operations. This fundamental binary then brings forth a multitude of others functioning in the same way: the white race is associated with culture, civilisation, reason, law and order, a “civilised restraint in their emotional, sexual and civil life” and so on.<sup>10</sup> The black race, then, becomes analogous with what is regarded as their opposites: nature, savagery, feeling, custom and ritual, no restraints in emotional, sexual or civil life, respectively. This logic, alongside with an existing smaller-scale system of slavery, doomed the people of Africa to slavery of a massive scale.

The slave trade was a profitable business that boosted the economy in Europe and shaped the history, culture and even population in the emerging economy of America. The mere existence of the large African American population is a direct result of the displacement and exploitation of hundreds of thousands of people, and the legacy of this injustice is what forms the core of Octavia Butler’s literary work. She explores themes such as sex, race, class and the ownership of one’s body, and as a rule her characters are non-white. Her novel *Kindred* tells the story of a modern black woman who falls victim to mysterious, involuntary time travel; she is transferred back and forth between her normal, modern life, and the antebellum South where she is treated like a slave. About Butler’s Wild Seed Trilogy Donna Haraway notes that it starts not with a white girl going to Africa but with a black woman being taken out during the slave trade.<sup>11</sup> In the Xenogenesis trilogy, there is an alien race that is physically stronger, more intelligent and more technologically advanced than the human race, and the aliens are “fascinated”, even “obsessed”, with the Human individuals they have captured. What is more, they plan a large-scale gene trade with the Humans. This echoes European perceptions of sexualised racial others and their subsequent exploitation.

To get to the American continent, when the New World was found, Nagel writes, both Columbus and Vespucci and their crews found the native women beautiful and the attraction was mutual. Applying European moral codes, though, they perceived the women as “prostituting”

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<sup>10</sup> Hall 1997, p. 243.

<sup>11</sup> Haraway 1989, p. 378.

themselves, and yet they happily welcomed the “excessive lust” and indulged themselves.<sup>12</sup> Thus, the tales of this New World became sexually loaded, and when more white people, mostly men, poured in America, ethnosexual dealings became commonplace for multiple reasons, of which power and trade were most important. Considering the variety of tribes and customs, Nagel claims that it is impossible to describe one clear pattern in these dealings, but the outcome was clear enough; the Native American women were the least powerful and they eventually became sexual prey.<sup>13</sup> Moreover, the conquering of the continent can thus be regarded as a sexualised project.

Native American men, on the other hand, were viewed from two perspectives. The positive associations were courteous, handsome, strong, modest and brave, the negative ones revolved around nakedness, lechery, sexual promiscuity, thievery, treachery and laziness. For white women, the red man represented both “possible romantic bliss” and “the chance of sexual harassment”.<sup>14</sup> Their alleged savagery and sexual threat served to justify the presence of the military and the actions of white men. Yet, the strong physique and virility of the Native American males were also admired, envied and emulated. Thus, Native American masculinity eventually shaped the white man’s identity on the new continent: “The contemporary metal of U.S. national manhood was forged out of the collision of native and non-native masculinities in the country’s first major nationalist imperialist project: Manifest Destiny – a vision and set of policies that designed and justified westward expansion as an inalienable right of America and Americans.”<sup>15</sup> In other words, expansion and courage, persistence, fighting the odds and civilising savages lie at the heart of the American experience. Besides, Nagel’s choice of words, the “metal” of manhood being “forged”, evokes military associations; armed forces are needed to safeguard the emergence and expansion of the nation. Nagel also notes that the image of the Wild West as white people perceived it, as a

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<sup>12</sup> Nagel 2003, p. 66.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., pp. 68-70.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., p. 71.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., p. 79.

masculine playground, became a cultural icon.<sup>16</sup> This ideology has been reflected in sf, too, as there are sf serials like *Starship Troopers* and *Star Trek*, in which the human characters are almost exclusively military people living in armed spaceships and space has become the “final frontier”. Furthermore, the universe of many other sf stories is like a futuristic Wild West. I shall return to the theme of science-fictionalised myths of America in 2.2.

Another issue related to the frontier and American history that deserves to be mentioned here is the captivity narrative. As it happens, the *Xenogenesis* trilogy starts with a scene in which Lilith wakes up in captivity and her captors turn out to be extraterrestrials. The captivity narrative, like the slave narrative, is a product of colonial America.<sup>17</sup> In the typical plot, a white man or woman is captured by Native Americans, suffers horribly in their hands, is redeemed and finally reunited with family and writes or dictates the story.<sup>18</sup> The genre is sentimental and sensationalist, and not free from religion and racial politics. Out of fear that they were perceived as somehow corrupted by their encounter with what was considered brutes, many authors adopted the narrative of God testing and then redeeming them.<sup>19</sup> Moreover, as the genre became popular, many of the stories became lurid and voyeuristic and they were used to justify the persecution of Native Americans.<sup>20</sup> Andrew Panay notes that the genre was also “routinely used” by Puritan ministers as a “jeremiad call for a reaffirmation of core spiritual and social values” as it effectively incited fear and anxiety in frontier communities.<sup>21</sup> However, there are captivity narratives of another type, too, such as that of Mary Jemison, in which the captives embrace the Native American way of life and never return to their old communities. Jemison had two separate husbands and at least three children, and she owned and cultivated land.<sup>22</sup> To replace members lost in conflicts, some Native American tribes adopted some of their prisoners into their tribes, women and children in particular,

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<sup>16</sup> Nagel 2003, p. 80.

<sup>17</sup> Sayre 2010, p. 179.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., pp. 181-182.

<sup>21</sup> Panay 2004, p. 202.

<sup>22</sup> Sayre 2010, p 183.

and thus, white individuals were assimilated to Native American tribes and they had hybrid children.<sup>23</sup>

According to Nagel, mixed-blood people were even seen in “positive” light by some white reformers, as these “Friends of the Indian” believed that Native Americans actually benefited from white blood, that the hybrids were “healthier, more intelligent, ... [had] larger, cleaner houses”, and even if they could not be as refined as the superior white race, they at least “approach the domestic condition of the white man”.<sup>24</sup> This assimilation of the Indians into the white population, according to Nagel, also agreed with the political agenda of taking possession of the land and resources in the name of common good; the seizure was thus supposed to benefit both whites and Native Americans. As a result, hybrids that “walk in the both worlds” were sometimes seen positively – although more often they were not – and they also worked as “cultural brokers”, mediators, between Indians and whites.<sup>25</sup> In her *Xenogenesis* trilogy, Butler makes use of this alternative narrative of two peoples living in a shared world and engaging in cultural and sexual exchange, and her heroes are not militants but negotiators, mediators, teachers and foster parents.

The black feminist critic bell hooks describes yet another different kind of encounter of two peoples that I find relevant. She refers to studies which suggest that black Africans had visited North America before the Europeans, established affectionate ties and sailed back home:

Contrary to colonial white imperialist insistence that it was “natural” for groups who are different to engage in conflict and power struggle, the first meetings of Africans and Native Americans offer a counter-perspective, a vision of cross-cultural contact where reciprocity and recognition of the primacy of community are affirmed, where the will to conquer and dominate was not seen as the only way to confront the Other who is not ourselves.<sup>26</sup>

Moreover, hooks continues that later, during slavery in America, the memory of the communion between Africans and Native Americans “lay the groundwork of an interaction based on mutual

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<sup>23</sup> Sayre 2010, p. 183.

<sup>24</sup> Nagel 2003, p. 77.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> hooks 1992, p. 181.

respect and reciprocity”.<sup>27</sup> According to her, there were many blacks who married into Native American tribes and bore mixed-blood children.<sup>28</sup> However, these Black Indians have been almost completely omitted from history books written by whites. Hooks argues that the non-aggressive journey to America and back to Africa is an instance of an alternative attitude towards otherness, and the affinity during slavery she describes with the expressions “generosity of spirit”, “sense of community” and especially “shared sensibility”.<sup>29</sup> That this interaction has been so completely ignored and forgotten, she claims, is due to the white supremacist ideology. As the colonising power imagines itself culturally superior to that of the colonised peoples, indigenous cultures are interpreted as inferior, and by writing history from their own standpoint and selling their version of history as universal, white historians have denied visibility and thus erased the memory of those mixed-blood Americans who did not have white blood in their veins.<sup>30</sup> Perhaps it is this omitted encounter that Butler had unearthed when planning her trilogy. The way African Americans and Native Americans were others to one another and yet found meaningful similarities and built on those, Butler’s Human and Oankali characters find similarities and ways to relate to each other, even love one another, despite substantial differences.

As regards the relationship of whites and blacks in America, it is decidedly different from that of whites and Native Americans as the practices of slavery made things more complicated, claims Nagel. The idea of blacks as property clashed with the idea of human rights, and their humanity was questioned altogether. On one hand, it was important to keep the white race pure, but on the other hand, as black women were seen as mere slaves and capable of bearing more slaves, their systematic rape by their white masters became common practice. The forced miscegenation was no secret and yet it could not be said aloud: “Every lady tells you who is the father of all the mulatto children in everybody’s household, but those in her own she seems to think dropped from

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<sup>27</sup> hooks 1992, p. 181.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., p. 182.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.



the clouds or pretends so to think.”<sup>31</sup> The schizophrenic double standards marred the relations of the two races and divided men and women. Not only were the black women sexually abused, but they were also being accused of seducing their masters with their perceived erotic power. Instead of sympathising with the women they could have regarded as their black sisters many white women felt bitterness towards black women who corrupted their husbands.

Black men were not sexually violated during the era of slavery in the way black women were, but they were emasculated by the same practices. They were beaten and they could not marry their female companions nor provide them any protection against the white masters. Black couples were not even seen as couples and any of the slaves could be sold anywhere any time. As regards the relations of black men and white women, the Civil War was a watershed. Prior to it, sexual relations between black men and white women were frowned upon, and if a woman was known to associate with blacks, she was interpreted as “loose” – the stigma of blackness could be extended to whites who befriended blacks – and her black partner was punished, but most likely a slave owner was not inclined to have his property executed for what could be regarded as a minor offence. Furthermore, if a white woman married a slave, she would become a slave, too, and she had to serve her husband’s master until the husband died.<sup>32</sup> After the war, however, the black males that had been rendered completely powerless were suddenly considered as a major threat: “The same strength and virility that whites had controlled and enslaved in black men took on a new aspect when seen in the bodies and actions of freed black men.”<sup>33</sup> There were fears that the oversexualised black man would avenge the exploitation of the race. As a result, after the Civil War, black men were put under extreme social and sexual control in the form of lynching and castration.

Later, in the 1960’s, the heyday of the civil rights movement, blacks and whites, black men and white women mostly, started seeing each other as potential sexual partners, but, according to Nagel, the relations were enmeshed in racial stereotypes, fantasies and political and cultural

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<sup>31</sup> Nagel 2003, p. 108.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 107.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 111.

meanings. As the white woman's body had been the "forbidden terrain" for black men, crossing the colour line became a way of asserting one's newly gained power and autonomy.<sup>34</sup> Some black men, "in search of their manhood", even devalued black "bitches" who "put them down" and dated white women instead, which antagonised black women. Embittered, black women in turn ridiculed and insulted such black men. Thus, not only white supremacists but also many blacks, especially women, wished to keep the races separate.<sup>35</sup> Moreover, many white women involved in the civil rights movement did not dare to reject black men's advances out of fear that they would be seen as racists.<sup>36</sup> All in all, after many changes in politics and legislation and many kinds of ethnosexual boundary crossing, the race question remained touchy for a long time.

To compare, if mixed-race children of whites and Indians could be perceived as walking "in the both worlds", the mixed-race offspring of blacks and whites, mulattoes, could walk in none with ease. Rather, they were somewhere between the "pure" categories of black and white and were often excluded from both. During slavery, they were regarded as black, that is, slaves, and therefore it was unacceptable for white people to socialise with them. However, those with a lighter skin were valued higher by the whites and often given work inside the house instead of field work, which in turn caused envy and discordance among slaves. Stuart Hall notes that black blood was seen as a tragedy or a stain in a human being. He elaborates on a product of this era, the tragic mulatta, who is beautiful, sexy and exotic, but "cruelly caught between 'a racially divided inheritance'".<sup>37</sup> Because of her white blood she is "acceptable" to white men, but her "indelible 'stain' of black blood condemns her to a tragic conclusion".<sup>38</sup> Hall talks about racial "pollution" that comes from interbreeding, that is, black blood "stains" white people.<sup>39</sup> This issue of genetic purity and pollution is acknowledged by Butler in the *Xenogenesis* Trilogy, too, as Lilith initially regards the gene trade

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<sup>34</sup> Nagel 2003, p. 117.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 118.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 119.

<sup>37</sup> Hall 1997, p. 251.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 243.

as “unclean” but cannot actually defend the view when she learns that she is pregnant with a Human-Oankali embryo.

There was a powerful civil rights movement, but it was led by black men and it fought for the generic black man and was uninterested in sexism. The women’s rights movement, on the other hand, was in the hands of white middle-class women, and it also had serious problems with addressing black femininity. White bourgeois women regarded work as liberating and were fighting for their right to work outside home, but hooks points out that as black women were already working outside home, in the white feminists’ eyes they were already “liberated”, whereas black women themselves saw the menial work they did out of economic necessity as alienating and dehumanising.<sup>40</sup> Ironically, many black women looked after the liberated white feminists’ children and mopped their floors, while those white feminists themselves were out enjoying their new liberty.<sup>41</sup> Thus, black women did not feel the movement was concerned with their interests in any way. For them, raising their own children at home was rewarding and dignifying and mothering was not seen as a burden.

Likewise, Butler is clearly foregrounding the importance and dignity of motherhood in her *Xenogenesis* world. Bell hooks claims that one of the issues that alienated “masses of women” from the white feminist movement, “especially poor and/or non-white women” was white feminists’ “attacks” on motherhood. Motherhood was seen as a “serious obstacle” for liberation, or a “trap” that confines women to home and keeps them “tied” to housework.<sup>42</sup> In contrast, for black women, parenting is “one of the few interpersonal relationships where they are affirmed and appreciated”.<sup>43</sup> Butler’s Lilith is initially independent and emancipated enough to pursue any career she finds interesting. Furthermore, she is not an obvious mother type in the eyes of the other Human characters. Nevertheless, she gradually becomes one, at first reluctantly and then willingly as her

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<sup>40</sup> hooks 1984, p. 98.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 50.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 130.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 134-135.

family and children give her new life a meaning. On the other hand, the infertile Human characters in the trilogy tend to become suicidal or resort to stealing children. As I am going to show, as a black mother, Lilith brings about a change in a number of ways, and her womanhood, motherhood and blackness are all equally significant.

Melina Abdullah notes that in the nineteenth century, black women were forced to choose between a racial identity and a gender identity, or “rank their oppressions” – determine which was more crippling, oppression against their sex or race.<sup>44</sup> Finding such a choice quite impossible, they made their own interpretation of feminism. Abdullah describes a black feminist leadership model that “seeks to encompass the simultaneous realities of race, gender and class, and eradicate all forms of oppression that accompany multi-axis identities”, and “takes on a radical approach – favouring fundamental transformation over limited reform”.<sup>45</sup> Hooks opens up this inclusiveness and radical stance as she notes that while white women were striving to become equal with men, in a “white supremacist, capitalist, patriarchal class structure”, they failed to see that men were not equal amongst themselves. Non-white, lower-class and poor women “would not have defined women’s liberation as women gaining social equality with men as they are continually reminded in their everyday lives that all women do not share a common social status.”<sup>46</sup> Instead of struggling to become “equal”, whatever that is understood to mean, black feminism has to strive to destroy the cultural basis of domination altogether. Hooks explains:

Individuals who fight for the eradication of sexism without supporting struggles to end racism or classism undermine their own efforts. Individuals who fight for the eradication of racism and classism while supporting sexist oppression are helping to maintain the cultural basis of all oppression. While they may initiate successful reforms, their efforts will not lead to revolutionary change. Their ambivalent relationship must be resolved or they will daily undermine their own radical work.<sup>47</sup>

Black feminism and womanism recognise the comparability of all forms of oppression and push for a profound social change. As I will show in the analysis, Butler’s heroine Lilith is a character like

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<sup>44</sup> Abdullah 2007, pp. 329-330.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., p. 328-329.

<sup>46</sup> hooks 1984, p. 18.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., p. 39.

this. In defending her human group against what she perceives as Oankali oppression, she speaks for women and men alike. When she sees her own Oankali companion hurt in a humans' attack, she chooses to help it rather than desert it, fully aware that in the eyes of the other Humans, it will look suspicious indeed. While struggling hard against perceived injustice from the Oankali side, Lilith cannot accept the brutal violence of the Humans and will help and defend anybody against excesses of any kind.

In their introduction to *Black Womanist Leadership: Tracing the Motherline* (2011) Toni C. King and S. Alease Ferguson separate three phases in black feminism: the first phase, or the laying of the foundation, 1800-1920, was about “conceptualization of liberty, freedom, dignity and voice”; the second phase, 1920-1960, was informed by “communalism and the development of collective movements, voice and self-help organisations” and the third phase, 1960 to the present, is contemporary black feminism that “reflects the diversification of the African American female and her communal experiences, life styles, issues and concerns”.<sup>48</sup> These phases correspond to the development of the relations of blacks and whites in America and yet, “black feminism/womanism” has “held a consistency in its themes and philosophical outlook”. The themes of communalism, struggle and empowerment have been central to the movement and they actually still form the core of the movement today.<sup>49</sup> The authors list four basic pillars of black feminism and black female leadership: the legacy of struggle, the search of voice and the refusal to be silenced, the impossibility of separating intellectual inquiry from political activism and the direct application of empowerment to everyday life. The authors talk about a “survivor’s legacy” that emphasises visibility, expression and countering of stereotypes.

In this thesis, I will look at the *Xenogenesis Trilogy* and its protagonist Lilith in a similar way: how Lilith empowers herself and transforms the social structures around her, and how her struggles against the Human characters who reject her correspond to the situation of black women

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<sup>48</sup> King and Ferguson 2011, p. 9.

<sup>49</sup> See *Sisterhood, Feminism and Power: From Africa to the Diaspora*, 1998. Ed. Obioma Nnaemeka.

in America at the time the trilogy was written, which would be, according to King and Ferguson who quote Emory S. Bogardus, the seventh epoch of racism or “modern racism”. The earlier epochs are given as “captivity and slavery”, “miscegenation”, “liberation and independence”, “Reconstruction”, “Jim Crow” and “civil rights”, respectively.<sup>50</sup> Butler muddles this picture, though, by placing all Humans, white and non-white, in the position of captives subjected to surveillance, control and training in relation to the Oankali who represent a different, supremely intelligent species. This setting is remotely reminiscent of the “captivity and slavery”, even “miscegenation” epochs, except that it is the Humans who very accurately correspond to white supremacists verbally abusing and physically attacking and killing the aliens, not the other way round. Instead of joining in the attacks and killings, Lilith accepts the Oankali presence as a fact, regards the closest individuals as friends and starts to build from there by relating to the Oankali, communicating with them and eventually joining her life with them to build a better world together. She is a character capable of loving herself, her children and her partners of three sexes across species boundaries.

Because of Lilith’s qualities mentioned above, I perceive her as not only as a feminist, but as a womanist character. The term *womanist* was coined by Alice Walker (1983), a black feminist – or womanist - thinker. She offers several definitions for it in the form of dictionary entries. “A black feminist or feminist of color” is the first and most concrete one, and “usually referring to outrageous, audacious, courageous or *wilful* behavior” and “wanting to know more and in greater depth than is considered ‘good’ for one” foreground struggle and courage.<sup>51</sup> Walker’s third entry, “Loves music. Loves dance. Loves the moon. *Loves* the Spirit. Loves love and food and roundness. Loves struggle. *Loves* the Folk. Loves herself. *Regardless.*” communicates a deep passion and zest.<sup>52</sup> There is also a strong sense of self-expression, joy and celebration of being what one is. This artistic flare is also expressed in Walker’s distinction: “Womanist is to feminist as purple to

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<sup>50</sup> King and Ferguson 2011, p. 9.

<sup>51</sup> Walker 1983, p. xi.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, p. xii.

lavender.”<sup>53</sup> Both colours are beautiful, but there is a slight difference in tone, purple being warmer and more intense. Walker’s writing is confident and she seems completely uninterested in whether expressions like “love and food and roundness” or comparing political movements to colours can be deemed sentimental, unintelligent or feminine foolishness.

In their understanding of womanism, King and Ferguson emphasise struggle, leadership and what they call “self-invention” and they quote Walker’s notion of self-love:

As black women’s lives require complex negotiations and the mediation of contradictions, the capacity for leadership has been shown in our ability to create strategies for survival and advancement that include self-authentication, through unending self-invention and reinvention.

In the black feminist/womanist posture, African American women of all strata strive for a measure of self-acceptance and appreciation such as that articulated by Alice Walker when she described womanists as intentional leaders, who love “[the] self. Regardless” (p. xii). Known for self-expressiveness, they have scripted their own ways of “being in the world” in both their public and private personas.<sup>54</sup>

In the *Xenogenesis* Trilogy, Lilith is caught in the middle of complex negotiations and doing precisely the kind of “unending self-invention and reinvention” which is discussed above, and together with her companions of another species she scripts novel ways of “being in the world”.

By the 1980’s, which is apparently the decade when the world as Lilith knew it came to an end, women in America had the vote and they were studying at universities and working outside home like never before. Therefore, female experience could not be ignored the way it had been ignored in the 19th century. Yet, this massive social change had raised concerns about whether women could really handle it all and how they would be able to raise their children.<sup>55</sup> What had not changed in step with the surrounding society was the idea of housework and childrearing being women’s work. Ann E. Kaplan has studied women’s magazines, films, advertisements and other media representations from the 70’s, 80’s and 90’s in attempt to draw a picture of mothers and

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<sup>53</sup> Walker 1983, p. xii.

<sup>54</sup> King and Ferguson 2011, p. 10.

<sup>55</sup> Kaplan 1992, p. 188.

mothering in the quickly modernised America. According to her, in the face of social problems, it is mothers who are being blamed for bad mothering.<sup>56</sup>

On the other hand, Kathryn Woodward quotes Ann Oakley in discussing a “mismatch” between the “moral ideal” and “social reality” of motherhood. According to Oakley, mothers are not being given the resources and positions they need to fulfil the ideal.<sup>57</sup> Woodward points out that this ideal is not a universal one either, but an “ethnically specific” one. The system in which women and men have completely different responsibilities and childrearing belongs exclusively to mothers is a white middle-class system and not applicable as such to all families and mothers. In many black families, there is no such differentiation in sex roles. Further, the ideal makes motherhood a full-time occupation that entails economic dependency on men. This leaves out single mothers, and due to racial oppression, not do all couples have private nuclear family households either.<sup>58</sup>

Bell hooks’s black feminist views go even further as she claims that sexist oppression “perverts and distorts the positive function of family”, as “even as we are loved and cared for in families, we are simultaneously taught that this love is not as important as having power to dominate others”, and because of power struggles and authoritarian rule, family may become “a setting of intense suffering and pain”.<sup>59</sup> She is aiming her critique at the Western ideal of nuclear family in particular:

Research by anthropologists and sociologists indicate that small privatized units, especially those organized around patriarchal thinking, are unhealthy environments for everyone. Globally, enlightened, healthy parenting is best realized within the context of community and extended family networks.<sup>60</sup>

Another point hooks makes is the importance of communication. The extended family does not automatically work either. It is “a good place to learn the power of community”, but “it can only become a community if there is honest communication” between the members. Like smaller nuclear

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<sup>56</sup> Kaplan 1992, p. 188.

<sup>57</sup> Woodward 1997, p. 241.

<sup>58</sup> Woodward 1997, pp. 241-242.

<sup>59</sup> hooks 1984, pp. 36-37.

<sup>60</sup> hooks 2000, p. 132.



family units, also dysfunctional extended families are, according to hooks, “usually characterized by muddled communication”.<sup>61</sup>

According to hooks, in contemporary feminist analyses of family, it is often implied that feminism would lead to the abolition of family since so many white women activists may have experienced it as an oppressive institution.<sup>62</sup> However, for black women, she says, family has been the least oppressive institution. She finds it important that feminists differentiate between sexist oppression and the family institution and perceive the value of family:

Feminist activists need to affirm the importance of family as a kinship structure that can sustain and nourish people; to graphically address links between sexist oppression and family disintegration; and to give examples, both actual and visionary, of the way family life is and can be when unjust authoritarian rule is replaced with an ethic of communalism, shared responsibility, and mutuality.<sup>63</sup>

As I see it, this is what Butler is doing in her *Xenogenesis* vision; she is creating a culture of communalism and mutuality.

## 2.2 Science Fiction and Otherness

Since I am reading my research material as a work of science fiction, I will also say a few words about the mechanics of the genre, about the way it relates to the past and mirrors the time it is written. Then I shall have a look at the history of the genre and the emergence of female sf and black sf. Finally, I am going to touch upon the political dimension of the genre, the possibilities opened up by it through imagining, envisioning and sketching out possible futures. Here I will be mainly relying on the analyses by Ursula Le Guin, a white feminist sf writer, Adam Roberts, a white sf critic and Samuel Delany, a black sf writer and critic.

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<sup>61</sup> hooks 2000, p. 132.

<sup>62</sup> hooks 1984, p. 37.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid. p. 38.

Science fiction is a broad concept; it is an umbrella term for literature, film, comics and perhaps even visual art. The great profusion of styles and visions is often divided into various subgenres, such as utopia/dystopia, space opera, hard sf, pulp or cyberpunk, just to name a few. For example, some critics label Butler's works speculative fiction rather than science fiction. However, the discussion of classifications and divisions would provide enough material for another pro gradu thesis, and I do not wish to go there in this one. In brief, in this study I am going to use the term science fiction (or sf) in its broadest sense, or as a continuum from pulps towards realism and more serious extrapolation which nowadays encompasses a variety of styles.

Because of this versatility, science fiction as a genre is notoriously hard to define. We do recognise it when we come across it, but without necessarily knowing how. There may be science fictional elements in the content, such as advanced technology, travel at light speed, laser guns, robots, aliens or time travel, or then again none of these. The story may be set in the far future, in our current world or on another planet. Brian Aldiss suggests the following definition:

Science fiction is the search for a definition of mankind and his status in the universe which will stand in our advanced but confused state of knowledge (science), and is characteristically cast in Gothic or post-Gothic mode.<sup>64</sup>

In other words, sf strives to tell something essential about ourselves: who we are and where we might be going to as a people. The details of the imaginative settings are less substantial as such, he notes, as long as they perform their function of distancing.

This distancing enables the reader to see familiar things from a new angle and opens up possibilities for critically observing the surrounding world and envisioning, experimenting and exploring other ways of living. Darko Suvin has coined the term "cognitive estrangement" to describe the distancing effect of sf. Damien Broderick opens it up: the term "cognitive" refers to the scientific, or "scientific" aspect of sf that appeals to the reader's intelligence and scientific world view, and "estrangement" to the effect of the "novum", i.e. that, which is different from our world

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<sup>64</sup> Aldiss 1986, p. 25.

and reality. In naturalist literature, the same is portrayed by the same, meaning that the author's empirical environment is portrayed by "exact recreation", whereas in "estranged fiction", it is portrayed by the other.<sup>65</sup> Thus, sf – or at least the more serious and ambitious part of it – is understood as a genre that provides the reader with a window to an alternative reality that is realistic or makes sense; it functions as a mirror. Broderick also quotes Gregory Renault as he notes that any act of signification has to select from potential signifiers available, and therefore "the strictest attempt at representation" is always "an interpretation, an artistically mediated re-presentation or reconstruction of 'the real' (itself signifier as well as signified)".<sup>66</sup> No matter how novel and fantastic visions and aliens sf creates, they are always somehow related to the world of the author.

The history of sf starts in the 19th century. In a way, women writers have contributed to sf from the very beginning of the genre: what many critics nowadays seem to agree on is that the first science fiction novel ever written was *Frankenstein* (1818) by Mary Shelley. The monster stitched together of body parts plundered from graveyards does belong to the Gothic tradition rather than sf, but what makes the novel 'scientific' is that the monster is quickened by electricity rather than spells or magic.<sup>67</sup> According to Sarah Lefanu, both Gothic and science fiction are genres that can offer women writers a means to challenge literary conventions, and "to produce a literature that can be at once subversive and popular".<sup>68</sup> She mentions Ann Radcliffe as an example, noting that her female heroes are much more active than those created by male writers. The former tend to be "tough, curious and self-interested", whereas the latter are often "trembling, passive and weak".<sup>69</sup>

By the 1930s the genre known as scientific romance had evolved into boys' adventure story.<sup>70</sup> The stories were rather fantastic, and especially the pulpier branch featured larger-than-life characters and scientific accuracy was rather nominal. When John W. Campbell, a nuclear

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<sup>65</sup> Broderick 1995, p. 51.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

<sup>67</sup> Scholes and Rabkin 1977, pp. 191–196.

<sup>68</sup> Lefanu 1988, p.25.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid.

<sup>70</sup> Parrinder 1980, pp.10-11.

physicist, became the editor of the *Astounding* magazine, one of the most long-lived and influential sf magazines in America, he was not pleased with this state of affairs and encouraged the writers to write more realistic and scientifically plausible stories instead. He even asked engineers and scientists to write stories, which resulted in not only more serious extrapolation, but also more realistic settings and characters. The heroes were now engineers or scientists rather than action heroes. On the other hand, as the world of science was dominated by men at the time, this more realistic science fiction mirrored the real world also in this sense.<sup>71</sup> There were a few female writers who created female characters, fresh ideas and good plotting while others placed their female characters in more traditional roles but, according to Pamela Sargent, the assumption was that women are “instinctual, emotional, concerned mainly with their household and children” and not interested in science or technology.<sup>72</sup> Some writers created “socially acceptable” female characters that would love their men and raise their children in their futuristic homes, and this was by disparaging critics called “wet-diaper” science fiction.<sup>73</sup>

In the 1960s, the emphasis moved away from space exploration and towards our inner space, but the sexual status quo of the surrounding society remained in the genre. However, second-wave feminism, being interested in sex and gender, started a change in society and also in the field of science fiction. Writers like Ursula K. Le Guin and Joanna Russ were among the first ones to realise the potential of the rather entertaining and escapist genre to feminists. Sarah Lefanu expresses the advantages of the innovative genre to feminists:

Unlike other forms of genre writing, such as detective stories and romances, which demand the reinstatement of order and thus can be described as ‘closed’ texts, science fiction is by its nature interrogative, ‘open’. Feminism questions a given order in political terms, while science fiction questions it in imaginative terms. ... If science fiction demands our acceptance of a relativistic universe, then feminism demands, no less, our acceptance of a relativistic social order. Nothing, in these terms, is natural, least of all the cultural notions of ‘woman’ and ‘man’.<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> Sargent 1976, p. xx.

<sup>72</sup> Sargent 1976, pp. xx-xxi.

<sup>73</sup> Sargent 1976, pp. xxix-xxx.

<sup>74</sup> Lefanu 1988, p. 100.

If women have long been excluded from future visions, so have blacks and people of colour. As the readers and writers of sf have largely been white middle-class men, the worlds envisioned by science fiction have been accordingly white. The genre is not inherently racist, though, but rather the opposite. Many white authors have actually written stories with non-white characters, even non-white protagonists, and critics have praised the genre for being unprejudiced and advanced. One of the most prominent sf writers inspired by the civil right movement is Robert A. Heinlein, who wrote several novels for youngsters and quite a few for adults with a decidedly didactic tone.

However, Gregory E. Rutledge<sup>75</sup> discusses a “blanching” of the future due to the fact that there are not enough non-white characters and that the representations of races are disproportionate within science fiction. He admits that this might not have been a conscious aim of the authors, but rather vice versa; in the benign visions of most sf writers, race has lost its significance and racism does not exist, and therefore writing a distinct racial background to a character becomes unnecessary. Nevertheless, the end result is, Rutledge argues, that the futures are all too white, almost as if blacks were not planned to be there. His idea is that black writers would probably change this, if only there were enough of them. However, the publishing industry is to be blamed, too: publishers have rejected stories with black protagonists as they have feared the white readership would not buy such books. This, in turn, kept the readership mostly white. Donna Haraway notes that she has even seen the *Xenogenesis* trilogy published with a cover on which is depicted “an ivory white brunette mediating the awakening of an ivory blond woman”.<sup>76</sup>

Not all readers have been white, though. For example Samuel R. Delany, a famous black science fiction writer and critic today, did feel attracted to the genre in his youth. He recounts how he had known the meaning of the word “equality”, but he had not been able to envision what an equal world would be like before he got a brief image of it when reading Heinlein’s novel *Starship*

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<sup>75</sup> See Rutledge 2001.

<sup>76</sup> Haraway 1989, p. 381.

*Troopers* (1960).<sup>77</sup> He emphasises the importance of envisioning and according to him, all people need images of tomorrow, especially blacks:

Without an image of tomorrow, one is trapped by blind history, economics and politics, and beyond our control. ... Only by having clear and vital images of the many alternatives, good and bad, of where one can go, will we have any control over the way we may actually get there in a reality tomorrow will bring all too quickly.<sup>78</sup>

Indeed, sf can be seen as a handy tool in creating such images and imagining alternative ways of being. Similarly, in his speech *Black to the Future*, Walter Mosley claims that within sf, “that which deviates the norm” can actually be the norm and history can be rewritten or ignored.<sup>79</sup> Like Rutledge, he believes that more black writers will start writing sf, he is even predicting “an explosion”, as he meets black poets and novelists working on sf manuscripts “everywhere he goes”.<sup>80</sup>

However, in the 2010’s, while women writers are producing a lot of sf, the most popular black sf writers remain the same: Samuel R. Delany, Octavia Butler, Walter Mosley, Steven Barnes, Tananarive Due and Nalo Hopkinson are the names that come up over and over again. A quick, less than academic search on the Internet reveals a handful of others that appear on various more or less official listings and sf blogs, but do not seem to have raised similar critical interest. Thus, perhaps attention should be paid to social media and science fiction fandom instead. As regards the contents and mission of black sf, there seems to be little critical work. Black sf writers and critics, such as Delany and Mosley, celebrate the new vistas sf opens for blacks, but rather than black sf, they talk about sf by black authors, sf that contains black protagonists and black characters that are complex and deep, and worlds in which blacks have a future. Depth and visibility of black characters and culture seem to be the common denominator.

In the sf film industry, at least the visibility of black characters has increased, though. In his book *Black Space: Imagining Race in Science Fiction Film* (2008), Adilifu Nama lists several films

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<sup>77</sup> Delany 1984, pp. 28-30.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 35.

<sup>79</sup> Mosley 2003, p. 202.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 204.

in which there are black actors in central roles: *Supernova* (2000), *Alien vs. Predator* (2004), *Serenity* (2005), *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* (2005), and *Children of Men* (2006).<sup>81</sup> Yet, Nama points out that these images fail to convey any “black cultural identity, history, subjectivity, or political sensibilities” or to any greater degree “expand, or self-consciously reconfigure historical, conventional, and/or alternative notions of blackness”. He notes, however, that since film-making is both expensive and risky, the larger phenomenon of afrofuturism, or spinning of futuristic tales about blacks for blacks, has found its expression in music and visual art. He names Sun Ra, George Clinton and Africa Bambaataa in his overview on afrofuturist films and popular culture and he identifies futuristic features also in hip-hop. Black sf is, according to him, just a small fraction of this tradition. In fact, according to Delany, many novels by black writers have been read as early examples of this afrofuturism, or sometimes “proto-science fiction”<sup>82</sup>, rather than sf or black sf.

As a matter of fact, the term black sf can be and indeed has been disputed. Recounting his personal experiences of being lauded as the first black sf writer, receiving sf awards and appearing in sf conventions and interviews as a *black* sf writer rather than just a sf writer, Samuel R. Delany takes up the race consciousness of the sf community. He wonders at the coincidence that at a convention of almost 80 sf critics and writers, he should be paired with the only other black participant, Nalo Hopkinson, at the Autograph Table at which two writers at a time sat for book signing. He stresses that people do not do these things out of ill will: “[a]s a system it [racial consciousness/racism] can be fueled by chance as much as by hostility or by the best of intentions. (‘I thought they would be more comfortable together. I thought they would want to be with each other...’).”<sup>83</sup> He is discussing the race question in the context of the science fiction community, but his analysis is universal. Similarly, he asks why he was so often being invited to appear with Octavia Butler, whose writing and interests are decidedly different from his, and not, for instance,

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<sup>81</sup> Nama 2008, p. 161.

<sup>82</sup> Delany 2000.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid.

with cyberpunk writers and critics who often cited him and fully acknowledged his influence, and whom he wrote about as a critic. Delany feels deeply uncomfortable about the conduct of the community. In addition, he sees the literary interest in Butler's work as "artificial" in that readers and critics see her through her sex and race rather than as a brilliant writer in her own right, and that they "generalize" their admiration into "this in-many-ways-artificial" African American science fiction. To quote Delany:

And while it provides generous honoraria for us [Butler and Delany] both, I think that the nature of the generalization (since we have an extraordinarily talented black woman sf writer, why don't we generalize that interest to all black sf writers, male and female) has elements of both racism and sexism about it.<sup>84</sup>

While he admits that despite coming from totally different parts of the US, he and Butler do share many experiences related to their racial background. Nevertheless, "as long as racism functions as a system, it is still fueled from aspects of the perfectly laudable desires of interested whites to observe this thing, however dubious its reality, that exists largely by means of its having been named: African American science fiction".<sup>85</sup> He regards the category as racist, artificial pigeonholing rather than a viable subgenre.

However, to get from communities and classifications back to sf literature, having suggested above that women writers brought women into (white) science fiction and racially aware white writers and a handful of African American writers brought non-white characters and the issue of race, I have to admit that the situation is far from being that straightforward. The problem has rather been that of representation; the boyish genre has made its future worlds into white male playgrounds, and the characters have become presented accordingly.

Adam Roberts argues that in "a great deal of contemporary sf", race is actually "a key concern".<sup>86</sup> Firstly, especially in America, the civil rights movements of the 1960s and the resulting emergence and celebration of black culture has shaped our world view toward multiculturalism and

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<sup>84</sup> Delany 2000.

<sup>85</sup> Delany 2000.

<sup>86</sup> Roberts 2006, p. 94.



this has affected science fiction, too.<sup>87</sup> Secondly, he claims, the consciousness of race permeates late twentieth-century Western culture. According to him, since race has been a major issue in postwar America, American myths and discourses “tend to embody a consciousness of race”.<sup>88</sup> As I briefly noted in 2.1, space has become the new Wild West, the borderline of civilisation where one needs a laser gun to protect oneself among all the fantastic humanoid bipeds and others. For instance, the Star Wars universe is full of swashbuckler heroes, evil villains and exotic aliens, complete with a space princess. Patrick Parrinder points out that the term “space opera” does not originate from “soap opera” but from the Western “horse opera”.<sup>89</sup> Patricia Melzer notes that in sf there is “a tradition of conceptualizing themes of colonialism and social orders in conservative, and at times reactionary, ways.”<sup>90</sup>

Ursula K. Le Guin elaborates on the notion of otherness especially in American sf, distinguishing between “the sexual Alien”, someone who is different from you in sex, “the social Alien”, who is different from you in its annual income, “the cultural Alien”, different in its way of “speaking, dressing and doing things”, and “the racial Alien” different in the “colour of its skin or the number of its heads or legs”.<sup>91</sup> Her critique is aimed at the pulps rather than more serious sf, but she does have a point. The social aliens, she claims, are not persons in sf, but faceless masses fleeing from “giant slime-globules from the Chicago sewers”, dying off from pollution, or huge armies led to battles, except for an occasional “busty lass”, also a sexual alien, who is “honoured by the attentions of the Captain of the Supreme Terran Command”.<sup>92</sup> A cultural alien could be “a quaint, old cook with a Scottish or Swedish accent”.<sup>93</sup> Even the more serious sf is usually told from the perspective of an individual or individuals, and often these individuals are soldiers or scientists. Even though they do not necessarily have superhuman qualities, they can hardly be regarded as

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<sup>87</sup> Roberts 2006, pp. 94-95.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 105.

<sup>89</sup> Parrinder, 1980, p. 15.

<sup>90</sup> Melzer 2006, p. 5.

<sup>91</sup> Le Guin 1982, p. 87.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 88.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*

ordinary people. Families and single mothers with their children, factory workers, physicians, nurses, teachers – all the ordinary people that populate our cities and countryside are made invisible.

Le Guin maintains that when one holds another person or a kind of person totally different from oneself, “as men have done to women, and class has done to class, and nation has done to nation”, one’s fear may come out either as hatred or reverence. The alien may be either persecuted or elevated “on a pedestal in a white nightgown and a virtuous smirk – exactly as the ‘good woman’ did in the Victorian Age”. In either case, Le Guin says, one has denied the alien’s spiritual equality and its human equality, one has “made it into a thing, to which the only possible relationship is the power relationship”. One has “impoverished” one’s own reality and alienated oneself.<sup>94</sup>

To return to my research material again, in the *Xenogenesis* trilogy, Butler has created in a biblical framework a secular world with no gods, demons or monsters. As I noted earlier, although there are Lilith, Adan, Joseph, María, Jesusa and many others among the Human characters, the superhuman forces God and Satan have been edited out. As an ironic nod towards the Bible, shocked and repulsed by the writhing Oankali sensory tentacles, Lilith calls the Oankali medusas and serpent people. Yet, as I am going to argue, the text resists a biblical reading.

Another allusion that Butler makes in the trilogy that I want to open up here is the myth of alien abduction. Roberts suggests that some of the stories created in the field of sf actually represent “the return of the repressed” and he regards the myth of alien abduction as an example.<sup>95</sup> In 2.1, I wrote about the captivity narrative, and alien abduction, too, is a captivity narrative of a kind, or a science-fictionalised version of it. Roberts explains that the abductees are typically white thirty-something Americans and they are suddenly taken from their homes, restrained, taken to an alien spaceship, subjected to “physically degrading and sometimes painful” treatment, and at the end,

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<sup>94</sup> Le Guin 1982, p. 89.

<sup>95</sup> Roberts 2006, p. 106.

they are compelled to forget their experience before returned home.<sup>96</sup> According to Roberts, this retells the story of the slave trade, and mainstream America is “interpolating itself in the victim’s role”.<sup>97</sup> In the Xenogenesis trilogy, Lilith wakes up in solitary confinement and finds a scar in her abdomen, but from then on the script is completely changed. This I will now discuss in chapter 3.

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<sup>96</sup> Roberts 2006, p. 106.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid.

### 3. Intimate Encounters with the Feminine Oankali

In feminist sf, it is not unusual that the aliens become women's friends as women feel alienated themselves in a patriarchal society and therefore may find it easier to relate to the aliens than male characters. In my research material, the aliens called the Oankali are remarkably feminine in their ways, but they are also remarkable in other ways. In this chapter, I will concentrate on the interstellar travellers' invasion from a historical perspective and the black female protagonist's role as a mediator between the two species (3.1), and then shift my attention to the racial and sexual politics of the trilogy and the differences between the two groups of Humans, the Traders and the Resisters (3.2). As I am going to argue, the main conflict is not between the Humans and the aliens but between the two Human groups. Furthermore, the novels maintain a systematic womanist revision of familiar storylines. In addition to the subtext of the Genesis revisited, there are several other explicit references to historical facts, Christian myths, urban legends and stock sf tropes, and they are all given a novel, womanist treatment. While the aliens are far more technologically advanced than the Human characters, they are experts in life sciences and genetics and completely uninterested in machines. With them, Butler is outlining a lifestyle free of structures and ideologies that marginalise women. In her vision, patriarchy, religious moralism, technocracy, materialism and consumerism are all linked together, and by siding with the aliens, Lilith is showing the way towards a better world. However, the trilogy is hardly an obvious utopia. The aliens are true gene traders in good and bad; they insist on trading and no-one who touches them remains unchanged.

The subtitles of the three novels convey an idea of a systematic plan of integration. In the first novel, *Dawn*, they form a continuum from birth towards maturity: "Womb", "Family", "Nursery" and "The Training Floor". The first three of them are all from the semantic fields of home and mothering but the last one, the training floor, changes the tone; it makes one think of keeping and training animals rather than human beings. Similarly, on the level of the storyline, the first novel is riddled with allusions to slavery. The Human characters are being held captives on a

spaceship and the captors, an alien race called the Oankali, engage their “trading partners” in an intimate, erotic bodily exchange that results in cross-species offspring. With their thick, grey skin, oddly bending joints and snake-like sensory tentacles the aliens are so monstrously ugly to the human eye that, initially, their mere presence is deeply unsettling and yet, they systematically seek to acclimatise all Humans and bind them either as individuals or couples into Human-Oankali families. The aliens are described friendly, civil, benign and yet completely unyielding, so the general atmosphere in the novel becomes oppressive and quite discordant.

*Adulthood Rites* is organised around the places the protagonist of the novel, a Human-Oankali Construct child of Lilith’s, is taken to and lives in: “Lo”, the unpretentious and literally down-to-earth village that is the home of Lilith and her family, “Phoenix”, an all-Human Resister village that eventually burns down without giving rise to a new, strictly Human civilisation, “Chkahichdahk”, which is the Oankali mothership, and finally, “Home”, which is not a single place as such but a reunion with the family from *Lo*. *Dawn* starts with Lilith being reborn in a way, awakened by the aliens to a drastically changed reality, and *Adulthood Rites* starts with a real child being born and almost all of it is written from the perspective of this not quite human infant, who like his mother struggles to be taken seriously and, like his mother, succeeds; he gives the new race a face and a voice. The integration that starts in *Dawn* deepens in this part of the trilogy and as the characters learn to know each other better, the oppressive feel of the Oankali project eases off. The title could perhaps be understood as a pun on the word rites and its homophone rights, too, as the hybrid child grows up, comes to terms with both his Human and his Oankali background and negotiates a deal for the Human Resisters.

The last part, *Imago*, introduces yet another Construct child from the same family. To list the subtitles of this novel, the child is entering its “Metamorphosis” to become the first ever human-born ooloi (representative of the Oankali third sex) – which again is a birth of a kind – but as it is metamorphosing into something truly transcendent, the child is impelled to “Exile” before it reaches

its “Imago”. With it, the new race will be complete. In this title, Butler is playing with meanings again. In English, the word *imago* has three different meanings, an entomological one, a zoological one and a psychoanalytical one. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary* online, they are, respectively: 1) “the final or adult stage in the development of an insect, during which it is sexually mature”, 2) “The final or adult stage of any other animal species that undergoes a metamorphosis during its development”, and 3) “a subjective image of someone (esp. a parent) which a person has subconsciously formed and which continues to influence his or her attitudes and behavior”.<sup>98</sup>

*Merriam-Webster* includes the psychoanalytical concept of the self: “an idealized mental image of another person or the self”.<sup>99</sup> All these definitions of the word are fitting in this context. The protagonist, and with it the whole new race, will have reached sexual maturity and full command of all of their new abilities and the Human-Oankali hybrids will metamorphose before reaching adulthood like the Oankali, but ironically, the “subjective image” which is “subconsciously formed” and influences one’s attitudes and behaviour cuts both ways; the reader cannot know whether the decision to be touched by the Oankali is a good thing. *Merriam-Webster* gives the zoological meaning of the word as follows: “an insect in its final, adult, sexually mature, and typically *winged* state”. The new race will be “winged” in the sense that when the time comes, it will take off from the earth to find new planets and trading partners. At the end of *Imago*, Lilith’s ooloi child Jodahs plants the seed of a spaceship in Earth’s soil. The ship entity will eat Earth’s biosphere as it grows until there is nothing left except stone, and then it will carry its people into space in the eternal search of new genetic material. However, at the end of *Imago*, Lilith is finally genuinely happy. Considering the traditional didacticism of sf, the idea of an “idealised image” coupled with a fantastic alien race suggests that this science fictional vision is an idealisation; while it may not be realistic as such, some of it might still be worth pursuing. If Lilith did choose from two evils the lesser one, then the Oankali way must be the right one.

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<sup>98</sup><http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/91660?redirectedFrom=imago#eid> [Accessed 9.5.2014]

<sup>99</sup><http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/imago> [Accessed 9.5.2014]

### 3.1 Slavery, Abduction or Adoption?

As I have mentioned earlier, the *Xenogenesis* trilogy is about American history and black women's history. In this chapter, I am going to trace the allusions to slavery and captivity narrative in the trilogy and follow what actually happens to Lilith and the other Human characters in order to examine the ways in which Butler reimagines the encounter of an alien race in a womanist way. At the beginning of the trilogy, although the setting is science-fictional, there is a scattering of small, seemingly innocent and sometimes ironic details seamlessly embedded in the storyline that could be taken from a history book: after Lilith the black woman has been in her solitary confinement for long enough to start to fear what might be waiting for her outside, to encourage her to come out of her "cage",<sup>100</sup> she is given a banana. When outside, she cannot move freely as the Oankali doors and food cabinets will not open for her and she needs an Oankali to let her in and out. As she asks for a pen and paper to write things down, she is refused, and in a crowd, to her own embarrassment, she cannot recognise Oankali individuals as they all look the same to her and she needs to stay close to her chaperon.

The Oankali-Human relations thus echo the relations between blacks and whites in the past, but with a difference. In the banana episode, for instance, the friendly Oankali who gives her the fruit is oblivious of any negative connotations, Lilith in turn welcomes the fruit which is voluptuously described as "fully ripe, large, yellow, firm, very sweet" and savours it "slowly, wanting to gulp it, not daring to", as it is "literally the best food she had tasted in two hundred and fifty years",<sup>101</sup> and it is only the knowledgeable reader who will make the connection to racism. Similarly, the doors will open at Lilith's touch when she allows Nikanj to alter her body chemistry, and the pen and paper are denied because the aliens want Lilith to learn another way. When she lets Nikanj enhance her memory and takes care of it while it is metamorphosing, she is given a handful

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<sup>100</sup> Butler 2000, pp. 12, 30 (in *Dawn*).

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 27 (in *Dawn*).

of pens and a ream of paper recreated by the Oankali and a few ancient, brittle books of Human making as a gift.<sup>102</sup> The tone of the trilogy is a revisionist and visionary one as the stories from history are given novel endings and positive spins. I will return to the theme of coercion and power later on.

The central character, Lilith, is a black woman who has curiosity, responsibility, a love of life and a love of herself, all of which are features that Alice Walker lists in her description of a womanist. From an underdog position she slowly works her way up to become an influential character in a multi-species community and sets an example to others much the same way as the heroes of the civil rights movement have risen from modest backgrounds into household names. Incidentally, also the Oankali acknowledge and esteem the same womanist characteristics in Lilith and choose her as their key person. Despite the apparent difficulties, Lilith regards the aliens as fellow beings, speaks her mind to them but will not hurt them or herself and enters into a meaningful dialogue with them. From this dialogue springs a relationship, hybrid offspring, a new lifestyle altogether and eventually a merger of two species.

To examine this development and the implications, I will at first examine the references to slavery, then discuss the points of resemblance to the American captivity narrative and its science-fictionalised version, alien abduction, and then suggest another point of view: I will consider Lilith's new Oankali family as an instance of alien adoption after the fashion of Native Americans who adopted white individuals into their families. This view is, as I am going to argue, more in line with the womanist ideals of sharing and inclusiveness. Alongside my own analysis I will draw on other critics, especially Donna Haraway and Michele Osherow.

To start from the allusions to slavery, the references in the trilogy are numerous. In her reading of *Dawn*, Donna Haraway concentrates on the image of a shipload of humans kept in suspended animation in an orbit around the Earth and compares it to the Middle Passage of the

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<sup>102</sup> Butler 2000, p. 108 (in *Dawn*).



trans-Atlantic slave trade. The slave trade, too, she points out, involved a kind of forced “gene trade” or miscegenation. The humans aboard the Oankali ship are what is left of humanity after a nuclear war. They come from different parts of the world and the only thing they have in common is that the war has ruined their lives. Thus, like the slaves, these people have lost all contact to their friends, relatives, or the whole of their former life, and now they have no home.<sup>103</sup>

Michele Osherow draws more parallels between the Xenogenesis Lilith and her female African American ancestors. Lilith is appointed as the leader of other Humans and in attempt to save herself and others from the Oankali gene trade, she advises everybody to learn as much as possible about the Oankali, the living conditions on Earth, edible plants, survival techniques and so on, and then try to escape. According to Osherow, this “learn and run” strategy corresponds to the way slaves strove to undermine their oppressors, to go against and sabotage them wherever they could.<sup>104</sup> Furthermore, Osherow points out that, like her ancestors, Lilith is vulnerable and exposed to sexual violence.<sup>105</sup> Lilith’s privacy is actually violated to such an extent that even her sexuality has been tampered with; enjoying human sex is not an option for her anymore.<sup>106</sup> After a human couple have been touched by an ooloi, they cannot bear the physical touch of each other anymore and they will need their ooloi as an intermediary through whom they are able to connect. This Osherow reads as an extreme violation of human rights.

Cathy Peppers calls Lilith’s choice to cooperate with the aliens as a slave’s “non-choice”.<sup>107</sup> Deprived of all human contact, Lilith is desperately lonely and to be able to talk to somebody, she strikes up a tentative friendship with an ooloi child called Nikanj. As a result, she becomes deeply bonded to it (ooloi are neuter and take the pronoun *it*). Hoping that she could together with other Humans find some way of escaping, she accepts the work the Oankali want her to do: she would awaken others and become their teacher. She would inform them about the aliens and the gene

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<sup>103</sup> Haraway 1989 p.379.

<sup>104</sup> Osherow 2000, p. 79.

<sup>105</sup> Ibid.

<sup>106</sup> Osherow 2000, p. 79.

<sup>107</sup> Peppers 1995.

trade about to take place and prepare them to the face-to-face meeting. Then she would teach them to survive in a forest environment and when ready, they would be sent to Earth. The appalled, anguished and enraged Humans regard Lilith as a traitor and in their confusion kill her Human trustee and partner, Joseph. Thus, her “work” merely alienates her from Humans and pushes her more towards the Oankali. At the end of *Dawn*, the adult Nikanj reveals that it has impregnated her with Joseph’s sperm and the child is half-Oankali.

Haraway, too, dwells on this pregnancy without consent and the ownership of one’s own body. She quotes a few lines from the discussion between Lilith and Nikanj at the end of *Dawn* where Lilith is left behind on the alien ship as her Human group is sent to Earth. Lilith says: “They [mixed-species children] won’t be human. That’s what matters. You can’t understand, but that *is* what matters”, to which Nikanj replies “The child inside you matters”.<sup>108</sup> The child is Lilith’s and Joseph’s, but some of its genetic material comes from Nikanj’s Oankali mates, and Lilith never consented to bear children to the Oankali. In this scene culminates all Lilith’s powerlessness in the face of the Oankali Trade.

In a way, the Oankali attitudes thus tally with the callousness of slave owners, too. Intelligent as they are and afraid of violence, the aliens are having difficulties in understanding the anguish they are causing to humans with their actions. Moreover, while they cannot close their eyes from human violence, they are still convinced that they are doing the right thing. The violence merely confirms their belief that the human race is suicidal and cannot be left alone; to “help” is their white man's burden.

However, the strongest allusions to slavery are concentrated around Lilith’s character. Osherow bases her reading of the echoes of slavery in the trilogy on Angela Davis’s views on black women’s history and slave mothers. According to her, Davis is “dedicated to debunking the image of black matriarch and slave collaborator”.<sup>109</sup> To call black women matriarchs is in Davis’s view

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<sup>108</sup> Haraway 1989, p. 381.

<sup>109</sup> Osherow 2000, p. 79.

incorrect, as they did not have any “stable kinship structures” to exercise “decisive authority” in, but their life was shaped by constant “fear” and “instability”. Yet, despite their limited power, their rebellious spirit remained strong and they went against their masters wherever they could. This, Osherow notes, applies to Lilith, too, point-to-point. At first she is set up as a “mother” to a group of human beings to be Awakened and cared for, then she is impregnated and gives birth to real, biological children. All this is imposed on her against her will, and all she can do is to preach “learn and run” to people who regard her as a traitor.

Furthermore, the African American protagonist is familiar with loss to begin with. In her previous life, she had had a husband and a son, who both had died in a car accident. Gradually the independent, affluent and resourceful black woman had collected herself and to do something, started anthropology studies. Anthropology started as a hobby of white well-to-do men who were fascinated by the exotic lives of indigenous peoples and had the time and resources to do research for the fun of it. That Lilith lands on her feet and pursues a traditionally white, male career makes her a strong, modern and emancipated black woman. Still, despite this formidable progress, she cannot cast off the ghosts of history. Lilith is not only physically black and female; the whole of her character is an embodiment of history, irony, myth and black woman’s experience.

This is also about as far as the analogue to slavery extends. What Osherow is overlooking, or perhaps not interested in, is the human extinction which was well underway when the aliens arrived in the first place. What the Oankali are attempting is a kind of a second chance for Humans, which inevitably involves negotiations and possibly compromises with the salvaging party. As it is, the humans died of a man-made apocalypse, a nuclear war. Furthermore, the aliens were themselves dying, and the finding of the human race to trade with saved them as much as they saved the humans still alive on the dying planet. Therefore, the view on the alien Oankali as being slavers and oppressors is too simplistic.

This is the technique in the Xenogenesis trilogy: at first Butler invokes familiar images and creates expectations, then confounds those expectations and formulates something different. The two species need each other to solve their own major crises, but the encounter is shocking to both parties and if the Human characters are at a loss, so are the Oankali. Consequently, transgressions and excesses occur on both sides and none of the characters escapes unscathed. For instance, Lilith interprets her own position among the Oankali at first as that of a “prisoner” ... “not permitted even the illusion of freedom”,<sup>110</sup> then “pet”,<sup>111</sup> then “experimental animal”,<sup>112</sup> but the relations are only taking shape and constantly developing. While Lilith’s sentiments are reasonable and the reader is inclined to read her position in exactly the same way, none of the assessments above eventually turn out to be quite right. Little by little these images of slavery are changed as Lilith learns to know her captors. The more she learns the more freedom she gains, and the more she understands the behaviour and motives of the Oankali the more she forgives their flaws. At the beginning of *Adulthood Rites* she is a respected member of a bustling and thriving Human-Oankali community and she explains the state of affairs to a less informed Human character:

They change us and we change them. ... I don’t like what they’re doing, and I’ve never made any secret of it. But they’re in this with us. When the ships leave, they’re stuck here. And with their own biology driving them, they can’t not blend with us. But some of what makes us Human will survive, just as some of what makes them Oankali will survive.<sup>113</sup>

What at first looks like arbitrary oppression becomes a (forced) joint venture. Lilith announces her dissatisfaction, but she also gives credit to the aliens and materially she is not badly off compared to the Resisters. At the end of *Adulthood Rites*, she urges a Resister woman, her former best friend called Tate, to join the Traders. Furthermore, even if the Humans initially have no chance of declining the aliens’ “offer”, as the relations between the species deepen, the Oankali finally relent and set out to terraform Mars to become the home of an exclusively Human society open to anyone

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<sup>110</sup> Butler 2000, p. 56 (in *Dawn*).

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 57 (in *Dawn*).

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 60 (in *Dawn*).

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 282 (in *Adulthood Rites*).

who wants to go. While Lilith could never have negotiated such a deal, her Construct son can. Thus, in the end the Humans do get a real choice. On the other hand, at the end of *Imago*, many of the Humans who had been running, hiding and resisting, realise that they quite like the new generation of Constructs and do not wish to migrate.

Like these various hints at slavery, there is another allusion that is initially introduced and then done away with: the captivity narrative. A person is captured by another people and incarcerated, enslaved or otherwise horribly mistreated (see 2.1). This person remains typically captured for long enough to learn the ways of the often barbaric people and then finally manages to return back home to tell his story. Lilith, too, has been captured, like all the other Human characters in the Xenogenesis trilogy, and she is at first adopted against her will to her Oankali instructor's family, then reunited with her own kind. The script is changed, though, as the other Humans turn against her and she seeks and receives protection among the Oankali.

Further, as I noted in 2.2, in sf, the captivity narrative has often metamorphosed into alien abduction, and there is a very direct allusion to this stock trope of sf, too, which a seasoned sf reader will recognise immediately. On the first pages of the first novel, when Lilith Awakens from suspended animation once again to see that she is still imprisoned, she mulls over a scar across her abdomen that has appeared between her Awakenings. She wonders what she has “lost or gained, and why”.<sup>114</sup> Here, too, the actual plot diverges from the traditional sf trope. The Oankali male, Jdahya, whom Lilith meets a few pages later, explains to her that her cancer has been healed, and the ooloi who did it, a relative of his, had not even needed to cut her, except that it had wanted to “observe” her with “all its senses”.<sup>115</sup> The cancer itself had been treated with gene therapy; Lilith's body had been “induced” to “reabsorb” the growth. Instead of having been subjected to some mysterious, painful or traumatising alien treatment, she has been painlessly saved from her own physiology.

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<sup>114</sup> Butler 2000, p. 7 (in *Dawn*).

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 22 (in *Dawn*).

As Lilith wonders how an Oankali can possibly know how to heal a human being, Jdahya tells her that the Oankali have had plenty of time to study the human body. It is Lilith who then thinks along the lines of Gothic horror stories, clinical animal testing and postmodern urban myths about alien abductions as she imagines “dying humans caged”, “dissections of living subjects as well as dead ones” and “treatable diseases allowed to run their grisly courses” in order to learn physiology.<sup>116</sup> It becomes clear that Lilith is speaking out of Human experience, imagination and fear, as she knows of nothing else, but the aliens do not actually correspond with her ideas. On the contrary, they are systematically presented as civil and caring, and it is the Humans who look rash, aggressive and violent in comparison. Thus this tip of the hat to the myth of alien abduction has at least two functions: it contrasts Human ways to Oankali ones, significantly in favour of the latter, and it also serves as a clear indication that the relation of the two species is not really that of captors and captives either.

The Oankali themselves claim that they are symbionts, and there is no evidence to be found in the text to counter this. The storyline actually corroborates nearly everything the Oankali characters ever say, except when they are for some reason mistaken or misinformed. They have a logic of their own that is consistent with their physique, mindset and origins, and although they may withhold information, by definition they do not lie. Thus, considering the textual clues, the multitude of names, allusions, wordplay and implication at work on the Human side of the trilogy, together with the volatility and aggression of the Human characters, the cool and composed aliens with completely artificial names and customs remain the one element that eludes interpretation and can only be taken at its face value. And, what the Oankali explicitly state that they want from Humans is not slavery or captivity but a merger of the two species. Therefore, they do not indisputably fit in the role of invaders, conquerors and slavers of human history. Hence, this encounter with the other is not a re-enactment of the old colonialist play.

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<sup>116</sup> Butler 2000, p. 22 (in *Dawn*).

Moreover, what the aliens keep talking about is family and family relations. It is Jdahya's "relative" that has operated on Lilith, it is his family home that the alien takes her to after her solitary confinement and introduces her to his mates. Even though she does not speak Oankali and there are only two English speakers, Jdahya and his ooloi mate Kahguyaht, Lilith finds herself eating at the same table and taking part in the reciprocal activity of filling dishes: "There was a central platform with more everything on it, and the Oankali took turns filling one another's dishes. One of them could not, it seemed, get up and fill only one dish. Others were immediately handed forward, even to Lilith."<sup>117</sup> Lilith is accepted as a family member and thus included in the exchange of food, selected information and favours. It is worth noting that in the harsh post-apocalyptic world of the Xenogenesis Trilogy, things like food and shelter take on a whole new significance and especially food is something that is grown, harvested, enjoyed and shared together by the characters throughout the trilogy. To continue, likewise, the family's ooloi child Nikanj is assigned as a companion to her, to teach and to be taught, and especially to kindle a mutual liking and trust, to form a relationship. To help it through its metamorphosis is Lilith's way to show her worth, to show that she can be trusted.

The Oankali are social to the extreme: they think everything in terms of relationships, reciprocal exchange, or Trade. They do not trade goods, but information, experiences and, eventually, "themselves", meaning their genetic material. Exchange is quite concretely their method of surviving, for with their genetic technologies they are, sooner or later, bound to deplete their own gene pool, unless they can find a new trading partner species. When they do find such a species, they divide into three: Dinso refers to the people who will mate with the new species; the outcome of the union, or the new species, is called Toaht; and finally there will remain a group called Akjai that will remember the Trade and all the information related to it but will not participate itself. The only element in the existence of the ever-metamorphosing Oankali species that helps the individuals

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<sup>117</sup> Butler 2000, pp. 47-48 (in *Dawn*).

make sense of their roots and retain a sense of the self is a kind of a biological “memory”. Each individual can “remember” each division in their own family through generations all the way to the first Oankali creatures in an unknown homeworld which has most likely ceased to exist aeons ago.<sup>118</sup> Correspondingly, each individual is also recognised, acknowledged and remembered within the web of families, kinship groups and eventually genealogies that run across time and space. What is more, if any of the family ties is broken, the individuals will fall physically sick. Thus, although they are physically tough and seemingly hard to kill, they are fragile and dependant on others, and to them, a successful Trade is a matter of life and death.

However, if we compare the fictional Oankali to real human beings, this depending on others is hardly very science fictional; the conflict between independency and dependency is central to human psychology. Furthermore, violent, quarrelsome or otherwise unsatisfactory relationships cause stress and are detrimental to human health. The real difference between the Human society and the Oankali society is that the Oankali companionship and nurturing also defines the aliens’ relation to the surrounding world and fellow creatures. For instance, the importance of affinity, kinship and nurturing is reflected on the level of vocabulary. When Kahguyaht informs Lilith about her employment, it uses the phrase “parent the first group”. As Lilith reacts to the choice of words, it explains “That’s the way we think of it. To teach, to give comfort, to feed and clothe, to guide them through and interpret what will be, for them, a new and frightening world. To parent.”<sup>119</sup> Another Oankali expression that surprises Lilith is “to share sex” instead of the Human equivalent “have sex”. Even the Oankali spaceships are living organisms bound to the Oankali economy of reciprocity. They care for the travellers and inhabitants by providing oxygen, synthesising food and recycling waste, and more, as Jdahya explains to Lilith:

The human doctor used to say it [Chkahichdahk, the Oankali mothership] loved us. There is an affinity, but it’s biological – a strong, symbiotic relationship. We serve

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<sup>118</sup> Butler 2000, p. 36 (in *Dawn*).

<sup>119</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 111 (in *Dawn*).



the ship's needs and it serves ours. It would die without us and we would be planetbound without it. For us, that would eventually mean death.<sup>120</sup>

Instead of piloting, the Oankali “guide” these ships by linking with them and sharing the experience of flying through space.<sup>121</sup> By engaging myriads of species to varying degrees in their Trade, the Oankali create wellbeing around themselves and form complex networks.

As regards Lilith and the other Humans, the frame of reference in the trilogy is not that of slavery or abduction but adoption. The Oankali are in a desperate need of new genetic material, but instead of merely taking DNA from dead or dying individuals, they press for a “full trade”, in which Humans actually live with them. It is told that at first the Oankali had perceived Humans as frighteningly alien creatures and yet they had taken pains to study Human physiology, culture and languages as they found it worth the effort. Therefore, when Lilith is awakened, the Oankali she communicates with speaks perfect English. Later, this character describes his family's response to their first human contact: “When the [Human] doctor first came to our household, ... some of my family found her so disturbing that they left home for a while. That's unheard-of behaviour among us. ... And I think their fear was stronger than yours is now”.<sup>122</sup> The Oankali believe in the healing power of intimacy and belonging and they practise what they preach as they open up their own families to accommodate Humans. Like invasion, enslaving and exploitation, this kind of behaviour, too, has its model in the US history. As I noted in 2.1, Native Americans sometimes adopted whites into their tribes. Bell hooks also writes about the warm relations and marriages between Native Americans and African Americans.

Another issue worth noting is Lilith's role as a member of the Oankali community. To compare, early on in *Dawn*, a man called Paul Titus is introduced to Lilith and the Oankali idea is that Lilith would like him and perhaps have sex with him. On the contrary, the puerile male makes Lilith uneasy with his egotism and sexism and, finding her reluctant, attempts to rape her. This

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<sup>120</sup> Butler 2000, p. 35 (in *Dawn*).

<sup>121</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 441-442 (in *Adulthood Rites*).

<sup>122</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 26 (in *Dawn*).

character has lived among the Oankali for longer than Lilith and from a younger age and yet, he is less mature, less intelligent and harder for the aliens to reach and communicate with; his violent behaviour comes as a surprise to them. Ironically, the character's first name is borrowed from a Christian patriarch and surname from an emperor and still he has not made the same progress as Lilith with the Oankali. In fact, his name links him to the tradition of male power that Lilith is up against when among Human characters, and I will return to that later on. Compared to Paul Titus, Lilith is a wise and kind character who bears the weight of black women's history on her shoulders and brings her life experience into her relationship with the Oankali. As the Oankali adopt Lilith, that is, accept her as one of their own and assimilate her into their family structures, her experiences gain weight. As the mutual understanding deepens and her child companion Nikanj matures to become an influential individual among the Oankali, her views on the oppressive methods in dealing with Humans are heard and appreciated. Thus, adoption is not enough to make things work; it takes a character like Lilith to start a meaningful dialogue between the species.

### 3.2 Miscegenation or Hybridity?

The previous chapter was about the nature of the relationship between the Humans and the Oankali. In this chapter, I am going to have a look at the position and attitudes toward the Oankali cross-species mating and the resulting cross-species offspring. Although the Oankali are presented as a benign species and their way of life superior to that of the Humans, the coexistence of the two species is not problem-free. Whatever the Oankali race touches it changes, and the nearly extinct Humans wish to be let alone. Moreover, the Oankali look disturbingly ugly and the gene trade plan is received with absolute horror. The distressed Humans turn against the messenger Lilith, each

other and the Oankali, and violence escalates. The Human response to the Oankali presence is hatred, name calling and physical attacks not unlike racism, even though this time it is against another species. On the Oankali side, in contrast, there is an innate drive to do good. However, this involves saving Humans from themselves by breeding out and/or otherwise fixing violent and hierarchical tendencies, as leaving the Humans alone would be a cruelty. Humans have already destroyed their world once in a nuclear war, and for the Oankali it is self-evident that if left to their own devices, they will do it again. There is a clash of world views.

As I am going to show, despite the Oankali oppression, the roots of the major problems on the Human side are traced to sexist, racist and xenophobic attitudes that spring from patriarchal order and religious moralism and the aliens provide an alternative point of view. In the trilogy, it takes two generations to iron out the problems between the species, and as I am going to argue here and in greater depth in chapter 4, the hybrids have a key role. To examine the racial politics of the trilogy, I am going to trace the ideas of purity and racial cleanliness and examine the way they are treated.

In the introduction, I labelled the trilogy simply an origin story. However, the title of the trilogy, *Xenogenesis*, contains yet another trick. The *Oxford English Dictionary* translates the prefix *xeno-* as “a guest, stranger, foreigner” or as an adjective, “foreign, strange”.<sup>123</sup> The trilogy can thus be read as a new genesis with the extra element of strangers from outer space meddling with the genome of Man. Yet, the trilogy being sf, it is worth noticing that there is a scientific meaning to the word *xenogenesis*, which The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines as follows: “production of offspring permanently unlike the parent”.<sup>124</sup> Again this definition can be taken literally in this context and the different angle gives rise to a less mythical, more robustly scientific and reasonable reading of the trilogy and its characters. Although the Oankali are foreigners and indeed strange to Humans, they are a people, an intelligent people at that, and deserve to be treated as such, not

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<sup>123</sup> <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/230989?redirectedFrom=xeno-#eid> [Accessed 16.5.2014].

<sup>124</sup> <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/230989?redirectedFrom=xenogenesis#eid14051484> [Accessed 16.5.2014].

labelled as devils, monsters or an abomination. Moreover, the science fictional point of view brings the next generation, the children, into focus and frees them as it gives an opportunity to accept them as they are, without labelling them as monsters. Yet, Cathy Peppers points out the ambiguity in the meaning of the original Greek word *xenos*: according to her, it has both the meaning of “guest/friend” and “alien/stranger”.<sup>125</sup> Thus, there is a tension between the two possible readings and it remains the reader’s task to decide whether the Oankali are friends from the stars or genetic pollution. At the beginning, Lilith is mistrustful herself and the other Human characters even more so, but as the story unfolds, it becomes more and more difficult to read the Oankali simply as a calamity.

Nevertheless, a trilogy named *Xenogenesis* featuring a protagonist called Lilith is a clear enough invitation to read the story as an alternative genesis. In her reading of *Dawn*, Osherow does that with a flourish, and I will return to her analysis of Lilith in chapter 4. However, she claims that the only character from the old scriptures left in this new *xenogenesis* is Lilith, but had she read the rest of the trilogy, she would have found quite a few others; there are at least Joseph, María, Jesusa, Adan and Tomás of the core group of the Bible, and perhaps even others, if one counts characters with names such as Paul, Conrad and João as biblical, too. I do not wish to go very deep into names in this thesis, but these characters tell a story within a story about the idea of racial (or species) purity which I find relevant here.

Despite the conspicuous names of the characters, the text resists any strictly biblical reading as it would turn the storyline simply absurd. If Lilith is interpreted as the wife of Satan, then the *Xenogenesis* trilogy narrates the decline of the humankind. Another option would be to read Lilith against the grain, as Osherow does, as good, and the Oankali perhaps as “friends” from space, god-like in their benevolence and genetic technologies. Still, instead of devils, this reading only casts the Oankali in the role of the missing God, or to quote Le Guin, raises them on a pedestal (see 2.2),

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<sup>125</sup> Peppers 1995.

which I do not think Butler is doing. Xenogenesis is essentially a story about people, regardless of whether they are terrestrial or not. This implies that both species are important in their own right, have a right to exist and it is impossible to label them simply as good or bad.

The conflict between the species could be resolved in favour of the Humans if the Oankali saved Humanity after a nuclear disaster, left them untouched and disappeared into space, but no Trade would mean death to the Oankali after they have helped Humans, and moreover, being natural genetic engineers, the Oankali are simply incapable of leaving. The other option for the Humans is to consent to the gene trade, which would bring Humanity as the characters knew it to an end. Like in the conflicts of the history of the US, there are no easy answers; the conflict could be resolved in both way and still one or both parties would be less than happy. Moreover, like in history, the situation is not fair, as in order to control the Humans, the Oankali have made them all incapable of having children without an ooloi partner. As it happens, as a reward for her kindness and civility, Lilith ends up bonded to an alien and is impregnated without consent. To quote Haraway again, she calls the trilogy “survival fiction” instead of “salvation fiction”. According to her, fiction like that cannot be rooted in fantasies of natural roots or recoverable origins, it cannot figure the “Second Coming of a sacred image” but something new has to come out of it.<sup>126</sup> As I see it, there is an attempt of such a second coming, but it is doomed to fail.

Towards the end of the trilogy, in *Imago*, we meet a female character called Jesusa. She is not headed for crucifixion but childbearing, “child after child after child”, to fill the earth with Humans in a hair-raisingly literal, biblical way until she dies either in labour or of her grotesque genetic disorder that grows tumours all over her body – most likely resulting from inbreeding. Her grandmother, María de la Luz, or the Maid Mary of this story, is an anomaly, a descendant of humans the Oankali had missed and not sterilised. In a way, she brings light – the word *luz* is Spanish for light – or at least a flicker of hope to the Humans who start to breed her. At the age of

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<sup>126</sup> Haraway 1989, p. 378.

fifteen she had been attacked, raped by several men and as a result, against all odds, was impregnated. She gave birth to a son, Adan, and the mother and the son being the only known fertile Humans on Earth, she was separated from Adan until he was thirteen and they had children together. From this incestuous union springs a sickly, deformed, disease-ridden but completely Human mockery of a race of which Jesusa is third generation. Her brother, Tomás, equally sick and forced to reproduce but with less risk to his life, doubts the point of their endeavour and indeed has attempted suicide, whereas the sister is strong in her faith in this new humanity.

The morbid story of Jesusa and Tomás I read as a rendering of such a “second coming” and the names of the characters suggesting that such an attempt of a revival is based on a (religious) belief system rather than realism. The idea of purity thus becomes a mere nostalgic fantasy upheld by a dwindling group of misguided people. Furthermore, the misery of the isolationist community proves it to be a pernicious one. Faith and doubt, Jesusa and Tomás, are presented as sister and brother, children of the same community, and both of them and their community are equally doomed until they open up to the rest of the world, which the Oankali have already touched.

In other words, in order to survive in the grim, postapocalyptic Xenogenesis world, the characters need to rely on each other and their intellect and there is no place for delusion. Inbreeding will not save the Humans, and nor does violence, segregation or incommunication. In addition to this religious community in *Imago*, there is much description of a secular Resister village called Phoenix in *Adulthood Rites*. Although the name of the village symbolises new hope, the villagers actually look back. They have a large excavation site where they salvage pre-war artefacts and they produce and trade goods with other Resister villages, including firearms, but they also traffic women. There is a harrowing scene in which a few villagers plan to make two Construct children more Human-like by sedating them with corn whisky and cutting off their tentacles. The idea of purity is reiterated time and again, rendered as ludicrous and here even tyrannical as the

characters are prepared to mutilate children. At the end of *Rites*, a villager sets one of the houses on fire in attempt to kill Lilith's hybrid son Akin, and Phoenix burns down.

Xenophobia, delusion, isolationism and violence are presented as poor coping strategies based on fear and backward-looking navel gazing: the characters guilty of practising this are either macho characters (Paul Titus, Peter) and their male and female followers (Gabriel, Tate, Celene), religious characters (Jesusa, Tomás) or characters deeply troubled or weak (Paul Titus, Peter, Curt). In this way the source of all moralism, dogmatism, restrictions and punishment is traced back to the monolithic social structures of religion, racial prejudice and patriarchal order. All these have long been criticised by feminists and womanists, and indeed in this future vision they all are necessarily due to overhaul.

The story of Jesusa and Tomás also allows the worst case scenario to be turned upside down. It is not any "illicit" mixing but, on the contrary, inbreeding that is presented as the downfall of all communities, whether they are religious or not and even Human or not. The religious community is doomed as long as they cling to their "purity", and this Human fate is paralleled by the Oankali existence – or the other way round – as the massive Oankali spaceships take their people from one planet to another and from one Trade to another in an endless race against genetic stagnation. In this sense, the Xenogenesis trilogy is necessarily "about miscegenation, not reproduction of the One" as Haraway suggests.<sup>127</sup> What is more, the ditching of the religious load debunks the idea that the mixing of the species is automatically unclean or catastrophic.

In the previous chapter, I showed how Butler at first refers to and then rejects the concepts of slavery and alien abduction. In a similar manner, she also comments on the concept of racial cleanliness in the trilogy and discards it. In *Dawn* Lilith speaks her mind to Nikanj about the Oankali plans and Nikanj challenges Lilith's point by making the pressing, yet somewhat abstract question of racial hygiene a strictly personal one:

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<sup>127</sup> Haraway 1989, pp. 378-379.

“Some will think the human species deserves at least a clean death.”

“Is it an unclean thing that we want, Lilith?”

“Yes!”

“Is it an unclean thing that I have made you pregnant?”

She did not understand the words at first. It was as though it had begun speaking a language she did not know.

“You ... what?”<sup>128</sup>

Lilith presents the general Human sentiment that mixing with another species is something unclean and it is the androgynous alien who plays the famous feminist the-personal-is-political card here by enquiring whether there is then something unclean in her own pregnancy. This is a dilemma Lilith cannot at this point resolve. Devastated as she is, she obviously cannot make herself regard her own child as unclean, and after the initial shock, she takes up another argument. This Nikanj again counters.

“But it won't be human,” she whispered. “It will be a thing. A monster.”

“You shouldn't begin to lie to yourself. It's a deadly habit.”<sup>129</sup>

With its comment, Nikanj condemns Lilith's attitude. It refers to what the Oankali see as yet another human flaw, the ability for self-deception. That “habit” had almost killed Lilith, as her human trainees chose not to believe her, and when they found out she had told the truth, they turned in their anger against her. As Nikanj explains that the child will look like Lilith and Joseph – the man whom those people did kill and who was thus lost for the human folly – Lilith's argumentation is reduced to a mere “I don't believe you”, which, considering all the things Lilith has already seen the Oankali do, probably is not quite true either.<sup>130</sup>

The idea of racial cleanliness is a concept that the aliens only understand through their knowledge of human genetics: Humans are intelligent but hierarchical. These two characteristics form the human “Contradiction” that, according to the Oankali, inevitably leads to violent behaviour. As the Oankali perceive it, the Contradiction makes individuals and groups seek domination over others. On one hand, the hierarchical Humans need others to gain a sense of the

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<sup>128</sup> Butler 2000, p. 246 (in *Dawn*).

<sup>129</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 247 (in *Dawn*).

<sup>130</sup> Butler 2000, p. 247 (in *Dawn*).



self and a sense of power but, on the other hand, they fear that others might be strong enough to dominate them, which makes Humans naturally xenophobic.

The Oankali challenge this behaviour with a diagonally opposite strategy. They connect, communicate, relate to and share. With their communication technologies, they are able to form a neurosensory link to almost any life form and start an exchange that benefits both species. For them, there are no monsters, only different kinds of beings. Thus the aliens simply reject all talk of monstrosity as nonsense and condemn prejudice. Nikanj calmly faces Lilith's outbursts and explains:

“Our children will be better than either of us,” it continued. “We will moderate your hierarchical problems and you will lessen our physical limitations. Our children won't destroy themselves in a war, and if they need to regrow a limb or to change themselves in some other way they'll be able to do it. And there will be other benefits.”<sup>131</sup>

The children will be mixed-species, so they will be different from their parents, and Nikanj's words bring out how it is unreasonable to judge them by narrow and arbitrary Human standards alone.

The Oankali themselves come from countless homeworlds and Trades and different generations have come in different shapes, sizes and physiques, but all Trades have given the race something new. For the Oankali, diversity quite literally equals life and lack of it stagnation and death. They are drawn towards diversity, and this different outlook is perhaps best expressed by the Construct Jodahs at the beginning of *Imago*: “Our river water at Lo always came to us clouded with sediment. ‘Rich,’ the Oankali called it. ‘Muddy,’ the Humans said, and filtered it or let the silt settle to the bottom before they drank it.”<sup>132</sup> Where the Humans see mud, or water mixed with dirt that has to be cleared, the Oankali perceive richness.

To the Oankali, mingling, mixing and metamorphosing is natural and beneficial, and significantly, their touch is advantageous to their Human companions, too. The Traders enjoy a longer life with virtually no disease, have warm relationships within their large families and the

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<sup>131</sup> Butler 2000, p. 247 (in *Dawn*).

<sup>132</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 523 (in *Imago*).

Oankali apparatus of biological production that involves specialised plants and animals caters for their material needs. In the end, it is quite easy for the Traders to adjust into the new way of life.

Cathy Peppers notes that the Oankali regard even human beings as symbiotic beings. She quotes Nikanj's words:

Examine [a human]. Inside him, so many different things are working together to keep him alive. Inside his cells, mitochondria, a previously independent form of life, have found a haven and trade their ability to synthesize proteins and metabolize fats for room to live and reproduce. ... I think we're as much symbionts as their [humans'] mitochondria were originally. They could not have evolved into what they are without mitochondria.<sup>133</sup>

According to Peppers, the Oankali perception allows the reader to see shared interests, cooperation and reciprocity instead of competition and survival of the fittest. She claims that Butler is appropriating and redeploing the idioms of sociobiology to challenge the Darwinian story that raised the white man over racialised others.<sup>134</sup> The issue of the critique of Western science aside, the aliens liken the Oankali principle of symbiosis to the mitochondria inside the Human body to indicate that such cooperation is not foreign to Humans.

Further, while the alien ability to connect and communicate with almost anything, touch and be touched, change and be changed, challenges the notion of any clear categories, it is also worth noting that even the Human characters challenge such categories to begin with. Lilith Iyapo is a Nigerian-American with a Jewish first name, her late husband a Kenyan-American and her dead son thus something in-between. In her new life Lilith chooses a Chinese-Canadian lover, about which Nikanj's mates are "mystified", as they had been certain she would pick "one of the big dark ones".<sup>135</sup> After Joseph's death, she pairs with a man called "Victor Dominic" although his name is actually Vidor Domonkos (his parent are from Hungary<sup>136</sup>) for a while, until they "tired of one another" and the man comes to see their Construct daughter a few times a year.<sup>137</sup> Then Lilith meets

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<sup>133</sup> Peppers 1995.

<sup>134</sup> Ibid.

<sup>135</sup> Butler 2000, p. 164 (in *Dawn*).

<sup>136</sup> Ibid. p. 118 (in *Dawn*).

<sup>137</sup> Ibid. p. 265 (in *Adulthood Rites*).

Augustino Leal, or Tino, a Latino man who in turn takes the place of the Human father in the family.

By mating with the Oankali and being assimilated in the Oankali kinship structures, Lilith gains a new family. She is capable of liking, even loving, her alien mates, and she is also capable of loving her Human-Oankali children exactly as they are. Later her children will have a crucial role in shaping the Human-Oankali relations. Akin, both Human and Oankali, or “walking in the both worlds” if you will, is able to perceive in the Oankali way both the Human and Oankali experiences in his own mind and body, and in him the clash of interests is thus personified. Therefore, it is also in Akin’s mind that the solution to the dispute germinates. Being as Human as Lilith and yet having Oankali sensory tentacles, he is able to make a neural connection with the rest of the Oankali and give them a “direct neurosensory image” of the urgency of the Human need to let a part of the Humanity live on unchanged. He brings forward the idea that Humanity needs their own *akjai*, a people that remains untouched by the Oankali, and this is the first step in the process to terraform Mars to be a new, strictly Human homeworld. Lilith’s ooloi child, Jodahs, is able to win Jesusa and Tomás’s trust, heal them and heal other sick members of the community.

The Oankali tell Lilith that she will never really understand the Oankali, but her children will, and this turns out to be true. To quote Haraway, with their genetic technologies, the Oankali are doomed to be “midwife to themselves as other”.<sup>138</sup> This system allows the Oankali to perceive the restrictions in individuals’ capabilities and for them, the answer is the next generation who will have a deeper understanding of the species of its parents and who will be able to make use of it. If many of the Resisters have difficulties in accepting the Oankali and communicating with them, they have much less problems with Constructs.

To sum up, the Xenogenesis world is a world in which (racial) “cleanliness”, or purity, is a sentimental, nostalgic, even “deadly” human dream. It will not hold against the cool Oankali

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<sup>138</sup> Haraway 1989, p. 379.

reasoning and eventually it will not hold against Lilith's own mother's instinct. On the contrary, it is Lilith's ability to tie an emotional bond to her own child, to *love* across species boundaries, that Nikanj recognises and counts on in impregnating her. Least of all it will hold against the Human characters in *Imago* who actually fall in love with the transcendent posthuman Construct protagonist. The hybrids are the ones that eventually save both the Human and the Oankali races exactly because they are of mixed breed. Plurality is presented as a resource, not a problem, and hybridity a solution.

## 4. Mothering and Family Formations

So far I have focused on the alien characters and how they interact with the Human characters. In this chapter, I shall study the Human characters in more detail. As I am going to argue, the main conflict in the trilogy is not really between the Humans and the Oankali – or between men and women with some alien allies, for that matter – but between the two groups of Humans, Traders and Resisters. As I showed in chapter 3, there is a tension between religious and scientific world views. Similarly, there is a tension between two kinds of feminism. Lilith, the tall black woman has a counterpart: a small, blonde woman roughly her age, called Tate Marah. The two become friends, but their ways are separated as Tate chooses the Resister side. With Tate's character Butler is able to compare Tate's segregationist (white) feminism to Lilith's more inclusive womanism, and the different implications for women and different kinds of sexual relations forming in the two women's communities. Tate functions as a nurturer, too, as her childless community buys Lilith's stolen son Akin and she becomes his surrogate mother for a period of time. On the other hand, Lilith, biological mother to at least three children, is able to share the physical effort of childbearing as well as the joys, sorrows and responsibilities of motherhood with her female Oankali mate Ahajas, the mother of the Oankali-born children in the family. Childrearing in general in Lilith's family – which is clearly the preferred one, a family unit of five adults and at least six children – is ultimately a shared responsibility of all the parents whether they are male, female or ooloi.

Thus, in 4.1, I am at first going to have a look at Butler's male and female characters in the trilogy in general, then concentrate on the role of Lilith in particular, and read her character as a specifically womanist mother type. In her we see the emancipation and transformation of a modern, ambitious, seemingly emancipated woman to an empowered and empowering teacher, nurturer, companion and defender of human rights, complete with an artistic flair and a penchant for gardening. I am going to compare her stance to Tate's.

The scale of the trilogy, however, is larger than the undertakings of any one character as it encompasses two generations. While *Dawn* leaves the Resisters to their own devices and Lilith both physically and emotionally stranded, in *Adulthood Rites* and *Imago* we see Lilith's unabated efforts bear fruit as the next generation starts learning the ropes. Her mixed-blood offspring, at home in both Human and Oankali communities, take up the task of defending the Resisters and work as mediators in ways Lilith never could. In 4.2 I will concentrate on Lilith's progeny and discuss the role of the mixed-blood Constructs in the whole of the story. The trilogy is not really about tolerance in the sense that one should tolerate otherness, but rather in the sense that one should embrace and enjoy diversity; it preaches what could be called an ethics of diversity. Genuine respect for the other, camaraderie and cooperation, even love, is what keeps populations alive and their members in better health. I will show how the emerging way of life enables not only women but also men to be free.

#### 4.1 Lilith: The New Mother

“You are going to set me up as their *mother*?” – Lilith<sup>139</sup>

In 3.1, I read Lilith as a modern version of the black female slave and the post-apocalyptic earth as a multi-racial and even multi-species world. In this chapter, I am going to take those interpretations a step further and read Lilith as a modern, womanist mother figure and her mixed-species family a key to a more humane, woman-friendly world.

To begin with, the Xenogenesis story is not centred on an Eve-figure but Lilith, the woman from the margins left out of the Bible, exiled from paradise and pushed aside from the history of man after quarrelling with Adam. Black women have been similarly pushed to the margins in the

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139 Butler 2000, p. 111 (in *Dawn*).

American society because of both their gender and race. If feminism arose from resistance to a patriarchal society, womanism fights all oppression and, further, it recognises the dignity in motherhood. While the difficulties Butler's Lilith faces in relation to the alien Oankali bear some resemblance to the history of the blacks in America, the attitudes of the Resisters towards the Oankali are reminiscent of the white supremacist ideology. Moreover, Lilith's experiences with her fellow Human characters mirror the atmosphere of the 1980s, the time the trilogy was written, when black women had already gained a footing in education, working life and society at large but were still vulnerable and struggled with the consequences of the double standards of a patriarchal society.

At first I am going to read Lilith as a superwoman and mother and consider her as a womanist heroine, then compare her to Tate Marah, the intelligent blonde woman who becomes a central figure on the Resister side. Eventually, I am going to take a few steps back and see what kind of commentary this Lilith figure with her less-than-Human partners and offspring makes on patriarchal culture and racial ideology.

According to Michele Osherow, the ancient Lilith myth represented male fear of female power and the Lilith that appears in female sf has evolved from there. These female characters "reject the 'good girl/bad girl' binary in which 'good' symbolizes women's service to the patriarchy and 'bad' announces them to be a threat to patriarchy", she explains. She refers to the images of women as either "empowered sorceresses" or "idealized mothers" and claims that the Lilith character "demonstrates the difficulties in reckoning an independent, sexual self with a being on whom innocents depend for sustenance and protection."<sup>140</sup>

Butler's Lilith overcomes these difficulties, and as Osherow notes, she manages to be powerful, sexual *and* maternal, even becoming a living legend among the rest of the characters. As I have noted before, at the beginning of the trilogy, her life reminds that of a slave woman's, as it is completely controlled by others (the aliens) and she is also vulnerable to sexual violence, as the first

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<sup>140</sup> Osherow 2000, p. 69.

human being she meets tries to rape her. Yet, with her characteristics typically associated with femininity, i.e. kindness, responsibility, nurturing and lack of aggression, she shows her worth to the Oankali. The aliens regard do not regard these features as weak, effeminate or negative in any way but, on the contrary, as positive characteristics of a leader. Therefore she is given a key position in their plans and extra strength for protection against male violence. The aliens recognise Lilith's potential and they choose her precisely because she is a woman.

Among the Humans, however, the situation is different. As Lilith knows the Oankali, has been trained by them to be able to take care of herself in a new environment and has even been physically altered to make better use of her memory and strength, she is indisputably the obvious leader for the Humans and yet, the moment she Awakens the first men from suspended animation, she needs to defend her leader role. The modern, educated English-speaking males from America and Canada that Lilith has deemed sensible, reliable and fit to be Awakened have problems accepting a female leader. Furthermore, as the Humans understand that their race is nearly extinct, they decide to pair off, and some characters, male and female, start reasoning it is women's duty to be sexually available for men. At times, Lilith also has to respond to male violence with her own physical strength and once she prevents a rape. Therefore, it is quite evident that at the time of a crisis, women's safety is still compromised and female leadership not easily accepted. The Oankali are made to comment on this, too, as an influential ooloi called Kahguyaht tells Lilith: "I believed that because of the way human genetics were expressed in culture, a human male should be chosen to parent the first group. I think now that I was wrong."<sup>141</sup> The ooloi had noticed that most of the former human leaders had been men and therefore it had not trusted the other Oankali's judgment, but when it had learnt to know Lilith better, it had changed its mind.

Furthermore, Lilith is also subjected to social control. Because of her special powers and relations to the Oankali, she is mistrusted by many and the vitriol she receives from her enemies

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<sup>141</sup> Butler 2000, p. 111 (in *Dawn*).



tends to be sexualised or gender-specific: “She [Leah, a woman who attacked Lilith and whom she hit back as an automatic reaction] is telling people you are a man ... only a man can fight that way”,<sup>142</sup> “Strip and screw your Nikanj right here for everyone to see, why don’t you. We know you are their whore”,<sup>143</sup> “In Phoenix people said things like that – that she was possessed of the devil, that she had sold first herself, then Humanity, that she was the first to go willingly to an Oankali bed to become their whore and to seduce other Humans...”.<sup>144</sup> Likewise, Lilith comments herself that some ex-resisters who have not seen her sometimes assume she “has horns”, and had people managed to kill her, they would have felt “virtuous and avenged.”<sup>145</sup> All this reproach and the accompanying terminology also have a religious clang to them; her relationship with the Oankali is a transgression, which makes her a bad woman or a whore, and her power is unwomanly if not demonic, which makes her womanhood and even humanity suspect. Indeed, it is male hegemony and competition, fear of the other and religious moralism that Butler’s Lilith is up against in a future world after Awakening a host of human beings. The reactions reveal what kind of behaviours are accepted and what is unacceptable among the former modern, mostly North American city people.

This behaviour is not debilitating to women but also to men. According to Nikanj, Lilith’s partner Joseph gets his share, too: “there are already two human males speaking against him, trying to turn others against him. One has decided he’s something called a faggot and the other dislikes the shape of his eyes. Actually, both are angry about the way he’s allied himself with you”.<sup>146</sup> There are further allusions to homophobia, as many of the male characters interpret the neuter ooloi as males and feel guilt about liking their touch, which comes out as anger and aggression. Both the discrepancy between Lilith’s humane action and her reception and Nikanj’s comment reveal that the name-calling is not based on any real beliefs, though, but is an emotional response to an unbearable

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<sup>142</sup> Butler 2000, p. 147 (in *Dawn*).

<sup>143</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 241 (in *Dawn*).

<sup>144</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 298 (in *Adulthood Rites*).

<sup>145</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 297-298 (in *Adulthood Rites*).

<sup>146</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 159 (in *Dawn*).

situation. Violence is presented as a result of failing logic and overwhelming fear in the face of an encounter with an alien race.

Lilith is the superwoman character that sets an opposite example. Despite being framed a “bad woman”, she is actually a nurturer. She very concretely lifts the helpless Humans out of the suspended animation plants, puts clothes on them and gives food. Haraway calls her a midwife/mother for this.<sup>147</sup> Further, despite the lack of trust, she still shares her knowledge and provides whatever protection she can to her group of grown-ups in *Dawn*, and in *Adulthood Rites*, she eventually gives birth to biological children and cares for them.

Despite her power, responsibility and mother role, she is attractive in the eyes of male characters, too. As Tino approaches Lilith’s village, the little but precocious Akin notices him first and informs Lilith that there is a strange man nearby who is “excited. Maybe afraid” and Lilith corrects him: “Not afraid, ... Not of a woman pulling cassavas and carrying a baby.”<sup>148</sup> The whole scene has a finely tuned, somewhat primeval air and voyeurism to it: there is a young and fit black woman at home in a luscious, tropical garden – the garden of Eden if you like – surrounded by rainforests, and a man watching her. With a basket in her hand and a baby on her back she is engaged in a most feminine action, gathering food for her family. Yet, she is equally capable of masculine action as she swiftly grabs the man’s bow and breaks it, explains that no weapons are allowed in her village and then deftly wields her own machete on some banana stalks. Easily controlling the situation she hands the bananas to the man and leaves him to decide whether he wants to follow her or not. This image is echoed later on as Tino describes Lilith as “an amazon of a woman, tall and strong, but with no look of hardness to her. Fine, dark skin. Breasts high in spite of all the children – breasts full of milk.”<sup>149</sup> Yet, Lilith is not simply objectified by the male character as he continues: “The woman was not beautiful. Her broad, smooth face was usually set in an expression of solemnity, even sadness. ... [i]t made her look saintly. A mother. ... And something

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<sup>147</sup> Haraway 1989, p. 380.

<sup>148</sup> Butler 2000, p. 267 (in *Adulthood Rites*).

<sup>149</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 285 (in *Adulthood Rites*).

else.”<sup>150</sup> Thus, Lilith represents to the male character a formidable presence at once strong, “saintly”, motherly and sexual rather than simply beautiful or desirable. In other words, there is no trace of the racialised exotic eroticism that for example bell hooks associates with representations of black women in popular culture. Later still, the man asks Lilith what she wants him to do, to stay or go, respecting her autonomy and asking for advice.<sup>151</sup>

Osherow quotes Nancy Chodorow as she maintains that in our culture, sexual power is denied from mothers. That Butler’s Lilith can be both sexual and maternal she sees as a diversification of women’s roles and an incentive to redefine our perceptions of womanhood. What is more, she finds two significant characteristics of Eve incorporated in this Lilith. Firstly, like Eve, she is altruistic, an “enabler” that both helps the Oankali in their desperation with humans, especially Nikanj in its metamorphosis, and she teaches a group of Humans no less than how to stay alive. It is only herself that she alienates in the process, Osherow claims, as at this point, she is already deeply bonded to the still alien Nikanj and physically changed by the ooloi and therefore her own people remain dubious about her motives and even her humanness. She is capable of empowering others, but not herself, Osherow concludes. This actually applies in *Dawn*, but in *Adulthood Rites*, she is a respected member of her community. She cannot break free, but she feels relatively happy with her second life. Moreover, as Tino asks her whether her pregnancy really was something she “wanted but would never come out and ask for” as the Oankali say, she replies: “Yes. ... Oh yes. But if I had the strength not to ask, it [Nikanj] should have had the strength to let me alone.”<sup>152</sup> The character has matured and although she was at a loss when Nikanj told her about her pregnancy, she now expresses genuine joy for her children and is loving and protective about them. In this respect, she indeed has empowered herself. Moreover, children are for her a natural way of enjoying her new, extended life and not a burden or “trap” that binds her home.

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<sup>150</sup> Butler 2000, p. 285 (in *Adulthood Rites*).

<sup>151</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 301 (in *Adulthood Rites*).

<sup>152</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 274 (in *Adulthood Rites*).

Secondly, instead of a mother of demons, Osherow sees Butler's Lilith as an Eve-like mother of all things, and here I can only agree. By nurturing Nikanj during its metamorphosis, then "parenting" groups of adult Humans and eventually giving birth to the first ever Human-born hybrid children, she can well be regarded as the ultimate nurturer and progenitrix of the new genesis. As I noted in 3.1, Osherow mentions the trope of the black matriarch, saying that Lilith's difficult position corresponds to the position of the black slave mother with dependants, responsibility and attitude but little real power. However, I would also compare Lilith to what King and Ferguson call black allomothers,<sup>153</sup> or black women who make it their business to nurture and teach children who are not their own. In a similar manner, Lilith feels deeply for her own people, takes on the imposed teacher's role and finds teaching rewarding, fights for her community and promotes human values and humane conduct in dire circumstances. Thus, instead of a black mother she should be considered a (black) allomother taking care of her own kind, which is not people of any specific colour but all Humans, and significantly, also people not exactly Human or not at all Human. With her passionate protagonist, Butler brings black tradition to a new era and on a new level altogether: the all-inclusive humanism inherent in black feminism and womanism is here expanded to include extraterrestrials, too.

Alice Walker defines a womanist as "a black feminist or feminist of colour" – I will return to colour later – and the term womanish as referring to "outrageous, audacious, courageous or wilful behaviour", "wanting to know more and in greater depth than is considered "good" for one", "responsible" and "in charge".<sup>154</sup> Lilith corresponds to this as in *Dawn* she questions the Oankali and their motives, speaks her mind about the coercion of Humans into the gene trade, cares for her Human group – cares even for Nikanj – and keeps her Human contenders in check. For instance, when she is given the freedom to come and go on the Oankali ship, she almost immediately slinks away from Nikanj, packs some food with her and walks to another part of the ship to find another

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<sup>153</sup> King and Ferguson 2011, p. 12.

<sup>154</sup> Walker 1984, p. xi.

Human being she has heard the Oankali talk about. As she learns that the person has died and a displeased Kahguyat comes to take her back home, she emphasises that she never wanted trouble to Nikanj for her own actions. In *Adulthood Rites* she has become a central character in her community, and perhaps as a nod towards Walker's *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*, she enjoys planting gardens. In them she grows food for her community and herself, but also for those Resisters who do not know which plants are edible and will not come and ask. According to Walker, a womanist is also "[c]ommitted to survival and wholeness of entire people, male *and* female", "[t]raditionally universalist" and "[t]raditionally capable."<sup>155</sup> In *Imago*, when the two species have been living together for a longer while, it is told that in her free time Lilith likes to stick to her Human habits, write things down and paint. She is dedicated to keeping Human traditions alive, much like African American women have kept African traditions alive as a means of expressing identity and belonging.

As a truly womanist protagonist, Lilith defends women against male violence but also men against what she perceives as Oankali violence against them. The first human being Lilith is allowed to meet, Paul Titus, a puerile male who had lost his parents at the age of fourteen and had been living in an Oankali family ever since, tries to rape her. After getting treatment for severe injuries, she defends her attacker to Nikanj:

“His family,” she said bitterly. “You keep saying that. His *family* is dead! Like mine. ... Like just about everyone's. That's half our problem. We [Humans] haven't any real family bonds.”

“He has.”

“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!”<sup>156</sup>

Later, Lilith also sets out to help the severely wounded Nikanj in the middle of a Human-Oankali fight.

The matter of colour, however, is more complicated. While colour is an important ingredient in womanism and Lilith's blackness is indisputably significant in *Xenogenesis* on many levels, the

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<sup>155</sup> Walker 1984, p. xi.

<sup>156</sup> Butler 2000, p. 101 (in *Dawn*).

Oankali are colour blind and so are the Human-Oankali communities. Among Resisters, some individuals or villages are downright racist and others are not, but the Oankali and hybrids make it more difficult if not impossible to keep track of any visual categories. In *Adulthood Rites*, as Tino meets Lilith for the first time, he wants to see her hands, as he has heard that the number of fingers will show whether a person is half-Oankali or not, but Lilith tells him this is not true. The first tacit indication that Lilith is not white comes on page 10 as it is told that a small boy is placed with her in her cell during the solitary confinement and he has “smoky-brown skin, *paler than her own*”. In other words, Lilith must be darker than “smoky-brown”. The next Human she meets dozens of pages later, Paul Titus, is described as “tall, stocky, as dark as she was”.<sup>157</sup> None of the Human characters in the Xenogenesis Trilogy is labelled as “black” or “white”, but rather dark or blonde, or darker or lighter in relation to somebody else. Race and colour are never absolute categories in the trilogy to begin with, and the boundary between Human and Oankali, terrestrial and extraterrestrial or “us” and “them”, becomes fluid as the story unfolds. Jodahs and Aaor, Lilith’s ooloi children, are shapeshifters. Nevertheless, as Akin metamorphoses from a Human-looking mulatto youngster into a completely Oankali-looking grey and tentacled Construct male, he fully enjoys his new body and senses but regrets the loss of his Human looks as he fears his old Resister friends will cease to trust him. Thus, personally and symbolically important as it may be to the Resisters and other fully Human characters, in Lilith’s new society skin colour – as well as the number of fingers, toes or other appendages of the body, for that matter – is only skin-deep and, as is the case with young Constructs, even transitory.

Tate, the first person Lilith Awakens and her ally and friend, is physiologically Lilith’s opposite. While Lilith is large, muscular and black with a sober face, Tate is petite, blonde and looks younger than her years. She comes from an affluent family and is used to being able to do whatever she chooses to use her energies to, and most often succeeds in her endeavours, but suffers

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<sup>157</sup> Butler 2000, p. 85 (in *Dawn*).

from bouts of ennui. She is intelligent but self-possessed and fails to see things from Lilith's perspective. Thus, if Lilith is the image of a black woman from the margins, a superwoman in her own right but ill-fitting to the traditional white ideals of womanhood, Tate could be seen as representing white middle-class women's liberation. She is an emancipated white well-to-do woman from the 1980's and does not feel the need for any major social change but is committed to rebuilding the world as she knew it. Much as she shares of Lilith's ideas about nonviolence, caution and solid reasoning, she eventually pairs with Gabriel, a strong male character who turns against Lilith. Lilith's emotional ties to the Human community are severed by the killing of Joseph, and as she consequently drifts towards the Oankali, Tate still puts her faith in resistance, overlooking the violence.

Violence becomes a severe problem in the Resister villages as the communities start producing firearms, shooting at Oankali individuals, raiding other villages, trading women and stealing mixed-breed children as they cannot have children of their own. There does not seem to be any common rules, but each village or community has its own ways and there are some language barriers, too. Some villages are wealthier, more organised, civilised and racially integrated than others, and Tate, a powerful presence in her community, dislikes firearms, strives to act against cruelty and expects her people to behave. Yet, she is lacking a network of allies who share her concerns and thus cannot alone control all the individuals in her village. Furthermore, as her community buys Akin, she lets the perceived good of the community override the child's needs, as she refuses to return the boy to his home. Thus, there is a noble faith in Humanity in her, but also a touch of desperation and hypocrisy, and she is lacking the communality and support Lilith is enjoying on the Trader side. Despite her shortcomings, Tate is not inherently a bad mother, though. She cuddles, nurtures and protects the child, sees to his material needs and strives to provide emotional support, but by depriving Akin of his siblings during a critical stage, she manages to damage his development. Although the Xenogenesis Earth is shared by two peoples, Tate (and other

Resisters, male and female) is content with a society which includes ones and excludes others.

Therefore, she is simply lacking knowledge about Akin's needs, and more importantly, her motives and actions are less than ethical.

Lilith, on the other hand, is different in two ways. Firstly, she is true to her own values of kindness, civility and nonviolence and therefore chooses the nonviolent, vegetarian, co-operative and communicative Oankali lifestyle over the xenophobic, carnivorous, competitive and hostile Resister life. Although the choice is not easy for her, an exclusively Human society is less important for her than her humane principles and her mates she is attached to. Secondly, she is open to difference; she accepts the Oankali presence as a fact, learns to know the species and finds a way to live with them. She loves her Human-Oankali children and strives to fulfil both their Human and Oankali needs. Lilith's own feelings of guilt spring from her sentiment that she has helped bring Humanity as she knew it to an end, but seeing Humanity live on in Constructs is for her better than a "clean death". She has a love of life, her children and even her alien mates that is stronger than her death wish. Eventually, it is her own son that solves the problem of the Resisters.

#### 4.2 Cross-Species Families, Cross-Species Love

In this chapter, I am going to have a closer look at Lilith's new Human-Oankali family and children. I shall compare and contrast it to the American ideal of the nuclear family which I described in chapter 2, discuss the implications of the Oankali system in general and then examine the role of the womanist protagonist's cross-species offspring. As I am going to argue, the Oankali practices undermine patriarchal ideology and promote personal freedom and choice. Finally, I am going to touch upon the concept of love, something which both Alice Walker celebrates in her explanation of womanism and bell hooks calls for, and moreover, something which is closely associated with the concept of family.



The American culture, which is the cultural background of the English-speaking Human characters, is based on the idea of the white middle-class nuclear family. As I explained in chapter 2, the model is not universal and as hooks points out, the logic of the model is rooted in nationalist, patriarchal ideology. Incidentally, Lilith's pre-war family had been a nuclear family of three, of which the other two members she had lost in a car accident. This loss had been devastating and she had started her anthropology studies to "seek" through other cultures as she had been deeply dissatisfied with the one she had been living in.<sup>158</sup> Hooks has criticised the isolation of the nuclear family as there is no extended family to share work, responsibilities and resources with, and as I noted in 2.1, communalism, traditions and inheritance lie at the heart of the womanist tradition. Lilith's experience reflects this viewpoint as she had emulated the white model, but because of a stroke of bad luck, it fails to make her happy. What is more, Lilith's conduct suggests that even if she had considered her life as relatively happy when her husband and son had been alive, she had not been as close to her family as she could have been. Firstly, the only relatives she ever names when talking to other characters are her husband Sam and son Ayre. Secondly, in *Dawn*, she is remembering by herself her own sister and Sam's parents who had hoped their son would marry a Yoruban girl instead of her and who never saw their grandchild, and this looking back takes place in quite a negative context, as Lilith is wondering whether or not the Oankali are going to inflict on her a similar brain damage as Sam had had.<sup>159</sup> She rarely talks about her family at all, except hundreds of pages later in the last part of the trilogy. In *Imago* she confesses to Jesusa: "There's closeness here that I didn't have with the family I was born into or with my husband and son."<sup>160</sup> This suggests that she actually learns the culture of communality closeness only after she has experienced it with her Oankali family.

The Oankali lifestyle offers her an alternative model which is much closer to the black womanist idea of a people living, loving and thriving across time and space, except that the Oankali

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<sup>158</sup> Butler 2000, p. 132 (in *Dawn*).

<sup>159</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 77 (in *Dawn*).

<sup>160</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 671 (in *Imago*).

genealogies extend more literally into space. Each individual is seen as important and family bonds are recognised, valued and given attention. This devotion to individuals, nurturing, teaching and the valuing of the networks based on kinship groups bears resemblance to African American women's tradition of valuing their relations, blood relations and other, networking, teaching their children, especially daughters, and keeping (women's) traditions alive. Moreover, the Oankali sexual unit of three provides more parental presence and care to children than a couple can give, and the extended family is never far away. Thus, there is a strong sense of togetherness and communality in the Oankali system, especially compared to the isolation of the human nuclear family. In addition, the Oankali family ties are based on knowing intimately one's companions and accepting, respecting and supporting them, so there is a truthfulness in the Oankali relations compared to a patriarchal model in which both sexes have their fixed places based on ideals rather than real, individual characteristics. Thus, the Oankali model is not dissimilar to the modern, western feminist/womanist ideal of a relationship based on equality, mutual respect and sharing of housework and childrearing. Despite their monstrously ugly looks, when one scratches the surface, the Oankali start to look human indeed.

Although calling her new Oankali mates a "family" initially feels like a bad joke to Lilith, she actually starts feeling grateful to the people who, despite her own alienness, accept her, tolerate her difficult behaviour and support her. The closest Oankali individuals around her treat her with civility and despite her underdog position, she feels obliged to respond in a like manner. This creates an uncomfortable discrepancy early on in the story: Lilith both likes the Oankali and hates herself for liking them. However, gradually it becomes clear that the Oankali have no ill will, but collectively the race is lacking understanding. In all important matters, the Oankali link together to form a consensus from which no individual can diverge, and the will of this group mind has authority over individuals. This actually corresponds to the Humans' sentiments about the nuclear war; nobody personally wanted war or had anything to do with it, and yet it happened. As the

Oankali claim that Humans are self-destructive, Human individuals feel the accusation is extremely unjust, and yet they cannot deny the war or account for it in any way. The oppression Lilith associates with the Oankali is the result of a consensus concerning the treatment of the Humans and not the will of those individuals who know her. On the contrary, her intimate contact with her Oankali mates deepens the Oankali understanding of human beings and makes them change their ways. Thus, it is contact, communication and companionship that make a difference in a precarious situation.

The friendship between Lilith and the child Nikanj starts like any human relationship. It springs both from Lilith's natural need to talk to somebody and a similarity in their position within the family: Lilith feels the child is almost as powerless as herself and, being a child, also less frightening than the adults. She also finds a good listener in Nikanj and notices that it respects her feelings in a way the other Oankali do not. As Nikanj grows up, their relationship deepens and becomes a physical one:

It [Nikanj] had become very interested in her physical pleasures and pains once its sensory arms [a pair of strong extra arms that conceal and protect the ooloi sexual organs called sensory hands] were fully grown. Happily, it had paid more attention to pleasure than to pain. It had studied her as she might have studied a book – and it had done a certain amount of rewriting.<sup>161</sup>

The significance of this studying is revealed when Nikanj connects its sensory tentacles with Lilith's partner Joseph, asks her to join them and gives the Human lovers an intense sexual experience during which it seems to “disappear”, leaving him and her to enjoy each other as if there were no alien intermediary at all.

Although the sex the Oankali offer – or “share” – with Humans is technically different from the Human way, it is by no means less affectionate or satisfying. Thus, they do not tamper with the Humans' sexuality without giving anything in return. What is more, they do not use force or pursue those who run away from them. The problem is rather that of Human scruples about accepting the

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<sup>161</sup> Butler 2000, p. 135 (in *Dawn*).

novel kind of relationships. Even this is presented as an intrinsic and thus understandable Human sentiment as the Oankali physique is disturbingly alien and monstrously ugly to the Human eye. Yet, Lilith's and even other characters' reactions show that it is possible for Humans to overcome their fear and disgust. Similarly, at the beginning, a relationship with an Oankali may indeed be interpreted as betraying the humankind and a strong sense of guilt bothers the central Human characters (Lilith, Joseph and Tino), but eventually the Mars colony invalidates any such judgments. Therefore it is only the problems of attitude and personal taste that remain.

The Oankali perception of relationships represents the polar opposite of male hegemony and thus it is harder for the macho characters to embrace it. Women, on the other hand, benefit from the equality, nonviolence and trust. However, male characters tend to perceive the ooloi as male and react in a homophobic manner. Under the influence of the ooloi drug they fully enjoy the experiences the Oankali give, but as the effect wears off, their confusion and guilt for liking those comes out as anger. Joseph, too, has initial problems in accepting what happens between himself, Lilith and Nikanj, but he is able to overcome them. Not all male characters are that flexible, and especially the more aggressive and competitive men seem to have problems with the Oankali. These men also resent the idea of losing control, feeling that their "manhood is taken away", which is consistent with preferences in a masculine, patriarchal culture. Although both men and women become Resisters, and also women resort to violence, the Oankali are concerned about men. This becomes evident at the beginning of *Adulthood Rites*, when the baby Akin overhears a conversation he does not understand:

"Some of his features are only cosmetic, Lilith. Even now his senses are more dispersed than yours are. He is ... less Human than your daughters."

"I'd guessed he would be. I know your people still worry about Human-born males."

"They were an unsolved problem. I believe we've solved it now."<sup>162</sup>

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"Why is he such an experiment?" she demanded. "And why should Human-born men be such a problem? I know most prewar men don't like you. They feel

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<sup>162</sup> Butler 2000, p. 254 (in *Adulthood Rites*).

you're displacing them and forcing them to do something perverted. From their point of view, they're right. But you could teach the next generation to love you, no matter who their mothers are. All you'd have to do is start early. Indoctrinate them before they are old enough to develop other opinions."

"But..." Nikanj hesitated. "But if we had to work that blindly, that clumsily, we couldn't have trade. We would have to take your children soon after they are born. We wouldn't dare trust you raise them. You would be kept only for breeding – like nonsentient animals."<sup>163</sup>

Men have the Contradiction stronger in them than women, and they also feel the Oankali, or possibly the ooloi in particular, are "displacing" them and forcing to "do something perverted". The Oankali would not trust Human women to raise male children if the whole family was not extremely careful. Lilith, apparently, does not share the view that the Oankali would be displacing or perverting her, but she does not like the discussion as she continues: "You say such god-awful things in such a gentle voice. No, hush, I know it's the only voice you've got. ...".<sup>164</sup> At this point of the story, Lilith is sympathetic to Nikanj but dislikes the features of the gene trade and she fears for Akin.

Regardless of the otherworldliness of their appearances and practices, the aliens are still both capable of and willing to give physical and psychological comfort and care, share their life, conceive and rear children and generally do all the things that human couples do together and, in addition, they are able to heal and give a long life. After Joseph's death, Lilith's relations to the other Humans become strained and there are only the Oankali left for her to talk to. She shares her grief and guilt with Nikanj and finds at least some real comfort and consolation in her contact with the Oankali family: "She lay with it and its mates at night and it pleased her as it had before she met Joseph. She did not want this at first, but she came to appreciate it".<sup>165</sup> Thus the new family of hers supports her and shares her loss, or, in other words, it functions much like a human family is supposed to work.

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<sup>163</sup> Butler 2000, p. 259 (in *Adulthood Rites*).

<sup>164</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>165</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 242 (in *Dawn*).

Like a human family, the Human-Oankali family is flexible. A while after Joseph's death, Lilith feels attracted to another man, and when she enquires Nikanj about this feeling she finds suspicious, she learns that she is "free to find another mate, ... I [Nikanj] wanted you to be free to choose whether or not to mate."<sup>166</sup> She chooses the man, Vidor Domonkos, as her new partner, and it is told later in *Adulthood Rites* that she has a child with him but the two "tire" of each other and break up, and Lilith spends a while with her Oankali mates without a Human partner until she meets Tino.<sup>167</sup> All this is accepted by the Oankali as they acknowledge Lilith's Human psychology and love life. They may bond for life amongst themselves, but apparently, they do not expect Humans to behave in the same way. This is an important feature of the Oankali-Human family: individuals, whether Human, Oankali or in-between, are accepted and respected as they are.

The Oankali rely on biology and the wisdom of the body and bodies can be of different shapes and sizes, even have different senses, needs or metabolisms. Lilith is allowed to "mate", find a Human partner, if her body tells her to do so. Yet, Lilith's longer-term companion Tino notices that it is not only Lilith but Lilith together with Nikanj that he finds attractive, the two are "a pair somehow": "Without Nikanj, she would not have been as desirable".<sup>168</sup> Nikanj is the ooloi of the family, the "magnet" or "bridge", or the central character of the reproductive unit. Since he accepts this and consents to lie down with the pair of them the night he enters their village, he very quickly finds his place in the family which is a quintet of adults – an Oankali male, female and ooloi, and a Human man and a woman – parenting several children.

This, however, is only the pattern of the crossover generation family. The next generation made of Constructs is going to be radically different. It is going to have a less complicated reproductive unit as it will retain the Oankali system of three: a male, a female and an ooloi, but again with a twist. The Oankali claim that Construct males will be loners who will prefer to wander, work and perhaps visit their children, while females and the ooloi run families, so this is a step back

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<sup>166</sup> Butler 2000, p. 243 (in *Dawn*).

<sup>167</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 265 (in *Adulthood Rites*).

<sup>168</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 292 (in *Adulthood Rites*).

towards the Human system of two parents raising children. As Lilith finds the change in male behaviour dismaying, though, Nikanj explains: “Most Human males aren’t particularly monogamous. No construct males will be”.<sup>169</sup> This behaviour will be “normal” and “no construct will feel that as a deprivation”.<sup>170</sup> That the Oankali regard men as “not particularly monogamous” sounds very much like going back to essentialism, but then, so does the idea of women having five or six children each in the crossover family.

The alien logic goes that every Construct individual is perfect, and by listening to one’s body, one will be happy. With their genetic technologies, the ooloi can “mix” children that are healthy and and also give them innate tendencies and inclinations. For instance, Jdahya tells Lilith that he was “bred” to work with humans. Yet, ooloi cannot be sure what exactly the child will be like and what it will decide to do, but the Oankali indeed rely on biology and the child’s ability to find a way. This freedom of choice is presented as the only way out of essentialism, but it sounds insufficient considering the ooloi power to mix children. By default, the children they conceive will always be healthy, but in *Dawn* there is an incompetent ooloi, Tehjaht, who accidentally kills its Human, and in *Imago*, Jodahs worries that Nikanj made a mistake when it made Jodahs ooloi. Beside the depletion of the gene pool and eventual need of new trading partners, the ooloi responsibility might be another downside to the gene trade, and yet all this must be weighed against the benefits the Oankali genetic technologies provide.

The Oankali seek harmony, balance and satisfaction, and after the shockwaves of the gene trade, the emerging patterns represent a new psychological, genetic and social balance based on both Human and Oankali characteristics. The new family is decidedly different from the modern American culture in that it prioritises women’s rights to family, motherhood and relationships, provides them with reliable partners, the ooloi, to live and share work with. It almost looks like the males are less important to the Oankali in general. Since this is not a feature of the previous Oankali

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<sup>169</sup> Butler 2000, p. 260 (in *Adulthood Rites*).

<sup>170</sup> *Ibid.*

generation, it could be Butler's slap on the male sex's wrist for excluding women in human societies. There will be fewer males than females and ooloi, Nikanj explains, and males "will come and go as they wish and as they find welcome". This "find welcome" suggests that women with their ooloi now have a say in relationships, perhaps more than women used to have before the Oankali arrived. However, in this vision, biology and custom are in harmony and women's wellbeing is foregrounded, and what is more, the vision is not exactly Human anyway. "Trade means change. Bodies change. Ways of living must change. Did you think your children would only *look* different?" Nikanj asks Lilith.<sup>171</sup>

This new coming of biology in the Xenogenesis trilogy is presented as liberating rather than binding; whatever feels "natural" or "right" to an individual *is* "natural" and good for that person. However, the Oankali society is quite an orderly one, and considering that the ooloi mix all children, the system sounds suspect as it raises the question of how much the ooloi actually plan in advance each individual child's life. The only thing in the Oankali society that is uncertain is the Trade. Yet, because of the Trade, the attitude towards otherness seems to be relaxed and respecting in the Oankali and cross-species families, though. Rather than expecting everybody to be exactly the same or relying on racial or sexual stereotypes, which some of the Human characters are guilty of, the Oankali are probably more likely to accept individuals as they are. Although different sexes have different preferences and characteristics that cast them in different roles in society, individual freedom is still great. In Oankali families, only the ooloi children are ooloi from birth and all the other children, male and female, are *eka* – sexless – until their metamorphosis. The male and the female mate are typically siblings and the ooloi comes from another family. (This way the partners will know each other well and be compatible, but as an outsider the ooloi will be perceptive enough to mix from their genetic material offspring that is not overspecified.) Therefore, especially the *eka* children within Oankali families tie deep bonds during their early years. If a sexless child

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<sup>171</sup> Butler 2000, p. 260 (in *Adulthood Rites*).



metamorphoses into a female, its nearest sibling will most likely become a male, and vice versa, and sometimes it is difficult to tell in advance which child will become which before the first one starts to metamorphose. This pattern remains the same in Human-Oankali families, so that many of the Construct children are of indeterminate sex. Sometimes a child will even have the choice, as is the case with Akin's younger sibling Tiikuchaht: if it stays with Akin, it will develop into a girl, it is told, but if it decides to stay with its male parents and female siblings when Akin goes elsewhere, it will most likely metamorphose into a boy. In addition, the metamorphosis in itself may alter a child's looks drastically, most often making a Human-looking individual strikingly Oankali-like or the other way round, until the differences even out in later generations. This already undermines any strict categorisations of children and frees individuals to find their own ways.

Yet, in *Imago* we meet Jodahs, a sexless child who metamorphoses into an ooloi, something new among the Oankali, and exhibits an unparalleled ability to change its shape. Its nearest sibling Aaor soon follows, showing the Oankali that the Trade does not only change Humans, but it also changes the Oankali. The future race is, to some extent, beyond the grasp of the Oankali and the Humans alike. The Oankali Trade is not any single transaction between the parties, but rather a long, large-scale process, the outcome of which is not one hundred per cent certain. What the Oankali do is give their best care, teach their values and share the skills and information they have accumulated during generations, and then trust the next generation to find their ways and build from there. Therefore, in the Xenogenesis trilogy, everything is in flux. New cultures and practices are only taking shape in the cross-species families and few things are quite certain or fixed. The children, new kind of beings such as Akin and Jodahs, are struggling to learn to know themselves and their legacy from both sides and to find ways to realise their own potential. Even flesh becomes malleable in this huge process, limbs re-growable and difficult diseases conquerable.

What remains irreplaceable are individuals with their own personalities, memories and life experiences. It is told that Lilith and other human beings are needed as Human mothers and fathers,

since even though the Oankali are capable of producing mixed-species offspring with their alien technologies without living Humans around, they are aware that they are very bad at rearing Human children. Likewise, they also need personal contacts, intimate interaction and preferably all the cultural knowledge the nearly extinct Humans carry in their heads to learn to know their new companion species and make the Trade succeed, it is told. Yet, it is equally true that they simply become attached to individuals. Joseph's death, for instance, devastates both Lilith and Nikanj. She holds it partly responsible for the killing and is further agitated when it asks whether she would share her feelings with it. This she refuses and demands it to give something to her instead:

“Let me share what you feel,” she [Lilith] said.

It [Nikanj] touched her face in a startlingly human gesture. “Move the sixteenth finger of your left strength hand,” it said softly. One more case of Oankali omniscience: *We understand your feelings, eat your food, manipulate your genes. But we're too complex for you to understand.*

“Approximate!” she demanded. “Trade! You're always talking about Trading. Give me something of yourself!”

The other ooloi focused back toward them and Nikanj's head and body tentacles drew themselves into lumps of some negative emotion. Embarrassment? Anger? She did not care. Why should it feel comfortable parasitizing her feelings for Joseph – her feelings for anything? It had helped set up a human experiment.

...

It gave her ... a new color. A totally alien, unique, nameless thing, half seen, half felt or ... tasted. A blaze of something frightening, yet overwhelmingly, compelling.

Extinguished.

A half known mystery beautiful and complex. A deep, impossibly sensuous promise.

Broken.

Gone.

Dead.

The forest came back around her slowly and she realized she was still standing with Nikanj, facing it, her back to the waiting ooloi.

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After a moment, she let herself hug it.<sup>172</sup>

The Oankali may be manipulative and conceited, but they recognise others' pain and feel acute pain themselves, especially when they lose someone near and dear. After a brief and pained

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<sup>172</sup> Butler 2000, pp. 225-226 (in *Dawn*).

consideration Nikanj does fulfil Lilith's request and she is overwhelmed by the intensity of the alien emotion.

There is another scene in which an ooloi called Tehjaht turns catatonic after reflexively killing Peter, its Human mate, in self-defence. Tehjaht's Oankali mates are visibly desolate for this as they “held onto one another, walking as though wounded, ... [t]hey were two when they should have been three, missing an essential part”.<sup>173</sup> Peter's Human partner, Jean, is in shock, unable even to go near other Humans because of the effect of the ooloi drug and without Peter she feels completely alone, but the two Oankali go to her and take her hands: “Jean seemed still afraid of the two strangers, but she was also relieved. They were what Nikanj had said they would be. People who could help. Family.”<sup>174</sup> There is a “chemical affinity” that “feels right” and provides relief, but it works between mates and within families only and not with anybody else. Nikanj needs Lilith's presence as much as it needs its Oankali mates Ahajas and Dichaan, and Lilith is the only person able to save its life when it is wounded in *Dawn*. In *Adulthood Rites*, while away from home, little Akin misses his mother badly, but what makes him even more desperate is the lack of contact to his sibling. When he was stolen by raiders, Ahajas was pregnant and the child to be born was Akin's closest sibling to whom he feels a biological need to bond. When finally united, a critical period has passed and their contact is discordant, which pains the siblings for years, until metamorphoses and mating bring healing. The Oankali affection to individuals is thus a deep and tangible, often even visible bodily sensation rather than a psychological phenomenon easily concealed or ignored.

Likewise, the Oankali express other emotions, such as interest, amusement, resignation or despair with their bodies as their sensory tentacles point, flatten, droop or form lumps, respectively, and without contact to their mates, the Oankali will fall ill. Thus, the aliens make visible with their bodies the invisible realm of social reality. They foreground the importance of such immaterial factors as fairness, emotional intelligence and safe, intimate social contacts, which greatly affect

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<sup>173</sup> Butler 2000, p. 195 (in *Dawn*).

<sup>174</sup> *Ibid.*

wellbeing and happiness. Lilith, who had been disappointed with the materially plentiful pre-war American society and culture, eventually experiences deep psychological satisfaction with her new family and second life.

I have noted before that the *Xenogenesis Trilogy* is full of tensions and contradictions, and here is one more. The Oankali are sensitive to each other's, and even their Human companions' needs, capable of reading those needs very accurately and capable of and willing to fulfil them. What they do could thus be labelled as acts of love. However, the Oankali do not use the expression "love" themselves, but it is the Human characters who do. Therefore, it is worth noticing how little most of the Human characters' behaviour seems informed by it. Osherow suggests the *Xenogenesis* world is such a harsh world, because it is a world without mothers and love.<sup>175</sup>

Indeed it is at the beginning, but it is also a world in which love makes a difference. The new family and motherhood, and indeed her love for her not-quite-human children gives Lilith's second life a new meaning on a personal level. Similarly, the buying of the young Akin gives hope for Tate and her community. Yet, on the level of the storyline, the role of Lilith's cross-species children is even greater. That Akin succeeds in convincing the Oankali of the Mars colony is a direct result of Lilith's life work. Her ethics, her love for her son, humanity and even the Oankali, and her Oankali-sounding (and indeed womanist-sounding) advice always to be true to oneself and listen to one's body and intuition guide Akin and make him what he is.

In Lilith's family, the best features of both the Human experience and the Oankali one come together and mixed background turns out to be a blessing. If Akin is able to provide the resisting Humans a fair choice, it is Jodahs from the same family who finally unites the two species. It is a new kind of a shapeshifter and a healer who transcends both Humans and the Oankali in looks and capability. While the Oankali have the ability to heal and communicate with Humans but their looks is repulsive to many and their ways of expressing themselves sometimes unintentionally

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<sup>175</sup> Osherow 2000, p. 77.

misleading, Jodahs heals inadvertently, reads peoples bodies, body language and emotions and responds to those with ease, and it will instinctively change its appearance to please the eye of its Human partner. Without a partner its body will become unstable and eventually dissolve, but in the company of a human being, its physique will stabilise and adjust to the taste of that particular individual. In other words, while Akin gives the Resisters a future on Mars, Jodahs gives those who are potentially interested in the Oankali but frightened a less traumatising way to join them. With the help of their ability to read genetic information, the Oankali perceive that it is natural for Humans to see the Oankali as gut-wrenchingly ugly, and the emergence of a being like Jodahs represents an Oankali-style biological response. As Lilith (and other Humans, too) makes the Oankali understand that coercing frightened individuals into sexual exchange with the Oankali creates substantial suffering, with the help of Human genetic material and, of all things, Lilith's cancer cells, the Oankali are able to create a next-generation ooloi that will automatically assume a bodily shape that does not frighten. Humans who find the Oankali appearance disturbing do not instinctively shrink from Jodahs and, after a while, they tend to like it, even be drawn to it, which significantly facilitates communication between the species and reduces Human fears.

Jodahs and its younger ooloi sibling Aaor are the first not-fully-Human characters that even Resister characters are explicitly expressed to start *loving*. Towards the end of *Imago*, the two Construct ooloi are being held captives in Jesusa and Tomás's village in which almost all the villagers have severe illnesses, deformities and injuries, and the ooloi start healing them. The first-person narrator's voice is that of Jodahs's:

They [the village Elders] didn't suddenly begin to love us, but they stopped spitting as we walked by, stopped muttering curses or threats at us, stopped pointing their guns at us to remind us of their power and their fear. ... Their people, however, did begin to love us and to believe what we told them and to talk to us about Oankali and construct mates.<sup>176</sup>

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<sup>176</sup> Butler 2000 p. 737 (in *Imago*).

With love comes trust and meaningful communication. The Humans trust themselves in the hands of the two Construct ooloi, receive help and go as far as to enquire about mates. The new generation of ooloi are able to make themselves so human-like that their appearance is not disturbing and their actions talk for themselves. Still, as an individual, Jodahs is, like its mother Lilith, a brave, determined and passionate pathfinder. The word “love” is reiterated in Lilith’s conversation with it:

“And the man, Francisco, is he typical of the people here?”

“He’s one of the old ones. The first one I met.”

“And he loves you.”

“As you said once: pheromones.”

“At first, no doubt. By now, he loves you.”

“...yes.”

“Like João. Like Marina. You have a strange gift, Lelka [affectionate word for one’s mated child].”<sup>177</sup>

After suspecting, accusing and reprimanding the Oankali for the use of chemical persuasion, Lilith acknowledges the same ability in her own child, but gives it an equally honest credit for its character. Furthermore, quietly, all along the storyline, the Oankali start using Human gestures and vice versa, such as Nikanj using its sensory arm to stroke Lilith’s face,<sup>178</sup> Ahajas nodding Humanly<sup>179</sup> and more conspicuously, towards the end of *Imago*, Lilith manages to approach Jodahs without it noticing her<sup>180</sup> and looks at it “hungrily”.<sup>181</sup> It is the Oankali, especially Oankali females, that have the ability to move without a sound, and “hungry”, or even “starving”, is the specific expression used when an Oankali is very much drawn to something or someone. The use of the word “love” to describe a sentiment/action/trait, or “a gift”, in an individual equipped with the Oankali organelle thus becomes the final stage in the long process of bringing the two species together, and in the end the bewildered Jodahs confirms Lilith’s observation.

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<sup>177</sup> Butler 2000, p. 740 (in *Imago*).

<sup>178</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 235 (in *Dawn*).

<sup>179</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 663 (in *Imago*).

<sup>180</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 740 (in *Imago*).

<sup>181</sup> *Ibid.*

Besides, the name Jodahs is introduced as an Oankali name, but it does sound suspiciously like *Judas*, and indeed the name is given attention on the text level as the character itself explains that contrary to the Oankali tradition, its mother Lilith had insisted on giving her child a deceased Oankali's name as a human gesture of gratitude.<sup>182</sup> A hundred or so pages later the character then turns out to be a Judas of a kind as it reveals the existence of Jesusa and Tomás's secret all-Human community to the rest of the Oankali and thus "betrays" them, but with the community's full consent.

Akin's name, in fact, is yet another pun. The character himself explains his Nigerian name as follows: "It means *hero*. If you put an *s* on it, it means *brave boy*".<sup>183</sup> However, *akin* is also an English word which, according to the *OED*, means either "[o]f the same kin or family; related by blood" or "[o]f the same kind or character; similar, alike". Thus, Akin is not a half-human monster, freak, other or destroyer of Humanity, but *akin*, of the same kind, similar. As a young adult he returns to see Tate and Gabe in the Resister village Phoenix, and despite he has grown up, the people who had been close to him as a child still recognise and welcome him, whereas others do not. It then turns out that Tate is dying of Huntington's disease, but with his Oankali abilities Akin is able to save her life. The healing process starts Akin's metamorphosis, though, and he is in turn left at the mercy of the Resister community. During his metamorphosis his appearance changes drastically, he starts looking very Oankali, but still the Humans who had loved him well during his childhood sit by his bedside keeping watch and do not mind as he is still Akin. Others, however, set the house on fire and Gabe risks his own life and carries out the half-conscious and now completely alien-looking male whom he had come to cherish and trust. Gabriel's devotion to Akin, to a half-alien yet *akin*, contributes to the saving of the Humanity, too, as he rescues the primus motor of the Mars colony. What Lilith and Nikanj do makes a difference, what their son and ooloi child do

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<sup>182</sup> Butler 2000, p. 528 (in *Imago*).

<sup>183</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 351 (in *Adulthood Rites*).

makes a difference, and even what the son's substitute family does makes a difference, because these are the key characters who are able to love across boundaries.



## 5. Conclusion

In the introduction I wrote that I intend to read the *Xenogenesis Trilogy* as womanist science fiction, and that science fiction itself I regard as a genre that, at least in its most ambitious manifestations, aspires to paint a picture of the human nature. It expands the human sphere of influence into space, brings humankind into contact with the fantastic and through distancing and extrapolation examines our current world. The contacts, in turn, are often re-enactments of similar encounters in world history and the alien others a mirror in which we see ourselves. In the *Xenogenesis Trilogy*, the mirror is the Oankali race.

As hooks describes the Africans' encounters with Native Americans as an alternative way of understanding difference and relating to others, the Oankali restoration of the dying planet and adoption of its surviving inhabitants, even the troublesome ones, is an instance of imagining an encounter with an alien species in a non-colonialist way. The Oankali motive is not rooted in any need to define themselves through others or establish power through oppressing others, nor is it in material greed. The Oankali essence lies in their Trade which, in turn, means exchange, reciprocity and companionship in a world that everybody shares together.

Further, contrary to the mechanisms of slavery and oppression, individuals are not mutually interchangeable to the Oankali. The Oankali are devoted to individuals of their own kind, and with a similar dedication they also seek to relate to Human individuals. They have a culture of belonging, in which individuals are seen as a resource and everybody has a place in a bigger kinship structure. Meaningful, intimate relationships have a healing power and they support individuals who in turn support the whole society. The advanced Oankali (genetic) technology renders biological difference unimportant, undermines any divisions between "us" and "them" and foregrounds companionship and shared emotion. This, in short, is also a blueprint of a woman-friendly, child-friendly, man-friendly and generally humane human society.

The encounter with these alien others brings out the flaws in the Humans' communities and indeed in the Humans' capabilities to relate to one another. Patriarchy and religion have a tradition of looking back in a nostalgic search for a golden age and setting fixed rules and limits to what is acceptable and "good". Together they form a system of prejudice and xenophobia that marginalises or rejects women, non-whites, non-heterosexuals and aliens alike. Womanism challenges all people to question and re-evaluate traditions that create inequality, and in the Xenogenesis Trilogy, the encounter with the Oankali not only highlights the flaws but also creates a space in which old standards and traditions can be re-evaluated and new deals negotiated. This is also exactly what Lilith, her mates from two different species and her children are doing.

Akin's character undermines any divisions into strict categories. His bodily change challenges the ways one can judge anybody through appearance, and his devotion to the Phoenix people who had bought him, deprived him of his own mother and family when he needed them most, but who had still cared for him and become his second family, foreground the healing power of love and undermine the idea of nuclear family and biological parents as the only acceptable alternative. Although the Oankali system is built on biological bonds and strong kinship groups, blood relation is not the only possible relation, but adoption is equally natural. Although there is the system of three sexes and a lot of weight is given to same-sex parenting, the Oankali respect individual choice. The children the ooloi "mix" are made perfect, complete and without fault but yet, what exactly the child will do as an adult remains, at least to some extent, open. The Oankali give their best care, teach everything they know and love, and then they trust the child will find its way as it grows up.

Lilith's male Human mates Joseph and Tino and all the other men that choose the benevolent, vegetarian, nonviolent Oankali lifestyle over the xenophobic, meat-eating and violent Resister side show that fear and violence are not inevitable biological masculine features but matters of choice. Their choice, like Lilith's, also benefits them. Despite the apparent differences

between the species, in Trading villages, all Human, Oankali and hybrid characters live quite content in peace and in good health, and in times of crisis, large families provide support. The Oankali kinship groups and the culture of nurture, support, integrity and communication are precisely the kind of communalism bell hooks associates with a functional extended family. Lilith herself corresponds to Alice Walker's description of a womanist almost point-to-point.

However, in the introduction I mentioned that the Xenogenesis trilogy is an uneasy utopia, or perhaps it is no utopia at all. The Human characters need an alien race to fix their problems, and the resulting Construct race with its Oankali-style chemical seduction, three sexes and the future males who do not bond like their females and ooloi counterparts is not quite Human. As regards the Oankali, although they rely on biology, they can also be seen as slaves to their biology as their genetic engineering compels them to seek new genetic material again and again, and they also bring back the issue of essentialism that feminists have fought against. If the male Traders show that Human behaviour is not biologically predetermined to begin with, the gene trade with the Oankali might actually change that. Moreover, as the aliens are so fascinated with the Human diversity, it does not seem likely that they are going to mix very radical children themselves, and the issue of heteronormativity, for instance, is hardly questioned at all. As the equivocal title of the final part, *Imago*, suggests, one cannot say for sure whether or not the gene trade is a wise thing for Humans to do.

Yet, considering the other alternative for the nearly extinct Humans, to die and leave the Oankali die, especially after the aliens have restored the Earth's biosphere after the man-made disaster, the Trade is the least dreadful choice as it is, above all, the choice for life for both species. Lilith is offered a chance to a painless suicide, but she turns down the offer. As Haraway says, the Xenogenesis trilogy is about survival. The complexity and unfairness of the situation in which the Human characters find themselves echoes the complications of history. Like survivors of catastrophes of the past, the Human characters Awaken into a grim world in which there are no

good options or right answers; realising that Humanity has destroyed the planet Earth and that they are now at the mercy of extraterrestrials is painful, and the first contacts with the Oankali are even more painful.

The one solution the Xenogenesis trilogy offers in the situation is love, sharing and forgiveness. It is Lilith's love of life, care for the subadult Nikanj during its metamorphosis and love of her new family and hybrid children that make a difference. Lilith's success, in turn, benefits all others, as her children are able to help the Resisters in ways she cannot. This is because Lilith has taught her own womanist values to her children. I mentioned earlier that there is an ethics of diversity in the trilogy. This is perhaps best expressed when Lilith explains to her hybrid son Akin that Humans "persecute their different ones" and yet need them to gain "definition and status", whereas the Oankali need difference in order to live. As Akin will most likely "find both tendencies surfacing" in his own behaviour, her sole piece of advice is: "When you feel a conflict, try to go the Oankali way. Embrace difference."<sup>184</sup>

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<sup>184</sup> Butler 2000, p. 329 (in *Adulthood Rites*).

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