

MYTH AS RESISTANCE: THE EPIC OF *LILITH'S BROOD*— OCTAVIA

BUTLER'S *XENOGENESIS*

TRILOGY

by

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ABSTRACT

The rise of Octavia Butler's *Kindred* and *Parable of the Sower* as multimedia narrative sensations, being adapted into television and film, signals how Butler's narratives bring revolutionary world building and Afrofuturist meaning making to twenty-first century media. Furthermore, the attention on Butler's more popular and canonized texts signals an urgency to re-examine Butler's *Xenogenesis Trilogy*, a work that highlights her unique narrative style and, arguably, places her storytelling in a realm of narrative epics. Historically, epic narratives have been the province of white, masculine world making, many of which lend themselves to a tradition of cultural myth building which functions to instill a singular, exclusionary world view. *Lilith's Brood* offers perspectives of post-human/alien world building that brings into focus marginalized identities and challenges processes of ideological myth making. As an early work of Afrofuturism, this narrative exists in a unique space of literary resistance, as Butler engages Black feminist storytelling and Afrofuturist world making. Indeed, this text provides a site for untangling the intersections race, gender and colonization through placing this narrative in a post-human/post-nuclear apocalyptic future.

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INTRODUCTION

You are intelligent . . . that's the newer of the two characteristics . . . You are potentially one of the most intelligent species we've found [but] you are hierarchical. That's the older and more entrenched characteristic . . . it's a terrestrial characteristic (Butler 39).

A revivalist energy surrounds the works of Octavia E. Butler in our contemporary moment. From the newest adaptations of her two most prominent texts, *Kindred* and *Parable of the Sower*, to Ibi Zoboi's brand new 2022 biography, illuminating Butler's star quality as a fiction writer from the time she was a young child, Butler's works and life continue to slip into a mainstream, public media arena of the twenty-first century. Tangentially, a new wave of scholarship emerges on Butler's works, some engaging with her *Xenogenesis Trilogy*. However, Butler's *Lilith's Brood*, a republishing of her three novels *Dawn*, *Adulthood Rites* and *Imago* into one work, remains in the shadows of Butler's previously noted works. Through a re-examination of this trilogy, this thesis explores *Lilith's Brood* as it embodies epic storytelling placed in a post-apocalyptic world. In Butler's 1987 novel, *Dawn*, the first of the three works in the trilogy, she tells the story of an African American woman who survives a nuclear apocalypse and is rescued/captured by an alien species and kept in suspended animation for over two hundred years.

Lilith Iyapo's journey with the alien race, the Oankali, begins with her reawakening where she learns about the destruction of her world as well as who the Oankali are and what their purpose was for the remaining human race. Lilith Iyapo was awakened intentionally by the Oankali as a means for them to begin their colonization of Earth. However, Lilith is not so easily

convinced the Oankali are everything they communicate they are. The Oankali are un-earthly: biologically, societally, historically and the list goes on. Therefore, *Lilith's Brood* tells a story of how humans come to learn, understand, and later resist the Oankali's forced colonization of the remaining humans.

The second and third books in the trilogy revolve around Lilith's children, Akin and Jodahs, as they present unique traits of both humans and Oankali and are constructs: the mixed race that is half Human and Oankali. Constructs were created by the Oankali and are, in the Oankali's eyes, free of any genetic mutation that humans could have, and, therefore, are a vision of perfection. Herein lies the cornerstone of the *Xenogenesis Trilogy*. The Oankali, a gene trading species that have existed for much longer than human beings, pose a great proposition for humanity; the Oankali believe that humans are genetically flawed and will go to great lengths to purify them, such as removing a deadly genetic contradiction that the Oankali believe led to the destruction of our Earthly race. Thus, Lilith's children, Akin and Jodahs' story continues the philosophical thread through their own experiences with post-apocalyptic humanity. Akin, one of the first construct children, is abducted by a faction of humans on Earth who call themselves "the resisters," and through his kidnapping, he learns to understand and even sympathize with these resisters: those who do not mate with Oankali, and consequently, are infertile. Akin's journey with resister humans leads him to propose a Mars colony for humans who do not wish to mate with the Oankali. A human version of what the Oankali call Akjai, or those who do not trade with other species, and, thus, remain in their original form.

Jodahs' story, however, is quite different from both Lilith's and Akin's. Jodahs is what the Oankali call an ooloi, a third gender which is much more powerful in abilities. However, Jodahs is a construct ooloi, a first of his kind, and as a half Oankali and half human ooloi, they

pose quite a threat to the order created by the Oankali. Jodahs' condition of being ooloi means that he will be required to return to the Oankali mothership to be watched and trained, but before they can leave, they run away deep into the forest and stumble upon a community of resister humans who have been able to reproduce but not without genetic consequence. Indeed, both Akin and Jodahs discover throughout their journey to understand humanity that the Oankali are not strictly the saviors they claim to be. Lilith and her children challenge the foundational philosophical underpinnings of this race, and, subsequently, the paralleling colonizing mindsets of the Oankali and post-apocalyptic humanity.

The rise of Octavia Butler's *Kindred* and *Parable of the Sower* as multimedia narrative sensations, being adapted into television and film, signals how Butler's narratives bring revolutionary world building and an Afrofuturist meaning making project to twenty-first century literary spaces. Furthermore, the attention on Butler's more popular and canonized texts signals a urgency to re-examine Butler's *Xenogenesis Trilogy*, a work that highlights her unique narrative style and arguably places her storytelling in a realm of narrative epics. Historically, epic narratives have been a province of white, masculine world making, with many narratives lending themselves to a tradition of cultural myth building which functions to instill a singular, exclusionary societal order. *Lilith's Brood* offers perspectives of a post-human/alien world that brings into focus marginalized identities and challenges processes of ideological myth making. As an early work of Afrofuturism, this narrative exists in a unique space of literary resistance, as Butler engages Black feminist storytelling alongside her Afrofuturist world building. Indeed, this text provides a site for untangling the intersections of race, gender, and colonization through placing this narrative in a post-human/post-nuclear apocalyptic future. Recent scholarship on Butler's work attributes her as the first African American Grand Dame of science fiction, paving the way

for new and exciting approaches to futuristic world making. Unfortunately, Butler did not live long enough to see her work adapted into other mediums such as movies, television shows, and even graphic novel adaptations of her works *Kindred* and *Parable of the Sower*. However, now her works are able to reach audiences that have never delved into Butler, and, therefore, can now get a dose of her Afrofuturist storytelling. Furthermore, Butler's *Xenogenesis Trilogy* provides a site to explore ideological roots of Black women's speculative fiction, leading to the rise of a new and revolutionary genre.

Coinciding with the ten-year anniversary of Butler's death, in 2016, Gerry Canavan published his research on Butler's archived papers, located at The Huntington Library in San Marino, California, one of the first major works on Butler since the early two-thousands. Canavan's research on Butler's papers is intimate and an extensive piece of Butler scholarship. Canavan frames Butler as a writer who did not only enter science fiction but turned the genre on itself, arguing "Butler's creative and critical work demonstrates that science fiction was never really a straight, white, male genre, despite its pretensions to the contrary; Blackness, womanhood, poverty, disability, and queerness were always there, under the surface, the genre's hidden truth" (2). He puts plainly, "Butler proved that spaces of science fiction could no longer afford to ignore the fraught questions of identity" (Canavan 2). Canavan's writing on Butler, spanning all of her work, observes how Butler questions structures of race, disability, and gender. Notably, Canavan discusses issues that are now prevalent within contemporary narrative spaces, such as racism and sexism, of which Butler knew would not be forgotten or resolved even thirty years after publishing *Lilith's Brood*, a text that thoroughly fleshes out experiences of marginalized identities when surrounded by colonizing forces. Canavan describes Butler's complex narrative structures as, "that interplay of attraction and revulsion is the source of what is

simultaneously most utopian and most disturbing about her stories;” a description that thoroughly encompasses the essence of the *Xenogenesis Trilogy* (2).

Butler engages liminality and the sublime in *Lilith's Brood*, and, thus, never fully satisfying preconceived or desired expectations of heroic fulfillment. Instead, she creates an inescapable labyrinth of moral and ethical dilemmas. The ethical structures in question in Butler's trilogy are adjacent to the central themes – motherhood and submission, heteronormative reproduction, and desires for racially driven hierarchy/colonization. These themes reveal a kind of anti-western-white ideological mythos underlying her speculative fictional space, specifically, western political mythos, including subservience of women and their bodies, cis-heteronormative ideologies of family, and xenophobic structures of race. This work frames Butler within the literary chassis of Afrofuturism which, subsequently, also positions Butler's work in conversation with Black feminist speculative fiction writers, such as Toni Morrison. For example, both Morrison and Butler engage in resistance narratives through their myth-building capacity and epic fantasy.

Beginning with a framework of Afrofuturism, Ytasha Womack in *Afrofuturism: The World of Black Sci-fi and Fantasy Culture* defines the project of Afrofuturism as “a space for women, a door ajar, arms wide open, a literal and figurative space for Black women to be themselves” (73). Furthermore, Womack insists “Afrofuturism as a movement itself may be the first in which Black women creators are credited for the power of their imaginations and are equally represented as the face of the future and the shapers of the future” (73). Thus, through an analysis of this trilogy using Afrofuturism, *Lilith's Brood* arguably embodies the intersections of Black Feminism and Afrofuturism. Oscillating between engaging the tradition of Black Feminist writing and informing her futuristic world building through a narrative epic, Butler establishes a

space for grappling with fear and possibilities of our future and our present. Lastly, “Afrofuturism celebrates women like Catlett, Hurston, and Dunham for using the imagination as a space of resistance and establishes a lineage of this history of thought” (Womack 73). Womack speaks to how “the complex Black women characters in sci-fi stories and the plethora of Afrofuturist women in the arts and beyond are no accident” and suggests that “there have always been Black feminists at the center of the project” (78). Afrofuturism exists as a space where Black women create from their experiences living in a the “crooked room,¹” sparking a reckoning with the worldview and historical oppression of Black women. In line with early Black feminist writer Zora Neele Hurston’s words, Butler bears witness to how Black women are treated as “the mules of the world.”

Though, historically speaking, Octavia Butler has been considered in isolation from other Black Feminist voices, her presence in contemporary media has unearthed her profoundly feminist, posthuman narratives. Moreover, as an early work of Afrofuturism, *Lilith’s Brood* forms its own narrative mythos revealing political myth as a constructed project of white supremacist meaning making. Indeed, Butler reveals that cultural narratives are the machine’s fuel, and conformity is the machine’s product. These cultural narratives, sometimes referred to as Grand Narratives, such as ideologies related to the “American Dream” or even racial structures, become archetypes. The materializing of Grand Narratives becomes a process of meaning-making through socialization into a particular ideological matrix. As a counter, Butler’s texts offer seeds of knowledge in her storytelling that challenges these Grand Narratives, cultural myths, and socialization matrices to unearth “who and what is human”? Thusly, my argument analyzes 1.) how Butler’s works function as space of resistance to white colonialists’ ideologies and 2.) how *Lilith’s Brood* thematically builds a mythos of resistance and a narrative epic. Butler

usurps colonial, westernizing narratives and reveals how they uphold white supremacist institutions through her own revisioning of cultural narratives, and, therefore, informs a new myth-making project. Specifically, she centers experiences of marginality and oppression to forge prophesying possibilities of the future, oftentimes in horrifying ways that highlight the possibility of a never-ending process of extinction through colonization.

Invoking classical narrative myth, Butler adopts Lilith, a Jewish mythological character, who also made a comeback within pop culture in the nineties and arose as a symbol of a new feminist wave. Butler, however, writes a new story of Lilith, again, lending this trilogy to a myth-building project. Michelle Osherow explores the myth-remaking of Lilith in *Dawn*, in her work “The Dawn of a New Lilith: Revisionary Mythmaking in Women’s Science Fiction.” Her essay positions Butler’s Lilith as a revisionary, myth-making project. Published in 2000 (at the cusp of the millennium), Osherow focuses on versions of Lilith as “the mother” within Octavia Butler’s *Lilith’s Brood* and C.L. Moore’s *Fruit of Knowledge*. Osherow argues that “motherhood [in particular] is an unusual concentration for Lilith,” reversing the roles of Lilith and Eve. Indeed, it is Lilith Iyapo, Butler’s Lilith, who is chosen by the Oankali to birth a new race (Osherow 20). Osherow explains, “highlighting Lilith as the mother of all reminds us, too, that Lilith *is* a mother, according to legend,” and, “in fact, God’s punishment of Lilith reflects her maternal status: she is to suffer the loss of scores of children every day” (77). Osherow suggest that Butler’s Lilith, with all her imperfections, “draws attention to a different aspect of motherhood than that associated with Eve” and “Instead of birthing and nurturing children, [Butler’s] Lilith causes us to consider the difficulties of loss or separation from them. Butler’s Lilith is certainly aware of that pain in the novel” (77-78). Butler’s narrative brings an alternative consciousness into the mythic tradition of Lilith. Specifically, Butler brings Black women’s

interiority, though somewhat outside of the racial matrix of the twenty-first century, to the forefront of a story invoking cultural mythos of motherhood. Lilith, then, in the later novels of the trilogy steps out of the spotlight while her children, Akin and Jodahs, continue their mother's legacy of challenging the Oankali order that Lilith resists for over a century.

Osherow unearths Lilith from her Jewish mythological roots excavating the displacement of her mythos in twentieth century literature². From C.L. Moore to Alicia Suskin Ostriker's "Lilith Poems," also one of the first depictions of Lilith as a Black woman, Osherow claims that a new attitude of Lilith arising out of twentieth century narratives, specifically science fiction, speaks across genres and culture in an effort to bring Black female representation of power and agency, or lack thereof, into a shared cultural consciousness. Placing Butler's work within a mythologization space invisions new possibilities of the future. Other than narrative myths, Butler's work also engages with cultural mythos regarding gender roles and family structures in her posthuman world. In Chapter 2 "Cultural Myths About Homosexuality," of *Same Sex Different Cultures*, Gilbert Herdt argues that homosexuality exists in the western tradition as the evil antithesis to the heteronormative gender order (25). Herdt insists that cultural myths are akin to "magical thinking" and "magic, one realizes, cannot be disproved. And bigotry (a form of magical thinking) remains stubbornly planted in closed minds" (26). Herdt clearly traces use of cultural myths, specifically heteronormative normality, as a form of scapegoating to hide bigotry and hate. However, there is also a dialectal process Herdt implies which positions myth and bigotry on a dialectical wheel of inference and reproduction. Herdt declares, "myths are timeless social realities and change ever so slowly. Belief exists independent from proof in the time and space world, though individuals can unlearn their beliefs and discover new realities...myth draws its existence from a collective pool of beliefs and stories that transcend individuals, and

[they] mask the structures and historical prerogatives of power in societies” (26). Herdt’s definition of myth and how it reinforces cultural structures, such as gender and sexuality, provides a useful departure for how Butler’s queer representation of the Oankali simultaneously invokes skepticism and challenges naturalized reproductive structures.

Additionally, Dorothy Allison, queer southern writer and critic, writes in her essay, “The Future of Female: Octavia Butler’s *Mother Lode*,” that “within the genre of science fiction, Butler is a realist, writing the most detailed social criticism and creating more of the most fascinating female characters in the genre” (471). However, Allison claims Butler’s characterization of women in her other work doesn’t apply to *Lilith Iyapo*. Instead, Allison claims Butler’s *Lilith* abandons her resistance too easily and “[is] nowhere near as captivating as her rebellious mothers and complex villains of her earlier book” (477). Rather than the focus on *Lilith* as a point of resistance, Allison’s interest lies more in Butler’s questioning of sexuality through her complex creation of Oankali family structures. Allison argues, “what continues to hold her interest and ours are many-layered and extensive explorations of male/female relationships, resistance to traditional moral teachings, women’s responsibility to bear and raise children and the fine line between compromise and betrayal” (477).

Allison sums up the intersections of conflict in *Lilith’s Brood* neatly and raises another interesting theme: compromise and betrayal. For example, the Oankali represent alternative and wildly challenging evolutionary qualities that lend themselves to being a moral good, but oftentimes, the Oankali abandon morality in fear that humanity will inevitably destroy themselves. Ambiguously, the Oankali toe the line between being custodians of change and self righteous overlords, constantly betraying *Lilith*’s trust in them. Subsequently, due to the natural abilities of the Oankali to manipulate genetic information, with their sole purpose being to bring

their version of perfection to other species, Butler's aliens simultaneously challenge gender notions while reinforcing practices of twenty-third century eugenics.

The last framework of myth that Butler engages is likely the more unique of the three modes. Her theory that she proposes in this narrative—humans contain a genetic flaw: a need for hierarchy despite attaining higher intelligence—does a kind of prophesying or warning that embodies its own mythos. Butler speaks towards a Posthumanism framework which in essence uses a future or posthuman context to grapple with present realities, arguably, crafting a new kind of epic narrative that proposes a journey toward the future will require a reckoning with the present.

My analysis of Butler focuses on the three distinct forms of mythic production engaged within *Lilith's Brood*—classical narrative myth (Lilith being a tangible figure in Jewish mythological texts), political/sociobiological myth, and prophesying myths. Moreover, historically, Lilith has been packaged in a Christian context—the misbehaving first wife of Adam who then births Lucifer's young and seduces men in the night, and, not to mention steals helpless babes from their cribs. Butler's version is not far off. Lilith Iyapo births construct children, half-human and half-Oankali, for her experience mimics the cultural expectation of Lilith as a mother of monsters. Lilith Iyapo also falls into the trap of working alongside the “devil” when she is tasked with seducing other humans, whom the Oankali also force her to awaken out of suspended animation, to join their colonization efforts and breed a half human/half Oankali species. Though Butler winks to the mythical narrative of Lilith as the mother of demons, she does not make it easy to pin the Oankalis' intentions as undoubtedly evil or good. However, Butler's Lilith does represent the pain and suffering that historically accompanies Black women motherhood.

LILITH: THE MYTH AND THE MOTHER

A framework of myth, or cultural narrative, maps ideological and socio-biological structures. Thus, through Butler's narrative, the Oankali, by default of their strange existence, and Butler's revisioning of Lilith, brings into question cultural understandings of patriarchy, racism, gender, family, and freedom. Butler accomplishes this by invoking a framework of myth in a few different ways throughout this work. Most obvious, she provides an allegorical nod to Lilith, the Jewish character who was Adam's first wife, and who escaped the Garden of Eden to resist a subservient life. Using Lilith as a point of departure brings into question ideological underpinnings of motherhood reinforced through white supremacist cultural narratives. Furthermore, returning to Womack, her chapter "The Divine Feminine in Space," tangentially positions Butler's Lilith within a larger scene of Black women's fictional creation. She explains, "the divine feminine principle [encompasses] a Mother Earth ideal, [valuing] nature, creativity, receptivity, mysticism, intuition" as well as how "healing [partners] with technology, science, and achievement" (Womack 74-75). Themes of the divine feminine principle point to the maternal role as a significant framework of resistance and protest. Butler's revisioning of Lilith as a not only new a myth but one encompassing Black women's experiences of motherhood, challenges cultural myths underpinning a strictly white woman's archetypal experience of motherhood.

Lilith as Myth

Lilith's myth began when she was created as Adam's first wife and, like him, she was created from the Earth (Pintel-Ginsberg). Lilith flies out of the Garden of Eden when she refuses to be sexually subjugated (Pintel-Ginsberg). She wastes no time, and flies over the walls of Eden toward the Red Sea. When God hears of Lilith's fleeing, he sends his angels to bring her back to Eden, and when they locate her floating upon the sea, she refuses to return and is cursed by God (Pintel-Ginsberg). Her refusal to return as Adam's subordinate results in a cursed motherhood where 100 of her children will die each day (Pintel-Ginsberg). Additionally, stories about Lilith depict her as a monster, Satan's wife, and even the original creator of the world. Indeed, Lilith's presence appears in different mediums and stories dating back to before the New Testament. Lilith's story is transhistorical and has continuously re-appeared throughout past centuries³.

Butler's attention to presenting a Black woman as the main protagonist of a post-human narrative speaks to Womack's assertion that Black women are using textual spaces to protest the white patriarchy through creating a future that is not white, masculine centered. Furthermore, Butler also reveals that when Black women exercise agency over their bodies (such as resisting outside authority over their physical bodies), their bodies then become contested sites that reveal machinations of colonialism. An engagement with Black women's bodies and how they are presented in literary spaces reveals how the violation of bodies is a trans-generational and trans-historical practice of colonialism. From the very beginning, Lilith resists the Oankali's assimilation of her. Though, because the Oankali are a complex and very inhuman species, Lilith's relationship with them complicates the colonizer/colonized boundaries that seem to be so clearly drawn at times. *Dawn*, the first book of the *Xenogenesis* trilogy, begins with a chillingly

detailed experience of Lilith Iyapo's awakening out of suspended animation, which the Oankali placed her in for two-hundred and fifty years.

Awakening was hard, as always. The ultimate disappointment. It was a struggle to take in enough air to drive off the nightmare sensations of asphyxiation. Lilith Iyapo lay gasping, shaking with the force of her effort. Her heartbeat too fast, too loud. She curled around it, fetal, helpless. Circulation began to return to her arms and legs in flurries of minute, exquisite pain (1).

Butler wastes no time and throws her reader into the cocoon, into the body, with Lilith. The reanimation of Lilith recalls Toni Morrison's language in *Beloved*, when Amy says to Sethe, "Anything dead coming back to life hurts" (42). Both *Dawn* and *Beloved* were published in 1987, at the heart of the renaissance of Black Women's writing. Both authors describe the process of reanimation as a gruesome and haunting experience. The process precedes the horrifying realities that lay ahead for these women. Coming back to life is just the beginning of Lilith's experience of being colonized by the Oankali. The attention on the physical body of Lilith in the first pages of the text signals Butler's awareness of the historical treatment of Black women's bodies as being violently nonconsensual. Figures such as Henrietta Lacks and the nonconsensual use of her cancer cells references historical mistreatment of Black women and their bodies. Furthermore, other figures such as Linda Brent and her narrative detailing violations of her body by the white supremacist state further references the cultural memory underpinning Butler's decision to begin this work with an excavation of Lilith Iyapo's physical body.

As opposed to *Lilith's Brood*, *Beloved* falls into a tradition of Black, feminist, speculative, fiction reviving the slave narrative style and creating a new genre: Butler's envisioning of a future where Black woman are still being forced into a kind of enslavement also

does similar work of Neo-Slave narratives. Neo-Slave Narratives are characterized by their return to the antebellum past and repackage familiar narrative structures, created by formerly enslaved people, to tell fictional stories of enslavement in the south⁴. Toni Morrison builds her mythos through re-memory of the past. Additionally, Morrison's coining of "re-memory" signals a similar experience of narrative discomfort that Butler's work also engages when looking into the future instead of the past. Her unique future making projects act as a kind of re-prophesying or re-envisioning of the future, one that like Morrison's narratives, centers on Black women's experiences. Thus, using Lilith as not only a vessel that pulls myth into the equation, Butler also engages similar narrative construction that mirrors Morrison's narrative-mythos, a structure or style associated with her world building, positioning herself into the myth-maker space embodied in Black feminist speculative fiction writing.

Building Butler's Lilith into a myth, Lilith Iyapo enters the narrative as a kind of monstrous being herself. She is not quite fully human when the Oankali are finished with her, and she's definitely not Oankali either, though she does give birth to half Oankali children. Her life with the Oankali reveals this monstrous liminal space that, historically, is fitting for Lilith. She's forced to follow around Nikanji, an ooloi who she later reproduces with, when it is young and describes how "[its] friend's poked and prodded her exposed flesh and tried to persuade her through Nikanji to take off her clothing... she got the feeling some would have enjoyed dissecting her" (Butler 57). This language is particularly uncomfortable to read, but it frames this Lilith as having very little agency, and her body is seen by the Oankali as grounds to explore their curiosity, not unlike historical predecessors of Black women who suffered similar fates. In fact, she makes it clear that "she was no more than an unusual animal to them" (Butler 57).

Butler revisions Lilith as toeing the line between embodying a mysterious formidable person (though this perspective is attributed to her by human resisters, those who reject breeding with the Oankali) , to revealing her interior experience in which she undergoes immense suffering. Tragically, she is not flying out of this Eden in Butler's story. Thus, the revision. Lilith does not escape and become this force of nature that God's Lilith became. She does what another Lilith may have not. She endures. She struggles, fights, gives up, falls in love, loses love, and persists for decades as the lynchpin for Oankali/human gene trading. She begins the story as captured and does not seem to ever transcend that status; therefore, Lilith Iyapo represents a reality more uncomfortable and traumatizing than mythical hero/heroin's typically portray. The mythos surrounding Butler's Lilith does not lend to a frightened or weary figure. She is flesh and bone, and endures her new life as opposed to fleeing and fulfilling the myth of a privileged Lilith.

Lilith as Mother

Returning to Michelle Osherow, *Lilith's Brood* effectively writes Lilith into a mythical mother archetype, opening up new ways for interpreting motherhood and Lilith's presence in that space. Beginning at the very end of *Dawn*, Lilith learns she has been impregnated without her consent. Nikanji, an ooloi Oankali, reveals that it has impregnated her with the seed of her deceased lover. Indeed, the Oankali can extract and preserve reproductive cells for later use. Lilith, of course, is horrified about this new information and protests that her child will not be the daughter Nikanji insists she will have, but, instead, she cries out "it will be a thing—not human . . . It's inside me and it isn't human (Butler 247). Not only does she insist that her conceived child is not human but "a thing. A monster" (Butler 247). Thus, Lilith Iyapo continues the fate of her

namesake, prescribing her a monstrous and miserable motherhood, similar to that of the biblical Lilith.

Adulthood Rites, the second book in the trilogy, begins with the first line “He remembered much of his stay in the womb,” reviving a monstrousness Lilith previously bestowed upon her unborn children (Butler 253). How could any human remember their time in the womb, unless they are not human? Butler starts Akin’s story in the same place she starts his mother’s, inside of her body. “He did not learn pain until it was time for him to be born. He could feel and taste changes happening around him—the slow turning of his body, then later the sudden headfirst thrust, the compression first of his head, then gradually along the length of his body” (253). Butler writes Akin’s beginning by describing his birth, Lilith’s birth of him. Akin embodies a long lineage of Lilith’s offspring, dictating his fate before he has even taken his first breath. However, Akin does not become a demon or monster prescribed to his birthright. Instead, Akin navigates a complicated and isolating experience in which he is stolen by resister villagers. Due to his abduction, Akin is forced to undergo a painful metamorphosis without the aid of his family. The metamorphosis period for Oankali, and constructs, is a very long period of the body changing and growing. Usually, Oankali are accompanied by their sibling-mate, children born in pairs and later mated to one another, consequently, turning Akin’s journey into one of solitude, isolation and deformity. However, Akin’s experience with human resisters leads him to propose a Mars colony for humans who do not want to mate with the Oankali. Because Akin spends time with the resisters, he begins to tune into his humanness and works to understand the resisters’ reasoning for not wanting to mate with the Oankali. Consequently, Akin convinces the Oankali and pioneers the settlement on Mars. Thus, Akin breaks the cycle of Lilith’s cursed children, metaphorically, and pushes the Oankali to create a space for “Akjai Humans,” a phrase the

Oankali use to describe a faction of a species that is unchanged. Akin becomes a part of the talks with the Akjai Oankali, a faction of Oankali that has never traded with other species, as they make their decision regarding the Mars colony. Akin describes the Akjai arguing, “To give them back their independent existence, their fertility, their own territory was to help them breed a new population only to destroy itself a second time” (Butler 470). However, Akin manages to convince the Akjai to allow for the Mars colony. Interestingly, Akin functions as a kind of prophetic figure, one who is able to restore humanity and bridge the divide between resister humans and the Oankali. Though, arguably Akin would not be able to achieve this unity without the lessons taught to him by his mother, Lilith. Lilith was forced into her role as the culprit for human/Oankali fusion. However, her son Akin chooses that role for himself and embraces the difficulty of convincing a powerful colonizer to understand and empathize with the humans’ perspective.

Lilith fades into the background in the remaining two novels and accepts the life of motherhood. Though, she is not completely convinced her children are anything like her. Still, she cares for them: “Lilith gave him bits of solid food now, but [Akin] still took great comfort in nursing. It frightened him to realize that someday she would not let him nurse. He did not want to grow that old” (Butler 266). An interesting consideration that Butler poses is how the Oankali complicate relationship bonds. Akin’s sensory abilities present themselves as a sensory tongue, and takes in information the same way the Oankali do with their sensory arms but using only his tongue until he undergoes metamorphosis and gains more sensory arms/tentacles. Interestingly, Akin learns of this ability through breast feeding. He describes his experience with feeding as one of attaining knowledge and learning of his Oankali abilities: “he tasted her flesh as well as her milk...he perceived the many cells. Her skin taught him what it needs to be dead. Its outer

layer contrasted sharply with what he could perceive of the living flesh beneath” (256). Butler’s description of the ways in which Akin learns using his Oankali abilities and testing them on his mother, Lilith, creates an alternate perspective of “monster” as embodying a creature who is different and perhaps unique. Lilith persists in learning with Akin and reveals a kind of motherhood that is difficult and unconventional. It is not the binary motherhood of which Lilith and Eve, biblical motherhood, of which they are associated. Lilith Iyapo is neither a mother of malicious demons nor a subservient domestic. Lilith and her children are bonded through a profound bodily connection, and, therefore, propose atypical and curious parent/child relationships. These relationships that Butler creates highlight this Lilith as accepting the monstrosity of her children and even learning to appreciate them for all the ways that they are uniquely human and monster.

Butler’s revised Lilith speaks back to the past, drawing her namesake and legacy to the forefront, and challenges historical depictions of Lilith. Lilith does not just represent a tradition of evil women, collaborators with the bringer of the apocalypse, or a mother of evil. Butler declares in her narrative that Lilith represents real women, Black women, marginalized and oppressed women, women who don’t escape. She endures her captors colonization of her and learns to love and teach the children of her forced reproduction to be more than she is able to be. She nurtures and protects them until she cannot. Butler’s Lilith breathes new life into this powerful mythos of womanhood and motherhood and bestows upon the mantle of western myth a revised version of Lilith.

THE OANKALI: COMPLICATING MATING STRUCTURES AND THEORIZING HUMAN NATURE

Butler engages cultural structures of gender and family as mythos within western worlds through her fashioning of an alien species seemingly devoid of humanness that even their very presence is described as incapable of being understood. She prophesies alternative structures using the Oankali as the proxy of resistance to western hegemonic gender structures. Because this narrative takes place two hundred and fifty years after an apocalyptic nuclear war, *Lilith's Brood* is a space that deconstructs the exclusionary, ideological apparatus which defines traditional western mating practices of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Butler's fictional species, the Oankali, a unique creation within science fiction, find Earth after it's decimation. A gene-trading species who have traveled space for millions of years trading genetic information with other species, the Oankali function as a mirror or reflection of twenty-first century totalitarian regimes. However, Butler complicates this species to make it nearly impossible to pin the Oankali down as a rigid colonizing race. The Oankali function very differently from humans, or so they claim. However, their actions through the story speak otherwise. For example, the first indication of who the Oankali are begins with Lilith's observation of her own body after her awakening. When Lilith realizes that this is not her first time awakening, it is in fact her third, she begins to scour her body for any signs of her past life:

Her hand touched the long scar across her abdomen. She had acquired it somehow between her second and third awakenings, had examined it fearfully, wondering what had been done to her. What had she lost or gained, and why? And what else might be

done? She did not own herself any longer. Even her flesh could be cut and stitched without her consent or knowledge (Butler 6).

Similarly, “she did not own herself any longer” invokes more Morrisonian language pointing to this notion that historically Black women have and will continue to fight over ownership of themselves (Butler 6). Morrison’s *Beloved* phrases the concept of owning oneself when she writes, “Freeing yourself is one thing, claiming ownership of that freed self was another.” Like *Beloved*, Butler’s *Dawn* begins with a Black woman experiencing feelings of being trapped, isolated, and forced into making terrible decisions. From these first lines, the Oankali are set up to be a violent race who do not even bother with consent before invading another’s body. Indeed, Butler invokes the historical perils of Black women as a central starting point for fleshing out inescapable oppression. Lilith’s realization that her body had been changed without her consent nor memory of it positions Butler’s narrative as an allegory for American chattel slavery. The idea that Black people’s bodies were considered the property of the white state comes to mind when reading about Lilith’s treatment by the Oankali.

Interestingly, the Oankali claim to be so inhuman and everything that humans are not with regard to a need for hierarchy and supremacy yet are defiant and absolute in their decision to sterilize human beings unless they mate with the Oankali and breed construct children. Forcible sterilization throughout human history has been a glaring sign and consequence of doctrines/ideologies born out of a sense of racial superiority. Butler is summoning the memory of how racial dominance leads to enslavement practices and politicized others, even leading so far as to racial genocide. Jdahya, the first Oankali Lilith meets, teaches Lilith about the Oankali and their history. Jdahya teaches Lilith mostly about how the Oankali found Earth and the state it was in: “We collected as many as we could. The ones we didn’t find in time died of injury, disease, hunger, radiation, cold... We found them later” (Butler 15). Lilith does not doubt Jdahya

as she responds: “She believed him. Humanity in its attempt to destroy itself had made the world unlivable. She had considered her survival a misfortune” (Butler 15). It is interesting that Butler does not answer the gnawing questions of who the Oankali are right off the bat and instead draws out the curiosity of where they came from and what their purpose was here.

Central to the myth building taking place in this text, Butler theorizes a repeated idea throughout the trilogy that humans were genetically imperfect, and this genetic flaw, discovered by the Oankali, caused the destruction of the human race. The discovery of this genetic flaw in humans becomes the driving factor. The Oankali’s drive and purpose for living revolves around trading genetic information with other species, so their evolution led them to other worlds to mate, learn, and then move on. Lilith asks: ““What do your people call themselves?” ” (Butler 23).

‘We are Oankali.’
‘Oankali. Sounds like a word in some Earth language.’
‘It may be, but with different meaning.’
‘What does it mean in your language?’
‘Several things. Traders for one.’
‘You are traders?’
‘Yes.’
‘What do you trade?’
‘Ourselves.’
‘You mean ... each other? Slaves?’
‘No. We’ve never done that.’
‘What, then?’
‘Ourselves.’
‘I don’t understand’ (23).

The first impression is skewed and conflicting. What does it mean to trade oneself? Not only are they not enslavers, to their knowledge, but the Oankali already possess unlimited resources that can’t be stolen or exploited. That is, their evolutionary abilities allow them to read and change genetic information, grow, and produce infrastructure from organic material

(Lo, the Oankali/human colony made up of a living organism) and make themselves virtually indestructible (the Oankali possess heightened strength, senses and healing capabilities). So,

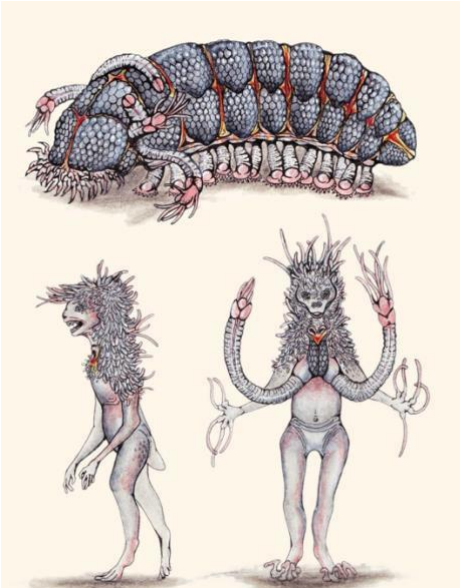


Figure 1 TheSeaMonster. *Aliens from ScienceFiction: Oankali*. 2018. DeviantArt. 18

what would they want from humans? The very first description of who the Oankali are and what they do scrambles any preconceived ideas about what their intentions are for humans, specifically, trying to assess them as a type of enslaver in a western historical sense. Indeed, Butler does not allow for an easy interpretation that anthropomorphizes this new race. In fact, the Oankali claim to be devoid of human tendencies entirely.

However, most of the differences between humans and Oankali are bodily functions such as how the Oankali communicate, reproduce and build infrastructure. For example, their process of reading, attaining, and sharing information all takes place through their sensory arms and tentacles, described as hard, long, nail-like in touch. The creation of a species so unearthly and unhuman allows for an interesting reflective lens for analyzing contemporary colonization. One of Lilith's first conversations with an olooi, Nikanji, who she later mates with, further explains that the Oankali only ever move forward in their conscious evolution:

‘[The descendants of Oankali and Human gene trading] probably won’t even know one another. They’ll remember this division as mythology if they remember it at all.’ [says Lilith]
‘No, they’ll recognize one another. Memory of a division is passed on biologically. I remember everyone that has taken place in my family since we left the homeworld’ (Butler 36).

Interestingly, Lilith prescribes human tendencies of recording historical memory, such as mythology to the Oankali. However, Oankali embody a mythology, a history that cannot be

forgotten due to their abilities to store information biologically. Interestingly, though the Oankali have an extensive advanced memory ability, they do not wish to ever return to former worlds. Nikanji insists, “No, Lilith, that’s the one direction that’s closed to us. This is our homeworld now” (Butler 36). As opposed to historical mechanisms of colonization, such as the creation of colonies as a means to supply a motherland, the Oankali colonize in a way that complicates preconceived ideas of this process. Indeed, Nikanji’s decisiveness regarding the Oankali’s habitation of Earth signals more than just a sense of ownership of the property of Earth but that Earth is now essential in the grander evolution of this species. Lilith learns early on why the Oankali are invested in the human race. She asks,

‘What can’t you go back to your homeworld?’ She asked.
‘it... still exists, doesn’t it?’
He seemed to think for a moment. ‘We left so long
Ago... I doubt that it does still exist.’
‘Why did you leave?’
‘ It was a womb. The time had come for us to be born.’
She smiled sadly. ‘There were humans who thought that
way – right up to the moment the missiles were fired.
People who believed space was our destiny, I believed it
myself.’
‘I know—though from what the ooloi have told me, your
people could not Have fulfilled that destiny. Their own
bodies handicapped them’ (Butler 38).

The Oankali possess a need to evolve forward and never return to their past, not even to reflect. Lilith’s mentions the need for humans to explore space and how that need forges a destiny. Sadly, for the humans in Butler’s story, their destiny was never achieved and led to the demise of humanity. As opposed to humans, the Oankali’s need to trade with new species in search for genetic perfection drives their continuous movement through the universe. However, the Oankali are insistent that the ways in which they evolve and trade genetic information does not relate to

human's need for exploration. Nikanji's reference to "their own bodies handicapped them" speaks to the Oankalis' theorization of human extinction (Butler 38).

However, the Oankali do find that humans possess some genetic material, specifically Lilith, of great value... cancer cells. Lilith asks the first Oankali she meets, Jdahya, about why the ooloi were particularly interested in her cancer cells. Jdahya explains they can use her cells to grow new limbs (Butler 37). She questions,

'Then I suppose it would eventually have killed me?'
'Yes it would have. And your people were in a similar position. If they had been able to perceive and solve their problems, they might have been able to avoid destruction. Of course, they too would have to remember to reexamine themselves periodically' (Butler 38).

Lilith remains resistant and curious simultaneously. She accepts the complexity of the Oankali but never accepts the Oankali's perception of human beings and that human instinct was the downfall of her race. Lilith responds with "I don't think most of us thought of it as a genetic problem" (Butler 39). However, Jdahya refutes Lilith that just because humans didn't acknowledge their flaws, the destruction of the human race couldn't have been stopped. In fact, Oankali persist when speaking to Lilith claiming that humans were evolutionarily destined to end themselves.

From this point, the Oankali see themselves as saviors whose sole purpose is to trade their knowledge of gene manipulation to save the remaining humans from themselves. Lilith realizes early on that the "salvation" offered by the Oankali would not come without a price,

'Tell me the price, Jdahya. What do you want? What will your people take from us in return for having saved us?' All his tentacles seemed to hang limp, giving him an almost comical droop. Lilith found no humor in it. 'You'll live,' he said. 'Your people will live. You'll have your world back again. We already

have much of what we want from you. Your cancer in particular’
(Butler 40).

Later, humans learn that the price of their compliance means human to human contact would not be possible, and, in fact, becomes repulsive. The lack of consideration for consent and or empathy for the remaining humans’ inability to have physical connection creates a fearful and resentful opinion of the Oankali. The Oankalis’ ability to genetically engineer any being naturally means their interactions with other species, regardless of other species’ desire to trade with the Oankali or not, is central to their purpose. Butler, then, in the second and third books of the trilogy, further complicates their colonizing ways by introducing the Oankali family structure in more detail.

Kitty Dunkley, in “Becoming Posthuman: The Sexualized, Racialized, and Naturalized Others of Octavia E. Butler’s *Lilith’s Brood*,” suggests the sexualized otherness of the ooloi usurp the space of reproductive agents, and subsequently, subvert traditional western mating practices. For clarity, the ooloi are the gender responsible for the process of reproduction. Since the Oankali evolved to require three individuals for reproduction, the ooloi those being the most necessary, this new structure threatens the human male reproductive role as “the pinnacle of a gendered hierarchy” (Dunkley 100). For, “the ooloi are regarded as neither male enough for the men to perform allyship with, nor female enough to conceptualize as potential sexual partners,” and, thus, pose the most ontological danger acutely felt by the men (Dunkley 100). Dunkley’s assertions of the ooloi as the sexualized other and its usurpation of human maleness atop the human hierarchical structure positions the Oankali as deconstructing traditional western hegemonic mating structures. Butler seemingly positions this third gender as a possibility for human family/mating structures. Furthermore, Dunkley asserts that Butler’s work can be read through a posthumanism⁴ lens arguing that this new reproductive model challenges the

foundations of humanism. She excavates the role of Humanism as a foundational ideology wielded at the hands of a dominant identity, such as white, hetero-cis maleness, to impose “order” and stratification benefitting the powerful. Dunkley asserts humanism is premised on a “Cartesian dualism,” she claims, that “has been co-opted and expanded to impose a dichotomous hierarchy upon the metaphysics of natural sciences” (97). She continues to include the role that myth takes on as a method to impose humanist thought:

Humanism functions to mythologize a set of assumptions regarding the quintessence and universality of the nature and condition of being ‘human’ – a blueprint that not only inadequately captures but actively excludes the Other against which humanity is extrinsically measured (Dunkley 97).

Dunkley’s focus on identity as the driving force behind humanist thought references Donna Haraway, cyborg theorist, who argues “who counts as ‘us’ in this [humanist] rhetoric? Which identities are available to ground such a potent political myth called ‘us’?” (qtd. in Dunkley 99). Identities are grounded in myth, specifically political myth. Thus, Butler’s complication of gender identity in a post-human context questions how such identities are reinforced through a narrative process. Dunkley argues this question is at the heart of *Lilith’s Brood*: how do particular uses of myth design the framework of a western sociological matrix? (99). Moreover, the Oankali prompt a reflection on western gender structures and challenge western cultural myth while simultaneously functioning in colonizing ways. Interestingly, Oankali both usurp and mirror a white supremacist colonizing effort. This text, in a unique way, possesses its own double consciousness.

Dunkley also references Gloria Anzaldua’s *mestiza consciousness* which argues for a “new mythos– that is, a change in the way we perceive reality, the way we perceive ourselves, and the way we behave” (qtd. in Dunkley 105). Both writers discuss a kind of “other

consciousness” and how that consciousness can be used as a critical lens. Dunkley’s lens of posthumanism is informed through Butler’s positionality as a Black woman writer, and reveals, alternatively, that the white male human condition underpins Humanism and all its assertions. Butler is indeed resisting the notion that white hetero-cis maleness is the universal or quintessential human condition, and, thus, as a narrative of resistance, a binary reproductive matrix familiar to human procreative practices becomes physically impossible for humans, as a result of the Oankali manipulating human genetic information. Though the Oankali subvert and bring into question a two-person mating system, and mark it as unnatural and repulsive, the Oankali still exhibit colonist tendencies of zero tolerance in their choice to sterilize humans. Thus, this mating structure poses problems for the humans left because it is not only unfamiliar but forcibly sterilizing, effectively complicates the Oankali/human relationship.

Butler’s creation of a race whose purpose for exploration and discovery intertwines with their physical and psychological abilities, down to their very cells (organelles), provides an uncomfortable lens for extrapolating and deciphering between colonizing behavior and foreign practices of exploration. The central reasoning for the Oankali’s actions toward humans, however, is attributed to simply a genetic contradiction, hierarchy and intelligence, that could be easily changed or “fixed.” The focus on genetic imperfection recalls a long history of human genocide. Butler seems to position her Oankali as prompting, not a story of heroism, but a quest to solve the problem of humanity's true downfall. Consequently, Butler challenges assumptions that our lack of imagination as a race is due to a genetic flaw, so she creates the Oankali to assess humanity as a whole.

CONCLUSION

Lilith's Brood summons an analysis defining this work as more than one of just science fiction. Butler's work can be pitted against grand narratives of womanhood, hegemonic-binary gender dynamics, and racial hierarchical structures. Butler's *Lilith's Brood* is grand and epic enough to engage sociological myths of gender, race, humanness, colonialism, etc. and puts into question the stronghold that ideological myths have on western culture. To reiterate Dunkley, "science fiction hereby becomes a subversive mode through which Butler reimagines the myriad of diverse embodiments that might be emancipated if we free ourselves from our ideological shackles to Humanism" (96). Furthermore, I argue that it is actually the central project of Afrofuturism, as a genre, to engage myth making, and, therefore, Afrofuturism is charged with mythological, epic world building—distinctly exploring a unique cosmology of being, prefaced on the experiences of marginalized others within a western patriarchal matrix. If we begin to understand the power of myths, disguised as cultural narratives of success and normalcy, to underpin structures such as those of a white supremacist world, the possibility for future structures do not have to rely on one dominant world view, but one that encompasses multiple perspectives and nuances. Butler's vision of a futuristic mythos questions our "nature" and scrutinizes values enmeshed within a western world view of humanity. In Canavan's words, "[Butler] made science fiction "messy"—or, rather, showed how messy it had always been. The future never belonged to just one tiny fraction of humans" (2). Butler's texts range from religious fanaticism fantasy to posthuman/alien world-building which contributed to the rise of Afrofuturism in the late nineties and early two-thousands and reveals this genre as the future of

the now. Womack insists, “Readers, our future is now. Fortunately, there are guideposts on this worded journey through the cosmos, key archetypes that anchor the imagination on this spaceship ride dubbed ‘freedom’” (8). Certainly, an Afrofuturist text is a journey toward freedom. Butler’s fiction functions as tools and clues on the quest towards a more enlightened future. Focusing in on one of Butler’s less canonized texts, *Lilith’s Brood*, engages this approach through displacing contemporary issues and structures within a futuristic context. 1.) motherhood equaling submission, and, to a further extent, reproductive enslavement, 2.) reproduction as restricted to heteronormative sexual practices (which also signals that any reproduction outside of that matrix results in monstrous offspring), and 3.) using perceptions of racial hierarchy and higher intelligence to identify colonialist world making.

Butler plucks Lilith out of classical mythology and places her into a post-human reality, embodying an identity rarely envisioned for Lilith, that is an African American Lilith, and theorizes how women, specifically Black women, historically are the most vulnerable to subordination via colonization and must create spaces outside of the colonialist project for their perspectives and lives to be valued. Though Butler’s epic does not fully embody the hero’s journey nor develops into the revolutionary narrative of post-human apocalyptic fantasies, this trilogy does something different, something new within the mythic tradition. Butler’s Lilith skews her classical framework, and, instead of fleeing, persists and survives in the role imposed upon her. She becomes a mother of monsters and a sympathizer, but she also becomes a myth herself. She becomes a mother and woman who supports her children and works to find the balance between both their humanness and their Oankali-ness. Lilith Iyapo exists in the in-between with the hope of achieving a better future, though all Lilith can do is float and watch. Butler breaks into the cosmos and shakes the very grounds of a western world view. Through her

fantastical and formidable characterization of humanity at its most vulnerable, Butler reveals how fragile world views steeped in white colonialist mythos are when they meet her imagination.

NOTES

1. In reference to Melissa Harris-Perry's work *Sister Citizen*, which explores how the crooked room theory, originating in the field of Psychology as premised on a study where participants are asked to orient themselves upright in a crooked room, mirrors the abstract feelings of Black women being positioned within the crooked room that is a white, centered world.
2. I want to include two paintings, both Dante Gabriel Rossetti's painting "Lady Lilith" in 1867 and Jacob Collier's painting "Lilith with a snake" in 1886 as part of what makes up the canon of Lilith depictions.
3. It's important to note there is a tradition of defining Black female motherhood. Hortense Spillers should be noted for her work exploring domestic roles of enslaved people, specifically, that of motherhood as being subverted by the selling of children.
4. Dunkley uses Rosi Brodetti's framework of posthumanism as a framework for her article.

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