



# *Dawn*

*Book 1, Xenogenesis (Lilith's Brood)*

Octavia Butler, 1987 (1988/89)

# Xenogenesis/Lilith's Brood

- ▶ **Xeno:** foreign, different, strange
- ▶ **Genesis:** beginnings, creation
- ▶ According to Andrew Plisner: "In terms of different beginnings, the title correlates with the book's primary theme: the human characters' collection from Earth's devastated surface in order to shift a diseased paradigm and ultimately move towards the planet's [and humanity's] re-habilitation" (147)
- ▶ **Lilith:** apocryphal biblical figure "identified as a diabolic agent – a 'dark character' and 'terrible mother' – whose proto-feminist transgressions influenced her satanic copulations and subsequent evil offspring" (Plisner 147-48)
- ▶ **Brood:** connects to Lilith's role as matriarch of a new hybrid species as well as the reproductive politics within the text



- Self-identity, self-ownership, autonomy
- Communalism, mutuality, symbiosis
- Transformation, metamorphosis, shape-shifting
- Imperialism, colonialism, slavery, eugenics

## Primary Themes/Tensions



- Mind/Body
- Culture/Nature
- Violence/Justice
- Utopia/Dystopia



## The Human Contradiction

“Personally, I find utopias ridiculous. We’re not going to have a perfect human society until we get a few perfect humans, and that seems unlikely.”

~ Octavia Butler



- ▶ According to the Oankali, humans “have a mismatched pair of genetic characteristics. ... You are intelligent. ... You are hierarchical.” (Butler 38-39)

“It’s less a matter of being programmed for self-destruction than it is that self-destruction occurs because we’re not willing to go beyond that principle of who’s got the biggest or the best or the most. We can; in fact, we do, individually. And if we know we are like that [hierarchical], we **ought to be able** to go beyond it.”

~ Octavia Butler (qtd. In Belkin 375)

# Theoretical Contexts: Critical Utopia/Dystopia

- ▶ Reading strategy defined by Tom Moylan and Raffaella Baccolini to expand our understanding of the utopian and dystopian genres, especially as found in feminist science fiction
- ▶ “Critical or open-ended dystopias are texts that maintain a utopian core at their center, a locus of hope that contributes to deconstructing tradition and reconstructing alternatives” (Baccolini, qtd. in Belkin 373).
- ▶ Typically, in such texts, utopia and dystopia are not presented as “mutually exclusive terms” but “coexist” to provide readers with “something to aim for...[and] something to avoid” (Baccolini/Belkin 373)
- ▶ In Butler’s (post-apocalyptic) text, we are not provided any clear answers; the utopian and dystopian elements remain ambiguous and we are presented with “both the horror of elimination and the hope for continuation of humanity” (Belkin 374).

## Theoretical Contexts: Bodily Intelligence & the Erotic

- ▶ “The erotic is a resource within each of us that lies in a deeply female and spiritual plane, firmly rooted in the power of our unexpressed or unrecognized feeling. ... Recognizing the power of the erotic within our lives can give us the energy to pursue genuine change within our world” (Audre Lorde, qtd. in Belkin 376)
  - ▶ According to Lorde, patriarchy privileges (masculine/phallic) logic while repressing the power of the erotic as an alternative (feminine) creative energy or economy of desire
  - ▶ *Dawn* deconstructs the body/mind duality in western cultures
  - ▶ Exposes where the denial of bodily intelligence over mind-intelligence often leads to violence against others, the self and the environment
  - ▶ Simultaneously, the text explores bodily invasion and what happens when the erotic is abused or used against an individual's will or desire

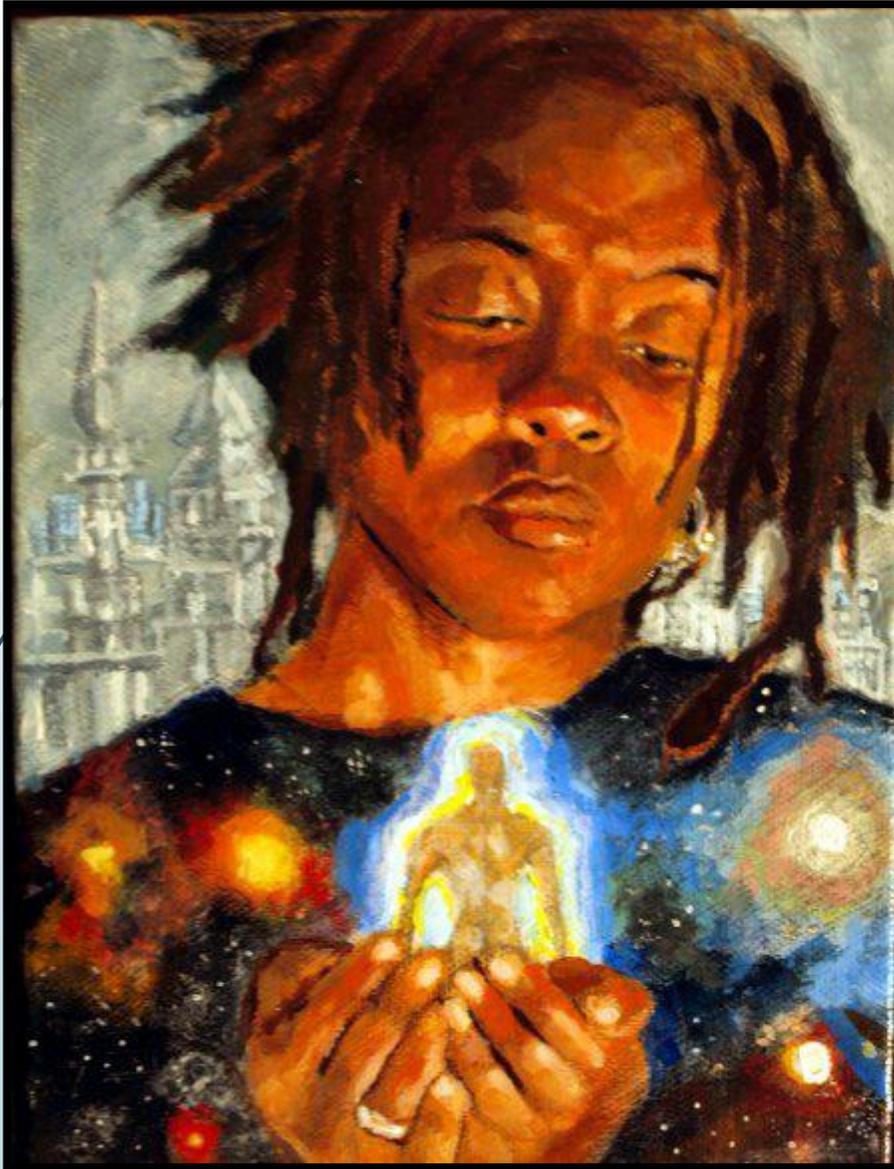


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# Theoretical Contexts: Ecocriticism

- ▶ Humans' relationships to their environments traditionally/rhetorically figured as mastery over nature and other species (equivalent to patriarchal mastery over female nature and/or women as subhuman)
- ▶ Oankali homes (trees) symbolic of communalism, rooted in environmental connectivity, solidarity and mutualism rather than alienation, mastery and imperialism (Plisner 151)
- ▶ Womb/spaceship: metaphor for symbiosis between environment and its inhabitants as mutually dependent and benefitting each other
- ▶ Emphasis on the organic (as opposed to hard technology), inclusive not only of growth but decay and waste
- ▶ Ironically, Oankali set up to be saviors of a post-apocalyptic earth, destroyed by nuclear war and then restored to primal/lush tropical habitat, only to be consumed later by Oankali when they decide it's time for them to move on to a new world (speaks to both utopian and dystopian elements in the text)

# Theoretical Contexts: Afrofuturism



- **Afrofuturism** combines elements of science fiction, historical fiction, fantasy and magic realism with non-Western cosmologies, cultures or traditions in order to critique not only the present-day dilemmas of people of color but also to revise, interrogate, and re-examine the historical events of the past (e.g. slavery, colonialism, diaspora).
- First coined by Mark Dery in 1993, Afrofuturism addresses themes and concerns of the African Diaspora through a technoculture and science fiction lens, and encompasses a range of mediums and artists who have a shared interest in envisioning black futures that stem from Afrodiasporic experiences.
- According to Kodwo Eshun: “Afrofuturism...is concerned with the possibilities for intervention within the dimension of the predictive, the projected, the proleptic, the envisioned, the virtual, the anticipatory and the future conditional” (qtd in Plisner 155)

“I think how essentially alone black women have been because of our bodies, over which we have had so little control ... black women writers are an important presence ... because of these writers ... there is a larger space in the universe for [black women and black bodies]” (Hortense Spiller, qtd in Plisner 156)

## Theoretical Contexts: Afrofuturism & Feminism

- ▶ Butler engages in the literary and cultural aesthetic of Afrofuturism primarily through the figure of Lilith as a black female protagonist who “expands, constructs and rotates spatial arenas in which the black female voice and body previously existed” and might exist in future spaces/modalities (Plisner 156)
- ▶ The Oankali breeding strategy – although aimed toward hybridity and the need for change and difference – can be read as manipulative, violent, and directly parallel to patriarchal, imperialist and racist historical practices that violated individual autonomies and bodily integrities of oppressed groups, for example:
  - ▶ Abduction of Africans and the slave trade (i.e. the Oankali’s gene trade)
  - ▶ Rape of female slaves/colonized natives and/or lands to increase labor force/profit
  - ▶ Eugenic experiments and forced sterilizations within African-American community





# Afrocentric Ecofeminism

- ▶ “Black women ... have been historically associated with animality. ... [and their] bodies as objects to be subdued and controlled like nonhuman nature” (Riley).
- ▶ Oankali mirror history of white supremacy, controlling and dominating human/nonhuman nature, wanting to perfect or uplift an inferior species.
- ▶ Lilith, as “mother” of new hybrid species, also recalls history of “white exploitation of Black women as breeders during the Slave Era” (Riley).
- ▶ How might BIPOC negotiate this history of oppression and objectification due to close association with nature while resituating views of humans in relationship to nonhuman nature as interconnected and interdependent (not split between constructed dualisms of nature/culture or human/nonhuman)?
- ▶ Afrocentric traditions and cultural practices might provide a model for seeing humans in “power *with* other forms of creation” rather than “power over” or domination of nature and those defined as “other” (Riley).

## Reading the Oankali

- Representative of both utopian and dystopian elements in the text
- Need to read them as both parallel to yet absolutely Alien from humans
- Butler warns that we should not view the Oankali as either good or evil:

“There are a lot of people...who seem to see things strictly in terms of good and evil: the aliens either come to help us get our poor heads straightened out or they come to destroy us. What I hope to wind up with in my work are a series of shadings that correspond to the way concepts like ‘good’ and ‘evil’ enter into the real world – never absolute, always by degrees.” (qtd in Belkin 384)



# Utopian Oankali: Difference, Otherness & Hybridity



- ▶ Oankali are representative of a radical difference repulsive to humans (both physically and ideologically)
- ▶ Driven by pleasure, symbiosis, collective action, the drive for constant change and evolution as a species
- ▶ Their ultimate hybridity contradicts human drive toward individuality and purity, and thus (partially) representative of utopian impulses within the text
- ▶ According to Naomi Jacobs, the "Oankali's goal is not to preserve an essential species identity, but always to be transforming themselves into something else. For them, restriction to an unchanging shape or fixed identity would mean the end of life" (qtd. in Belkin 380)



## Dystopian Oankali: Violence [as] Justice

**Key dystopian question:** “Whose justice will determine or influence the identity, security, and the overall happiness of the many?” (Braid 49)

- ▶ *The Xenogenesis* trilogy not only explores the ways in which the state regulates violence but also how violence is often disguised as justice, requiring readers “to develop a conscience through its rich meditations on the variations of violence. ... [and] to engage...in the critical work of identifying various traps of violence within the ambiguous spaces of each story” (Braid 51)
- ▶ Ambiguity of the Oankali as “saviors” or “slavers”: “The Oankali invasion denies Human civil rights by scientifically calculating their abilities, limiting their identity, and regulating their freedoms” (Braid 55)
  - ▶ **Intellectual and cultural chauvinism/imperialism; ethnic cleansing; genetic experimentation; sexual submission/coercion; denial of free will/choice**
- ▶ Oankali are figured as “benevolent” or “friendly” fascists in their refusal to negotiate responsibility for their actions or understand the Other as he/she perceives the world: as Lilith informs them, “If you knew anything at all about the human imagination, you’d know you were doing exactly the wrong thing” (Butler 26)

## Sources



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