

UNIVERZITA KARLOVA V PRAZE – FILOZOFICKÁ FAKULTA

ÚSTAV ANGLOFONNÍCH LITERATUR A KULTUR

The *Xenogenesis* Trilogy: The Utopian Writing of Octavia E. Butler

Trilogie *Xenogenesis*: Utopické Psaní Octavie E. Butler

DIPLOMOVÁ PRÁCE

Vedoucí diplomové práce:

Mgr. Pavla Veselá, Ph.D.

Zpracovala:

Bc. Magdalena Hejna

Praha, leden 2024

Studijní obor:

Anglistika-amerikanistika

Prohlašuji, že jsem tuto diplomovou práci vypracovala samostatně, že jsem řádně citovala všechny použité prameny a literaturu a že práce nebyla využita v rámci jiného vysokoškolského studia či k získání jiného nebo stejného titulu.

V Praze dne 9.1.2024

Bc. Magdalena Hejna

Mé poděkování patří především vedoucí této práce, Mgr. Pavle Veselé, Ph.D., za její podporu a trpělivost a za to, že mi umožnila práci dokončit. Děkuji také Jamesovi za jeho neutuchající podporu a lásku, která mě vždy motivovala a dodávala mi sílu.

Souhlasím se zapůjčením diplomové práce ke studijním účelům.

ABSTRACT

This thesis analyses the three main characters of Octavia E. Butler's *Xenogenesis* trilogy – Lilith, Akin, and Jodahs, and studies each book in the trilogy in order to trace utopian elements in Butler's writing. It explores different ideas of what utopia and the utopian is, and, through this, proposes that it is the impulse of change, constant becoming, that constitutes utopian writing. The thesis states that even though Butler herself was skeptical towards the concept of utopia, her work is an example of modern utopian writing – a constant striving towards a better future through the creation of worlds that inspire and call for change.

The introduction starts with the main question of the thesis: "Is Butler a utopian writer?" It focuses on the author's own approach towards utopia and her self-distancing from being labelled a utopian writer. The following part is centered on the development of the concept of "utopia" itself. It starts with the first use of the term by Thomas More in 1516, which initiated an understanding of the term as a "better place," then presents different criticisms of utopia, which point to its dystopian nature, and finishes with the modern concepts of utopia that revitalize its potential. The introduction concludes with the brief summary of the planned research on the three parts of the trilogy – *Dawn*, *Adulthood Rites* and *Imago*.

The first chapter focuses on the dystopian/anti-utopian reality of *Dawn* – the first book of the trilogy. It presents the world that the main character, Lilith, encounters after being awoken from suspended animation that she has been put into by her captors – the aliens called Oankali. The chapter presents different criticisms of the trilogy which claim that the world Butler creates in *Xenogenesis* depicts a colonial world based on slavery, despite the writer's attempt to show the Oankali in a complex, but generally positive light. This chapter also explores Hoda M. Zaki's

criticism of Butler as being a biological essentialist, a writer who sees no hope for humans due to the “human contradiction” – a characteristic that Butler assigns to humankind in the trilogy and which is a mix of intelligence and an innate predisposition for hierarchy, which will always lead humans to their own destruction.

The next chapter focuses on *Adulthood Rites* – the second book in the trilogy – and it investigates ways in which the book undermines the dystopian/anti-utopian totality of the *Xenogenesis* world presented in *Dawn*. It focuses on the character of Akin – Lilith’s son, who, through his hybridity, opens up new possibilities for humans. The chapter explores the idea of a “cyborg” developed by Donna Haraway, and presents its disruptive, revolutionary potential. The chapter closes with the claim that through the cyborg character of Akin, Butler rejects the determinism of *Dawn* and initiates a journey towards manifesting the utopian potential of her work. She also shows the reader the direction of change she believes we as a species should initiate to bring about a better tomorrow.

The third chapter investigates the idea of change that permeates the last book of the trilogy, *Imago*, and examines its potential limitlessness as portrayed by Butler. It argues that the book transforms a post-apocalyptic dystopian reality into a new, unknown future of possibilities through the character of Jodahs – an unexpected outcome of the Oankali’s genetic engineering. The chapter reads *Imago* through the lens of the philosophy of becoming developed by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, and through the practice of deconstruction put forth by Jacques Derrida. It argues that utopian change is decentered, playful, and limitless but not aimless and detached from the world we live in. In order to bring about positive outcomes, it needs to be consciously directed and founded in what surrounds us and in the values that we cherish. The chapter then concludes that

Jodahs is an example of deconstructive becoming – it embodies the constant, limitless change that constitutes Butler’s utopian writing.

The conclusion briefly focuses on her later work – *Parable of the Sower* and *Parable of the Talents* – to show Butler’s further development in her thinking of change as an impulse of utopian hope. It then reiterates the argument that Octavia Butler is a utopian writer because of the way she writes about and embraces change.

ABSTRAKT

Tato diplomová práce analyzuje tři hlavní postavy trilogie *Xenogeneze* z pera Octavie E. Butler – Lilith, Akina a Jodahs – a studuje každý díl trilogie s cílem vysledovat utopické prvky v autorčině tvorbě. Dále zkoumá různé představy o tom, co je to utopie a co je utopické a na základě toho navrhuje, že právě impuls změny, neustálého *stávání se (becoming)*, je tím, co tvoří utopické psaní. Práce tvrdí, že ačkoli sama Butler byla k pojmu „utopie“ skeptická, její dílo je příkladem moderního utopického psaní, tedy neustálého usilování o lepší budoucnost prostřednictvím vytváření světů, které inspirují a vyzývají ke změně.

Úvodem je položena základní otázka diplomové práce: „Lze Butler považovat za utopickou spisovatelku?“. Je zaměřen na autorčin vlastní přístup k utopii a jejímu vymezení se vůči tomu, aby byla označována za utopickou autorku. Následující část se zaměřuje na vývoj samotného pojmu „utopie“. Začíná jeho prvním užitím, a to Thomasem Morem v roce 1516, které iniciovalo jeho chápání coby „lepšího místa“, dále popisuje kritické náhledy na utopii, které poukazují na její dystopickou povahu a končí moderními pojetími utopie, které ožívují její potenciál. Úvod končí stručným shrnutím plánovaného výzkumu tří dílů trilogie, tedy *Úsvitu*, *Obřadů dospělosti* a *Imaga*.

První kapitola se zaměřuje na dystopickou/antiutopickou realitu *Úsvitu* neboli první knihy trilogie. Popisuje svět, ve kterém hlavní hrdinka Lilith procítá z pozastavené animace, do níž ji uvedli její vězňatelé – mimozemšťané zvaní Oankali. Kapitola se dále věnuje vybraným kritikám trilogie, které tvrdí, že svět, který Butler v *Xenogenezi* vytvořila, zobrazuje koloniální svět založený na otroctví, a to navzdory spisovatelčině snaze ukázat Oankali v komplexním, ale obecně pozitivním světle. Tato kapitola také zkoumá kritický postoj Hody M. Zaki, která Butler označuje za biologickou esencialistku a spisovatelku, která nevidí pro lidi žádnou naději kvůli „lidskému

rozporu“, což je vlastnost, kterou Butler v trilogii lidstvu přisuzuje a která je směsicí inteligence a vrozené náchylnosti k hierarchii, jež lidi vždy povede k jejich vlastní zkáze.

Další kapitola se zaměřuje na *Obřady dospělosti* – druhý díl trilogie – a zkoumá, jakým způsobem kniha podryvá dystopický/antiutopický celek světa *Xenogeneze* představeného v knize *Úsvit*. Zaměřuje se na postavu Akina, Lilithina syna, který díky své hybriditě otevírá lidem nové možnosti. Kapitola zkoumá koncept „kyborga“, který rozvinula Donna Haraway, a popisuje její převratný, revoluční potenciál. Kapitulu uzavírá tvrzení, že prostřednictvím postavy kyborga Akina Butler odmítá determinismus *Úsvitu* a zahajuje cestu k manifestaci utopického potenciálu svého díla. Zároveň čtenáři ukazuje směr změny, který bychom podle ní měli jako druh iniciovat, abychom dosáhli lepších zítřků.

Třetí kapitola se zabývá ideou změny, která prostupuje posledním dílem trilogie, *Imagem*, a zkoumá její potenciální bezbřehost, jak ji vykresluje Butler. Pracuje s myšlenkou, že kniha transformuje postapokalyptickou dystopickou realitu do nové, neznámé budoucnosti plné možností, a to prostřednictvím postavy Jodahs neboli nečekaného výsledku genetického inženýrství Oankali. Kapitola čte *Imago* optikou filosofie *stávání se*, kterou rozpracovali Gilles Deleuze a Félix Guattari, a také skrze postupy dekonstrukce, které předložil Jacques Derrida. Kapitola říká, že utopická změna je decentralizovaná, hravá a neomezená, ale nikoli bezcílná a odtržená od světa, v němž žijeme. Aby taková změna přinesla pozitivní výsledky, musí být vědomě řízena a založena na tom, co nás obklopuje, a na hodnotách, kterých si vážíme. Kapitola pak končí argumentem, že Jodahs je příkladem dekonstruktivního *stávání se* – ztělesňuje neustálou neomezenou a vědomou změnu, kterou je prostoupeno utopické psaní Butler.

Závěr se krátce zaměřuje na Butlerové pozdější díla – *Podobenství o rozséváči* a *Podobenství o talentech* –, aby ukázal další vývoj autorčina uvažování o změně jako impulsu

utopické naděje. Poté opakuje tvrzení, že Octavia Butler je utopickou spisovatelkou díky způsobu, jakým píše o změně a vítá ji.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

1. INTRODUCTION.....	12
Octavia Butler, a utopian writer?	12
What is utopia?.....	13
Thesis summary.....	21
2. <i>DAWN</i> : DYSTOPIA OR ANTI-UTOPIA?	24
3. <i>ADULTHOOD RITES</i> : TOWARDS CRITICAL UTOPIA.....	42
4. <i>IMAGO</i> : UTOPIAN BECOMING	64
5. CONCLUSION	84
BIBLIOGRAPHY	90

1. INTRODUCTION

Octavia Butler, a utopian writer?

In a 1990 interview with Larry McCaffery and Jim McMenamin, Octavia Butler claimed that the concept of utopia was not of any interest to her:

I find utopias ridiculous. We're not going to have a perfect society until we get a few perfect humans, and that seems unlikely. Besides, any true utopia would almost certainly be incredibly boring, and it would probably be so overspecialized that any change we might introduce would probably destroy the whole system.¹

According to her, utopia is an unreal, unattainable dream, where human flaws are miraculously absent and what is left is a boring existence of untroubled prosperity and contentedness. In her novels, Butler paints a very different picture of humans – a species that most probably could never reach a peaceful state of coexistence with one another, who are in a constant state of war, who are hierarchical and selfish. The worlds created in her work are often dystopian, full of violence, aggression and despair. She focuses on the human drive to destroy and abuse power over the vulnerable and weak. She portrays futures in which Earth is not habitable due to our greed and over-consumption, where humans kill each other for resources, domination and out of pure hatred.

¹ Larry McCaffery and Jim McMenamin, "An Interview with Octavia E. Butler," in *Across the Wounded Galaxies: Interviews with Contemporary American Science Fiction Writers*, ed. Larry McCaffery (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1990), 69.

In one of her most ambitious creations – the *Xenogenesis* trilogy – Butler depicts a world after an apocalypse, the complete destruction of the planet caused by a nuclear war. She portrays the miserable lives of the survivors who have been saved by an extraterrestrial species – the Oankali – and brought to outer space in their ships. They are held against their will, experimented on and genetically modified. The Oankali have complete control over them, and there is nowhere to escape as their home has ceased to exist. Even though the survivors have lost everything due to the madness of war caused by uncontrollable, destructive human desires, they cannot do anything but repeat the mistakes of their kind. They do not cooperate with each other, they are full of mistrust and spite for one another, they attack, rape and kill. Immediately after being brought to consciousness from a coma induced by the Oankali, some of them start forming groups of allies, some of enemies, and they establish hierarchies. Butler has no mercy on her characters – they are incapable of overcoming their flaws, not willing to change. The Oankali, who can decode and read human genetic coding, have a clear diagnosis of these flaws – they call it the “human contradiction.” Our case is hopeless because our genetic pattern is internally flawed; we are intelligent and hierarchical at the same time, which will lead to nothing in the end but self-destruction of the whole species. Undoubtedly, the world depicted by Butler is grim. At first sight, one cannot see a trace of hope and even a glimpse of a possibility for utopia. However, does this mean that Butler is not a utopian writer? Could a detailed study of her work, combined with a deeper analysis of what utopia is, prove otherwise?

What is utopia?

In her book *The Concept of Utopia* Ruth Levitas tries to answer the question of what utopia is and how it could be defined. She notes that it is difficult to grasp the substance of the term as it

has been used for centuries, given different content, form and function, and understood differently depending on the historical time, literary epoch or political trends. At the opening of her book, she writes:

The view that utopia is not escapist nonsense but a significant part of human culture is a fundamental assumption of the expanding field of utopian studies. [...] Yet although utopia attracts increasing attention there is much confusion about exactly what makes something utopian, and disagreement about what utopia is for and why it is important. Are all images of the good life utopian, or only those set in the future and intended to be implemented? Should the pursuit of spiritual perfection be included, or paradises beyond death, or does utopia refer only to transformed versions of the social world in which we live our lives before death? Are there lines to be drawn between utopia and religion, or utopia and 'real' politics? And what is utopia for? Does it help to change the world or to stabilise existing societies? Although we may initially think we know what utopia is, when we try to define it, its boundaries blur and it dissolves before our eyes.²

Indeed, the term "utopia," used for the first time by Thomas More in his book *Utopia* published in 1516, has come a long way since its creation. In his book More depicts a fictional island society founded by the King Utopos and describes the social, political and religious customs of its inhabitants. Utopia is a place of prosperity and abundance, where private property does not exist, everyone is required to work in agriculture and have a trade, and where religious tolerance thrives.

² Ruth Levitas, "Introduction," in *The Concept of Utopia* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2010), 1-2.

The structure of the society is well-organized, everyone knows their place and seems to be happy with their way of living. Moreover, by creating a new term that combined the Greek words *eutopie* (“good place”) and *outopie* (“no place”), More played with the idea of a better yet possibly ungraspable place that became a reference for generations of writers and political thinkers to come. However, *Utopia* was not the first attempt to imagine a better place for humans to live in nor has it escaped being modified and modernized in the centuries to follow, often giving it new meaning and use.

In their book *The Utopia Reader*, Gregory Claeys and Lyman Tower Sargent note that even though the term “utopia” was only coined in the sixteenth century, the utopian impulse has a much longer presence in human history. More’s work is an early representation of what they call the “utopia of human contrivance” and is preceded by a long tradition of “utopias of gratification” – worlds of abundance, happiness and distorted rules that exist outside of the human realm.³ These two types of utopian impulse mark a big shift in human history – a shift towards self-determination and the sovereignty of man, the renaissance era of anthropocentrism. These utopias of gratification can take many different forms – ancient myths, stories of paradise, festivals like Saturnalia or Carnival, imaginings of places of prosperity and abundance like the land of Cockayne. One thing that all these utopias have in common is a lack of human agency. They are a gift given from the gods or from nature, bestowed by grace upon humble life on Earth, a dream of prosperity and abundance awaiting. They are stories of escapism and consolation during difficult times where one has no control over their life.

³ Gregory Claeys and Lyman Tower Sargent, “Introduction,” in *The Utopia Reader* (New York: New York University Press, 1999), 1-6.

The utopias of contrivance mark a new era of believing that things can change and lives can be improved through new ideas and the joint effort of the people. An early example of such a utopian impulse is Plato's *Republic* and then, starting with the Renaissance and the emergence of the term itself, the idea of an "achievable utopia" grew and developed, taking different forms in the centuries to come. The sixteenth and seventeenth centuries were a time of many egalitarian ideas, of which More's *Utopia* is an example. The ideas of a new social order sprouted from Christian, often radical thought. Many thinkers criticized the political system of their time, pointing to its inequality and abuse of power. Also, discoveries of new lands expanded Europeans' horizons and encouraged new ways of thinking about possible ways of living.

In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries the development of science and technology gave the utopian impulse a new spark. The idea of unlimited progress became predominant. A belief that, by means of civilization and the control of nature, humans could create an ideal society, became a focus of many utopian visions. The late eighteenth century saw yet another layer of utopian impulses. The revolutionary ideas of the time – the fight for freedom, equality, and fraternity that spread across Europe and North America – gave new hope to the people and fed the dreams of a better future to come: a future in which all men and women work together for a dignified and fulfilling life in a democratic society, where the government takes care of the needs of individuals and gives citizens the freedoms they deserve. In the nineteenth century the utopian impulses became more and more intertwined with socialist and communist ideology. This was the result of the transformation of the much-worshipped concept of progress into an aggressive capitalism that served few and oppressed many.

Finally, the twentieth century brought a disappointment with regard to utopia. This became very visible in literature, where many dystopian works started being published, comprising

descriptions of a bleak future to come if humans do not come to their senses and change their ways of destruction, greed and violence. However, even when the idea of utopia as an ideal place lost its appeal, the utopian impulse survived. Many of these literary works are what Tom Moylan in his book *Scraps of the Untainted Sky: Science Fiction, Utopia, Dystopia* calls “critical dystopia[s]”, dystopias that bring self-reflection and a call for change, which in consequence awake the hope for a better future through action and transformation.⁴

From the sixteenth century onwards, utopian thought focused on different ways of achieving the same thing – a better society that aims towards perfection. The twentieth century shattered the belief that this was at all possible. Two World Wars, Communism, Fascism and the spread of dictatorships all around the globe brought a realization that an imposed system of an “ideal” society could never work. Such a system will always escape the ideal framework it was supposed to fill and mutate into something monstrous. However, this realization did not stop people from dreaming about a better future and it did not stop utopian impulses from infiltrating literature, politics and social activism. In fact, the 1960s and 1970s brought a revival of utopian thought in the Western world. The field of utopian studies emerged and utopian thought developed a depth and complexity as never before. Since the beginning of the revival in the late 1960s and 1970s (after the grim first half of the century consumed by the Wars), many critics deliberated on what “utopia” and “utopian” was. This re-evaluation took place after the traditional way of conceptualizing “utopia” lost its appeal because of the totalitarian atrocities of the twentieth century. There came a realization that thinking about utopia as an ideal place or society could not be sustained; history had taught us that such places could not exist, as sooner or later they would

⁴Tom Moylan, *Scraps of the Untainted Sky: Science Fiction, Utopia, Dystopia* (Oxford: West View Press, 2000), 91.

turn against the utopian impulse that brought them into existence and turn themselves into dystopian dictatorships. But the potential of utopian imagination in political activism, often connected to Marxist, anti-capitalist thought, continually grew in importance in the second half of the twentieth century.

This utopian hope also became an important means of expression in literature. In the late 1960s and 1970s, for the first time since the nineteenth century, a major revival in utopian writing could be observed, taking the form of what critics would later call “critical utopia.” Tom Moylan, in his book *Demand the Impossible: Science Fiction and the Utopian Imagination*, conceptualized what “critical utopia” is and coined a definition that has been used by other critics since:

A central concern in the critical utopia is the awareness of the limitations of the utopian tradition, so that these texts reject utopia as blueprint while preserving it as a dream. Furthermore, the novels dwell on the conflict between the ordinary world and the utopian society opposed to it so that the process of social change is more directly articulated. Finally, the novels focus on the continuing presence of difference and imperfection within the utopian society itself and thus render more recognizable and dynamic alternatives.⁵

This type of utopian writing is self-reflexive and shaped by currents in post-modern thought. It calls for a better future by incorporating new ideas not in order to impose any utopian blueprint but instead to advocate for utopian dreaming. Moylan opposes “critical utopia” to “anti-utopia,” a

⁵ Tom Moylan, “Introduction: The Critical Utopia,” in *Demand the Impossible: Science Fiction and the Utopian Imagination*, ed. Raffaella Baccolini (Bern: Peter Lang, 2014), 10-11.

practice that, due to its lack of critical approach, is destitute of the “militant,” active form of utopian hope. In his essay “Transgressive, Totalizing, Transformative: Utopia’s Utopian Surplus” he further develops the idea of an “active” utopian impulse, and he suggests that the utopia of modern times is more of an act of transgression, a statement of non-conformity towards the status quo and a constant battle for a better future through political, activist dreaming. Instead of a static “utopia,” we should focus on the active, transformative “utopian”:

I want to reaffirm the validity of the utopian persuasion and to argue that it is an inherent *necessity* in the work of any political culture and practice that aims to be authentically transformative. As I do this, I will not begin with *utopia* as a *noun* – as an object, be it a text or a realized society – but, rather, as an *adjective*, most specifically in its conceptual mode as a modifier. That is, as the *utopian*, rather than *utopia*. Against the commonsense, anti-utopian, usage of the term as a diminutive that designates and condemns unattainable and wasteful dreaming, I want to reclaim, or refunction, *utopian* as an action word (with the adjectival now returning to the quality of the nominative) that privileges the process of existential and systemic revolutionary praxis as it negates and goes beyond the established reality out of which it emerges.⁶

Moylan lists a triad of adjectives that, according to him, constitute utopian “militant” dreaming: transgressive, totalizing, and transformative. Utopian hoping should always be reaching “beyond the horizon,” outside what is current and given; it must be critical towards the existing system and

⁶ Tom Moylan, “Transgressive, Totalizing, Transformative: Utopia’s Utopian Surplus,” *Utopian Studies* 29, no. 3 (2018): 311.

constantly look out for its shortcomings; and it should call for change, leading the way towards new social movements.⁷

In *Scraps of the Untainted Sky*, Moylan implicitly develops the idea of the “critical utopia” by looking into dystopian writing as well. He notes that after the revival of utopian texts in the 1960s and 1970s, the 1980s brought a political regression that was reflected in the shift of utopian literature into dystopian gloom. Many authors focused on depicting the dark and the hopeless, without offering a way out or a critical approach that would allow the utopian impulse to break through. The 1980s would also be an era of dystopic “pulp fiction” that according to Moylan did not offer much more than a cheap thrill and entertainment through evoking pessimist images of possible futures. He claims that after this time of hopeless dystopia, the revival of the utopian impulse came in a new form, that of “critical dystopia.” He says:

Critical dystopias [...] continue in the political and poetic spirit of the critical utopias even as they revive the dystopian strategy to map, warn, and hope. Stepping inside the ambient zone of anti-utopian pessimism with new textual tricks, they expose the horror of the present moment. Yet in the midst of their pessimistic forays, they refuse to allow the utopian tendency to be overshadowed by its anti-utopian nemesis. They therefore adopt a militant stance that is informed and empowered by a utopian horizon that appears in the text – or at least shimmers just beyond its pages.⁸

⁷ Moylan, “Transgressive, Totalizing, Transformative,” 331.

⁸ Moylan, *Scraps of the Untainted Sky*, 196.

This new discourse on critical utopia and critical dystopia shaped utopian studies as well as the utopian literary genre of the late twentieth and the twenty-first century, transforming the way “utopia” and “the utopian” are analyzed and perceived. Critical utopia and critical dystopia replaced the traditional ways of thinking about utopia, and added a completely new, more nuanced approach to the debate on what utopian means, how we can cultivate it, and how to preserve the utopian hoping in the world where the static narratives of utopia do not work anymore. This modern, critical approach ignited new ways of thinking about utopia and encouraged exploration of the possible ways to nurture utopian dreaming in the unsteady, often dystopic world. In this thesis I would like to explore the idea that Octavia Butler’s *Xenogenesis* trilogy is an example of such a quest to preserve utopian hoping in an often overwhelmingly dystopian world.

Thesis summary

Octavia Butler was suspicious of utopia in its traditional form, in which the goal was to create an ideal society. Her work criticizes organized, structured attempts to impose well-being and happiness on others. In the *Xenogenesis* trilogy (otherwise known as *Lilith’s Brood*) she shows the Oankali as doubtful saviors who claim to know what is best for humans, and who want to genetically change them at all costs for their own good. However, if we look at the trilogy from the angle of modern utopian criticism, which explores different ways in which the utopian impulse permeates the work of activist, socially conscious writers, I believe that utopian hope is what constitutes her work. This thesis will look through the lens of the three main characters of Butler’s *Xenogenesis* trilogy, Lilith, Akin and Jodahs, and analyze each book in the trilogy (*Dawn*, *Adulthood Rites* and *Imago*) to trace dystopian and utopian elements in Butler’s writing. It will look at different ideas of what utopia and the utopian is, and through this, explore the idea that it

is the hope incited by the idea of change that constitutes Butler's utopian writing. This change is conscious, directed towards better tomorrow and "militant." At the same time, it is playful, limitless and allows for constant transformation. The thesis will explore the idea that even though Butler herself was skeptical towards the concept of utopia, her work is utopian because of its constant striving towards a better future through the creation of worlds that inspire the hope for change. It focuses on *Xenogenesis*, as this is where Butler first develops the idea of embracing change as a tool to openness and acceptance of the Other, the unknown that we fear and reject. The thesis then concludes with a brief mention of the Parable series, where Butler develops her philosophy of change further. Here, she transforms the external force that initiates the change in *Xenogenesis* into an internal coming-of-age as a species – embracing change as a result of self-reflection and self-development.

In the first chapter, I will focus on the dystopian reality of the trilogy. I will present the world that Lilith encounters after being awoken, and ask if there is any utopian potential in the dystopian representation of the future that Butler depicts. I will focus on the criticism of Butler's work that argues that *Xenogenesis* is limited by biological essentialism, which shows in her concept of the "human contradiction" – a mix of intelligence and an innate predisposition for hierarchy, which takes away hope that humankind will ever be able to avoid self-destruction. I will examine her interest in the following question: can humans save themselves or is their only hope a radical, external change that will save them from destruction but at the same time annihilate that which is human about them?

In the second chapter, I will argue that the second book of the trilogy undermines the dystopian totality of the world of *Xenogenesis*. I will explore the character of Akin, who, through his hybridity, but also through his potential and growth, opens new possibilities for humans.

Drawing on selected criticism by Donna Haraway and Tom Moylan, among others, I will claim that in the second book of the trilogy, *Adulthood Rites*, Butler rejects the determinism of *Dawn* and initiates a journey toward the full utopian potential of the series through embarking on the path of “militant” change that advocates for multiplicity, embracing difference, and the rejection of fixed binaries present in Western culture.

In the third chapter, I will investigate further the idea of change as the main impulse of utopian writing. Here, I will focus on the work of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari as well as that of Jacques Derrida in order to claim that this constant change, involving the perpetual deconstruction of meaning, is what constitutes utopian literature. I will argue that this utopian impulse is decentered, playful, and limitless but at the same time claim that it is never aimless and detached from the world we live in. It needs constant, conscious shaping towards the diversity and inclusion that Butler calls for in order to open the possibility of change for the better. I will argue this point through an analysis of the character of Jodahs – an unexpected outcome of the Oankali’s genetic engineering who completely transforms the post-apocalyptic dystopian reality of Lilith and other survivors into a new, limitless future of possibilities.

In the conclusion, I will revisit my thesis that Octavia Butler is a utopian writer because of the way she writes about and embraces change. I will briefly focus on *Parable of the Sower* and *Parable of the Talents* as another case study of her thinking about change and its potential. I will then summarize the different dystopian and utopian elements in the *Xenogenesis* trilogy explored in the thesis. In doing so, I will present Butler as a writer engaged with the concept of change as a liberating force that leads us towards utopia.

2. *DAWN*: DYSTOPIA OR ANTI-UTOPIA?

In the opening scene of the trilogy the reader is introduced to the main character of the first book – Lilith Iyapo – awakening in an empty, bare room. She knows this is not the first time she has been in this space, and that she has been awoken and put back to sleep multiple times. She is kept in the room against her will, and her captors keep her in the dark about who they are, where she is, and how she ended up there. She has been subjected to examination, her body mutilated of which a long scar on her abdomen is proof and she has been kept in captivity naked and utterly defenseless. This time however, she notices a change; she is given a set of clothing, something that “[s]he had not been allowed [...] from her first Awakening until now. She had pleaded for it, but her captors ignored her.”⁹ Soon, it turns out that the clothes she is given are supposed to make her feel more comfortable with what is about to come. She is to meet her captors in person for the first time. A voice calls her name and she realizes that unlike before, it comes from within the room. She notices a slender figure in the shadowed corner of the room and she is soon faced with the fact that her captors are extraterrestrials:

The lights brightened as she had supposed they would, and what had seemed to be a tall, slender man was still humanoid, but it had no nose – no bulge, no nostrils – just flat, gray skin. It was gray all over – pale gray skin, darker gray hair on its head. The hair grew down around its eyes and ears and at its throat. There was so much hair across the eyes that she wondered how the creature could see. The long, profuse ear hair seemed to grow out of the ears as well as around them. Above, it joined the eye hair, and below and behind, it joined

⁹Octavia Butler, *Dawn* (London: Headline Publishing Group, 2022), 4.

the head hair. The island of throat hair seemed to move slightly, and it occurred to her that that might be where the creature breathed – a kind of natural tracheostomy. (*Dawn*, 12)

The figure's name is Jdahya, and it¹⁰ is an Oankali, an alien species of “gene traders” who have saved the humans from becoming extinct due to a nuclear war on Earth, and brought them to their ship. The Oankali are a species that crave difference and roam the universe in search of new genes they can trade and, through this, they evolve incessantly. They decide to save humanity, an act of interference with another species that they have not carried out for millions of years. They do it due to a very strong attraction to human DNA, specifically cancer cells that can bring their gene training to another level. They put the saved humans in suspended animation, study and experiment on them for hundreds of years, awake them to try make them cooperate and convince the humans that they want peace and partnership only to receive violence and despair in return. After many mistakes they make in dealing with the humans, they decide that Lilith is a person who they can trust to teach the others to accept the Oankali and lead them to voluntarily engage in the gene trade that will give rise to the re-colonization of Earth with constructs – human-Oankali hybrids.

From the very first moments of the novel the saving of humans by the Oankali evokes mixed feelings in the reader. Without them, humanity would be gone, perished in the atrocities of war that they have brought upon themselves. The Oankali claim that they bring peace and a better future for humankind. However, as Lilith is soon to learn, their salvation comes at a price. The Oankali require the humans to mate with them and through that create a new hybrid species, or stay infertile and bring humanity to extinction. As Aparajita Nanda notes in “Power, Politics, and

¹⁰ I use the “it” pronoun throughout the thesis when writing about ooloi – sexless Oankali – as this is what Butler uses in the trilogy.

Domestic Desire in Octavia Butler's 'Lilith's Brood,'" their promise of utopia can easily be seen as another story of forceful colonization that so many have experienced throughout human history.

She says:

The Oankali adroitly camouflage their colonizing intent, enforcing restrictive rights on humans, in a rhetoric of altruistic salvation. Mouthing "option" as a choice for the humans, the Oankali seem to bring a subtle if insincere change to the reality of the colonized, who were never given a choice of options about colonizers' intent. Naturally, the situation recalls the European civilizing mission, a rationale for colonization that proposed to contribute to the spread of Western civilization but was replete with demeaning assumptions about civilizing barbaric, native savages, which formed the heart of the campaign. The Oankali justify their gene trade with the need to produce a hybrid species for the future, along with the promise of a utopia.¹¹

Lilith can either help the oppressors or be put back to sleep – the thing that she fears most. After she declines to help, she is offered the "mercy of death," the only way out of her situation. Confronted with this choice, she chooses life and agrees to cooperate, thinking that she will do whatever is in her power to escape and lead people to freedom. She is then brought to the other parts of the ship, meets other Oankali and starts learning their ways. She quickly realizes that the Oankali are very different from humans and that the way they live offers a change that the humans desperately need. The Oankali are a species who understand each other without words; they can

¹¹ Aparajita Nanda, "Power, Politics, and Domestic Desire in Octavia Butler's 'Lilith's Brood,'" *Callaloo* 36, no. 3 (Summer 2013): 775, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/24264846>.

communicate directly through their nervous systems. They understand humans on a deep, biological level, and they see that our genetic material does not give us any hope of survival. Two genetic characteristics, intelligence and being hierarchical, develop in humans like cancer and bring them to their doom. Jdahya tells Lilith:

“You have a mismatched pair of genetic characteristics. Either alone would have been useful, would have aided the survival of your species. But the two together are lethal. It was only a matter of time before they destroyed you.” [...] Jdahya made a rustling noise that could have been a sigh, but that did not seem to come from his mouth or throat. “You are intelligent,” he said. “That’s the newer of the two characteristics, and the one you might have put to work to save yourselves. You are potentially one of the most intelligent species we’ve found, though your focus is different from ours. Still, you had a good start in the life sciences, and even in genetics.” (*Dawn*, 40-1)

Lilith then asks what the second characteristics is, to which Jdahya replies:

“You are hierarchical. That’s the older and more entrenched characteristic. We saw it in your closest animal relatives and in your most distant ones. It’s a terrestrial characteristic. When human intelligence served it instead of guiding it, when human intelligence did not even acknowledge it as a problem, but took pride in it or did not notice it at all ...” The rattling sounded again. “That was like ignoring cancer. I think your people did not realize what a dangerous thing they were doing.” (*Dawn*, 41)

This mismatched pair of genetic characteristics the Oankali call the “human contradiction.” It is an intrinsic feature of our DNA that we cannot eradicate ourselves. Sooner or later the unhealthy relation of the two will come to the foreground, and cause violence and death of which the nuclear war is the most recent, horrific example. They suggest that our only hope is to get rid of it by partnering in creating hybrid generations of human-Oankali that will overcome this genetic shortcoming, and allow the two species to create a new, better future.

The intrinsic inability of humans to overcome their flaws is the main focus of *Dawn*. Even though Lilith is against the coercion by the Oankali of humans, she also knows that their assessment of our species is right. After she spends substantial time with the Oankali, learns their social structures, their language, and the way they interact and get in symbiosis with others and their environment, she sees an even bigger contrast with how humans cannot come to such agreement and peaceful coexistence with each other. In the trilogy, the picture of humans and their future is grim: they are biologically determined by their DNA to fail. This approach is noted by critics of Butler’s work, and some of them claim that this biological determinism limits the utopian potential of her work. One of the strongest critics of Butler is Hoda M. Zaki who in her essay “Utopia, Dystopia, and Ideology in the Science Fiction of Octavia Butler” claims that:

For Butler, there is a pervasive human need to alienate from oneself those who appear to be different – i.e., to create Others. [...] For her, the human propensity to create the Other can never be transcended: the end of racial discrimination must coincide with the rise of

some kind of similar discrimination based upon biological differences, which accordingly continue to play a role in future social orders.¹²

Zaki accuses Butler of political stagnation, presenting a world of no hope for action and change. She argues that in *Xenogenesis* humans always seek to oppose themselves to the Other, in order to preserve their identity. For Zaki, the picture that Butler paints in her books is of untamed violence, of humans not being able to control themselves and transcend their biological conditioning:

Another characteristic of human nature as Butler sees it is its static quality, evinced in a human incapacity to change in response to radically altered conditions. The force by which humans are wedded to their biologically-determined natures and their inability to transcend it she makes clear in her “Xenogenesis” series. Even when extraterrestrials initiate change, humans continue to manifest the same qualities of violence, cruelty, and domination over others. [...] Butler’s unmediated connections between biology and behavior have an implicit corollary: that abandoning the human body is a necessary pre-requisite for real human alteration. This represents an essentially retrogressive view of politics (i.e., of collective human action), which she never sees as offering the solution to social or political problems. Her conditions for fundamental social change are such as to postpone it indefinitely.¹³

¹² Hoda M. Zaki, “Utopia, Dystopia, and Ideology in the Science Fiction of Octavia Butler,” *Science Fiction Studies* 17, no. 2 (July 1990): 242, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4239994>.

¹³ Zaki, “Utopia, Dystopia, and Ideology,” 357-8.

Indeed, when Lilith is allowed to meet with another human on the ship for the first time, this meeting ends in violence. She is introduced to Paul Titus, a man that was brought on the ship when he was fourteen, and who has lived among the Oankali for years. Lilith is very happy and excited to interact with another human after such long time of being only among the alien species, but it quickly turns unpleasant and dangerous for her. It becomes clear that Paul Titus thinks of her as sexual prey given to him, and when she objects to his advances he beats her heavily before the Oankali manage to interfere and take her away.

Lots of the violence in *Dawn* is based on sexual and territorial domination that Butler seems to assign predominately to males. When Lilith is given the task of awakening the first group of humans, she carefully chooses not only the ones she thinks would do well in a new, hostile environment, but she also wants the people who, she believes, will not “cause trouble.” Her first thought is to avoid dominant males and to start the process of awakening with females who she can better cooperate with. Later on, when she awakes one of the males, his first reaction is to attack one of the females and try to rape her. At another point, a group of males want to rape a woman who has just joined the group. Lilith needs to watch the people she awakens all the time to make sure they do not hurt her or each other, and only the fact that she is physically stronger than any of the men, due to the genetic changes carried out on her by the Oankali, allows her to keep the group under control. After fighting the group of men, she lays down the law to them:

“There’ll be no rape here,” she said evenly. She raised her voice. “Nobody here is property. Nobody here has the right to the use of anybody else’s body. There’ll be no back-to-the-Stone-Age, caveman bullshit!” She let her voice drop to normal. “We stay human. We treat each other like people, and we get through this like people. Anyone who wants to be

something less will have his chance in the forest. There'll be plenty of room for him to run away and play at being an ape." (*Dawn*, 201)

The humans have no other choice but to cooperate, and they still choose not to. On top of the sexual violence there is a lot of violence directed towards Lilith. People do not trust her, and think she is a traitor, a tool in the oppressors' hands. Even when Lilith shows them evidence that cooperation is the only reasonable way to try to escape, they cannot overcome their hierarchical coding. When they are sent to training in the jungle created by the Oankali on the ship as their final preparation before being sent to Earth, they immediately divide themselves in small groups and abandon Lilith. When she joins one of these groups to show her support for the human cause, and to be close to her partner Joseph, she is attacked by Paul, a man she has had many problems with in the past. Paul kills Joseph and leaves Lilith unconscious in the jungle. Everyone in Lilith's group joins him, no one stays to help and show their loyalty to her. As Zaki notes, this overbearing mistrust and constant battle for domination create a state of emergency where no political action can be formed:

How Butler portrays politics is intimately related to her vision of human nature as a biologically-determined entity. The public arena of politics, where dialogue and dissent occur, is nullified in most of her novels by her construction of permanent states of emergency, which pre-empt any full exploration of the moral and ethical dimensions of political decisions; there can be no room for real debate when the very survival of the individual or group is at stake.¹⁴

¹⁴Zaki, "Utopia, Dystopia, and Ideology," 242.

This determinist, essentialist flaw of humankind is also visible in the way Butler presents sex/gender in *Dawn*. Firstly, she shows humans as being unable to grasp the idea of the ooloi, a sexless Oankali who orchestrates sexual acts between female/male humans and female/male Oankali. The males are humiliated by the idea of sexual intercourse where they do not play an active, dominant role; the idea of non-binary sexes is something that the humans do not understand and reject with a passion. When Lilith meets with Paul Titus, he tells her that for him the sex/gender roles that he sees with the Oankali are exactly like the female/male roles he knows:

“Nikanj isn’t male,” she said. “It’s ooloi.”

“Yeah, I know. But doesn’t yours seem male to you?”

She thought about that. “No. I guess I’ve taken their word for what they are.”

“When they woke me up, I thought the ooloi acted like men and women while the males and females acted like eunuchs. I never really lost the habit of thinking of ooloi as male or female.”

That, Lilith thought, was a foolish way for someone who had decided to spend his life among the Oankali to think—a kind of deliberate, persistent ignorance. (*Dawn*, 99)

Secondly, not only does Butler portray men as more violent and more prone to hierarchical behavior. She also assigns more positive, malleable characteristics to women. What is more, motherhood in this trilogy of novels is what makes women different from men. It determines their

behavior and makes them better than men. As Nancy Jesser notes in her essay “Blood, Genes and Gender in Octavia Butler’s *Kindred* and *Dawn*”:

[W]hen relating to sex/gender her female characters are often biologically coded as female – that is devoted to self-sacrifice in the name of nurturing at one’s own expense and the urging of maternal instincts. The terms of gender in Butler are drawn from the discourse of sociobiology and population biology. Her female heroines’ biological position as mothers/potential mothers affects their actions, predisposing them to a kind of altruism notably lacking in most of her male characters. There is a strong correlation between “other-directed thinking” and the female body.¹⁵

Butler definitely assigns a different set of characteristics to women than to men in her novels. Lilith is chosen by the Oankali not only because she shows her ability to consciously oppose the “human contradiction” but also because she is a healthy woman that can bear the future generations of the human-Oankali hybrids. Her role as a mother is a pivotal one in the trilogy, she is the beginning of a new species, and her maternal, “other-directed” instincts are what the Oankali value in her. As Dorothy Allison notes in her essay “The Future of Female: Octavia Butler’s Mother Lode”:

Butler [...] advocates motherhood as the humanizing element in society. [...] While acknowledging the imbalances and injustices inherent in traditional family systems, Butler goes on writing books with female characters who heroically adjust to family life and

¹⁵ Nancy Jesser, “Blood, Genes and Gender in Octavia Butler’s *Kindred* and *Dawn*,” *Extrapolation* 42, no. 1 (Spring 2022): 38.

through example, largeness of spirit, and resistance to domination make the lives of those children better – even though it means sacrificing personal freedom.¹⁶

Allison argues that Lilith's maternal instincts are what Butler sees as women's main strength. According to her, Butler sees motherhood as a necessary sacrifice that will bring a better future to the next generations. She sees an essentialist approach in the way Butler constructs her female characters.

Interestingly, in the book Lilith lacks agency on both levels: as a human who is a representative of a species that cannot escape their genetic "contradiction" and as a woman who does not have control over her own body. The Oankali assure her that giving birth to construct children will only be done with her consent and when she is ready. However, in the end, her ooloi called Nikanj impregnates her without her knowledge, simply assuming that it knows what is best for her and what she wants. At the end of *Dawn*, when Lilith returns to the camp from a day of wandering in the jungle, she notices that all the humans are gone. She learns that they have already been taken to Earth, and that she has not been informed about it on purpose as the humans were again plotting against her and the Oankali were worried about her safety. When Lilith meets Nikanj, the information that the Oankali have decided to send people to Earth without her knowledge is not the only unpleasant surprise. Nikanj also informs her that it made her pregnant:

"I have made you pregnant with Joseph's child. I wouldn't have done it so soon, but I wanted to use his seed, not a print. I could not make you closely enough related to a child

¹⁶ Dorothy Allison, "The Future of Female: Octavia Butler's Mother Lode," in *Reading Black Reading Feminist: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr (New York: Penguin Books, 1990), 471.

mixed from a print. And there's a limit to how long I can keep sperm alive." She was staring at it, speechless. It was speaking as casually as though discussing the weather. She got up, would have backed away from it, but it caught her by both wrists. She made a violent effort to break away, realized at once that she could not break its grip.

"You said –" She ran out of breath and had to start again. "You said you wouldn't do this. You said –"

"I said not until you were ready."

"I'm not ready! I'll never be ready!"

"You're ready now to have Joseph's child. Joseph's daughter." (*Dawn*, 281)

Lilith has no choice but to give birth to her first construct daughter. Yet again, the novel shows a lack of human agency, and the complete control of the Oankali over their lives. Even though the Oankali claim that they want to be partners with humans, their actions suggest otherwise. Lilith appears to be a tool that brings them closer to their goal, and they rationalize their actions by claiming that they know better what is good for humans.

This impossibility of a "way out" – a way of constituting yourself and your kind – is what for Zaki makes Butler's trilogy a pessimistic dystopia, a dystopia that is in fact anti-utopian and does not carry any spark of hope:

It seems evident, [...] that Butler's dystopianism is pessimistic not because Earth and its civilizations are almost lost, but because the causes of catastrophe are depicted deterministically as unavoidable. For this reason, her critiques of human violence and

prejudice are not traced back to their particular social or political foundations. Her dystopianism is therefore anti-utopian in its deterministic definition of human nature. It may be that Butler's sensitivity to the increasing conservatism of the contemporary social and political order, which has made substantial inroads upon Afro-American communities sooner and more systematically than others, has led her to adopt a position of pessimistic, or anti-utopian, dystopianism.¹⁷

In her essay Zaki uses terminology coined by Søren Baggesen who argues that “the simple opposition of optimistic (read ‘utopian’) versus pessimistic (read ‘dystopian’) fictional futurology is too simplistic” as “there isn’t just one brand of pessimism; there are pessimisms.”¹⁸ Baggesen, following the Marxist philosopher Ernst Bloch, divides pessimism into “militant” and “resigned” versions and carries out a detailed analysis of the two. He claims that the optimist/militant pessimism is one where there are glimpses of hope even if they are sometimes hidden. While, on the other hand, the pessimistic/resigned version lacks any “way out”. In the pessimistic dystopia the evil is ontological, unavoidable. For Zaki, Butler's trilogy is this type of dystopia, the characters cannot escape their fate. The utopian impulse is strangled by the ubiquity of destruction they bring upon themselves. Zaki also uses the term “anti-utopian,” which many utopian critics like Sargent or Moylan use to describe a literary work that, due to its lack of utopian hope, and only focusing on the grim aspects of the world, is actually a “nemesis” of the utopian, the complete

¹⁷ Zaki, “Utopia, Dystopia, and Ideology,” 244-45.

¹⁸ Søren Baggesen. “Utopian and Dystopian Pessimism: Le Guin's ‘The Word for World Is Forest’ and Tiptree's ‘We Who Stole the Dream’ (Les Pessimismes Utopique et ‘Dystopique’ Dans ‘Le Nom Du Monde Est Forêt’ de Le Guin et Dans ‘We Who Stole the Dreams’ de Tiptree),” *Science Fiction Studies* 14, no. 1 (1987): 33-43. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4239792>.

opposite of the powerful utopian impulse that is awoken by a militant “social dreaming”¹⁹ and that can be traced in both utopian and dystopian critical works.

The picture of the Oankali and the situation of Lilith and the other humans in *Dawn* evokes mixed, bitter feelings in the reader. They feel the rotten smell of the “salvation” offered by the aliens even if the Oankali do this for the good of humankind. Some critics claim that Butler does not manage to escape anti-utopian hopelessness due to the way she depicts colonial eagerness of the Oankali to control humans, their treatment of humans as inferior, not giving them a choice to decide for themselves; they also say that it does not overcome the anti-utopian gloom due to the fact that the story circulates around the human flawed genetic coding that is impossible to fix and determines our failure as species. In his book *Octavia E. Butler*, Gerry Canavan dedicates a chapter to the *Xenogenesis* trilogy and tellingly calls this chapter “The Training Floor.”²⁰ He claims that the trilogy was a training ground for Butler to develop her ideas about ways to evoke utopian hoping in her writing. He shows the genesis of her process of creating the Oankali, and the ways Butler depicted them in different drafts of her work that in the end became *Xenogenesis*. The aliens take different forms, more or less malevolent, and only then become the Oankali we know – patronizing creatures that force humans to things that are “good for them” but who presumably do so in good faith. Canavan is not convinced by the benevolent side of the Oankali and in the chapter, contrary to pro-Oankali critics, he “suggest[s] instead that in fact the Oankali do almost nothing but harm the humans, in almost literally every possible way.”²¹ He talks of psychological manipulation, gaslighting and brainwashing. He notes that the sexual desire and practices of the

¹⁹ Tom Moylan, *Scraps of the Untainted Sky*, 74. For more information on “social dreaming”, see: Lyman Tower Sargent, “Three Faces of Utopianism Revisited,” *Utopian Studies* 5, no. 1 (1994): 1-37, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20719246>.

²⁰ Gerry Canavan, “Training Floor (1987-1989),” in *Octavia E. Butler* (Chicago: Illinois University Press, 2016), e-book.

²¹ Canavan, “Training Floor (1987-1989).”

Oankali, even if they bring pleasure, are a form of “eroticized rape”; he notes that their vision of breeding dangerously resembles the ideas of “eugenic discourses.” He also claims that it is very suspicious that the Oankali were at the right place and time to save the humans even though they had millions of galaxies to explore, and that it might have not been a coincidence that they interfered, and possibly they could have even caused the war. He further mentions that with the great power the Oankali have of influencing human brain chemistry, everything that the captured humans perceive could be a grand illusion; part of a plan of the Oankali to keep humans dependent on them.

Canavan provides a very comprehensive criticism of Butler’s depiction of the Oankali. However, it is essentialist determinism that, according to him, is the main reason the Oankali are not the solution to Butler’s search for utopian change. He says:

Even setting aside this darker take on the trilogy, which sees the Oankali as embodying that same human contradiction, the Oankali can’t offer a genuine solution to the human contradiction because they are not themselves human (and they have what amounts to magical powers to boot). How might humans improve their situation? How might humans, in a human context, become better – without the cheat of divine intervention?²²

According to him, only humans can save themselves. If we cannot do it ourselves, it does not count. The impulse needs to come from within to be truly utopian.

Undoubtedly, the first book of the trilogy focuses on the grim and hopeless situation of the humans who have survived the nuclear war and have been brought to the Oankali ship. *Dawn* is a

²² Canavan, “Training Floor (1987-1989).”

dystopian, cautionary tale of the effects that human hierarchical greed and violence can cause if they are not controlled and suppressed. In Lilith's story there are many elements that show a lack of agency and hopelessness that might be seen as anti-utopian. She is put in a situation that might seem like one with "no way out." However, I do not agree with the critics that claim that presenting the Oankali as the oppressors diminishes the trilogy's utopian potential. In my opinion, the ambiguous depiction of the Oankali adds to the dramatic story of the survivors and shows that there are no easy solutions. The way the Oankali are so multi-dimensional, doing amazing and horrible things at the same time, encourages critical thinking from the reader and brings more awareness of the complexity of choices that humans are faced with. I also believe that seeing Butler as a biological determinist who forsakes hope for humankind is a mistake. Firstly, she herself denied believing that our genes are all there is. In one of her interviews she said:

Some readers see me as totally sociobiological, but that is not true. I do think we need to accept that our behavior is controlled to some extent by biological forces. Sometimes a small change in the brain, for instance – just a few cells – can completely alter the way a person or animal behaves. [...] But I don't accept what I would call classical sociobiology. Sometimes we can work around our programming if we understand it.²³

She does not turn away from our biology, and certainly a lot of her work focuses on how the way in which we are built as species determines our actions. However, she also sees that what is programmed can be re-programmed. There is no end to our evolution and if we understand it and

²³ Stephen W. Potts and Octavia E. Butler, "'We Keep Playing the Same Record': A Conversation with Octavia E. Butler," *Science Fiction Studies* 23, no. 3 (1996) 332-3, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4240538>.

try to control and shape it, we might overcome what holds us back. I will further explore this approach in Butler's work in the second and third book of *Xenogenesis*.

Secondly, the story of the Oankali can be read on many different levels. I believe that what Zaki does in her essay is a criticism of the most literal level of the trilogy. It is a plausible, yet superficial interpretation that the Oankali are a malevolent, external force that will bring humanity to extinction. And indeed, Butler does not make it easy for the reader, creating a complex story where partnership and subordination are closely intertwined, where benevolent intentions are often an excuse for coercion and a refusal to give humans their independence and freedom. However, if we read this story metaphorically, the Oankali symbolize "the Other" and they are an embodiment of the human fear of change and embracing the unknown. The Oankali are many things that humans often are not: they do not find value in individualism; they crave change; they communicate on a deep, intimate level; they appreciate life in all its forms; they embrace difference. If the trilogy is read in the light of resisting and then learning to accept and incorporate these differences, then it sends a very different message to the reader than a story of the extraterrestrial oppressors willing to consume humans. Instead, it becomes a tale of possibilities, of human growth and of overcoming our limitations. In chapter two I will look closely at this way of reading the trilogy – as a story of metamorphosis through acceptance and embracing difference.

Thirdly, with the development of the story itself, following Lilith's son Akin in the second book of the trilogy and Jodahs in the third one, both the literal story of the extraterrestrial "kidnapping" becomes more nuanced and richer in meanings, and on the metaphorical level it develops new layers of interpretation as well. What looks like "no way out" for Lilith becomes a way of discovery for her children. The metaphorical realm of possibilities expands. The characters of Akin and Jodahs make the anti-utopian reading less and less persuasive. In the next two chapters

I will look closely at this shift in Butler's trilogy, and look further for utopian impulses that resonate throughout her work.

3. *ADULTHOOD RITES: TOWARDS CRITICAL UTOPIA*

The second book of the trilogy, *Adulthood Rites*, focuses on the character of Akin, the first male “construct” child – a child of mixed human and Oankali origin that is human-born. He is the son of Lilith, a woman who has played a crucial role in the mix of the species by giving birth to the first female and then the first male construct child. The Oankali have waited for a long time to allow this to happen, as they feared, firstly, the instability of the combination of human-birth and male genes, and, secondly, that they would not be able to control the experiment fully. The ooloi took time to learn further the human DNA and only when they were confident that they could succeed in correctly mixing the genes, did they take the next step in the completion of the “trade.” Akin, a mix of the human and the Oankali DNA, perceives the world differently than any of their parents, and combines both human and Oankali characteristics. The novel opens with a vivid description of how Akin perceives the world and those around him:

He was Akin. Things touched him when this sound was made. He was given comfort or food, or he was held and taught. Body to body understanding was given to him. He came to perceive himself as himself – individual, defined, separate from all the touches and smells, all the tastes, sights, and sounds that came to him. He was Akin. Yet he came to know that he was also part of the people who touched him – that within them, he could find fragments of himself. He was himself, and he was those others.²⁴

²⁴ Octavia Butler, *Adulthood Rites* (London: Headline Publishing Group, 2022), 6.

This first paragraph shifts the focus of the story from the humans who do not want to understand and cooperate with the Oankali to a boy who is both human and Oankali and feels that he is part of all his people; the reader senses that the birth of Akin contains within it the promise of something new to come. Akin is a curious, bright child, who wants to understand and know everything. He uses his tongue, the only sensitive sensory organ he has, to taste everything and everyone around him. He is driven by discovering others, and his relentless nature always pushes him to get to the core of things, to understand them thoroughly. He has the ability to get within the heart of everything he investigates, but even that is not enough for him:

He focused on a few cells, on a single cell, on the parts of that cell, on its nucleus, on chromosomes within the nucleus, on genes along the chromosomes. He investigated the DNA that made up the genes, the nucleotides of the DNA. There was something beyond the nucleotides that he could not perceive – a world of smaller particles that he could not cross into. He did not understand why he could not make this final crossing – if it were the final one. It frustrated him that anything was beyond his perception. He knew of it only through shadowy ungraspable feelings. When he was older he came to think of it as a horizon, always receding when he approached it. (*Adulthood Rites*, 8)

Most of all, Akin craves closeness and the love of others. He is at the same time an independent individual, and he feels deep connection with others on an animalistic, biological level. Without others, their care and affection, he feels lonely and miserable; he needs others to thrive.

The action of *Adulthood Rites* happens many years after *Dawn* and takes place on Earth. Humans are brought back from the ship and allowed to go on with their own lives. They are given

the choice of either staying with the Oankali, building new “trading villages,” mating with them and populating Earth with construct children, or of going their own way, building human-only colonies but remaining infertile. Vast numbers of humans reject the Oankali and join the “resisters” as they call themselves. They focus their energies on rebuilding what was lost during the war, trying to get back to the pre-war ways by cultivating the land, mining to produce metal and glass, and building towns. They find it important to bring back “civilization” and they have contempt for the way the Oankali live – the symbiosis that they establish with their environment and their lack of domination over it. The resisters build these communities with varying degrees of success. Many colonies become quite prosperous but at the same time there are lots of people who stay in small groups in the forests, raid and plunder the villages, kill the men and kidnap the women. More and more people learn how to produce fire arms and the spiral of violence continues. Most of all, the hatred towards the Oankali persists, and even grows with time. The humans are bitter about the Oankali denying them the right to have human children and they become so desperate that they start to kidnap construct children with the hope that if they are brought up among humans they will become more human themselves.

This is what happens to Akin. At the age of seventeen months he is kidnapped by a group of men while he is outside the village with his carer Tino. The attackers batter Tino and leave him to die, and they run away with Akin. They bring him through the jungle with the aim of selling him. This journey frightens and upsets Akin tremendously, as the men are unpredictable and violent, they are scared of Akin, treat him roughly and ignore him; but at the same time, Akin is fascinated by them, and he studies their behavior in great detail. When, after a dramatic journey, he is sold to people in Phoenix, a rich town where Tino comes from, he is given to Tate, one of the first people that Lilith awoke on the ship. Akin then spends around a year among the humans,

learning their behavior and trying to understand them. He is at first surprised at their resistance, and cannot grasp why they are so opposed to having their genes mixed with the Oankali's. However, with time he sees how important it is for humans to decide about their own lives for themselves, and to preserve their species. In a conversation with two other construct children brought to the town, he for the first time openly states his views:

“We are them! And we are the Oankali. You know. If they could perceive, they would know!”

“If they could perceive, they would be us. They can't and they aren't. We're the best of what they are and the best of what the Oankali are. But because of us, they won't exist anymore.”

“Oankali Dinso and Toaht won't exist anymore.”

“No. But Akjai will go away unchanged. If the Human-Oankali construct doesn't work here or with the Toaht, Akjai will continue.” [...] He said with intensity, with utter certainty, “There should be a Human Akjai! There should be Humans who don't change or die – Humans to go on if the Dinso and Toaht unions fail.” (*Adulthood Rites*, 144-5)

Akin feels it is unfair that the Oankali will have their unchanged people – the Akjai – and that humans are denied this right. He decides that he wants to collect as much information as he can about humans during his stay in Phoenix, in order to share it with the Oankali and convince them to give humans a chance of governing themselves, to reverse the infertility tampering that the Oankali set, and to allow humans to attempt to overcome the “human contradiction” – the deadly mix of intelligence and hierarchical tendencies, on their own terms. After around a year among the

resisters, the Oankali bring Akin home. When he is giving his last goodbyes to Tate, he says: “I’ll do what I said I would [...] I don’t forget things” (*Adulthood Rites*, 190). Indeed, when he returns to the Oankali and is sent to Chkahichdahk – their ship – to learn about his Oankali ancestors, he still has the human cause in mind. During his stay on the ship he is taught by an Akjai teacher, and when they become friends, he shares his dream and asks the teacher for advice:

“I want to make a place for them,” he said. “I know what will happen to Earth. But there are other worlds. We could change the second one or the fourth one – make one of them more like Earth. A few of us could do it. I’ve heard that there is nothing living on either world.”

“There’s nothing living there. The fourth world could be more easily transformed than the second.”

“It could be done?”

“Yes.”

“It was so obvious.... I thought I might be wrong, thought I had missed something.”

“Time, Akin.”

“Get things started and turn them over to the resisters. They need metal, machinery, things they can control.”

“No.”

Akin focused his whole attention on the Akjai. It was not saying, no, the Humans could not have their machines. Its signals did not communicate that at all. It was saying, no, Humans did not need machines.

“We can make it possible for them to live on the fourth world,” it said. “They wouldn’t need machines. If they wanted them, they would have to build them themselves.”

“I would help. I would do whatever was needed.” (*Adulthood Rites*, 234-5)

Akin knows that the humans cannot stay on Earth, as this planet is eventually going to be consumed by Chkahichdahk, and the new construct species will fly to the stars in search of a new “trade.” Instead, he decides to move humans to Mars and with his help recolonize it. At the end of *Adulthood Rites* Akin convinces the Oankali to allow humans to travel to Mars and start a new human colony there. It is a new beginning, providing new hope. Butler moves away from the “pessimistic dystopia” of *Dawn* and opens new possibilities to humans. In doing so, she provides a window on a utopian, “militant” impulse that calls for change.

Akin’s fight for the human cause can be definitely seen as a utopian possibility in a generally dystopian world that humans are faced with after being awoken on the ship by the Oankali. It is an option that many of the readers would see as the most appealing utopian development of the story. The humans receive one more chance to change their ways and to battle the “contradiction” on their own terms. They are wiser in the wake of their experiences of nuclear war and their struggles with the Oankali; they are informed about what they need to overcome in order to have a chance to survive. They also have Akin, a representative of the mixed species, who can teach them the Oankali ways in a non-oppressive, consensual manner, and they can benefit immensely from his way of perceiving the world. However, Butler does not choose to focus on this particular aspect of the story. Rather than focusing on the humans themselves, *Adulthood Rites* is all about Akin growing, learning human ways and fighting for their cause. When his plan comes to fruition, and he manages to send humans to Mars, their story is not developed any further. We

do not know what happens on Mars, how its inhabitants get on there, and if they manage to build a better future for themselves. Instead, what Butler focuses on is the journey of Akin, his differences from and similarities with the humans, his willingness to learn, grow and change; his unorthodox way of seeing the world and creating a new reality. In “Posthuman Bodies and Agency in Octavia Butler’s *Xenogenesis*,” Naomi Jacobs points out that Butler focuses on two “utopian possibilities”:

The more conventional and, I will argue, the less central to her project is that offered by a group of humans who choose to attempt a settlement on Mars rather than to lose their species identity in becoming part of the posthuman hybrid. The other is to be found in the radically changed relation to difference, identity, and agency exemplified by that new hybrid itself, which figures both the utopian possibilities and the dangers of the posthuman. On the whole, although contradictions in Butler’s work expose her own ambivalence about such a future, it is the posthuman alternative that provides the more compelling image of hope.²⁵

In *Adulthood Rites*, Butler is certainly interested in painting a picture of a different world. Akin can be seen as a metaphor for a posthuman, hybrid alternative to the individualistic, binary world of the humans saved from the apocalypse by the Oankali. Butler’s response to the closed-minded and violent ways of the humans is the openness and flexibility that Akin represents, together with his curiosity about the Other. Jacobs argues that all the construct children are a

²⁵Naomi Jacobs, “Posthuman Bodies and Agency in Octavia Butler’s *Xenogenesis*,” in *Dark Horizons: Science Fiction and the Dystopian Imagination*, eds. Raffaella Baccolini and Tom Moylan (New York: Routledge 2003), 91-2.

median way between the humanist, totalizing narratives that humans have been creating for centuries and that perceive the Other as a threat, and “uncommitted,” extreme posthumanism that does not recognize any Other, and thus is incapable of any political action. In her criticism of Hoda M. Zaki’s interpretation of the *Xenogenesis* series as an essentialist and determinist anti-utopia, she says:

[I]f we read her [Butler’s] work as a metaphor rather than a manifesto, a different kind of political use might be made of it. Her extreme depictions of the humanist self, violently defending its integrity against the threatening Other, and of the posthuman self, struggling to maintain any coherence in the absence of constituting Others, might both be read as cautionary accounts of the excesses of humanist and posthumanist thought. In a sense, her work sets up and then blurs the false dilemma between integral and dispersed subjectivities, between an identity politics incapable of coalition-based action and an uncommitted postmodernism allowing itself to be shaped by, “contained” by, whatever opposition it encounters. [...] In these novels, Butler ultimately asks her readers to set aside their fears of difference and of change, and to enter willingly into less absolutist, more relational ways of being and acting in the world.²⁶

Akin is a third way between the humanist self, represented by the fearful, violent humans, and the Oankali, who consume and collect everything they come across in their trade-searching journeys and who can be seen as a representation of an extremist posthumanism described by Jacobs. Akin has access to both extremes through his genes, and can make conscious decision of the “mix” he

²⁶ Naomi Jacobs, “Posthuman Bodies and Agency,” 109.

wants to become. He understands the importance of deciding for yourself and having a choice of approaching and collaborating with the Other on your own terms. Even though the Oankali are sure that the humans will not survive on their own, and he knows on a deep, genetic level how convinced they are of their judgment based on their amazing skills, including their ability to read human DNA, he still believes that they deserve a chance. He outlines his views on this in an exchange with Dehkiaht, the ooloi who he meets on the ship and who is supposed to help him with his broken relationship to his sibling Tiikuchahk, caused by the two of them not being able to bond properly due to Akin's absence:

“I want to establish them as Akjai Humans.”

“They won't survive.”

“Perhaps not.”

“There's no perhaps. They won't survive their Contradiction.”

“Then let them fail. Let them have the freedom to do that, at least.” (*Adulthood Rites*, 246)

Akin then pleads:

“Let me show them to you – not just their interesting bodies and the way they are here and in the trade villages on Earth. Let me show them to you as they are when there are no Oankali around.”

“Why?”

“Because you should at least know them before you deny them the assurance that Oankali always claim for themselves.” (*Adulthood Rites*, 246)

Akin sees in humans what the Oankali, with all their knowledge of human genetics, fail to perceive. One of the important moments in the novel, which allows Akin to realize that humans are “not just their interesting bodies,” is when he sees Gabe, one of the resisters in Phoenix, performing the role of King Lear. Gabe’s performance scares and astonishes Akin at first. He is amazed that Gabe is able to undergo such a transformation and make him feel emotions on a deep, non-linguistic level:

Gabe became an old man. His voice became heavier, thicker. His body seemed heavier, too, and painfully weary, bent, yet hard to bend. He was a man whose daughters had betrayed him. He was sane, and then not sane. He was terrifying. He was another person altogether. Akin wanted to get up and run out into the darkness. Yet he sat still, spellbound. He could not understand much of what Gabe said, though it seemed to be English. Somehow, though, he felt what Gabe seemed to want him to feel. Surprise, anger, betrayal, utter bewilderment, despair, madness... (*Adulthood Rites*, 180)

Akin realizes that what he experiences during the performance is the same as what he has felt with the Oankali, and that the humans have access to this deeper way of communication, even if it is not as easy for them to access it as it is for the Oankali. He tells Gabe:

“I liked the acting. It scared me at first, and I couldn’t understand a lot of it, but... It’s like what we do – constructs and Oankali. It’s like when we touch each other and talk with feelings and pressures. Sometimes you have to remember a feeling you haven’t had for a long time and bring it back so you can transmit it to someone else or use a feeling you have about one thing to help someone understand something else.” (*Adulthood Rites*, 180-1)

At the same time, Akin knows what prevents the humans from overcoming their “contradiction.” When he is traveling through the jungle with the men who kidnapped him, he becomes closer with one of them. When Akin decides to reveal to the man that he can speak, the man’s approach to Akin changes completely. He shows anger and fear, and, from the very moment he knows how different Akin is, he avoids him and treats him very coldly. When this happens, Akin recollects his conversation with Lilith:

“Human beings fear difference,” Lilith had told him once. “Oankali crave difference. Humans persecute their different ones, yet they need them to give themselves definition and status. Oankali seek difference and collect it. They need it to keep themselves from stagnation and overspecialization. If you don’t understand this, you will. You’ll probably find both tendencies surfacing in your own behavior.” And she had put her hand on his hair. “When you feel a conflict, try to go the Oankali way. Embrace difference.” (*Adulthood Rites*, 88)

He knows that it is fear that brings out the worst in humans, he is very perceptive of their reactions, and he learns quickly how to behave to convince them that he is not a threat.

This mix of characteristics in Akin, being able to put himself in both positions and being different from both the human and the Oankali kind, is also something that he needs to process and accept. All the tensions that are caused by his mixed origins make him feel that he does not belong anywhere, that he is alone and drifting between two worlds, and that he is not “complete.”

When he meets Dehkiaht, he shares with it this fear of being flawed. However, Dehkiaht ensures him that nothing is wrong with him and he will find his path. It says:

“You aren’t flawed. I noticed even before I went to my parents that there was a wholeness to you – a strong wholeness. I don’t know whether you’ll be what your parents wanted you to be, but whatever you become, you’ll be complete. You’ll have within yourself everything you need to content yourself. Just follow what seems right to you.” (*Adulthood Rites*, 244)

Akin is a creature that crosses boundaries, explores new territories, and re-creates himself. He is what Donna J. Haraway calls a “cyborg.” According to Haraway, the cyborg is a creation of the postmodern world, a hybrid that rejects grand, totalizing narratives, that embraces diversity and multiplicity, that opposes the humanist view of the world. Haraway claims that:

By the late twentieth century, our time, a mythic time, we are all chimeras, theorized and fabricated hybrids of machine and organism; in short, we are cyborgs. The cyborg is our ontology; it gives us our politics. The cyborg is a condensed image of both imagination and material reality, the two joined centres structuring any possibility of historical transformation.²⁷

²⁷ Donna J. Haraway, “A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century,” in *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 149.

Haraway argues that the “Western” culture is a system of repressive binaries and borders, which claim to have divine, indisputable origins and a hegemony of truth in telling their stories. The cyborgs are able to undermine these structures by proposing new ways of existence in the world and, in doing so, perceive these binaries and borders as constructed and changeable. The cyborg takes “pleasure in the confusion of the boundaries” and “responsibility in their construction.” It resists the totalizing narratives that “form wholes from parts, including those of polarity and hierarchical domination.” It is “resolutely committed to partiality, irony, intimacy, and perversity.” It is “oppositional, utopian, and completely without innocence.”²⁸ Akin takes the narratives created by the humans and by the Oankali; in combining them, he exposes their fragility. His work is against the totalizing narrative of the humanist self that would always reject and fear the Other; his teachings break the Oankali narrative of the “human contradiction” and allows for a glimpse of uncertainty to create a crack in the smooth surface of the Oankali conviction about human imperfection; his opposition to the Oankali’s dominant, overpowering omniscience and overconsuming inclusivity undermines their validity. Akin’s existence, the fact that he has been brought to life and is building a new, alternative narrative by mixing the two he was born into, reveals the instability and temporary construction of these origin stories that his predecessors believe in.

In her essay “Dialogic Origins and Alien Identities in Butler’s *Xenogenesis*,” Cathy Peppers investigates how *Xenogenesis* re-creates different origin stories, brings them into dialog and, by doing so, creates new, “cyborg” origins. She notes that Butler starts this interplay in the very title she gives to her trilogy:

²⁸Haraway, “A Cyborg Manifesto,” 151.

As the title of the trilogy suggests, XENOGENESIS is an origin story, a story about the origins of human identity, but it is a story with a difference. XENOGENESIS means “the production of offspring different from either of its parents”; this is reproduction with a difference, the (re)production of difference. And the “xeno” of this genesis comes from the Greek *xenos*, which in its original bivalence meant both guest/friend and alien/stranger. As an origin story, this trilogy tells about the genesis of an alien humanity, of a humanity which will survive not, as Donna Haraway puts it, by “recreat[ing] the sacred image of the same” (*Primate Visions* 378), but because Lilith, the African-American heroine of the first novel, will become the progenitrix of the new race of “constructs” [...]. She will give birth to herself as other.²⁹

Peppers analyzes in detail the origin stories she identifies as running through *Xenogenesis*: the biblical story of genesis, the sociobiological story of human identity that lies in our genes, the paleoanthropological story of evolution, and the discourse of the African diaspora and slavery. She then shows how these stories are told from a different perspective in the trilogy and investigates how they get into dialog with each other to use the “very power of these discourses to help us imagine the origins of human identity in other ways.”³⁰ With the story of genesis, she focuses on Lilith, who becomes mother of the new species instead of the biblical Adam. She points out the choice that Butler made regarding the name of her heroine, one that evokes the biblical story of the rebellious Lilith, the first wife of Adam, whom God expelled from Eden after she refused to be submissive to her husband. She also shows how this re-told story of origin is brought into dialog

²⁹ Cathy Peppers, “Dialogic Origins and Alien Identities in Butler’s *Xenogenesis*,” *Science Fiction Studies* 22, no. 1 (March 1995): 47, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4240397>.

³⁰ Peppers, “Dialogic Origins and Alien Identities,” 48-9.

with the story of slavery, as Lilith is a black woman who becomes mother of the new species against her will. With the story of our genes constituting our separate, human identity, Peppers shows how the trilogy opposes the humanist approach of being a separate “chosen” species. Instead, humans are presented as being symbiotic organisms that are part of their environment – this is the way the Oankali who can read our genes see us:

“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. We’re in his cells too now, and the cells have accepted us.... Even before we arrived, they had bacteria living in their intestines and protecting them from other bacteria that would hurt or kill them. They could not exist without symbiotic relationships with other creatures. Yet such relationships frighten them.” (*Adulthood Rites*, 199)

Peppers argues that this approach undermines the myth of the individual, humanist self. She pairs it again with the discourse of slavery and points out how *Xenogenesis* reveals that the self vs. Other binary is merely a construct, a story that could be re-written in a very different way. Finally, with the discourse of evolution, Peppers shows how Butler’s depiction of another species, another evolution brings the reader’s attention to the fact that human evolution to this point is just one of the versions of the “survival of the fittest” and that the biological determinism of violence, dominance and xenophobia is something that can be changed and replaced with another adaptation. Doing so will make humans better equipped for not only surviving but also for thriving.

Peppers summarizes her argument with the following paragraph:

If the Oankali are figures for postmodern anti-origins [...] and the Resisters are figures for an insistence on an essential notion of identity, neither comes away unchanged from the encounter. The text offers a third choice between: 1) a postmodern call to “forsake the pursuit of the origin” (as Foucault recommends) or to reveal science as yet one more meaningless master narrative (in the Lyotardian sense), and 2) an essentialist desire to claim some gender/race identity based in a “biology” outside history or cultural construction (as feminists are accused of doing). We can, as cyborgs, choose among alternative stories of our biological inheritance (themselves technologies of meanings) with which to interface. The trilogy itself privileges this third choice, represented by Lilith’s origin of a new “race” of “constructs”: her children with the Oankali are the hero(ine)s of the second and third novels, and these constructs, being constructed out of the complex discursive dialogue [...], carry with them both the desire to reclaim potentially powerful origin stories which marks “feminism,” and the recognition, which marks “postmodernism,” that traditional origin stories have historically been oppressively reductive in their creation of identity.³¹

In a similar manner to Naomi Jacobs, Peppers believes that the middle way between humanist individualism and boundaryless postmodernism is the cyborg way, a way represented in Butler’s novel by Akin and other construct children. Akin recognizes the boundaries and binaries within his world and refuses to define others and himself through their lens. He constructs his own “origin stories” and helps the humans to create their new origin story on Mars. He is aware that

³¹ Peppers, “Dialogic Origins and Alien Identities,” 59-60.

what is perceived as final is in fact a constructed narrative that can be exposed and re-written. He is also, as Nanda notes, “A-kin,” “a-kinsual” hybrid who has the potential for utopian political dissidence:

Akin, with his name split into A-kin, suggests a certain Utopian “destinerrancy.” And whereas, in the case of hybrid subjects, divided loyalties may suggest a competition between one loyalty and another, in A-kin’s case, given that he is “a-kinsual,” the loyalties, not divided, become “uncertain,” not subject to competitive equations. This results in political dissonance, a form of dissidence that by its discord opens up a possibility of new domesticities, new social and political formations that present an escape from the hybrid logic that is itself a legacy of the calculus of colonialism.³²

Akin sees both perspectives and has access to both of the worlds. His mixed origin makes him a carrier of a utopian desire for change. He can be an advocate for the humans and is also able to infiltrate their resistance due to the fact that he is part of them; he can empathize with their struggles and understand their behaviors. At the same time, he can understand (even if he does not agree with) the perspective of the Oankali, and see their genuine fear of giving humans a chance to create their own destiny on Mars which, according to them, will not be any better than murdering humans themselves. Akin can also see the gaps in the Oankali thinking, something no one thought was possible. Akin’s name indicates that he will not take sides just because he is “part of the tribe;” instead he will focus on what he feels is right, and by doing so awake the dissident, militant dreaming that can change both the humans and the Oankali forever.

³²Nanda, “Power, Politics, and Domestic Desire,” 781.

Nanda's postcolonial reading of the trilogy presents another breaking of a boundary – that of the oppressor and the oppressed. She notes that through the unique relationship of the species that need each other to survive, the line between this boundary blurs. Also, by telling the story of the humans as the ones responsible for the nuclear war and destruction of the whole planet, and the Oankali as the propagators of life, the binary opposition is further diluted. As Jim Miller writes in his essay “Post-Apocalyptic Hoping: Octavia Butler’s Dystopian/Utopian Vision”: “There are no ‘bad guys’ in the XENOGENESIS trilogy, only bad ways of thinking. The Oankali, human-males, and others interested in domination are not shown as inherently bad but as ignorant or ideologically deluded.” Miller argues that even though the Oankali are shown as the ones with colonist tendencies, the trilogy “defamiliarizes the victim/victimizer paradigm and shows it to be an inadequate way of understanding oppression.”³³ Through the story of Akin, Butler encourages the readers to get deeper into the story of “colonization” by the Oankali, and to see it in a new light; she wants them to analyze and to think how nuanced the situation of the humans is. Through the way that the story unravels, she encourages them to abandon a binary, boundary-focused way of perception. Butler’s novel is a call to open-mindedness, to refraining from one-dimensional judgements in order to find ways of hoping even in the dystopian circumstances. This blurring of the oppressor/oppressed binary is further achieved by the use of the genre itself. Through placing a familiar story of colonization into a new world of speculative fiction, the reader is faced with the something that Darko Suvin calls “cognitive estrangement,” an effect that science fiction is able to invoke when the reader is presented with a “novum” – a device that awakes the feelings of unfamiliarity and prompts the reader to imagine a different way of conceiving the world.³⁴ As

³³ Jim Miller, “Post-Apocalyptic Hoping: Octavia Butler’s Dystopian/Utopian Vision,” *Science Fiction Studies* 25, no. 2 (July 1998): 343, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4240705>.

³⁴ Darko Suvin, “Poetics,” in *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction: On the Poetics and History of a Literary Genre* (London: Yale University Press, 1979), 3-84.

Nanda notes: “by removing the inherent defense mechanisms of a traditional story, science fiction allows defiant or even deviant desire to usher in a revolutionary tactic that opens up new areas for future research.”³⁵

Another thing that plays an important role in *Xenogenesis* is desire understood as a will to live, experience, and understand on a deep, emotional level. Nanda writes: “The story is more complicated than a simple colonizer/colonized as it embraces insidious forms of force, compulsion, subtle conditioning, and human choice, where compulsion, attraction, and repulsion between the oppressor and the oppressed take on fascinatingly interlinked forms of desire.”³⁶ Nanda focuses on the sexual forms of desire present in the book, and argues how Lilith’s attraction to the Oankali and the desire that she feels complicates, exposes, and ultimately allows Lilith to defy the oppressor/oppressed binary. However, in my opinion, it is important to look at a different aspect of Butler’s writing on desire, namely to see it as power to perceive the world in opposition to the pure mind-based intelligence that caused the human population to be decimated by the nuclear war. She portrays the Oankali as the ones that can communicate and cooperate because they have mastered a deeper way of connection, communication via the body. In his essay “The Certainty of the Flesh: Octavia Butler’s Use of the Erotic in the *Xenogenesis* Trilogy,” Nolan Belk calls it the “erotic of the body” and he points out that it is important not to limit it to sexual aspects:

The erotic nature of the body – the body’s ability to “know” without thought what it desires – has been too long relegated to the realm of sexuality. Surely it belongs there – and the Oankali who personify the power of the erotic certainly emphasize the importance of a

³⁵ Nanda, “Power, Politics, and Domestic Desire,” 784.

³⁶ Nanda, “Power, Politics, and Domestic Desire,” 773.

sexual connection. However, the true power of the erotic comes through following its lead against the world of logic that has chosen to ignore it.³⁷

The intelligence of the erotic is a counterbalance to the hierarchical intelligence that divides and categorizes, that creates boundaries and binary oppositions. As Belk notes: “For Butler, the locus of hope is in the power of the erotic – the trust in the body’s deep desires for propagation, love, and connection.”³⁸ This desire is very visible in Akin’s quest to help humans to get their chance to live on their own terms. He understands deeply their needs and is able to explain them to the Oankali, that their “knowledge of the flesh” is not as complete as they are sure of, that there is still a part of humans that escapes their understanding. When Akin fights for the human cause in front of the Oankali gathering, he says:

“Look at the Human-born among you,” [...] “If your flesh knows you’ve done all you can for Humanity, their flesh should know as mine does that you’ve done almost nothing. Their flesh should know that resister Humans must survive as a separate, self-sufficient species. Their flesh should know that Humanity must live!” (*Adulthood Rites*, 249)

Akin knows that only this deep willingness to understand the other species can lead to a better future that is based on partnership and mutual respect. He sees that the answer in the “knowledge

³⁷ Belk, “The Certainty of the Flesh: Octavia Butler’s Use of the Erotic in the *Xenogenesis* Trilogy,” *Utopian Studies* 19, no. 3 (2008): 376, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20719917>.

³⁸ Belk, “The Certainty of the Flesh,” 373.

of the flesh” that he can see in the Oankali, and that he recognizes in humans as well after his experience of seeing Gabe acting and accessing the erotic of the body through desire.

Akin, through his hybridity and cyborg identity is able to resurrect the utopian hoping that is missing from the dark, dystopian world of *Dawn*. The moment the story of Akin is introduced in *Xenogenesis*, the world that could be perceived as hopeless, even anti-utopian due to the seemingly unavoidable end of humans, is transformed. I believe that from the very start of *Adulthood Rites* the trilogy transforms into a critical dystopia as the story of Akin does what Baccolini and Moylan identify to be the main function of critical dystopia: it “allow[s] both readers and protagonists to hope by resisting closure: the ambiguous, open endings [...] maintain the utopian impulse *within* the work.”³⁹ I also think that the glimpse of hope that arises with the birth of Akin grows stronger throughout the book, and with each page the developing character of Akin enables the potential of the trilogy to become a critical utopia, which, in my opinion, it achieves in *Imago*. Akin transforms the fear of the difference into curiosity and hopeful awaiting of what can come next. The dystopian world of fixed origin stories is undermined through Akin’s own fragmented origin story. The boundaries of rigid binaries blur, allowing the reader to unmask the conventional ways of thinking that constitute our humanist self and that block us from our desire and embracing the Other. The critical lens of the trilogy allows us to “estrangle ourselves” from the world as we know it and explore different ways of thinking about it, thus “forc[ing] us to ‘work through’ the dystopian before we can begin the effort to imagine a better world”⁴⁰ on entirely new terms.

³⁹ Rafaella Baccolini and Tom Moylan, “Introduction. Dystopia and Histories,” in *Dark Horizons: Science Fiction and the Dystopian Imagination*, eds. Rafaella Baccolini and Tom Moylan (New York: Routledge 2003), 7; emphasis in original.

⁴⁰ Jim Miller, “Post-Apocalyptic Hoping,” 339.

The second novel of the *Xenogenesis* trilogy, *Adulthood Rites*, allows us to imagine a different, better world through Akin, whose hybridity shatters the world as we know it. His cyborg identity prompts us to ask questions about things that we took for granted before, and to activate desire that has utopian potential. It also makes us realize that the story of the alien colonization by the Oankali is not one-dimensional and should be read with a critical approach; not only as a dark, dystopian world of lost control.

However, in the third and final book of the trilogy – *Imago* – Butler goes even further. She takes another step towards exploring the breaking of boundaries by focusing on another child of Lilith – Jodahs, who becomes the first human-born ooloi and completely redefines the shape of the new species. In the third chapter I will focus on the character of Jodahs, in order to trace yet another dimension of Butler’s utopian thinking. Through the character of Akin, Butler also shows what is her idea of change that brings hope for a better future. She calls for embracing difference and open-mindedness that will allow us to expose the “fixed,” limiting structures of Western culture as mere changeable discourses that we need to oppose and replace with new, more inclusive stories.

4. *IMAGO*: UTOPIAN BECOMING

Imago, the last book of the *Xenogenesis* trilogy, switches from the third-person narrative of *Dawn* and *Adulthood Rites* to a first-person account – a story told by Jodahs, another human-born construct, and child of Lilith. The story starts with the description of metamorphosis, a process that every construct child, similarly to the Oankali children, goes through in order to fully mature. During this process a child turns female, male or ooloi and becomes ready to mate and reproduce. This process does not go the usual way for Jodahs, who is worried and scared about the changes it is going through. The book starts with the following passage:

I slipped into my first metamorphosis so quietly that no one noticed. Metamorphoses were not supposed to begin that way. Most people begin with small, obvious, physical changes – the loss of fingers and toes, for instance, or the budding of new fingers and toes of a different design. I wish my experience had been that normal, that safe.⁴¹

Jodahs feels that something extraordinary is happening to him, something out of control. He does not seek help and support from his female or male parents, which is the normal reaction of every construct child developing into a female or a male during the metamorphosis. Instead it feels a strong connection with Nikanj, its ooloi parent. When Jodahs comes to Nikanj, it examines Jodahs and reacts with shock and fear – it realizes that Jodahs is turning into an ooloi, something that was not supposed to happen. Creating a construct ooloi was a step in the “trade” that the Oankali put

⁴¹ Octavia Butler, *Imago* (London: Headline Publishing Group, 2022), 3.

on hold until they were sure that the process of mixing is well-established and safe. With the creation of the first construct ooloi, the “trade” is complete, and the process of creation of the new species is finalized. Nikanj is terrified because it made a mistake: the mix of genes it picked to create Jodahs was supposed to turn it into female or male but instead it evolved into an ooloi – the first of its kind, an experiment that could turn out to be dangerous for itself and for the whole species.

When the Oankali learn about what Jodahs is becoming, they decide that it needs to go into exile in order to make sure that it does not endanger the people around it, the environment it affects and ultimately the whole living ecosystem. This unplanned event is an important switch in the way Butler depicts the Oankali in the trilogy. In the first and the second book, they are presented as omniscient beings who masterfully control human and their own DNA, and who claim that they know everything about humans and their “contradiction” because genetics holds no secrets for them. Instead, it turns out that the human DNA, especially the cancer cells that the Oankali are so fascinated with, is also unknown ground to them, something that can bring unexpected results, and evolve in a way that they cannot predict. Through the character of Jodahs, Butler further undermines the determinist approach that some see in her work, by saying that we always evolve, and can develop in new, unpredictable ways. While we may think that there is no escape from our “coding,” *Imago* shows us that we can always be surprised with new opportunities for change that arise.

Jodahs has to be watched as it has a new ability that no ooloi yet possesses, and that it cannot control well – it can shape itself limitlessly, and through that also affect the people and the environment around it. This ability, which is caused by the incorporation of human cancer cells into the construct species, gives Jodahs unprecedented power in creating itself anew over and over

again, and adapting to things that surround it. Because Jodahs does not know how to use these abilities, and has no control over them when it uses them, it can unknowingly affect the genetic structure of organisms around it, and make them unwell. Jodahs slowly masters these skills, and it turns out that it is humans that stimulate Jodahs' powers and allow it to focus on channeling and controlling its skills. When it meets its future mates – Tomás and Jesusa, and needs to tend to them to cure their genetic disease, it realizes how easy it is to use the skills it possesses. With time it becomes a true shapeshifter – a master of self-creation, a true cyborg. As Cathy Peppers notes:

By the time we get to the third novel, the text fully embodies in its construct ooloi hero(ine) Jodahs a cyborg identity which breaks down the boundaries between human/nonhuman, male/female, and natural/technological. This “genetic engineer” is both the scientist and the laboratory (it is the ooloi who manipulate the genetic exchanges of reproduction within their own bodies [...]); both (and neither) male and female (Jodahs is a shapeshifter, and we see it become both genders in different scenes).⁴²

According to Peppers, Jodahs is the ultimate cyborg, an ideal creation of broken binaries and crossed boundaries. The fact that it is a shapeshifter and can become what it wants, whenever it needs to do so, is the true sign of a cyborg who can create and shape their origin stories and construct their own narratives.

However, I believe that Butler goes even further in her creation of Jodahs than to break the limiting boundaries of humanist narratives. The fact that Jodahs is a shapeshifter introduces a new

⁴² Peppers, “Dialogic Origins and Alien Identities,” 59-60.

dimension to Butler's vision of utopian, hopeful dreaming. As Eric White notes in his essay "The Erotics of Becoming: *Xenogenesis* and 'The Thing'":

Butler introduces a further qualification in the last volume of *XENOGENESIS*, this time involving her earlier apparent valorization of limitless becoming. Until they encounter the human species, the aliens' largely decentered and multiplicitous existence has been constrained in but one respect. Although they are driven to become other, they can only do so from one generation to the next. None of them, prior to their contact with the humans, are literally protean. But from human cancer cells they acquire the ability to reprogram their DNA at will and thus reinvent themselves as true shapeshifters.⁴³

White argues that the fact that Jodahs is a shapeshifter unlocks the full potential of the new species into limitless becoming. As the etymology of "imago" suggests – a word which denotes the final and fully developed adult stage of an insect – Jodahs' transformation into an ooloi is the full development of the species into its maturity, into its full potential. This potential is its beauty in never staying stagnant and limited by its form, instead being open to and in dialogue with others and with its environment.

As noted by Alison Tara Walker, Jodahs is a perfect representation of what embodies "becoming" in the work of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari. In their book *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, they develop a philosophy of multiplicities that constantly form connections with each other and affect each other to transform and create anew. Deleuze and

⁴³ Eric White, "The Erotics of Becoming: *Xenogenesis* and 'The Thing,'" *Science Fiction Studies* 20, no. 3 (1993): 405. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4240279>.

Guattari oppose “becoming” to the stative philosophy of “being” that has ruled the Western world for centuries, a philosophy which claims that there is a divine origin, a beginning and an end that contains life in a limited, closed form. They claim that our existence cannot be pinned down to any finalized map, that there is no such thing as a singular identity, essence or center that we can and should search for, as what we experience are instances of becoming. The moment we notice them, they are already in process of change, eternally and limitlessly creating connections that influence each other and that produce constant difference. Becoming is not a “thing” that can be grasped; instead it is the energy that floats between the points of origin of its limitless materializations:

A line of becoming is not defined by points that it connects, or by points that compose it; on the contrary, it passes between points, it comes up through the middle, it runs perpendicular to the points first perceived, transversally to the localizable relation to distant or contiguous points. A point is always a point of origin. But a line of becoming has neither beginning nor end, departure nor arrival, origin nor destination; to speak of the absence of an origin, to make the absence of an origin the origin, is a bad play on words. A line of becoming has only a middle. The middle is not an average; it is fast motion, it is the absolute speed of movement. A becoming is always in the middle; one can only get it by the middle. A becoming is neither one nor two, nor the relation of the two; it is the in-between, the border or line of flight or descent running perpendicular to both.⁴⁴

Jodahs’ shapeshifting not only exposes and contradicts boundaries and the oppositional binaries, it also demasks their senselessness, as these boundaries and fixed binaries can only exist in a

⁴⁴ Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), 293.

limited, finite world, where the possibility of change has its end. Instead, the reader realizes that Jodahs represents the eternal play of meanings and possibilities. As Walker notes in her essay “Destabilizing Order, Challenging History: Octavia Butler, Deleuze and Guattari, and Affective Beginnings”:

The Construct’s line of becoming strikes directly through the middle of what it means to be human and Oankali arriving at a perfect synergy that runs between both species. Since the Constructs are always becoming, like Deleuze and Guattari suggest, there is no beginning or end in their line, but only a path of endless possibilities. There can be no destination in the Construct Ooloi’s becomings because there is not a stable identity from which to start or a concept of a pinnacle to reach – its self is becoming.⁴⁵

Walker rightly points out that the construct ooloi are an apt symbol of limitless possibilities. The Oankali trace themselves as far as an “organelle” that has no beginning; it is pure vital energy, expressing the need of the constant acquisition of new life, constant change and transformation. With Jodahs, who carries human genes within itself, and who is a beautiful example of the philosophy of becoming that the Oankali believe in, Butler offers the human characters in her novel an entry into a world of limitless potential – a world where you can shape and discover yourself, where you always have the possibility to introduce change. She also offers her readers a new perspective to think about what we should have in mind when thinking about the utopian impulse, the impulse of hopeful dreaming, so we do not kill it by pinning it down and making it a stagnant anti-utopia.

⁴⁵ Alison Tara Walker, “Destabilizing Order, Challenging History: Octavia Butler, Deleuze and Guattari, and Affective Beginnings,” *Extrapolation* 46, no. 1 (Spring 2005): 117.

In her essay, Walker explores how Deleuze and Guattari describe the methodology of becoming and how it resonates in *Xenogenesis*. She focuses on the concept of a “rhizome,” which Deleuze and Guattari implement as an alternative to the narratives of “root” and “tree” structures that are deeply ingrained in Western culture. Deleuze and Guattari describe the “rhizome” as an “antigenealogy,” a structural alternative to the Western tree genealogies which always try to get to the root of things and sanctify them as divine origin. Instead, “the rhizome operates by variation, expansion, conquest, capture, offshoots. [...] [T]he rhizome pertains to a map that must be produced, constructed, a map that is always detachable, connectable, reversible, modifiable, and has multiple entryways and exits and its own lines of flight.” The rhizome contrasts “centered (even polycentric) systems with hierarchical modes of communication and preestablished paths,” and is an “acentered, nonhierarchical, nonsignifying system without a General and without an organizing memory or central automaton, defined solely by a circulation of states.”⁴⁶ Deleuze and Guattari call for this way of perceiving and creating reality around us – a circular entanglement of connections that continuously expand and affect each other, making becoming possible. Walker argues that Butler, similarly to Deleuze and Guattari, uses this (anti-)methodology of the rhizome to present alternative ways for humankind to exist. She says:

Though through different means, Octavia Butler and Deleuze and Guattari interrogate the same structures within both of their works. Most importantly, they imagine new possibilities for species fruition and development that flourish apart from the seemingly intrinsic hierarchy of the root-tree. Through fascicular becoming, Butler, Deleuze and Guattari all propose that it is not through scientific descent and filiation where species’

⁴⁶ Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 21.

growth occurs. But such amplification can also take place within areas of involution and becoming. These affective spaces encourage growth that hierarchical systems deny, making it possible to engender imaginative possibilities for race, gender, evolution and formations of completely new species as well.⁴⁷

Instead of a linear, hierarchical Darwinian evolution, an involution of multiplicities is proposed. Involution – evolution between two heterogenous terms – is a decentered play of possibilities, where “any point of a rhizome can be connected to anything other, and must be.”⁴⁸ This decentered play involves two separate points affecting and influencing each other, bringing becoming into existence. Walker sees this Deleuzean “necessity” of choosing multiplicity in Butler’s work. She claims that Butler shows us a world that can survive and thrive only by embracing a rhizomatic approach that encourages the coming into being of possibilities we cannot even envisage.

Jodahs is a symbol of freedom. More specifically, it embodies the act of freeing oneself from oppressive, hierarchical genealogies that assign fixed labels and binaries – it does so through embracing limitless multiplicities. There is a beautiful passage in the novel, where Nikanj shares all its knowledge with Jodahs as a sign of the completion of Jodahs’ metamorphosis. Nikanj believes that Jodahs’ has reached its maturity and is ready to receive and accept the information about life that the ooloi store in their yashi – an internal organ in between the two hearts that they have, which is a container of all the knowledge they have collected for all the generations as long as they can trace it. Nikanj connects its sensory arm to Jodahs whose world opens up with a flaring sensation of abundance:

⁴⁷ Walker, “Destabilizing Order, Challenging History,” 116-7.

⁴⁸ Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 7.

Then the world around me seemed to flare brilliant white. I could no longer see beyond myself. All my senses turned inward as Nikanj used both sensory hands to inject a rush of individual cells, each one a plan by which a whole living entity could be constructed. The cells went straight into my newly mature yashi. The organ seemed to gulp and suckle the way I had once at my mother's breast. There was immense newness. Life in more varieties than I could possibly have imagined – unique units of life, most never seen on Earth. Generations of memory to be examined, memorized, and either preserved alive in stasis or allowed to live their natural span and die. (*Imago*, 194)

It is difficult not to be afraid of this vastness of experience and its wisdom – doing so requires a conscious effort from Jodahs. Being able to embrace this amount of diversity is difficult even for the Oankali, and only mature ooloi are granted access to this gift. Jodahs is overwhelmed with the magnitude of information collected by the Oankali and feels dizzy from its weight. When Tomás asks it about this experience, Jodahs describes it as “having billions of strangers screaming from inside you for your individual attention. Incomprehensible...overwhelming...no word is big enough.” When Tomás responds with a comment that Nikanj told him that it is “just information” it gave to Jodahs, Jodahs replies: “Yes. And if I began now and continued for the rest of our lives, I could only explain a small fraction of it aloud to you.” (*Imago*, 196)

In “Certainty of the Flesh,” Belk describes how this multiplicity of life is an important part of Butler's work, something that she feels we should nurse and celebrate as it allows us to deal with our fear of the other and thus embrace the path of becoming:

For Butler, these generations of memory are to be celebrated because they show the tremendous abundance of change available to any species willing to embrace it. [...] What Butler is driving at with Jodahs' body knowledge is a kind of race consciousness. Jodahs is able to see back through this race consciousness in ways which suggest that if humans understood the tremendous changes the species has already experienced in order to become the species, then we would not fear species-level changes, we would embrace them. Who wants to be trapped in the human shell on Mars with Akin when she could be traversing the universe and sharing her body with the stars? However, as Jodahs has explained, only a creation beyond human – a creation which could actually feel its intimate, erotic connection with all life in the universe – could truly understand.⁴⁹

Belk argues that it is difficult for humans to see this abundance of life and expand the feeling of connection with things that seem alien and distant to us. The Oankali function as a bridge to this inclusive perception of the world that Butler wants to bring closer to us so we can understand it better and learn from it. The effect of cognitive estrangement that Suvin attributes to speculative fiction, and which Butler invokes with her depiction of very different possible worlds, allows the reader to step back from reality as they know it, and imagine a world where this abundance of life and change is something that we can process better, see on a larger scale, and embrace. Through her depiction of the Oankali, Butler points out what it is that stops us from embracing the Other: the fear of abundance and diversity that we are not able to control and comprehend. We are building what Deleuze and Guattari would call “molar identities” – identities that aggregate and fix the world to blocks of steady matter and lock it in a well-known, “safe” space. Deleuze and

⁴⁹ Belk, “The Certainty of the Flesh,” 380-1.

Guattari pair “molar” with “molecular” – and call for a molecular sensibility, an appreciation of microscopic things, a realization that all that surrounds us is a dynamic structure of moving molecules.⁵⁰

In her essay “Becoming and Belonging: The Productivity of Pleasures and Desires in Octavia Butler’s *Xenogenesis* Trilogy,” Erin M. Pryor Ackerman investigates this human inclination towards clinging to molar identities and analyses how it is portrayed in Butler’s work. She says: “The molar identity that humans must begin to abandon in order to enter into a becoming is precisely the subjectivity they are least willing to surrender. And throughout her trilogy Butler demonstrates precisely how hard it is for humans to embrace this becoming.”⁵¹ The humans in the *Xenogenesis* trilogy do everything they can to stick to what they know and what feels safe and familiar to them. They build pre-war-like towns by using and destroying the environment around them, they create same pre-war hierarchies to establish their societies, they kidnap construct children in order to bring them up as “their own” and try to eradicate any element of alienness in them – a task which is simply impossible to achieve. However, the resistance of some of the humans slowly diminishes with time, they are curious about the Oankali, do not want to admit at first to others and to themselves that they would be willing to join them, that they are attracted to what the Oankali have to offer. Ackerman connects this attraction to sexuality, and points out how important an element it is in Deleuze and Guattari’s philosophy of becoming. She says:

But if becoming is such a difficult move to make for humans (a point that Butler stresses by having resister humans consistently outnumber non-resister humans throughout the

⁵⁰ Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*.

⁵¹ Erin M. Pryor Ackerman, “Becoming and Belonging: The Productivity of Pleasures and Desires in Octavia Butler’s *Xenogenesis* Trilogy,” *Extrapolation* 49, no. 1 (Spring 2008): 26.

narrative), what is it that helps or convinces people to begin this transformation? If we turn again to Deleuze and Guattari and their discussion of molecular subjectivities, we find that they argue that sexuality is “badly explained by the binary organization of the sexes...Sexuality brings into play too great a diversity of conjugated becomings” for the molar subjectivities expressed through culture.⁵²

Sexuality, and the desire that comes with it, is a force that cannot be tamed, a powerful tool in the name of becoming. As it does in Akin’s work in the second book of the trilogy, desire in *Imago* plays an important role in overcoming fear. Where Akin could intensify this desire by looking very human and allowing humans to get close to him without the initial fear of otherness, for Jodahs it is its shapeshifting abilities, its gift to synchronize with others and be fully open to their desires, that allows the boundary of fear to be broken almost immediately. When Jodahs meets the staunch resisters on its way, or meets the mountain people who have never been in contact with the Oankali before but imagine them as devils incarnate, it is able to immediately tune in to their needs and wants, and to disarm their aggression and hatred. Ackerman notes that this gift is also connected to giving physical pleasure, which I believe is not only limited to sexual experiences, but goes beyond this, to experiencing pleasure in the comfort of the ooloi that is so tuned to what humans are, who understands their needs before they even realize them themselves. Ackerman says:

Imago most closely links this molecular change with desire. [...] Up until this point in the trilogy there have only been construct males and females, as the Oankali are wary, in the

⁵² Ackerman, “Becoming and Belonging,” 29.

light of the danger they locate in the human contradiction, of creating construct oolois and thus “completing” a new species too quickly. [...] Construct ooloi, more so than any Oankali or male or female construct, have the potential and ability that is expressed explicitly through their giving of physical pleasure.⁵³

Jodahs is a key to opening the potentiality of becoming for humans, it allows them to feel more and “see” further than what they already know and deem safe. As Ackerman notes, through pleasure and desire the humans are able to open themselves up to “[b]roadening one’s horizons, transgressing those molar boundaries and lines of desire”; and in return, this “will prove rewarding, not only for society, but also for oneself.”⁵⁴ Embracing becoming means immersing oneself in a multiplicity of new potentialities and meanings, and through doing so experiencing continuous personal enrichment. Through desire the process of becoming turns into play, a pleasurable experience of exploration and curiosity about change and what it can bring.

The concept of play is an important element of Derridean deconstruction that in many ways resembles the philosophy of becoming outlined by Deleuze and Guattari. For Derrida, who largely focuses on language and how it shapes our being in the world, it is this free play of substitutions of meaning that we should focus on in order to escape the totalizing, closed structures of Western philosophies that have dominated our thinking about the world for centuries. In order to free oneself from the fixed, binary oppositions and boundaries, and expose their pointlessness, we have to – in a manner that is analogous to becoming – accept that there is no center, no root from which all meaning stems from. Instead, there is an eternal play of meanings that interact with each other,

⁵³ Erin M. Pryor Ackerman, “Becoming and Belonging: The Productivity of Pleasures and Desires in Octavia Butler’s *Xenogenesis* Trilogy,” *Extrapolation* 49, no. 1 (Spring 2008): 33-4.

⁵⁴ Ackerman, “Becoming and Belonging,” 41.

creating new meanings in the process.⁵⁵ Becoming and deconstruction expose the idea of essence, of fixed identity, of the One; and they do so with vigorous playfulness and the hopeful realization that anything is possible.

Such a vision of decentered play is key to *Imago*. At the same time, is it important to note that a multiplicity of possibilities does not mean aimless transformation without direction and focus. It is clear in the novel that Butler sees the dangers of limitless change which can lead to one feeling confused and utterly lost. Instead, one has to transform the world one is given and can relate to, while holding on to the values one finds dear and important as a horizon. In *Imago*, Jodahs' younger sibling Aor also undergoes an unexpected metamorphosis into an ooloi. Aor does not have as much luck as Jodahs in finding human mates, and the new shapeshifting ability that it receives by virtue of its transformation becomes a great danger to it. This results in being miserable and longing for connection, for a reference point in its life that it could rely on, and because of this its body becomes less and less complex, its misery and lack of drive cause its slow dissolution. When it returns to its family seeking help, it is almost too late. It is luckily found in the river by Hozh, another sibling. Jodahs recalls:

Hozh showed me what Aor had become – a kind of near mollusk, something that had no bones left. Its sensory tentacles were intact, but it no longer had eyes or other Human sensory organs. Its skin, very smooth, was protected by a coating of slime. It could not speak or breathe air or make any sound at all. It had attracted Hozh's attention by crawling up the bank and forcing part of its body out of the water. Very difficult. Painful. Its altered flesh was very sensitive to sunlight. (*Imago*, 173-4)

⁵⁵ Jacques Derrida, "Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences," in *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (London: Routledge, 2002): 351-70.

When Jodahs examines Aaor, it feels how its body suffered and how out of control the process of shapeshifting has gone:

It had no control of itself, but like a rock rolling downhill, it had inertia. Its body “wanted” to be less and less complex. If it had stayed unattended in the water for much longer, it would have begun to break down completely individual cells each with its own seed of life, its own Oankali organelle. These might live for a while as single-cell organisms or invade the bodies of larger creatures at once, but Aaor as an individual would be gone. In a way, then, Aaor’s body was trying to commit suicide. I had never heard of any carrier of the Oankali organism doing such a thing. We treasured life. (*Imago*, 182)

Aaor wants to disappear; the multiplicity and intensity of its experiences that could not be aimed at fulfilling its desire of connection with humans drove it to the brink of despair and death. It became so desperate that its body wanted to dissolve, to end the aimless changes it has been undergoing in its search for meaning and consolation. In “The Erotics of Becoming” White argues that it is community, these steady points in the maps of becoming, that provide direction, a feeling of sense, and a compass point when immersing oneself in the process of becoming. He says:

In order to avoid dissolution, however, these shapeshifters, principal agents in the process of “xenogenesis” or becoming other, require a community – the embodied memory of past biological and cultural becomings – to serve as a point of orientation or recurrence in the midst of limitless variability. The community’s self-similarity rescues the shapeshifter from randomized becomings and devolution into chaos. Meanwhile, the shapeshifter’s

providentially destabilizing improvisationality in turn saves its community from investing in some putatively essential identity or definition of itself.⁵⁶

White points out that there must be some foundation, some already available substance that we can use to start our own process of becoming. The world we live in is what we have as a point of reference; we need these existing points on the maps of becoming that give us direction and focus. Jodahs and Aor need their community to ground themselves so their becoming does not become dangerously aimless, lost in the vastness of possibilities. White concludes that with Jodahs and Aor the *Xenogenesis* trilogy moves towards an “erotics of becoming.” He points out that it “does not simply dismiss identity in favor of desiring metamorphosis but, instead, proposes the self-similar mutations of a subject-in-process as a way to reconcile the need for psychological structure with the possibility of embracing the flux of matter in motion.”⁵⁷

This brings us back to the utopian impulse in Butler’s writing. For Butler, change is not aimless – it can and should be used as a political tool used to strive for a better tomorrow. Butler shows that we have a world of limitless possibilities and that we should use it wisely. Deconstructing the world around us in order to fuel our becoming is a way to undermine the structures and boundaries that creep in and want to limit our perception of the world to enclosed binaries that invoke fear and rejection of the other. In his essay “‘The Time Had Come for Us to Be Born’: Octavia Butler’s Darwinian Apocalypse,” Adam Johns connects the idea of limitless becoming with the biological/social identity that we are given and that we should be “working with” throughout our lives. He notes how Butler uses the fundamentals that we are born with (which brings upon her the critique by some critics of being a biological determinist), and makes

⁵⁶ White “The Erotics of Becoming,” 406.

⁵⁷ White “The Erotics of Becoming,” 407.

this a starting point for a discussion of how becoming can transform who we think we are and how we are in the world. He says:

[C]hange isn't merely powerful. It is ceaseless. We cannot be fixed, even if we are limited. Because we cannot be static, we can have at least some influence on the direction of change. To change our environment is to change our body, or the bodies of our descendants. Changing the environment can, in some cases, even lead to genetic changes. Butler reveals that a fully biological-material understanding of the world is not the foreclosure of all hope, and specifically of utopian hope. Any nature which is shaped by genes is also shaped by an environment, and organisms evolve in response to their environments. A fully biological nature, in other words, is not an eternally fixed one, but an eternally malleable one. Butler's novels are the first Utopian Darwinian Apocalypse. I mean that precisely and technically: Butler's novels are concerned with unveiling the possibility of a utopia, and even a theology, for a purely material world which operates strictly by biological rules.⁵⁸

“Utopian Darwinian Apocalypse” – this term that Johns uses to describe Butler's work is an apt summary of what she attempts to achieve. Johns points out that the word “apocalypse” comes from the Greek word “apokalypsis” and means “an uncovering, unveiling, or a revelation.”⁵⁹ Contrary to the common understanding of the word, it is not the finite end. Instead, an apocalypse is the unveiling of something new to come after something else finishes. In this view of Butler's fiction, the Darwinian system of structured, predictable evolution that is entirely determined by our

⁵⁸ Adam Johns, “‘The Time Had Come for Us to Be Born’: Octavia Butler's Darwinian Apocalypse,” *Extrapolation* 51, no. 3 (2010): 410.

⁵⁹ Johns, “‘The Time Had Come for Us to Be Born,’” 397.

biology dies, only to be replaced by a utopian involution where deconstructive play will power our becoming and bring limitless change.

This utopian deconstructive becoming requires our working with what we already know and what we can grasp in order to be able to change it. However, during the process, we will undoubtedly come across the obverse side to the well-known and the familiar. We will be faced with a realization that some questions cannot ever be answered; we will be faced with a feeling of “aporia.” Aporia, a Greek word that means “non-passage” is one which Derrida uses to explain that the world in which there is no center will surprise us with moments where we are faced with a complete unknown, something that cannot be explained or proved; we will experience the impossible. In his work *Aporias* this is what he writes about his choice of the word:

I knew what was going to be at stake in this word was the “not knowing where to go.” It had to be a matter of [*il devait y aller du*] the nonpassage, or rather from the experience of the nonpassage, the experience of what happens [*se passe*] and is fascinating [*passionne*] in this nonpassage, paralyzing us in this separation in a way that is not necessarily negative: before a door, a threshold, a border, a line, or simply the edge or the approach of the other as such.⁶⁰

As Angela Warfield notes in her essay, “Reassessing the Utopian Novel: Octavia Butler, Jacques Derrida, and the Impossible Future of Utopia,” this non-passage, the experience of the impossible, is something that constitutes utopia. It allows for the utopian impulse to be alive and constantly to renew itself. Without aporia, without something “beyond the horizon,” we would not

⁶⁰ Jacques Derrida, *Aporias*, trans. Thomas Dutoit (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993), 12.

be able to dream and imagine new worlds. Warfield analyzes this connection of aporia and the utopian:

By reducing utopia to *topos*, its critics have neglected the crucial *ou* – the not *topos* – and consequently dismissed the aporetic import of the genre. Utopia both *is* and *is not* at the same time; it is the aporia *par excellence* and the aporia compels activity and a response to the other, to that which is at any moment unrepresentable or unrealizable. Deconstruction implores us – in the name of the ontological conditions by which we are bound by time and language – to engage, listen and respond to this other, this utopian no-place.⁶¹

Warfield notes that without this no-place of utopia we would “foreclose on the future.” Our future “could no longer be a promise of something to come, but rather an inactive and immobile future-present, an already predictable moment.”⁶² She also stresses, something I mentioned above, that “the aporia necessitates a response – it calls for responsibility rather than nihilistic apathy.” Even though utopianism as well as Derrida’s work have been criticized for this nihilism, the reality is that they both make “considerable room for movement, action, ethics and politics – indeterminacy, the aporia, and the no-place constitute the conditions for responsibility.”⁶³

Butler does exactly that – she challenges the reader to embrace the deconstructive ways of becoming and to welcome aporia, and at the same time reminds us to remain political about our choices and keep the militant spirit of the utopian impulse alive. According to Butler, then, it is not shapeshifting itself that we should strive for, but what it can achieve and how it can enrich us

⁶¹ Angela Warfield, “Reassessing the Utopian Novel: Octavia Butler, Jacques Derrida, and the Impossible Future of Utopia,” *Obsidian III* 6/7 no. 2/1 (Fall 2005/2006): 64.

⁶² Warfield, “Reassessing the Utopian Novel,” 64.

⁶³ Warfield, “Reassessing the Utopian Novel,” 63.

and the communities we are part of. Jodahs is an embodiment of such conscious shapeshifting. When it does not have a focus and a community to relate to, a point of reference it can strive and fight for, it is clueless and lost. Jodahs' love and care for its community makes it feel that it wants to change and grow and build the world with and for them. This connection gives it strength and offers meaning and focus to the changes it undergoes.

Through the story of Jodahs, Butler shows us that it is important to take change into our own hands, and shape it consciously. She calls for maturity, an awareness that we are not undirected free atoms, but instead that we influence and are influenced by others and by our environment. We have limitless possibilities but also responsibilities towards others. Our actions will not only bring change (for better or worse) for ourselves, but will also change the world around us.

5. CONCLUSION

*All that you touch
You Change.*

*All that you Change
Changes you.*

*The only lasting truth
Is Change.*

*God
Is Change.⁶⁴*

The above passage comes from *Parable of the Talents* – a book that Butler published almost a decade after the *Xenogenesis* trilogy. It is the second book of the unfinished Parables series (the first one, called *Parable of the Sower*, was published in 1993), and it tells a story of a young, black woman – Olamina – who starts a new religion in the depths of the dystopian world of the near future. The series was one of the last of Butler’s projects before her untimely death, and shows the writer’s struggle to encapsulate her thoughts and beliefs on what a better future for humans could be, and how they could achieve it.

As Gerry Canavan’s analysis of the Parables series indicates, initially Butler planned to focus the series around humanity’s future “in the stars,” and imagined a story of settlers who have to fight and overcome the new environment, as it has an “immune reaction” to the humans. This idea fascinated and excited her, but as Canavan notes, writing it proved to be an extremely difficult task to accomplish. He says:

⁶⁴ Octavia E. Butler, *Parable of the Talents* (London: Headline Publishing Group, 2019), 124.

The literary object of that new infatuation would go on to overwhelmingly define the next seventeen years of Butler's career, the last of her life – resulting in some of her most successful and most beloved novels at the same time that it drove her to complete despair over her inability to realize the enthusiastic potential of her initial ideas. In many ways this love affair turned out to be a very bad romance, with Butler's partner simultaneously an inspiring and life affirming creative muse and a moody, selfish, and unreliable life-mate – a real trickster.⁶⁵

Before immersing herself into this initial idea (that would turn only into a fragment of the third novel of the series – *Parable of the Trickster*), Butler wrote two novels that were prequels to the story; a context and foreground she thought was needed to fully prepare the reader for her “space odyssey.” In these two novels she built a vision of a new religion – Earthseed – that would see God as limitless change that the humans should embrace and that would bring them to their destiny among the stars.

Canavan describes in detail how much of struggle it was for Butler to develop her ideas, how many different versions of the story she wrote, how different the unfinished versions were from one another. He claims that Butler's pessimist view of humankind allowed her to invest herself in a “kind of constrained hope, which is to say a hope that is made possible by constraints, our boundless human creativity channeled by necessity into productive and useful ends because otherwise we'll all die.”⁶⁶ He claims that “she was never able, in her too short life, to think through the hopeful part. Not ‘if this goes on,’ but ‘if only’: if only she'd been able to complete that vision

⁶⁵ Gerry Canavan, “God of Clay (1989–2006),” in *Octavia E. Butler* (Chicago: Illinois University Press, 2016), e-book.

⁶⁶ Canavan, “God of Clay (1989–2006).”

of better humanity, not perfect, not even perfectible, just better.”⁶⁷ According to Canavan, Butler’s utopian imagination fell short due to the fact that she never managed to bring her characters out of the dystopian worlds she created. Both in *Xenogenesis* and in the Parables series, he sees a utopian potential that was not developed and fully realized.

But would not completing a vision of better humanity instantly oppose the idea of utopian hoping? Would not pinning it down to a plausible version of a better society be the death of utopia? I agree that the task Butler put in front of herself was truly daunting. How does one encapsulate utopian ideas when change is at the core of your thinking about the utopian impulse? How can you convert this energy into something graspable if the whole point is to be open to constant change and limitless possibilities? At the same time, is it not exactly the point to try new ideas, and through that to keep the utopian impulse alive? Is it not the utopian dreaming to create worlds that make us think of other possibilities and inspire us? Is it not the core of modern, critical utopian writing: to focus on the journey instead of the destination? Is not the utopian impulse a trickster, that escapes through our hands the moment we think we can grasp it? It seems that Butler knew that feeling very well, and she never stopped chasing the dream.

Butler did not fail to bring across the utopian impulse in her work. Her writing pointed towards the difficulty of preserving the utopian dreaming, and through her self-doubt and through the creation of imperfect worlds she fueled the utopian hoping further. In my opinion, the *Xenogenesis* trilogy is testimony to Butler’s development of thinking about utopia. She starts with the exploration of the dystopian ideas in *Dawn*, which put a focus on what, in her opinion, stops us from heading towards a better future. She portrays a dystopian world to warn us against greed and violence, which, as it does in the novel, can bring us to our death. She writes about human

⁶⁷ Canavan, “God of Clay (1989–2006).”

limitations, including biological ones, and contrasts them with the very different ways of the Oankali, allowing readers to step out of the familiar and the known immerse ourselves in a new perspective and, by doing so, see more clearly our own limited horizon. She portrays our “salvation” as a type of colonial oppression in order to draw our attention to the fact that the required change might be difficult to achieve and that the path there might be rocky. Then, in *Adulthood Rites*, she explores the territories where, according to her, our change should be directed in order to fight these limitations. Through the character of Akin she calls for multiplicity, a breaking of the Western discourses of binaries and boundaries that keep us from embracing the Other. She presents different ways of thinking and feeling to the mainstream, binary reality in order to awake in the readers the feeling that change is indeed possible. She makes Akin a “cyborg,” a symbol of the new to come. Through this she shows her political engagement and the direction she believes our societies should aim towards. She encourages active, “militant” hoping for a different, more inclusive, more diverse tomorrow. Lastly, with *Imago* and the character of Jodahs, she fully embarks on the “religion of change” that evokes utopian hoping through embracing limitless possibilities. She calls for the enacting of a prayer of change – a conscious deconstructive becoming. She draws our attention to the fact that the binaries and boundaries which we use to describe the world, and which are regarded as “divine” rules, are in fact only temporary constructions imposing their uniqueness; it is our responsibility to deconstruct them to allow for better future. She unmask the “fixed” structures of the world as being only discourses that we have power to influence and ultimately change into something utterly different.

What Butler starts in *Xenogenesis* she continues in the Parables series, reiterating her belief in limitless (but consciously directed) change and its power to renew and bring hope. Her vision of the new religion, based on change as the only “divine” thing that we can be sure of, is clear

proof of her utopian philosophy. With *Earthseed*, she switches from focusing on the final effect (the embracing of change, even if it is imposed from outside as is the case of *Xenogenesis*) and instead focuses on the importance of the journey and the process of learning that allows us to embrace difference. At the end of *Parable of the Talents*, she offers the reader the following Earthseed prayer:

Earthseed is adulthood.
It's trying our wings,
Leaving our mother,
Becoming men and women,

We've been children,
Fighting for the full breasts,
The protective embrace,
The soft lap.
Children do this.
But Earthseed is adulthood.

Adulthood is both sweet and sad.
It terrifies.
It empowers.
We are men and women now.
We are Earthseed.

And the Destiny of Earthseed
Is to take root among the stars.

(Parable of the Talents, 377)

Through her work, Butler tells us that accepting change is a sign of adulthood that we should strive for as a species. This maturity requires conscious, “militant” decisions to choose diversity, to embrace difference, to break the limiting boundaries of Western culture that keep us in fear of the Other. This will allow us to keep the flame of utopian dreaming alive. With her writing, she incessantly ignites the utopian hope and provides fuel for us to continue her utopian quest.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Ackerman Erin M. Pryor. "Becoming and Belonging: The Productivity of Pleasures and Desires in Octavia Butler's *Xenogenesis* Trilogy." *Extrapolation* 49.1 (Spring 2008): 24-43.
- Allison, Dorothy. "The Future of Female: Octavia Butler's Mother Lode." *Reading Black Reading Feminist: A Critical Anthology*. Ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. New York: Penguin Books, 1990. 471-78.
- Belk, Nolan. "The Certainty of the Flesh: Octavia Butler's Use of the Erotic in the *Xenogenesis* Trilogy." *Utopian Studies* 19.3 (2008): 369–89. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20719917>.
- Baccolini, Rafaella and Tom Moylan. "Introduction. Dystopia and Histories." *Dark Horizons: Science Fiction and the Dystopian Imagination*. Eds. Rafaella Baccolini and Tom Moylan. New York: Routledge 2003. 1-12.
- Butler, Octavia E. *Adulthood Rites*. London: Headline Publishing Group, 2022.
- . *Dawn*. London: Headline Publishing Group, 2022.
- . *Imago*. London: Headline Publishing Group, 2022.
- . *Parable of the Sower*. London: Headline Publishing Group, 2019.
- . *Parable of the Talents*. London: Headline Publishing Group, 2019.
- Canavan, Gerry. "Training Floor (1987-1989)." *Octavia E. Butler*. Chicago: Illinois University Press, 2016. e-book.
- . "God of Clay (1989–2006)." *Octavia E. Butler*. Chicago: Illinois University Press, 2016. e-book.
- Claeys, Gregory and Lyman Tower Sargent. "Introduction." *The Utopia Reader*. New York: New York University Press, 1999. 1-6.
- Deleuze, Gilles and Felix Guattari. *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005.
- Derrida, Jacques. *Aporias*. Trans. Thomas Dutoit. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993.

- . “Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences.” *Writing and Difference*. Trans. Alan Bass. London: Routledge, 2002. 351-70.
- Haraway, Donna J. “A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century.” *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*. New York: Routledge, 1991. 149-81.
- Jacobs, Naomi. “Posthuman Bodies and Agency in Octavia Butler’s *Xenogenesis*.” *Dark Horizons: Science Fiction and the Dystopian Imagination*. Eds. Raffaella Baccolini and Tom Moylan. New York: Routledge 2003. 91-111.
- Jesser, Nancy. “Blood, Genes and Gender in Octavia Butler’s *Kindred and Dawn*.” *Extrapolation* 42.1 (Spring 2022): 38-61.
- Johns, Adam. “‘The Time Had Come for Us to Be Born’: Octavia Butler’s Darwinian Apocalypse.” *Extrapolation* 51.3 (2010): 395- 413.
- Levitas, Ruth. “Introduction.” *The Concept of Utopia*. Bern: Peter Lang, 2010. 1-9.
- McCaffery, Larry and Jim McMenamain. “An Interview with Octavia E. Butler.” *Across the Wounded Galaxies: Interviews with Contemporary American Science Fiction Writers*. Ed. Larry McCaffery. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1990. 54-70.
- Miller, Jim. “Post-Apocalyptic Hoping: Octavia Butler’s Dystopian/Utopian Vision.” *Science Fiction Studies* 25.2 (1998): 336–60. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4240705>.
- Moylan, Tom. “Introduction: The Critical Utopia.” *Demand the Impossible: Science Fiction and the Utopian Imagination*. Ed. Raffaella Baccolini. Bern: Peter Lang, 2014.
- . *Scraps of the Untainted Sky: Science Fiction, Utopia, Dystopia*. Oxford: West View Press.
- . “Transgressive, Totalizing, Transformative: Utopia’s Utopian Surplus.” *Utopian Studies* 29.3 (2018): 309-24.
- Nanda, Aparajita. “Power, Politics, and Domestic Desire in Octavia Butler’s ‘Lilith’s Brood.’” *Callaloo* 36.3 (Summer 2013): 773-88. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/24264846>.

- Peppers, Cathy. "Dialogic Origins and Alien Identities in Butler's *Xenogenesis*." *Science Fiction Studies* 22.1 (March 1995): 47-62.
- Potts, Stephen W. and Octavia E. Butler, "'We Keep Playing the Same Record': A Conversation with Octavia E. Butler." *Science Fiction Studies* 23.3 (1996): 331-38.
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/4240538>.
- Sargent, Lyman Tower. "Three Faces of Utopianism Revisited." *Utopian Studies* 5.1 (1994): 1-37, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20719246>.
- Søren Baggesen. "Utopian and Dystopian Pessimism: Le Guin's 'The Word for World Is Forest' and Tiptree's 'We Who Stole the Dream' (Les Pessimismes Utopique et 'Dystopique' Dans 'Le Nom Du Monde Est Forêt' de Le Guin et Dans 'We Who Stole the Dreams' de Tiptree)." *Science Fiction Studies* 14.1 (1987): 33-43.
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/4239792>.
- Suvin, Darko. "Poetics." *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction: On the Poetics and History of a Literary Genre*. London: Yale University Press, 1979. 3-84.
- Walker, Alison Tara. "Destabilizing Order, Challenging History: Octavia Butler, Deleuze and Guattari, and Affective Beginnings." *Extrapolation* 46.1 (Spring 2005): 103-119.
- Warfield, Angela. "Reassessing the Utopian Novel: Octavia Butler, Jacques Derrida, and the Impossible Future of Utopia." *Obsidian III* 6/7 (2005): 61-71.
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/44511662>.
- White, Eric. "The Erotics of Becoming: *Xenogenesis* and 'The Thing.'" *Science Fiction Studies* 20. 3 (1993): 394-408. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4240279>.
- Zaki, Hoda M. "Utopia, Dystopia, and Ideology in the Science Fiction of Octavia Butler." *Science Fiction Studies* 17.2 (July 1990): 239-251. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4239994>.