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“More Alike Than We Like to Admit”  
Revising Otherness and Reenvisioning Humanity  
in Octavia Butler’s *Dawn*

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**Abstract**

This paper aims to map the complex web of intertextuality, reappropriation and redrafting of traditional notions of humanness in Octavia Butler's *Dawn*. By exploring how the novel uncovers the binary oppositions entrenched in these definitions, the study will assess their potential subversion and/or resignification in the text. Its emphasis on hybridity, symbolised in the posthuman figure of the cyborg, will thus be evaluated in light of its implications towards a new conception of humanity, and alternative ways to negotiate *otherness*. The consequent findings will be simultaneously weighed in connection to Afrofuturism so as to gauge the novel's affiliation to the genre as much as the innovations it avails. For this purpose, the analysis will draw on a variety of sources, ranging from sociological studies and philosophy to science fiction and feminist theory.

**Keywords:** Octavia Butler, *Dawn*, Afrofuturism, otherness, cyborg, intertextuality.

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## 1. Introduction

Since the advent of Darwin's theories, which rendered religious myths of origin forever obsolete, the question of hybridity has become a fertile ground for speculative fiction. Yet while early and modern tales of hybridity such as *Frankenstein* or *The Island of Dr. Moreau* reflect both "anxiety over racial and species degeneration and an attraction to racial and species boundary crossing" (Squier 366), the arrival of postmodernism saw in this "xenogenic desire" a positive aptitude for the reassertion and revaluation of difference—a shift that Octavia Butler's work significantly embodies.

Her novel *Dawn* (1987), the first volume in the *Xenogenesis Trilogy*,<sup>1</sup> also proves a meaningful revision of the early stages of debates on hybridity which, as Squier notes, adjusted to suit Victorian normative discourses and became "a powerful site of cultural construction," where the void left by the dismantling of Creationism tried to reconfigure itself into "an evolutionary model that arranged not only species, but races of humankind, hierarchically" (365). Butler's deliberate scaffolding of her novel around the "Human (Hierarchical) Contradiction," in close relation to a revision of *Genesis*, thus allows for the exploration of these cultural constructs and the resistance to let go of them despite their belying. Her choice of an African American woman as the protagonist for her science fiction narrative, on the other hand, works to reveal the power dynamics undergirding biological justifications of race and gender. The conjoining of both principles serves both to re-examine stereotypes of black womanhood and resignify them by subverting early literary representations of hybridity. Instead of staging a production of monstrous offspring "from which women are pointedly, uncomprehendingly, distanced" (368), *Dawn* posits her female lead as an essential factor in this process, while the *monstrosity* of her children is contested and recast as part of human evolution.

The novel's subsequent study of the binaries behind these oppositions became in the 1990s a treasured contribution to the Afrofuturist movement, since its critical perspective "does not abandon the historical terms of black existence, especially slavery, but also does not give in to that history as a fatalistic limit on what comes next" (Mann 66). At the same time, it reappropriates historically constructed notions of femininity and traditional science-fiction devices for the depiction of otherness—namely that of the *alien*—to consider alternative, non-hierarchical modes of being where "the difference between aliens and others can be accommodated rather than repressed" (Wolmark 2). The

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<sup>1</sup> Rebaptised as *Lilith's Brood* from the turn of the century.

author's reenvisioning of race and gender in the vortex of hybridity thence results in the posthumanist symbol of the cyborg, leading Butler's story to "presage an ironic salvation history" (Haraway 227) whose depths this paper aims to fathom.

## 2. To Afrofuturism and Beyond: *Dawn* and the Binaries of Human Rejection

The term "Afrofuturism" is a relatively recent, if retrospective one. Coined by Mark Dery in his 1993 essay "Black to the Future," its definition already signals a postmodern contradictory standpoint, one that looks back to the past while envisioning future alternatives—and to a great extent drawing its materials from the very past it seeks to redefine:

Speculative fiction that treats African-American themes and addresses African-American concerns in the context of twentieth-century technoculture—and, more generally, African-American signification that appropriates images of technology and a prosthetically enhanced future—might, for want of a better term, be called 'Afrofuturism.' (180)

This relation between the past and the future is drawn through Dery's argument that science fiction is a genre "uniquely suited" for the expression of African-American concerns, partly because its literary dismissal as a "pulp" genre resembles the subaltern position of black people in American history, but most importantly because of the historical implications it acquires when regarding slavery as an alien abduction (179–180). But although it acknowledges the detrimental consequences that this legacy has imprinted in the US, Afrofuturism differs from Afro-pessimism<sup>2</sup> in considering that the past does not inevitably determine the future (Mann 65). Instead, it acknowledges that history as an essential part of black identity and its potential to craft future alternatives, whereby Afrofuturist narratives "create reflections on the African diasporic past" and become "past-future visions" (Nelson 35). As opposed to the imperative of "black authenticity" that, according to Nelson, has encouraged a "tradition of social realism" attempting to represent black diasporic experience uniformly (37), the forward-oriented nature of Afrofuturism enables multiple conceptions of the future, weaving the scattered fragments

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<sup>2</sup> Afro-pessimism, a philosophical and literary current associated to "black nihilism," holds the history of black suffering in America to be an unbridgeable gap against ever-changing forms of racial prejudice, and hence "conceives of blackness as an ontological and political impossibility" (Mann 64-65).

of that past into more promising alternatives and allowing for the diversity of black experience to be expressed, without comprising it under a single frame of representation. Furthermore, the speculative basis of science fiction endows these narratives with the power to thoroughly reenvision the past and invest the future with cultural critiques (Womack 9). This outlook, perhaps the most radical within Afrofuturism, opposes the main claim of Afro-pessimism and holds that “Black identity does not have to be a negotiation with awful stereotypes, a dystopian view of race ... an abysmal sense of powerlessness, or a reckoning of hardened realities” (11). In fact, a recent study has proved Afrofuturism to be particularly suited to the current digital era, since the advent of social networks such as Twitter is contributing to widen its scope at both a scholarly and a geographical level, promoting the study of African American cultural expressions in the light of Afrofuturist values (see Gipson).

On the other hand, as Greg Tate points out in his interview with Dery, Afrofuturism does not mark a clean break with African-American literary tradition —on the contrary, he avers that the “imaginative leap that we associate with science fiction, in terms of putting the human into an alien and alienating environment, is a gesture that repeatedly appears in the work of black writers” (209–210). This analogy with the “tradition of social realism” it had been purported to counter, however, may point towards a more *realistic* conceptualisation of Afrofuturism, and so render its social critique the more acute —even if such past-future visions be less optimistic. In this respect, while Dery’s panoramic reading that “African Americans, in a very real sense, are the descendants of alien abductees” (180) rings true to slavery and its pervasive legacy, it is problematised by the fact that African American characters in SF have not traditionally featured as heroes. Instead, existing social attitudes against them have most often been encoded in the figure of the Alien itself.

The peripheral position of African Americans in the genre bears a strong resemblance to that of women; an association that seems to unsettle its fictional basis and suggest that science fiction may have served to sublime —and perpetuate— widespread notions of *otherness* in Western society. In her scathing critique of male-dominated science fiction, Ursula K. Le Guin unveils this three-fold connection by relating human discrimination on the grounds of sex, income, culture and race with the production of “the sexual Alien, and the social Alien, and the cultural Alien, and finally the racial Alien” (97).

It is precisely this alienating intersection<sup>3</sup> of race and gender, and its relation to traditional constructions of otherness, that Butler's novel —through a complex process of reappropriation, refutation and resignification— ultimately explores.

*Dawn* adheres to the Afrofuturist genre inasmuch as it backs its future alternative on a re-examination of the past that shaped discrimination of black people *and* women, while simultaneously installing it in the continuum of socio-historical conditions in 1980s America. Written in the Reagan Era, an epoch characterised by its “twinned wars against poor blacks at home and Soviets abroad” (Mann 62), *Dawn* exposes the irrationality of human behaviour by presenting a future where “Humanity in its attempt to destroy itself had made the world unlivable” (O. Butler 13). Two hundred and fifty years after this nuclear apocalypse the novel opens to find Lilith, an African American woman survivor, waking up aboard the spaceship of the alien Oankali, who have rescued the remnants of humankind and kept them in “suspended animation” while they worked to restore living conditions back on earth. The Oankali, a humanoid species who define themselves as “gene-traders,” ground humanity's “mass suicide” in a “mismatched pair of genetic characteristics” (36) that introduces the first and utmost duality encompassing Butler's work. The so-called “Human Contradiction” comprises human intelligence and its “older and more entrenched characteristic” of hierarchy, but reveals how the former has been used to serve, justify and perpetuate the latter instead of counteracting it (37).

However, by reckoning this contradiction to be “a tangled combination of factors that only begins with genes” (38), *Dawn* extrapolates its binary relationship to explore the persistence of dualisms in Western culture, and particularly the dichotomy severing “Self” from “Other.” According to Haraway, these dualisms “have all been systemic to the logics and practices of domination of women, people of colour, ... all constituted as others, whose task is to mirror the self” (177), and are closely related to Western myths of origin. Butler's novel, in turn, looks back beyond the times of slavery and reappropriates the Judeo-Christian myth of *Genesis* to reimagine it as a *Xenogenesis*. At the same time, its use of the alien as a traditional SF metaphor that “enables difference to be constructed in terms of binary oppositions which reinforce relations of dominance and subordination” (Wolmark 2) is complicated by the Oankali contradictory status, being

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<sup>3</sup> The term “intersectionality” was coined in 1989 by Kimberlé Crenshaw, who used the metaphor of a traffic intersection to illustrate how discrimination on both racial/gender grounds can simultaneously affect black women (Crenshaw 139). Its definition has therefrom been broadened to include a wide range of factors (class, age, sexuality, etc.) potentially producing the same phenomenon (see Collins).

both the saviours of the human species and its ultimate colonisers. In this way, the aliens' demand to interbreed with humans and give way to an allegedly improved hybrid species works to rewrite religious metanarratives in the context of a relationship that "contains implicit echoes of the slave narrative" (30).

The same twofold implications apply to their choice of Lilith as "parent" and leader of the humans meant to repopulate Earth with these offspring. Despite her refusal to partake in this hybridisation, the Oankali's determination to impregnate Lilith—fulfilled at the end of the novel—forcefully "recalls practises during slavery in which the colonisers had access to and control over black women's bodies and reproduction" (Melzer 57). On the other hand, its connection to *(Xeno)Genesis* renders Lilith "significantly 'Eve-like'" (Osherow 76) and highlights how "the colonized woman's significance for both the colonizer and the colonized man is pivotal in deciding the colonized people's fate" (Melzer 60). This retrospective revaluation of black maternity and sexuality allows *Dawn* to counter some pernicious stereotypes dating back to the plantation era,<sup>4</sup> while recasting black womanhood at a preeminent position within African American and Afrofuturist concerns.

Yet while the "deracinated captive fragments of mankind packed into the body of the aliens' ship inescapably evoke the terrible Middle Passage of the Atlantic slave trade" (Haraway 228), positing humanity—black and white—as the object of a literal and metaphorical alien abduction, the Afrofuturistic overtones of this analogy are overshadowed by the reiteration of racial and gender prejudice among the human abductees. As Melzer notes, while science fiction usually transfers notions of racism and xenophobia onto representations of aliens, Lilith's in-between stand in the novel "places racism within relationships of humans with the other—both human and un-human" (81). In a very real sense, Butler's choice to retain her society ideologically unchanged two hundred and fifty years afterwards—instead of opening *medias res* in a reality where this evolution has already taken place—offers a rather "dystopian view of race" and forces Lilith to negotiate with the "awful stereotypes" that Afrofuturists had sought to overcome. Mann, however, regards the negative outlook of *Dawn* as its central strength, since it enables the novel to conjoin "the centrality of historicity and futurity" that "lay at the heart of debates between Afro-pessimism and Afrofuturism" (65). Butler's "pessimistic

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<sup>4</sup> Namely those of the *mammy*, a black mother contented with her role as child care-giver; the *sapphire* or "matriarch," conceived of as aggressive and dominating; the *jezebel* or "sexual siren," a promiscuous or sexually available black woman, and the more recent stereotype of the *welfare queen*, an uneducated, black single mother who makes herself pregnant to take advantage of public assistance (Rosenthal and Lobel 4).

futurism,” as he terms it, “emerges from an *ambivalent standpoint*, one that seeks the future without the blind assurance of hope” (63, my emphasis). Nevertheless, this “ambivalent standpoint” seems particularly suited not only to the postmodern notion of Afrofuturism (as noted at the opening of this section), but also to the intersection of race and gender that undergirds Butler’s work.

The embrace of that ambivalence and fragmentation, in line with the rejection of absolutes and dichotomies, becomes a compelling force that articulates the narrative’s most mordant critiques. At a textual level, the re-examination of the biblical myth purporting to define the unitary origin of humankind “produces a ‘hybrid’ text that ultimately undermines colonial discourse” (Melzer 53), while the hybridisation of humans with their alien captors is presented as the “way out” of the Human Contradiction that drove it to quasi-annihilation. Framing interspecies relationships within “the violent history of slavery and incarceration that saturates black experience in the US” (Mann 68) while signalling the acceptance of this union as the answer, *Dawn* “exposes that history but simultaneously uses it as a way forward” (68), hence offering the Afrofuturist hope for liberation whilst carefully pondering the price to be paid for it. Its consequences, notwithstanding, extensively evoke Haraway’s metaphor of the cyborg, a being who “does not seek unitary identity and so generate antagonistic dualisms without end” (180). At the same time, as Lennard remarks, Butler’s nuclear apocalypse deliberately thwarts the African American “genealogical quest” and shifts the focus to humanity’s common flaw (92), encouraging the reconsideration of human nature as a whole in spite of its fragmentary condition and ambivalent standpoints.

In turn, the text’s hybridisation of myth and history renders it a “cyborg” one itself. The significance of “cyborg writing” for coloured women in the US, Haraway avers, lies in its expression of “the power to survive, not on the basis of original innocence, but on the basis of seizing the tools to mark the world that marked them as other” by means of retold stories that “reverse and displace the hierarchical dualisms of naturalized identities” (175). The exploration of these dualisms in *Dawn* appears nonetheless inseparable from its multi-layered structure of meaning. In this way, the novel conscribes gender and race to the myth it simultaneously revises, while its historical implications are both expressed and problematised through the Oankali’s role in the narrative. Yet it is this constant negotiation between past and future, reality and fiction that both affords it a reenvisioning akin to Afrofuturism and widens its scope to suggest that “Human beings are more alike than different ... more alike than we like to admit” (O. Butler 133).

### 3. The Eternal Feminine: Lilith Revisited

The choice of Lilith as the protagonist and narrative standpoint in *Dawn*, far from incidental, plays an essential role in contriving the story as a revision of the biblical *Genesis*. To fully comprehend the intertextual dialogue established through her figure, however, it is necessary to note that the Lilith of Hebrew and Sumerian mythology supports—rather than destabilises—the Cartesian association of the body with “deception, sin, the premonitional metaphors of hell and the eternal feminine” (J. Butler 465).

The main defining features of her myth can be appreciated in Sumerian culture as far back as the 3<sup>rd</sup> millennium B.C.E., where she was bestowed the epithet of “the beautiful maiden” but also deemed “a harlot and a vampire” (Patai 221–222). Notwithstanding, the rabbinical reformulation of Lilith that became endurable in apocryphal Hebrew mythology was not postulated until c. 11<sup>th</sup> century, when she appeared as Adam’s first wife before Eve (223–233). Unlike the latter, Lilith had not been born from Adam’s rib, but created from the same dust as him, and grounding their equality on this fact she refused to lie beneath him during intercourse. On realising his determination to prevail, she uttered the ineffable name of God and escaped to the Red Sea, where she “engaged in unbridled promiscuity” with lewd demons and “bore a demonic brood of more that [*sic.*] one hundred a day” (223). When she refused to return, God condemned her to witness a hundred of her offspring die every day (224), and for a long period of Hebrew folklore Lilith’s activities were confined to “seducing men and killing children” (233).

The Kabbalistic revision of Lilith also introduces some relevant suggestions for the purposes of this study, whereby the ends of the traditional female continuum paradoxically merge. Namely, it asserts that the destruction of the Temple forced God’s wife, the Shekinah or Matronit, to follow her children (*viz.* the people of Israel) into exile; and so God took Lilith as His concubine, until the coming of the Messiah put them asunder (250). Comparing the Lilith of Sumerian and Jewish religion, Patai significantly draws attention to how her mythical development “ran very similar courses” (251)—thriving from a mere she-demon to a goddess and God’s consort respectively—while “the basic qualities of her personality never changed” (252), thereby rendering her “the original femme fatale” (Osherow 71). At one level, the narrative dynamics that mark her subaltern position in both myths could be easily associated with that of mainstream science fiction regarding African Americans and women, as discussed above. But perhaps more important remains her characterisation as both a demon and a goddess, which circumscribes the categorical dehumanisation of “all constituted as others” and is closely related to the construction of aliens in SF. As Le Guin frames it:

If you deny any affinity with another person or kind of person, if you declare it to be wholly different from yourself—as men have done to women, and class has done to class, and nation has done to nation—you may *hate it*, or *deify it*; but in either case you have denied its spiritual equality, and its human reality. You have made it into *a thing*, to which the only possible relationship is a power relationship. (99, my emphasis)

This dual mode of female objectification, which has become the subject matter of Ambivalent Sexism Theory,<sup>5</sup> has also severed women's personality and body for the sake of the "eternal feminine," generating familiar binaries such as Mary/Eve, mother/mistress—virtue/sin. The character of Lilith in *Dawn*—taken from the margins of an ancient myth and the periphery of contemporary reality, to be placed at the centre of a futuristic narrative—thus obfuscates these clear-cut distinctions.

However, the novel itself refuses the categorical rejection of categories; in fact, its reliance on many of them seems to suggest a process of reappropriation rather than outright reversal. In this regard, Lilith's apparent compliance to fulfil the mission that the Oankali have destined for her unfolds several conflicting consequences. On the one hand, it establishes the main connection between self and other—human and alien—that enables Lilith's most significant gender transgressions, while their association with racialised sexual prejudice further allows to explore "the latent potential in those assumptions" instead of plainly opposing them (Mann 67). On the other hand, it also perpetuates these assumptions in the eyes of other humans, who question her womanhood and even deny her humanity; as Osherow marks, "the price of Lilith's empowerment is her estrangement" (76). This alienating process begins as soon as the Oankali genetically modify Lilith, aiming to increase her chances of survival among the potentially violent humans she must train to inhabit the *alien-ex-machina* restored Earth. Even before she "Awakens" any of them from their state of suspended animation, Lilith herself is aware of the "dangerous possibilities" of these "transgressed boundaries, potent fusions" that Haraway (151) invests in her cyborg myth: "The Oankali had given her information, increased physical strength, enhanced memory, and an ability to control the walls and the suspended animation plants. These were her tools. And every one of them would make her seem less human" (O. Butler 120). Discussing the biological justification of gendered behaviour in Western thought, Lorber notes the

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<sup>5</sup> Ambivalent Sexism Theory correlates the ideological implications of *benevolent* sexism (comprising subjectively positive attitudes for the sexist, such as protective paternalism or idealisation) and its negative equivalents in hostile sexism, both of which foster adherence to traditional gender roles (Glick and Fiske 119).

importance of physical competence as a “marker of masculinity” (571), and the consequent “gender trouble” this poses for physically competent women (572–573). Due to Lilith’s African American intersectionality, however, her “increased physical strength” actually reinforces her identification with the sapphire archetype whereby “Black women [are] perceived as more masculine, because of the strong association that people hold between ‘Blackness’ and ‘maleness’” (Rosenthal and Lobel 5). Such association becomes apparent once she is forced to employ this strength in self-defence. Her human partner, a Chinese-Canadian man called Joseph, informs her after she knocks a female opponent down: “She’s telling people you’re a man. She says only a man can fight that way. ... That new man, Van Weerden said he didn’t think you were human at all” (O. Butler 147). Similarly, Lilith’s proximity to the aliens—whom her fellow humans squarely consider their slavers—draws them to delineate her as “promiscuous, hypersexual, sexually available, ... all of which have a long history connected to the sexualized exploitation of Black women during slavery and are consistent with the jezebel archetype” (Rosenthal and Lobel 5). These alienating categorisations of Lilith increase rather than diminish as the plot develops, to the point that even one of the humans who had remained fairly sympathetic to her throughout finally professes: “We know you’re their whore! Everybody here knows!” (O. Butler 240).

But the fact that Lilith is repeatedly pigeonholed in stereotypes analogous to her Hebrew counterpart does not necessarily support their limiting views. On the contrary, acknowledging them may be the first step towards their resignification, a process whose very intertextuality may prove useful to fathom. Obourn’s account of Butler’s mythical method appears closely related to Mann’s theories on the reappropriation of black motherhood assumptions, and unveils some significant if troubling implications of Lilith’s revision in *Dawn*:

Butler’s use of the Lilith myth recognizes our necessary conscription to the narratives that precede us. ... A sense of oneself as freer in relation to one’s social identity in the future relies on an understanding of one’s social identity through the texts that have constructed it, and those texts, particularly those with minoritized identities, are usually authored by another. Butler’s choice of Lilith as her model for the wounded history of nonpure, non-white, nonpassive, nonideal womanhood is a reappropriation of another’s text and a reliance on that text—oppressive aspects included—to make space for the future. (135)

If reappropriation is the first step towards reformulation, then Lilith's own acceptance of the "oppressive aspects" that have constructed her identity in the eyes of Self-declared others may be the first step towards the avoidance of past mistakes. It is arguably, too, the main force that enables the transformation of *Genesis* into *Xenogenesis* in the novel—through Lilith's admittance and overcoming of her own *xenophobia*.

Lilith's instinctive reaction towards the first (male) Oankali she meets, whose body is replete with "sluggish" sensory tentacles, is understandably enough one of fear and disgust despite his bipedal constitution. The language employed to describe Lilith's feelings appears particularly meaningful to consolidate a connection between the italicised terms above: "She tried to imagine herself surrounded by beings like him and was almost overwhelmed by panic. As though she had suddenly developed a phobia—something she had never before experienced. But what she felt was like what she had heard others describe. A true xenophobia" (O. Butler 21–22). Although never straightforwardly stated, the narrative voice hints from the first that Lilith has not only *heard of*, but actually *suffered* this xenophobia herself, having thus "gotten over being afraid of 'ugly' faces long before her capture" (11). Even her Nigerian parents-in-law, we learn, "had not been pleased at his [their son's] marriage to Lilith," seemingly for not being "black enough," since they "had hoped he would marry a Yoruban girl" instead (76). These inferred precedents, which offer a "peculiarly determined critique of much contemporary thinking, Black, White, or just self-limitingly black-and-white" (Lennard 92) and counter "black authenticity" ideals, also foreground Lilith's unusual attitude towards her fears. Indeed, it is her deliberate reaction against this newly developed "phobia," rather than an unconscious enactment of it, that presents her *social otherness* as "an enabling set of understandings and strengths, rooted in an inherited history of wounds" (Obourn 136). Unlike most of the humans she is afterwards coerced to lead and "parent," Lilith actually forces herself to examine the nature of what seems, to her, quite an irrational stance: "He could have been so much uglier than he was, so much less... human. Why couldn't she just accept him? All he seemed to be asking was that she not panic at the sight of others like him. Why couldn't she do that?" (O. Butler 21).

At the same time, because she neither hates nor deifies the Oankali, she is able to define herself as different from them as well as to "accept them as what they are" (133). Lilith's embrace of both selfhood and otherness, her recognition of difference as well as similarity, seems to support Wolmark's contention that "it is her marginality, articulated in terms of both gender and race, that has become her strength. It is Lilith's assertion of

her difference, and, ironically enough, of her marginality, that allows her to retain a sense of selfhood by refusing to become fully assimilated within the Oankali” (32). Yet, while Lilith does refuse to interbreed with them, and urges the other humans to “accept their captivity, accept the Oankali, accept anything until they were sent back to Earth. Then to run like hell at the first opportunity” (O. Butler 117), her final insemination on their part forces the ultimate reconsideration of history and myth that completes Butler’s revision of the original Lilith.

In this complex web of intertextuality, where the echoes of slavery become intertwined with the Christian myth of origin, Lilith’s “demonic brood” acquires radically different connotations from the “plagues of mankind” (Patai 232) she bore in the original legend. Instead, these hybrid offspring become “powerful and promising alterations of a bad past” (Jesser 53). It is through this Afrofuturist promise that the stereotypes featured in the pages are as much resignified as Lilith’s children, and whereby the novel “reframes notions of black maternity, figuring black female reproduction as essential, rather than ancillary or antithetical, to the project of human development” (Mann 62). The process of conceptual hybridisation that began with Lilith’s genetic modifications is thus reified in the literal hybridity of her children, who render her “the progenitor of human evolution, simultaneously perpetuating and destroying the species” (63). In this light, as Lennard notes, the title shift from *Xenogenesis Series* to *Lilith’s Brood* “retrospectively stresses *-genesis* in the *biblical* sense” (85); and it could be further argued that, by emphasising the hybridity of the characters in relation to the text —instead of the other way around— its Afrofuturist overtones become the clearer. As Jesser avers, the narrative’s insistence on genes and reproduction allows it to “use so-called blood connections to assert a metaphoric and physical connection between the past and future” (39), while its textual hybridisation is reminiscent of the ultimate past which, through its binaries of rejection, “had made the world unlivable” —as much in Western reality as in the novel that phrases it.

Through the two-dimensional counterparts of text and narration, *Dawn* thus exposes —at a metaphorical and a literal level respectively— that “To be One is to be autonomous, to be powerful, to be God; but to be One is to be an illusion, and so to be involved in a dialectic of apocalypse with the other” (Haraway 177). Similarly, their concurrent hybridity and advocacy of it at both levels recalls the merging contradictions and transgressive fusions of the cyborg. The intertextual, intersectional, interspecies nature of Butler’s story appears to accord with Thweatt-Bates thesis that “Cyborg hybridity

challenges not just notions of ontological boundaries and natural givens, but also the religious structures, narratives, symbols, and beliefs which frequently and authoritatively articulate and undergird those notions” (32). By investing Lilith with the traits of a “prosthethically enhanced” cyborg, far from further objectifying her, this new “dawn” becomes prosthethically *humanised*, witnessing “the demonic Lilith replaced by one who knows and recognizes pain” (Osherow 80). The acceptance of this pain “to make space for the future” necessarily establishes a past-future vision, suggesting a befitting alternative for humanity to realise its Contradiction, and where Lilith “the demon-goddess” can be redrafted into a flesh-and-blood woman. Whether this future could be realised, the novel’s own failure to do so cannot tell —yet its allegiance to Haraway’s famous maxim “I would rather be a cyborg than a goddess” (181) seems to hold true of Lilith in every respect.

#### **4. When the Other Becomes the Norm: Problematizing the Abject Alien**

The Oankali, in a similar fashion to the Lilith myth, claim the hackneyed SF metaphor of the alien and contest its binary oppositions, whose resignification complements and enhances that of the Hebrew legend. In the case of the Alien, however, its *otherness* lies in its “*literal unearthliness*” (O. Butler 11, my emphasis), as visibly realised in its non-human body. The very embodiment of the Alien thus causes a rejection without reflection that renders it the ultimate Other, the “Abject.” In *Powers of Horror*, Julia Kristeva defines the Abject as “a threat that seems to emanate from an exorbitant outside or inside, ejected beyond the scope of the possible, the tolerable, the thinkable. It lies there, quite close, but it cannot be assimilated” (1). Both the Oankali and their purpose to crossbreed with humans seem to align with this description, for their SF threat lies indeed beyond intellection, and therefore beyond comprehension. This nightmarish, surreal condition moreover places them “[o]n the edge of non-existence and hallucination, of a reality that, if I acknowledge it, annihilates me” (2). As Kristeva points out, the Abject is not a mere “object” that the subject can define as opposed or inferior to itself; it is beyond uncanniness, a direct threat to the sense of Self (1–5). Lilith herself experiences this reaction repeatedly; not so much at the *sight* of the Oankali themselves as at the *envisioning* of the offspring she might bear them: “Medusa children. Snakes for hair. Nests of nightcrawlers for eyes and ears” (O. Butler 41). Despite their promise that the gene trade will benefit both species, it is one she can only construe as “spreading [their] own genes like a disease among unwilling humans ... It was a terrible promise, a threat” (63). Judith Butler’s association of the bodily rejection of the Abject, as “literally rendered ‘Other’” (468),

with the demarcation of social and individual boundaries distinctly apprehends the metaphorical relation between unearthly Aliens and earthly Others. Following Iris Young, Butler purports that “the repudiation of bodies for their sex, sexuality, and/or color is an ‘expulsion’ followed by a ‘repulsion’ that founds and consolidates culturally hegemonic identities along sex/race/sexuality axes of differentiation ... founded on the instituting of the ‘Other’ or a set of Others through exclusion and domination” (469). Therein again surfaces the production of Aliens through different or intersecting criteria of human abjection, made to “mirror the Self” so long as they remain behind the looking-glass.

In *Dawn*, however, the superior position of power of the Oankali makes their threat the more imminent, while their role in the narrative deconstructs the process that abjected them in the first place and reveals it as a human product. As already noted, the metaphor of this alien abduction makes significant innuendos on slavery, even enacting a futuristic equivalent of the Middle Passage. That this time not just people of African descent, but all the remnants of humanity travel *in the hold* of the Oankali spaceship dismantles the original black-and-white binary, thus working to “subvert those structures and relations [of dominance] by the very act of exploring the experience of subordination” (Wolmark 27). Concurrently, the very embodiment of the Oankali allows to explore those structures in relation to gender and to subvert them in a potentially similar manner. Their own reproductive process involves a sex-neutral Oankali, or “ooloi,” between a human couple who do not touch each other, but instead share an elating, chemically-induced “sensory communion” through their alien mediator. Yet, paradoxically, this seeming parity of pleasure and experience also “complicates things further by placing *men* into the subject position usually inhabited by women” (Melzer 203). The lack of self-possession regarding their own body, as the following passage seems to suggest, plays an important part in the humans’ final rebellion against the Oankali:

‘Look at things from Curt’s point of view,’ Gabriel said. ‘He’s not in control even of what his own body does and feels. He’s taken like a woman and... No, don’t explain! ... He knows the ooloi aren’t male. He knows all the sex that goes on in his head. It doesn’t matter. It doesn’t fucking matter! Someone else is pushing all his buttons. He can’t let them get away with that.’ (O. Butler 203)

On the other hand, the conflicting drives implicit in Gabriel's words install humanity in a contradictory standpoint towards the Oankali that is consistent with the impossibility to objectify the Abject. For, if the upturning of power positions whereby "The other, the alien, takes up the position of normative existence while the self suddenly becomes other" (Melzer 65) generates an overpowering sense of helplessness among humans, their wish to reject it is complicated by their attraction to the Oankali's sensorial exhilaration. Nonetheless, that "the alien becomes the expression of a culture's simultaneous fear of and desire for the other" (Wolmark 3) unfolds yet another paradox: because of the impossibility to fully repudiate the unearthly Abject, it is Lilith—the earthly Other—who serves as a scapegoat for their frustration. And because Lilith's objectification into a "Judas goat" (O. Butler 240) simultaneously abjectifies her via identification with the Oankali, the analogy between Other and Alien is again established and sanctioned. Her own ooloi's warning: "Because they can't kill us, they would have killed you" (243) denotes the human tendency to destroy whichever difference cannot be accommodated, whose sole acknowledgement seems to threaten the Self with annihilation.

The Oankali, on the contrary, regard the rejection of difference not only as a threat, but as the fateful annihilation of their species. By their own reckoning, interspecies reproduction is as essential for them as it is monstrous to humans: "We do it naturally. We *must* do it. It renews us, enables us to survive as an evolving species instead of specializing ourselves into extinction or stagnation" (39). In this light, their spaceship arguably echoes Noah's Ark as much as the Middle Passage, a fusion of history and myth that seems to emphasise their role as humanity's saviours rather than its jailers. Therefore, Melzer's avowal that the Oankali's motivation for gene-trading emerges "not from a desire for power over others, but from the search of permanent diversity" (78) would reinforce a positive view of *xenogenesis*. Even in semantic terms, the equation of *xenophilia* with survival and *xenophobia* with extinction welcomes difference, as did the original Greek definition of *xenos*: "a guest, stranger, foreigner, refugee, guest-friend, *one entitled to hospitality*" (my emphasis). The same etymological principle applies to the Oankali definition of "ooloi," which translates as "treasured strangers" (O. Butler 104) on account of the necessary genetic diversification they generate when mating. Hence, precisely because of their *alienness*, humans are just as treasured to them.

This unconditional embrace of difference and the consequent dismissal of any unitary identity strongly suggests the Oankali's identification with the cyborg. The "disturbingly and pleurably tight coupling" (Haraway 152) that both draws and repels

humans, together with their physical *abjectness*, all take on a mighty symbolic value as presented in *Dawn*. Instead of enforcing the binary oppositions usually ascribed to aliens in SF, the Oankali uphold Tweatt-Bates contention that “The means of dismantling these categorical boundaries lie in the cyborg’s hybrid embodiment itself, a body that interrogates the distinctions between human and nonhuman, male and female —self and other, in all of its variations” (25). Their role in rewriting *Genesis* moreover presumes a substantially Afrofuturist stance, different though it is from Lilith’s. Devoid of a homeland, the nomadic Oankali “share with the cyborg a disconnection from any psychosocial Genesis narrative” (Melzer 97), much as the advent of slavery “deliberately rubbed out” the past of African American people (Dery 180). But instead of embarking in a nostalgic genealogical quest, the Oankali’s characterisation as people “whose origins take multiple forms and whose future is oriented, not to the past, but to the infinite diversity of the unknown” (Melzer 97) poses a promising Afrofuturist alternative, one that embraces the fragmented identity of a diasporic past and presents the future “as a hybrid of times” (Nelson 37). Even the current definition of *xenogenesis*<sup>6</sup> subsumes a “resistance to the imperative to recreate the sacred image of the same” (Haraway 226) as the ultimate means to avoid restaging a “bad past.”

Lilith’s similar adherence to these principles, with her acceptance of both humans and aliens “as what they are,” also resignifies her association to the Oankali and casts it in a positive light —thereby countering the notion her own people hold. Perhaps the most relevant instances of this outlook, as stressed in the narrative, are her choice of Anthropology at university and of Joseph as a partner. The former, in addition to contravening the *welfare queen* stereotype,<sup>7</sup> forces Lilith to (repeatedly) justify her decision before other humans who find it derisory. Her endeavours, however, reveal the Self-righteousness and Other-derisiveness that led to factual annihilation in the first place:

‘Anthropology,’ Tate said despairingly. ‘Why did you want to snoop through other people’s cultures? Couldn’t you find what you wanted in your own?’

Lilith smiled and noticed that Tate frowned as though this were the beginning of a wrong answer. ‘I started out wanting to do exactly that ... It seemed to me that my culture —ours— was running headlong over a cliff. And, of course, as it turned out, it was. I thought there must be saner ways of life.’ (O. Butler 132)

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<sup>6</sup> The “(supposed) production of offspring permanently unlike the parent” (*OED*).

<sup>7</sup> See note 3.

In Joseph's case, his role in the story introduces a solid relation between the disdain other humans feel for Lilith and the Oankali. Tate's remark to Lilith "He's old, he's short, and he's ugly. Haven't you got any discrimination at all?" (147) significantly contrasts with that of Lilith's ooloi, Nikanj: "He doesn't *look like* you, but he's *like* you" (164, my emphasis). The chasm between both views would thus accord with Melzer's thesis that "how we *deal* with difference is what creates the binary of self and other" (75).

The humans' self-assuaging attempt to impose a "back-to-the-Stone-Age" (O. Butler 178) social order, on the other hand, makes them "seem childish and violent in comparison" (Melzer 56). The character of Curt, an aggressive, domineering, white New York policeman, arguably plays the lead in defining Butler's critique of traditional power relationships. His demand that all humans "pair off ... One man, one woman. No one has the right to hold out. It just causes trouble" (177) appears to emerge "from the exigences of the social order" that, according to Lorber, constitute the basis for gendered behaviour (577), while his emphasis on *man/woman* similarly aligns with Judith Butler's grounding of compulsory heterosexuality in a false stabilisation of gender to regulate the reproductive domain (470–471). Even Curt's protective paternalism towards his partner Celene, the only woman in the novel stereotyped as *damsel in distress*, is consistent with expressions of benevolent sexism.<sup>8</sup>

But it is his xenophobia that ultimately exposes the perils of such a limiting worldview. Foreshadowed as soon as Lilith "Awakens" them both, when Joseph's "slight accent" causes Curt "to stare, then to glare at him" (O. Butler 141), Curt and his subalterns soon establish Joseph as a second-rate scapegoat for their rage against the Oankali and Lilith herself. His final murder at Curt's hands thus unveils the violence entrenched in hierarchical power structures, while his profession complicates matters further by relating it to racialised police abuse during the 1980s "war on drugs" —both of which would deserve consideration to our day. At a narrative level, however, the breakdown of civilised humanity symbolised in the crime highlights how definitions of otherness "become impossible to sustain as the question of who is 'alien' becomes increasingly unanswerable" (Wolmark 3–4). This thesis is apparently backed by the works of Le Guin and Kristeva, where they repeatedly note how the processes of alienation and abjectification of the Other simultaneously alienate and abjectify the Self. Yet if this is so,

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<sup>8</sup> See note 4.

the Oankali's "position of normative existence" in the novel would resignify humans' tendency to establish categorical boundaries by ironically having them build the very walls that shut them out. Hence, the first step *back in* sustained by the narrative may lie in reconsidering the very concept of *humanness* —applying to aliens and humans alike.

##### 5. "What Will We Be, I Wonder?": Reconsidering and Reconceiving Human Nature

In the face of adversity, human behaviour as portrayed in *Dawn* swerves from millennia of civilisation and brings to the fore its lowest instincts, forcefully weighing its worth against an extraterrestrial culture who —ironically— sees this violence as "[f]righteningly alien" (O. Butler 14). The sudden disintegration of Western values thereby exposes their nature as cultural constructs, simultaneously revealing how "humanity is a fragile thing indeed, threatened by all sorts of encounters with the other, whether alien, technological, or even the less-good versions of ourselves" (Tweatt-Bates 24). Nevertheless, the implementation of Self-reassuring hierarchies does not necessarily accord with existing or potential definitions of human nature. Instead, it seems to back Lorber's assertion that there is "no bedrock human nature" behind the swirling production of otherness, since it is but a manifestation of socio-cultural values and normative discourses (578), which undermines the apprehension of these binaries as natural givens.

Butler's characterisation of her alien species as one that thrives on the destabilisation of its own identity, a principle that is paradoxically their only defining trait, conversely looks to *saner* ways of life. By introducing new forms of "humanness," as Melzer notes, the Oankali challenge our assumptions on what it is that makes us human, not simply upholding their "humanity" as *better*, but valuing it in the very light of its *difference* (71) —an argument which their complex position towards humans seemingly supports. Even Lilith finds herself torn between admiration and bewilderment at her people's resistance to place survival as their first priority, wondering: "Were they strong, then? Or simply unable to adapt?" (O. Butler 201). The narrative, depicting this "contradictory combination of xenophobia and heroism" as "ultimately self-defeating" (Wolmark 33), presumably suggests the latter. Likewise, Lilith's reprimand to her fellowmen after an attempted rape, compelling them to "stay human" and "treat each other like people" (O. Butler 178) seems to conceive of "humanity" in terms of mutual respect above any genetic particular. Yet, while interspecies reproduction is clearly not a plausible solution beyond the realms of fiction, it may be metaphorically understood as "a strategy of resisting ideologies of purity" (Melzer 60); not just against those on the upper echelons

of the hierarchy, but also defying the urge to return “to a pure, precolonial identity” that equally “locks the self into a binary power relationship ... since the self can only be defined as that which the coloniser is not” (60). Instead, the novel resignifies the very concept of difference by presenting a future alternative where Lilith’s “social ‘disabilities’” become her resources for survival (Obourn 136). The rejection of these dualist conceptions of humanity concurrently addresses one of Afrofuturism’s major concerns, as Samuel R. Delany expounds in his interview with Dery:

[T]he problem is the idea of *anybody’s* having to fight the fragmentation and multicultural diversity of the world, not to mention outright oppression, by constructing something so rigid as an identity, an identity in which there has to be a fixed and immobile core, a core that is structured to hold inviolate such a complete biological fantasy as race —whether white or black. (190)

A *saner* way to encompass this fragmentation, without instituting a fixed structure of dichotomous distinctions, seems to lie in *Dawn’s* envisioning of the Oankali’s “terrible promise” as the “illegitimate promise” of the cyborg that, according to Haraway, may enable the subversion of Western teleology (151) —for, in denying original unity, so does the cyborg refuse its “longing for fulfilment in apocalypse” (175). By recasting Lilith as the mother of a new race that simultaneously defies categorisation as “human” while claiming the right to its *humanity* (Melzer 61), the novel similarly redefines the notion of *genesis*: not as a founding source of dualisms or their ultimate destruction, but emphasising the concept of human *kinship* towards the “generation not of a raceless, historyless, people but of communities tied together through *affinity* and blood” (Jesser 52, my emphasis). The acknowledgement of this affinity, if only realised in Tate’s dimly conscious admittance that “Human beings are more alike than different —damn sure more alike than we like to admit” (O. Butler 133), may nonetheless lead to a more *humane* apprehension of humanity.

The cogitation of a future where both semblance and difference are equally valued would hence redeem the Oankali’s “threat” and postulate it as a promising alternative. Its consequent reassemblage of opposition as analogy, in turn, would reify Haraway’s conception of a “cyborg world” as one of “lived social and bodily realities where people are not afraid of their joint kinship ... not afraid of permanently partial identities and contradictory standpoints” (154). The embrace of this parted-self

relation over the Self/Other dichotomy imbues Nikanj's phrasing of the Oankali promise: "I offer a oneness that your people strive for, dream of, but can't truly attain alone" (O. Butler 189), while the latter may iterate "Let's play Americans against the Russians. Again" (175) —as the humans in *Dawn* finally do.

Yet if hybridity is to be understood as "the strategy of embracing difference: neither upholding nor denying it, but accepting it as a part of identity" (Melzer 67–68), a comparable analogy may be possible of the cyborg. For this purpose, it must be first restated that the present study has focused on Butler's redrafting of the biblical *Genesis* precisely to disclose its pervasive socio-cultural repercussions —not to surmise the Alien Almighty as a more auspicious demiurge. On the contrary, the meaningful capitalisation of "Awakening" throughout the novel seems to encourage an altogether different approach in the dawn of a secular age, where the very theories of evolution that dismantled religious metanarratives may compound past and future in their respective multiplicity. Following Andy Clark, Tweatt-Bates broadens the notion of "cyborgness" by foregrounding that "human beings are now, and in fact have always been, 'natural-born cyborgs.' Our 'post-human' future is therefore nothing more or less than a simply human future ... inevitable and yet completely continuous with our past and present human selves" (20). This reading of cyborg hybridity in view of Octavia Butler's novel could also be deemed to widen its scope. Instead of suggesting the acceptance of multicultural fragmentation as a subversive alternative to Joseph's query: "What will we be, I wonder? Not human. Not anymore" (O. Butler 196), it appears to assume it as the only human (*humane*) possibility. It is, then, a reality whose diverse unity in the future emerges precisely from the historical multiplicity of our past, and remains coherent with the unavoidable evolution of our present condition —whether white or black.

## 6. Conclusions

The complex processes of reappropriation and resignification in *Dawn* problematise traditional equations of *otherness* with the Alien, and instead explore the similitudes that these definitions aim to conceal. Butler's re-examination of the Judeo-Christian myth of origin, with its forward-oriented emphasis on genes and *xenophilia*, creates a hybrid text that celebrates diversity and upholds it as both the past and future of humanity. At a contiguous level, the novel assesses the metanarrative's more troubling implications by portraying the relapse of civilisation and presenting humans as "frightened people looking for someone to save them, ... Moses or something to lead them into lives they can

understand” (174). In this respect, the reappropriation of the apocryphal myth of Lilith functions both to revise the historical consequences of traditional dualisms endorsed by these narratives —Self and Other, human and alien, male and female, white and black— and to revalue the potential for change and evolution that they have paradoxically bestowed on the “impure” counterpart of each binary.

Through its parallels with African American baggage and the problematic relations between humans and aliens, however, the novel “refuses an absent-minded futurism” (Mann 68) and instead reflects on the importance of the past for the generation of *saner* futures. Ultimately, the acceptance of that past appears as essential as the embrace of the difference it had strived to alienate. Their combination, the narrative suggests, may allow for a reality where their fragmentation can build a coherent unity that is not based on hierarchies of value; and where consequently *otherness* is not regarded as a threat but appreciated as an essential factor of evolution and identity.

The latent potential of this posthuman, cyborg hybridity thus becomes “an argument for *pleasure* in the transgression of boundaries and for *responsibility* in their construction” (Haraway 150). The contradictory standpoint that Lilith is forced to take, and which estranges her from both humans and aliens, nonetheless places her beyond the reach of categorical definitions. Similarly, her capacity as the catalyser of human evolution overturns the demonic connotations of her brood and posits *xenogenesis* as a promising reenvisioning of humanity in light of its *humanness*, valuing it not for what it looks like, but for what it is—in the full extent of its difference and kinship. In “seizing the tools to mark the world that marked them as other” (175), Butler’s novel upholds miscegenation against biological fantasies of purity, broadening the scope of Afrofuturism to include all the forms of rejection encoded in these binaries. Through its revision of the pervasive “Separate but equal,” *Dawn* thus exposes our conscription to the past as much as to its future redemption.

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