

Mothering Medusa; or,

Hybridity and the Construction of Subaltern Agency in Octavia Butler's *Xenogenesis*

Postmodernity has been defined by a crisis of representation, the refusal of any privileged mode of explanation or subject position, and the loss of totalizing systems; in other words, the project of modernity with its monolithic universalizing tendencies has given way to an emphasis on particularity and difference. With race, class, and sexual orientation (to name only the most prominent ones) problematizing any naive understanding of a common political goal, theorists have begun to underwrite political action by relying on new models of identification predicated on multiply constructed and shifting subject positions in an attempt to bridge the gap between a theoretical understanding of particularity and a political desire for universality. However, as this refusal for universal authority concurrently restricts universal legitimization, theorists must find new justifications for their particular theories or actions. Often these take the form of granting a privileged access to truth, political action, and social change to the disenfranchised subjects, so that their very marginality becomes the basis for a legitimating practice.<sup>1</sup> Of particular interest in these discussions, then, are hybrid subjects who are marginalized in a variety of ways: if subalterity grants automatic access to subversive agency, multiply othered subjects should accede to a particularly privileged position, should have exceptional subversive potential.

Many critics focus on model cyborgs and hybrids in literary texts in their attempt to produce such hybrid subjects and display their subversive potential. I will duplicate

this move in order to elaborate its argumentative structure, question its overall validity, and expose its inherent problems. In response to recent scholarly interest in Octavia Butler, the only African-American female science fiction writer of prominence, I will use her work as an exemplary instantiation of theories of subalterity and hybridity. Butler's *Xenogenesis* trilogy in particular investigates the logic of hybridity as it undercuts any apparent dichotomy between the dominant alien and its human captive by suggesting a symbiosis (and consequent complicity) between the human characters and their alien counterparts.<sup>2</sup> As such, she resists more simplistic notions of pure antagonistic positions and clear dichotomies but instead describes a world predicated on concepts of impurity, contamination and hybridity.

At the same time, however, any reading which purely views Butler as celebrating hybridity is problematized by her texts. While most of her characters are multiply othered subjects, their marginal positions do not empower them to question and undermine the center via what Bhabha calls the "subversive strategy of subaltern agency" (185). As a result, Butler's texts do not lend themselves to a simple reversion of authority or even a more complicated exploration of the different trajectories of power in order to formulate a site of empowerment and possible agency; instead, she forces the reader to engage closely with the issues of power and authority, domination and enslavement in a movement that foregoes simple closures. In so doing, Butler's work externalizes the classical human antagonistic strategies of the psyche, compelling us to recognize the Oankali as the "other" within us rather than comfortably displacing them. Besides, Butler's description of desire and interdependency offers a highly intricate insight into the human psyche as it concerns power relations in which the Oankali operate as an elaborate metaphor for

gender construction, othering, and subject formation. Even though psychoanalysis has often been faulted for subjugating all other differences under the sexual one, Butler's texts invite such a reading as issues of both race and species get translated onto questions of gender and sexuality.

As a result, a close reading of Butler and her critical reception will allow us to see how her texts appear to support notions of subaltern agency, but ultimately must be understood as contradicting them. First, I will show how different responses to Butler's *Xenogenesis* trilogy represent a variety of discourses surrounding hybridity and the subaltern subject. The most basic and initial response is comprised of a singular reading of the Other that establishes the clear dichotomy necessary for an analysis interested in binary race relations or in ecofeminism. These more simplistic readings are immediately superseded by an analysis conscious of the various trajectories which construct the contemporary subject. Such an interpretation—as exemplified by Donna Haraway's reading of the text—claims subversive power for Butler's work similar to Bhabha's subaltern agency. In order to re-examine Haraway's claim, as well as Butler's highly problematic endorsement of sociobiology, I will argue that relations in her text should not be understood as inter- but rather as intra-psychic. Using Lacan's theory of the Other and its role in alienation and separation, I will show how psychoanalysis can offer a constructive reading of Butler which neither falls prey to complete biological determinism (as in a sociobiological reading), nor to the promise of an illusory agency (as suggested by Haraway's reading). In such a reading, then, we not only recognize the potential in Butler's work for a genuine postmodern feminist science fiction, but also

refute universalizing claims to subaltern agency and political activism within a theoretical context of particularity.

Octavia Butler's *Xenogenesis* trilogy describes a post-nuclear war scenario in which the few surviving humans have been collected by the extraterrestrial Oankali. These technologically advanced and highly communal aliens are genetic traders, who travel the universe to find new species with which to merge. All surviving humans are kept alive in suspended animation aboard the ship while the Earth is being restored by the Oankali. In return for their survival, humanity is to sacrifice its uniqueness as the aliens demand a mixing of species, a genetic blending which is vital for their survival. No human couple can procreate without the help of an ooloi, one of the three Oankali genders, who mixes human and Oankali genes in order to create a new, different species, called the constructs. While Lilith, the protagonist of the first novel *Dawn*, is initially resistant and hostile, she slowly comes to realize that the Oankali are her only chance of survival and agrees to help train the first group of humans to resettle Earth. Human character, however, comes to the fore, when she is forced to represent the aliens to her fellow humans, who resent her for her supposed complicity and finally succeed in killing her mate, Joseph. At the end of *Dawn* the first group of humans and Oankali is sent to Earth; Lilith is left aboard the ship without a partner but impregnated by her ooloi Nikanj with the first construct child.

Both *Adulthood Rites* and *Imago* take place several years later and focus on two of Lilith's children, Akin, the first human-born male construct and Jodahs, the first human-born ooloi construct. Humans and their Oankali mates have recolonized Earth and now live in villages created by the same material that forms the ship, a living entity, in

constant symbiosis with its inhabitants. Though they are rendered infertile by the aliens, some humans refuse to live with the Oankali and instead create their own villages in the jungle. When Akin is kidnapped by these “resisters” to be brought up as one of their children, he realizes the Oankali error of denying the basic human right of reproduction. As a result, Akin persuades the community to permit the resisters to build a separate human colony—albeit on a changed and reconstructed Mars—and to procreate in an attempt to preserve the human species. The third book concentrates on the future of the constructs as it focuses on the final step in the merging of humans and Oankali with the human-born ooloi Jodahs. Since he is potentially dangerous—as an ooloi, he has the ability to genetically alter his surroundings—his survival and acceptance by the Oankali community is proof of the final success of a complete (and somewhat equal) merging of the two species. Jodahs, however, knows that this merging is at the cost of Earth which will be abandoned within several generations, completely devastated when the newly created species continues the Oankali search for ever-new trading partners.

Looking at Butler, we must investigate how her text may be (mis)read as an exemplary instantiation of a theory of subaltern agency, or, more specifically, where and how Butler discusses race and gender and their hybrid intersections. The most obvious reading focuses on race, an approach that is supported by Butler’s conscious choice of protagonists—far from the standard science fiction stock of white male heroes, her main characters emphasize the variety of non-Western, non-white survivors of the nuclear holocaust, such as the African-American heroine Lilith and her Chinese-American mate Joseph.<sup>3</sup> Accordingly, the Oankali could easily be read as a metaphor for race, a reading which Francis Bonner’s analysis of the trilogy exemplifies. Bonner primarily focuses on

the relationship between Butler's work and "the specificity of the Afro-American experience" (53) as she emphasizes the uncomfortable moments of doubt, antagonism and hatred in Butler's human characters towards the Oankali. Likewise, she relates various instances of forceful seduction (i.e., rape), of open exertion of power (often through chemical induction), as well as the objectification of humans to the African-American slave experiences, especially to "issues of forced reproduction" (53). Thus, both in its emphasis on reproduction and complete forced abandonment of any possible powers to the Oankali, *Xenogenesis* can be read as a futuristic reworking of the slave narrative. Yet such a reading is complicated by the apparent feelings of love and sympathy that Lilith (along with many of the other humans) has towards her oppressors.<sup>4</sup>

Consequently, the more radical exploration of notions of hybridity occurs in the treatment of sex and gender (and their complete subversion within the Oankali community). As the plot summary indicates, one of Butler's principal concerns is the close relationship between erotic desire, sex, and female reproductivity as an implicit threat to men. The overwhelming concern for a symbiotic linking with the environment invites an ecofeminist reading, since we can see how Butler portrays the alien Oankali as essentially feminized on various levels as she describes their nurturing instincts and their primary focus and emphasis on reproduction and child rearing. In their worship of life, the aliens become idealized woman-as-mother figures: "To kill was not simply wasteful to the Oankali. It was as unacceptable as slicing off their own healthy limbs" (*Imago* 548; 1: 6).<sup>5</sup> Additionally, Butler emphasizes several aspects of the Oankali that can easily be read as belonging to a feminist utopia: the Oankali have a communal and communitarian structure which is based on an immediate, non-verbal communication,

and their exclusive dependency on biological science and technologies. Their non-hierarchical behavior is most apparent in an episode late in the trilogy; towards the end of *Imago* the entire Oankali community holds a conference that will decide whether Jodahs is permitted to remain on Earth, a scene which Jodahs describes as follows: “The ship transmitted our messages . . . In that way, the people came together . . . to share knowledge of construct ooloi . . . and to decide what to do with us” (*Imago* 721; 3: 15). This conference—as well as any conversation between Oankali—employs a non-verbal communication that functions on touch via neurotransmission. We first learn of this ability from Lilith as “she stood alone, watching as the five conscious Oankali came together, touching and entangling head and body tentacles. . . . The Oankali could communicate this way, could pass messages from one to another almost at the speed of thought” (*Dawn* 107; 2: 11).

Furthermore, in their sole dependency on biological technologies, the Oankali have a disgust for artificial products, such as metal and plastic; when Akin accidentally “tastes” a piece of plastic, he “thr[ows] it hard away from him, disgusted, nauseated” and describes it as “more poison packed tight together in one place than [he had] ever known” (*Adulthood Rites* 380-1; 2: 16). As a result, the Oankali obey a variety of stereotypical feminine attributes in their respects for life and loathing of technology, their understanding and intuition, their emphasis on community and utter lack of hierarchical behavior, so that we might be inclined to read these aliens as the “feminine other.” Such a reading is undertaken by Hoda M. Zaki who suggests that *Xenogenesis* be read as “part of the post-1970 feminist and utopian SF trend” (237), because it “express[es] hope for unambiguous and truthful communication, for long life free of diseases, for the elimination of racism and

the tolerance of differences among people, for pleasurable work, peace and dignity, and for social communion” (244). Zaki mainly focuses on Butler’s portrayal of the alien community as an ideal alternative to our patriarchal society and conflates Butler with the classical feminist portrayal of other utopian societies. Ultimately, however, such a reading does not do justice to Butler’s novel with its complex and complicated depiction of power relations, since it refuses to take into account a variety of other features assigned to the Oankali.<sup>6</sup>

The Oankali’s physical description introduces their more ambiguous gender characteristics: Lilith, for example, describes them as “Medusa”: “Some of the ‘hair’ writhed independently, a nest of snakes startled, driven in all directions” (*Dawn* 17; 1: 2). This allusion to the phallic female who represents the threats of female sexuality alludes to the contradictory gender roles the Oankali occupy in respect to the humans. After all, they assume the male role in the sexual relationship, despite the fact that the Oankali are gendered female on a variety of levels in the depiction of their physical, social, and emotional bearing. They not only have complete control over humans, but also dictate the pattern of sexual intercourse and social interactions in general—both are modeled after their needs. Lilith, to whose point of view we are restricted in *Dawn*, compares her situation in turn to that of a toy, a child, a pet, and a breeding animal. Even when offered a choice, she feels coerced, because she is constantly aware of her complete powerlessness: whether she asks that the aliens not clone her or whether she simply wants pen and paper, none of her wishes are honored. Thus, throughout the trilogy there is never any doubt as to *who* has the power in this human/Oankali relationship. While a displacement of a threatening female sexuality onto an aggressively sexual alien functions as a common

topos in pulp science fiction,<sup>7</sup> Butler's portrayal differs insofar as she focuses on Lilith, the human woman. By forcing us to engage in her protagonist's constantly shifting positions towards the aliens—from love and tenderness to extreme hatred and despair—Butler refuses to resort to a simple dichotomy between the female alien and the male human in which the latter is forced to exchange gender roles. Nor can we as readers easily judge the Oankali, because the text constantly reminds us of humans' peculiar complicity and ambivalence towards the aliens. After all, the Oankali save the surviving humans, heal them and enhance their lives, yet, at the same time, they are completely dependent on having human mates, a personal need as well as a need of the entire species. As a matter of fact, the Oankali only live as long as their human mates do and cannot survive without them: when considering mating with an older female, for example, Jodahs realizes, “She might live a century more here on Earth. . . . I could live five times that long—unless I mated with someone like Marina. Then I would live only as long as I could keep her alive” (*Imago* 565; 1: 8). Moreover, the particular powers that the Oankali hold are not centered in any one leader but are rather spread and diffused, always localized and diversified. Any decision is made communally, and displays of power are for the communal good only (for example, any human that kills another human or an Oankali is exiled onto the ship for lifelong surveillance). As a result, the peace-loving Oankali stand in clear contrast to the aggressive humans. This becomes especially apparent when humans are left to interact in their “pure” form, i.e., as human resisters with their frequent use of violence and abuse of power.<sup>8</sup>

This power relation, in which humans take on the subordinate, i.e., feminine position, creates special difficulties for the males who are forced to adjust to a new

situation of sexual and emotional submission. In several episodes the seduction of human males by ooloi can easily be construed as rape, especially in one scene where Jodahs describes: “before he could get up, before he could shout, I was down beside him, one hand over his mouth, the other grasping his hand. . . . He let me take the machete from his hand and put it aside. I already had several body tentacles linked into his nervous system” (*Imago* 610; 2: 7). Accordingly, we are spared Lilith’s seduction in favor of an ooloi/male one, a scene which Lilith resistingly but curiously enjoys: “Lilith sat on the table, waiting, watching. She was patient and interested. This might be her only chance ever to watch close up as an ooloi seduces someone. She thought it should have bothered her that the ‘someone’ in this case was Joseph” (*Dawn* 185-6; 3: 12). Fearing for her mate (especially for his male ego), she cannot help but enjoy this male submission. In so doing, Butler can implicitly destabilize gender boundaries, since the reader feels confronted with both same-sex and interspecies sex. Although the text painstakingly attempts to assert that the ooloi “it” constitutes a third gender, a neutral gender position,<sup>9</sup> the ooloi nevertheless occupies a male power position insofar as it functions as the head of an Oankali family.<sup>10</sup>

As Butler attempts to break with classical sex and gender notions, she also examines “alternatives to the nuclear family” (Bonner 58). She avoids Oedipal constructions by rejecting the incest taboo (Oankali male and female mates are usually siblings) and by the fact that “gender is physically determined by affinity with the same-sex parent” (59). Thus, the novel undercuts and questions Oedipal constructions of gender and suggests that other theories of gender formation may be possible for us which do not rely on antagonism and the wish to kill one’s parent. Since any construct has five parents,

Butler not only breaks the triangular structure, but also offers different modes of interaction among the parents and between parent and child. The child, called “eka,” is nongendered until metamorphosis (which occurs after adolescence) so that all gendered parents relate to it on an equal level while the ooloi, the only parent who holds power among the mates, is completely nongendered. Consequently, Butler has created a complicated system of reproduction that attempts to avoid the replication of gender binaries: while we only have two species and five genders in *Dawn*, their offspring already produce four different species and eleven genders (if we distinguish here between human born and Oankali born constructs). This multiplicity of gender and species thus breaks the simple duality of a male/female binary. While we may be able to read species as reintroducing gender dynamics on the first level (i.e., the “male” Oankali against the “female” humans), the next generation frustrates any such interpretation. Although Butler strongly emphasizes the biological determinacy of both species, we can read the biological multiplicity as a metaphor for social relations which constructs the multitude of genders as a new model for sex and gender politics (and, not coincidentally, the offspring themselves are called “constructs”). As Judith Butler has argued in *Gender Trouble*, it is possible to conceive of sex and the body as social constructions similar to that of gender. If we collapse the sex/gender, the nature/culture distinction, *Xenogenesis* plays out social constructedness on the body of the construct children and Octavia Butler’s society becomes an elaborate allegory for Judith Butler’s theories in which sex is *discursively* produced as that which is *prediscursive*. Moreover, if these biological constructs signify social constructedness, we must read the biological aliens as merely another version of

ourselves, so that we can read *Xenogenesis* as investigating the interpersonal and its power relations.

In her essay “The Biopolitics of Postmodern Bodies,” Donna Haraway provides a similar analysis which reads the aliens as a representation of our own contaminated and hybrid selves. Moreover, by choosing to conclude her article with a reading of *Dawn*, she suggests the prominent place that Butler occupies in her own theoretical project.<sup>11</sup> In the figure of the cyborg who easily crosses borderlines and refuses to be contained, Haraway explores notions of hybridity, a concept she believes is also present in Butler’s writing, which she describes as “a fiction predicated on the natural status of adoption and the unnatural violence of kin” (223). Haraway thus exemplifies a reading of Butler which views the author’s use of multiple discourses and her focus on competing power relations as ultimately subversive. Jenny Wolmark, for example, describes how Butler “work[s] to subvert those [repressive] structures and relations [of dominance] by the very act of exploring the experience of subordination” (27) and claims that “Butler’s transformed and hybrid identities begin to dismantle the totalising power structures on which those ideologies [of race and gender] rest” (37). Similarly, Cathy Peppers argues that “it is in th[e] excess of genealogies that oppressive ideologies are exposed and resisted, and simple essentialist identities are contested” (49). Accordingly, Butler’s constructs are evidence for the physical, emotional, and moral superiority of the hybrid child over the parents, a superiority to which both Akin and Jodahs testify. If we see the Oankali as our “human others”/“other humans,” Butler’s text becomes a manifesto for hybridity.<sup>12</sup> Her narrative shift from Lilith to Akin and Jodahs suggests that the move towards difference is not only crucial for humanity’s survival but also indicates ethical progress.

Moreover, if we look at the resisters in the context of hybridity and difference, it becomes obvious that they symbolize the rejection of difference and change. Their attempt to keep humanity “pure” is punished with their impending destruction. Butler implies that we need to change (or allow our self-difference to develop) if we are not to commit suicide. This becomes particularly obvious towards the conclusion of the trilogy when Jodahs discovers a resister village whose occupants are not sterile. Deriving from one fertile ancestor, they have resorted to forced inbreeding which results in an extremely corrupted and diseased gene pool:

When [the First Mother’s son] was weaned, . . . they encouraged [her] to work in the gardens and help with the building and be away from her son. That way, when Adan was thirteen years old, they were able to put mother and son together. By then both had been taught their duty. . . . The Mother had twenty-three grandchildren . . . Fifteen survived. Among these were several who were deformed or who grew deformed. They were fertile and . . . could not be spared. (*Imago* 641-3; 2: 12)

By creating this village, Butler illustrates the effects of a pure and separatist ideology—deformation and death. In a theoretical space, the resisters must be read as the purveyors of such an essentialist ideology, insofar as they believe in the concept of purity and the possibility of excluding difference and otherness. Yet, as we have learned from the Oankali, whose very existence is founded upon genetic mixing, impurity, and contamination, any such stasis will result in death.

At the same time, however, Haraway emphasizes the ambiguity that coincides with the endorsement of difference and mixture, of mutation and metamorphosis when

she describes how Butler reflects on “the monstrous fear and hope that the child will not, after all, be like the parent” (“Biopolitics” 223). This modification forces us to analyze closely the humans’ ambivalent emotions as they relate to the alien other; in particular, we need to explore the economics of desire between human and Oankali in its dialectic relationship. The Oankali are described as “needing” the gene trade with the humans like a human needs to breathe, as one of Lilith’s Oankali relatives explains to her: “We are as committed to the trade as your body is to breathing. We were overdue for it when we found you. Now it will be done—to the rebirth of your people and mine” (*Dawn* 44-5; 1: 5). On the other hand, they are often described as “desiring” the humans, especially for their interesting gene structure and their “Contradiction” (the idea that human intelligence and hierarchical behavior are at odds and potentially dangerous). Similarly, the humans’ sexual attraction to the ooloi is usually described in terms of “need”: “what she felt now went beyond liking, beyond loving, into the deep biological attachments of adulthood. Literal, physical addiction to another person” (*Imago* 658; 3: 2). Yet their constant desire for freedom reintroduces the category of “desire” on the human level as well; Lilith, for example, is repeatedly described as wandering and attempting to break away from her home and Oankali family—even after several decades with the Oankali: “Sudden freedom would have terrified her, although sometimes she seemed to want it. Sometimes she stretched the bonds between herself and the family. She wandered. She still wandered. But she always came home” (*Adulthood Rites* 455; 4: 9).

Unlike Lacanian psychoanalysis which maintains a rigid distinction between desire and need (following Hegel who privileges desire as that characteristic—unlike need—which distinguishes humans from animals), Butler’s text confuses the two. Since she

associates such traditionally *human* qualities as love and passion with the category of need, her text suggests that need is always primary and superior to desire. The fundamental problem that such an interpretation of human nature, i.e., one solely understood in terms of need, entails is addressed by David Brande, who illuminates the close resemblance between Butler's construction of the Oankali/human relationship and the determinism of sociobiology. Brande defines sociobiology, as "holding culture on a leash," insofar as it "intend[s] to close the gap between nature and culture by foreclosing the possibility of cultural, semiotic, or erotic behavior that is not ultimately transparent and finally inalterable in its biological motivation."<sup>13</sup> Accordingly, *Xenogenesis* endorses a biological determinism in which genetic coding cannot be overcome but instead must supplant any notion of culture we might have. This highly anti-humanist ideology, then, circumvents any notions of a culturally constructed symbolic by inscribing all potential development as well as any interaction between subjects on their physical embodiment, thus creating a utopia void of any biological significance. While Brande certainly is correct in pointing out the biological overdetermination of the Oankali—their lack of a written language, their "immediate" communication by touch, their biological knowledge of humans—he ignores the more metaphorical potential the Oankali present, i.e., what is it about the Oankali that make them irresistible and repulsive to both Lilith and us, the reader?<sup>14</sup> One way to answer this question is by understanding Butler's biological inscriptions in a psychic rather than a physical sense, and it is this reading that, I think, will allow us to reexamine the subversive potential of her work.

After all, Freudian psychoanalysis itself is deeply steeped in biology, especially as it positions the drive and the libido in the realm of biology rather than within the purely

psychic, and even Lacanian theory is impossible to understand without having recourse to biology. In this context, then, Butler's pervasive defense of biology can best be explained within a psychoanalytic framework and serves as further support for an *intrapsychic* interpretation of her text. Consequently, psychoanalysis, by bringing to the fore how the internalization of the other functions as the key moment of subjectivization, allows us to read *Xenogenesis* not as a science fiction about the relationship between extraterrestrials and humans or between different types/genders/races of humans, but as a tentative reading of a subject's relationship to its own other, i.e., as a representation of our minds. As such, it functions as an elaborate metaphor in which we recognize the Oankali as the other within us rather than comfortably displacing them onto another world. As we situate Butler's text within a psychoanalytic framework, we can better understand the special position of the Oankali, especially the Oankali ooloi other, within Butler's symbolic universe. On first sight, one might want to identify the Oankali with the Lacanian construction of "Woman," who is not the scary Medusa figure any more, as Freud had it, but rather the central figure of the symbolic, stabilizing as well as disrupting. In such a reading, the Oankali would become the figure, that part of ourselves, that needs to be excluded (i.e., othered) for our own symbolic universe to remain consistent. As humanity's other, the Oankali show any number of feminine traits, and their interesting ability to communicate without words suggests their position within the Lacanian universe as those who can exceed the symbolic—thus becoming idealized figures for the transgressing subject. At the same time, however, the Oankali are in power and thus not the classical female other; rather, they must be read as the big Other as Lacan has constructed it in his theory of desire.

In Lacan's theory, the human subject constructs its coherent identity by attempting to fulfill the Other's desire, or, rather, by behaving in such a way as the subject believes the Other wants it to behave. Since the big Other exists only insofar as the subject projects its hopes and fears onto it, it necessarily serves various functions: it becomes the punishing or the comforting Other, and, as a result, its function for the subject is "radically ambivalent. It can function as a quieting and strengthening reassurance . . . or as a terrifying paranoid agency" (Žižek 39). Considering their ability to read and know human desires beyond human knowledge itself, the Oankali can be read as the (big) Other, as "the subject supposed to know"—especially when they describe humans as a community of contradictory messages among which they try to find a consensus as to what the human *really* wants, since "Humans said one thing with their bodies and another with their mouths and everyone had to spend time and energy figuring out what they really meant" (*Imago* 533-4; 1: 4). While humans are aware of this, they remain ambivalent in their relation to the Oankali and, at times, attempt to escape from the all-encompassing care—even if it means hurting themselves. Consequently, Butler suggests that humans are torn between staying and leaving, between a comfortable, idealized community that satisfies every need and the desire for self-determination and freedom. On a general level, this choice is represented by the question as to how much freedom we actually need and desire, as to how much care and protection we actually require. Insofar as the Oankali fulfill these contradictory roles of desired as well as hated object, they represent *that* part of ourselves that simultaneously attracts and repulses us and thus stand in for human contradictory desire in general. It is this very ambiguity which we find at the heart of Octavia Butler's fiction: Butler has constructed the *Xenogenesis* trilogy in such a way that

humanity owes its very survival to the Oankali at the same time as their interference ensures that neither side will survive unchanged. Quite literally, then, human relations cannot exist without the Oankali—whether on a larger social level, in the Oankali’s initial refusal to allow humanity to survive on its own, or on the personal level in the humans’ physical dependency on the aliens and their ensuing inability to touch one another.

Humanity’s existence has become predicated on the very thing which ultimately intends to destroy it, a general logical impasse which corresponds to the Lacanian *vel*: either you refuse the Oankali trade and die, thus losing everything, or you merge with the Oankali and also lose your uniqueness.<sup>15</sup> In their function as Other, the Oankali demand this ultimate choice between two equally undesirable options—both ultimately leading to the extermination of humanity.

As a result, humanity’s relationship to the Oankali imitates our attempt to negotiate the different and opposing drives which can be understood within the dynamic of alienation and separation. Lacan describes how humans need to feel connected to others without losing their separateness, either direction threatening the annihilation of the subject. This desperate attempt to negotiate a stable state between two destructive alternatives offers a choice that is none, an alternative—*vel*—which will lead to the same result regardless of the decision. Butler’s description of the humans’ interaction with the Oankali perfectly enacts this dilemma between complete sameness (i.e., *jouissance*, which is what the Oankali promise) and complete difference (i.e., self-difference, the Real). Obviously, the Oankali represent complete difference in its most extreme form—on initial contact all humans turn away in disgust from their absolute Otherness. At the same time, however, they also exemplify complete sameness: although they can

consciously change their offspring's abilities and looks, all maintain access to the same genetic memory. Similarly, their nonverbal, perfect communication, their immediate knowledge of humans, as well as the intensely pleasurable experience that the Oankali/human merging provides, suggest that the Oankali stand for complete sameness and *jouissance*. The battles that we see Lilith (and the other human characters) fight on a daily basis, in order not to be completely eradicated by the Oankali while still remaining close to them, can be seen as an apt translation of Lacan's description of alienation and separation.

These battles, however, reveal yet another function which the Oankali serve for their human partners. When we look at Slavoj Žižek's descriptions of the Thing as that which "we abjure and disown," but which nevertheless "exerts an irresistible attraction on us" (123), he might as well be describing Lilith's relationship to her ooloi Nikanj.<sup>16</sup> In fact, this ambivalence is the condition of existence, since "the Thing is what 'holds together' the social edifice by means of guaranteeing its fantasmatic consistency" (123).<sup>17</sup> The aliens, who are ultimately inscribed at the very core of our being, allow us to structure our fantasy-space: if we conceive of the Oankali society as ideal and utopian (though somewhat threatening), we also have to recognize that the Oankali are "the Thing" that is needed to secure this fantasy space.<sup>18</sup> What we must realize here is the fact that the Thing is intrapsychic as the point within the subject that is not part of it but nevertheless guarantees its internal consistency. In this respect it serves a function similar to the Other; both are utterly necessary for the subject, but somehow not proper to it. Thus, the Oankali are the most symbolic (i.e., the Other) and the most non-symbolic (i.e., the Thing) part of the subject. This understanding allows us to resolve the contradictions we faced earlier vis

a vis the Oankali—in their function as both Thing and Other they can fulfill their contradictory roles for the humans insofar as they are both repulsive and attractive, both alienating and appealing.

In conclusion, we can see how Octavia Butler explores ideas of power discourse and its relation to gender, of desire and dependency by extrapolating it to a human encounter with an alien species—ultimately, however, she is interested in human relations. Her fiction plays out on different levels the interdependency between the same and the other, and shows that one always is defined in terms of its counterpart. Nevertheless, we are faced with two corresponding yet contradictory readings of Butler’s text: if we read the relationship between her characters on an interpersonal level, i.e., if the Oankali stand in for humans and the Oankali/human relation represents human interaction, the novel suggests the possibility of subjects, such as the constructs, who are “more hybrid,” more self-different, so that their very hybridity is valorized and offers a potential site for agency. Such a reading is exemplified by Homi Bhabha’s notion of hybrid subjectivity and subaltern agency: the hybrid subjects who populate Bhabha’s Third Space closely resemble the “constructs” that inhabit Butler’s fictive, futuristic universe. Both emerge from the interstices, live on borderlines, and are defined by their ‘in-between’ status. Here, then, differences, rather than erasing one another or functioning independently, are negotiated within these gaps and offer a potential for resistance, a so-called “strategy of subaltern agency.”

On the other hand, if we read the Oankali as the other within us, we not only can explain the strange biological determinism that pervades Butler’s work, but also are faced with an interpretation that understands the human psyche as self-different and hybrid by

definition. It is this latter reading of *Xenogenesis* which questions whether there exists a space of special hybridity and subaltern agency. If we take our reading of Butler's text as a representation of the human psyche seriously, we must realize that, according to Butler, humans are always hybrid, are always already self-different. Thus, the constructs are simply another, clearer form of our basic features, i.e., their fundamental characteristic of hybridity does not distinguish them from the human and Oankali, but instead allows them to represent both species. As progeny, the constructs emphasize their parents' similarity and difference as well as each species' self-difference and, in so doing, exemplify their hybridity.

As a result, Butler's texts suggest that the privileging of any group—be it marginal, subaltern, or doubly displaced—is not possible insofar as it simply opposes the impossible and empty category of the pure, i.e., the original and untainted.<sup>19</sup> If then, the only possible space for any subject is the site of the always already corrupted and contaminated, theorists like Bhabha cannot claim a particularly powerful agency for the subjects occupying the Third Space, since no one exists outside of it. While their version of hybridity optimistically promises a powerful agency, Butler's description recovers the ambivalent and traumatic elements of such hybrid subjectivity. Consequently, Butler's text allows us to see how projects that attempt to close the gap between theory and practice by employing a "strategy of subaltern agency" are problematized by the very theory they use to underwrite it—which may, ultimately, be the reason why few of these theoretical concepts actually translate into political actions.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Hans Bertens, for example, illustrates one of the problems of this approach: “It is not easy to see . . . why marginal cultures would have a more direct access to the real and why their representations and cultural practices would be less coded than those of mainstream culture” (102).

<sup>2</sup> Butler’s trilogy was initially published as three separate volumes, *Dawn* (New York: Warner, 1987), *Adulthood Rites* (New York: Warner, 1988), and *Imago* (New York: Warner, 1989), all with separate pagination. Since I am using the Science Fiction Book Club edition, which contains continuous pagination, I will also give chapter references within the text.

<sup>3</sup> While Butler explains this scenario within the logic of her text, i.e., as nuclear winter predominantly affecting the Northern hemisphere, it also suggests a certain justified punishment of the ones responsible for the global disaster.

<sup>4</sup> Bonner does acknowledge the complicated bond between humans and Oankali and actually connects it to the similarly inexplicable attachment female slaves at times forged with their male masters; nevertheless, the force of her argument lies in the antagonistic relationship between master and slave.

<sup>5</sup> This comparison—connected with the fact that the Oankali learn to re-grow their extremities— suggests that the Oankali are not castrated, i.e., that they may represent the non-castrated Other. This argument is convincingly made by David Brande who reads the Oankali lack of culture as a circumvention of the Symbolic network, so that the

Oankali apparently do not submit to castration. As our further discussion will show, however, the Oankali are not exempt from castration in their desire of human difference.

<sup>6</sup> Again, Zaki's complete argument is more complicated and acknowledges the ambivalent relationship that humans have towards the Oankali; my main concern, however, is the fact that ultimately the essay tends to privilege a rather positive reading of the aliens and their futuristic society.

<sup>7</sup> In her excellent overview of the female alien in science fiction literature, Robin Roberts points out how the alien as other traditionally has not only often been gendered female, but how this female gendering has mainly been used by male authors to portray an implicit threat. In all her examples—ranging from Ayesha, the jungle goddess of H. Rider Haggard's *She*, or the explicitly feminized Eloi in H. G. Well's *The Time Machine* to the female alien in pulp science fiction—she discovers the metaphorical overlap between alien and female, who together pose a dangerous threat to phallogocentric society. In order to counter this often negative and threatening depiction of the female alien, much of seventies feminist science fiction opened the subject of the female alien for reevaluation and emphasized the positive aspects of the (female) alien. Its most apparent instantiation, the feminist utopia, thus “enact[ed] a strategy of separatism through alternative science, a reworking of myths about mothering and the valorization of qualities identified as feminine: an emphasis on community, home, and family” (Roberts 66).

<sup>8</sup> Many resister villages have regressed to slavery, misogyny, and extreme racism; one woman, for example, describes: “When I passed their village, they took me from my

canoe . . . . The men kept me shut up in an animal pen and they raped me. The women spat on me and put dirt and shit in my food because the men raped me” (*Imago* 562; 1: 8).

<sup>9</sup> In fact, the only time such a reading is explicitly suggested, it is by a human male who attempts to rape Lilith: “When they woke me up, I thought the ooloi acted like men and women while the males and females acted like eunuchs” (*Dawn* 90; 2: 8). Since our identification lies with Lilith, we believe her when she remarks that such a thinking is “a kind of deliberate, persistent ignorance” (*Dawn* 90; 2: 8).

<sup>10</sup> Butler takes this displacement onto the male victims to its logical conclusion in “Bloodchild,” her award-winning short story. In this story humans are allowed to live with aliens on their distant planet and, in return, act as hosts for the aliens who need another organism in which to plant their eggs; “giving birth” thus entails the surgical removal from the human body. Host parents are usually male so that the female humans can attend to reproducing their own species. While an initial reaction to the story may perceive it as an extreme form of slavery or torture, Butler views it quite differently; in an interview she asserts that “‘Bloodchild’ is very interesting in that men tend to see a horrible case of slavery, and women tend to see that, oh well, they had caesarians[sic], big deal” (Kenan 498). Moreover, Butler shows her constant concern with symbiotic relationships when she comments, “If humans were able to make that good a deal with another species, I think it would be miraculous” (498).<sup>10</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Haraway’s work repeatedly uses feminist science fiction as an exemplary instantiation of “inappropriate/d others” and discusses Butler’s work in several other texts; see in particular “Cyborgs at Large” and *Primate Visions*.

<sup>12</sup> This is especially true when seeing how Haraway's main critique of Butler cannot be maintained: while Haraway ultimately criticizes Butler for "fail[ing] to tell another story about another birth, a xenogenesis" (*Primate Visions* 380), insofar as she enforces a compulsory heterosexuality, she fails to acknowledge the plurality of genders that Butler "constructs" at the same time as she erases the gender/sex boundary. Moreover, as Stephanie Smith has convincingly argued, Haraway's own assumptions must be questioned as well, in particular her understanding of the constructs as "miscegenation" as well as her limited focus on vision—especially since both concepts are interrogated and undermined in Butler's text.

<sup>13</sup> Since I quote from Brande's unpublished manuscript, I will not provide page numbers for quotes from this essay.

<sup>14</sup> Moreover, Brande also somewhat simplifies the matter when he claims that the Oankali are solely interested in humans' genetic structure. While the Oankali can genetically engineer all humans whose material they have collected and stored, they prefer actual human cooperation which suggests their understanding and acknowledgment of a cultural dimension. As Nikanj explains to Tino, Akin and Jodahs' father, "there are no resisters, living or dead, who are not already parent to construct children. The difference between them . . . and you is that you have decided to act as parents. . . . If all Humans were like them, our construct children would be much less Human, no matter how they looked. They would know only what we could teach them of Humans" (*Adulthood Rites* 416; 3: 1).

<sup>15</sup> The logic of the *vel* is most explicitly developed in *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-analysis* where Lacan explains, “*Your money or your life!* If I choose money, I lose both. If I choose life, I have life without money, namely a life deprived of something” (212).

<sup>16</sup> This should help us contradict McHale’s enthusiastic claim for cyberpunk as the prime postmodern example within contemporary science fiction. McHale emphasizes the importance of cyberpunk as a “SF which derives certain of its elements from postmodernist mainstream fiction” (229) and foregrounds the classical “male” topics, such as technology, hard sciences, and death, “the final frontier of imagination” (267). According to McHale, these topics are predominant in cyberpunk fiction and define it as postmodern. Yet our discussion has shown that Butler’s work most certainly qualifies her as a postmodern writer—less in terms of experimentation and style, but rather in her subject matter. As such, Butler’s characters can be read as a living and embodied answer to the disembodied and virtual subjects which cyberpunk privileges. Furthermore, Stephanie Smith, who argues for a similar redefining of postmodern science fiction, points out: “when 1984’s cyberpunk manifesto *Neuromancer* walked off with the Hugo and Nebula Award for best novel, Butler’s ‘Bloodchild’ did the same as a short story” (76).

<sup>17</sup> The Oankali in general contain certain notions of the abject to which most human’s initial reaction can testify. Probably the most accurate account of “the Thing” appears, however, in a description of Aaor, Jodahs’ sibling, who changes shapes and finally turns into “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” (*Imago* 655; 3: 2).

<sup>18</sup> It is in this construction of the Oankali as fantasy space that we can see how Butler retracts her previous insights and falls prey to an idealized essentialist notion. If, as I have argued, the construct children must be seen as moving within the direction of hybridity, difference, and change, this glorification of the Oankali as the ideal utopian society contradicts such a concept. Moreover, as many critics have pointed out, Butler discloses a fatally essentialist view in her portrayal of the aggressive male and her description of the “Human Contradiction,” which predetermines human behavior in its entirety. Finally, the construction of the Mars colony, which allows humans to continue as a “clean” and separate race, also shows the breakdown of her earlier understanding that hybridity and continual merging and change are vital to the survival of any species.

<sup>19</sup> In his very different project of tracing the notion of hybridity within an English context, Robert Young raises similar objections when he writes, “The whole problem . . . for Englishness is that it has never been successfully characterized by an essential core identity from which the other is excluded. It has always . . . been divided within itself, and it is this that has enabled it to be variously and counteractively constructed” (3).

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