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# A New Way For Life: Striving for Post-Humanity in Octavia Butler's Fiction

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*All that you touch*
*You Change.*

*All that you Change*
*Changes you.*

*The only lasting truth*
*Is Change.*

*God*
*Is Change.*
(*Parable* 3)

Octavia Butler makes this powerful statement the opening to her first Earthseed novel. Much of Butler's work is centered on the theme of change. In order to better oneself and humanity, change must happen. Many gay rights theorists echo this theme of change with a less optimistic feeling: queer culture has seen much progress, but little change. Butler notes that change exists as neither better nor worse; a concept so deified as change cannot be described with a simple binary. Change is. Lilith, the protagonist of Butler's *Xenogenesis* trilogy, asks her captor to explain himself and the changes his alien race is inflicting upon humanity: "'You think destroying what was left of our cultures will make us better?'" The alien responds calmly, "'No. Only different'" (*Dawn* 35). Change and difference are vital aspects of life.

Butler's imagination and forays into the realm of science fiction allow her to explore extensively these themes of change and transcending humanity. The first two books of the *Xenogenesis* trilogy, *Dawn* and *Adulthood Rites*, follow the remnants of humanity after a devastating nuclear war. These last humans are rescued from the dying earth by an alien species called the Oankali, a race genetically obligated to gather information on other species and adapt old genetic structures into new biracial constructs with the data. Many humans resist because such an adaptation creates an entirely different species and ultimately means the end of mankind. In *Dawn*, the first book of the trilogy, the Oankali choose Lilith to lead the surviving humans. The Oankali bond with the humans to re-*produce* a new species—the resulting species will not be human or Oankali. Because of this radical change, Lilith struggles to personally accept the fate of humanity while teaching the resistant humans. Akin, the protagonist of *Adulthood Rites* and Lilith's son, is a product of the Oankali's experimentation. He represents the first human-born male construct, made from the genetic structure of humans and aliens. After being kidnapped by the humans, he is abandoned by his family there so he may collect information and learn about his captors. Akin's humanity causes him to sympathize with these resistors, making him advocate to the rest of the Oankali in defense of the humans. "Bloodchild" is a short story by Octavia Butler in which a group of humans, fleeing from persecution on Earth, form a symbiotic relationship with an insect-like species on another world. The aliens use the humans as a host for their eggs while in return providing shelter, food, longevity and a new kind of family. The narrative follows Gan, a human male, and his struggle to accept his role in the family and with his alien implanter T'Gatoi.

Many of the characters in Butler's works are dehumanized, reflecting the treatment of minorities in a white patriarchal society. She even insinuates that such behavior, such cruel dehumanization, is natural to humanity. It is human nature to be an extremely intelligent people, yet still cling to hierarchical tendencies. Octavia Butler suggests that humanity needs to surpass itself, to adapt and change. Rather than re-humanize in response to dehumanization, the human race must post-humanize and transcend its natural defects. Because even ideal humans are imperfect, post-humanization is the only way to succeed and escape the inevitability of extinction.

**A New Sexuality**

The existence of a third sex among the Oankali is problematic for the humans who encounter them, but the overall characteristics of these unsexed "ooloi" are positive and what they provide humanity is undeniably beneficial. Ooloi "perceive things differently" than humans, typifying them as unique and fascinating (*Dawn* 22). In their drive to gather information, the ooloi partner with human couples and facilitate extraordinary sex. Lilith admits about her unsexed ooloi partner, "Nikanj could give her an intimacy with Joseph that was beyond ordinary human

experience," even though the thought of sex with something so otherworldly repulses her (*Dawn* 168). As Nancy Jesser describes in her article "Blood, Genes and Gender in Octavia Butler's *Kindred* and *Dawn*," the ooloi "produce the acute sense of dissociation of self, felt by the humans as they are programmed to find pleasure in an alternative/perverse sexuality" (46). Xenophobia and homophobia (many humans perceive ooloi as masculine, even though they are ungendered) play a large role in human resistance to the ooloi.

The Oankali have unique sexual relationships and expressions of sexuality. Lilith's ooloi, Nikanj, confuses Lilith when it uses the term "share sex" rather than "have sex" (*Dawn* 101). To the Oankali, expressions of sexuality are shared through mutual contact of sensory tentacles. Therefore, all parties experience the pleasure. Oankali form family relationships with a male, a female, and an ooloi. The male and female are related, often brother and sister or close cousins. Ooloi, the facilitators of sexual relationships, come from another family and are thought of as 'treasured strangers.' Furthermore, Oankali know intuitively about these relationships. Akin insists when questioned, "I've known since I touched my sibling… we were two-thirds of a reproductive unit… My body knows that" (*Adulthood Rites* 137). He knows this because of the Oankali in him, but after his metamorphosis, the humanity in him makes pairing with his sister feel weird and incestuous (*Adulthood Rites* 231). Tino, the new human male in Lilith's family, to adjusts to the different sexuality with difficulty because of his human tendencies. He finds it awkward to relate to Dichaan, the Oankali male, because "he never expected to have a male mate," and, even though their sexual expression pleases Tino, he likely maintains residual homophobia (*Adulthood Rites* 179).

Humans make gender assumptions and prescribe gender characteristics. Oankali, however, smash gender prescription and transcend traditional normativity, only adapting gender when necessary for balance. Upon first meeting one of her alien hosts Lilith asks if the alien is a male or female, to which he responds, "'It's wrong to assume that I must be a sex you are familiar with'" (*Dawn*, 12). Additionally, Oankali children are sexless until adolescence at which point they take on the gender that best balances their family structure. Twice in *Dawn* men assume their ooloi are more male than neuter where Lilith "'[takes] their word for what they are'" (*Dawn* 92, 179). Some humans question Lilith's femininity because of her augmented strength, saying, "'Only a man can fight that way'" (*Dawn* 154). Akin often notices that human men he interacts with try to intimidate him with their size; he finds this ridiculous (*Adulthood Rites*). He knows that their gendered spectacles of domination mean nothing to him as his strength significantly surpasses all of theirs.

Alien women in Butler's work tend to be heartier, bigger and more robust than males. Oankali females are nearly twice as large as ooloi and are significantly bigger than Oankali males. Women, they explain, need to be larger in order to best nurture and protect children still in the womb. In "Bloodchild," Tlic females live to extreme ages: "[T'Gatoi] was nearly three time my mother's present age, yet would still be young when my mother died of age" ("Bloodchild" 8). They measure three meters long and are strong enough to overpower any human. Compared to Females, Male Tlic live much shorter lives. Butler's reversals of physical power dynamics logically support her model for a new humanity.

The introduction of a new species into sexual relationships requires a restructuring of sexual ideas and behaviors. As Eva Federmayer writes, "The utopian thrust of Butler's trilogy, then, crucially depends on cyborg identities and [cooperation] with aliens" (102). Expectedly, this cooperation causes backlash among many of the human characters in Butler's novels. Joseph, Lilith's first human mate, distrusts the experiences Nikanj gives him, insisting they are illusions (*Dawn* 198). Now that Lilith has bonded with Nikanj, her new sexual partner Tino cannot separate the two of them because "Lilith and Nikanj were a pair somehow" (*Adulthood Rites* 43). Castleberry believes the introduction of an alien species can be representative of homosexuality: "The frontrunners of using homosexuality in [science fiction] didn't use it directly—they used intermediaries, such as aliens or a "third" sex to get their point across" (13). This is unlikely to be Butler's intention because Oankali pair solely for reproduction. However, Butler may be suggesting a naturalization of alternative sexualities because the Oankali can communicate—as in talk, get feelings across, and provide immense pleasure—with all other Oankali people. Family joining for them does require polyamory, but no limitations exist on pleasurable interactions outside the family unit with people of any gender.

**A New Family Structure**

Lilith's characterization in the *Xenogenesis* novels shapes the nature and the tone of the novels, foreshadowing the role the Oankali have for her. *Dawn* opens with a section entitled "Womb" and Lilith curled in a fetal position, setting the tone of motherhood and deliverance for the trilogy. Also, before the nuclear war on earth, Lilith birthed her children naturally and not in a hospital—she didn't "like the idea of being treated as though [she] were sick" (*Dawn* 94). Because she was chosen by the aliens, Lilith, "has to negotiate her role as 'race mother'" (Federmayer 102). The Oankali find her strength, adaptability and intelligence suit Lilith perfectly for her task of assimilating the first humans.

Outside of the novels, the name Lilith bears a great deal of significance when analyzed concurrently with the protagonist's role of 'race mother' in the novels. Indeed, Lilith admits it is an "unusual name loaded with bad connotations." (*Adulthood Rites* 36). Lilith, a prominent figure in Judeo-Christian mythology, takes on numerous incarnations throughout Europe and the Middle East (Dame, Rivlin, Wenkart 7). She is said to be the first woman God created, formed "just as he had formed Adam, from pure dust" (5). Unlike Eve, Lilith denies Adam's claim to dominance. When Adam insisted she lie beneath him during sex and force her obedience, "Lilith chose to leave Adam and live alone by the Red Sea" (5). Here she experienced great sexual freedom, copulating with half-humans and birthing demonic babies. Many incarnations of the myth portray her as a demon or a witch, at fault for such horrific deeds as infant mortality and nocturnal emissions. But feminist religious scholars have since deconstructed the myth of Lilith and find her actions empowering. In fact, "Some scholars suggest that the extant myths may have been rewritten from an earlier gynocratic mythology." Perhaps "the male mind, in order to cope with sharp-witted females, could only imagine a demonic explanation" (10). Butler's choice to name the protagonist Lilith underlines her role in the new civilization. Furthermore, the Oankali place Lilith and her people in a pollutant-free and genetically supplemented jungle wilderness, bearing uncanny similarity to the Garden of Eden. Maybe Bulter wishes to indicate that humankind would have been different and better had the biblical Lilith been the woman Adam paired with and that this nuclear war is a chance to start that superior humanity.

Though much about them is different, the Oankali share many similarities to the positive characteristics of humans. Their definition of "parenting" bears similarity to a human's: "'To teach, to give comfort, to feed and clothe, to guide them through and interpret what will be, for them, a new and frightening world'" (*Dawn* 116). An important note is the gender neutrality of the word "parent," as the alien family structure does not place emphasis on either "fathering" or "mothering." Oankali still experience feelings much as humans do. They require balanced nourishment and exercise. And they have an easy time relating to the humans on personal levels. Butler's characterization of the Oankali illustrates as much resemblance to humans as possible while still keeping a degree of foreignness. By doing this she paints them as an exemplary species, a level of being humans could possess but for the disposition favorable to power relationships.

Butler's aliens have unique family structures. The Oankali's involves up to five parents and the families are perfectly balanced. "Akin spent some part of the day with each of his parents" rather than being unequally raised solely by one of his parents (*Adulthood Rites* 12). Akin recognizes this need for balance when he admits already thinking of his unborn, ungendered sibling as a sister (13). Dichaan, the Oankali male involved in Lilith's family unit, feels the new human male, Tino, in the group provides "a balance found after painful years of imbalance." He feels the imbalance more than any other because he "had been born to work with a Human male parallel" (64). In this family there is no concept of adultery because each Oankali can communicate feelings, sensations and pleasures to any other being; family relationships are to benefit child rearing and have no undertones of possession (224). The Tlic family structure is well controlled: only one female allowed to breed. Other sisters remain sterile and provide unfertilized eggs to heighten the health of the humans. Males seldom factor into this equation at all; they live such brief lives and spend as much of it as possible copulating. But the Tlic incorporate humans into their family in order to best suit both species' needs, causing everyone to have "a personal stake in keeping the peace" ("Bloodchild" 12). Gan's mother and T'Gatoi both went through adolescence together and T'Gatoi is equally as protective of Gan as his mother. When another Tlic learns her surrogate, Lomas, has just violently had the implanted larva removed, the first thing she asks is whether Lomas is safe ("Bloodchild" 18). These

family structures indicate a multitude of ways to organize families in order that all parties involved are safe, satisfied and well taken care of.

Butler's fiction imagines a great deal of changes in birthing routines and standards. After publishing these books under the name *Xenogenesis*, Butler made the decision to change the name to *Lilith's Brood*, a more gripping and evocatively natal title. When Joseph dies and Lilith and Nikanj are left without a male to balance the relationship, Nikanj impregnates Lilith with Joseph's child by simply manipulating her cell structure and using genetic remnants of Joseph's biology (261). This child, immaculately conceived, will be the first genetic mix of both species. Already discussed is the importance of Lilith's name, both in relation to mythology and the Genesis of the human race; now that the protagonist Lilith will be bearing myriad mongrel children the comparison is even more befitting. Construct children, as Akin describes, can remember their time in the womb vividly (*Adulthood Rites* 3). During the Oankali birth, "[The Oankali female] needed all her mates near her, touching her, needed to be able to link into them and feel the parts of her child that had come from them" (*Adulthood Rites* 82). This need for closeness parallels human birth, but the difference is the other Oankali's recognition of their absolute need to be present. The text suggests that humans should adapt to value this need as well.

The aliens impose a few birthing restrictions in both the novels and the short story. After pairing with the ooloi, the humans no longer have a desire to mate with each other and are actually repulsed when an ooloi is not present for the interaction (*Dawn* 234). Nikanj admits the Oankali did this to curb dangerous over-population by rebellious humans (*Adulthood Rites* 42). In "Bloodchild," designated family members provide sterile eggs to give health benefits and pleasure to humans. The suppliers of these eggs are the "sterile sisters" because there is only "one fertile female in every lot" ("Bloodchild" 23). Additionally, Tlic officials safeguard and carefully dole out humans to deserving Tlic families. T'Gatoi recollects a time when humans were caged and treated as nothing more than animals. With the current arrangement, T'Gatoi manages the Preserve where the humans stay and protects them from greedy and desperate Tlic would-be rapists.

Not only do birthing rituals change in Butler's work, in "Bloodchild" she reverses the roles of birth to balance the gendered roles society dictates. An Afterword to "Bloodchild" declares Butler wanted to "write a story in which a man chose to become pregnant *not* through some sort of misplaced competitiveness to prove that a man could do anything a woman could do, not because he was forced to, not even out of curiosity" ("Bloodchild" 30). As Elyce Helford points out, the world of the Tlic is one of "a biologically determined matriarchy" (10). The females hold the positions of power because such comes naturally. In addition, when T'Gatoi goes to impregnate Gan with her eggs, she penetrates him to implant her fertilized egg, providing a description that "clearly complicates the traditional gendering of sexual imagery" (Helford 9). This birthing process bases itself on alien biology and its impact on the human body, just as pre-feminist conceptions of intercourse were centered on a male (subject) affecting the female (object). Displacing the act of penetration onto males deconstructs typical sexual narratives.

**A New Humanity**

Butler uses her fiction to point out the many shortcomings and deficiencies of humanity. Before the novel begins, when the Oankali first encountered humans, "It hurt some of them to touch" these humans; they "had never before seen so much life and so much death in one being" (*Dawn* 25). This "the human contradiction,"—as it is referred to in the rest of the book—defines humans as intelligent but also possessing a propensity toward hierarchical behavior. The latter genetic tendency selects in breeding and holds humankind back, limiting it. Many of the humans Lilith teaches feel that pairing off and mating with each other is necessary for survival, to the point that they would rape in order to accomplish this (*Dawn* 187). To Lilith this is unacceptable: "'There'll be no rape here… Nobody here is property. Nobody here has the right to the use of anybody else's body. There'll be no back-to-the-Stone-Age, caveman bullshit!'" (*Dawn* 188). That these humans believe rape the only option for human survival, and that Butler uses Lilith's dialogue to hearken back to humanity's conception, indicates a flawed human mentality. Human males cannot feel the magic of bearing a child inside of them as females can. However, the Oankali can simulate that feeling and share it between the genders, allowing for greater understanding and empathy (*Adulthood Rites* 55). When Akin returns to the village in which he spent much of his

childhood, he encounters a mother-like figure, the one who nurtured him while he was stranded with the humans, in poor physical health. He asks to help her by entering her nervous system and fixing the problems directly. But her human husband, suspicious and petty, does not trust Akin to heal his wife (*Adulthood Rites* 248). Another representation of humanity's appalling nature, this human would put his hatred and racist feelings before his wife's physical wellbeing,

Despite human deficiencies, they are still undeniably alluring to the Oankali and beneficial to the Tlic. Humans inexorably draw the Oankali because they present such a curious and strong genetic contradiction. Also, during the gene trade the humans gave the Oankali cancer, a fascinating anomaly in the eyes of the new species. Ooloi have the ability to manipulate cellular biology and structure; with the existence of cancer they see endless possibilities like limb regrowth, enhanced musculature and beyond. Humans in Butler's fiction often augment alien lifestyles. After human contact, the previously stagnating Tlic begin to flourish. T'Gatoi says to Gan: "'because your people arrived, we are relearning what it means to be a healthy, thriving people'" ("Bloodchild" 25). She suggests that neither species was perfect before but now that they have each other they can learn how to cooperate and live better. It seems Butler is not completely skeptical of human capability.

Because humans fear change, they come into direct conflict with the Oankali, a species with a genetic imperative toward change. When presented with an offer to be changed by an ooloi, Lilith reacts negatively even though the change would give her increased strength, resistance to disease and an eidetic memory. Peter, one of the most resistant and hateful humans Lilith has to teach, finds the manipulation by the ooloi frightening and emasculating (*Dawn* 203). Butler takes this opportunity to express how removing dynamics of masculinity from human nature is ultimately positive. While captive, Akin constantly questions the human motives to remain unhealthy and infertile when pairing with an ooloi and working logically with the Oankali solves these problems (*Adulthood Rites* 69). Conversely, Tino, a full human, laments leaving his family and joining with the Oankali because he feels he is "a traitor to [his] people" (*Adulthood Rites* 180). This view comes from him being one of the last humans who still lays claim to complete humanity yet he helps the other species proliferate half-breeds. However, Nikanj makes an interesting parallel:

> 'Examine Tino. Inside him, so many different things are working together to keep him alive. Inside his cells, mitochondria, a previously independent form of life, have found a haven and trade their ability to synthesize proteins and metabolize fats for room to live and reproduce. We're in his cells too now, and the cells have accepted us. One Oankali organism within each cell, dividing with each cell, extending life, and resisting disease… They could not exist without symbiotic relationships with other creatures. Yet such relationships frighten them.' (*Adulthood Rites* 183)

Nikanj's also cites the quantities of bacteria that also find shelter in the human body. Its unflappable logic still conflicts with human fear and irrationality. The humans in these novels do not realize humanity and Earth, as they stand after the nuclear war, are doomed. Each Oankali comprehends that coming to the aid of humans was the only viable option.

What the Oankali and the Tlic do to humans can be viewed as colonization or slavery, but such an analysis is too simplistic; Butler provides numerous cues that speak to a different, new kind of relationship. Holden writes, "The Oankali consumption of difference turns out to be not much better than the human repudiation of difference; both result in a domination and/or erasure of the 'other'" (51). This is not true. Each of the constructs has both Oankali *and* human genes equally present in their biology. Rather than an erasure, the Oankali provide a single, more perfect species with the union of both. Also, the Oankali split up into three groups: Dinso to bond with the new species on the planet; Toaht to bond with the new species in the safety of their mother ship; and Akjai to remain as they were before bonding in case the mix turns out disastrous. After his time with the humans, Akin understands their rationale and realizes that the humans need an Akjai group in order to have another chance at life their own way. Though many Oankali resist, Akin convinces them and the dissident, pure humans are given a second home on Mars. Additionally, when Akin communes with one of the animals the Oankali use for transportation he makes an interesting discovery: "Oankali simply bred animals who did not want to stray and who enjoyed doing what they were intended to do. They were also pleased to be rewarded with new sensations or pleasurable familiar sensations" (*Adulthood Rites* 203). Because the animal maintains a desire to remain in service, the best relationship the two species can

have is a symbiosis. This relationship mirrors White Man's Burden to a degree, but with crucial differences. First, the Oankali can directly link into the nervous system of other animals and people to feel with them. Any dissatisfaction, pain, or injustice would only be magnified in such a union. Therefore, all of the creatures the Oankali meet and bond with benefit from symbiotic rather than colonial relationships. T'Gatoi, and the other Tlic government officials, "Parceled [humans] out to the desperate and sold [them] to the rich and powerful for their political support" ("Bloodchild" 5). But Gan makes clear that the humans are an independent people. Before T'Gatoi advocated for humans, the Tlic would break up human families and use their bodies without any regard. Current relations changed for the betterment of humans. Without the protection of T'Gatoi's political faction, the hoards of desperate Tlic would enslave the humans rather than cohabitate and respect them as a sentient species. T'Gatoi assures Gan he, rather than just the role he plays, bears importance to her: "'You know you aren't animals to us'" ("Bloodchild" 24). Relating Tlic/human to human/animal relationships alludes in an abstract way to marginalization by patriarchal society and how it is similar to human subjection of animals. Additionally, Gan demands he keep the gun that is illegal in order to balance the relationship between them, insisting, "If we're not your animals… accept the risk" ("Bloodchild" 26). Gan's actions equalize the two characters, showing a complex series of interactions that blur the lines of subject/object. Though analyzing Butler's work in terms of colonizer/colonized relationships is appealing and thought provoking, the argument carries less weight than some commentators think. These new relationships must be thought of as completely separate from the dynamics of modern human relationships because Butler constructs a new kind of life, a new humanity.

**Conclusion**

Critics discuss Butler's work as not post-gender because many of her main characters reinforce traditional female roles. According to Nancy Jesser, "Butler offers some counter narratives to the most retrograde of evolutionary biology, [but] she continues to be very much bound to the explanatory and predictive power of genetic sexual difference" (42). This interpretation, however, is insufficient. Butler may use traditional sex roles to describe her humans and her alien reproduction, but she only does so to recognize that gender differences do indeed exist today. Her exemplary species, the Oankali, use gender for the mating and parenting necessities, showing that since sex remains reproductively essential, it should be *socially imposed* gender differences that go by the wayside. While the deficient humans maintain these differences and the male tendency to dominate, the male and female Oankali have few differences and both recognize their purpose and requirement in social life.

Butler's work pleas for humankind to fix itself and remedy its shortcomings; she appeals humans to embrace change. In an interview with Charlie Rose on an NPR broadcast Butler discusses these failings: "There are times I know we can do better than we have because we have done better—but I don't know if we will. I know that I want us to do better, I want us to focus on other things" (2000). In the fantastic worlds Butler creates humanity can improve by casting off the defects and imperfections of humanness. Her characters, dehumanized in some way or form, find their solution is not to re-humanize, but rather to transcend character weaknesses inherent with "the human contradiction." Is it possible for modern humanity to accomplish such a goal? Butler, rather than constructing a post-gendered world, creates a species that balances the roles of different genders while still recognizing the reality of each sex. Even with Butler's appeals, though, it is unlikely mankind will go off the path of expediency and desert hierarchic predilections—barring, perhaps, nuclear war.

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