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Elizabeth Rutkowski

Posthuman and Alien Breeding: The Implications of Cybersex in Octavia Butler's *Dawn*

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Posthuman and Alien Breeding: The Implications of Cybersex in Octavia Butler's *Dawn*

by

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### *Introduction*

Speculative science fiction affords new ways for authors to represent social problems of the modern day in an apocalyptic manner. Authors such as Octavia Butler use science fiction to analyze social injustices revolving around race, gender, and sexuality. Throughout her novel *Dawn*, Butler uses the posthuman to represent minority groups in the late twentieth century. The posthuman represents those who have moved from humanity towards a new opportunity that is mixed with the potential for struggle.<sup>1</sup> As demonstrated through Butler's work posthumanism blurs the lines between binaries such as male / female, straight / gay, and consensual / non-consensual performance. Focusing on the empowering act of sex, agency is deconstructed in science fiction as the influence of the actual alien other transforms notions of power.

When a consensual agreement is made, sex can be empowering to the individual. Going beyond the contemporary human into the posthuman of the sci-fi realm the act of sex is transformed. Scholars Luciana Parisi and Federica Caporaso term this transformative sex of the future as "cybersex." Cybersex is defined as the sexual interactions between the posthuman and alien "others" where genetic and cranial material is transferred and stored into a web of information. The use of cybersex is most apparent in science fiction texts such as Butler's first novel to the *Xenogenesis Trilogy*, *Dawn*. Speculative science fiction allows a space for non-heteronormative people to occupy where they can have a sense of agency that would not be present in a white-centered heteropatriarchy. By normalizing previously believed "abnormal"

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<sup>1</sup> See Jelaca Dijana's "Alien Feminisms and Cinema's Posthuman Women." Dijana argues the posthuman is directly connected to feminism, making what is now known as humanity open for new opportunities but also for struggles. Focusing her argument around feminism, Dijana combines posthumanism with alien feminisms.

sexualities, queer themes (such as cybersex) creates a space for multi-identifying types of individuals.

Speculative science fiction analyzes past and present social issues involving gender, sexuality, and race which are interwoven into the text's primary storyline. Butler performs this interconnectedness throughout her novel *Dawn* where she analyzes various social injustices through a speculative lens. By incorporating elements of power structures with the skepticism of the characters, specifically Lilith and Joseph, surrounding the act of cybersex, Butler's novel questions notions of authority. The protagonist Lilith has awakened on a space ship orbiting Earth's atmosphere after being rescued from a nuclear war. Lilith struggles to trust her alien saviors as they are highly skilled gene traders and have performed nonconsensual surgery on Lilith's body. Following her journey on board the living space craft Lilith becomes the new leader to a rescued group of humans who distrust her and the alien Oankali.

Butler's text utilizes elements of Afrofuturism to parallel the treatment of the humans, in the position of slaves, to that of the Oankali, slave owners. Analyzing how gender, power, and Afrofuturism function in the text is crucial to understanding how cybersex connects these elements to determine whether Butler's future is utopian or dystopian. Parisi and Caporaso argue cybersex in *Dawn* is a "new prosthetic extension of human sex, the prolongation of sexual pleasure outside of the limits of the body" (171). However, cybersex in Butler's *Xenogenesis Trilogy* is a means of manipulation through pleasurable stimuli controlled by the alien other of the Oankali. Rather than focusing on the sensation of pleasure the Oankali provide for the human race the Oankali are actually stripping away the people's agency, essentially enslaving them through the use of cybersex.

By focusing on posthuman sexual practices, we can track the pattern of change between human mating and posthuman alien breeding. With this development of alien and human mating in *Dawn*, the question emerges: is this hybrid method of sexuality problematic for our concept of the “human race?” If humans can have sexual relations with non-human partners who are able to manipulate and transfer DNA, then a new alien-human species could emerge. Would this be threatening for the remaining human species survival? If the transferring of DNA is not known by the human partner then is the act of cybersex actually consensual?

Speculative science fiction allows the possibility for contemporary readers to think through these novels with an allegorical framework. In *Dawn*, Butler uses metaphors to illustrate real world issues involving gender, sexuality, and race. By transforming these modern-day issues into science fiction, she is targeting a specific audience who would not normally acknowledge those problems. When *Dawn* was published in the eighties, the prominent audience for science fiction was white males.<sup>2</sup> This target audience was not actively involved in social injustices such as inequalities faced by people of color and women. Butler’s novel offers an allegorical reading that mirrors real world problems faced during the late twentieth century. However, her argument is disguised underneath bio-technological elements of the text. Questions regarding the transferring of DNA and consensual cybersex illustrate the violence that is often taken against not only women in heteronormative society but people of color as well. Asking these questions is crucial to our own understanding of development and survival and can move away from the discussion surrounding the posthuman in the novel.

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<sup>2</sup> The dominant audience for science fiction in the 1980s was young white hetero males. See John Tulloch and Henry Jenkins, *Science Fiction Audiences: Watching Doctor Who and Star Trek*.



Cybersex is used throughout the novel to connect the themes of Afrofuturism, power, and gender. Cybersex is more than the pleasurable act of connecting sensory organs in a physical manner. There is a deeper connection that is formed when the Ooloi plug into the nervous system and chemically alter the way humans behave and experience their surroundings. Caporaso further defines cybersex with the Oankali as “metaphorical bridges that link humanity to its next evolutionary stage, but they are also physical bridges able to connect several bodies to one-another so as to let genetic material and pleasure flow through assemblies of up to five bodies that can communicate among themselves” (171). The Ooloi are compared to bridges both in a physical and metaphysical sense as they transfer information not only from each other but from human to human as well. This allows genetic information and pleasurable sensations to be passed around similar to an exchange of goods. By making the human genetic material comparable to transferable goods, Butler has created a capitalistic quality to the plot of the text. Thus, critiquing the way contemporary society functions underneath capitalism’s control, and equating the human race to slaves.

The Oankali use their physical bodies as a method of transferring the genetic material, placing them in a position of control and demoting the humans to merely an object to be traded. Thus, cybersex allows the Oankali to control the human’s emotions and blurs their ability to see what is happening around them. The Oankali exchange pleasurable sensations through sex to obtain the genetic material they desire in order to create a new alien sub species. Even though it seems as if both human and alien are obtaining what they want, the human with pleasure and the alien with commerce, this sets up the plot to extinguish the human race. The commerce the Oankali receive in exchange for the human’s savior is their genetic material which holds a value similar to money. This demonstrates how pleasure acts as a means of control in science fiction as

humans tend to be pleasure-seeking animals. Butler demonstrates a mutually reinforcing relationship of pleasure and power through the Oankali and posthuman characters. By giving all the power to the Oankali, Butler is illustrating how even egalitarian societies still utilize a hierarchal structure that is deeply rooted in capitalism. The pleasure the posthuman characters, such as Lilith, are desperate to achieve is an allegorical reflection on how people behave according to their desires in modern society. Without the physical pleasure that accompanies the Oankali's touch, the humans would continue to be repulsed by them. Therefore, they would have a better chance of survival.

*A Review of Scholarship on the Passive-Aggressive Nature of the Oankali*

Speculative sci-fi theorists agree *Dawn* is representative of a future built upon pressing social issues of the twentieth century such as gender, sexuality, and race. However, it is debatable whether Butler's Oankali society reflects a utopian egalitarian future or an impending dystopian one constructed on notions of racism, sexism, and patriarchal power. It is clear the Oankali live in an equal classless society within their own species, however the treatment of the "rescued" humans are questionable. Just as Lilith is skeptical of the true motives behind the Oankali rescuing mankind, scholars debate whether their actions position them as saviors or captors.

Jessie Stickgold believes *Dawn* represents a dystopian society symbolizing a slave structure because of the Oankali's position of power over the human "captives." Butler incorporates breeding programs and genetic manipulation throughout her novel to demonstrate the invasiveness of the alien organisms (414). By analyzing the negative consequences of the Oankali's control over the human captives, Stickgold states Butler's text encompasses a slave narrative as Lilith's physical body is violated by the Oankali. Fundamentally, "Butler's work

imagines scenarios in which the boundaries of the human are pushed to their limits, and although she articulates those limits she is constantly engaged with the possibility of transformation” (416). The transformation Stickgold discusses is illustrated through the human and alien involvement in cybersex. Cybersex is represented to Stickgold through the pushing of the human’s limits which is done for them to “transform” their biological bodies into an improved being. By connecting into the human’s nervous system with their sensory arms the Oankali are able to genetically modify, surgically enhance, and manipulate the humans into submission. This is seen as an improvement on the human’s physical being because their bodies are more advanced, more adaptable.

Adaptability is one of Lilith’s triumphant characteristics as she is able to adjust to the presence of the Oankali easier than the other humans. Butler’s text demonstrates various ethnic diversities of people adapting to their surroundings throughout her novel. Jennifer Nelson argues Butler’s novel does this in order to act as a speculative representation of civil rights and social issues in the Twentieth Century. Nelson claims, “Butler’s narrative traces post-singularity society’s development through multiple, hybrid generations to deconstruct the fictions of transcultural reciprocity on which Western imperialisms’ triangulated system of global exploitation depend” (89). In this context Nelson explains post-singularity as a futuristic point in time in which bio-technical growth results in incomprehensible changes to human civilization. She believes Butler’s political agenda is deeply rooted within the text through the Oankali’s Western derived power structure. By portraying political and social injustices through a futuristic scope Butler provides her audience with an accessible approach to enter into the conversation regarding civil rights for African Americans. This is demonstrated through Lilith, the African American protagonist, in her journey to understand the Oankali’s society. Douglas Dewitt agrees

with Nelson that most science fiction texts are written in order to symbolize a greater political or social problem. Focusing his research on Afrofuturism DeWitt argues: “The methods by which we examine the history of race (and racism) in science fiction have also multiplied.

Afrofuturism, for example, reveals that sf conventions and narratives have an appeal beyond stereotypes of its core audience of adolescent white males” (16). The rise of Afrofuturism as a popular science fiction convention introduced twentieth-century readers to real political and social concerns. DeWitt argues Butler’s text is Afrofuturist as it centralizes an African American female character who metaphorically and physically births a new race. Similar, to Nelson’s argument regarding *Dawn* as a novel with a political agenda, DeWitt agrees that Butler’s intentions were to make her readers aware of the social and political injustices that were happening during the late Twentieth Century, thus, positioning themselves on the side of the debate which argues the Oankali are symbolic of slave captors.

Radical notions of slavery are portrayed through Butler’s novel as argued by Nelson and DeWitt. Claire Curtis enters the conversation agreeing with their research stating the manipulation of genes by the Oankali through pleasurable stimuli (cybersex) acts as a form of enslavement. By analyzing the Oankali’s actions towards the humans and humanity Curtis believes the aliens put on a seductive appearance in order to lure the humans into their control. Curtis argues this is done so the Oankali can eliminate humanity which is the fundamental problem the Oankali believe needs to be fixed. Ultimately Curtis centers her argument on the Oankali’s seductive nature and how it effects the biological tendencies inside the humans, thus forcing them to become slaves.

Many scholars agree Butler’s novel is representative of a dystopian society as through the usage of cybersex as a tool of manipulation as well as through the power structure between the

Oankali and the humans. However, some scholars do believe *Dawn* symbolizes a progressive ecological future. Andrew Pilsner argues from an ecocritical perspective that the living biological space ship which encompasses the setting of the novel, illustrates the conscious motives of the Oankali to co-exist in harmony with every aspect of life. Nolan Belk agrees Butler's emphasis on the biological nature of the space ship and symbiotic relationship of the Oankali to their surroundings affords them total control over their environment. It is because of the Oankali's mastery over DNA both within themselves and within other species that they are considered to be "gene engineers" (377). Even though this may portray the Oankali as manipulative or dangerous Belk argues it demonstrates their cooperativity with the living beings around them. Belk suggests that the Oankali's handling and transferring of DNA could resemble what Jessie Stickgold called a "breeding program." However, he argues this is done to preserve humanity after a nuclear war destroyed most of the human population.

Speculative science fiction represents political and social problems often through a non-heteronormative scope. Butler's *Dawn* encompasses issues of the past including gender, sexuality, and race. Following Lilith through her journey as a "maternal" figure scholars continue to debate whether the text is representative of a utopian or dystopian future. Although many scholars agree the novel portrays issues of slavery and racism others still believe the text illustrates what a successful egalitarian society can be modeled after. Focusing on the biological structure of the human body and the alien form, scholars continue to debate whether the Oankali's position as "genetic engineers" is pessimistic or progressive. Ultimately it is agreed upon cybersex throughout *Dawn* is used as a tool of power for both safe and corrupt usage.

*Afrofuturism (An Alien Reflection of the Past)*

Afrofuturism plays a crucial role in the novel as Butler writes about social issues that exist in the modern day that represent aspects of slavery in the past as seen through scholar's arguments on the text.<sup>3</sup> Butler uses cybersex as an erotic form of enslavement which is represented through Lilith, who illustrates the distinction of the power structure between the Oankali and the humans through her interactions with both species.

How the humans choose to behave on board the space craft impacts their chance for survival and escaping the Oankali, gaining their freedom. In order to pass the trials set in place by the Oankali, the humans must be bonded to an Ooloi, meaning they have to allow the Ooloi to connect into the human's nervous system through cybersex. In a similar way to how Lilith engaged with Joseph and Nikanj, forcing them to become chemically dependent on the pleasure they received. In this way, the humans are aiding to their own entrapment; it is a cyclical cycle of attempting to cooperate with the Oankali but ultimately further enslaving themselves. By obeying the Oankali's rules the humans are willingly forfeiting their agency, believing that will ultimately lead to their freedom. However, the humans are instead ingraining themselves deeper into the Oankali society, destroying their own chances for survival as an independent species.

Once Lilith is awakened her body is no longer her own. Instantly she becomes the property of the Oankali, specifically Nikanj who she was forced to bond with through its sexual maturity. Lilith soon understands her own entrapment on board the ship and accepts that she is not in control of her surroundings or her physical body. Lilith admits, "They knew how she would react to just about everything they put her through. And they knew how to manipulate her, maneuver her into doing whatever they wanted" (90). The Oankali are expert manipulators, their

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<sup>3</sup> Scholars such as Claire Curtis, Kilgore DeWitt, Veronica Hollinger, Nancy Jesser, Jennifer Nelson, and Jessie Stickgold-Sarah all argue for Afrofuturist readings of *Dawn*.

gene trading skills allow them to transfer DNA as well as to alter the chemical effects of the brain. Their manipulation tactics go beyond psychological as they are physically able to persuade the human's through their desire for cybersex. Some scholars<sup>4</sup> argue they can be seen as "rescuers" or "peace makers" however they have intervened in the "saving" of the human race only to receive genetic material in exchange. It is also unethical that the Oankali decide who is fit to return to Earth and who must stay within the alien population. The Oankali decide who may return to Earth to repopulate the planet based on a series of behavioral tests. Only the posthumans who have proven to be non-violent, submissive, and intellectually capable are able to return to their home planet. However, they will still be accompanied by the Ooloi who are the posthumans only option for breeding. This ultimately will create a new sub species of Oankali and human that will inhabit the Earth, eliminating the potential for the posthuman to regain their humanity. This illustrates how the Oankali believe themselves to be superior to their captives, thus showing their sinister and truer intentions of both mating with and breeding the remaining humans.

Lilith's manipulation goes beyond her physical and metaphysical modifications. At the end of the novel, Nikanj announces to Lilith she is pregnant carrying a hybrid baby that is a result of her DNA combined with Joseph's and Nikanj's. This is a betrayal of truth as Lilith was originally told her internal structure was altered similar to the way birth control functions so she would not become pregnant until she was ready. Nikanj decided for her that she was ready to have a baby and chemically altered her body to adjust accordingly, thus stripping Lilith of the little agency she had. Nikanj says, "I have made you pregnant with Joseph's child. I wouldn't

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<sup>4</sup> Scholars such as Nolan Belk, Federica Caporaso, Michelle Osherow, and Andrew Pilsner all argue the Oankali are representative of peace makers or rescuers.

have done it so soon, but I wanted to use his seed, not a print” (245). In which Lilith declares “I’m not ready! I’ll never be ready!” (246). Nikanj controls this crucial choice for Lilith, illustrating how little power she really has in the Oankali society. Nikanj’s language emphasizes he wanted to use Joseph’s “seed” which relates to planting or growing crops. This highlights the real use of Lilith and Joseph as they are merely crops for the Oankali to breed, grow, and harvest for their own purpose. They are not considered to be human or even posthuman as they lost all of their agency and humanness, making them no more than an object to be capitalized from. This shows how Afrofuturism functions within the text as the notions of slavery resonate very strongly here as Lilith’s pregnancy resembles a historical practice of breeding slaves.<sup>5</sup> Stripping her of all her agency and giving her no choice in whether or not she wanted to carry a baby, Nikanj displays its role as the master in this scenario. Lilith’s engagement in a cyber sexual and emotionally manipulated relationship with Nikanj led to her own enslavement.

The Oankali’s reasoning for keeping the human race hostage on their ship and denying them the freedom to return to Earth is for their own benefit, contrary to what they tell the humans. The Oankali claim to have “saved” the human race from extinction however, they demand human genetic material in return as a type of trade or payment. They are exchanging human freedom for sexual reproduction through cybersex, yet their procreation with the Oankali leads to non-reproductive freedom in the Oankali social and genetic order. Donna Haraway argues, “Sexual reproduction is one kind of reproductive strategy among many, with costs and benefits as a function of the system environment. Ideologies of sexual reproduction can no longer reasonably call on notions of sex and sex roles as organic aspects in natural objects like

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<sup>5</sup> Claire Curtis, Kilgore DeWitt, Veronica Hollinger, Nancy Jesser, Jennifer Nelson, and Jessie Stickgold-Sarah all discuss the implications of science fiction texts and slave breeding, reflecting on the circumstances of contemporary social inequalities.



organisms and families” (317). Sexual reproduction acts as a means of commerce and in Butler’s novel is used as a form of labor. Reproductive labor in the text is portrayed through Butler’s use of organic and natural imagery while building upon the nature and maternal binary. The images of the ship are very organic which aligns with Lilith as a maternal leader to an almost extinct race of people. This connects to Haraway’s statement that sexual reproduction is a function of the environment as the Oankali essentially breed Lilith with Joseph in order to produce more commerce.

Upon awakening, each of the humans locate a mate which the Oankali purposefully placed in order to increase the chances of sexual reproduction. By making the humans physically disgusted by the touch of one another, they will use the Ooloi as a barrier in order to breed, thus creating a means of sexual and reproductive labor. Through the cybernetic sexual encounters with the Oankali, the humans, specifically Lilith, surrender their genetic material in an act of sexual reproduction to further advance what Caporaso calls an “alien subspecies.” In order to create this subspecies, or alien human hybrid, the Oankali paired various males and females together. Staying relatively vague and attempting to show Lilith that the Oankali allow the humans to have independence, Nikanj said, “I offered you to one another. The two of you did your own choosing” (165). Although Nikanj’s language seems unproblematic, it did admit that “they [Ooloi] agreed that the two should be together” (165). Nikanj and the other Ooloi are not the only ones though who believed in paired relationships among the humans. Curt shouted, “One man, one woman. Nobody has the right to hold out” (177). Even some of the more aggressive humans agree with the mating practices of the Oankali as the humans tended to pair together in hetero relationships. Even when Curt proclaimed, “one man, one woman” it was still problematically sexist. Butler does this to critique the way most people in contemporary

capitalistic society exhibit sexist behaviors. Curt in this context is representational of white, heteronormative society. Opposingly, in Nikanj's case it was not necessarily sexist yet it was demonstrating the power it held over the choices Lilith made, placing her in the position as a slave.

It is through the sexual encounters that Lilith experiences with Nikanj which makes her susceptible to the Oankali's control as she is addicted to the pleasurable simulations they provide for her. Similar to a drug addiction, the Oankali alter the receptors in the nervous system to control Lilith through cybersex. This illustrates how harmful Lilith's addiction is to the Oankali's pleasure as well as the extent of awareness the aliens are of their own power over the humans. In conversation with science fiction texts cybersex encourages the posthuman to stray farther away from humanity and towards something that is more "other." Specifically, something that is a blend of human and Oankali. By combining the two species the humans will suffer extinction and a new subspecies will emerge.

Extinction is an extreme allegorical framework that Butler has created to illustrate the correlation between the abused posthumans and African Americans throughout history. Butler offers this version of the humans going extinct in order to create urgency in the text. This allows for readers to see the problematic treatment not only of minorities, people of color and women, but also showing what will happen if there is no change in action. Just as Lilith's agency is continuously stripped throughout the novel, so is that of many women and people of color in the real world. Butler uses this speculative text to demonstrate the extremity and urgency of what can happen when a hierarchal power is in control and operates under a capitalistic mode.

*Power (Alien Sexualized Power)*

Caporaso argues cybersex in *Dawn* is the Ooloi's way of, "modifying all the traditional modalities of sexual coupling and re-think reproduction by blurring the limits of the human bodies so as to anticipate the unknown potentialities" (170). This cross-species breeding combines the DNA of both Oankali and human to create a surreal experience of pleasure for the human, creating what C. Peppers calls an "alien humanity." Although the cross breeding of alien and human species is not negative, Caporaso fails to mention the intentions of the Oankali. By providing the humans with extraordinarily pleasurable sensations they cannot find anywhere else, the Oankali have rendered the human race helpless. Even Caporaso states there are "unknown potentialities" that comes along with cybersex. Caporaso only focuses on the transformation of the posthuman. These "unknown" factors are never considered in Caporaso's essay, which is critical in distinguishing the role that cybersex has on the posthuman body.

Becoming more "other" is not in itself dangerous as it is detrimental to the human race in regard to cross species breeding. The role of cybersex is used as a way to manipulate and control the human race through pleasurable stimulations. Even though there seems to be gender equality throughout the Oankali society, Lilith is forced into carrying an alien child she that had no consent in its conception. This goes against the beginning of the text when Nikanj assured Lilith it would not impregnate her until she was ready but then never gave her the chance to voice her own agency. Essentially, Nikanj prohibits Lilith from giving any consent over her own body. Even though Caporaso and Parisi argue for cybersex as a positive transformation, Butler's text illustrates how unequal the relationship between Lilith and Nikanj really is. Connecting to the past of slavery, cybersex is used as a tool for breeding humans and furthering the Oankali's plans to eliminate the human race and create a new alien sub species.

Lilith succumbs to the sexual authority of the Oankali by submitting to Nikanj, thus giving up her human power to stop the breeding of a new hybrid species. This is due partially to her inability to have the technological means and organic advancements the Oankali possess. Sheryl Vint argues the use of technology is one of the factors that distinguishes animals from humans. She believes, “Technology, however, is something that humans must master. It is a way of encountering the world as a possibility of tools and resources, a way of bringing forth, but at the same time technology is a way of revealing the world that shapes our understanding and limits our possibilities” (429). One of the failures of Lilith and even the other humans is they do not understand the technology that surrounds them. Even though the Oankali have altered their shapes to slightly represent the stature of a human body, the chemical balances within themselves is unexplainable to Lilith and the other humans. They do not understand the Oankali’s technology because it comes from within the alien themselves, making it difficult to comprehend. Although Lilith is able to manipulate some of the walls and doors that comes from the natural power of the Oankali when they genetically modified her. Even this power Lilith holds was given to her by the Oankali which puts them in a position of power above herself. The human body is unable to perform the same tasks the Oankali do, which is crucial to why Lilith’s body is modified. These modifications afford new possibilities for Lilith which although may seem empowering are actually stripping her of her own humanness forcing her towards the posthuman framework.

The Oankali are described as peaceful beings who have only intervened in the “saving” of the human race to prevent their extinction. Butler describes them as being egalitarian and gentle in nature. However, this is done only to illustrate how appearances can be deadly. Consent is often blurred throughout the text as the Oankali do not value verbal forms of consent but rather

take actions from physical signs. It is through consent, or rather the lack of consent, where the Oankali demonstrate the most of their power. In an attempt to engage in cybersex with Lilith and Joseph how Nikanj interprets consent was shown. Disgusted in repulsion by the physical touch and sight of Nikanj, Joseph refused to engage in cybersex willingly after discovering he was drugged the first time. Nikanj responded by stating, “Your body said one thing. Your words said another” (190). Joseph verbally stated no to cybersex with Nikanj and Lilith, however, because Nikanj sensed that Joseph’s body was sexually aroused it made the decision to engage in the activity anyway, ignoring the verbal statement. This resembles a slave-like relationship as Nikanj believed it had the power to determine whether Joseph was consenting or not based on his physical bodily reaction. Because consent is based on only one of the participants feelings, there is no actual consent happening within the text. Essentially Joseph was raped because he never agreed to cybersex with Nikanj; he only agreed to sex with Lilith. The Oankali use their sexual fluidity and non-normative gender to manipulate the humans into performing sexual acts that will result in the transferring of their DNA. Essentially, the fluidity of Nikanj’s sexuality, and queerness, is a trap.

Lilith’s first encounter with the Oankali was fueled by fear and a deep distrust for her surroundings. However, as the text progressed, Lilith was forced to become physically comfortable with the appearance of the Oankali. Lilith and the other humans are initially physically repulsed from the sight of the Oankali. In a conversation with Joseph Lilith says, “I was shut up for days with one of them before I could touch him... There were times... I’d rather take a beating than go through anything like that again” (Butler 158). The language Lilith uses to describe her experience with the Oankali is slave like in narrative. She was “shut up for days” with Jdahya and was not granted the ability to leave until she “touched him,” which suggests a

sexual act of touching which initially repulsed her. Her narrative continues with her “rather taking a beating” then be forced to stay in the room and touch the Oankali illustrating how disgusted she was by both the creature and the situation. It is not until after Nikanj hooks into her nervous system that she enjoys the touch of the Oankali, however, she is still repulsed by the sight of them. This demonstrates how manipulated she is by the Oankali. This repulsion and desire binary complicates the notion of sexuality being a social power in critical queer theory. Queer theory allows for those who identify outside of heteronormativity to be accepted. Often times sex can be empowering to an individual allowing them to express themselves and feel a sense of agency or even power. However, in the context of the novel, Nikanj uses sex to manipulate and control Lilith through a bio-chemical stimulus in her nervous system. Even though sex should be an empowering act for Lilith, even if it is cybersex, Nikanj uses it as a tool against her own internal structuring.

Although the concept of “othering” a species is seen as a positive characteristic in science fiction, this proves to be highly problematic as it is essentially dehumanizing. Lilith becomes less human and more “other” meaning she is becoming more alien, thus alienating herself from the human species. Although Butler describes Lilith’s enhancements as tools for her transformation into something better that is beyond human and more posthuman, the Oankali’s advancements make Lilith appear more alien. In comparison to xenophobes such as Curt and many of the other awakened humans, Butler does not view Lilith as alien, instead she views her as an enhanced human. However, because of the people that surround Lilith, her changes will make her feared. Butler writes, “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” (120). These enhancements

changed Lilith's physical capabilities while also impacting her ability to flourish among the human group. Although these genetic alterations all seem to be positive modifications, such as enhanced memory and physical strength, they go beyond Lilith's human measurements making her more "other" and isolating her from her own species. In this case, how could Lilith distinguish between the two? Although Lilith willingly submitted to having these modifications done, the process of doing so is closely related to the way they perform cybersex in that her connection with the Ooloi could have easily been made more "other" without her consent. Caporaso argues this is a way for Lilith to experience sensations beyond her physical limitations and capabilities. Yet it costs her humaneness and agency. It is difficult to distinguish at what point Lilith becomes more Oankali in nature and less human, thus leaving her human kind behind. Caporaso fails to look past the figurative transformation of Lilith and analyze the implications of being controlled by alien cybernetic sex. Instead of reading cybersex as an extension of physical transformation and pleasure, cybersex is actually a form of control. By surgically altering Lilith's bodily functions the Oankali successfully divided her from her own people. Lilith and the other humans allowed this divide to happen because of their contorted desire to feel pleasure through the Oankali's transformations, thus making cybersex a possibility for the aliens control over the human race.

*Power (Fluid Alien Power)*

By contrast, cybersex can be looked at as a positive shift away from heteronormativity and white patriarchy as the exchange of pleasure and genetic material is transferred in an entirely new performative way. Caporaso argues,

The Ooloi represent the possibility of an enhanced, fluid sexuality that escapes patriarchal rules by allowing the abandonment of a male model of pleasure in favor of a

queer stream with no aims or endings, a ceaselessly flowing liquid matter that, having no shape at all, can expand itself across connected bodies communicating with each other. In contraposition with a male, linear conception of pleasure, this strongly embodied form of sexual coupling brings humanity back to its queer, liquid origin.” (176)

According to Caporaso, the function of cybersex in Butler’s text is a progressive representation of the shift away from heteronormative white patriarchy and towards a more fluid queer “cyborgian” future. Caporaso analyzes the act of cybersex between Nikanj and Lilith as well as the other human’s connections with their Ooloi. By analyzing the pleasurable stimulations and accessibility of storing and transferring DNA through the Oankali’s elaborate biological systems, Caporaso believes the act of cybersex affords new and queer possibilities. From a queer theory perspective, her argument is grounded in the debate against heteronormativity, shifting her focus on new sexual modes of the future.

Referencing Luciana Parisi’s book *Abstract Sex*, Caporaso agrees with Parisi’s analysis of cybersex acting as an extension of the human self. Parisi argues, “The emergence of cybersex defines a new prosthetic extension of human sex, the prolongation of sexual pleasure outside the limits of the body” (1). Even though Parisi’s analysis concentrates on the modern role of cybersex, the emergence of sexual encounters through the internet, her argument directly relates to *Dawn*. As seen through Caporaso’s interpretation cybersex in Butler’s novel is used as a method of exchanging both pleasure and information through a “web” like structure via the human nervous system.

The usage of cybersex throughout the text blurs the line between *Dawn* being representative of a utopian or dystopian future. As Caporaso stated cybersex can be used as an accessible method for transferring and storing DNA as well as other genetic material. However,



the intense pleasurable sensations caused by the connection formed by the Oankali with the human makes the act of cybersex between the two-species alarming. Caporaso explains by hooking into the human's nervous system, the Ooloi alter the chemical balances in the brain, thus making the experience addictively pleasurable. Because the human's encounter with the Oankali is extremely satisfying, they continue to seek the gratification forcing them into a slave position. Humans, as a species, are viewed and treated as inferior to the Oankali, demonstrating a relationship that is based on a master-slave structure. Reflecting an allegorical framework, the Oankali represent white masters while the human species represent the African American slave. Because the humans are dependent on obeying the Oankali in order to return to Earth, this places them in debt to their alien "saviors." Even though the characters aboard the Oankali ship are ethnically diverse they represent a broader argument that shows the negative and harmful effects of racism. By having Lilith be African American, Butler demonstrates the purpose of *Dawn*, to bring to attention to the extremities of racism and sexism in contemporary society.

*Gender (The Maternal Leader)*

Queer theory and LGBTQ studies not only focus on sexuality, gay-lesbian-bisexual-transgender-queer, but also looks at how gender is portrayed, not merely in a political sense but a literary one as well. Queer themes in literature deconstruct the male and female binary while incorporating non-gender specific characters. Shifting away from heteronormativity and towards a queer posthuman future, speculative science fiction allows there to be more representation. This is seen directly in Butler's writing as the Oankali Ooloi do not have an assigned gender. This is crucial to the understanding of queer theory as science fiction texts not only subvert our perception of the physical act of sex, as seen with the Oankali and human cybersex, but how we analyze gender and feminism as well.

Gender has a crucial role in the text not only because the protagonist is female but because of the androgynous nature of the Oankali as well. Focusing momentarily on Lilith's position as a woman, her gender associates her with the Biblical role of Eve as both women give "birth" to a new race. Lilith is compared to Eve as both are described as "mothers" because of their status as leaders, "By endowing Lilith with characteristics traditionally associated with Eve, Butler revises Lilith with an eye for the anxieties experienced by women and mothers of the twentieth century. In this revision, we are encouraged to reconcile women's self-love with altruism, female desire with motherhood" (Osherow 78). Lilith's position as a "maternal" leader to the other humans on board the space craft illustrates her power and connection to Eve as both women are responsible for the upbringing of a new "human" species. Not only is Lilith leading a new colony of posthumans but she is also responsible for carrying a human-alien hybrid within her womb. Lilith both metaphorically and physically births a new species of humans to repopulate the world with her as a maternal leader, bringing forth a new population.

Once Lilith is introduced into the Oankali family structure and shows signs of adapting her future role as a "parent" is exposed. When conversing with Nikanj, Lilith discovers the Oankali's motives for choosing her to not only survive but to be integrated into the Oankali's way of life. When Nikanj reveals they want her to be a "parent," he answers her questioning by saying, "That's the way we think of it. 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. To parent" (110). Lilith's primary function to the Oankali is to act as a maternal figure and leader for the posthuman survivors. Not only will Lilith guide them into a "frightening world" but she will lead them to reproduce with the Oankali, creating a new hybrid of human-alien subspecies. Lilith's

position as a “parent” not only represents a “Biblical” fluidity but illustrates our own societal views of women and performative gender roles as well.

Within the historical context of the text itself the Oankali, specifically the Ooloi, have no assigned gender. They are essentially androgynous beings whose functions in the text is to act as a third sexual extension between a male and female pairing. Gender in the Oankali society is based on an egalitarian structure, therefore males are not considered to be more valuable or powerful than females. In fact, the female Oankali are often described as being physically larger than the males. This power structure in relation to gender then does not have any faulty significance to Nikanj and its family choosing Lilith to be a “parent.” It is Lilith who proclaims, “You’re going to set me up as their *mother*?” (110). Lilith’s emphasis on “*mother*” brings to attention the human nature to relate “parenting” with “mothering.” Illustrating the disconnectedness between the Oankali society and the human society within the text has been destroyed. Gender-based biases are not inherent in Oankali culture. It is not until the other humans are awakened that a power structure based on gender emerges.

There are still conventional elements of gender seen throughout the text. Specifically looking at femaleness, Lilith as a maternal figure is a prominent theme in Butler’s work. Simply observing the titles of each section of the text illustrates the unique nature of what it means to be female, what it means for Lilith’s own femaleness. Titles such as “womb,” “family” and “nursery” all exemplify the maternal qualities of the text that the Oankali seem to value. Gender, female gender to be precise, is deeply connected to motherhood in the novel. Although it is unclear Butler’s intentions for this, it can highlight the stigma surrounding women who do not have children. Historically women were, and even today are still, expected to have children and start a family. The titles throughout each section illustrate exactly this as Lilith first awakens in a

“womb” only then to be introduced and assimilated into Nikanj’s “family.” Finally, she is in charge of “parenting” the “nursery” where she is responsible for awakening forty other humans and preparing them for the ghastly sight of the alien Oankali. The final section of the novel is titled “the training floor,” which on the surface has no maternal connected theme to its name. However, as a “parent,” Lilith is responsible for “training” the other humans on how to survive and interact in non-hostile way with one another. The act of her “training” or as Nikanj said “guiding” is essentially a maternal duty. Even though femaleness is often viewed upon as inferior to maleness, Lilith’s position as a maternal figure and leader gives her a degree of power that on Earth she would never have.

Although the Oankali clearly live in an egalitarian society where gender biases seem nonexistent, there are still sexist themes scattered throughout the text, especially in the nursery. The Oankali do not distinguish between female and male as the humans do, however they still establish their power in relation to both the awakened and non-awakened humans. In the nursery, it is not Nikanj or any of the other Oankali who question Lilith’s gender based on her physical capabilities. Instead, it is one of her own species that questions her in a derogatory manner. Because of the enhancements Nikanj made on Lilith, her strength and ability to heal quicker has made her significantly other. This is not only because of those two traits but because of those two traits mixed into a woman that makes her othered. After defending herself in a fight one of the other humans, Jean, began a rumor that Lilith was a man, “she says only a man can fight that way” (147). Although the Oankali possess qualities that label them as captors, it is notable that they are not inherently sexist. Jean, a member of Lilith’s own species and a member of her own gender, is the one who demonstrates sexist qualities that have no relation to Lilith’s actual identification. By making the voice of sexism come through Jean, Butler is critiquing the way

our human society is so entrenched in sexist ideologies. The modified strength and healing Lilith demonstrates is in no way connected to her gender, however, because of the heteronormative society the humans were from they still believed only men could exhibit such traits.

The theme of pregnancy or child bearing in science fiction is a common trope as according to Joanna Russ. Russ analyzes the various tropes and themes that are apparent across the spectrum in science fiction. She argues the problem with science fiction is the representation of women. Even though *Dawn* is written by a female author, there are some sexist qualities to the text representing sexism, especially the way male characters treat women. Lilith's role in *Dawn* is empowering as she is the protagonist and represents a strong female character. However, through her cybernetic sexual relationship with Nikanj, who is genderless, she is rendered powerless to Nikanj's choices. Lilith's pregnancy demonstrates how even though she is written as an equal character in terms of gender to the rest of the Oankali, she still has to deal with the performative role as a maternal leader as according to Caporaso. Regardless of the equality that is in the text between genders, Russ points out, "even where women participate equally with men in the society, they still after all do all the child-bearing and so most of the hold rearing" (208). Butler proves Russ to be true as Lilith is the one who will have to carry the half human and half alien child as well as raise it. By forcing Lilith to become pregnant, Nikanj abuses its own power and puts Lilith in a position of inferiority, thus Butler calls for a new image of intersectional, black feminism.

Understanding how gender functions is crucial to our understanding of the Oankali. Butler clearly wrote about issues of sexism, capitalism, and racism during the 1980s when the novel was published. All of these problems arise in *Dawn* at some point through Lilith's journey. The portrayal of gender is not only important for the modern reader to understand how gender

binaries function in society but also to demonstrate the egalitarian nature of the Oankali.

However, even though the Oankali do not view gender in the same way humans do, they still have problematic associations with how they treat people in general. This is portrayed explicitly with the impregnation of Lilith at the end of the novel. When Lilith was impregnated without giving consent, the Oankali further proved to be untrustworthy and problematic. Gender here is crucial because the Oankali would never have been able to impregnate a male, Joseph for example, but they are able to incubate a child inside a woman. Through Nikanj's nerve manipulation through cybersex, it is wrongly given access to Lilith's body to do as it desires. Even though the Oankali do not treat their own species differently in relationship to gender their treatment of the human females is distinct as it represents a conduct similar to the breeding of animals.

### *Conclusion*

Octavia Butler's novel brings to attention real world problems that have existed for centuries. Social problems such as sexism, capitalism, and racism all inhabit the context of *Dawn* working against each other and in relationship to each other to complicate the reader's opinion of the Oankali as well as Lilith's journey. Although the Oankali represent an egalitarian society which ideally our own human society would want to model after, Butler's novel critiques our image of utopia and illustrates the dystopian treatment of humans by alien "others." Throughout the text the usage of humans, of all races and genders, as slaves illustrates the need for Afrofuturism in speculative science fiction texts.

The scholarly debate surrounding speculative science fiction texts such as Butler's novel analyze the implications of power, race, and gender. Throughout the novel cybersex is seen as a connector to all of these issues as each term is represented through the Oankali's performance of

cybersex with the humans. Cybersex throughout the novel is used as a tool for manipulating the humans, placing them in the position as slaves. Butler's involvement with the Afrofuturism movement further supports this claim as the Oankali represent the colonial "white power" and the remaining human race is the inferior "other." Instead of viewing the Oankali as saviors of the remaining human race they are instead captors who forcefully intervened on the human's lives, placing them in a position of debt which can only be repaid through the enslaving act of cybersex.

By analyzing speculative science fiction, we are exploring the genre outside of white colonial power. Instead of celebrating popular science fiction novels and movies written by white hetero-men, we as a society should be reading and teaching texts written by feminist authors. Shifting away from futuristic galactic explorations and stories of colonialization, the genre of science fiction should bring attention to real world issues from an allegorical framework. Authors such as Butler write about worlds that stereotypically represent what our society considers to be utopian, but instead shows how they are exclusionary of many types of peoples based upon gender, race, and class. Further discussing and analyzing feminist science fiction texts will lead the way for real societal change away from heteronormativity and towards a more equal and progressive future.

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