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THE EMERGENCE OF THE IDEAL POSTHUMAN IN THE XENOGENESIS TRILOGY

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ABSTRACT

Octavia Butler's XENOGENESIS trilogy utilizes traditional discourses of racism, colonization, and sexism to promote an image of inevitable posthumanism. The exploration of the Human Contradiction in the first two novels involves the definition and redefinition of humanity. The third novel demonstrates that a posthuman cyborg is presented as a more peaceful solution to the binary opposition that requires a physical, moral, and cultural evolution of humanity to a state of posthumanism. This thesis examines the trilogy through a feminist lens and illustrates how the interaction of the traditional discourses resolves itself in a promotion of a mediated solution of posthumanism.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

“Guests and prisoners can be the same thing, and the deadliest enemies can be indispensable to our survival”¹

Octavia Butler’s famous XENOGENESIS trilogy – *Dawn* (1987), *Adulthood Rites* (1988), and *Imago* (1989) – revolves around one apparently essential fact about human beings: they are essentially contradictory. They embody the “Human Contradiction,” a term that refers in this work to the conflict between humans’ intelligence and their drive to form hierarchies. The conflicted “nature” of the human being is challenged, however, by the race of beings known as the Oankali – who offer the surviving humans a path through the Contradiction that seems to point them towards sure extinction. The trilogy explores the limits of boundaries of humanity at a point in its history when, thanks to their own destructive politics and careless treatment of the earth, they seem to have no other choice but to accept a form of *posthumanity* in order for humanity to survive. The trilogy thus redefines humanity, putting forward the scenario of a hybrid posthuman society where there is less conflict and more tolerance of difference. The first two novels of the trilogy, *Dawn* and *Adulthood Rites*, tentatively resolve the dilemma of essentialism in the third novel, *Imago*. Throughout the trilogy Butler revises traditional literary discourse’s destructive binaries – and instead creates a hybrid narrative that promotes a mediated third option that acknowledges hybrid and intimate connections that lay between the intransigent binaries. This thesis use a feminist lens, influenced by the concepts of the intimate, the cyborg, and posthumanism, to explore the way that Butler’s trilogy offers an alternative to a purely dualistic mindset by offering a mediated perspective which explores the future evolution of the posthuman.

¹ Margulis, Lynn, and Dorion Sagan. “Microcosmos.” Barlow. q.v. 57-66

Throughout the trilogy, Butler portrays traditional relationships between colonizers and the colonized, slaves and their slave masters, and encourages a posthuman solution which highlights the mediated position her characters occupy between the two extremes. Posthumanism is offered as a solution to the Contradiction as well as the conflict surrounding it. Throughout the novels, many different discourses of colonization, the African-American slave narrative, heterosexism, essentialism, and posthumanism are discussed in relation to each other. Cathy Peppers states that Butler is “using the very power of these discourses to help us imagine the origins of human identity in other ways.”² The connection of these discourses denies a singular identifying narrative for an individual or humanity, but rather requires the audience to read humans as a combination of all of these discourses. According to Jim Miller, “Butler’s aliens are both colonizers and a utopian collective, while the captured/saved humans are both admirable survivors and ugly xenophobes.”³ There are no easily separable discourses within the trilogy and this ambiguity illustrates a complex vision of posthumanism. The trilogy is posthumanist on a very basic level because the novel’s setting is one where humans are in a period of spatial dislocation after their destruction. Humanity as we know it has been destroyed and the survivors are beyond them--the posthumans.

These characters are defined by their posthuman identity connected to boundary breaking and a fluid identity. Posthumanism departs from the notion of a whole stable identity and the humanist definition of humanity: “rationally self-determining, self-defining being, and of the individual identity as a source of agency.”⁴ The constructs are posthuman in their departure from the bindings of what “humanity” was and their crossing and renegotiation of multiple boundaries. Furthermore, the posthumans are considered “a human body whose integrity is violated, a human

² Peppers, Cathy. "Dialogic Origins and Alien Identities in Butler's *Xenogenesis*." *Science Fiction Studies*. 22.1 (1995): 49. Web. 30 Jan. 2014. <<http://jstor.org/stable/4240397>>.

³ Miller, Jim. "Post-Apocalyptic Hoping: Octavia Butler's Dystopian/Utopian Vision." *Science Fiction Studies*. 25.2 (1998): 340. Web. 30 Jan. 2014. <<http://jstor.org/stable/4240705>>.

⁴ Jacobs, Naomi. "Posthuman Bodies and Agency in Octavia Butler's *Xenogenesis*." Trans. Array *Dark Horizons Science Fiction and the Dystopian Imagination*. New York, NY: Routledge, 2003. 91. Print.

identity whose boundaries are breached from all sides.”⁵ Butler’s hybrid constructs exist in a posthuman state where their identity is dynamic and where boundary crossing does not exist. Butler’s characters exemplify an inevitable evolution of posthumans based on the ambiguity of boundaries between identities and a reconstruction of human origins. The posthuman body is a vehicle for change as it “might enable new forms of subjectivity and agency, grounded in relation rather than separation.”⁶ There are no concrete boundaries or singular identity; the posthuman subject has “multiple and fluid open spaces for transformative encounters with difference... a location where differences intersect in unstable configurations, can always make room for more.”⁷ The posthuman represents continual change in pursuit of the better good.

The cyborg is inherently a posthuman who represents the breaking of typical boundaries and a lack of stable self. Oankali culture reflects that “a cyborg world might be about lived social and bodily realities in which people are not afraid of their joint kinship with animals and machines, not afraid of permanently partial identities and contradictory standpoints.”⁸ The Oankali are genetic engineers that create “machines from organisms through reproduction, thus destabilizing boundaries between machine and organism.”⁹ The Oankali embody the post-humanist concepts of multiple ideas and lack of a stable identity and the concept of the cyborg by breaking boundaries between self/Other, human/machine and promoting hybridity and intimacy. The Oankali are, according to Donna Haraway, “extra-terrestrial lovers/rescuers/destroyers/genetic engineers.”¹⁰ Their identity is one of multiplicity, relativity, and change. Since there is no unified whole in the posthuman subject, there are no clear

⁵ Hurley, Kelly. “Reading Like an Alien: Posthuman Identity in Ridley Scott’s *Alien* and David Cronenberg’s *Rabid*.” Halberstam and Livingston 205.

⁶ Jacobs, Naomi. “Posthuman Bodies.” 92.

⁷ Jacobs, Naomi. “Posthuman Bodies.” 94.

⁸ Haraway, Donna. *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*. NY: Routledge, 1991. 154. Print.

⁹ Melzer, Patricia. *Alien Constructions Science Fiction and Feminist Thought*. 1. Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press, 2006. 95. Print.

¹⁰ Haraway, Donna. *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women*. 149-181, 203-230.

oppositions, no opposition to the Other, and it can offer a future without boundaries, categories, or hierarchies.

The conflict regarding the Human Contradiction sheds light on the discourse of essentialism examined in the first two novels. The Oankali believe that humans embody the Contradiction, a conflict between humans' intelligence and their drive to form hierarchies. The Oankali perspective reflects the essentialist point of view that the humans possess this genetic Contradiction and that the genes will inevitably result in the second destruction of humanity. Additionally, the Oankali believe that the Contradiction is more prevalent and therefore dangerous in human males, reflecting Oankali conceptions of essentialism as well. The essentialism discourse exists in relation to the other discourses of heterosexism, racism, and colonization throughout the trilogy. The temporary resolution of the Human Contradiction in the first two novels lays the groundwork for the exploration of the mediated solution of posthumanism in the third novel.

Chapter 2

An Overview of the XENOGENESIS TRILOGY

The first novel in the trilogy, *Dawn*, follows the life of Lilith from the moment she is awakened in her cell until the departure of the first group of humans to Earth. After the humans experience a nuclear Holocaust, the alien Oankali stumble upon Earth in search of new trading partners. They capture the remaining humans they find on Earth, placing them in suspended animation aboard their ship for two hundred and fifty years. Lilith is one of the humans who is saved, and subsequently chosen to be the leader of the first group of humans who will be sent back to Earth after they have traded with the Oankali. Before she can awaken any humans, she must learn about the Oankali and overcome her initial fear of their appearance and behavior.

Lilith learns that in exchange for saving humanity from destruction and death, the Oankali would like to trade with the humans. This proposed trade is a genetic one; the Oankali want to breed with the humans to create hybrid construct children with the best qualities of both species. The Oankali believe that the humans possess the Human Contradiction, which is the conflict of humans' traits of intelligence and the compulsion to form hierarchies. Tension and violence was high amidst the humans. By breeding with humans, the Oankali would be able to manipulate human genes so that the construct children would be "Contradiction free." But Lilith understands the implications: the end of the human species as she knows it. This terrifies Lilith because of how close humanity came to extinction during the nuclear war. The Oankali argue that humanity will inevitably destroy themselves without Oankali intervention. They will not allow humanity to self-destruct again, and so disable the human capacity to reproduce with each other: humans must mate with the Oankali.

This proposed trade repulses Lilith and her strategy is to “learn and run” until they get to Earth where they can try to escape from the Oankali. The humans whom Lilith awakens feel the same disgust and aversion to the trade as Lilith does. A violent standoff ensues between the Oankali and the humans. When the Oankali decide the humans have learned all they can aboard the ship, they return their captives to Earth. Lilith remains behind and she is designated to train the next set of humans. She is also impregnated with a child who inherits genes from herself and her dead human lover.

During *Adulthood Rites*, the second novel in the trilogy, the situation on Earth has progressed over many years. Now there are resistor colonies on Earth fighting among themselves and the hybrid villages. The resisters emphasize human survival for the sake of the human species. One result is an Othering of the victims who are sacrificed for the good of humanity: the women. There are scenes of violence where women are being kidnapped, raped, and traded like commodities; construct children who look human enough are kidnapped as well. When presented with the opportunity to run, the resisters establish communities that seem to echo the violence and destruction of the previous Earth. During this novel, the majority of conflict occurs between the Resisters and the hybrid families who have cooperated with the Oankali over the fate of humanity and the definition of what it means to be human. Akin is kidnapped by resistor humans in order to be traded to other villages for women. While he is captive, the resisters nearly kill one of his fathers, Tino. While in the village, Akin learns more about humans’ culture, their inconsistencies, and their desires.

Adulthood Rites concludes with Akin fighting for humans’ right to have an exclusively human colony on Mars. Akin, however, hopes that this new and unfamiliar territory will force humanity to relinquish its hierarchal impulse and thereby naturally select the Contradiction out of

their genes. Butler's construct characters "convince their alien relatives to give humans another chance at simply being human."¹¹

¹¹ McCaffery, Larry. *Across the Wounded Galaxies*. Chicago, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1990. 63. Print.

Chapter 3

Essentialism and the Human Contradiction

Some scholars argue that the XENOGENESIS trilogy, written by Octavia Butler, reflects Butler's essentialist perspective regarding human genetics and the apparent need to create hierarchies. Essentialism is the belief, in the context of the novel, that humans have inherent and essential characteristics that define their humanity. The concept of essentialism can be applied to gender as well. The Oankali have saved humanity in order to enact a trade with the humans; the two species will breed a new hybrid species that will be free of the Human Contradiction and be more mobile than the Oankali. The logic behind the hierarchies is an inherent assumption of power where those on the top of the hierarchy are more powerful than those below. The word XENOGENESIS itself means, "the production of offspring different from either of its parents."¹² By creating a hybrid species through genetic technology the Oankali hope to select the best qualities of both species.

Throughout *Dawn*, the Oankali maintain an essentialist position for most of the novel, believing that humanity will never escape their Human Contradiction and that this contradiction will result in the inevitable destruction of the human race. Humanity's need for hierarchy creates the power dynamics reflected in a range of human activities. Naomi Jacobs remarks that "though we might expect the resistant humans to represent a lost ideal to be recuperated or an endangered essence to be preserved, most of these human beings exercise agency in only the most brutal forms. The 'human' world that we might expect to be posited as the hopeful alternative, the locus of value, here promises little more than a return to barbarism."¹³ Humanity's inclination to create

¹² Peppers, Cathy. "Dialogic Origins." 47.

¹³ Jacobs, Naomi. "Posthuman Bodies." 101.

hierarchies, and thereby positions of power and subordination, is proven correct as Lilith is raped by the first human she encounters on the ship. Additionally, at the end of the novel, her lover Joseph is killed by fellow human beings both because of his cooperation with the Oankali and because of the genetically enhanced abilities given to him by the Oankali, particularly his speed of self-healing. The first awakened humans in the training area do not believe Joseph is human.¹⁴ Curt, who later kills Joseph, states that “we didn’t kill a human being...we killed one of your animals.”¹⁵ Joseph is so thoroughly Othered that Curt identifies him as an animal in an attempt to distance himself from the ‘alien’ actions that Joseph has engaged in. The drive to hierarchize is proven further by the lifestyle of the resisters in *Adulthood Rites* who organize their villages by ethnicity and resort to the rape and trade of women as commodities. Yet again the boundaries of ethnicity are drawn and women are given a subordinate position in society. The actions of the resisters offer evidence in agreement with the Oankali’s perspective.

Scholars who feel that Butler’s novels argue for essentialism reference the point of view of the Oankali. They also point out that men in the novels display the human contradiction more than females. Because of these aspects of gender essentialism in *Imago*, the human birth of male construct children is feared because of the human male’s inclination to present the Human Contradiction stronger than females. Hoda Zaki argues that “to accept Butler’s notion that males are genetically (i.e., inherently) more violent than women is to accept an essentialist view of human nature.”¹⁶ Nancy Jesser concurs, adding that “[Butler] give[s] gender to aggression, nurturing, hierarchy, and heterosexuality...her bodies say women are more or less likely to be altruistic and cooperative and men selfish, domineering and driven to rape.”¹⁷ These scholars agree that these gendered roles seem to suggest that women inherently are more nurturing

¹⁴ Butler, Octavia E. *Dawn*. New York, NY: Warner Books, Inc, 1987. 223. Print.

¹⁵ Butler, Octavia E. *Dawn*. 228.

¹⁶ Zaki, Hoda. "Utopia, Dystopia, and Ideology in the Science Fiction of Octavia Butler." *Science Fiction Studies*. 17.2 (1990): 241. Web. 30 Jan. 2014. <<http://jstor.org/stable/4239994>>.

¹⁷ Jesser, Nancy. "Blood, Genes and Gender in Octavia Butler's *Kindred* and *Dawn*." *Extrapolation*. 43.1 (2002): 36-62. Web. 8 Feb. 2014.

whereas men are more aggressive. Jesser argues that it is always women who are “crossing racial or species boundaries emotionally, sexually, and reproductively in the name of the future.”¹⁸ Zaki points out that the trilogy “seize[s] upon biological differences between the two species to reassert, yet again, notions of inferiority and discrimination. For her [Butler], the human propensity to create the Other can never be transcended.”¹⁹ Zaki’s grounds for argument rest in the unequal power relationship between humans and Oankali. Zaki believes that Butler asserts that “abandoning the human body is a necessary prerequisite for real human alteration.”²⁰ Zaki adds that Butler denies humans in the novel the opportunity for change by choosing to have them fulfill the Oankali’s expectations of them: “what she [Butler] denies to humans she invests in her description of alien societies: her aspirations for a more human community, where consensus is reached through communication and dissent.”²¹ However, in the novel the Oankali are not the only group who believe in essentialism.

The resisters’ perspective on pure human genetics reflects an essentialist position. They believe the key to humanity is in its genetics, not in its culture. They believe that “DNA is seen as holding the key to what makes us human and to what makes us the particular humans that we each individually are.”²² Their desire to remain human is “simultaneously...the desire to stay the same and the desire to be different.”²³ The potential of mixing or altering the pure human DNA threatens the resisters’ identity. It is a “threat to personal identity – a threat to what it means to *be*

¹⁸ Jesser, Nancy. "Blood, Genes and Gender." 36-62.

¹⁹ Zaki, Hoda. "Utopia, Dystopia, and Ideology in the Science Fiction of Octavia Butler." *Science Fiction Studies*. 17.2 (1990): 241. Web. 30 Jan. 2014. <<http://jstor.org/stable/4239994>>.

²⁰ Zaki, Hoda. "Utopia, Dystopia." 242.

²¹ Zaki, Hoda. "Utopia, Dystopia." 242.

²² Vint, Sherryl. *Bodies of Tomorrow Technology, Subjectivity, Science Fiction*. Toronto, Canada: University of Toronto Press, 2007. 63. Print.

²³ Tucker, Jeffrey A. "'The Human Contradiction': Identity and/as Essence in Octavia E. Butler's *Xenogenesis* Trilogy." *Yearbook of English Studies*. 37.2 (2007): 168. Web. 8 Feb. 2014. <<http://jstor.org/stable/20479308>>.

and especially what it means to *be me*.”²⁴ They pursue survival at any cost, valuing humanity’s survival as a pure species above the survival of any individual. The resisters believe that the fate and freedom of humanity as a whole is more important than any one human’s freedom. The women who are raped and kidnapped have no freedom, yet the resisters want them to believe that they exist in a community where individual freedom is valued. What these actions demonstrate is a repetition of violence that is associated with an unwillingness to adapt and change. Jacobs states that the humans themselves are the ones dedicated to the destruction of their society, not because of the aliens, but because of their unwillingness to change. Jacobs states, “The true horror has already occurred, and not as a result of predatory aliens: human beings themselves have already nearly succeeded in wiping out the species. Thus, the humans are imprisoned and enslaved most irrevocably by their own species’ nature.”²⁵ Meanwhile, Nolan Belk states that “the Oankali aren’t wondering whether humans would destroy the Earth; that has been proven.”²⁶ The resisters’ actions prove that they are committed to maintaining the genetics which, to them, are seen as the backbone of humanity, at any cost. Yet the resisters are just one group in the novel and resisters who argue for essentialism are not the main characters.

Scholars arguing against the essentialist position describe how the main focus of the novels is the select individuals in humanity who overcome the Human Contradiction. Michelle Green states that “Butler’s ‘essentialism’ is tricky; her novels focus on the exceptions to the rules she posits as human norms rather than on those who exemplify them.”²⁷ Lilith cooperates with the Oankali to ensure the survival of the human species and their return to Earth. Akin’s time with the resisters, the result of his kidnapping because of his human appearance and the human’s fierce

²⁴ Hopkins, Patrick D. . "Gender Treachery: Homophobia, Masculinity, and Threatened Identities." Trans. *Array Race, Class, Gender, and Sexuality: The Big Questions*. Blackwell Publishers, 1998. 171. Print.

²⁵ Jacobs, Naomi. "Posthuman Bodies." 101.

²⁶ Belk, Nolan. "The Certainty of the Flesh: Octavia Butler's Use of the Erotic in the Xenogenesis Trilogy." *Utopian Studies*. 19.3 (2008): 382. Web. 8 Feb. 2014. <<http://jstor.org/stable/20719917>>.

²⁷ Green, Michelle. "There Goes the Neighborhood." Trans. *Array Utopian and Science Fiction by Women*. First. Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1994. 167. Print.

desire to have children, allows Akin to learn about his human heritage and come to the conclusion that the humans, like the Oankali, must have a pure human colony of their own on Mars. This ending of *Adulthood Rites* offers humanity a chance of escaping their Human Contradiction. Scholars cite this ending as proof against some critics' assertion of Butler's purely essentialist viewpoint. Green states that "The novels scarcely seem interested in proving whether or not humans actually suffer from the Contradictions; rather, they illustrate how human agency can triumph over prejudice, violence, and essentialism."²⁸ Butler's hybrid species and communities without unnecessary violence, an equal division of labor, and a sense of community, demonstrate the possibility that posthumanism is the only way to create a better humanity which will not ensure its own destruction. At the same time, however, the Mars colony is presented as another option open to humans, whereby their Human Contradiction may be selected out of the population due to the harsh conditions. Additionally, while the Oankali may present a biological essentialist point of view that does not necessarily mean that Butler's readers are encouraged to follow suit. Butler is "clearly critical of the self-destructive tendencies of humans, she sees even greater risks in the hubris of assuming that there is an all knowing subject position – alien or scientific – that could presume to correct these faults."²⁹ Butler's argument is separate from the Oankali and the resisters and instead offers another solution.

The debate has focused upon the dilemma of essentialism within the trilogy, but what Butler promotes is a solution which refuses to put either category, human or alien, in binary opposition. "Both species have their strengths and weaknesses," Butler notes. "You have small groups of violent humans, but we don't see all humans rampaging as a result of their Contradiction. For the most part, the Oankali do not force or rush humans into mating but try to

²⁸ Green, Michelle. "There Goes the Neighborhood." 187.

²⁹ Vint, Sherryl. *Bodies of Tomorrow*. 71.

bring them in gradually.”³⁰ While the humans suspect the Oankali will consume the human species whole, both species, it turns out, will undergo a fundamental change during the trade: “They [the Oankali] change us and we change them...Some of what makes us Human will survive, just as some of what makes them Oankali will survive...Look at the children here...You can’t tell who was born to whom.”³¹ The Oankali, while on one hand believing that humans’ genetics will destroy them, also insist that their humanity is not only connected to pure genetics.

Additionally, the Oankali would not have had to awaken any humans in order to have access to their genetic material because it was collected at the same time they found the humans. The Ooloi could mix construct children without the humans ever being awoken from suspended animation. The Oankali “wanted humans – real humans with memories of a pre-war Earth – to contribute directly to rearing the first generation of the human-Oankali construct species.”³² The Oankali believe that humans are “more than only the composition and the workings of your [their] bodies. You are your personalities, your cultures. We’re interested in those too.”³³ The hybrid construct children are the only hope for either species. The Oankali must trade with the humans in order to evolve and the humans must cooperate in some way with the Oankali to remain a viable species.

³⁰ Potts, Stephen W., and Octavia E. Butler. ““We Keep Playing the Same Record”: A Conversation with Octavia E. Butler.” *Science Fiction Studies*. 23.3 (1996): 332. Print. <<http://jstor.org/stable/4240538>>.

³¹ Butler, Octavia E. *Adulthood Rites*. New York, NY: Warner Books, Inc, 1998. 33. Print.

³² Belk, Nolan. “The Certainty of the Flesh.” 382.

³³ Butler, Octavia E. *Dawn*. 154.

Chapter 4

Colonization

The narrative of colonization in *Dawn* illustrates the uneven power dynamics and complicates the typical victim/perpetrator relationship between the humans and the Oankali. The resisters feel that they are innocent victims of the Oankali's sterilization, yet the Oankali do not want the Human Contradiction to be inherited and ensure the destruction of humanity again. This is an uncharacteristic colonizer perspective, but remains condescending and reflective of the unequal power relationship. Yet the Human Contradiction complicates the relationship because, due to the reinforcing behavior of the resistor humans, the possibility of the Oankali being right cannot be ruled out. However right the Oankali may be, their actions reflect a condescending attitude of colonization.

Patricia Melzer comments that the trilogy's characters' "confrontations with colonial powers (dominant entities trying to define the protagonists) take place through two basic experiences: diaspora and being colonized 'at home.'"³⁴ The humans removed from Earth are physically alienated, unconscious in isolation on a ship in space. The Oankali disabled uncooperative human's reproduction so that no more humans are born with the Human Contradiction. The resisters, therefore, feel that their reproductive freedom is being taken away against their control. Considering both perspectives clearly complicates the roles of victim and perpetrator, but Butler offers a third perspective. In *Adulthood Rites*, Akin, after resistor humans kidnap him, negotiates with the Oankali for a human-only colony to be established on Mars. He does this not because there is any guarantee that humans will not destroy themselves, but because they should be given the chance to try to survive by themselves. Just like Akin learns the

³⁴ Melzer, Patricia. *Alien Constructions*. 53.

complexity of the humans during his captivity at Phoenix, the complexity of the Oankali is focused upon throughout the trilogy.

The Oankali are not simply colonizers or slave masters and cannot be easily categorized. How they act “defamiliarizes the victim/victimizer paradigm and shows it to be an inadequate way of understanding oppression. There are no ‘bad guys’ in the XENOGENESIS trilogy, only bad ways of thinking.”³⁵ They are not just cruel gene manipulators or benevolent saviors, but a complex hybrid of both. Because of the inability to simplify the Oankali’s perspective, the humans feel conflicting emotions towards them. The desire for the Oankali that the humans feel genuinely scares them, because they feel “a deep psychochemical attraction to Ooloi, almost a compulsion,”³⁶ despite their seemingly unequal dynamics and the resistor humans. The humans may be genuinely terrified of the foreignness of the Oankali, but some of them are inquisitive and have the intelligence to cross the boundaries between their species to figure it out. There is a deeper connection between these two opposites for the Oankali. They are connected, relying not only on each other, but also intimately inseparable.

When one group colonizes another, it is not simply taking over a way of thinking, but also their labor, family structures, and their bodies. It is deeply personal and intimate. There is no way to be objective and disassociated from the concept of colonization; it involves the imposition or taking over of one group of another. The colonized hold their ideas dear to them, identifying and living by them. Their loss is a loss of a part of themselves. Colonization and the relationship between both parties are intimate, involving alterations in thinking that deal with reproduction, families, religion, and personal values. The trilogy explores the intimate connections between seemingly opposite binaries, such as colonized and colonizer.

³⁵ Miller, Jim. "Post-Apocalyptic Hoping." 343.

³⁶ Allison, Dorothy. "The Future of Female: Octavia Butler's *Mother Lode*." Trans. Array *Reading Black, Reading Feminist*. The Penguin Group, 1990. 478. Print.

The feminist concept of “the intimate” revolves around the idea that the unquestioned binary opposites, such as the Eastern and Western world, are not defined against each other, but exist in relation and connection to each other. The intimate “both is and is not a binary; while irrefutably a pairing, it juxtaposes and resists the flattening effect of most binaries by bringing together terms that...offer an implicit critique of one another.”³⁷ By nature, a focus on the intimate nature of relationships disrupts the apparently natural order and power of hierarchy. Where there is no clear stable division, there can be no clear ordering between the non-existent fixed categories that shape our reality and power dynamics. The intimate denies a relationship of opposition, but asserts one of mutuality and connection. For example, in regards to the Cartesian split between mind and body, the intimate reading of this theory illustrates the lack of a clear distinction. The idea that the mind and body are completely separate has denied the wholeness of the human as a combination of mind and body. The two do not function on their own, but interact with each other on many levels. This can be seen when psychological symptoms manifest themselves in physiological ways. Because of this opposition, one category, the mind, was given precedence over another, the body. Categories lend themselves to hierarchy and as long as there are categories, the possibility for hierarchy always exists. The intimate “allows us to break out of established categories; it creates an opening to think something new.”³⁸ The intimate does not allow for stable boundaries, the breeding ground for hierarchy, but demands the destruction of categories and especially those of opposition.

The intimate reading of colonization acknowledges that there is no clear distinction between colonized and colonizer, but instead relationships which have elements of both. The colonization narrative exposes the source of the resisters’ powers, their resistance. The Oankali do not want merely to clone the resisters, but to trade their culture and history. These resisters

³⁷ Pratt, Geraldine, and Victoria Rosner. "Introduction: The Global and the Intimate." Trans. Array *The Global and the Intimate Feminism in Our Time*. New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2012. 2. Print.

³⁸ Pratt, Geraldine, and Victoria Rosner. "Introduction." 22.

oppose the Oankali and their community. It is not a simple relationship in which one group has all the power and another has no power. The Oankali do not interfere with the resistor colonies, only interjecting when there are extreme threats of violence, or in the case of Akin, the prolonged kidnapping of construct children. They do not actively force their mindset onto the humans, but prevent through reflection future harm to humanity. The simplification into binaries risks losing this complexity and hybridity.

Chapter 5

The Colonized African Body

The broader narrative of colonization during slavery exposes the hypocritical nature of the humans' feelings of injustice with regard to the Oankali's actions. The passage on the ship and experience of the humans after the nuclear war can be interpreted as a version of the African-American slave narrative, which effectively results in all of the remaining humans delegated to the Other position in opposition to the Oankali. Additionally the narrative structure of *Adulthood Rites* reflects the stages of life that the slaves underwent: capture, assimilation, and compromise. Amanda Boulter states that "it is the non-human 'construct' protagonist who draws upon the conventions of the slave narrative to describe his life among humans as a story of 'abduction, captivity, and conversion'"³⁹ in order to persuade the Oankali of the humans' right to their own colony. The comparison of the Oankali's actions and slavery demonstrates the inability to simplify the categories of slaves and slave masters, illustrating that some of the slaves were once slave masters of their own.

The references to slavery range from the humans' treatment, to their lack of control, to their physical isolation. The allusions to slavery throughout the trilogy begin with the humans' capture and time in their suspension pods on the ship which can be seen as symbolizing the middle passage. Lilith, an African-American woman and the first human awakened, and the other humans who are awakened do not know where they are. They are disconcerted and find themselves two hundred and fifty years into the future orbiting in space around Earth. The humans' time in suspended animation leaves them spatially and temporally disconnected from

³⁹ Boulter, Amanda. "Polymorphous Futures: Octavia E Butler's XENOGENESIS Trilogy." Trans. Array *American Bodies*. New York, NY: New York University Press, 1996. 179. Print.

Earth and powerless to remove themselves from their situation. They are completely at the hands of the Oankali, unable to leave the ship, and only to be put back into animation by an Oankali. The humans have little agency over their reproductive rights and their physical bodies are used in the trade with the Oankali much like the slaves' bodies were used for labor and perpetuation of the slave trade through reproduction. The Oankali make decisions for the humans' wellbeing based on their presumed superiority and genetic knowledge. The humans are not given information freely, but only when they need to know certain pieces of information and are often deceived by omission. When Lilith attempts to learn about the Oankali, she is denied writing tools, but offered the alternative of mental enhancement by the Oankali in order to improve her memory. The denial of the processes of accessing or recording one's history and culture is reminiscent of the way slaves were denied knowledge as well as reading and writing materials.

Lilith's narrative illustrates the comparison between the humans' feelings of dehumanization at the hands of the Oankali and slavery. The extent of the dehumanization that perpetuated the system of slavery resulted in slaves being treated like animals. The biology and physical qualities of the slaves were emphasized during slave sales. The rhetoric of slave "studs" compares the slave men's virility and animal drive to reproduce to that of stallion horses. When Lilith first leaves her room to enter the ship and is hesitant to go outside, Lilith thinks that "she was retreating into her cage – like a zoo animal that had been shut up for so long that the cage had become home."⁴⁰ Lilith feels experimented on, caged, and dependent throughout her initial time on the ship. This treatment makes Lilith feel dehumanized and demonstrates that humans were guilty of the same cruelty as the Oankali; while feeling dehumanized, Lilith reflects on the humans' similar treatment of animals and slaves. Both slaves and animals were not only sources of physical labor, but a way to reproduce labor sources for the next generation.

⁴⁰ Butler, Octavia E. *Dawn*. 29.

The issue of reproductive freedom is one of the resisters' motivations for their rebellion against the Oankali and demonstrates the complexity of the Oankali's actions. The Oankali's lack of respect for the humans' reproductive freedom is similar to the treatment of the female African-American slaves. According to Marleen Barr, "the Oankali, who alter humanity's reproductive capacity, are an exaggerated version of real-world biological alterations of women's bodies. The Oankali's reproductive intervention, however, is more humane than existing technological reproductive intervention."⁴¹ The actions of the Oankali recall the actions of slave masters who controlled the slaves' reproduction. As Barr points out, the actions of the slave masters were highly abusive and violent, including the rape of slave women and the forced procreation of slaves. The Oankali's methods may seem more invasive and do violate the humans' free will, but are less abusive than the slave masters' actions. Lilith asks herself if she will be partaking in "forced artificial insemination. Surrogate motherhood? Fertility drugs and forced 'donations' of eggs? Implantation of unrelated fertilized eggs...Humans had done these things to captive breeders--all for a higher good, of course."⁴² While she reflects on the horror of her possible fate, Lilith remembers that humans did the same things to others and to animals for the 'higher good,' drawing a comparison between the two species. Butler frames the Oankali's actions in terms of humanity's own actions during slavery in order to deny the possibility of simplification to two stable categories of identity and morality.

The fear of breeding with the Oankali reflects the concepts of racial purity and miscegenation present during slavery. This fear affirms the connection between sexuality, race and the fear of children with the mixed blood of two species. The control of sexuality and reproduction between different ethnicities was seen as the solution for miscegenation. Laws prohibiting the marriage of biracial couples were designed to control reproduction and sexual

⁴¹ Barr, Marleen S. *Feminist Fabulation*. Iowa City, Iowa: University of Iowa Press, 1992. 85. Print.

⁴² Butler, Octavia E. *Dawn*. 58.

expression. This fear and control reflected inherent value judgments about both races. During the period of slavery, society viewed blacks and whites to be different races, not ethnicities. They valued the one race as better than the other and the corruption of one race with blood of another, less valued race, was feared. Intimacy between two members of different ethnicities was heavily feared. The same fear exists for the humans in regards to breeding with the Oankali. The mating between the two species is highly feared as a challenge to the status quo and the possible contamination of the human species. The resisters view the humans who cooperate with the Oankali as traitors to the human race and its racial purity. The similarities in actions between slave masters and the Oankali illustrate that humans have been guilty of similar actions.

The African-American slavery narrative breaks down the binary between the humans and Oankali, demonstrating that the “alien” acts the humans experience are familiar and distinctly human. Gwyneth Jones state that the Oankali “speak our human predicament, our history, our hopes, and fears, our pride and shame...the aliens we imagine are always other humans in disguise: no more, no less.”⁴³ The humans try to distance themselves from the Oankali and reinforce the subject/Other position that keeps them divided. While the Oankali are alien to a greater degree than the humans have ever experienced, their similarities must be acknowledged. The narrative promotes a complex picture of the Oankali and the humans, portraying both their similarities and differences. While the humans reject the Oankali for their foreignness, the comparison of the Oankali to slave masters demonstrates that the Oankali practices are not as “alien” to the humans as they want to believe. Perhaps what the humans reject in the Oankali is a hyper-extreme of human desires. Belk states that the Oankali are “an extension of some of humanity’s most extreme tendencies. Humans disturb and pollute our ecosystem; the Oankali will

⁴³ Jones, Gwyneth. *Deconstructing the Starships: Science, Fiction and Reality*. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1999. 108. Print.

literally consume every organic molecule of it.”⁴⁴ The African-American narrative illustrates the similarities between the two species, denying the humans the moral high ground.

One of these “extreme tendencies” is the creation of scientific theory to justify discrimination. Thomas Foster states that “the category of the ‘human’ has historically been used to justify slavery through the denial of humanity to the whole population.”⁴⁵ Similar medical arguments have been made in the past to justify the discrimination and subordination of other races or ethnicities by the dominant powers. The Oankali justify their manipulation of humans’ reproduction with genetics. The Oankali go one step further by having complete control of humans’ reproduction on a bodily level. Humans have engaged in the forced sterilization of other humans based on discrimination. Humans from the dominant class have had the technology to disable reproduction of others they deem unfit. The pursuit of science and genetic technology, good or bad, is continuing today towards the extent of the knowledge the Oankali have--genetic manipulation. Technology and science are advancing to a state where fertilization for reproduction occurs outside the body, and genetic markers for diseases can be read. The Oankali possess that technology, except to a more advanced degree. What the Oankali have is exactly what humans are striving towards, except that they cannot control the technology in their case.

Colonization and slavery not only relied on the oppression of women, but also reflected the colonization of their bodies. This continues to be seen today when rape is used as a weapon of war to send the message that the women are not safe and that the community has been completely oppressed. Women are raped and impregnated with the children of their oppressors. This is seen as a way to destroy the culture and the blood of the colonized completely. In the novel the human resistors understand that during these conflicts, women are not even safe in their own homes and that they have lost control of their culture. The oppressors have made the women theirs and

⁴⁴ Belk, Nolan. "The Certainty of the Flesh." 381.

⁴⁵ Foster, Thomas. Trans. Array *Strange Matings: Science Fiction, Feminism, African-American Voices, and Octavia E. Butler*. Seattle, WA: Aqueduct Press, 2013. 151. Print.

ensured future reminders of this oppression through the children the women will give birth to after their rape.

Chapter 6

Lilith: The Cyborg Origin Mother

Lilith embodies boundary crossing; the human tentatively cooperating with the Oankali, the physical strength previously delegated to men in a female African-American body, resulting in the awakened humans questioning if she is human. Feminist theorist Donna Haraway creates another term for the categorical boundary breaking between binary opposites: the cyborg. The cyborg represents an entity whose very existence defies the notions of stable categories of identity. The cyborg is a combination of “transgressed boundaries.”⁴⁶ Butler’s fiction “discuss[es] cyborg identity through the creation of aliens, human hybrids, and genetic engineering; this kind of science fiction that ‘translates’ the idea of the technological cyborg into a feminist identity of boundary crossing and acceptable of differences.”⁴⁷ Part of the definition of the cyborg is a refusal to reproduce a whole image of the same and instead create a new origin myth. Haraway argues that the traditional origin myth is one that reinforces the importance of wholeness and a return to an original image of oneness. By definition a cyborg cannot conform to that model of wholeness. Its identity is a series of incomplete identities and fractured selves. It cannot return to a sacred image of wholeness, as it was never made from one and thus cannot retrieve it. Lilith represents a recreation of that traditional origin myth into a cyborg origin myth. The children Lilith will produce are hybrids with no complete identity--instead a mix of alien and human and forced to create a new mixed identity. Lilith becomes a cyborg, in the middle of multiple identities and mother to the new hybrid cyborg species.

⁴⁶ Haraway, Donna. *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women*. 154-181.

⁴⁷ Melzer, Patricia. *Alien Constructions*. 94.

The legend of Lilith reflects a cyborg threat to masculinity and the established social order. The departure from Lilith's role in mythology as a mother who defies God, to the Lilith in the trilogy as a mother of a new hybrid species, reflects the creation of a new origin myth. Peppers states that Lilith was "Adam's first wife; however, because she refused to submit to his role...she was repudiated and cast out of Eden. Her 'fate' was to couple with 'demons' and give birth to a monstrous brood of children."⁴⁸ The creation of Lilith stems from the interpretation of Jews who noticed that in Genesis the creation of Adam in God's image has a female human constructed in God's image as well.⁴⁹ Her name alone reflects a departure from the traditional origin myth.

Lilith's position in the novels reflects her complete rewriting of the origin myth. While she is chosen by the Oankali, as an African-American woman she was Othered on Earth because of her race. In the trilogy, "everyone empathize[s] with the perspective of the so-called genetically flawed."⁵⁰ Lilith is already aware of unequal power dynamics. It is the previously dominant humans who experience the Other position for the first time. Immediately when Lilith awakes, she becomes "the alien, the uncomprehending outside."⁵¹ She immediately reverses the subject and object positions that were present on Earth; she becomes the Other. According to Adam Johns, "Lilith's dread of the Medusa/Oankali...encapsulates the struggles of intelligence to rise above xenophobia; it is the human contradiction."⁵² Lilith is immediately forced to confront the Other before her. After doing so, Lilith, before awakening the remaining humans, is genetically altered by the Oankali to be faster, stronger, and quicker to heal, making her stronger than the other humans. Lilith recognizes that any added abilities or tampering "would make her

⁴⁸ Peppers, Cathy. "Dialogic Origins." 49.

⁴⁹ Peppers, Cathy. "Dialogic Origins." 49.

⁵⁰ Vint, Sherryl. *Bodies of Tomorrow*. 68.

⁵¹ Butler, Octavia E. *Dawn*. 105.

⁵² Johns, J. Adam. "Becoming Medusa: Octavia Butler's *Lilith's Brood* and Sociobiology." *Science Fiction Studies*. 37.3 (2010): 387. Web. 30 Jan. 2014. <<http://jstor.org/stable/25746440>>.

seem less human”⁵³ and yet at the same time Lilith needs the abilities to protect herself from the resistor humans; the first of those awakened are “afraid she was not human, or not human enough.”⁵⁴ Due to her already awakened state, the humans mistrust her and place her in the Other category against themselves. Their mistrust makes the humans view Lilith as inhuman--placing her between the humans and the aliens. Lilith is an intersection of the boundary crossings in the novel. Lilith is “a conflicted cyborg who has chosen survival but can neither fully accept nor reject her position within the cyborg world she has helped to create.”⁵⁵ Throughout the novel, Lilith is conflicted because while she cooperates with the Oankali, fellow humans label her a traitor to humanity. She does empathize with the humans and believes they can be better than they are, and she does not fully agree with the Oankali’s methods. She cooperates because she wants humanity to survive in whatever way it can. Her own identity and position are always in flux. Lilith herself refuses to go back to the Stone Age and repeat the same history as earlier humans: the Oankali offer a chance to start over, but on a new path. When trouble over women occurs on the ship, Lilith states: “There’ll be no back-to-the-Stone-Age, caveman bullshit!...We stay human. We treat each other like people, and we get through this like people.”⁵⁶ Lilith represents the possibility and hope to rewrite history and provide an alternate story about human biological and cultural evolution.

While Lilith empathizes with her fellow humans, she makes the decision to cooperate with the goals of a better future and survival in mind. Lilith never tells her children to accept blindly what they know, but to learn and survive. Lilith does what is necessary to ensure their survival. Lilith recognizes that the Oankali are both “mothers, nurturers, healers – traditional Butler heroines in new forms. But they are also tyrants, with the same tendency to infantilize, to

⁵³ Butler, Octavia E. *Dawn*. 120.

⁵⁴ Butler, Octavia E. *Dawn*. 181.

⁵⁵ Holden, Rebecca J. "The High Costs of Cyborg Survival: Octavia Butler's Xenogenesis Trilogy." *Foundation*. 72. (1998): 49-57. Web. 8 Feb. 2014.

⁵⁶ Butler, Octavia E. *Dawn*. 178.

make choices for the child's 'own good.'"⁵⁷ Lilith is both a human and hybrid mother. While the Oankali represent an alternative, and perhaps better, version of the future, accepting their offer requires violating the ideas and identity Lilith holds closest – her humanity.

Lilith struggles with the identity of her children, wondering if they will be human or Other. Lilith argues that her child "'won't be human,' she whispered. 'It will be a thing-not human...A monster.'"⁵⁸ Lilith believes her children will be "Medusa children. Snakes for hair. Nests of night crawlers for eyes and ears."⁵⁹ The crossing of boundaries between the two species reflects a deep intimacy that is necessary, under these circumstances, to reproduce. Ultimately Lilith agrees to cooperate with the Oankali in order to ensure the survival of the human species. She is aware that "all actions must be undertaken with the consciousness both of self and other and of the kinship between the two. Kinship includes male and female, black and white, oppressor and oppressed,"⁶⁰ or as Barr states, "Butler's third kind, the child born of black and white – or human and extraterrestrial – parents...the third kind resulting from black women's close encounters with aliens."⁶¹ Lilith's children represent the boundary crossing and merging of the self/Other and human/alien. Melzer explains Lilith's actions as a "refuse [refusal] to accept the terms we conventionally associate with heroic resistance...Instead they [Butler's protagonists] survive – and often force their opponents to meet them halfway"⁶². Lilith encourages the humans she trains to "accept anything until they were sent to Earth. Then to run like hell at the first opportunity."⁶³ Lilith does not encourage the blind acceptance of the Oankali and raises children who resist in their own ways as well. This is reflected by Lilith's choices in raising her children,

⁵⁷ Allison, Dorothy. "The Future of Female" 478.

⁵⁸ Butler, Octavia E. *Dawn*. 246.

⁵⁹ Butler, Octavia E. *Dawn*. 41.

⁶⁰ Shinn, Thelma. *Women Shapeshifters Transforming the Contemporary Novel*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1996. 81. Print.

⁶¹ Barr, Marleen. *Lost in Space Feminist Science Fiction and Beyond*. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1993. 100. Print.

⁶² Melzer, Patricia. *Alien Constructions*. 55.

⁶³ Butler, Octavia E. *Dawn*. 117.

teaching them both sides of the conflict between the humans and Oankali, but encouraging them to “embrace the Oankali way” of accepting differences. Lilith encourages Akin that “when you feel a conflict, try to go the Oankali way. Embrace difference.”⁶⁴ Lilith’s child, Akin goes on to advocate for a human-only colony on Mars, believing that they deserve a chance to remain only human, similar to the Oankali who have a group who will not participate in the trade.

Lilith produces not only hybrid children, but also a new notion of family and culture for the humans cooperating with the Oankali. The origin myth that Lilith creates does not rely on a return to wholeness and her children, who are “signifiers of both racial impurity and a lack of origin and history – and thus of a prescribed social order – redefine the basis of ‘human’ subjectivity.”⁶⁵ Lilith’s children are born into a completely different culture of motherhood, where there are multiple parents and the raising of a child is a communal event. Furthermore, one can have a child who was not born from themselves, but from one of the breeding partners. This practice destabilizes an emphasis on lineage being straightforward as well as an emphasis on genetic parenthood. All of the members of the Oankali family are parents with no distinction between which members gave birth to the child. This suggests that “both reproduction and parenting can be separated from heterosexuality.”⁶⁶ The children of Lilith represent the “monstrous fear and hope that the child will not, after all, be like the parent.”⁶⁷ Her children represent a new future for both species without a typical origin and possibility. The construct children represent the “irretrievable loss of the illusion of the one.”⁶⁸

⁶⁴ Butler, Octavia E. *Rites*. 80.

⁶⁵ Melzer, Patricia. *Alien Constructions*. 101.

⁶⁶ Vint, Sherryl. *Bodies of Tomorrow*. 72.

⁶⁷ Haraway, Donna. *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women*. 226.

⁶⁸ Haraway, Donna. *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women*. 228.

Chapter 7

Introduction to the Third Novel

The first two novels tentatively resolve the discussion of the Human Contradiction, having shown readers the conflict from both sides. Neither the humans nor the Oankali have the perfect solution, isolating themselves or forcing humans to reproduce. The human-only colony on Mars is a resolution to the conflict. This compromise in ways of thinking on the part of humans and Oankali represents Butler's vision of another option to a binary. The first two novels explore the different characteristics and hypocrisies of both species, illustrating the dissolution of binaries between them. *Imago* builds upon this foundation to explore the inevitable futures of the humans and constructs. The last novel in the trilogy represents an evolution in Butler's vision of an image of posthumanism.

In *Imago* the first human-born construct Ooloi child is born to Lilith and its survival is put to the test as it must navigate the world as the first of its kind. The Ooloi are neither male nor female, but a third gender. Their sexuality cannot be likened to human sexuality, occupying a completely new territory. Because of this, they are always referred to in the third person: each one is an "it." *Imago* revolves around the lives of Jodahs and Aaor, the two construct Ooloi who must find themselves mates and go through metamorphosis twice. During their journey to find mates, regarded with caution by the Oankali, Jodahs and Aaor stumble across a colony of humans who are fertile. They somehow managed to evade the Oankali's reproductive control and are able to reproduce. However, because they must hide, they only reproduce within their community, causing severe mental and physical problems. The first members of this community are healed by Jodahs, who follows them back to their village in an attempt to find mates for Aaor. At the end of

the novel, after Aor has found mates, the village is given the chance to go to Earth or stay with the Oankali and construct children.

Chapter 8

The Anxiety of Homosexuality and Deviance from the Norm

Even though the Ooloi occupy a third gender, the men who reproduce with the Oankali associate having sex with the Oankali with a feminized loss of control that reveals their anxiety of homosexuality. On a very basic level, the Oankali represent a threat to masculinity, threatening their heterosexual relationships. After Lilith determines Jdahya is an alien, Lilith wants to know what gender Jdahya is, to which Jdahya responds, “It’s wrong to assume that I must be a sex you’re familiar with.”⁶⁹ Jdahya is immediately seen as an alien Other in opposition to the heterosexual self, Lilith. Visually, Lilith sees Jdahya’s sensory organs as animal-like, snakes or worms, “a nest of snakes,”⁷⁰ identifying them with an already Othered category, Medusa. The comparison to Medusa elicits a reference to the patriarchy associated with Medusa, who was a dangerous threat to masculinity, representing the Other in opposition and defiance to typical masculinity.⁷¹

The loss of control of reproduction that the men feel during sex with the Oankali reflects their fear of opposition to the status quo. All of the characters in the novels are heterosexual, yet the men associate sex with the Oankali as a homosexual experience. Lilith tries to tell Joseph after their first sexual experience with Nikanji that ““It isn’t male, Joseph.” “What difference does that make!” “What difference does any self-deception make? We need to know them for what they are, even if there are no human parallels-and believe me, there are none for the Ooloi.””⁷² This fear of losing control over one’s women is reflected in the humans’ own actions and a fear about

⁶⁹ Butler, Octavia E. *Dawn*. 11.

⁷⁰ Butler, Octavia E. *Dawn*. 12.

⁷¹ Wolmark, Jenny. *Aliens and Others Science Fiction, Feminism, and Postmodernism*. Iowa City, Iowa: University of Iowa Press, 1994. 27-53. Print.

⁷² Butler, Octavia E. *Dawn*. 170.

homosexuality and loss of masculinity. By having sex with the Ooloi, the human men occupy a non-physical position where they are linked into the Ooloi through sensory organs and the Ooloi becomes a conduit for pleasure. Neurochemical signals are induced and a feeling of intimacy and oneness is achieved that would not be possible through traditional sex. At its very basic level sex with the Ooloi becomes indeed alien sex in more than one sense. As Alcena Rogan states, “participants in the acts are alien to the prevailing social order, the straight mind.”⁷³ Not only are the Ooloi aliens, but also the sex they engage in is alien to the straight mind of power, male/female, and an emphasis on physical pleasure. The human men associate the non-physicality and position of passivity with a loss of masculinity, and, by binary opposition, the feminization of their identity. This fear turns into homophobia as the human men associate feminization of the male body with homosexuality.

Additionally, the fear of homosexuality is connected to the heteronormative status quo of the patriarchal former Earth. When everyone is expected to be heterosexual, homosexuals become the Other, individuals who break the status quo and perceived stability of the system. If humanity is defined by its ability to reproduce, which privileges heterosexuality over homosexuality, then betraying these heterosexual desires to mate with the Ooloi, since the humans mistakenly associate the Ooloi with males, indicates a betrayal of the human race. Jacobs states that “to choose otherwise than solidarity with other humans, against all others, is perceived as a betrayal of humanity; the punishment for this betrayal is a violent death.”⁷⁴ Joseph, Lilith’s lover in *Dawn*, is violently killed by the resistor humans during an attack due to his cooperation with the Ooloi. Echo Savage sees Joseph’s death as the actions of humans who “are intent on excising what they

⁷³ Rogan, Alcena Madeline Davis. "Alien Sex Acts in Feminist Science Fiction: Heuristic Models for Thinking a Feminist Future of Desire." *PMLA*. 119.3 (2004): 448. Web. 8 Feb. 2014. <<http://jstor.org/stable/25486060>>.

⁷⁴ Jacobs, Naomi. "Posthuman Bodies." 99.

understand as threats to the natural, heteronormative order.”⁷⁵ The resisters knew that not only was he cooperating with them, he was engaged in sex with the Ooloi and was killed for his cooperation. Representing homosexuals, the Oankali embody an Other position, part of the human historical category and oppression of homosexuality to the status quo of society.

The Ooloi represent the Other; “ungendered, highly-sexualized beings confound and entice their human counterparts – they confuse notions of discrete gender identities...the Ooloi become the expressly sexualized Other.”⁷⁶ The Ooloi become a further Othered category as sex with them becomes a political event, a statement about one’s alliances and a sign of rebellion against the dominant system. Some scholars have argued that the absence of homosexual characters in this vision of the future upholds heteronormativity, but the sexual act with the Ooloi destabilizes the heteronormative notions, for humans, of sex and destabilizes men’s masculinity and control.

For men, sex with the Ooloi means “he’s not in control even of what his own body does and feels. He’s taken like a woman...Someone else is pushing all his buttons. He can’t let them get away with that.”⁷⁷ Melzer states that “loss of control over the body connotes female attributes.”⁷⁸ For humans, male sexuality is regarded as active, whereas sexuality for females is traditionally regarded as passive. This rigidity is demonstrated when women defy these gender roles and are shamed for taking an active role in their sexuality. One of the male resisters in *Imago* tells Jodahs, a human-born construct Ooloi, that “You treat all mankind as your woman.”⁷⁹ This statement reflects the humans’ lack of control, not only in sex with the Ooloi, but also on Earth. Savage states that “when a man is feminized in this manner [Ooloi sex], he is stripped of

⁷⁵ Savage, Echo E. . ““We pair off! One man, one woman”: The Heterosexual Imperative in Octavia Butler’s Xenogenesis Trilogy.” Trans. Array *The Sex is out of this World*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 2012. 57. Print.

⁷⁶ Savage, Echo E. . ““We pair off!” 54.

⁷⁷ Butler, Octavia E. *Dawn*. 203.

⁷⁸ Melzer, Patricia. *Alien Constructions*. 84.

⁷⁹ Butler, Octavia E. *Imago*. New York, NY: Warner Books, Inc, 1989. 77. Print.

the control that he has been socialized to believe is solely his within sexual interactions.”⁸⁰ When denied this power, their gender identity -- already proven to mean more to humans than to the Oankali -- is threatened. The men choose to misinterpret sex with the Oankali and refuse to open their minds to different forms of sex and pleasure.

There is no emphasis in Oankali sex on genital organs; for the Oankali “pleasure itself is not necessarily sexual, but polymorphous.”⁸¹ There are no set definitions of pleasure. The Ooloi take great pleasure from their ability to heal. The concept of sex with the Oankali represents a “loss of selfhood in a kind of polymorphously perverse transcendent moment that is not only beyond the ‘natural’ heterosexual experience, but beyond the human. It entails a utopian loss of the ego in the process of blissfully merging with a larger self that includes the alien other.”⁸² The humans experience a loss of self during Oankali sex that they cannot achieve alone. The Oankali can give “her [Lilith] an intimacy with Joseph that was beyond ordinary human experience. And what it gave, it also experienced.”⁸³ Sex with the Ooloi represents, for humans, an unsettling loss of self; the participants lose themselves and their bodily awareness as they merge with the alien Other. This boundary crossing terrifies the humans.

⁸⁰ Savage, Echo E. . ““We pair off!” 55.

⁸¹ Rosu, Anca. "Alienating Sex: The Discourse of Sexuality in the Works of Octavia Butler." Trans. Array *The Sex is out of this World*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 2012. 42. Print.

⁸² Miller, Jim. "Post-Apocalyptic Hoping." 344.

⁸³ Butler, Octavia E. *Dawn*. 161.

Chapter 9

The Ideal Posthuman: Jodahs

Imago focuses on the construct Ooloi, Jodahs, whose external bodily changes represent the internal and external boundary crossing between Oankali and human, the effects of desire on the body, and the importance of body knowledge. Butler's "ideal" posthuman is dynamic and imperfect, but represents a further evolution of posthumanism. Posthumanism denies a wholeness or stable identity of the subject and emphasizes the multiple and dynamic identities of the subject. Jodahs represents posthumanism in a variety of ways. As the next generation of hybrids, Jodahs is literally a posthuman, the next evolution of humanity. Additionally, Jodahs' own identity is fractured, incomplete, and dynamic. Jodahs' ability to change its outward appearance is symbolic of its own identity as a hybrid of human and Oankali. The first two novels focused on the definition of human and Jodahs emerges as a unique posthuman.

A major question throughout the trilogy of the boundary between human and nonhuman illustrates the context from which Jodahs emerged as an image of posthumanism. The resisters who defend the position that a genetic exchange would mean the death of the human species assert the position that humanity's defining factor is in the genes. The Oankali believe that because of the trade, the construct children will have both human and Oankali features. They do not believe that the trade will bring the complete erasure of the human species, because they believe in the trading of not only genetics, but also their culture. The Oankali believe that the construct children will "be more like us and ours more like you."⁸⁴ Neither the Oankali nor the human species will walk away from the trade completely one species or another; they will all walk away from the trade different from how they came into it.

⁸⁴ Butler, Octavia E. *Dawn*. 40.

There are many elements of Oankali culture that are transgressive to the humans and that contribute to their identification of the Oankali as alien in both body and culture. As Melzer states, “Aliens occupy a special position: they signify boundary crossing per se – as a metaphor, they *are* difference.”⁸⁵ The human culture built upon power and a hierarchical structure is challenged by the Oankali culture which relies on fluid change. Oankali relations “to others are always established through exchange, negotiation, and mutual compromise, rather than direct coercion or domination. They demand active partners.”⁸⁶ Their decision to leave the resistor colonies to face their own fate reflects their lack of direct coercion. Because of their sensory organs, “the Oankali are constantly penetrating and being penetrated, dramatizing a terrifyingly limitless intimacy.”⁸⁷ They are unable to lie to each other and instead omit knowledge that others do not need to know when they are intimately connected. Boulter states that “the Oankali are free from the artificial cultural reality that, because it provides a semblance of connection between humans, ultimately distances and separates them all the more.”⁸⁸ The Oankali are a physical representation of the boundary breaking between human/animal, human/mythical beasts. Even despite their cultural differences, the discourses in the first two novels illustrate the similarities between the two species.

One narrative of posthumanism underlies these similarities between the humans and Oankali. The two parties, human and Oankali, seem to be opposed at opposite ends of the spectrum, but the Oankali society demonstrates how “it’s not just the Oankali who are symbionts; enforced contact with them makes humans see how we, too, are already symbiotic beings.”⁸⁹ Nikanji explains this concept to the humans that, “They [humans] could not exist without symbiotic relationships with other creatures. Yet such relationships frighten them...I think we’re

⁸⁵ Melzer, Patricia. *Alien Constructions*. 69.

⁸⁶ Foster, Thomas. Trans. Array *Strange Matings*. 142-143.

⁸⁷ Jacobs, Naomi. "Posthuman Bodies." 98.

⁸⁸ Outterson, Sarah. "Diversity, Change, Violence: Octavia Butler's Pedagogical Philosophy." *Utopian Studies*. 19.3 (2008): 446. Web. 8 Feb. 2014. <<http://jstor.org/stable/20719920>>.

⁸⁹ Peppers, Cathy. "Dialogic Origins." 53.

as much symbionts as their mitochondria were originally. They could not have evolved into what they are without mitochondria.”⁹⁰ Despite their differences and foreignness to each other, underneath it all there is an intimate connection, not just their shared necessity for each other. Having embraced symbiotic partners before and evolved from it, Nikanji states that humanity has done so in the past and can do so again. Yet again, these two opposites have a much more intricate and intimate relationship. They are not merely opposites, but are related to each other in multiple ways. The “Oankali represent a state of being that matches point by point many utopian fantasies of a better human future, an improved human type. And yet, because to merge with the Oankali would bring the disappearance of the human type...such metamorphosis is regarded with horror.”⁹¹ The loss of identity is a terrifying concept which results in the refusal of the resistor humans to cooperate. The comparisons between the Oankali and the humans illustrate that “even if the result of the Oankali’s project is something that we have dreamed of for so long, the means of accomplishing it amount to a violent negation of that dream – precisely because the agency is no longer ours.”⁹² The humans could embrace the new vision and culture of the Oankali, but to do that, the resisters feel, would result in a loss of control. Despite the promise of the Oankali’s offer or the colony to Mars, the limiting factor for the resisters becomes not entirely a biological one, but also a cultural one. While the Oankali aliens and culture have many practices that the humans would desire, the prospect of a lack of control results in a complete refusal for some of the humans. This refusal represents a major difference between the Oankali and the humans; the privileging of knowledge. While cooperating may be the best option for the humans, the resistor humans cannot acknowledge the idea.

⁹⁰ Butler, Octavia E. *Rites*. 183.

⁹¹ Jacobs, Naomi. "Posthuman Bodies." 100.

⁹² Shaviro, Steven. "Exceeding the Human: Power and Vulnerability in Octavia Butler's Fiction." Trans. *Array Strange Matings: Science Fiction, Feminism, African-American Voices, and Octavia E. Butler*. Seattle, WA: Aqueduct Press, 2013. 224. Print.

The Ooloi represent a privileging of the knowledge of the body, instead of the mind, a large difference between the humans and Oankali. The sensory organs for all Oankali represent an intimate and feminist concept of body logic. The Oankali read the humans' genetic code through these sensory organs and it is the only way they perceive the world. The Oankali see the inevitability of the human contradiction as a fact due to their complete trust in their body knowledge. The Oankali's "skill as genetic engineers is inexplicably tied to their bodies...their body *is* their technology."⁹³ Their knowledge of genetics shows them the presence of the contradiction and because of this, they deem it to be essentially true. As Akin tries to describe to Tate, the Oankali "feel and know it. They... There's no English word for what they do."⁹⁴ The Oankali believe in the "truth of the flesh."⁹⁵ This pure reliance and value of the body contrasts with the humans who live in a society founded on a mind and body split; "they position the body as the lesser term within a mind-body split, which demands that bodily impulses be regulated by social values."⁹⁶ Jacob states that the Oankali, unlike the humans, "literally take knowledge into themselves, make it a part of themselves, and pass it on to others in the intimate exchanges...it is not possible without a literal merging of self with otherness."⁹⁷ The Oankali rely solely on their body to perceive and understand the world. For them there is no Cartesian split between the mind and body, there is just the body. Accompanying this lack of split between mind and body, there is no split between self/Other if the only way to know the world is to physically take the Other into the self. For Jodahs this concept of body knowledge and logic is even more pronounced because of its large physical changes on its body due to its desires.

Jodahs has the ability to change its body based on the desires of its mates, reflecting its lack of a stable gender identity. The Ooloi "who bring pleasure to all are the ultimate cyborgs,

⁹³ Melzer, Patricia. *Alien Constructions*. 238.

⁹⁴ Butler, Octavia E. *Rites*. 262.

⁹⁵ Belk, Nolan. "The Certainty of the Flesh." 374.

⁹⁶ Boulter, Amanda. "Polymorphous Futures." 175.

⁹⁷ Jacobs, Naomi. "Posthuman Bodies." 99.

existing at the boundary between/beyond gender.”⁹⁸ The Ooloi “undermine stable sexual identities through their unstable bodies, while at times insisting on identities that exist outside of social construction.”⁹⁹ The boundary crossings that are explored throughout the trilogy are reflected in the unsettling feelings of the humans in regards to the uncertainty and lack of information about Jodahs’ gender. The “unstable relationship of both to (gender) identity is threatening to the status quo, which relies on a dual gender concept; it enables transgressive forms of rethinking gender relations and challenges the structure of power between them.”¹⁰⁰ The ability to change gender questions the foundation of gender in human society not only by representing one of the third gender individuals, the Ooloi, but by also possessing the ability to unconsciously change his appearance to please his mates. The fluidity of Jodahs’ sexuality is one that relies “not on a fixed gender identity but on the pleasure of transgressive sensual exchange – even across species.”¹⁰¹ Jodahs’ physical response to its change in desire demonstrates that “desire, then, is not a psychologically based phenomenon originating in a gendered body and aimed at a gendered sexual object, but one rooted in the body’s amorphous craving for physical pleasure.”¹⁰² For Jodahs, sexuality and gender have no meaning, all that matters is desire – no matter what gender or species.

Melzer states that the fluidity of the Ooloi’s identity “queers sexual desire but also enables us to conceptualize reproduction – and family-- outside a heterosexual context and within genderqueer constellations.”¹⁰³ The nature of Jodahs’ identity complicates the traditional opposition between self and other. Jodahs’ “embodiment does not take form apart from its desire, and its lack of a coherent self outside of relations with others is threatening to our notion of identity... Instead its desire for its mates compels its body to transform – preform – depending on

⁹⁸ Miller, Jim. "Post-Apocalyptic Hoping." 34.

⁹⁹ Melzer, Patricia. *Alien Constructions*. 224.

¹⁰⁰ Melzer, Patricia. *Alien Constructions*. 227.

¹⁰¹ Melzer, Patricia. *Alien Constructions*. 235.

¹⁰² Melzer, Patricia. *Alien Constructions*. 236.

¹⁰³ Melzer, Patricia. *Alien Constructions*. 241.

its mates' needs. Outside of its relation to others, there is no self."¹⁰⁴ The construct Ooloi demonstrate that "identity is based in difference and pleasurable experience of the other without trying to retain a certain form; the self is relational and contextual."¹⁰⁵ For the construct Ooloi, there is no stable sense of self, Oankali, versus Other, humans. While Jodahs' physical appearance might change, Jodahs' identity does not because for the construct Ooloi, identity is not solely connected to appearance. The Oankali essence is "to not have a fixed essence, but to remain always open to change at the most basic levels."¹⁰⁶ The Ooloi are "not limited to the current cultural formation of our identities."¹⁰⁷ Despite the idealistic fluidity and freedom of the Oankali, they are restricted and changed by their desires.

While Jodahs represents an evolution of post-humanism, Butler does not posit this complete dependence as a utopian ideal. While the Oankali represent a hope for change, they "become a literal representation of how the subject and the social are mutually constitutive and suggest that...we may change the subjects formed through these identifications and so change the social context produced by these subjects."¹⁰⁸ They also represent the danger of a self completely dependent on others. Without mates, Aor almost loses itself and disintegrates, a kind of Ooloi suicide. Aor's disintegration demonstrates that there is danger and vulnerability in dependence. Aor's experience demonstrates that one cannot remain truly the same; however, Jodahs and Aor illustrate that the only way to move is forward, towards change, and evolution. Butler's emphasis on the exceptions to the norm illustrate that humans and aliens are able to transcend these boundaries. In an interview with Larry McCaffery, Butler sums up this same idea stating, "It's less a matter of being programmed for self-destruction than it is that self-destruction occurs because we're not willing to go beyond that principle of who's got the biggest or the best or the

¹⁰⁴ Melzer, Patricia. *Alien Constructions*. 239.

¹⁰⁵ Melzer, Patricia. *Alien Constructions*. 241.

¹⁰⁶ Foster, Thomas. *Strange Mating*. 143.

¹⁰⁷ Vint, Sherryl. *Bodies of Tomorrow*. 76.

¹⁰⁸ Vint, Sherryl. *Bodies of Tomorrow*. 75.

most. We can; in fact we do, individually. And if we know we are like that, we ought to be able to go beyond it.”¹⁰⁹ As individuals, and representatives of the ‘pure’ human race, the resisters are unable to ‘go beyond it,’ to change, and to evolve. The danger for the resisters is not only inevitable death, but also the loss of diversity. Sherryl Vint states that “the implications of the practice of technology exhort us to pay close attention to how we choose to construct this notion of what is ‘human’ or we, too, run the risk that our children will not be human, because they will lack the diversity of contemporary humanity.”¹¹⁰ The Oankali, by definition, are drawn to change in the name of evolution. Jodahs may not be the perfect posthuman, but further illustrates that it is about evolution. For the XENOGENESIS trilogy, Jodahs is another step in the evolution of posthumanism.

¹⁰⁹ McCaffery, Larry. *Across the Wounded Galaxies*. 63.

¹¹⁰ Vint, Sherryl. *Bodies of Tomorrow*. 78.

Chapter 10

Conclusion

While the first two novels of the trilogy were invested in defining humanity, the last novel explored the future for each species. At the end of the trilogy “the humans have lost the worst elements of their xenophobia, and the Oankali have come to recognize the importance of individual autonomy.”¹¹¹ The hybrid species society at the end of the novel respects individual autonomy, allowing the colony on Mars, but does not tolerate the destruction of the society as a whole based on the principle of individual freedom alone.¹¹² However as Johns remarks, “Either we will all die in a conflagration (as the Oankali believe), or we will make ourselves into something radically new, something perhaps beyond our very understanding of self, more flexible, more oriented toward the superorganism above and the gene below, rather than toward the self as such.”¹¹³ The evolution of humanity to posthumanism is inevitable on Mars and Earth.

Even at the end of the trilogy, Butler asserts an intimate connection between the two seemingly opposite options: inevitable death and complete extermination. Both options require a drastic renegotiation of what it means to be human and what humanity has become. Both result in some sort of biological change to humanity because “biological changes in the worlds of Butler’s fiction stand in for the social changes that occur in our actual world...social constraints are as oppressive as biological ones and conversely, biology is at least as mutable as is society.”¹¹⁴ Butler states, “I do feel that we are either going to continue to play the same record until it shatters...or we are going to do something else. And I think the best way to do something else is

¹¹¹ Miller, Jim. "Post-Apocalyptic Hoping." 342.

¹¹² Miller, Jim. "Post-Apocalyptic Hoping." 347.

¹¹³ Johns, J. Adam. "Becoming Medusa." 397.

¹¹⁴ Shaviro, Steven. "Exceeding the Human." 225.

to go someplace else where the demands on us will be different. Not because we are going to go someplace else and change ourselves, but because we will go someplace else and be forced to change.”¹¹⁵ If a human colony on Mars results in, as what Akin hopes, a type of human without the need to create hierarchies and without the Human Contradiction, then the humans that live there will also be in a state of posthumanness.

The possible hopeful future for humanity involves an essential reworking of what it means to be human, a departure from the traditional humanist qualifications of humanness and the “posthuman has become the only possible continuation of the human.”¹¹⁶ Her children are “signifiers of both racial impurity and a lack of origin and history – and thus of a prescribed social order – redefine the basis of ‘human’ subjectivity”¹¹⁷. The change that Butler proposes at the end of the series, through the Mars colony or the construct children, requires an acceptance that:

we are bound and limited both by our genes and by our cultural inheritance: both are constraints that we cannot ignore, and yet both are susceptible...to alteration. So the question is never whether something is ‘in our genes’ or merely a ‘cultural construction;’ everything is both, and there is no reason to see either ‘nature’ or ‘culture’ as more restricting than the other.¹¹⁸

This third option, of a mediated reality consisting of parts of each “opposite,” is reflected in the trilogy. Butler states in an interview that “What I hope to wind up with in my work are a series of shadings that correspond to the way concepts like ‘good’ and ‘evil’ enter into the real world – never absolute, always by degrees.”¹¹⁹ Butler’s trilogy is able to explore all of those discourses in a new way because “Earth functions as a patriarchal room located on the ship. Humans have no place to run to avoid patriarchy. Nowhere. The Oankali provide a potentially

¹¹⁵ Potts, Stephen W., and Octavia E. Butler. ““We Keep Playing the Same Record”” 336.

¹¹⁶ Johns, J. Adam. “Becoming Medusa.” 397.

¹¹⁷ Melzer, Patricia. *Alien Constructions*. 101.

¹¹⁸ Shaviro, Steven. “Exceeding the Human.” 227.

¹¹⁹ McCaffery, Larry. *Across the Wounded Galaxies*. 64.

positive new space in which to be free from patriarchy.”¹²⁰ The trilogy explores both the definition of humanity from multiple perspectives as well as the future for humans. In Butler’s novels, the evolution to posthumanism is inevitable: whether forced by natural selection on Mars or through cooperation with an alien race, no one escapes unchanged.

¹²⁰ Barr, Marleen S. *Feminist Fabulation*. 86.

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ACADEMIC VITA

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EDUCATION

- The Pennsylvania State University**, University Park, PA Sep 2010 – Present
Bachelor of Arts in Women's Studies and English minoring in International Studies with specialized areas of study in Comparative Literature and Media Studies
- Participated in a pilot program connecting the Penn State labor department and the Global Labor University in Berlin, taking a Master's-level course on labor rights and multinational corporations
 - Studied abroad in Vienna, Austria, during fall 2014, taking courses in Teaching English as a Second Language, sociology, and women's literature

EXPERIENCE

- Alta Gracia Internship**, State College, PA Sep 2012 – May 2013
- Increased awareness for a sweat free apparel company
 - Built skills in community outreach and organizing, media outreach, and campaign strategizing
- United Students Against Sweatshops (USAS)**, Washington, D.C Jan 2010 – Present
- Attended and spoke at the Global Project for Workers Rights Labor Conference March 2012
 - Participated in a student delegation to Central America to speak with workers, tour factories, and visit workers homes
 - Attended the Regional Conference at North Eastern University in November and the National Conference in February 2012 in Madison, Wisconsin
 - Was a major organizer responsible for Penn State being the eighth school to sever ties with Adidas in March 2013 over its serious human rights violations
 - Was an organizer responsible for Penn State being the sixth school to demand that their brands sign onto the Bangladesh Fire and Building Safety Accord in February 2014
- Kiwi Frozen Yogurt**, State College, PA June 2011 – Sep 2012
- Served as a cashier, prepared frozen yogurt toppings, and cleaned the store
- Waring Dining Commons**; The Pennsylvania State University; Jan 2010 – May 2010
- Prepared and served hot food during dinner and lunch time
- Nittany Notes**, State College, PA Jan 2010 – May 2010
- Took notes in classes and prepared practice examinations

ASSOCIATIONS AND ACTIVITIES

- Teaching English as a Second Language Tutoring** Feb 2013-Present
- Teach two ESL learners every week
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- Taught an Austrian child English grammar and conversation for 10 hours a week
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- Global Connections Conversation Partners** Aug 2011 – Dec 2011
- Paired with an international student to improve student's English skills

ACHIEVEMENTS

- Dean's List every semester: Maintain a minimum 3.5 GPA each semester
- Women's Studies Department Marshal at graduation
- Paterno Fellows: Self selecting educational leadership opportunity emphasizing achievement in liberal arts through the completion of a second major, while maintaining a minimum 3.4 GPA.
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