

Kimberly Gilson

ENGL4900

Dr. Jason Haslam

March 2020

Coercion in Octavia E. Butler's *Xenogenesis*

Fear of strangeness and strangers can segment “us” and “them” into rigid categories without the introduction of an alien species.

Science fiction can use an alien species to explore xenophobic divisions and power relations made by the categories of “us” and “them.” In the late 1980s, speculative fiction author Octavia Butler began a deep exploration into humanity’s conflict between biophilia and xenophobia-- a love of life and a fear of difference. Butler’s *Xenogenesis* trilogy is comprised of *Dawn* (1987), *Adulthood Rites* (1988), and *Imago* (1989). In *Dawn*, human survivors are removed from Earth’s post-apocalyptic terrain by an extraterrestrial species known as the Oankali. The species is described as inherently “curious about other life [and] acquisitive” (*Imago* 531) of it. These life-seeking, biophilic organisms hope to participate in a gene trade that will ensure the survival of both species. Thus, every surviving human is reproductively sterilized by the Oankali; supposedly, their sterilization will prevent the continuation of an unchecked, destructive pair of human characteristics. The characteristics are known as the Human Contradiction, a deadly combination of *intelligence* and *hierarchical thinking*; with hierarchical tendencies being served by intelligence, humans are bound to destroy others and themselves. With this foreboding claim, the Oankali seek to mate with humans in order to correct any “genetic flaws” (*Dawn* 39) via the direct manipulation of a human’s genetic material.

To persuade humans into this mating proposition, the Oankali appoint Lilith Iyapo, an African-American anthropologist, to act as their species liaison. The Oankali use Lilith to indirectly introduce themselves to the humans because, without heavy sedation, a human may be so utterly horrified by the Oankali that they try to take their own life, or the lives of others (*Dawn* 40). That being noted, it is very important to the Oankali that humans *choose* to be with them, which presents a complicated definition of what choice is considered to be by the Oankali. Many resister humans, who view the Oankali as a threat to “pure” humanity (Johns 384), refuse the Oankali’s propositioning. Butler frames this reaction as being informed by xenophobia and a reluctance to relinquish patriarchal lifestyles which, in turn, makes many of the resister humans prone to violent, regressive behaviours. Therefore, the resisters are often framed antagonistically.

Xenogenesis’ point-of-view leans away from these resisters and into the minds of the Oankali, with Lilith’s Oankali-Human children being the protagonists of the series’ second and third novels. In the second addition to the trilogy, *Adulthood Rites*, Akin, a Human-Oankali hybrid, must grapple with his identity after being kidnapped by a group of resister humans. He eventually convinces the Oankali that humans need to be able to freely reproduce on their own; the Oankali concede to this even, though they believe “*to the bone* that it’s wrong to help the human species regenerate unchanged because it *will* destroy itself again” (*Imago* 532, emphasis not mine). The trilogy’s conclusion takes place approximately fifty years after *Adulthood Rites*. *Imago* features the first Human-Oankali construct ooloi, Jodahs, whose stable, physical representation of human-gender characteristics, as well its existence as a multicellular organism, depends on the attachment to and desires of its mates. Butler’s *Xenogenesis* novels feature

multitudes of complex characters and relationships that develop in not wholly unproblematic ways.

Central to *Xenogenesis* is the concept of sexuality-- what it is and how it can be manipulated or abused. To genetically “trade” (*Dawn* 41) with humanity, the Oankali must confront, among other obstacles, the xenophobic, patriarchal power structures that inform human gender identity. The Oankali confront these obstacles by deploying euphoria-inducing sedatives and human-attracting pheromones as well as by secreting chemicals that repel humans from contact with members of the opposite sex. Essentially, humans are drugged to encourage Human-Oankali relations but the Oankali need Lilith to avoid drugging humans *too much* (*Adulthood Rites* 300). In *Xenogenesis*, the treatment of sexual coercion and assault is depicted more sympathetically when committed by Oankali perpetrators in contrast to the depictions of human perpetrators of sexual coercion and assault. Yet, the coercive methods of the Oankali are matched by Butler’s depictions of human, heterosexual relationships. Therefore, throughout *Xenogenesis*, Butler appears to argue that *all* relationships inherently create and take place within structures of unbalanced power dynamics and, therefore, contain coercive aspects.

I. Human Hierarchy, Power, and Coercion

Lilith fears that her fellow surviving humans may regress to primitive, “Stone-Age” treatment of one another, losing their “humanity” (*Dawn* 178) by exhibitions of violent, patriarchally-informed attempts to establish dominance. This regressive behaviour exemplifies the Oankali’s assessment of the Human Contradiction. Peppers views the human survivors' fixated, aggressive attempt to establish patriarchal dominance, despite new, alien terms of

existence, as a defence of “pure, essential human[ity]” (Peppers 51). To be human means to be hardwired to the default setting of being hierarchically-inclined. Humans like Lilith can attempt to distance themselves from hierarchical structures, like patriarchy, by embracing the Oankali but, even in a non-human situation, they may feel that there is an imbalance of power. Even Titus, a human who was raised by and nurtured by an Oankali family, insists that there is an unspoken hierarchy that even the Oankali take part in. *Xenogenesis* presents humans as fixated on the application of hierarchical thinking, even if it may not be present in the way that they imagine (i.e. between the genders of the Oankali) (*Dawn* 39).

According to Bahng, Butler based the Oankali and the knee-jerk, human reaction to fabricate hierarchy where there is none on the scientific history and biology of a group of organisms known as “slime molds”(314). Slime molds are single-cell organisms that cluster together when threatened to gain protection from or prevail over obstacles. Upon discovery, scientists presumed that the slime mold must be directed by a “leader cell” that organizes the temporarily multicellular form. However, slime molds are not recognizably hierarchical and there is no actual leader cell. This does not mean that the *Oankali* are intended to be completely nonhierarchical, but Butler’s research into the slime molds illustrates the real human phenomenon of insisting upon a nonexistent hierarchy. Yet, in the case of the Oankali and the human, where there is an imbalance of power and the desire to exert one’s will over another through force, there is the potential for coercion.

Human relationships in *Xenogenesis* are all engaged in coercive behaviours and its heterosexual relationships can feature, at the very least, misogynist undertones. From the beginning of *Dawn*, all adult-human interactions exist in a power struggle. Despite being

separated from other human beings for over a decade, Titus attempts to exert control over Lilith the first time that they meet; when he cannot sexually coerce her, he beats her (*Dawn* 96). Titus believes that this attack is justified because the Oankali sanctioned him to have sex with her and then Titus blames Lilith for “mess[ing] it up” (96). After the attack, Lilith blames the Oankali for “[keeping] him fourteen for all those years” (97); despite Titus’ coercion and assault, Butler depicts Lilith’s reaction to Titus as nuanced and problematic. When Lilith is first kissed by Titus, Lilith remarks that it resembles being “kissed by an eager boy” (94) and she subconsciously “[responds] to him in spite of her fear” (94). Yet, Lilith can sense something insidious behind Titus’ desperate attempt at a few “minutes of pleasure” (94). Titus reveals that he experiences feelings of violation that are caused by the Oankali remotely creating dozens of anonymous children from his genetic material; as a result, Titus experiences mounting paranoia that the Oankali are running countless other unknown experiments on him. Lilith sympathizes with Titus because she can sense his lonely desperation and his disconnection from human society. However, Titus’ decision to forcefully violate Lilith, paired with his deliberate misgendering of the Oankali that assign gender-based power roles within a projected hierarchy, reveals a desire to gain a semblance of patriarchal control by asserting coercive dominance over Lilith.

Deliberate misgendering of the ooloi is used several times to reveal the underlying misogyny and patriarchal delusions that erupt from humans interaction with the Oankali. Lilith first encounters this “persistent ignorance” (89) when Titus asserts the “[he] thought the ooloi acted like men and women while the males and females acted like eunuchs” (89). Titus’ assertion separates the concept of gender performance from biological sex. Butler uses this deliberate misgendering to emphasize how traditional gender roles are assigned by patriarchal ideas of

dominance and subordination rather than biological sex. This concept is emphasized when characters in *Xenogenesis* engage and reflect on sexual interactions with the Oankali ooloi. The Oankali males and females are seen as eunuchs, by which Titus problematically means they are not gendered beings because they do not participate sexually with humans. Therefore, the male and female Oankali do not directly intervene in heteronormative, patriarchal, human relationships. As an ooloi facilitates sexual relations between a human male and a human female, it becomes a direct intermediary between heterosexual sex. Both male and female humans equally relinquish control and, thus, they relinquish their power to the ooloi. Butler even specifies that the three genders are all placed on the same level, with the human male, Oankali ooloi, and human female all spooning each other as an intertwined triad. No longer does the female Lilith “lie below” the male Adam, or vice versa (Osherow 70). Rather, the ooloi dissolves the traditional structure of the dominating, male role in heterosexual sex. In response, the humans who feel that their heterosexual identity has been threatened by the ooloi lash out with the greatest ferocity to restore their patriarchal power. For example, Curt believes that his “humanity [is] profaned [... and] his manhood [is] taken away” (*Dawn* 192) after sexual relations with the Oankali and, thus, attempts to kill the ooloi assigned to him; if successful in killing the ooloi, Curt would be able to regain his perceived place in his mental hierarchy and, therefore, his supposed manhood. Butler argues that, due to the patriarchal hierarchy, humans use perceived power to assign gender identity; this concept becomes important for understanding the coercive aspects of the trilogy. It arbitrarily imbues the toxically-masculine males with a sense of authority that validates violent oppression and creates a disturbing, fragile link between the need for dominance and somebody’s stable self-image.

After Titus attacks Lilith, *Xenogenesis*' next example of human-human sexual coercion is carried out by one of the Awakened human survivors, Peter, and his violent, hyper-patriarchal crew. Peter openly drags a struggling woman, Allison, towards the bedroom quarters to "impress one of his followers [Gregory] by helping them get a woman" (*Dawn* 176). Allison was targeted because she had not entered a relationship with a man and, thus, Peter argues it is Allison's "duty to get together with someone" (176). Peter's group ensures that the "someone" has been decided for her. Gregory beats back those trying to aid Allison, telling them to "get [their] own" woman (177). This interaction, as Lilith quickly assesses, is not about procreation, species survival, or intimacy, but about violently claiming authority over others by treating them as objects. Lilith proclaims that nobody is "property" (178) or "has the right to the use of anybody's body" (178). To treat each other as less than people would be to lose what Lilith considers their humanity. For his incitement of Allison's attempted sexual assault, Lilith asserts that Peter is "garbage [...] human garbage" (177). Peter's attempts at coercion, whether sexual or his threats towards Lilith, are remarkably violent in nature. They represent a heavily-toxic masculinity that is rooted in the assertion of, and desire for, dominance over others; this desire for dominance and its associated problematic behaviours become exacerbated in the new, alien world that Peter feels subordinate within.

Even among Lilith's friends, Gabe and Tate, there are more nuanced levels of coercion. Gabe firmly rejects his affection for and the chemical bond with the couple's ooloi, Kahguyaht. However, in *Adulthood Rites*, Tate reveals a level of longing to return to the Oankali mate (417). Furthermore, when Kahguyaht offers itself to Tate, it is Gabriel who chooses to "[snatch] her away" (*Dawn* 229). Moreover, at the end of *Dawn*, Tate actively "abandon[s]" (227) interaction

with Lilith partially “to please Gabriel” (242). Tate’s bond with Gabriel, however loving, has made her vulnerable to both emotional and physical coercion. Tate does not reach out to Kahguyaht because she fears Gabriel’s anger and abandonment. Gabe must emotionally and, at times, physically enforce *his* decision that Tate and himself are not to engage with the Oankali.

Every human-human relationship in *Xenogenesis* eventually results in at least some coercive aspects due to the balances of power that are in constant negotiation. For example, in *Dawn*, a small, timid woman named Celene “put[s] herself under Curt’s protection” (141) in order to be protected under his patriarchal promise; she subordinates herself in a relationship with a violent man by what, arguably, could be considered coercion by the human-constructed patriarchal system itself. The aforementioned, specific examples of violent, attempted rape foreshadow a wide-spread problem of human trafficking and rape on the newly re-settled Earth in *Adulthood Rites* and *Imago*. Furthermore, the only consensual, heterosexual sex¹ that is directly alluded to throughout *Xenogenesis* occurs in *Imago* when Aor asserts that its new mates were already mated (712). However, these mates are also brother and sister, as a result of their mountain village’s culturally compulsive, inbred reproduction; before Jodahs and Aor arrived, for these fertile humans to refuse to breed meant exile or worse from the community, but it is framed and accepted as a social duty. The Oankali allegedly missed the sterilization of the reproductive capabilities of a few humans before releasing them. This was discovered when a fifteen-year-old girl and her mother were ambushed by other human resisters. Her mother was killed and the girl was raped (*Imago* 661) and left to die, but she survived and had been impregnated. Thus, the proclaimed “First Mother” of the human settlement was brought violently into her position by aggressive, murderous assault. The human relationships that Butler describes

in *Xenogenesis* are constantly showcasing the coercive behaviours that manifest under destructive, unbalanced power structures, which falsely presume that someone has the right to the use of someone else's body (*Dawn* 176).

II. Oankali Relationships, Power, and Coercion

Therefore, as a species that eschews hierarchy and is concerned with comfortable, totalizing pleasure, the Oankali offer a stark contrast to the violence of the heterosexual, Awakened humans. As mentioned earlier, the positioning of bodies in Oankali-Human sexual relations differs from the images of *Xenogenesis*' forceful, male-dominated sex. During sex with an Oankali ooloi, the ooloi, the male and the female partners are equally enraptured in full-body pleasure. The ooloi constructs and mediates the illusions but, supposedly, only acts to provide the greatest amount of pleasure for the trio. In contrast, Lilith Iyapo's name invokes an allusion to the biblical Lilith who refused "to lie below" (Osherow 70) Adam; as supported by Osherow, this refusal to subordinate herself can be taken for its sexual and patriarchal implications (69). In contrast, sex with the Oankali demonstrates sexual pleasure without the patriarchal hierarchy while introducing a sexual intermediary between a heterosexual pair, which inherently queers the act. Further, the Oankali are understood to be "avatar[s] for gayness" that reveal the "breadths of sexuality" (Castleberry 16) capable of humans. This mediation of heterosexual sex inherently challenges the patriarchal, dominating alternative offered by Butler's resister humans. Where the resisters inflict violence through sex or other means of assault, the Oankali avoid physically harming humans to their greatest ability. When they give pain, they feel physical pain (*Adulthood Rites* 294); even if the Oankali are violently attacked, they claim to only

involuntarily cause physical harm to another organism. Additionally, the Oankali insist that they “care for [their] mates as deeply as [humans] do for [theirs]” (*Imago* 730). Throughout *Xenogenesis*, this is made an overwhelming true statement; the Human-Oankali ooloi literally “need” (*Imago* 736) their human mates in order to hold their multicellular forms together. Furthermore, if an ooloi’s human mates abandon it, like in the case of Tate and Gabe’s ooloi Kahguyah, then the ooloi will retreat in grief and loss (*Adulthood Rites* 364). In these ways, the Oankali contrast and highlight issues within Butler’s human resisters’ coercive, hierarchically-informed treatment of their fellow human and offer an equitable, queer model of relationships.

However, before *Lilith Awakens*, the Oankali test her (and every other human) for two hundred and fifty years (*Dawn* 95). They take genetic imprints of all the gathered humans, for safe-keeping, and thoroughly infiltrate and alter their bodies when they are unconscious (*Dawn* 153). When they perform these actions, the Oankali claim that they only alter human physiology to improve the human’s life-- to make them healthier versions of themselves (*Dawn* 39). However, it is during this time, without any consent, that the Oankali take away the reproductive abilities of humans. They believe that it would be immoral to allow the continued reproduction of solely-human children because they are doomed to destroy themselves (*Adulthood Rites* 502). Even if this is true, any (even partially) human creature understands that “humans must be free to go” (*Imago* 530) and play out their tragically-framed existence. While the Oankali eventually allow for a purely human settlement, against what their moral biology instructs them to do, they still hold all of the power in the Human-Oankali dynamic. The Oankali transport humans to Mars where they must terraform the planet into a livable space because the Oankali are planning to

consume all of Earth's life before they return to the stars (*Imago* 531). Therefore, before the Oankali form relationships with humans, they have already sedated, experimented on, and taken the genetic information from the human survivors while, simultaneously, cementing their intention to consume Earth, regardless of human sentiments.

These blatant examples of coercive force are caused by the so-called unbridgeable differences in biology between humans and the Oankali. Rosu argues that "the Oankali seek only the fulfilment of their biological need to combine with other species and diversify their genetic pool" (42). Further, the Oankali's overwhelming, biological means of communication and idea of "love" is bodily. Therefore, the Oankali cannot grasp the idea that humans need human companionship for more than just biological need; Lilith recognizes this gap in Oankali knowledge after she is assaulted by Titus. Nikanj cannot understand why Titus' Oankali family was not sufficient for Titus and Lilith asserts that she "could spend hours talking to [Nikanj] in its own language and fail to communicate" (*Dawn* 97). Adamantly believing that their touch and care is sufficient, the Oankali engage in a form of chemical coercion that makes humans repulsed by human contact after mating with an ooloi. Initially, it is an unbearable period of "ooloi-induced reclusiveness" (*Dawn* 195) that supposedly lessens to a tolerable degree after some undisclosed span of time. This specific drugging applies to other Oankali ooloi as well--essentially, mating partners cannot stand to be around those that are not their mates to reinforce their bond. Further, even though the ooloi drugs that cause aversion to other humans *in general* wanes, a separate ooloi drug makes any contact from a member of the *opposite sex* unbearable. Lilith is unable to hold her human partner Joseph's hand without "shuddering with revulsion and relief" (*Dawn* 220). Additionally, in *Imago*, Jesusa and Tomas are unable to make contact

besides stroking each other's hair (which is made of dead cells, so it does not transmit a repulsing signal) even though they are brother and sister. However, Butler explicitly states that these repulsions only apply to the opposite sex²! Females “could touch other females in comfort [... and a male] could touch males” (*Imago* 703). Therefore, the aversion seems directly targeted the discouragement of human-human, male-to-female contact. This suggests that the repellent is an extension of the Oankali's enforcement of non-human reproduction, which means that it is used to encourage the artificial dependency on the Oankali.

Essentially, the Oankali use biological warfare to seduce humans into mating with them (*Dawn* 161). Lilith describes her bond with Nikanj as loving but, more than that, a “literal, physical addiction to another person” (*Imago* 679). The Oankali generally believe that her statement is too “[cold]” (679) of an assessment, but Lilith makes an accurate assessment. The Oankali ooloi's pheromones “won't let [humans] hate [an ooloi] for long” (*Imago* 690) and, thus, Lilith's “xenophobia is, without ever disappearing, blended with pity” (Johns 368). This is compounded by the pitiful, manipulative (however well-intended) displays of the “misunderstood alien” (Bonner 58). Nikanj exalts to Lilith that “[humans] captured [the Oankali], and [they] can't escape” (*Dawn* 153). Nikanj suggests that despite the Oankali's explicit use of chemical coercion and experimentation, humans are the ones in control. Rosu believes that Butler uses Nikanj's statement to ironically contrast the human resister's assertions that *they* “and not the Oankali, are the captives” (Rosu 44). Yet, despite the need that Oankali place onto their human mates (*Imago* 682), the Oankali's “trade” with humans is not equal (*Dawn* 225). The Oankali “absorb [humans], and [they] don't mind” (*Imago* 671). Even when the ooloi Jodahs heals its mate Jesusa, its “desire to heal is mixed with the desire to possess”

(Rosu 46) her body's information. A reformed-resister human states casually that the Oankali "probably won't kill [humans], but they'll swallow us whole" (*Imago* 722). These examples demonstrate how the Oankali use their artificial, chemically-induced bond with their human mates to placate their valid fear of being overtaken. Even though *Xenogenesis*' characters argue that their attachments to their Oankali mates surpasses pheromones and reaches love (*Imago* 671, 690), they are still coerced into their relationships with the Oankali whether by physical ultimatums or hormonal drugs.

Moreover, the Oankali drugs and the Oankali focus on biological pleasure are used to mask the dangerous, coercive element of the Oankali mating ritual. In *Dawn*, Nikanj drugs and assaults Lilith's mate Joseph before he can choose for himself whether he wanted to engage with the ooloi. Nikanj says that this is done to spare Joseph's pride (160). Yet, when Joseph is given the chance to answer whether he desires to go through the experience again, Joseph vehemently refuses. Joseph realizes that his body wants Nikanj's touch, but human sexuality and attraction is not solely ruled by biology (*Dawn* 190). Therefore, Joseph uses his volition to oppose his bodily desires. However, Nikanj disregards Joseph's vocal refusal by stating that Joseph's body "made a different choice" (*Dawn* 189). The Oankali defend themselves by stating that they only take part in consensual trade, but they find consent through bodily consensus (*Dawn* 189; *Adulthood Rites* 468). Human consent does not hinge on the body's uncontrollable, biological responses. Yet, the Oankali will disregard what the human vocally asserts and, then, take away their volition through, if not solely artificial bonding, force. Yet, Lilith interprets these assaults on Joseph as seduction (*Dawn* 189). Moreover, in *Adulthood Rites*, the trembling anticipation of Nikanj when looking at a potential, new mate is visible to the young Akin (*Adulthood Rites* 284). This exhibits

that the Oankali feel desire intensely, but it does not excuse their forceful coercion of those who vocally reject them. Further, an Oankali's attraction and desire for a human does not convert sexual coercion and assault into a benign form of seduction. Yet, Lilith expands this problematic interpretation of the Oankali's assault to encompass the mass-drugging that the Oankali use to introduce themselves to the Awakened humans (*Dawn* 183).

III. Perspectives and Love, and the Absence of Human-Human Queerness

Despite the obvious, blatant coercion used by the Oankali to bring humans into their genetic trade, the protagonists of *Xenogenesis* frame the assaults and violence committed by humans very differently than those perpetrated by the Oankali. Undoubtedly, this is intentional on Butler's part. In *Dawn*, the sympathy the Lilith extends to the Oankali demonstrates the effectiveness of the Oankali ooloi drugs and the nature of the addictive pheromones that prevent human mates from hating their ooloi; if they cannot hate them, they are more likely to make excuses for them (*Imago* 690). Therefore, Lilith's interpretation of Nikanj's assault on Joseph as a seduction is a sign of the Oankali's biological conditioning. Since *Dawn* is in Lilith's point-of-view, the her narrative suggests to the reader that Joseph's "sexual experience is pleasurable [as it is] something [Lilith] is all too willing to engage in herself" (Bonner 58), which effectively "masquerades" (Bonner 58) Nikanj's assault as a seductive act. However, while Lilith can comfort herself by framing the assault of her beloved Joseph, which she cannot prevent, as a seduction, Lilith is unable to ever fully forgive Nikanj for impregnating her without her consent (*Imago* 671). Lilith recognizes the severity of this violation in spite of the mental-hold of the Oankali drugs. Even in *Imago*, when Lilith says that she finds a greater level of closeness with

her Oankali-Human family than she had with her pre-apocalypse, human family (671), she asserts that she can never forgive Nikanj for denying her volition over her body's reproduction (671). Yet, as Kahguyaht said in regarding communication barriers between the two species, "[Oankali-Human Construct] children will know us, Lilith. You never will" (*Dawn* 112). Yet, Kahguyaht's statement works in reverse for the Oankali as well; the Oankali cannot fully understand humanity until they are genetically melded. However, the Oankali do not *need* to try very hard to understand humans because they are ultimately in control. Subsequently, in *Adulthood Rites*, the new narrator is Lilith's Oankali-Human Construct child, Akin. Akin acts as a bridge between human and Oankali, mediating the necessary options for both species. Lilith's Construct child can understand why humans may reject the Oankali and believes that they have the right to do so, even if his Oankali biology tells him that it is comparable to committing genocide (*Adulthood Rites* 502). In *Imago*, this interspecies knowledge is further explored through Lilith and Nikanj's ooloi Construct children, Jodahs and Aaor. From the perspective of Jodahs, its intense desire and need to find mates -- or, risk its entire body collapsing-- is paramount. It cannot fully control the pheromones that it gives off, but Jodahs demonstrates real care for its mates. However, all of these protagonists lean further and further into sympathies with the Oankali. As Santos declared, the Oankali species is swallowing humanity (*Imago* 722). Therefore, Butler's depictions of Oankali coercion are more sympathetic and less violently refuted as sexual assault because, yes, the Oankali are highly concerned with physical pleasure and community but, more importantly, the protagonists of *Xenogenesis* are biologically conditioned to either forgive, make excuses for, or understand on some irrational wavelength the Oankali species. Butler does not forgive the Oankali for their coercion, but she imagines the

different power politics surrounding sexual relations with a powerful, alien species that could influence a human's biochemical reactions. For this reason, Butler portrays the Oankali as equally coercive and involved with power as humans are, even if the severity of their coercion is masked by their alienness in itself.

While Butler showcases that all relationships, alien or otherwise, have coercive aspects due to the constantly shifting, ever-present power structures that no being can escape from, she does not rule out love. When Lilith is asked whether the human connection to the Oankali ooloi was purely due to biological persuasion, she states that while it begins as pheromones “[at] first” (*Imago* 740), the human's feelings *become* actual love over time. Jodahs' mates know this to be true; they do not like that their emotions were influenced, but they love him regardless. Butler shows the same phenomenon in human-human relationships. For Tate, it is the thought of leaving Gabriel that keeps her from fulfilling her desire to be with the Oankali. Before and after directly encountering the Oankali, Tate and Gabe, like Jodahs' mates Tomas and Jesusa, take care of each other and have deeply affectionate interactions (*Adulthood Rites* 416). Even the resister Curt shows affection for his fellow humans. For Celene, Curt comforts her when she is scared (*Dawn* 143, 195), and for a human female named Jean, Curt becomes distressed when he cannot comfort a grieving, panicked friend (*Dawn* 194). One could easily argue that the chemical exchanges and hormones released during human social interactions are what bonds humans together as well. Even if, as Bonner claims, Butler is arguing that all love is chemical (54) and participates in unbalanced relationships, it seems clear that Butler does not dismiss the attachment. Butler's understanding of human relationships amongst themselves, as well as with the Other, is extraordinarily complicated, nuanced, and defies being categorized as solely evil or

good. Butler does not depict human or Oankali assault and coercion as being worse than the other. She introduces the extremes and nuances of their horrors in order to articulate how complicated power in a relationship can be.

However, while Butler's depiction of relationships is complicated, there is a gap in *Xenogenesis*' scope. The gap is produced by the sheer lack of queer-human representation throughout the trilogy, noted by many critics (Bonner 55). While the Oankali may stand as "avatars for gayness" (Castleberry 16) and may even create a queer, reproductive future, they are not human. Yet, Butler makes it clear that, in the *Xenogenesis* universe, homosexuality or the idea of queer sexuality is present. However, humans are exclusively referred to as queer, directly or through derogatory language (*Dawn* 159), to undermine their humanity and their authority or to associate them with the Oankali Other. Therefore, despite the apparent existence of queer humans at one point in *Xenogenesis*' diegesis, they are all missing from the novels themselves; this problem of the Vanished Queer human remains in the depictions of human settlements and the Oankali settlements. As advanced genetic engineers, who have access to male and female reproductive cells, there is no explanation for why there would only be heterosexual pairings and any potential is not explored further. Bonner points out that *Xenogenesis*' "concentration on forced reproduction leaves limited space for the non-heterosexual, but the unease of Tino, the human male with his Oankali male mate [...] raises [...] the issue" (55). Additionally, one could examine the implications of why the Oankali ensure that humans are only continuously repulsed by members of the opposite sex, but able to be "comfort[ed]" (*Imago* 703) by same-sex humans. Yet, overwhelmingly, queer representation is solely attributed to the alien and the relationship dynamics between human-human queer relationships are not explored (though, Butler would

probably argue that those relationships also exist in an inherent power struggle). As Castleberry said in “Twisting the Other: Using a ‘Third’ Sex to Represent Homosexuality in Science Fiction”, while science fiction authors have a tradition of letting the Alien encompass a novel’s depiction of queer sexuality, it is time to “[let] LGBT literature be the Other no longer” (17) or, at the very least, not solely depict queer sexuality in the form of the Other.

Throughout the *Xenogenesis* trilogy, Butler argues that all relationships, human or Oankali, exist within inherent, inescapable power structures. Therefore, despite varying intentions or communicative barriers, all relationships engage in coercive behaviours. Early in the trilogy, Butler establishes the violent threat and destructive nature of human’s tendency towards hierarchical thinking. The patriarchal need to be in a position of dominance is threatened by the Oankali and, consequently, toxically-masculine behaviours erupt among certain Awakened humans in order to maintain their gender identity, which has been arbitrarily attached to their position of dominance. As a result, overtly violent examples of human coercion, sexual and otherwise, ensue. By increasing the salience of these destructive behaviours, Butler forefronts both the little and large struggles for power and uses of coercion in human-human interactions. The pleasure-centric, intimately attached Oankali serve to critique and highlight the violence of human-human relationships through a queered, equitable model. However, despite allegedly not operating within a hierarchical structure, the Oankali are revealed to be just as inescapably involved in power structures that lead to coercion. Their biological acquisitiveness and pheromone secretion, coupled with their removal of human volition based on their own, biologically-based criteria of “choice” makes nearly all of their interactions with humans essentially coercive. Yet, the depictions of Oankali sexual coercion are treated with

disproportionately more sympathy than the depictions of human-human sexual coercion; that is not to say that either perpetrator of sexual coercion should be treated with sympathy but, rather, Butler demonstrates how both perpetrators and victims may formulate justifications and excuses for coercion (especially under emotional duress).

Arguably, the sympathy lies with the Oankali examples of coercion in *Xenogenesis* because all of the narrative protagonists of *Dawn*, *Adulthood Rites*, and *Imago* are strongly emotionally or biologically bonded to the Oankali. Lilith is affected by Oankali drugging and eventual bonding with her ooloi Nikanj; meanwhile, Lilith's Construct children are part-Oankali and are, therefore, privy to the incommunicable, Alien differences in perspective that justifies their coercion in the interest of sexual reproduction and survival of the self or species as a whole. Therefore, the sympathetic view towards the Oankali coercion does not excuse or negate their coercive actions. Rather, the perceived sympathy is a result of Butler's portrayal of the Oankali's mind-altering coercion, in Lilith's case, or because the Oankali perpetrators' entire existence biologically requires and, therefore, normalizes their acquisitive, inherently coercive relationships with the species that they genetically acquire. However, Butler does not appear to argue that the inherent power dynamics of all relationships means that there is no love, even if that love is chemically-based. In *Xenogenesis*, Butler argues that all relationships are a myriad of nuanced, messy, coercive power struggles, whether they are human or Alien. Butler does not appear to represent human-human queer relationships because all queer representation in *Xenogenesis* is associated with the alien Oankali; Butler's full relationship to queer representation and relationships in *Xenogenesis* would require greater examination in future critical readings and works. However, one could reason that Butler would extrapolate her

argument, that all relationships have coercive issues due to the ever-present existence of power dynamics, to queer human relations as well. Throughout *Dawn*, *Adulthood Rites*, and *Imago*, Butler creates a nuanced, intricate world where coercion is inescapable in any relationship because, simply, things are complicated and the structures of power are *always* in play.

Notes

1. This is not necessarily the only time that a human-human *relationship* is framed as consensual, but this is the only direct reference to a heterosexual, human sexual act that is not associated with violent coercion.
2. In *Xenogenesis*, biological sex is framed, for humans, as a binary.

Works Cited

- Bahng, Aimee. "Plasmodial Improperities: Octavia E. Butler, Slime Molds, and Imagining a Femi-Queer Commons." *Queer Feminist Science Studies: A Reader*. University of Washington Press, Nov. 16, 2017. Accessed online: 1 March 2019 at <https://compostingfeminisms.files.wordpress.com/2019/04/bahng-plasmodial-improprieties-queer-feminist-science-studies.pdf>.
- Bonner, Frances. "Difference and Desire, Slavery and Seduction: Octavia Butler's Xenogenesis." *Foundation: The International Review of Science Fiction*, vol. 48, 1990, pp. 50–62. EBSCOhost, search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=mzh&AN=1990037657&site=ehost-live. Accessed 16 November 2019.
- Butler, Octavia. *Lilith's Brood*. Grand Central Publishing, 2000. Print.
- Castleberry, Traci N. "Twisting the Other: Using a 'Third' Sex to Represent Homosexuality in Science Fiction." *New York Review of Science Fiction*, vol. 21, no. 5 [245], Jan. 2009, pp. 13–17. EBSCOhost, ezproxy.library.dal.ca/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=mzh&AN=2009300131&site=ehost-live. Accessed 20 March 2019.
- Johns, Adam. J. "Becoming Medusa: Octavia Butler's Lilith's Brood." *Science Fiction Studies*, vol. 37, no. 3 [112], Nov. 2010, pp. 382–400. EBSCOhost, ezproxy.library.dal.ca/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=mzh&AN=2011026014&site=ehost-live. Accessed 1 March 2019.

- Osherow, Michelle. "The Dawn of a New Lilith: Revisionary Mythmaking in Women's Science Fiction." *NWSA Journal*, vol. 12, no. 1, 2000, pp. 68–83. *EBSCOhost*, ezproxy.library.dal.ca/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=mzh&AN=2000071478&site=ehost-live. Accessed 20 March 2019.
- Peppers, Cathy. "Dialogic Origins and Alien Identities in Butler's Xenogenesis." *Science Fiction Studies*, vol. 22, no. 1, Mar. 1995, pp. 47–62. *EBSCOhost*, ezproxy.library.dal.ca/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=mzh&AN=1995065121&site=ehost-live. Accessed 20 March 2019.