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POWER, POLITICS, AND DOMESTIC DESIRE IN OCTAVIA BUTLER'S *LILITH'S BROOD*

by Aparajita Nanda

Octavia Butler's works, from her short stories and novellas to her science fiction novels, focus on themes of power, control, bondage, and a desired freedom from servitude. Power structures inevitably center on the master / slave or the captor / captive trope. Her handling of this issue takes on complex manifestations in her works, where enslavement and genetic evolution often form the core of the narrative. Within this framework, hostile and repressive regimes enforce a controlled society. Butler brings race, gender, and sexuality to the foreground of speculative fiction as she deals with complex social and political issues in all their ambiguity. Her handling of these issues defiantly explores taboo topics of incest, bisexuality, genetic mutations, and complicated male and female relational dynamics in the throes of oppressive power politics. In the trilogy *Lilith's Brood*, Butler deconstructs the simple binary of oppressor / oppressed through an interaction between the two, apparently on mutually beneficial terms, that may lead to the survival of both.¹ The story becomes far more complicated as it embraces insidious forms of force, compulsion, subtle mental conditioning, and human choice, where compulsion, attraction, and repulsion between the oppressor and the oppressed take on fascinatingly interlinked forms of desire.

Butler achieves her goal by locating her narrative in speculative fiction that combines traits of science fiction and fantasy.² She combines the "epistemological gravity" of science fiction with the "technically reactionary" quality of fantasy to create an alternative space that can interrogate past subjugations of history and look at reactionary statements that sought to disrupt the regimentation of the rule (Jameson qtd. in Miéville 232). Despite these combinative qualities, this space belongs to speculative fiction: as opposed to other types of fiction, this particular genre is a necessity that allows one to speculate with traditional realist censors turned off. The importance of colonialism as a historical context for the genre of science fiction has been recognized by a number of critics.³ John Rieder in *Colonialism and the Emergence of Science Fiction* asserts that "no informed reader can doubt that allusions to colonial history and situations are ubiquitous features of early science fiction motifs and plots. It is not a matter of asking whether but of determining precisely how and to what extent the stories engage colonialism" (3). Rieder proposes that the "other" of colonialism, replete with its core ambivalence, often forms the essence of science fiction narratives. I argue that Octavia Butler picks up the theme of colonial oppression and subjugation and in her parable of postcoloniality presents us with a set of aporias built on several inevitably linked discourses of power, genetics, and evolution that confound the limitations of the traditional discourses by acknowledging the ambiguity at the heart of the colonial project. She makes a major intervention into the discourse of postcoloniality

by suggesting a third meaning that is neither colonialism nor “not colonialism.” Theory often tends to polarize or oversimplify, while literature, especially the novel, tends to work more on the level of contradiction and ambiguity.⁴ Butler was thinking seriously about a “third” form of colonialism in the 1980s, in the wake of Ronald Reagan’s arms race with the Soviet Union: the colonization of nuclear weapons and the potential self-destruction of humanity.⁵

Butler’s *Lilith’s Brood* deals with this third form of colonialism that deconstructs the rigid binaries of oppressive, colonizing, and alien Oankali and victimized, colonized humans, as it recognizes ambivalences within these definitions by acknowledging Oankali as propagators of diversity and healers with an altruistic purpose, and humans as erratic and violent.⁶ What makes the Oankali interesting as colonizers is that they exhibit some, many, or most of the traits of colonizers without easily being branded as oppressive equivalents of Spanish or British colonizers. What Butler achieves, then, is a situation in which the colonial narrative as such is critiqued as an administratively coercive, inequalitarian situation in need of “domestic trysts” (as opposed to “domestic bliss”) even when its motives are genuine.⁷ Perhaps the colonial dynamic is more clearly rendered in *Lilith’s Brood* precisely because, as opposed to the case of the colonizers mentioned above, in which colonialism is clearly autocratic rule and all arguments about the benefits to the colonized are easily exposed as rationalizations, the Oankali are not “white devils.” By forcibly and brutally taking over the culture of another, they (rightfully) become demonized in a way that, for all of its rightness, suggests that the hierarchy of colonial situations stems from the colonizers’ original motives and acts. However, by removing or even questioning the original motives, one ceases to fixate on them, and one can analyze the structure of colonialism in a more theoretical way, perhaps concluding that, even if an instance of “bloodless colonization” happened on earth, here and now, the colonial situation itself would be intolerable from the standpoint of human solidarity and individual freedom. Butler’s text focuses on a controlled society, on strategies for organizing that society, recalling the creation and maintenance of rules and strictures that would uphold and justify the conceit of order and well-being at the heart of colonial rule. Maintenance of categories of citizenship, differentiating the colonizer from the colonized, was a major goal of imperialist rule. This, however, was not an easy task, because these seminal categories were threatened by hybrid citizens. These hybrid citizens, the product of contact zones where the European national often formed sexual liaisons and affective ties with natives, included the growing population of interracial children of European and native parentage, as well as European children who were “too taken with local foods, too versed in local knowledge” and who became virtual natives themselves (Stoler, *Carnal Knowledge* 2). Clearly, the issue was one of cultural belonging, and the primary concern of the imperialist regime was how to classify or categorize this hybrid population.⁸ In its effort to turn out citizens who would abide by state authority and strengthen the nation-state through their loyalty, the imperialist regime was faced with the problematic of its hybrid citizens. Given that they belonged to an intermediate zone of divided loyalties, these citizens could maintain a semblance of loyalty but could be potential conduits of subversion beneath it. Racial vigilance, which earlier was concerned only with securing national borders and with the macropolitics of the nation, now had to contend with the micropolitics of the domestic domain of individual citizens and their family lives.⁹ The resultant anxiety operated in a new arena where the management of

domestic space, of parenting, of sexual morality, and of upbringing moved from being peripheral topics of colonial interest to cardinal ones that made these everyday, personal spaces highly political.

Butler's text opens in the wake of a human-led apocalypse in which the human race nearly brings about its own demise by means of nuclear war. The Oankali, a nomadic, gene-trading alien species, rescue the few surviving humans, but at a price. Whoever opts to be saved forgoes the right to reproduce. As gene-trading aliens, the Oankali evoke European traders in their initial forays into establishing a colonial empire (Goss and Riquelme 448). The Oankali adroitly camouflage their colonizing intent, enforcing restrictive reproductive rights on humans, in a rhetoric of altruistic salvation. Mouthing "option" as a choice for the humans, the Oankali seem to bring a subtle if insincere change to the reality of the colonized, who were never given a choice of options about the colonizers' intent. Naturally, the situation recalls the European civilizing mission, a rationale for colonization that proposed to contribute to the spread of Western civilization but was replete with demeaning assumptions about civilizing barbaric, native savages, which formed the heart of the campaign. The Oankali justify their gene trade with the need to produce a hybrid species for the future, along with the promise of a utopia. They plan to breed with humans to create a superior breed of human-Oankali constructs and thereby to eliminate the Human Contradiction, humanity's toxically flawed, "mismatched pair of genetic characteristics," intelligence and hierarchical reasoning (Butler 38). To implement their plans, the Oankali abduct Lilith Iyapo, an African American female, mutate her brain chemistry somewhat to set her up as a virtual mother figure, and make her responsible for convincing human survivors to join the Oankali fold. The Oankali claim that the new breed of constructs, rid of their Human Contradiction, will not repeat the genetically fated history of their human ancestors when they return to Earth. Lilith is also the chosen progenitor of Akin, the first human-Oankali construct, who like his mother is deployed by the Oankali in the human camp to act as an informer. Mother and son, one by way of genetic mutation and the other by way of birth, straddle the human-Oankali divide and thereby qualify as the hybrid citizens of colonial rule. And, like the latter, Lilith and Akin, complicit in the Oankali plan, have the potential to betray the humans. But on the other hand this mother-son duo, defined by affective ties acquired within the domestic sphere, could also lead to political aberrations and possibilities of dissent against any kind of autocratic rule. Butler redefines domestic space, moving it beyond the traditional definition of a nuclear family to embrace a broader meaning in which the "nuclear" exists in the form of a dark pun. She introduces us to a family resulting from or made possible through a nuclear holocaust. I argue that Lilith and Akin specifically evolve from this domestic space and prioritize the domestic, a traditionally safe space, as a site of radical disruption rooted in desire, an overlooked site of revolutionary energy.

Motherhood, Sexuality, and Deviant Desire

Lilith is first introduced to us as a captive, a victim of a controlled society whose administrators have a definite plan for her. During her imprisonment, her captors introduce

a five-year-old child to her. Lilith, who has lost her son in a car accident, almost instantly starts caring for this child and is grateful “she could touch him” (Butler 10). As suddenly as he was given to her, the child is taken away. The text reads, “experiment completed” (11). Introducing a human child to Lilith was a ploy to revive her maternal instincts, a necessary experiment in the Oankali agenda to assure themselves of the successful completion of their plan. It was a test to establish the viability of their program, which depended primarily on Lilith’s becoming a successful surrogate mother, a maternal accomplice in the Oankali “captive breeding program” (60).

Her victimized position is quickly changed as she is bequeathed the role of surrogate mother. Surrogate motherhood had a long history in pre-World War II days.¹⁰ The role of surrogate mothers was enhanced with the rise of eugenics, which advocated racial purity, a cleansing of ethnic, religious, or national groups, with an added emphasis on heredity. Eugenic ideas of selective breeding, of selection based not only on moral and cultural purification but also on maintenance of racial superiority, became important issues.¹¹ In *Dawn*, there is a clear implementation of selective breeding, albeit this time accommodating the “environmental catastrophe [that] becomes the justification for sexual/genetic manipulation of surviving humans.” Moreover, because humans according to the Oankali are genetically flawed by their “Contradiction,” manipulation of genes becomes the only answer, “and forcible control of sexuality/reproduction is justified by the need for species evolution” (Stein 211). As Joseph comments, “There was a lot of work being done in genetics before the war. That may have devolved into some kind of eugenics program afterward. Hitler might have done something like that after World War Two if he had the technology and if he had survived” (Butler 143). The Oankali carry on the experiments. They save the humans so that the latter feel indebted to them, thereby compelling the humans to share their genes and to give the Oankali the knowledge that will help their species to evolve. The Oankali agenda is pretty well laid out, as Jdahya explains to Lilith: “You’ll awaken a small group of humans . . . and help them to deal with us. You’ll teach them the survival skills we teach you” (Butler 32). Thus, Lilith is deployed in the midst of humans to propagate Oankali teachings. But as she penetrates the domestic or “home” space of the human survivors and virtually raises them on Oankali teachings, she recalls colonial concerns regarding the bearing and rearing of children, confirming, in the words of Sidney Webb, that “the empire was rooted in the home” (qtd. in Davin 97). This home space, thought to be contained within the parameters of regulation and control, to be a relatively safe, static space, becomes a veritable arena of dynamism and disruption. The situation becomes tricky: as institutionalized surrogacy demands fulfillment of orders that have been given, it admits, whether it cares to or not, the possibility of covert disobedience or dissent if the surrogate mother refuses to abide by the given tenets of colonial rule, confirming thereby that control is most frequently and hysterically implemented when it is almost impossible to maintain.¹²

Surrogate motherhood, however, catapulted women to a status that demanded an unerring sense of duty toward their wards that was fulfilled only by a successful implementation of the patriarchal norms and agenda that would secure future generations as virile, responsible citizens of the nation.¹³ The condescension in Joseph’s voice— “[Lilith,] [d]o you understand why they chose you—someone who desperately does not want the responsibility, who does not want to lead, who is a woman?” (154)—highlights typical male

chauvinism; it also hints at calculated premeditation in the Oankali choice of a woman to accomplish their agenda.¹⁴ Details of a genetically mutated Lilith, “with altered body chemistry . . . [and] as strong and as fast as her nearest animal ancestors” (153), agree with Joseph’s suspicion about a woman ready to fulfill the Oankali role tailor-made for her. As she realizes her enhanced mental faculties and sheer physical strength, courtesy of Oankali intervention, even Lilith is dumb struck by “the carnage she create[s]” as she interrupts the rape of Allison Zeigler (Butler 175). A parallel may be found in colonial history, in the aspiration to strengthen the mother figure by improving her knowledge, guiding and tutoring her, in order to safeguard and reinstate white supremacy. The symbol of motherhood was so compelling that it cut across class barriers, subsuming the narrative under the iconic figure of a “Queen Bee,” preserved for her fertility and herself “the cradle of the race” for procreating and maintaining white, European, and “preferably Anglo-Saxon” supremacy, thereby subtly equating and simultaneously validating imperialism and superiority, along with a birthright to rule and guide the rest of the world (Sloan-Chesser qtd. in Davin 135, 138).¹⁵ It is also interesting that, as a result of Lilith’s increased strength and power (her controlling the food and opening the walls), the humans are incredibly dependent and rendered powerless, increasing the likelihood that they will follow the Oankali’s (and Lilith’s) wishes. But the situation may also bring about other feelings (such as anger, or a sense of denial or repression) in the humans, feelings that may lead to a significant change in Lilith’s role, given that she is also, in some way, somewhat human. Thus, Lilith cannot simply be dubbed “a colonial subject” just because her rejection of an offer of euthanasia from Jdahya guarantees her life and thereby forces her into a lifetime of servitude to the Oankali (Nelson 92–93). The situation is far more complex: she cashes in on the power and significance of her role as she meticulously acts it out and successfully camouflages her intention. By allowing her subconscious repressions to morph into desires of resistance to the Oankali plan, she satisfies her anger and feelings of denial that she has felt at the hands of the Oankali.¹⁶

The essentiality of motherhood in the Oankali community is again underscored when Jdahya outlines Lilith’s role and details her grooming process, as colonial mothers were primed to carry out the colonial agenda successfully. “You’ll live,” he says, “with my family for awhile—live as one of us as much as possible. We’ll teach you your work. . . . You’ll teach them [what] we teach you” (Butler 32). He admits that the Oankali are “powerfully acquisitive” but justifies that fact by adding that this is a genetic trade that will ultimately help the human species to survive, albeit in a crossbred form (41). The ooloi, a subadult Oankali type of what Slonczewski labels “the ultimate post-colonialist,”¹⁷ would be the primary determinant, mixing and matching genes, implementing ideas of selective breeding and sterilization, “mak[ing] changes in [human] reproductive cells before conception and . . . [also] control[ling] conception” (42). The Oankali push their plan for contained order to promote a sense of peaceful well-being in the human-Oankali construct they mean to create. Lilith’s decision to go along with the Oankali plan qualifies her as a nurturer, fulfilling her role “to teach, to give comfort, to feed and clothe, to guide” the resistant humans (111). The Oankali are dependent on Lilith to fulfill the role of the maternal figure who is capable of convincing her wards on their behalf. Lilith has been groomed by the Oankali to “choose and Awaken . . . at least forty human beings [and make] them ready to meet the Oankali,” “to weave them into a cohesive unit and

prepare them for the Oankali—prepare them to be the Oankali’s new trade partners” (115, 117). Lilith is accorded the power to choose her wards, provided she eliminates their individual, resistant clamoring and creates a homogeneous, “cohesive unit,” a sacrificial commodity for Oankali consumption. A significant parallel occurs in the colonial intent that sought homogeneity as a prerequisite in manifesting a “one nation” concept but that was seriously threatened by the indigenous presence of the racialized “others.” As Lilith meticulously scrutinizes dossiers that contain biographies of her wards’ backgrounds in order to inform her choices, there is a suggestion of the successful completion of selective breeding and the execution of the colonial agenda of grooming wards to become more like the imperial race. The fact that Lilith becomes more powerful only by deserting her fellow humans reinstates the power structure of the colonial-Oankali society.

Given her divided loyalties, Lilith Iyapo, a human by birth but mutated by the Oankali, propagates and justifies the Oankali gene trade to the humans even as she charts her own agenda within the parameters of the Oankali narrative.¹⁸ In her complexity, she performs the colonial mission to guide her wards but, like a native foster mother, works against the state. In her search for the right people to awaken, she looks for a few potential allies who would trust her, play along with her, understand that “unless they could escape the Oankali, their children would not be human,” and so “accept anything until they were sent to Earth” (117). Moreover, her human allies would have to be “thoughtful people who would hear what she had to say and not do anything violent or stupid” (116–17). “That meant they must control themselves, learn all she could teach them, all the Oankali could teach them, then use what they had learned to escape and keep themselves alive,” and in so doing successfully enact her subversive plan of undermining the Oankali tenet by actually abiding by the letter of the law (Butler 117).

Further complications are introduced when Lilith presents an intriguing picture not only of a surrogate mother but also of a biological one. She introduces a radical alteration into “the female subject,” who in the imperialist regime was constructed and whose “capacity (or vulnerability) to pregnancy” was highlighted to valorize the authority of the nation-state (Squier 126). Her initial rejection of the Oankali offer of motherhood, appalled as she is by what she visualizes as her offspring—“Medusa children. Snakes for hair. Nests of night crawlers for eyes and ears” (43)—recalls Lilith’s first encounter with the Oankali, when she noticed that “some of the ‘hair’ writhed independently, a nest of snakes. . . She imagined big, slowly writhing . . . night crawlers stretched along the sidewalk after a rain” (Butler 13). In “The Erotics of Becoming: *Xenogenesis* and ‘The Thing,’” Eric White refers to the same passage and adds that “she [Lilith] pronounces the name ‘Medusa,’ a mythological monster that can be interpreted . . . as a figure for everything abject and abominable” (402). Lilith’s revulsion at “Medusa children” may also be traced back to Greek mythology, in which Medusa was ravished by Neptune against her will. It seems as if the Medusa children are born of rape, a violation that later becomes the fate of Lilith herself. Repelled by the vision of demonic children, Lilith openly accuses the Oankali of manipulating her: “You’re going to set me up as their *mother*? Then put me back to sleep, dammit. . . I never wanted this job!” (111–12). Her peremptory rejection of motherhood, which contradicts the traditional maternal pledge to love one’s children unconditionally, clearly fails to qualify her as an ideal mother, one who submissively abides by colonial tenets.¹⁹ And yet, despite her initial reaction, she never opts out of her maternal role.

Maybe, like all humans, she “is primed to react emotionally to the sight of snakes, not just to fear them but to be aroused and absorbed in their details” (Wilson qtd. in Johns 388).

Lilith strives beyond the typically defined (read sexually contained) human, as she transforms domestic space into a sexually charged revolutionary zone where transgressive desire aspires to fulfill the novel’s fantasy of the posthuman. She emerges as a seductress, sexualized to the point that her intense desire craves sexual stimulation and later satiation only for herself. The discourse of sexuality has often been used as a symbolic representation of domination. Edward Said in *Orientalism* refers to the construction of the Orient as “an exclusively male province . . . viewed with sexist blinders . . . [where] women are usually creatures of a male power-fantasy . . . to be solved or confined or . . . taken over” (207), and thereby relegated to a subservient status. Lilith defies any inferior status when of her own accord she has sex with aliens and even inducts her human male counterpart into it. She is the first human to have sex with an ooloi (Nikanj, a gender-neutral alien seducer) without being drugged into a submissive state. The text reads: “Human beings liked to touch one another—needed to. But once they mated through an ooloi, they could not mate with each other in the Human way—could not even stroke or handle one another in the Human way” (Butler 297). Lilith’s dominant sexuality is spelled out in no uncertain terms: “She did not pretend outwardly or to herself that she would resist Nikanj’s invitation—or that she wanted to resist it.” In fact, she concludes, “Nikanj could give her an intimacy with Joseph that was beyond ordinary experience” (161). Her maternal status is complicated in her desire for this contact and underscores the fact that she is no longer totally human, given that she can no longer desire Joseph without her ooloi’s presence. It shows how Lilith is forever changed through contact with the ooloi/Oankali, embracing what Erin Ackerman calls “a molecular subjectivity” where “sexuality becomes an integral part of becoming,”²⁰ or what Nolan Belk describes as “the ability to become more than the limitations of their societies . . . chang[ing] in ways that make them unrecognizable posthumans” (379, 386). When Lilith enjoys sex with the ooloi, she introduces a contraband desire that rebukes Cold War domesticity and procreative sex by reveling in infamous forms of pleasure. Ensnared in the role of a powerful seductress and colluding with the Oankali, Lilith detracts greatly from the image of an innocuous, idealized mother figure (for instance, that of Eve).

Lilith’s sexuality harkens back to the rabbinic Lilith, whom Adam thought should submit to him sexually, when he instructed her to “lie below him.” Almost like her ancestral namesake, Butler’s Lilith defies traditional notions of sexual relationships and their unwritten text of hierarchy and male domination.²¹ She has sex with her human lover Joseph through the ooloi, as she “sandwiche[s] Nikanj’s body between her own and Joseph’s, placing it for the first time in the ooloi position between two humans” (161). Joseph is completely alarmed, almost dumbfounded, after the experience; he is definitely skeptical, even refusing to “take food from her hands” (168). His reaction is juxtaposed with that of Lilith, who confesses:

“I liked it,” she said softly. “Didn’t you?”
 “That thing will never touch me again if I have anything to say
 about it.”
 She did not challenge this. (Butler 169)

While Lilith totally enjoys the sexual experience, Joseph is possibly terrified by it. The irony of the situation is manifold. Men usually experience greater sexual desire than women, and therefore one assumes that Joseph would have enjoyed the experience more than Lilith. However, the situation is reversed here, prioritizing a woman who derives intense pleasure and seems to be totally at ease with the situation. It also brings to the fore a different sexual alignment that puts all genders on a par in the act itself and so gives the lie to sexuality as a loaded metaphor for male domination. Lilith's position in the sexual configuration presents an interesting overturning of that trope. For one thing, in this asymmetrical alignment there are three, not two, participants. Nikanj, the ooloi, forms an essential part of the triad. The ooloi invites a reversal in the traditional sexual position of a woman lying under a man by saying, "Lie here with us . . . why should you be down there by yourself?" (161). Lilith "thought there could be nothing more seductive than an ooloi . . . making that particular suggestion" (161). She gives in to the seduction; she is the one who chooses to do so. It is Lilith who "[tears] off her jacket and seize[s] the ugly elephant's trunk of an organ, letting it coil around her as she climbed onto the bed. She sandwiches Nikanj's body between her own and Joseph's, placing it for the first time in the ooloi position, between two humans" (161, emphasis added). In fact, she feels no compunction in admitting to Joseph the pleasure she has derived from the sexual act.²² As an empowered sexual trope, Lilith becomes a political epicenter of power that, like her namesake, destroys any regulatory comfort embedded in a trope of domesticity by instilling chaos into an ordered form of the sacred.

Lilith's relationship with Nikanj further problematizes her role as a mother in the throes of a dual surrogacy, both to the humans and to the Oankali. Her initial reaction to "the child, Nikanj . . . half . . . her age, three-quarters her size, and still growing" (57) is wistful, as "[s]he wishes it were not an ooloi child . . . not a child at all" (57). Slowly but surely, a teacher-student relationship, despite initial impulses of revulsion, grows between the two, which in its reciprocity becomes a strong bond complicated by sexual overtones. Lilith develops intrinsic ties with Nikanj that defy simple dualities of oppressor and oppressed. She risks being branded a traitor by the humans as she strips naked to save Nikanj after his sensory organ is severed. Yet as *Dawn* draws to a close, Lilith virtually sacrifices herself for the human cause when she lets herself be led by Nikanj into "the dark forest" and lets herself be impregnated against her will in order to become the mother of the first male human-Oankali construct child, while she hopefully awaits the return of the humans (Butler 248).

Affective Ties and the Birth of Desire

In Butler's *Adulthood Rites*, Akin, the human-Oankali construct child born to Lilith, has two sets of parents: human and Oankali. As he is born and bred an Oankali, Akin is totally disconnected from his human self. Akin's other name, "Eka," means "lonely" in Sanskrit. It is precisely the incompleteness of any family unit that makes one lonely, a seeker of kinship and solidarity with others. The saga of Akin is a story of desired bonding, a bonding with the other, to alleviate his loneliness, to establish a familial bond through knowledge

not only of the Oankali part of him but also of the human part of his identity. An engulfing sense of seclusion and alienation threatens to overwhelm him. And, on a wistful note, the lonesome sigh that escapes Akin brings forth his desire: "I want to know the Human part of myself better" (Butler 398). The lack of a human father figure who would guide him and whom he could emulate as he grows up dogs Akin's coming-of-age narrative. Ruth McElroy notes that an "enduring feature of [colonial] surrogacy narratives [was that] men as fathers disappear[ed] as prime actors from the scene of surrogacy," leaving nation-states to "police the composition of the nation through legislative powers over women's reproduction" and the children born to them (325–26). Thus, what starts out as the search for a father ultimately creates a sense of lack that, if the conditions are right, becomes revolutionary in nature, as opposed to a matter of "consolidation," which is the logic of administrative culture. A similar situation haunts Akin, who bemoans the loss of his human father Joseph; this triggers his desperate search for other human father figures to replace the one he has lost.²³ As a young boy, during one of his sojourns with his mother, he comes across Tino, a human resister who had crossed over to an Oankali village. Akin's initial fear is replaced by an overwhelming curiosity: "something about him reminded Akin of the picture he had seen of Joseph. This man's eyes . . . narrow like Joseph's, his skin . . . almost as brown as Lilith's" (Butler 268). Akin comes to trust Tino. The child's first few steps toward Tino's outstretched hands, along with his "r[iding] on Tino's back whenever the man would carry him" speak to the beginning of the father-son relationship that Akin had craved (303). Akin's admission to Nikanj that "he calls me 'son'" is followed by the wistful question, "he won't go away, will he?" (304). Tino is protective of his newfound son too; he desperately tries to fend off the human raiders who brutally attack him and kidnap Akin. The latter's terrorized scream confirms his growing attachment to a human father figure even as it registers another loss for the child. It lays the groundwork for Akin's "wanderings" in the human resister camps, where he seeks to know his human roots, the other part of his family. The situation recalls hybridized colonial citizens, who may have wandered into segregated habitats in colonized countries to find answers to questions haunting them and who, given their divided loyalties, may have resorted to political dissidence.²⁴ Akin, with his name split into *A-kin*, suggests a certain utopian "destinerrancy." And whereas, in the case of hybrid subjects, divided loyalties may suggest a competition between one loyalty and another, in *A-kin's* case, given that he is "a-kinsual," the loyalties, not divided, become "uncertain," not subject to competitive equations. This results in political dissonance, a form of dissidence that by its discord opens up a possibility of new domesticities, new social and political formations that present an escape from the hybrid logic that is itself a legacy of the calculus of colonialism.

Akin's wanderings familiarize him with the human habitat and with the loss of two human father figures, one negative and the other positive. His sympathy and human feelings are brought to the surface. Initially, he is "frightened and miserable and shaking with anger" when he is taken captive by the human resisters. He is shocked at his "mix of intense emotions" until a chance memory reminds him of his mother's anger, which "had always frightened him, and yet here it was inside him" (329). Experiencing these emotions makes him realize the other inside himself, the human part of himself. He comes very close to acting as a human, hoping that Damek, his captor and Tino's assailant, "would die . . . [and] suffer . . . [and] scream" while he lies injured (350). He not only experiences

the death of one of the captors (a negative father figure) who mistreated him, but also witnesses the death of Iriarte, a positive father figure, who was kind to him. On both occasions, Akin feels a deep sense of unnecessary loss. He muses: "It was *wrong* to allow such suffering, *utterly wrong* to throw away a life so unfinished, unbalanced, unshared" (319). Though the reference to "unfinished, unbalanced, unshared" life harkens back to the Oankali element in him, Akin's knowledge and understanding of the human side of himself awaken his desire to save and empathize with the humans. The pain Akin feels when he sees human suffering generates the wish to alleviate it and forces him to question why humans choose death and reject the Oankali option of genetic healing. He understands that the Oankali choice of genetic healing does not merely alleviate suffering for the humans but comes at a huge cost. It recalls the consequences of colonialism as a solution to alleged native problems. Akin's musings lead him to question the Oankali contention that humans would not survive their self-destructive instincts if they were not genetically modified and purged of the "Contradiction." This in turn allows him to understand how vital the right to reproduce is for humans. As he tells Dehkiaht, his ooloi, "[L]et them fail. Let them have the freedom to do that, at least" (Butler 456).

Akin's sojourn in the human resister camp begins the narrative of bonding with the other, a bonding born of affective ties initiated this time by Tate, his surrogate mother. In the arms of the human Tate, Akin presents a tangible image and gives form and voice to the intangible sadness that haunts him in his abandonment. His situation, along with his mixed birth, recalls the plight of deserted mixed-blood children, who were often embarrassments to their colonial fathers as they grew up in segregated native habitats. The absence of a patriarchal authority figure denied these children firsthand exposure to European manners and a nationalistic mindset. Brought up by single native mothers, they grew up with a close connection to the local culture, which fostered cultural contamination in them (Stoler, *Carnal Knowledge* 67–70). Akin's contamination is far more deep-rooted as he comes to realize the human side of his identity. Thus, both Akin and mixed-blood children were part of yet separate from a single biologically immutable category of an Oankali or imperial race when they partook of both and in their liminal positioning and unstable loyalties played with concepts of detraction, betrayal, and even revolution. Thus, the domestic milieu became a charged political site that demanded imperialist intervention to coordinate and contain this racially porous site. Yet one may argue that this "racially porous site" was segregated, because it represents the result of a potential domesticity that is truly revolutionary because it is racially porous. Though the situations that birth these hybrids may be inegalitarian, by perforating a specious concept like race (specious particularly because it is "conceptual," reflecting not a genetic reality but a political one), the resulting chaos creates a vacuum for desire, for a new domesticity based upon revolutionary desire and love. Part of this infrastructure was often fed by the native biological mother and also by the native foster mother or nanny of a European child; Lilith is clearly a variant of the former, as Tate is of the latter, in their dealings with Akin. Tate, a white woman, recalls ideal European women and mothers in the imperialist context, who were taken to be the guardians of European morality. But Tate, at one time a friend of Lilith's who had almost accepted the latter's role in the Oankali plan, ultimately sided with the resister humans, thereby acquiring the title of "native."²⁵ A hybrid colonial child such as Akin threatened to create asymmetric alignment and disordered growth that could undermine the empire's

sense of stability and order. Clearly unable to control and contain desire and its affects/effects, the restrictive colonial imperatives were directed not at the colonized but at the social “otherness” of the colonials and their hybrid children.²⁶

Butler rewrites this imperialist anxiety regarding racial degeneracy with a unique plot twist. In *Adulthood Rites*, Akin, having been abducted by human resisters, is forced to spend time in the human villages. Unlike the hybrid children of the colonies, Akin is left with the humans to serve an Oankali purpose. He is deployed as an informer, to interact with the humans, glean information, and bring it all back to the Oankali. Like mixed-blood children, however, he forms affective ties with Tate, an “other” mother figure, and veers from the original plan as he takes up the human cause and becomes the humans’ advocate for reproductive freedom. Having convinced the Oankali to give the humans another chance on Mars, Akin comes back to Phoenix to fulfill his promise to Tate to bring back the hope of “restored fertility” to a place where hope had almost ceased to exist (Butler 472). He attends to her Huntington’s disease even as he “read[s] pain in her face.” His memory surges back as he revisits tender details:

He had forgotten nothing about her. Her quick mind, her tendency to treat him like a small adult. . . . he had . . . liked her from his first moments with her. It troubled him more than he could express that she seemed so changed now. She had lost weight, and her coloring, like her scent, had gone wrong. She was too pale. Almost gray. . . . And she was far too thin.” (Butler 485)

As he nostalgically recalls details etched into his memory that speak of a fond bonding from his sojourn with her (“her quick mind . . . her scent”), he regrets that she is a specter of her former self. Again, it is with Tate in Phoenix that Akin finds a home, a comfort zone that the “wander[er]” can relate to as he metamorphoses into his adult self (421). Likewise, Tate is protective of her long-lost son; she keeps watch over Akin with a “long, dull-gray rifle” in his helpless, vulnerable condition, and is terrified that “[h]e could be shot. If an attacker was persistent enough, [he] could be killed” (504).

And yet the Akin-Tate relationship goes beyond traditional definitions of the mother-son relationship when it teeters on the brink of adolescent sexuality. It interpolates an almost forbidden desire that threatens to disrupt any form of security and stability at the heart of the domestic. Akin’s clearly sexual reaction to Tate—“her femaleness torment[ing] him more than ever . . . he could taste it, savor it”—leaves her a bit amused and leaves him in an embarrassed quandary (505). Admittedly, Akin’s sojourn in the resister villages is “a phase of quasi-Human sexuality” that he undergoes when he has sex with several human women (422, 437). These sites of “unfettered sexual opportunity,” to use the language of colonial discourse, made it possible for men to “go native” in their interactions with women of color (Stoler, *Race* 5). The role of women was fundamentally redefined in this emerging milieu. The colonial concubine or native woman, who had been regarded earlier as a safeguard for colonial men, an outlet for their sexual desire, now came to represent an abhorred trope, a source of cultural contagion that could bring about the degeneracy of the imperial self, including European men who had adapted to native customs and had developed intimate relationships with local women. Similarly, the European child in the care of the native nanny (the foster mother) was also at risk. The native foster mother of

a European child, or the concubine of a European adult (as the human Tate was for the Oankali-raised Akin), could produce men whose cultural contamination born of these affective ties would make them malcontents, potential rebels against the state.²⁷

In *Lilith's Brood*, these spaces of domesticity—the new definitions of family that are created or exist in variations of mother-child relationships—clearly stand politicized as they give birth to new narratives of dissension. Lilith and her construct son Akin are both products of this terrain where the domestic not only includes the nuclear family but also embraces everyday life. By replacing the secure space of the domestic with possibilities of disruptive volatility, Butler both reveals a new area of imperialist anxiety and concern and suggests ramifications for postcolonial and neocolonial studies. Set up by the Oankali as a mother figure to carry out their narrative of organizational stability, Lilith rewrites her role and the domestic space she inhabits by means of her deviant desires. Her mutant son Akin, despite his name, which speaks of dual kinship and yet admits of an ambiguity that may place him outside the bonds of kinship, connects with humans only in his sojourn in the human resister camps. These acquired affective ties and sexual liaisons, nurtured in spaces of domesticity, make him a spokesperson for the human cause and politicize his intentions.

Taken together, Lilith and Akin reveal opportunities to defy not only fixed biological categories but even the category of hybridity, creating what Gwendolyn Wright calls “laboratories of modernity” (qtd. in Stoler, “Sexual Affronts” 226). Each character’s role in society defines that character as unconventional, forcing each to straddle the human-Oankali world in different ways. Products of the domestic domain, mother and son deconstruct domesticity by instilling a postcolonial desire that transforms colonial domestic security forever. Butler utilizes the alienating effect of science fiction to call into question things that are stable and acceptable and that would pass by unnoticed in traditional literature. By removing the inherent defense mechanisms of a traditional story, science fiction allows defiant or even deviant desire to usher in a revolutionary tactic that opens up new areas for future research. Lilith and Akin redefine hybridity as they move beyond their assigned roles to embrace a rare complexity that dismantles any utopian reading of the domestic as safe space.

NOTES

1. *Lilith's Brood* is a trilogy that includes *Dawn*, *Adulthood Rites*, and *Imago*, published separately. They were earlier published as the trilogy *Xenogenesis* and later renamed *Lilith's Brood*.
2. In *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction*, Darko Suvin posits a radical breach between science fiction and fantasy literature by emphasizing the cognitive element in the former and arguing that the latter is “committed to the imposition of anti-cognitive laws” (qtd. in Miéville 231).
3. See Suvin; Csicsery-Ronay; and Rieder. See also Singh, Skerritt, and Hogan; and Singh and Schmidt for reading ethnic American literature as postcolonial writing.
4. See Bakhtin.
5. In an interview with Larry McCaffery, Butler states: “Ronald Reagan inspired *Xenogenesis*. . . . When his first term was beginning, his people were talking about a ‘winnable’ nuclear war, a ‘limited’ nuclear war, the idea that more and more nuclear ‘weapons’ would make us safer.” (McCaffery 97)
6. The ambiguity that embraces both humans and aliens, Miller argues, stems from the sense of “Contradiction” that defines humanity (339–40). Joan Slonczewski aptly points out that “the Oankali are not our opposites, but rather an extension of some of humanity’s most extreme tendencies.”

7. From another point of view, the situation recalls James Beniger's point that in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, the more "different" industries became, the more centralized the control phenomenon had to be; this centralized control had range and sweep, as well as a focus on minute, specific details. A crisis in the control mechanism occurred when new, innovative "desire," which led to the birth of new markets, threatened to disrupt the order of mass production and distribution (qtd. in Clinton 80).
8. Robert Young clarifies the threatening quality of this concern "whereby a culture in its colonial operation becomes hybridized, alienated and potentially threatening to its European original through the production of polymorphously perverse people who are, in Bhabha's phrase white, but not quite" (175).
9. My primary idea of the domestic as a subversive space is based on Stoler's discussion in *Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power* (41–111) of what Johann Gottlieb Fichte called the "interior frontier" of a nation-state (qtd. in Stoler 80).
10. See Black, *War against the Weak*, especially chapters 5, 6, and 9. Adolf Hitler incorporated eugenic ideas and legislation for sterilization, which had been pioneered in the United States, into *Mein Kampf*. See Paul Weindling's article in *The Oxford Handbook of the History of Eugenics* in which he shows that eugenics shifted from an inclusive biological approach for the well-being of Germans to one of institutionalized violence based on racial discrimination. For considerations on the subject of racialized colonialism in more recent times, see Andrea Smith's article "Not an Indian Tradition."
11. See Stoler, *Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power* 61–78. There Stoler points out that eugenics provided a new biological basis for European hierarchical thinking. Because the implementation of the principles of eugenics very much depended on women as mothers, the situation called for a reevaluation of the status accorded to motherhood. In colonial societies motherhood was not as important as "the value attached to mothering": its status, as defined by that particular society at that particular time, "one that need[ed] to be made and analyzed contextually" (Mohanty qtd. in Stoler 340). In other words the role a mother would play in the upbringing of a child was important. This contextual analysis is what is so important in the imperialist and Oankali contexts, where the "value" of motherhood is judged not only by what it is (the act itself) but also by what it may attain or achieve for the nation. See Michelle Osherow's article in which she claims that "the revised Lilith reflects the myths and experiences of alien minorities, namely, Jewish and African American women" (68).
12. Hence, the Nazis focused on "the Jew" precisely because Jews were so fully integrated into German culture. (They literally had to be designated, extracted, made visible, and "administered.") In the 1980s American context, groups such as Focus on the Family began to insert "family values" into the political argument at the moment of the family's "disintegration" because of rising divorce rates, *Roe v. Wade*, cable television, and so forth.
13. My discussion of the new development of the role of women in early-twentieth-century Britain draws on Anna Davin's article "Imperialism and Motherhood."
14. In an article, J. Adam Johns compares *Lilith's Brood* with De Waal's *Chimpanzee Politics* to point out that, while De Waal stresses that male leadership is necessary to control male aggression, Butler's Oankali believe "that human hierarchical violence can best be constrained by female leadership, as Lilith's lover Joe recognizes" (398).
15. To justify the nation's involvement in child-rearing issues, the Poor Law Act of 1899, David Lloyd George's 1911 Health Insurance Act, and maternity insurance were referred to (Davin 90–91).
16. Lilith's decision once more underlines the complexity and ambiguity of the text by iterating Butler's "refus[al] to endorse the eugenics perspective that it is a kindness to curtail the reproduction of such 'defectives'" (Vint 68).
17. Slonczewski labels Jodahs, the human-Oankali ooloi, as "the ultimate post-colonialist." Though Nikanj is not a human-Oankali ooloi, he definitely is a type of the postcolonialist.
18. Robin Roberts notes an overlap between women and aliens that creates a conflated image of a potential threat to men in mainstream science fiction novels. Feminist science fiction writers, Roberts claims, have countered this trend by emphasizing the positive aspects of womanhood, by "reworking myths about mothering and . . . valoriz[ing] qualities identified as feminine . . . [such as] emphasis on community, home, and family" (66). Octavia Butler's contribution to the creed is Lilith. While in "Mothering Medusa" Kristina Busse also refers to Roberts's point, Busse's reading focuses on and justifies Lilith's "shifting positions towards the aliens," which bring her human qualities to the fore. But then again, Lilith is in addition a woman who in her mutated form is a virtual alien. And Butler's reworking of myths about mothering and the identifiably feminine spaces of the hearth and home allows Lilith to envisage and undermine the Oankali narrative.
19. Amanda Boulter reads Lilith's rejection of motherhood as a holdover from slavery. Lilith's revulsion at her offspring voices the feelings of "women slaves whose pregnancies were the result of forced

matings or rape . . . her womb . . . the abjectified terrain from which an unhuman child will emerge” (177).

20. Erin Ackerman refers to Deleuze and Guattari’s molecular subjectivities, with regard to which they cite sexuality as the space of becoming, of “multiplicities [defined by] the explicitly sexual relationship between wasp and orchid, in which the wasp becomes-orchid (pollinating one orchid with another’s pollen) and orchid becomes-wasp (attracting the wasp through its botanical waspishness).”
21. In their respective articles, both Michelle Osherow and Sarah Wood cite the comparison of Butler’s Lilith to the rabbinic Lilith. While in “The Dawn of a New Lilith” Osherow argues for a birth of the New Woman, in “Subversion through Inclusion” Wood argues that Butler subverts the Judeo-Christian, negative connotations of Lilith by deliberately naming her fictional character Lilith, only “to subvert, revise, and quer[y] the hegemony of Judeo-Christian mythology, by *amalgamation*” (96–97, emphasis added).
22. In her essay “Mothering Medusa,” Kristina Busse references a scene of seduction—Joseph’s seduction by the ooloi Nikanĵ—that Lilith watches. Busse emphasizes the overturning of the power structure as the human male is forced to take on the typically feminine position of sexual and emotional submission—a reversal that Lilith enjoys. Busse’s reading contributes a slightly different perspective to my own reading of the destabilizing of gender boundaries.
23. An interesting variation on this theme is offered by Mathias Nilges in “‘We Need the Stars,’” which discusses how Butler’s *Parable* novels “trace the roots of political and social reactionary developments” or even insurgencies to “idealize re-filiation as a response to the dominance of the decentered subject in post-Fordism” (1351). Lauren Olamina’s “re-filiation” seems to be an extension of Akin’s desperate search for a father figure.
24. See Nightingale, “The Transnational Contexts of Early Twentieth Century American Urban Segregation,” which traces Baltimore’s segregation arrangements back to Western colonialism and highlights segregated habitat trends in India and Africa:

The tradition began in the late 17th century when the British East India Company officially designated separate walled sections of its capital at Madras, India as ‘White Town’ and ‘Black Town.’ In the 19th century the British and other European imperial powers developed new techniques of urban segregation, laying out separate districts for Europeans and ‘natives’ in literally hundreds of cities, especially in the aftermath of the Great Uprising of 1856 in India, and then again after the Scramble for Africa. (668)

25. In *Race and the Education of Desire*, Stoler points out:

To be truly European was to cultivate a bourgeois self in which familial and national obligations were the priority and sex was held in check. . . . As custodians of morality, [white women] were poised as the guardians of European civility, moral managers who were to protect child and husband in the home. . . . European women who veered off respectable course were not only stripped of the European community’s protection of their womanhood, but disavowed as good mothers and as true Europeans. (182–83)

Tate Marah is a type of the latter and therefore, despite her being a white woman, in my view qualifies as a native.

26. In “Sexual Affronts and Racial Frontiers,” Stoler adds that the legal status of the “Métis, mixed blood” progeny became a major issue that was debated in international colonial forums in the 1930s. Despite the argument that these “Métis” could become virtual insurgents against the nation, citizenship was denied to them on political grounds “in which racial thinking remained the bedrock on which cultural markers of difference [primarily their upbringing] were honed and more carefully defined” (212).
27. See Stoler, *Carnal Knowledge* 68–69 for more details.

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