

Alien Evolution(s). Race, Cyber-Sex and Genetic Engineering in Octavia Butler's *Xenogenesis* Trilogy

Abstract: Octavia Butler's *Xenogenesis* trilogy (1987-1989) offers the reader a far-sighted vision of a shocking encounter between humanity and a bio-technologically advanced race of aliens called Oankali. This article analyses how the aliens modify the established modalities of sexual coupling with the aim of mixing with humans and giving birth to a new, queer and multiracial species that is explicitly echoed in Donna Haraway's theorization of the "cyborg". The figure of the cyborg was, for Haraway, strongly intertwined with the history of women of colour, who can be themselves seen as cyborg identities. In this respect, Haraway stresses how cyborg writing is, for women of colour, strongly related to the action of "seizing the tools to mark the world that marked them as other" (Haraway 1991).

Specifically, Butler's cyborg trilogy focuses on the Oankali, who introduce a completely new modality of mating akin to bacterial and cyber-sex, all by operating from the standpoint of an anti-racist evolutionary science. By drawing on Luciana Parisi's notion of "abstract sex" (2004) and by referring to Gloria Anzaldúa's figure of the "mestiza" (1987), this article examines how Butler's futuristic world gives posthumanism an anti-racist founding myth. In the post-human universe invented by Butler bodies are able to connect to one another and exchange flows of genetic information. Furthermore, mates are united by strong, indissoluble chemical bonds that, ironically, prove to be much stronger than traditional marriages: this article especially focuses on how the new, post-human hybrid race changes the given modalities of sex in order to create a utopian, feminist and antiracist vision of sexual pleasure. This article examines how the Oankali create a new world in which a post-human race can develop and how the Ooloi, special genetic engineers, challenge any idea of racial purity. The article focuses on how the new modalities of sex they introduce mobilizes a feminist, queer desire, also by exploring the interrelation among natural and sexual selection as analysed by Elizabeth Grosz (2004), placing a special attention to the relation existing between technology, science and race.

Keywords: *afro-futurism, cyborg, race, gender, pleasure, evolution, post-human*

Introduction

Octavia Butler's *Xenogenesis* trilogy (1987-1989) narrates the formation of an utterly new species resulting from the mixing of humanity with an extraterrestrial race called Oankali, endowed with a superior knowledge of biotechnology and genetic engineering and a natural nomadic drive towards the discovery of different places and species. Specifically, *Xenogenesis* narrates how, after a nuclear worldwide war that caused the destruction of a great part of the planet Earth, the Oankali rescue humanity from extinction with the aim of creating a hybrid race, half human and half alien that will eventually colonize not only Earth, but also other uncharted places all over the Universe.

By ironically subverting one of the most important founding myths of Western culture, Butler substitutes the biblical figure of Adam with Lilith, an African-American heroine whose name recalls Adam's first wife, eventually repudiated as a consequence of her refusal to unconditionally obey her husband's will and desires.¹ Lilith is the black woman the Oankali choose to be the progenitrix of the new race, a race destined to put into question all the traditional dichotomies of patriarchy. The challenge posed by the Oankali to human understandings of gender is evident since her very first encounter with the aliens:

¹ Janet Howe Gaines, "Lilith: Seductress, Heroine or Murderer?", *Biblical Archeology* (2012), <http://www.biblicalarchaeology.org/daily/people-cultures-in-the-bible/people-in-the-bible/lilith/>, accessed 23 November 2013.

Lilith glanced at the humanoid body, wondering how humanlike it really was. "I don't mean any offense" she said, "but are you male or female?" "It is wrong to assume that I must be a sex you're familiar with", it said, "but as it happens, I'm male".... "You should notice", it said, "that what you probably see as hair isn't hair at all. I have no hair. The reality seems to bother humans".... "Oh God", she whispered. And the hair, the whatever-it-was, moved.²

² Octavia E. Butler, *Dawn* (London: VGSE, 1988), 12.

After the first meeting between Lilith and Jdahya, a member of the Oankali community, the most taken for granted human distinction between the sexes and genders begins to unfold. The boundaries between a familiar humanity and a surprisingly new extraterrestrial reality melt by mixing together two worlds that will fuse themselves into what C. Peppers calls an "alien humanity":

As an origin story, this trilogy tells about the genesis of an alien humanity, of a humanity which will survive not, as Donna Haraway puts it, by "recreat(ing) the sacred image of the same", but because Lilith, the African-American heroine of the first novel, will become the progenitrix of the new race of "constructs (children born of Oankali and human parents)".³

³ Cathy Peppers, "Dialogic Origins and Alien Identities in Butler's Xenogenesis", *Science Fiction Studies* (1995) <http://www.depauw.edu/sfs/backissues/65/peppers65art.htm>, accessed 24 November 2013.

If "we are all chimeras, theorized hybrids of machine and organism; in short, we are cyborgs",⁴ Butler provides the reader of the 20th century with a powerful origin story of posthumanism. In the Xenogenesis trilogy the becoming "other" of mankind is mediated and regulated by the Ooloi, the Oankali's third gender and natural genetic engineers who are able to manipulate DNA as naturally as humans "manipulate pencil and paintbrushes".⁵ In the Oankali language, ooloi means "treasured stranger, bridge, life trader, weaver, magnet".⁶ Ooloi represent the bridges humanity crosses in the process of becoming a "post-humanity" or, as Braidotti calls it in her work *The Posthuman*, an "electronically linked pan-humanity",⁷ by merging with technology and by being modified and re-thought through genetic engineering. The Ooloi, as a matter of fact, modify all the traditional modalities of sexual coupling and re-think reproduction by blurring the limits of the human bodies so as to anticipate the unknown potentialities and marking what Luciana Parisi calls "the emergence of cyber-sex":

⁴ Donna Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century", in *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 150.

⁵ O. Butler, *Dawn*, 175.

⁶ Octavia E. Butler, *Imago* (New York: Popular Library, 1990), 6.

⁷ Rosi Braidotti, *The Posthuman* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013), 186-187.

Sex is no longer a private act practiced between the walls of the bedroom. In particular, human sex no longer seems to involve the set of social and cultural codes that used to characterize sexual identity and reproductive coupling... Human sex has now entered a cyberspace of information where every-day bodily contacts and sexual encounters have given way to long distance rendezvous. The emergence of cybersex defines a new prosthetic extension of human sex, the prolongation of sexual pleasure outside the limits of the body.⁸

⁸ Luciana Parisi, *Abstract Sex: Philosophy, Biotechnology and the Mutations of Desire* (London and New York: Continuum, 2004), 3.

In fact not only are the Ooloi metaphorical bridges that link humanity to its next evolutionary stage, but they are also physical bridges able to connect several bodies to one-another so as to let genetic material and pleasure flow through assemblages of up to five bodies that can communicate among themselves. Far from creating an embodied version of a masculinist, disembodied cyberspace, as Katherine N. Hayles remarked, Octavia Butler provides the reader with an utopian view of sexual pleasure which, instead of going along with the patriarchal utopia of separating the mind from the flesh, involves an enhanced form of embodiment characterized by the possibility of experiencing a multiple-body resulting from the connection of more bodies that communicate with each other in a way that Cathy Peppers compares to an “embodied version of the internet”.⁹

⁹ Peppers, *Dialogic Origins and Alien Identities*.

Octavia Butler’s post-apocalyptic world in which bodies can connect to each other like machines and untouchable patriarchal pillars such as traditional motherhood are completely re-thought, gives post-humanity a powerful founding myth, starting from *Dawn* (1987) – the first book of the trilogy which represents the gestation of the new species – passing through *Adulthood Rites* (1988) and *Imago* (1989) – in which humanity becomes “other” through a never ending metamorphosis that leads to a conception according to which the most evolved state of a living being is represented by its abilities of transformation.

Oankali Architecture: Maternal Spaces and the Invention of a New Species

The dawn of humanity as it is narrated in the Bible has its starting point in the divine breath of God. There is no gestation, no passage, there are no interstitial places in which the shaping of human beings takes place. Octavia Butler’s genesis on the contrary starts with a long, liminal phase that takes place in a futuristic living spaceship made of flesh. With the irony and blasphemy that characterize Donna Haraway’s cyborg,¹⁰ Butler overturns the biblical story of creation by locating the first moments of life of her post-human species in the recesses of the uncanny space of a maternal body.

¹⁰ Haraway, *Cyborg Manifesto*, 149.

The first chapter of *Dawn* (1987), first book of the trilogy, is as a matter of fact called *Womb* and starts when Lilith, the main character of the trilogy, wakes up naked, in foetal position in a dark environment where the normal phenomenological experience of time and space is altered.

Awakening was hard, as always. The ultimate disappointment. It was a struggle to take in enough air to drive off nightmare sensations of asphyxiation. Lilith Iyapo lay gasping, shaking with force of her effort. Her heart beat too fast, too loud. She curled around it, fetal, helpless.... The room did not only seem dim, it *was* dim. At an earlier Awakening, she had decided that reality was whatever happened, whatever she perceived.¹¹

¹¹ O. Butler, *Damn*, 3.

Lilith finds herself in a pre-natal state which not only marks her second birth, but reflects also a return to the depths of a primitive state of humanity which finds itself compelled to return to an embryonic phase, to return to the pre-verbal in deep contact with the unconscious, with the dark space in which everything starts again before the establishment of a patriarchal social structure. Butler's "genesis of the other",¹² thus begins from one of the most inaccessible psychic areas that represents an original space that precedes civilization and nullifies the removal of the most instinctive impulses:

¹² Peppers, *Dialogic Origins and Alien Identities*.

The womb is conceptualized as a place where gender has yet to be crystalised, and auto-eroticism flourishes. In such an intrauterine space bodily memories are separated from a masculine desire and absorbed in a 'thetic moment when the preverbal and the symbolic meet'.¹³

¹³ Catherine B. Silver, "Womb Envy: Loss and Grief of the Maternal Body", *Psychoanalytic Review*, 94.3 (2007), http://catherine-b-silver.com/docs/womb_envy.pdf, accessed 18 March 2014.

Unlike the Garden of Eden, the setting of Butler's *Xenogenesis* is strongly connoted as feminine. The environment in which Lilith awakes and takes her first step towards her transformation into a post-human being is, as an Oankali explains to her after her last awakening, a living spaceship made of pulsating flesh:

The hole in the wall widened as though it were flesh rippling aside, slowly writhing. She was both fascinated and repelled. "Is it alive?" She asked. "Yes", he said.... "What is it?" She asked. "Flesh. More like mine than like yours. Different from mine too. It's... the ship."¹⁴

¹⁴ O. Butler, *Damn*, 30-31.

The architectural spaces within the womb-like spaceship are extremely simple as the boundaries between the 'inside' and the 'outside' are constituted by simple walls that can be erected by the Oankali with a simple touch (and by some humans once they are genetically modified by the aliens) . The walls normally enclose very simple, unfurnished spaces, in which there is nothing more than a couple of platforms that serve as tables and beds, like in the case of the room in which Lilith awakes:

The walls were light-colored-white or gray, perhaps. The bed was what it had always been: a solid platform that gave slightly to the touch and that seemed to grow from the floor. There was, across the room, a doorway that probably led to a bathroom.... There was another platform perhaps a foot higher than the bed. It could have been used as a table, though there was no chair.¹⁵

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 4.

Like a territory which stands in a relation of counterpoint to the living organisms that inhabit it,¹⁶ so the ‘houses’ of the humans within the Oankali spaceship reflect their embryonic status, their phase of metamorphosis that precedes their becoming another species. Their architecture recalls Elisabeth Grosz’s description of the relationship between art, territory and the body.

¹⁶ See Elisabeth Grosz, *Chaos, Territory, Art: Deleuze and the Framing of the Earth* (New York: Columbia U. P., 2008), 43.

Art is of the animal to the extent that art is the consequence, the unexpected, unpredictable effect, of the coupling of a milieu or territory with a body, and the extraction of qualities, whether sonorous, visual or tactile, framed through the constitution of a (history of) form.¹⁷

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 45.

For Grosz, architecture is the form of art through which ‘nature’ becomes a territory and, in particular, the act of raising walls, that is limits, boundaries, frames, means to create a stage, a space in which seduction, and therefore art, creation and re-production, takes place. Thus for Grosz,

The first artist, for Deleuze, is the architect, the one who distinguishes inside from outside, who draws a boundary.... This boundary is not self-protective but erotico-proprietorial: it defines a stage of performance, an arena of enchantment, a mise-en-scène for seduction that brings together heterogeneous and otherwise unrelated elements.¹⁸

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 48.

The living flesh-made walls that the Oankali Architect builds around humans configure themselves as the ideal stage for a totally new performance of gender and race. The structures of patriarchal society are replaced with walls made of flesh that mark a re-birth, a return to the womb in order to be re-shaped and a view of gender and race which privilege the fluidity of pleasure with regards to the rigidity of binarisms and social boundaries. The coming of age of the new species coincides with a fantasy of going back to the maternal womb in order to be re-shaped in a fluid environment in which pleasure, sexual orientation and the emergence of new instincts substitute the most rigid beliefs of patriarchal cultures.

The idea of building spaces, of dividing the inside from the outside, the domestic from the social, the hidden from the visible is intertwined with the mise-en-scène of the unconscious. The walls mark a womb-like environment in which a new act of creation is possible, a re-thinking of the self. The Oankali create a stage for post-humanity to create its performances, enabling the construction of a new society in which there are no fixed limits but only blurred boundaries of flesh that can be created, opened and destroyed with a touch. The main actor in this process is the Ooloi, an Oankali sex which is neither male nor female and which escapes any attempt of definition based on gender binarism. If the Oankali are the architects of a post-racial post-humanity, the Ooloi can be defined as the genetic engineers that shape bodies as naturally as human beings breathe. With *Dawn*

(1987), such new *post*-humanity is provided with a stage, with a territory in which it can move its first step. As Grosz puts it, there is no creation without a frame that encloses affectivities, sensations and impulses so as to take them out of chaos.¹⁹ The frame par excellence, the womb and the vagina, are represented by the spaceship made of flesh from which everything will begin again. What emerges from the archaic mother, the mythical frame from which life begins, is to the Ooloi like marble to the sculptor. These futuristic genetic engineers play with genes, flesh and bones to create a new species while giving humans the gift of an unprecedented sexual *jouissance*.

Post-Human Sex: When Pleasure Meets Genetic Engineering

During sexual intercourse, the Ooloi functions as a bridge between those who participate in the sexual act. While having sex in the Oankali way, the male and the female members of the multiple sexual encounter never touch each other, but connect to the Ooloi and get into contact with each other through direct neuronal stimulation:

I linked into their nervous system and brought them together as though they were touching one another. It was not illusion. They were in contact through me. Then I gave them a bit of illusion. I ‘vanished’ for them. For a moment, they were together, holding one another. There was no one between them.²⁰

²⁰ Octavia E. Butler, *Imago* (New York: Popular Library, 1990), 122.

The Ooloi functions like a computer to which whoever participates to the sexual intercourse can connect through a simple USB-like device. Pleasure flows freely through bodies regardless of any physical boundary, and the meeting between the body and the alien’s superior bio-technology results in the discovery of new modalities of pleasure made possible by the becoming prosthetic of the body, which is a characteristic typical of post-humanity:

The post-human view thinks of the body as the original prosthesis we all learn to manipulate, so that extending or replacing the body with other prostheses becomes a continuation of a process that began before we were born.... the post human view configures human being so that it can be seamlessly articulated with intelligent machines. In the post-human, there are no essential differences between bodily existence and computer simulation, cybernetic mechanism and biological organism, robot teleology and human goals.²¹

²¹ N. Katherine Hayles, *How We Became Post-Human: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2006), 3.

The post-human body is therefore an open organism in which flesh merges with technology, in which the body is not closed and ‘given’ but is open towards an infinity of possibilities. In Octavia Butler’s *Xenogenesis*, the Ooloi incarnates the modern, uncanny figure of the genetic engineer who has the power of manipulating flesh as if it was made of clay. The Ooloi stores D.N.A. so as to open

the path for cloning and for the overcoming of death as it is conceived in human society and opens the human body to contamination, to an unprecedented exchange of bacteria and genetic material. The body becomes thus a site of passage:

This is not simply an alien penetration of the pure organism. Her body is caught in the middle of a passage, a genetic trade proliferating inside her body as much as coming from outside.²²

Lilith's body is a borderland in which contamination among species occurs not only through the ordinary, heterosexual relationship, but through the recombination of D.N.A., bacteria but also social and cultural elements that merge together giving birth to an utterly new humanity. New modalities of sex are created, so that the traditional sexual relations are substituted by modalities akin to what Luciana Parisi calls "abstract sex":

Expanding upon the feminist politics of desire, abstract sex brings into question the pre-established biological possibilities of a body by highlighting the non-linear dynamics and the unpredictable potential of transformation of matter. ... Abstract sex points to the non-linear coexistence of the biophysical (the cellular level of the body-sex defined by bacteria, viruses, mitochondrial organelles, eukaryotic cells); the biocultural (the anthropomorphic level of the human body-sex defined by psychoanalysis, thermodynamics, evolutionary biology and anatomy in industrial capitalism); and the biodigital (the engineering level of the body-sex defined by the information science and technologies such as in vitro fertilization, mammal and embryo cloning, transgenic manipulation and the human genome in cybernetic capitalism) layers of the virtual body-sex.²³

By portraying a scenario in which, in order to achieve its goals of pleasure, the human body is able to open itself to contamination and to become a site of passage, Octavia Butler foresaw in her stunningly far-sighted trilogy the emergence of a humanity which is not at all far from our contemporary reality, as Joi Ito argues:

The web will enter our body in other ways, for instance through synthetic molecular biology: bacteria that go into the body, scan for things and send information.... We're making robots that create biology; biology that creates robots; and hybrids of all of them – and they need to communicate.²⁴

When the humans and the Oankali encounter each other, the human bodies are opened to a wide range of possibilities. Thanks to alien genetic engineering the human body becomes able to connect not only with other bodies, but also to the environment in which it lives. The boundaries between the body and the 'outside' are blurred, and the species reproduces itself not only through sexual relationship but also through contamination, through the migration of genetic material from

²² Luciana Parisi, *From Pleasure to Desire. Involution and Anti-climax in Octavia Butler's Dawn* (Virtual Future, 2012), <http://virtualfutures.co.uk/archive/papers/pleasure-to-desire/>, accessed 18 March 2014.

²³ Parisi, *Abstract Sex*, 10-12.

²⁴ Joi Ito, "1989-2039: A Living, Evolving Organism", *Wired UK* (March 2014), 95.

one being to another without necessary involvement of sexual contact. In opposition to the patriarchal dream of disembodiment and the white supremacist notion of ‘pure’ races, Octavia Butler’s Ooloi are able to create an interstitial space in which humans and aliens can “meet” in the form of sensations, memories and information by creating loops of feelings they experience in a deeply embodied and utterly new way.

²⁵ O. Butler, *Imago*, 155.

Her greatest enjoyment would happen when I brought her together with Tomàs and shared the pleasure of each of them with the other, mingling with it my own pleasure in them both. When I could make an ongoing loop of this, we would drown in one another.²⁵

The Ooloi represent the possibility of an enhanced, fluid sexuality that escapes patriarchal rules by allowing the abandonment of a male model of pleasure in favor of a queer stream with no aims or endings, a ceaselessly flowing liquid matter that, having no shape at all, can expand itself across connected bodies communicating with each other. In contraposition with a male, linear conception of pleasure, this strongly embodied form of sexual coupling brings humanity back to its queer, liquid origin and takes this primordial state as the starting point of a new, cyborgian species whose origins look back at that “woman thing” described by Luce Irigaray:

²⁶ Luce Irigaray, “Fluid Mechanics”, in *This Sex Which Is not One* (New York: Cornell U. P., 1985) 111.

Continuous, compressible, dilatable, viscous, conductible, diffusible ... that is unending, potent and impotent owing to its resistance to the countable ... it enjoys and suffers from a greater sensitivity to pressures; that is changes – in volume or in force, for example – according to the degree of heat...²⁶

Irigaray’s view of a queer femininity finally liberated from the constraints of patriarchy, of strict definitions of identity and sexuality, resonates with the new modality of sex emerging from the contact between humans and Oankali. As Luciana Parisi points out:

²⁷ Parisi, *Abstract Sex*, 33.

Irigaray opposes the Freudian theory of entropic pleasure to multidirectional flows escaping the constancy of reproduction and exposing the turbo-dynamics of a matter-matrix, a feminine sex outside all claims of identity. Fluid dynamics defines a body not by its achieved forms and functions (identity) but its processes of composition and transformation that exhibit the metamorphosis of fluids able to acquire any shape. This metamorphic body-sex is not regulated by the cycle of accumulation and discharge, but displays a ceaseless flow of desire that leaks out of genitality and genealogy.²⁷

In this context, a normalized femininity undergoes a deep change which mobilizes a queer cybernetics:

The matrix ship is not the womb of the woman, but a wondering womb in a body. It delineates a hysterical zone of desire never fully repressed by the biology and culture of the organism. It is therefore evident that Dawn embraces the cybernetic revolution.²⁸

²⁸ Luciana Parisi, *From Pleasure to Desire: Involution and Anti-climax in Octavia Butler's Dawn* (Virtual Future, 2012), <http://virtualfutures.co.uk/archive/papers/pleasure-to-desire/>, accessed 18 March 2014.

Post-Human Evolutionary Science: Multiracialism and Camouflage

Lilith's abduction in the Oankali spaceship and the theft of any kind of control over her own body operated by the aliens is akin to the deportation of African slaves to America, which recalls dystopic Afrofuturist science fiction scenarios in which technology becomes one of the most powerful means used to tame black bodies:

African-Americans, in a very real sense, are the descendants of alien abductees: they inhabit a sci-fi nightmare in which unseen but not less impassable force fields of intolerance frustrate their moments: official histories undo what has been done; and technology is too often brought to bear on black bodies (branding, forced sterilization, the Tuskegee experiment, and teasers come readily to mind).²⁹

²⁹ Mark Drery, "Black to the Future: Interviews with Samuel R. Delany, Greg Tate and Tricia Rose", in *Flame Wars: The Discourse of Cyberculture* (Durham: Duke U. P., 1994), 181.

When Lilith realises that she has ended up in the hands of an alien race endowed with a very advanced bio-technology, she is overwhelmed by the feeling of loss of control of her body. The condition of African slaves, abducted and deprived of control by the slave-traders, is transposed by Butler in a dystopian post-apocalyptic world in which the destruction of humanity as it was conceived before the "apocalypse" passes through the loss of control that humans exercise over their bodies. When Lilith finds herself completely helpless among the Oankali, her fantasy of surgical – bio-technological manipulations of her body runs wild:

Was that what she was headed for? Forced artificial insemination. Surrogate motherhood? Fertility drugs and forced "donation" of eggs? Implantation of unrelated fertilized eggs. Removal of children from mothers at birth....³⁰

³⁰ O. Butler, *Dawn*, 62.

Nevertheless, the scenario in which Lilith and the Oankali give birth to the new, post-human species is both dystopian and utopian. Human beings are manipulated as if they were animals (often, throughout the trilogy, Lilith compares herself to guinea pigs or domestic animals) and lose every control of their own bodies. Deprived of their dignity they are often punished by their captors who, instead of using the infamous whips that slave-owners employed on their slaves, use hyper-technological ways of annihilating human dignity. The most common Oankali punishment, is to abduct humans who don't behave according to their rules and take them to a space ship in a state of semi-consciousness.

We never thought we were in danger from Pascual because its people knew better than most resisters what happened to anyone who attacked us. Their village, already shrunken by emigration, would be gassed, and the attackers hunted out by scent. They would be found and exiled to the ship. There, if they had killed, they would be kept either unconscious or drugged to pleasure and contentment. They would never be allowed to awaken completely. They would be used as teaching aids, subjects for biological experiments, or reservoirs of Human genetic material.³¹

³¹ O. Butler, *Imago*, 48.

Although Butler's post-apocalyptic world seems to be nothing but a waking nightmare, the opening of the body to contamination and contact with other species marks the coming of age of a multi-racial species echoing African American mixed genetic heritage such as drawn on by Donna Haraway's cyborg.³²

Moreover, even though the Oankali have a very paternalistic attitude towards humans (they treat them as if they were children and they take away from them any decisional power over their lives etc.), the attitude of the first constructs is completely different.³³ The members of the hybrid species find themselves struggling with their human and Oankali essences that seem to be in contrast with each other. Very often they find themselves helpless in a world reduced to a huge frontier area in which two different species face each other, leaving them in the middle of the clash. The constructs *are* the frontier, they bear on their bodies the signs of their hybridism and in their mind the struggles that they did not decide to face. Jodahs for instance, the main character of the third and last book of the trilogy, is the first construct Ooloi, and his birth marks a new beginning in the evolution of the post-human species. Being Ooloi means, above all, being natural genetic engineers. Giving birth to a new kind of Ooloi, never experimented before, means to endanger the whole species, as Ooloi are able to make crucial, genetic changes in the environments and in living beings. The fear that Jodahs could be flawed leads the Oankali to isolate and exile him. Feared and marginalized, Jodahs embodies the struggles of a frontier that is both external and internal. Butler's new race of constructs situates itself in the interstitial spaces that insinuate into boundaries such as male and female, human and animal, heterosexual and queer, and represents the blurring of dichotomies in favour of a heterogeneous, stronger species. Evolutionary theory is thus given a strong antiracist inflection by means of its rejection of racial purity and its embrace of mutations and differences. As Gloria Anzaldúa argues, the "mixture of races, rather than resulting in an inferior being, provides hybrid progeny, a mutable, more malleable species with a rich gene pool";³⁴ Anzaldúa's 'mestiza, as a matter of fact, embodies the cohabitation of apparently opposite qualities:

I, like other queer people, am two in one body, both male and female. I am the embodiment of the *hieros gamos*: the coming together of opposite qualities within.³⁵

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 19.

³²Through her heroines, Butler challenges and relativizes masculinist notions of power. She redefines power and agency by theorizing a feminist, woman-of-color subject emblematic of Donna Haraway's cyborg. 'Catherine S. Ramirez, "Cyborg Feminism: The Science Fiction of Octavia E. Butler and Gloria Anzaldúa", in M. Flanagan and A. Booth, ed. , *Reload: Rethinking Women + Cyberculture* (Cambridge, Mass., and London: The MIT Press, 2002), 383.

³³ See O. Butler, *Imago*, 44.

³⁴ Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera. The new Mestiza* (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1999), 99.

Jodahs, the post-human genetic engineer, is a “mestiza” of outer-space, the embodiment of the infinite possibilities given to a living being in a state of metamorphosis and camouflage. He passes through boundaries and frontiers insinuating through the interstices as if it was made of water and possesses the ability to change shape in order to please its potential mates. It can look human, animal (when it feels lonely, its body tends to disintegrate and to become liquid at the point of looking like a sea creature), male or female. The new, post-human species theorized by Butler does not seem to follow the rules of Darwinian ‘natural selection’, which is regulated by the principle of the ‘survival of the fittest’. Rather it evolves through sexual selection which, according to Grosz, does not aim at mere survival but at the fulfilment of sexual desire:

Sexual selection, the ability to attract sexual partners (which is not itself to be conflated with successful reproduction: the aim is sexual relations, even if the most measurable form for sexual success is the generation of offspring), not only works in cooperation with natural selection but at times functions in conflict with it, placing individuals and species in potential danger to the extent that they attract partners.... Species are no longer natural collections or kinds developed to survive and compete, they are also a posteriori and ultimately incalculable consequences of sexual taste, appeal, or attraction. Perhaps sexuality itself is not so much to be explained in terms of ends or goals ... as in terms of its forces, its effects ... which are forms of bodily intensification.³⁶

³⁶ Grosz, *Chaos, Territory, Art*, 29-33.

The ultimate aims of the Butlerian, post-human genetic engineer seem to be the enhancement of sexual pleasure and the construction of a queered feminine modality of sex that privileges fluidity over the fulfilment of pre-determined goals. The most stunning upheaval brought by the Oankali is a revolution of sexuality that privileges ‘abstract sex’ over heterosexual mating favoured by theories of natural selection. The construct Ooloi, the hybrid genetic engineer turns the dystopian, post-apocalyptic world of the first two books of the trilogy into an utopian return to a fluid, queer essence in which sexuality is completely re-thought and in which love takes the shape of a chemical bond³⁷ that ironically proves to be stronger than any traditional marriage.

³⁷ O. Butler, *Imago*, 6.

Conclusions

From the depths of a pre-verbal, uterine and yet alien origin to adulthood, Butler’s *Xenogenesis* tells a new antiracist story of post-humanity. In order to advance in the evolutionary line, the new species has to gain the ability of becoming fluid, malleable, able to cross given for granted boundaries such as those separating the ‘human’ from the ‘animal’, the ‘male’ from the ‘female’, the ‘natural’ and the ‘artificial’. Passing through a queer conception of sexuality, the new species is able

to reproduce itself through contamination, to evolve by enhancing its abilities through the absorption of characteristics belonging to other species and to the surrounding environment. Post-humanity is mutant, feminine, liquid, queer and antiracist to the extent that it's able to take an infinite number of shapes, to insinuate itself in any interstice and at the same time undermine all notions of racial purity and natural selection. Jodahs, one of the most revolutionary creatures resulting from the encounter between humans and aliens, is able to change its physical appearance in order to please its potential mates. By changing its shape, it is able to pass through the frontiers unseen. He does not belong to any specific place but any place can, potentially, belong to it. Unlike its Oankali predecessor, it employs its abilities in genetic engineering to pursue the fulfilment of sexual and sentimental desire. The new, construct humanity is not regulated by the principle of 'the survival of the fittest' but it evolves according to sexual selection. The more a living being is able to change itself, the more its chances of be sexually and sentimentally fulfilled increase. A totally antiracist evolutionary principle which privileges the emergence of difference regulates the species of constructs of Butler's *Xenogenesis* which is all but far from our contemporary post-humanity, which is a multi-ethnic species endowed with prosthetics, technologically enhanced bodies. In Butler's Trilog, instead of threatening an old-fashioned concept of humanity, bio-technology re-shapes the concept of a closed body into an open organism able to transform itself in order to mate and to evolve.