



Pessimistic futurism: Survival and reproduction in Octavia Butler's *Dawn*

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Abstract

This article examines the critical work of Octavia Butler's speculative fiction novel *Dawn*, which follows Lilith Ayapo, a black American woman who is rescued by an alien species after a nuclear war destroys nearly all life on Earth. Lilith awakens 250 years later and learns that the aliens have tasked her with reviving other humans and repopulating the planet. In reframing Reagan-era debates about security and survival, Butler captured the spirit of 'pessimistic futurism', a unique way of thinking and writing black female sexuality, reproduction and survival. Suturing concepts central to both Afro-pessimism and Afrofuturism, pessimistic futurism carefully considers how black female subjectivity and labour create the coming world. By linking human survival to Lilith's own ability to adapt to the new and dangerous world, Butler offers scholars of black studies a vital interpretive framework for thinking about the points of contact between pessimism and futurism. Specifically, Butler presents a form of futurism brought back to Earth, grounded in the sensibility of the black female experience.

Keywords

Afrofuturism, Afro-pessimism, black feminism, reproduction, speculative fiction, survival

Early in Octavia Butler's 1987 novel *Dawn*, Lilith, the black female protagonist, and Jdahya, her alien handler, discuss the 'human contradiction'.¹ Jdahya tells Lilith that humans have two conflicting operating scripts. On the one hand humans are hierarchical, an evolutionary atavism. Born of their territorial lineage, competition and conflict have lingered despite civilisational development. On the other, humans are intelligent, 'potentially one of the most intelligent species' in existence. Intelligence should have made difference negligible or meaningless;

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instead it has cultivated hierarchies. Moreover, rather than oppose each other, these qualities reinforce one another; humans have set their intelligence to compounding hierarchy (Butler, 2001: 39). Written in the context of the Reagan administration's twinned wars against poor blacks at home and Soviet enemies abroad, *Dawn* seeks to understand and explain the contradiction by imagining an alternative destiny for humanity. In its deployment of Lilith as an agent working to subvert the forces of hierarchy – racism, misogyny and nationalism chief amongst them – the novel suggests that the human contradiction is not a necessary or inevitable destiny. It presents Lilith as a unique figure, a black mother who has known loss and who therefore understands the stakes of self-destruction. As humanity's universal ancestor, Lilith recasts human survival in terms of adaptation and evolution rather than conservation and maintenance. In its presentation of Lilith, the novel reframes notions of black maternity, figuring black female reproduction as essential, rather than ancillary or antithetical, to the project of human development. Despite these investments, the novel expresses its own anxieties about the potential for such world-making endeavours. Lilith herself remains dubious of her ability to re-make the human social order without patriarchal white supremacy.

These oscillations between certainty and scepticism exemplify what I term 'pessimistic futurism'. Pessimistic futurism couches the prospects of tomorrow in the uncertainties conditioned by the past and present. A striking example of this mode occurs when Lilith and her lover Joseph Shing mate with Nikanj, their Oankali partner.² Both initially revile the creature but eventually come to rely on it for bodily pleasure and survival. During their first sexual encounter, Nikanj wraps its 'sensory arm' around Lilith's throat, 'forming an oddly comfortable noose' (Butler, 2001: 158). Through the noose, Nikanj has access to her brainstem, and by extension her central nervous system and the body it controls. In this position, it brings Lilith and Joseph unimaginable pleasure during sex. Yet the noose's 'odd comfort' paradoxically evokes its legacy as a symbol of sexual violence, murder and terror. This paradox, captured by Lilith's feeling of 'odd comfort', reveals the text's acute ambivalence. On the one hand, it evinces the ongoing project of racial oppression and the apparent impossibility of black subjectivity, while on the other, it suggests that the intersubjective link Oankali form with humans propels humans towards a transcendent racial destiny. Butler's careful deployment of the noose, and particularly the description of its position, melds these two propositions, leveraging it to metaphorically shatter and then recast its meaning-making potential. The noose thus simultaneously encompasses the pleasure and pain, history and futurity, and abjection and subjection that constructs late twentieth-century black life.

In this article, I argue that *Dawn* reframed Reagan-era debates about security and survival by describing humanity as hell-bent on self-annihilation, and then marking Lilith as an agent able to combat those suicidal tendencies. Tasked with Awakening other humans and teaching them how to survive on Earth, Lilith must also teach her people to overcome the racist and misogynist antipathies that structured human interactions before they were rescued from the dying

planet. Yet, those she Awakens are not so ready to abandon their prejudices. Their failure to abandon hierarchy by clinging to bygone social formations and structures frustrates the Oankali efforts and endangers Lilith and Joseph. Despite this animus and the threats to their lives, Lilith adheres to the Oankali's mission and, as a result, metaphorically repudiates and reframes the vulgar constructions of black maternity circulating in American discourse. Moreover, Lilith is presented as the progenitor of human evolution, simultaneously perpetuating and destroying the species. Lilith herself is deeply anxious about this capacity; although she moves inexorably along the path of survival, she also demonstrates deep fears about what will result from trading with the Oankali. Pessimistic futurism emerges from an ambivalent standpoint, one that seeks the future without the blind assurance of hope. In fact, it doubts the possibilities that lie in the future it nevertheless looks to.

Butler wrote *Dawn* in the mid-1980s, at the crossroads of two key transformations in American life. First, black feminist literary production became increasingly popular among both academic and popular audiences in this period. One year after the publication of *Dawn*, Toni Morrison's *Beloved* won the Pulitzer Prize for literature. Like Morrison, Alice Walker and other black feminist authors, Butler devoted her literary efforts to a critical engagement with the legacies of slavery and Reconstruction and the effects of racism and inequality on the black family. Together, these texts refute the despicable characterisation of black women as 'welfare queens', and reveal the structural impasses that have assailed black families since the advent of slavery.³ By deploying speculative elements, including a future timeline, an alien species and genetic manipulation, Butler presents an alternative vision of the relationship between human survival and black maternity. Whereas state and market forces extracted value by simultaneously necessitating black reproduction and deriding it, *Dawn* exposes this foundation and empowers Lilith with at least a modicum of agency (Wacquant, 2009; Alexander, 2010; Hinton, 2016). Trapped though she is in a limiting situation, Lilith consistently chooses survival over self-abnegation, retreat or forfeit.

A second, equally important force at work in *Dawn* is the Reagan administration's effort to make nuclear war winnable. A cadre of science fiction authors including Robert Heinlein – most of them white men – sought new ways to 'assure survival' (Pournelle and Ing, 1984). Through technoscientific innovation, they endeavoured to protect the Western hemisphere from Soviet missiles. They advocated for investment in futuristic defense technology infrastructure rather than social welfare programming. Butler's *Dawn* self-consciously stages total annihilation as the eventual conclusion of such efforts. In an interview with *In Motion Magazine*, Butler stressed the relationship between her work and Reagan's security regime: 'I thought there must be something basic, something really genetically wrong with us if we're falling for [the idea that nuclear war could have winners]' she explained (Butler, 2004). In *Dawn*, Butler rejected the link between increased security and survival, and instead opted to construct survival as a quandary faced by a young black woman.

Dawn thus ties humanity's survival to Lilith's reproductive and maternal capacity. As a prisoner-refugee, Lilith's self-possession is fraught. She is always-already a captive, beholden (like all humanity) to the Oankali for her own survival. Yet, they need her as much as she needs them. Lilith never betrays a foolish optimism for life after death. She also resolutely hews to the related projects of survival and reproduction. This mediated position is instructive; it demonstrates the capacity of speculative thinking to reimagine social realities, offering insight into how the world might be made differently. In what follows, I explain how Lilith's representation in the novel offers a theoretical model for black studies. Pessimistic futurism, as it appears in Butler's *Dawn*, reveals an orientation to the future that synthesises the events of the past to propose an alternative horizon.

Pessimistic futurism, speculative fiction and black sexuality

In the concluding passage of her 2008 article, 'Venus in Two Acts', Saidiya Hartman turns to Octavia Butler's speculative novel *Kindred* as 'a model for a practice' of 'critical fabulation' that might address the erasures of black girls from the historical archive (2008: 14, 11). For Hartman, *Kindred* – the story of Dana, a black woman who is wrenched back in time by an unnamed force to experience her family's origins in slavery – exemplifies the kind of critical engagement that will fulfill the difficult task of enlivening the experiences that white heteropatriarchy has erased. Hartman's work addresses three critical faults that subtend contemporary black studies: the opposition between pleasure and death which often manifests as a meditation on the affective terms of black existence; the implicit and, at times, unacknowledged projection of the past into the future, which tethers blackness to an ongoing project of slavery; and finally, the paradoxical terms of imagining black subjectivity in spite of the deliberate 'occlusion' and what I would call sublimation of 'the very objects that we wish to rescue' (2008: 14). In recent years, and certainly 'in the wake' (Sharpe, 2014) of the many murders of black people by police and private citizens alike, this set of tensions has produced a fault, dividing scholarship on black studies between two counter-vailing theoretical orientations: Afro-pessimism, which conceives of blackness as an ontological and political impossibility; and Afrofuturism, which emphasises the capacity to exceed the historical constraints of blackness by imaging its iterations in a potential and often fantastic future.

Afro-pessimism understands blackness as an impossibility, an 'aporetic subjectivity' dominated by its proximity to imminent death (JanMohamed, 2005: 2). For Abdul JanMohamed, blackness 'can never feel securely grounded in the myriad social, political, and cultural values, rules, and procedures that "normal" society takes for granted: *the bareness of bare life permeates its finest capillary structures*' (2005: 10; emphasis in original; see also Agamben, 1998). The black subject, who is always already a 'death-bound subject', is precluded from enjoying the full measure of life promised by American liberalism. Moreover, racism

excludes blacks from the full measure of humanity in this view. In affective terms, 'hope', now inextricably linked to President Barack Obama, serves as a carrot for black people, leading them ever towards their own continual demise. Calvin Warren argues that 'black nihilism' is the only appropriate remedy for such false promises. By enacting 'political apostasy', the black nihilist 'renounces the idol of anti-blackness but refuses to participate in the ruse of replacing one idol with another' (Warren, 2015: 233). For Afro-pessimism, the future and futurism emerge as central problems for black people. Because anti-blackness 'adapts to change and endlessly refashions itself', black people are forced 'to place our hope in a future politics that avoids history, historicity, and the immediacy of black suffering' (Warren, 2015: 239).

Rather than refuse future possibilities, Afrofuturists seek radical world-making to unsettle the terms of black life in the contemporary moment.⁴ For Ytasha Womack, 'imagination, hope, and the expectation for transformative change is a through line that undergirds most Afrofuturistic art, literature, music, and criticism' (2013: 42). What lies on the brink of the Afrofuturist horizon – in other words, what is imagined, hoped for and expected – is not merely 'transformative change', but is more importantly the possibility of liberation. Yet, it would be a misreading of Afrofuturist theory to suggest that it posits these expectations without also inciting and agitating them. In 'Black to the Future', Mark Dery suggests that history, historicity and the technologies of 'black suffering' are the very things that cause Afrofuturists to 'imagine possible futures' (1994: 180). Mark Bould similarly argues that Afrofuturism is a prideful refutation of 'sf's colorblind future', a refutation that squarely centres experiences that shaped the black experience in the US: 'the West African genocide, the Middle Passage, and Slavery', but also crime and incarceration (2007: 177–178). Unlike Afro-pessimism, these histories do not prefigure destinies, but rather reveal 'a much more varied and complex set of relationships between domination and subordination, whiteness and color, ideology and reality, technology and race' (Bould, 2007: 182; see also Nelson, 2002; Eshun, 2003; carrington, 2016: 23–25).

Although Afro-pessimism and Afrofuturism seem to be diametrically opposed, they reveal much when read as complementary. Pessimistic futurism, the critical mode I understand Butler to be writing in, looks to the potential that lives in the future, acknowledges the unknowability of that future and then speculates about the possible position of black subjects when the future arrives. In Octavia Butler's own words, 'I don't think we can know how things will be in the future. We're creating the future, but we can't see it clearly. We can only try to make it better' (Butler and Francis, 2010: 176). Elsewhere, she describes herself as a pessimist (Butler and Francis, 2010: 8; see also Stickgold-Sarah, 2010: 423). Together, these statements reveal the productive tension that rests at the heart of pessimistic futurism; on the one hand, pessimism is a force that threatens to overtake her, yet on the other, ignorant futurism is unenticing. In short, the centrality of historicity and futurity lay at the heart of debates between Afro-pessimism and Afrofuturism. Whereas Afro-pessimism posits the historical past as the recursive and inevitable

tomorrow, Afrofuturism looks beyond the horizon to think about how to transcend the bearing of the past on the present. Pessimistic futurism is thus a critical orientation that does not abandon the historical terms of black existence, especially slavery, but also does not give in to that history as a fatalistic limit on what comes next. Instead, it mobilises the historic markers of blackness to unsettle and destabilise the arrangements of power in the present and to try to think beyond those arrangements to re-make the future. One central question for both Afro-pessimists and Afrofuturists concerns the relationship between blackness and humanity. As Alexander Weheliye argues in his critique of the prevailing theory of posthumanism, there is ‘an aporetic relationship between New World black cultures and the category of the “human”’ (2002: 21). In his reading of *Beloved*, Weheliye explains that the novel articulates its own ambivalence around questions of humanism, ‘depicting the dehumanizing effects of slavery on particular black subjects and their struggle to reconstruct their fractured bodies and subjectivities’ but also ‘insist(ing) that there can be no uncomplicated embrace of liberal humanist subject positions’ in slavery’s aftermath. For Weheliye, and indeed for Butler, blackness is exceptional, at a distance from, and perhaps beyond, humanity. Christina Sharpe puts this differently, saying succinctly, ‘Black has always been (...) excess’ (Sharpe, 2016: 30; see also Tinsley, 2008).

Time, specifically the orientation to temporal motion, is a related concern for scholars writing in both traditions. Time is also quite central to SF literature broadly speaking and to black speculative fiction in particular. In recent years, scholars of black studies have increasingly turned to speculative fiction to make sense of the arrangements of time at work on black life. In speculative fiction, scholars of black studies can locate historically specific ways of thinking about the future that reveal the terms of the present and the past (Nelson, 2002; Browne, 2015: 119–123; Wright, 2015: 84–88; carrington, 2016). An archive of black speculative fiction uniquely reveals how black authors imagine a future tempered by historical present and past. Pessimistic futurism never relinquishes its bases in the distinct fact of racial oppression, but it also does not conceive of that context as a teleological destiny. It is no wonder then that Hartman proposes ‘advancing a series of speculative arguments and exploiting the capacities of the subjunctive’ (2008: 11).

Sexuality and its relationship to death are central to the construction of pessimistic futurism in Butler’s *Dawn*. As Christina Sharpe concludes, to engage blackness is to understand the order of thinking that ‘produces and enforces links, discursive and material, between the womb and the tomb’ (2014: 62). Black (female) reproductive sex results in ‘young black and blackened people’ who signify ‘the less-than-Human being condemned to death’ (Sharpe, 2014: 61–62; see also Sharpe, 2010). As Sharon Holland explains, ‘copulation, heterosexual or homosexual, embraces death to make the ritual of recognition complete’ (2000: 36). Black sexuality usefully contrasts ‘the pathological with the normal in both sexual and social arenas in U.S. culture’ (Abdur-Rahman, 2012: 15), and marks a difference between productivity and ‘wasteful’ sexuality (Nash, 2014: 455). Butler’s representation of

these facts of black sexuality, especially in the conjunctive metaphor of the noose, epitomises these concepts.

Yet, this is not the only way to think about black sexuality. Rather than accede to the demands of white supremacy, some use sexuality as a force for resistance and rebellion. For example, Jennifer Nash asks, 'if black (female) bodies are tethered representationally and ideologically to the anus, how might we consider making the anus a space that can also please, excite, arouse, and also a locus where racial stereotype can be playfully performed and unraveled?' (2014: 546; see also Abdur-Rahman, 2012). Others, such as Francesca Royster (2013) and Uri McMillan (2014, 2015), discuss how black female performers purposefully queer gendered and sexual expectations in order to unmask and unmake them. Lilith's body, especially its reproductive capacities, exemplifies this possibility. To crib Nash's question, if black female bodies are 'tethered representationally and ideologically' to their reproductive capacities, what opportunities lie in exploring the latent potential in those assumptions? Put differently, what happens when the noose is resignified? How do its latent or residual meanings affect its construction as a metaphor of pleasure as well as of pain (Williams, 1977)? *Dawn* positions pleasure and reproduction as fraught but necessary pathways to the future. Sex with the Oankali is consequently presented as strange and dangerous, yet, like the noose, also oddly comfortable and immensely pleasurable. In the next section, I examine the complementary forces of pleasure and danger as they inhere in *Dawn*. Oppositional but related forces, they work in concert on Lilith, perplexing her but also assuring her of her life. Lilith's body registers both excitement and insecurity, and indeed these opposing forces redouble her investment in returning to Earth.

'I don't understand why I'm so . . . afraid of you': Survival and difference in *Dawn*

Dawn opens with a meditation on the terms of survival. As Lilith abruptly comes to consciousness from her slumber in suspended animation, the narrator remarks, 'Alive! Still Alive. Alive . . . again. Awakening was hard, as always' (Butler, 2001: 5). Gasping for breath as she is, each moment is marked temporally. That Lilith is alive 'still' and 'again' implies that she is engaged in ongoing struggle. The commentary 'as always' suggests that the process of Awakening has happened before and could happen again. The novel presents life as an active and ongoing struggle rather than a passive state of being. From the outset, *Dawn* repudiates notions that link blackness to a state of unlife. But Lilith takes little pleasure in her own survival; 'Awakening', the narrator explains forebodingly, 'was the ultimate disappointment' (Butler, 2001: 5). Here, Butler reveals that Lilith is bound to life, a life of struggle and labour, but also a life of productivity and action. Lilith's initial 'struggle' to shrug off the remnants of her stasis is marked by oscillation between excess and insufficiency. At first, she cannot take in enough air, but then her heart 'beat(s) too fast, too loud' (Butler, 2001: 5). The forces of her circulation are at

odds and she must laboriously bring them under her own control. From its first words, *Dawn* insists on a paradox of survival akin to Audre Lorde's characterisation: 'when (black women) survive, it is in spite of a world that takes for granted our lack of humanness, and which hates our very existence outside of its service' (1984: 129). For both Lilith and Lorde, black women's survival is a remarkable and unlikely occurrence in a world that tirelessly seeks their abnegation. Like the oddly comfortable noose that encompasses the contradictory pleasure and pain of sex in the text, Lilith's struggle to consciousness reflects the ambivalence that inheres in pessimistic futurism. Her Awakening is not comfortable, and nor does she seem pleased by it. Put differently, Lilith's rebirth is 'aspirational' according to Sharpe's definition; it 'keep[s] and put[s] Black breath back in the body', where it is ostensibly not supposed to be (2016: 130).

From its outset, then, the novel refuses an absent-minded futurism. Instead, it frames the ensuing narrative in the violent history of slavery and incarceration that saturates black experience in the US. This is *Dawn*'s most significant contribution: its attention to Lilith's detention exposes that history but simultaneously uses it as a way forward.⁵ As an aspirational act, Butler breathes life into Lilith and in so doing 'reimagine[s] and transform[s]' the ship into a space for elaboration and detail. She thus enacts the 'ethics of seeing and of *being*' that Sharpe describes through her attention to Lilith's circumstances (2016: 131; emphasis in original). Neither Sharpe nor Butler, nor Lilith for that matter, seem disillusioned by those circumstances. As I have said, Lilith acknowledges her own insecurity. Yet as both Lorde and Sharpe suggest, her mere existence, and our readerly attention to her, constitute something potentially radical and inspire anticipation and curiosity.

After composing herself, Lilith determines that she has been gifted life's necessities on this particular Awakening: a bathroom, food and clothing, which she quickly dons. After dressing, she feels 'more secure than she had at any other time in her captivity. It was a false security she knew, but she had learned to savor any pleasure, any supplement to her self-esteem that she could glean' (Butler, 2001: 6). Here again, the tension between pleasure and danger coalesces into wilful ignorance. She is well aware of her precarious circumstances, but she elects to savour the texture of the cloth on her skin to make herself feel better. The pleasure of the tunic ultimately leads her to inspect the scar bisecting her abdomen. As she wonders what had been done to her while she slept, Lilith concludes that, 'she did not own herself any longer. Even her flesh could be cut and stitched without her consent or knowledge' (Butler, 2001: 6). Dispossessed of herself as she is, Lilith nevertheless goes on with her post-Awakening rituals: eating and then searching for a way out. Lilith's actions in her cell are not typical of one for whom Awakening would be a disappointment and, indeed, the Oankali reveal that her peculiar behaviour makes her an ideal candidate for their special mission.

The opening passage of *Dawn* shifts between surfeit and lack, security and insecurity and ultimately pleasure and pain, establishing the text's investment in pessimistic futurism from the outset. The dilation between these poles prevents

Lilith and the reader from settling into comfort, yet also compels both to keep looking for it. Lilith's actions and emotions, the feeling of the cloth, the incipient food and the gaze she imagines produce an atmosphere of uncertainty and hesitation. Yet, Lilith acts determinedly in spite of her own apparent insecurity and disempowerment. Hope is completely absent from these pages; she even acknowledges the fallacy of safety she locates in the shift she wears. The text thus posits that survival is an act unto itself, but one that is suspended and inert.

Lilith's experiences aboard the Oankali ship firmly establish racial difference as a central problematic for the text, one that relates directly to her feelings of insecurity. Two encounters, one with the Oankali Jdhaya and one with the human Paul Titus, take difference as their central conceit. Jdhaya and Paul are two of Lilith's firsts – the first Oankali and the first human she meets on the ship respectively. Lilith initially encounters Jdhaya in her cell after prolonged interrogations with the Oankali, who remain screened and out of sight. When she sees Jdhaya, she realises that there is something different about him, that 'something is wrong' (Butler, 2001: 8). Moving towards him, one step at a time, her body suddenly refuses to continue; as the narrator explains, 'she could not make herself approach him'. Lilith is unable to look at him, and although she is allegedly unfazed by 'ugly faces', when she sees Jdhaya in the full light, she is repulsed: 'She did not want to be any closer to him. She had not known what held her back before. Now she was certain it was his alienness, his difference, his literal unearthliness' (Butler, 2001: 13). Lilith's body again refuses to comply, and one movement later she comes to understand why. When Jdhaya's hair begins to move towards her, she misrecognises the motions as 'a nest of snakes' and retreats with a seemingly involuntary motion.

Lilith is eventually able to master her body, and the two begin a discussion of human nature and the reason for the Oankali intervention. Over the course of the conversation, Lilith becomes more comfortable with the alien, learning that the procedure performed on her without her knowledge was done to remove a virulent cancer. In the midst of her conversation with Jdhaya, she attempts to 'imagine herself surrounded' by creatures like him and '[is] almost overwhelmed by panic. It is as though she had suddenly developed a phobia – something she had never before experienced. But what she felt was like what she had heard others describe. A true xenophobia . . .' (Butler, 2001: 23). The force of the xenophobia transcends rational thought. She is able to rationalise the many ways that Jdhaya is like her: it has two hands and two feet, and is not as ugly as it was at first sight. She even calls her own revulsion into question and becomes frustrated with herself when she cannot quell the feelings of aversion that force her to look away from him. 'I don't understand why I'm so . . . afraid of you', she tells him, in spite of her acknowledgement of their similarities (Butler, 2001: 17).

Lilith's experience with Paul Titus is quite different from her first meeting with the Oankali. With the Oankali, she eventually discovers companionship. But with Paul, her initial desire to see another human is betrayed by the darkness of what isolation has done to him. Paul is both the first human she encounters and the first black human she meets, and it is during their encounter that Lilith's own blackness

is made apparent. Her affinity for Paul and their sexual desire for each other initially causes her to remark that he is like her, but different, ‘wrong and strange, yet familiar, compelling’ (Butler, 2001: 85–86). The ambivalence between kinship and difference she feels towards Paul upon initially seeing him settles quickly on difference. They are separated by their disagreement about whether humans should accept the Oankali and their offer of genetic trade. Lilith is able to fight through her initial revulsion and eventually grows more comfortable around them. Paul, who has been Awake for longer than Lilith, is barely able to tolerate the Oankali. In addition, Lilith quickly comes to terms with her new circumstances on the ship, whereas Paul flatly refuses to abandon the Earthbound human context he experienced as a child. Lilith is struck by his reluctance to accept the Oankali’s tryptic gendered order. In addition to male and female Oankali, they also have a third gender called ooloi. The ooloi can manipulate genes, which enables them to forge symbiotic relationships with the creatures they meet throughout the galaxy, including their biological partnership with the giant ship-sized beings in whom they travel. Unlike Lilith, who takes the Oankali at their word, Paul betrays a ‘deliberate persistent ignorance’ by insisting that the ooloi’s importance to Oankali survival marks them as male and therefore superior (Butler, 2001: 89).

Ultimately, Paul and Lilith arrive at an impasse – he wants her to stay on the ship with him, whereas she wants to return to Earth. After a heated exchange, he beats her and attempts to rape her. In the course of his attempt, Lilith explains that she does not want to give the Oankali ‘a human child to tamper with’, to which Paul replies, ‘You probably already have’ (Butler, 2001: 89). In imminent danger of being sexually assaulted, Lilith challenges, ‘How many times have they made you do this before? [...] Maybe they’ve made you do it with your mother!’ (Butler, 2001: 95–96). Enraged, Paul throws her off him and beats her. The Oankali intervene, returning Paul to stasis, but not before he knocks Lilith unconscious. When she regains consciousness, Lilith indicts the Oankali for Paul’s attack, claiming that they have kept him a fourteen-year-old boy by preventing him from engaging with other humans. Cloistered as he is amongst the Oankali, Paul remains improperly socialised, a pubescent, confused child who lacks impulse control and misunderstands social relations. The Oankali’s inability to understand human social needs causes Lilith to ‘feel more strongly than ever the distance between them—the unbridgeable alien-ness of [her ooloi mate] Nikanj’ (Butler, 2001: 95–96). Paul’s reluctance to surrender to his new circumstances makes Lilith’s stalwart refusal to abide by the social conventions that governed human interaction on Earth clearer. As a futuristic figure, she remains alert to the dangers that press in, both from Oankali and from other humans. Specifically, she accepts that the Oankali possess the best possibility for human survival, even if that survival requires human adaptation and evolution.

Both examples reveal the novel’s investment in probing the terms of survival. In both cases, *Dawn* posits an intimate relationship between survival and difference. Lilith, Paul suggests, is unique in her ability to accept the Oankali’s terms. ‘I wonder how many women they had to go through before they came up with you’,

he remarks, smiling ‘crookedly’ and shaking his head. ‘A lot, I’ll bet. You’re probably just what they want in ways I haven’t even thought of’ (Butler, 2001: 91). Lilith is indeed special. Once she begins Awakening other humans, her uniqueness becomes all too apparent. Ultimately, it sets her apart from her companions and paints her as a target for derision and ire. In the final section, I argue that the *Dawn* offers Lilith up as a sacrificial figure who must transcend the limits of humanity in order to survive on Earth. However, transcending those limits inevitably excludes her from the social milieu she is responsible for reconstructing.

‘What will we be, I wonder?’: Pessimistic futurism and transcendent humanity

The Oankali select Lilith to Awaken other humans because of her compassion and resolve, her open-mindedness and her inherent futurism. In her capacity as their leader, the Oankali give her unique powers to communicate with the ship and make her the enforcer of the rules aboard it. Yet, the Oankali have little knowledge of human racism, and the resistance to Lilith’s leadership fomented almost as soon as the Awakenings begin. Perhaps unsurprisingly, conflict arises over social organisation among the Awakened. When a member of the group, Allison, resists the imperative for heterosexual coupling, two men grab her and try to drag her to one of their bedrooms, to make her choose a mate. Lilith disrupts the attempt, throwing aside the assailants, exclaiming, ‘There’ll be no rape here [...]. Nobody here is property. Nobody here has the right to the use of anybody else’s body. There’ll be no back-to-the-Stone-Age, caveman bullshit!’ (Butler, 2001: 178). This statement echoes an earlier question Lilith posed to Jdhaya: ‘Could you go back [to your homeworld] if you wanted to?’ ‘Go back? [...] No, Lilith that’s the one direction that’s closed to us. This is our homeworld now’ (Butler, 2001: 36). Like the Oankali, back is the direction closed to the humans Lilith has Awakened. Lilith, awakened as she has been to enact the Oankali’s designs for humanity, has nevertheless determined that forwards is a direction worth going. The ‘cavemen’ seeking to drag Allison away are as repulsive to Lilith as Paul. Lilith’s intervention also demonstrates her own distance from her companions. Genetically enhanced thanks to Nikanj’s ooloi talents, she stands apart from the other humans. In a way, she awoke already evolved.

Rape and the threat of sexual violence permeate much of *Dawn*. In its meditation on the relationship between blackness, sexuality and subjection, the novel frames the question of survival in terms of sexual vulnerability. Although she labours selflessly in their service, and in the service of human longevity, her Awakened companions nevertheless revile her. But Lilith is able to find companionship and even love with some of the people she Awakens. Joseph Shing, a Chinese emigre to Canada, becomes Lilith’s lover and ally. Joseph’s status as a racial minority sets him apart from the rest of the group and the knowledge of his difference is perhaps one of the things that draws Lilith to him. It is during his first meeting with Nikanj, their ooloi partner, that Nikanj’s noose-like arm slips around

Joseph's and Lilith's necks. Lilith has just explained the reason she has chosen not to try to prevent the Oankali from enhancing her physical capabilities. Joseph is incisive in his questions, asking Lilith if she understands fully why the Oankali have chosen her, but does not realise that he has also been chosen. Lilith asks Nikanj to leave, and he seems to do so until he suddenly ensnares her with his sensory arm – the oddly comfortable noose. Acting on her behalf, Joseph reaches out to touch Nikanj, and briefly contacts the alien's flesh before it drugs him.

The resentment the Awakened feel towards her, Joseph and eventually Nikanj, grows in the wake of their coupling (tripling?). In the final phase of their training, the humans move from the cells to a room constructed to resemble the Earth they will come to inhabit. Once they arrive in the training room, humans try to escape the Oankali. Joseph is injured in the confusion when Curt, a former police officer and Lilith's primary adversary, witnesses Joseph's wounds healing supernaturally and waylays him with an axe (Butler, 2001: 123, 223).⁶ Lilith is initially despondent; she blames both Curt and the Oankali for Joseph's death. Nikanj offers to share Lilith's grief; it gives her a fleeting glimpse of its own sorrow: 'It gave her . . . a new color. A totally alien, unique, nameless thing, half seen, half felt, or . . . tasted. A blaze of something frightening, yet overwhelmingly, compelling' (Butler, 2001: 226). In this communication, she realises that Nikanj's feelings for Joseph are deep and sincere. Through Lilith's and Nikanj's connection the novel presents sentience, and indeed affective acuity, as an interspecies bridge, one that brings Lilith closer to the Oankali.

Joseph's death is a harbinger of more violence (Butler, 2001: 225–226). Curt's group of humans revolt against the Oankali, injuring many. Nikanj is mortally wounded and Lilith is despondent. Another ooloi tells her that if she wishes to save Nikanj's life, she needs to lay with it. As she does, it 'penetrate[s] her body with every head and body tentacle that could reach her, and for once, it felt the way she had always imagined it should' (Butler, 2001: 232). Here again, Butler links survival and death to sexual pleasure. Nikanj's life depends on Lilith's willingness to lay beside him and allow him to sap her of her life force. When Lilith returns to the human camp, she is the subject of even more revulsion. When another human, Gabriel, asks her why she chose to lay down with Nikanj rather than allow it to die, she replies, 'I don't hate Nikanj. Maybe I can't. We're all a little bit co-opted', to which Gabriel responds, 'I don't give a shit what you feel [. . .] we know you're their whore. Everybody here knows' (Butler, 2001: 240–241). The co-optation Lilith mentions works in and through the sexual connections the ooloi have made with their human mates. And yet, this co-optation is not only a 'little bit'. Lilith could call it domination or explain that humanity is subject to the Oankali's whims, but she refuses to accept that she and the Awakened are not agential. Moreover, Lilith understands that the relationship between the humans and the Oankali is symbiotic rather than parasitic, because Nikanj has told her so. Indeed, humans, and not the Oankali, have a monopoly on destruction in the novel. Moreover, the Oankali need humans as much as the humans need the Oankali. The future the Oankali offer is a complicated one; it requires that humans move beyond their own self-conception.

For many this is impossible, but for Lilith it is inexorable. As in her first encounter with Jdhaya, in which her body failed to respond to her brain's command, Lilith moves forward towards the horizon that is not wholly her own.

As a final gift to Lilith, Nikanj impregnates her with Joseph's child. Lilith is initially horrified at the prospect, aghast that Nikanj would do so against her will. 'It won't be a daughter', she tells the ooloi, 'it will be a thing—not a human [. . .]. A monster' (Butler, 2001: 246). Nikanj is unfazed by Lilith's rejection and tells her to stop lying to herself. Moreover, Lilith's daughter will have a sister by Nikanj's Oankali mates. 'Our children will be better than either of us', it tells her. Lilith's concerns that her child will be something other than human suggest that she herself has forgotten that she has become something more than human. Before his death, and before their entry onto the training room floor, Joseph ominously tells her that their hope to survive and remain human are incompatible. 'What will we be, I wonder? Not human. Not anymore' (Butler, 2001: 196). Yet, as Lilith comes to learn, her own humanity has been in question throughout her incarceration. The Oankali see in her the capacity for something new, while the humans see her as inhuman.

As a model for critical engagement, *Dawn* importantly reminds us that resistance comes in a variety of forms. The novel is intensely focused on the disruptive potential of black sexuality. In a sense, it enacts the radical, world-breaking potential Fred Moten (2013) speaks of in 'Blackness and Nothingness'. The novel's investment in the future does not undermine its hesitance to enter that world; on the contrary, it models a specific approach to the temporal horizon of the future, one that looks to what is coming with a doubtful, yet stalwart, posture. This posture is linked specifically to the combination of pleasure and danger performed in black sexuality. The world-shattering potential of such strange and exciting sexual possibilities also remakes the world, imagining radically different alternative futures for Earth's humans.

True to form, the first novel refutes the fantastic resolution of so many other speculative worlds. Lilith remains on the ship, forced to Awaken a new set of humans and to prepare them for resettlement. She is told that she will make it to Earth with Nikanj and their interspecies family. The future, her future, however dim, nevertheless approaches. In its simplicity, the question, 'What will we be, I wonder?' (Butler, 2001: 196) effortlessly captures the posture of pessimistic futurism. It reveals the impulse to look to tomorrow, to look beyond the 'dawn', we might say, but to do so with caution and care. It suggests a tomorrow enshrouded in the unforeseeable, yet crystallising. As a matter of speculation, pessimistic futurism promises little, but considers much.

Notes

1. The trilogy, which includes the novels *Dawn*, *Adulthood Rites* and *Imago*, is currently published in a one-book volume titled *Lilith's Brood*.
2. The Oankali have three genders – male, female and 'ooloi'. The ooloi have complete control over cellular regeneration and genetic replication and can induce changes in

DNA. Much of the scholarship devoted to examinations of *Dawn* focuses on this capacity and its bearing on social change. (See, for example: Haraway, 1990; Stickgold-Sarah, 2010; Nanda, 2013).

3. Dorothy Roberts succinctly describes the ‘welfare queen’ as ‘the lazy mother on public assistance who deliberately breeds children at the expense of taxpayers to fatten her monthly check’ (1997: 17). For Roberts and other Black feminist legal theorists, the fallacy of ‘reckless Black fertility’ was a useful trope for conservatives and liberals alike who sought to undermine the social welfare disbursement to black families (1997: 17, 208). Patricia Williams describes this process as ‘substitution’, explaining, ‘instead of black motherhood [working] as a generative source for black people, master-cloaked white manhood’ took over. ‘Blacks are thus, in full culturally imagistic terms, not merely unmothered but badly fathered, abused and disowned by whites’ (1991: 163). See also Spillers (1987).
4. For the purposes of this commentary, I consider black optimism to be part of the Afrofuturist project, although the distinctions between the two are important. Additionally, I am most interested in the temporal and political orientations of Afrofuturism.
5. For detailed discussions of the homologies between slavery, incarceration and detention, see Butler (2006); Gilmore (2007); Browne (2015); and Hinton (2016).
6. Curt’s former life as a police officer is instructive. Bereft of the power that set him atop the social hierarchy and innately suspicious of racial others, Curt assembles a group of dissenting humans around him. Nikanj excuses his actions, explaining that he acted in anger, fear and pain, but this is an insufficient explanation. Curt’s actions demonstrate an unwillingness to adapt and evolve; he clings to his former position of power as an agent of state authority and the aphoristic ‘law and order’ that featured prominently in conservative racial discourses of the time. In this case, his actions, although impulsive, are directly linked to his own feelings of disempowerment, a clear indication of Patricia Williams’ claims cited above: Curt destroys Lilith’s husband, the novel’s paternal figure, leaving Lilith to abide his death and carry out her mission despite her bereavement. (See also Nash, 2016).

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