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SOMATOGRAPHY OF THE FUTURE. MONSTROUS MOTHERHOOD AND ODDKINSHIP IN *XENOGENESIS*

SOMATOGRAFÍA DEL FUTURO: O DE LA MATERNIDAD MONSTRUOSA Y DEL PARENTESCO EXTRAÑO EN XENOGÉNESIS

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ABSTRACT

In *Xenogenesis*, Octavia Butler tells the story of Lilith Iyapo, an Afro-descendant woman who survived a devastating nuclear war—that completely ravaged the earth and decimated its inhabitants—thanks to the intervention of an extraterrestrial species, the Oankali. These creatures engage in intergalactic gene trafficking with other sentient species with whom they interbreed and live symbiotically. In this article, I explore the ways in which feminism has historically conceptualised motherhood to illuminate how Lillith's monstrous motherhood articulates a new relational order (oddkinship) that escapes the logic of domination and points to possible forms of resistance to ecosocial contemporary crisis in the polyform register of prefigurative imagination.

Keywords: *Xenogenesis*, Octavia Butler, prefigurative imagination, monstrous motherhood, posthuman oddkinship

RESUMEN

En *La estirpe de Lilith* (trad. en castellano del original *Xenogenesis*) Octavia Butler cuenta la historia de Lilith Iyapo, una mujer afrodescendiente que ha sobrevivido a una guerra nuclear —que devastó por completo la Tierra y diezmó a sus habitantes— gracias a la intervención de una especie extraterrestre, los Oankali. Estas criaturas se dedican al tráfico intergaláctico de genes con otras especies sentientes con las que se entrecruzan y viven simbióticamente. En este artículo exploro las formas en que el feminismo ha históricamente conceptualizado la maternidad para ilustrar cómo la monstruosa

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maternidad interespecista de Lillith articula un nuevo orden relacional que escapa a la lógica de la dominación y apunta a posibles formas de resistencia simbólica a la crisis ecosocial contemporánea en el registro polimorfo de la imaginación prefigurativa.

Palabras claves: *La estirpe de Lilith*, Octavia Butler, imaginación prefigurativa, maternidad monstruosa, parentesco raro posthumano

1. Introduction

According to Darko Suvin, science fiction could be normatively defined as a 'genre whose necessary and sufficient conditions are the presence and interaction of estrangement and cognition, and whose main formal device is an imaginative framework alternative to the authors' empirical environment' (1979, p. 8). While this assertion may be true if one considers—as he does—male authors who dominated the literary science fiction scene until the late 1970's, it does not help to illuminate the specificity of women's science fiction writing, which in the same period was largely troubled by forms of technological development that were already modifying their sexed bodies and their capacities/possibilities as reproductive agents (Bonnevier, 2023). Novels by Ursula Le Guin, Kate Wilhelm, Susy McKee Charnas, Katherine Marcuse, Marge Piercy and Margaret Atwood among others echoed feminist concerns about reproductive freedom in America and shifted the focus from the *unrealistic framework* of science fiction narratives to a political critique of existing modes of social relations—namely the consumerist, strategic use of women's affective care and reproductive capacity under patriarchy—by blurring the boundaries between science fiction, realist fiction and feminist non-fiction (Barr, 1993). In this context, Octavia Butler's extensive body of work provides a privileged material for reflecting on the ways in which this blurring operates, and helps to explore some of the emancipatory sites that the feminist science fiction imagination has articulated in women's struggles against patriarchy. Many critics have already noted the value of her literary contribution to feminist debates revolving around myth-making (Haraway, 1991), sexism and racism (Salvaggio, 1984; Flagel, 2012), sexual and personal identity (Castleberry, 2009; Ramírez, 2002; Omry, 2005), disability (Obourn, 2013; Curtis, 2015; Pickens, 2015) and trauma (Mitrea, 2017; Fernández San Miguel, 2018); as well as have highlighted the challenges that her work posed to the white imagination that has historically dominated the sci-fi tradition (Womack, 2013; Ramírez, 2008). Overall, scholars have explained the originality of her work as an attempt to provide an imaginary *exit door* from oppressive hierarchical race/gender relations in the past century America. In this article, I aim to contribute to the existing scholarship on her literary

universe by examining the ways in which motherhood and the pregnant body are conceptualised and represented in her *Xenogenesis* (*Dawn, Adulthood Rites* and *Imago*). Although the series has been the subject of previous critical enquiry, a fresh look at it through a revision of the feminist debate on motherhood and the pregnant body, paired with the notion of the monstrous mother (Braidotti, 2021) and the posthuman oddkinship (Balzano, 2021; Haraway, 2016; Clarke & Haraway, 2022) offer new insights into the symbolic potential of (monstrous) motherhood as a way of moving beyond the oppositional dyad of destiny and resistance—that dominated the feminist debate while the author was alive—to embrace the full potential of a hybrid, interspecies imaginary to conquer emancipation.

The article is structured as follows. First, I highlight the general direction of my work by providing a brief introduction to the ways in which monster figurations and prefigurative imagination operate. Secondly, I offer some expressionist sketches of the content of *Xenogenesis* to situate my critical reading. Finally, I outline theoretical feminist approaches to motherhood and the pregnant body—two key moments in the feminist conceptual and political critique of patriarchy—in order to reveal the symbolic potential of the interspecies posthuman alliances of *Dawn*, *Adulthood Rites* and *Imago* in the struggle against the current ecological and social crisis.

2. Of Monsters and (Prefigurative) Imagination

In *Madri, Mostri, Macchine* (2021), Rosi Braidotti highlights how the modern and postmodern human imagination is saturated with monsters. She conceptualises the monster as a device that allows us to define the limits of the human, simultaneously signalling those who legitimately belong to the human community and those who are excluded from it. A brief etymological approximation reveals that the word *monster*, common to most European languages, derives from the Latin word *monstrum* and has its root in *monere*, 'to warn' or 'to show' (Balza, 2013). Invoking the monster is therefore both a way of warning us against a set of behaviours and of informing that a terrible transgression has been committed. Following Braidotti's intuition, I have argued elsewhere (2021) that the monster constitutes itself at the edge of the legitimate and functions as a double-edged device: it warns of danger and reveals what the future holds for those who do not conform to the established norm. These two dimensions are intimately connected. Put another way, we could argue that the monster constitutes what Judith Butler has defined as 'the constitutive outside': someone (or something) that must be excluded in order to provide an ontologically differential ground

for the emergence of the human subject and a normative social order at any given time. In her words:

> The exclusionary matrix by which subjects are formed thus requires the simultaneous production of a domain of abject beings, those who are not yet "subjects," but who form the constitutive outside to the domain of the subject. The abject designates here precisely those "unlivable" and "uninhabitable" zones of social life which are nevertheless densely populated by those who do not enjoy the status of the subject, but whose living under the sign of the "unlivable" is required to circumscribe the domain of the subject. (Butler, 1993, p. 3)

Stated differently, we can think of the monster as an alter ego of the human, and a close examination of its cultural history reveals the complex ways in which humans have self-reflectively understood what it means to be one (Asma, 2010). More specifically, in her book (2021), Braidotti has examined the complex dynamics that regulate forms of symbolic inclusion and exclusion, highlighting how women have historically been represented as monstrous others, in a symbolic universe in which the male subject and his body have progressively coincided with the normative (Introduction). It is well known that, at the time when Braidotti was exploring the cultural and political relevance of the monster, Simone de Beauvoir had already shown how Woman occupied the position of the Other, as a non-subject, as a monstrous creature who revealed how the relations of domination in patriarchal societies were founded and consolidated precisely through her exclusion (de Beauvoir, 2007). Moreover, Braidotti has shown how the monster, through its polysemic nature and its configuration as a double-edged device, provides an *exit door* from normativity, giving voice to women's fantasies, fears and desires. In her work, she understands the monster as a creature that expresses the tension that exists within the social imaginary between *potestas* and *potencia* (2021, Introduction). The coexistence of a repressive force alongside a transformative one renders its multiple representations irrevocably ambiguous. In other words, as the etymological approximation has already revealed, the monster polices the limits of normativity and, at the same time, indicates the conditions of possibility for its collapse (Foucault, 2017). If we pay a close attention to this conceptual ambivalence, it seems reasonable to argue that sci-fi monsters might express the *prefigurative* dimension of literature. Let's see.

The term *prefigurative* has been widely used in social studies scholarship to refer to the crafting of alternatives in the *here and now* and to facilitate the embodiment of new scenarios that one wishes to realise (van de Sande, 2013). I argue that this tentative definition provided by social studies scholars resonates with the transformative force of literary figures in

Braidotti's, when she states that the monster embodies new emancipatory scenarios and imaginary exit doors for liberation. In other words, the monsters' imagination expresses the power of poetic creations to show alternatives and multiple possibilities beyond the norm. In this sense, the feminist science fiction imagination—populated by monster creatures—could be understood as a form of symbolic intervention, a literary way of changing public life and an instrument for transforming existence. Hence, its prefigurative nature. Without pretending to offer a precise cartography of the multi-layered and convoluted history of the concept imagination, I would like to highlight how Braidotti situates herself within a long-lasting critical enquiry. According to Western philosophy, the prefigurative dimension of literary creations lies precisely in their capacity to *propose alternatives* and forms of intervention on reality itself, recovering the *productive sense of language* as *world-building* in a multiplicity of ways that take shape in literature but are reflected in the experiences of embodied subjects (Benéitez Andrés, 2020). In *Nomadic Subjects*, Braidotti evokes this very prefigurative dimension of the feminist imagination through the notion of figuration:

> The term figuration refers to a style of thought that evokes or expresses ways out of the phallocentric vision of the subject. *A figuration is a politically informed account of an alternative subjectivity.* (1994, p. 13. Emphasis mine)

Thus, the ways in which I will interrogate Octavia Butler's texts are intended to highlight precisely the prefigurative dimension of her work. *Dawn*, *Adulthood Rites* and *Imago* allow us to think differently—to think *other*—about key issues of our present and to suggest a future course of action that might have novel effects on our social realities. Or, as Octavia Butler herself stated, very eloquently:

> What good is science fiction's thinking about the present, the future, and the past? What good is its tendency to warn or to consider alternative ways of thinking and doing? What good is its examination of the possible effects of science and technology, or social organization and political direction? At its best, science fiction stimulates imagination and creativity. It gets reader and writer off the beaten track, of the narrow, narrow footpath of what "everyone" is saying, doing, thinking—. (1996, p. 731)

Prefigurative imagination and (female) monstrosity will therefore be the underlying discursive core articulating this paper on the work of Octavia Butler, a black American writer who places the generative potential of motherhood, the pregnant body and the alien/hybrid monster at the centre of her post-apocalyptic fantasy world. In the next section, I will briefly consider the novels' subject matter.

3. Xenogenesis, a Future Scenario

Butler was a very prolific writer—having written eight novels and a collection of short stories—and by the time of her untimely death, she had achieved cult status among an ever-growing audience made up of science fiction fans, feminists, and African American readers (Weinbaum, 2022). *Dawn* (1987), the first novel in the *Xenogenesis* series (published between 1987 and 1999), tells the story of Lilith Iyapo, a black American woman who survives a nuclear war that has devastated the Earth and decimated its inhabitants thanks to the intervention of an alien species, the Oankali. This extraterrestrial race has saved what remains of the Earth's ecosystem and few humans from the extinction to which they would have been condemned as a species:

> Nothing would have survived except bacteria, a few small land plants and animals, and some sea creatures. Most of the life that you see around you we reseeded form prints, form collected specimens from our own creations, and from altered remnants of things that have undergone changes before we found them. The war damaged your ozone layer. (*Adulthood Rites*, p. 45)

The Oankali are space travellers from another galaxy who exchange genes with other sentient beings as a way to endure and evolve. As a species, they seem both repelled and fascinated by the human genetic structure. According to their precise mapping of the human genome, humans are fundamentally flawed, being both intelligent and hierarchical. They name this characteristic *the human contradiction* and describe it as a lethal combination that has made peaceful coexistence on Earth impossible (*Adulthood Rites*, p. 191). The contradiction represents a mark of human distinction in the vast genetic make-up of a living universe and a source of marvel for a species that has spent millions of years wandering. In this discursive universe, the origin of nuclear violence lies in human genetic structures that have precluded the possibility of articulating pragmatic forms of intelligence in the construction of a common world.

> But before the war—during the war—they had done terrible things to each other even though they could have children. The Human Contradiction held them. Intelligence at the service of hierarchical behavior. They were not free. All he could do for them, if he could do anything, was to let them be bound in their own ways. Perhaps next time their intelligence would be in balance with their hierarchical behavior, and they would not destroy themselves. (*Adulthood Rites*, p. 201)

Linked to this trait is the inability to tolerate differences (of race, gender and species) and the human penchant for war. In a mirrored way, Oankali's behavioural patterns are also determined by their genetic structure, which drives them to interbreed with other life

forms—humans, plants and animals alike—and to plan *benign* forms of colonisation through gene trafficking.

> "Human beings fear difference," Lilith had told him once. "Oankali crave difference. Humans persecute their different ones, yet they need them to give themselves definition and status. Oankali seek difference and collect it. They need it to keep themselves from stagnation and overspecialization." (*Adulthood Rites,* p. 144)

As a species, they are organised into extended families consisting of a male and a female (consanguineous) and of an ooloi, which is an essential member of this alien social structure; it is through it that procreation takes place. The ooloi are neither male nor female but a *third sex* whose special reproductive organs—hidden below two revolting still fascinating sensorial tentacles—carry out genetic mixing and favour the birth of Onkali offspring. In other words, any children they may have will be the result of genetic mixing. Furthermore, after the colonisation of Earth, the ooloi were given the task of mediating any sexual relations that took place between humans and Oankali. Thanks to them, a new race of hybrids (the constructs) was engineered to overcome the genetic flaws of both species:

> Our children will be better than either of us […]. We will moderate your hierarchical problems and you will lessen our physical limitations. Our children won't destroy themselves in a war, and if they need to regrow a limb or to change themselves in some other way they'll be able to do it. (*Dawn*, p. 248)

The relationship between humans and Onkali is presented as a form of strong symbiotic, organic interdependence, which Butler ambiguously locates at the intersection of oppression and necessity. If the Onkali control the human ability to reproduce and have rendered humans incapable of living independently in this post-apocalyptic ecological scenario, the only way for the aliens to survive is to move from one universe to another, collecting new genes in order to adapt and evolve. They need humans as much as humans need them.

In the second volume, *Adulthood Rites* (1988), some humans refuse to settle with the Oankali and—being sterile (independent reproduction was inhibited during the early stages of colonisation)—they form resistance communities and steal human-Oankali children to satisfy their desire for a collective future. They want to form a 'purely human' community to avoid their own annihilation as a genetically independent species. However, it is precisely this independence that puts the resisters in danger; they have organised warrior-like settlements and are building arsenals to protect themselves from other resisters' attacks:

> "Why are you afraid of guns?"
> "They make killing too easy. Too impersonal. You know what that means?"
> […] "So we'll kill more of each other than we already do. We'll learn to make better and better guns. Someday, we'll take on the Oankali, and that will be the end of us." (*Adultood Rites*, p. 173)

After a long period of captivity in a resisters' village, Lilith's Onkali/human construct son, Akin, becomes an advocate for their right to live independently and, eventually, manages to persuade the Oankali to establish an all-human colony on Mars.

In the last instalment, *Imago* (1989), we follow the adventures of another of Lilith's children, Jodahs, who, against all odds, metamorphoses into an ooloi, a being that is neither male nor female:

> There were still some Humans who insisted on seeing the ooloi as some kind of male-female combination, but the ooloi were no such thing. They were themselves—a different sex altogether. (*Imago*, p. 93)

Jodahs as a character provides a much closer look at the evolution of Oankali-human society and a critical insight into hybridity as a symbolic potential at the service of social change (Bhabha, 1990; Anzaldua, 2012; Fusco, 2021).

The *Xenogenesis* series, like other feminist science fiction, weaves together a number of dimensions, namely otherness, race, sexuality, reproduction and the environmental crisis. Octavia Butler interlocks these dimensions though the strategic positioning of the experience of motherhood and the pregnant body as the site of the monstrous subjectivation of the female lead.

In order to illuminate the original ways in which the author represents Lilith's experience of motherhood and gestation in the era of techno/reproduction, in the following section I will present and discuss how motherhood emerged as a key concern at the time when Octavia Butler was writing the series. In particular I will attend the discursive articulation of the domination/submission dichotomy to then explore a more recent poststructuralist conceptual mode that seems to provide a precious analytical tool to dive into *Xenogenesis*' fantasy world.

4. Feminism and Motherhood: Expressionistic Sketches

> The power of the women's movement lays in its capacity to stimulate such deep rethinking, to pose, *as a problem*, concepts such as femininity and motherhood and relationships previously taken for granted.
>
> Sara Evans

Motherhood and the pregnant body have been one of the most productive and problematic reflexive kernels within feminist theorising (Neyer & Bernardi, 2011). Elaine Tuttle Hansen (1997) has identified three nuclear moments (*a drama in three acts*) in the evolution of feminist debates revolving around motherhood which she calls "repudiation", "recuperation" and "impasse". *Impasse* attempts to name the contemporary difficulties "to go forward, even as it seems impossible to go willingly back" (1997, p. 6).

4.1. First Act: *Repudiation*

Well into the 1980s, many feminists took a critical approach to motherhood, seeing its rejection as a necessary milestone in overcoming women's subordination and the foundational ground of their unequal position in the social landscape. This position was initially advocated by de Beauvoir in *The Second Sex* when she stated that becoming a mother could never be an act of freedom and therefore represented an obstacle to women's liberation. If the precondition for becoming a subject is the ability to exercise freedom and transcendence,[2] then the normative nature of motherhood makes it a *forced* choice for women, since historically they have had no other option: "there is no way to directly oblige a woman to give birth: all that can be done is to enclose her in situations where motherhood is her only option" (de Beauvoir, 2007, p. 1613). Even if becoming a mother is rooted in biological functions—"to give birth and to breast-feed are […] natural functions; they do not involve a project, which is why the woman finds no motive there to claim a higher meaning for her existence; she passively submits" (de Beauvoir, 2007, p. 1683)—, it is the cultural context, dominated by male ideology and misogyny, that shapes these very functions into a destiny. For these reasons, the overcoming of immanence and otherness through

[2] Simone de Beauvoir considered self-creation and the exercise of freedom the fundamental core of human subjectivity. As far as women are concerned the will and ability to exercise such freedom will project them into an emancipated future.

transcendence implies the individual and collective renunciation of motherhood as a socio-cultural imperative.

De Beauvoir's writings had a profound impact on second-wave feminist theorising (Hengehold & Bauer, 2017). After the publication of the volume, most feminists began linking motherhood to social, economic and racial structures and their inherent hierarchical power arrangements, turning rejection into a strong denial of many other valuable dimensions of the experience of motherhood that where later recovered. Shulamith Firestone's artificial uteri as devices to conquer emancipation (1970), Kate Millett's notion of dependency as the root of patriarchal legitimacy (2016), and Betty Friedan's argument against "sacred motherhood" (1977) must be seen as examples of the wide influence of de Beauvoir's prior conceptualisation.

4.2. Second Act: ***Recuperation***

Rich's hybrid text,[3] *Of Woman Born* (1986), introduced the productive distinction between experience(s) and institution, which helped to make visible the conflicted affective dimensions of the lived experience of childbearing.

The value of the text resides in the fact that the distinction between experience and institution helps to illuminate simultaneously different embodied experiences of becoming a mother (articulated by diverse cultural contexts and subjective positions) and the normative dimension of motherhood. The notion of institution points to the abstract quality of motherhood as universal and revels itself as an epistemological framework that oppresses women by disciplining their bodies and choices within the patriarchal biopolitical order. This new conceptualisation of motherhood as an institution provides an essential split. On the one hand, it turns it into a form of culturally institutionalised violence to control and administer women's bodies:

> the mothers, if we could look into their fantasies —their daydreams and imaginary experiences— we would see the embodiment of rage, of tragedy, of the overcharged energy of love, of inventive desperation, we would see the machinery of institutional violence wrenching at the experience of motherhood (1986, p. 280).

[3] I speak of a hybrid text because *Of Woman Born* combines fragments from the author's own diaries, scenes from her dreams and from conversations with her own children. The essay is indeed an example of *écriture féminine* due to its experimental nature (disruptive, eruptive and volcanic) and a site through which a *mother tongue* might emerge.

One the other hand, the split allows for a closer look at motherhood as an embodied experience—the body becomes the site where biopolitical control and its administration takes place—providing the necessary displacement from the abstract dimension of the concept to the fleshy experience of becoming-mother. The fleshy, meaty logic of motherhood as incarnation evokes Foucault's understanding of biopower as a disciplinary force that cannot fully control life with all its contradictions and ambivalences and demonstrates its inability to supress its potential for resistance (Foucault, 2017). Rich's narrative reveals precisely the liminal position that motherhood occupies at the intersection of domination and liberation where the embodied subject can also experience the joy of becoming-other-than-oneself.

> To suffer with and for and against a child—maternally, egotistically, neurotically, sometimes with a sense of helplessness, sometimes with the illusion of learning wisdom—but always, everywhere, in body and soul, *with* that child—because that child is a piece of oneself. (Rich, 1986, p. 22)

This new *experiential take* has had a profound impact on the theorising of a number of scholars in the field of feminist theory, but it seems particularly relevant to the psychoanalytic contributions of Nancy Chodorow (1978) and Juliet Mitchell (1974) in the Anglo-Saxon world and to Luce Irigaray (1985) in France.

4.3. Third Act: *Impasse*

More recently, postmodern and poststructuralist feminists have rejected the notion of Woman as a category based on untenable meta-theoretical assumptions (Butler, 1999; Spivak, 2006) and Mother as a fixed, timeless category (Baxter, 2003; Badinter, 1981). Overall, these authors understood motherhood in representational terms, identifying a set of ideas and behaviours that conform motherhood as mutable and contextual rather than a fixed, static state (Jeremiah, 2006, p. 21). In this constellation, being a mother is subsequently represented as one aspect of female identity, one of many that inform the kaleidoscope of our intersectional condition. In other words, *motherhood as a discursively constructed experience* thus implies neither being *the other*—the *second sex*—nor subordination *per se* because language is always negotiated and signifiers are unstable, without fixed and unambiguous meaning within linguistic structures that conform our being in the world as meaning-makers. Therefore, this new conceptualization of motherhood in the framework of the poststructuralist turn opens up the possibility of acting out an emancipated becoming, that is, of *performing* forms of the maternal that subvert the structures of domination and promote different modes of being based on recognition, collaboration and reciprocity. Moreover, poststructuralist motherhood

provides "a different narrative, […] that recounts the shift from essentialist accounts of mothering to a more liberating awareness of maternal subjectivities as diverse, multifaceted, and shifting" (Jeremiah, 2006, p. 22).

Haraway's oddkin (2016) and Balzano's reflections on posthuman kinship (2021) constitute some of the most virtuous examples of the productivity of the poststructuralist twist. The notion of oddkin is central to Haraway's contribution that revolves around the depiction of the current ecological crisis and the articulation of possible collective responses. She defines oddkin as a prefigurative emancipatory device that portraits other-than-conventional biogenetic mixing and a form of kinship that renders us collectively responsible for each other—human, plants and animals alike—. In other words, oddkin operates as a discursive technology that:

> troubles important matters, like to whom one is actually responsible. Who lives and who dies, and how, in this kinship rather than that one? What shape is this kinship, where and whom do its lines connect and disconnect, and so what? What must be cut and what must be tied if multispecies flourishing on earth, including human and other-than-human beings in kinship, are to have a chance?

According to Balzano, the notion presents "a rethinking of the western re/productive system and a heartfelt critique of the delirium of capital's limitless growth and the environmental devastation it harbours" (2021, p. 19). Moreover, it is both an invitation to weave non-anthropocentric transpecies bonds and a reversal of scientific/philosophical/political reductionism that has discursively situated humans at the hype of an ecosocial hierarchy that has historically made us blind to the need of configuring a present/future that does not consider the human or human interests as central measures of our collective connectivity.

In other words, according to their proposal, addressing our epistemological stand on nature and, consequently, the hierarchical organization of human/non-human species relations appear as the only effective strategies "to regenerate, to repair the damage that human-centred theories and practices, as rational/pivot subject, have caused to human and non-human otherness as a whole" (Balzano, Bosisio, & Santoemma, 2022). Due to the relevance of connectivity and interdependency as keywords that articulate Haraway's and Balzano's formulations, oddkin provides another effective tool to explore Butler's work.

5. Final Remarks on Lilith's Becoming-Mother and Oddkin-Making

Despite the fact that Hansen has provided what appears to be a useful three folded analytical model, I will argue that she presents the distinction between the three acts in a rather exclusionary way. In a sense, they seem to be an *effect* of the modern obsession with taxonomies that seek to produce a conceptual order free of ambiguity. In other words, these linear conceptual trajectories may not be very sensitive to historical change, theoretical overlaps and ambiguities that are always present in the history of (philosophical) concepts (Deleuze & Guattari, 2006). Furthermore, such clear-cuts cannot effectively represent and account for the ambiguous and contradictory ways in which Butler presents motherhood and the pregnant body in the series. In other words, locating *Xenogenesis* in such a fragmented landscape appears quite challenging.

Indeed, it would certainly be difficult to pigeonhole Lilith's becoming-mother within the acts of *repudiation* and *recuperation* mainly because the dichotomy of subordination and emancipation relies on the (ontological) distinction between self/other (repudiation) and other/others (recuperation) which Lilith-monstrous-mother disarticulates through her hybrid genetic condition and her alien intermingling. She appears neither as Self nor as Other but an in-between-creature constituted by intertwined, interweaved differences. Octavia Butler presents Lilith's motherhood as elusive and inherently opaque precisely because the interlocking of multiple differences renders a taxonomic ordering impossible: the alien (the Oankali), the racial (a black American woman), and the queer (the ooloi as a neutral third sex) constitute the ground of her textual subjectivation. For these very reasons, I suggest that a hybrid paradigm that articulates the three offers a more productive approach to illuminating the ways in which the author represents Lilith's experience of motherhood, the pregnant body and its monstrous conditions.

Repudiation lies at the heart of Lilith's existential conflict with motherhood when she is *offered* to participate in the Oankali's genetic experiment. Becoming-mother turns into an oppressive experience and an insoluble moral dilemma in the face of the imminent extinction of the human race. It is not the result of a free choice, since she is effectively trapped in a situation "where motherhood is her only option" (de Beauvior, 2007). She wants to resist the imposition but seems unable to deny the urgency of building oddkin to resolve the *human contradiction* that has led to the destruction of the human (Self) and Earth.

Recuperation provides the theoretical underpinning to move away from the abstract realm of the regulatory ideal of motherhood to reinvent it as an embodied experience. In this respect it will always be the body of a self, a "her-own-body" (Rich, 1986). This displacement opens up new venues to account for the fleshy and sticky materiality of Lilith's monstrous pregnancy. Indeed, Octavia Butler abandons the (abstract) body—crystallised in a closed individuality—to replace it with a dual-female-pregnant body saturated by differences and *opened to plurality*.

Finally, the (*impasse*) poststructuralist body politics of Octavia Butler forge a protagonist who is fully interconnected with other sentient creatures; the organically engineered genome brings at the forefront the capacity to shape new affinities between creatures and structures of sustainable getting-along face to face with an ecological apocalyptic crisis that rests on the background. This getting-along could be expressed by Haraway's "living and dying well with each other".

In other words, Octavia Butler (re)reads the pregnant body—the experience of embodied motherhood embedded in a vibrant network of symbiotic relations—as a *complex structure* that lies at the intersection of different planes of experience and is configured as an epistemology that helps the author to explore possible paths to overcome dominance. In Butler's narrative discourse, the recognition of the value of difference—exemplified through plural genes intermingling—and its acceptance represents an imaginary way out of the destruction of the Self and Earth. These elements are expressed through the representation of forms of kinship between humans and non-humans (both aliens and plants) as conditions *sine qua non* a common future is unimaginable (Haraway, 2016; Balzano, 2021). This African American literary artefact, concerned with the status of motherhood and the maternal as an alternative mythical point of origin, Lilith as the mother of a new posthuman genealogy, seems far removed from western forms of descent that pivots on blood sharing.

Octavia Butler does not embrace the power of motherhood as Nature nor the power of motherhood simply as an expression of the singularity of each incarnated subjective experience but defies the phallic logic of descent and kinship that are at the heart of de Beauvior's refusal. Though her writing, she participates in the postmodern critique of the humanist subject that has been historically conceived as self-determined and totally independent from the ecological network of organic relations she is imbedded in. Lilith opens up the pregnant body to the experience of the more-than-dual putting to work in a novel manner the ambiguities of motherhood and of the pregnant body as a monstrous body

in order to place it as a source of a futuristic somatography that works against the grain of patriarchal logic to promote forms of symbolic emancipation for women and Earth.

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