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Humanity in the Grip of Alien Geneticists: Octavia E. Butler's *Lilith's Brood*

"Is there anything left on Earth?" she whispered. "Anything alive, I mean."
"Oh, yes. Time and our efforts have been restoring it."

[...]

"Jdahya," she said, "I want to know the price of your people's help. What do you want of us?"

<div align="right">Octavia Butler, Lilith's Brood [1]</div>

In this chapter etymological interpretations are used to analyse Octavia E. Butler's (1947–2006) somewhat special naming of the characters in *Lilith's Brood* (2000). In the future world created by Butler, myths function as effective narratives in a powerful story containing many different levels of social criticism and authoritative structures. Since its publication, *Lilith's Brood* has been analysed from a multitude of perspectives, and different writers have focused on distinctive aspects of the future world that Butler created.[2] Feminist authors have revised and reformulated mythological characters for a long time, for example to strengthen female identity and make power structures visible.[3] By analyzing Butler's naming in the novels, we can deepen the understanding of the course of events in this speculation about future human life and reproduction. The interdisciplinary, analytical perspective also involves intertextuality and theories of rituals and myths, as Butler's narrative choice of names implies myths from various cultures. By elucidating different origins and

meanings of names, new understandings of the respective narrative and function in Butler's future world open for new interpretations, insights, and approaches.

Lilith's Brood comprises *Dawn* (1987), *Adulthood Rites* (1988) and *Imago* (1989). The novels were published at a time when public debates about gene therapy, IVF and genetic engineering were at a relatively early stage. The novels can be understood as a novelist's speculation about one possible outcome of genetic engineering. A prominent theme throughout the trilogy is Butler's question of just how profound changes human beings can undergo and still consider themselves humans. In *Lilith's Brood*, humans are not the engineers but those engineered upon. The aliens in Octavia Butler's novels are not only genetic engineers, but they are also genetic geniuses. And in the Oankali laboratory, human beings are the preferred species to experiment on.

In the 1980s, public debates about the consequences of gene technology became more common but were still in an early phase. By the end of the 1990s, Lee M. Silver and several transhumanists became actors on the public scenes, arguing for benefits expected from new technology.[4] Several transhumanists believe that we decide what we want to do with gene technology. According to Silver, human beings are in control of their reproduction and can choose their way when it comes to genetic engineering, new reproductive methods, or which direction to go in the future. Silver is confident that the future of human beings is to enhance themselves in any possible way, by any means. This position is quite common within the framework of liberal democracy and among those who are concerned by modern gene technology; people tend to believe that humans, as scientific beings, are in control to determine the future of Homo Sapiens. According to our reading of Butler, she suggests otherwise.

Each book in Butler's trilogy has its main protagonist. Lilith is the main character in *Dawn* and, with reference to Jewish mythology and mysticism, is named after the first mythological woman. In the future world of *Lilith's Brood*, she is the reluctant first mother of the new species. Lilith thus indicates an important direction for the understanding of Butler's fiction. In *Adulthood Rites*, Lilith's son Akin is the main character, and in the final novel, *Imago*, Jodahs is the protagonist. These two offspring both have human and alien genes but are brought up extremely differently. The aliens are named Oankali, and a key character in the alien race is named ooloi. The significant names and naming add to understanding their stories and functions in the respective narratives.

Butler seems to have been particularly deliberate in the naming of her protagonists in *Lilith's Brood*. According to the creation myth in *Genesis*, name-giving is one of the most important acts performed in the first days of the new world. In *Genesis* chapter 2:19,

> the Lord God formed every beast of the field, and every fowl of the air, and brought them unto Adam to see what he would call them; and whatsoever Adam called every living creature, that was the name thereof. [5]

The novels were initially released as *The Xenogenesis Trilogy Part I–III* (1987–1989). This title mirrors two main themes in the novels: the prefix 'xeno' relates to a foreigner or foreigners, other, different, strange in origin, alien, and outsiders[6], whereas 'genesis' means origin, creation or beginning, and is the name of the first book in the Old Testament. Hence, the title is an echo of allusions reflecting the themes on which the intrigue is built.

Butler clarifies and emphasises the need for diversity and change through the disposition of the trilogy: *Dawn* focuses on the female, Lilith, and the story is told in the third person with a historical backdrop. *Adulthood Rites* focuses on the male, Akin, and is a story told in the third person from a distance. The final novel, *Imago*, focuses on Jodahs, the first construct child who turns out to be ooloi. The story is intimately told from Jodahs point of view. The last novel is written in the first person, as the third sex has an overall understanding. Together with the main character's perspective in the three novels, the changes in human beings and gradual alienation become obvious to the reader and allude to the irrevocable evolution: the all-seeing construct ooloi finally finding its form.

At stake in Butler's future world is the 'development' or 'evolution' of mankind. Humanity has outgrown its *raison d'être*.[7] An extra-terrestrial species, the Oankali, saves several individuals from various parts of the world after a worldwide, cataclysmic atomic event. However, their rescue comes with a high price in that the aliens make great demands on the humans. The main protagonist, Lilith, asks her alien rescuer: "I want to know the price of your people's help. What do you want of us?"[8] The survivors not only have to change their behaviour and social structures but are also expected to interact sexually with the alien creatures if they want to reproduce.

The Oankali way of life is concerned with co-opting and crossbreeding with other species from myriads of planets across the universe. They change continuously, that is, they evolve and enhance thanks to the intricacies of

their reproductive system and their urge to investigate new genetic material. The Oankali have three sexes: male, female, and ooloi, this third being neither male nor female, and is completely different from both. The ooloi are essential to Oankali reproduction, which involves all three sexes. By extracting gametes from both male and female, an ooloi then induce fertilization within its own body before replacing the new zygote into the female and chemically stimulating the womb for bringing the new life to term.

A price for human survival is the genetic manipulation which leaves males and females of the original species repulsed by one another. The ooloi 'marks' the members of the family group with a scent that connects them as an emotional unit, why also sexual 'unfaithfulness' is impossible in the Oankali world. When a human is mated with an ooloi they are forever changed and can no longer stand the scent and touch of another human without an ooloi present to mediate the gap. When the ooloi touch human beings, they thereby change them.[9]

Octavia E. Butler: "all that you touch you change"

As a feminist-oriented author, Butler used speculative fiction as a thought laboratory to explore the life possibilities of women and men, power structures and violence, limits, and possibilities – and experiments going wrong. In the book simply entitled *Octavia E. Butler* (2016), Gerry Canavan analyses her fictive worlds. He also writes about her impact on other authors and states that Butler "told us what would happen – 'all that you touch you change' – and then she touched us, fearlessly, brave enough to change us".[10] Cohabitation forms and gender expectations serve as catalysts to shed light on difficult contemporary areas of debate. In novels and short stories, Butler examined human prerequisites, capacities, and conditions, mainly by changing the prerequisites to review what might be possible and difficult for human beings.

One profound characteristic feature in Butler's narrative strategies is her use of 'the monstrous'. In *Lilith's Brood*, the human survivors are forced into interaction with alien creatures having – at first and second sight – monstrous bodies. It follows that the offspring will be a combination of humans and aliens. They are in part human beings but have tentacles all over their bodies. The characters naturally display great resistance to these interactions. Human resistance against symbiosis with the alien race is deeply rooted in purely aesthetic notions of what is considered beautiful versus repulsive. The theme of resistance also becomes visible through

a human-centred worldview that places the human characters populating Butler's world at the pinnacle of evolution. It takes a long time for the main characters to see through what in their view is a monstrous exterior. Some characters eventually realise that caring and even loving individuals are hiding inside these grotesque alien bodies. Amber Lea Strother writes in *Speculative sexualities and futuristic families: Representations of reproduction and kinship in science fiction* (diss., 2017) that in speculative fiction, "representations of reproduction have tended to rely on depictions of artificial reproduction as 'unnatural' and reinforced the threat of developing technologies through images of monstrous mothers and horrific births".[11] Strother writes that in speculative fiction, moving away from traditional depictions of

> monstrous mothers and horrific births, images of non-normative reproduction in science fiction can help to redefine the concepts of woman and mother, man and father, and further challenge the limiting ways in which gender and reproduction have been defined by the physical body.[12]

Lilith's Brood can be read as an investigation of what might happen if human beings lose control over genetic engineering in the future.

In Butler's speculative fiction, intelligent, empathetic, caring, and loving alien genetic engineers take control of the situation and claim to know the best future path for humans. The aliens conduct themselves with patience, care, sacrifice and a great deal of love for the humans. Even so, the result is problematic from the human perspective. In its known form, humanity is being slowly yet inescapably wiped out. The development is no longer in the hands of humans. The alien race can be interpreted as an allegory of reproductive techniques – or as science itself – as Silver and other transhumanists describe it in their work.[13]

Speculative fiction is an effective tool in Butler's thought laboratory. Her novels are some of the most notable examples of extreme unions constrained by an outside force. Butler previously investigated the theme in *Lilith's Brood* in a short story called "*Bloodchild*" in her collection *Bloodchild and other stories* (1984), which she describes as "a story about an isolated colony of human beings on an inhabited, extrasolar world",[14] with no hope of rescue or help from other human beings. Here, human existence is at the mercy of aliens, and sooner or later they will "have to make some kind of accommodations"[15] with their hosts: "Chances are this would be an unusual accommodation. Who knows what we humans have that others might be willing to take in trade for a liveable space on a world not our own?"[16]

In *Lilith's Brood*, Butler digs deeper into the extraordinary challenges and problems, solutions, and depictions of humanity's difficulties in terms of gender, power, conflict management and technology versus biological life. She develops the slow transformation process further, through several generations, into a previously unknown human-alien form of existence.[17] Among other things, Butler illuminates' conflicts between ethnic groups, examines human (i.e., male) violence through the eyes of an outside species and brings gender-related problems into focus from an innovative perspective.[18]

One of many possible interpretations is presented by Jeffrey A. Tucker. In the article "The Human Contradiction" he argues that Butler's novels are to be read as a satire of human irrationality and folly:

> Readers sensitive to the essentialism in *Xenogenesis*, therefore, should keep in mind Jacobs's response to Zaki's reading, which encourages a reading of Butler's trilogy 'as a metaphor rather than a manifesto', that is, as a description of human behaviour writ large in order to bring attention to the folly of that behaviour. Indeed, *Xenogenesis's* representation of late twentieth-century humanity approaches the satirical.[19]

Furthermore, Tucker interprets the novels as inspired by cold War-era rhetoric in the 1980s, "particularly in the Reagan Administration's delusional statements about achieving victory through nuclear warfare".[20] This, Tucker claims, inspired Butler to write Xenogenesis. Tucker also claims that the trilogy "brings a severe critique to bear on a particular human behaviour – hierarchical thinking – by imagining it as part of humanity's biological hard-wiring."[21]

According to our reading, these elements are important in the understanding of Butler's project. But there is more to it: Butler envisions a future in which technology, weapons and machines have been denounced, being tools of the human hunger for power. The extra-terrestrial beings save a human pillar from doom and create new variations to the human form of life, which the Oankali regard as improvements.[22] The Oankali restore the Earth and the organic life that can be saved after the global nuclear war. The aliens have physical bodies and are thus limited to a certain part of time and space. They have a rich and empathetic emotional life but lack a fundamental understanding of how humans function. In *Technology, Subjectivity, Science fiction: Bodies of Tomorrow* (diss., 2019), Sheryl Vint also lucidly points out that the perspective is turned upside-down as Butler "encourages her readers to see ourselves as the objects acted upon by genetic technology

rather than subjects who choose how to use it".[23] Vint writes that Butler's novels are "potent calls to socio-political action that seem ever more pertinent to our survival as a species".[24]

The Oankali scientific approach serves as an existential driving force. One goal of their existence is to constantly expand and vary genetic material in all conceivable forms. As the process is slow, it takes several hundred years before the Earth is returned to the people – who are expected to share it with their saviours. An advanced future world revolving around unknown, alternative organic life forms is thus shaped, and this way of life, which is unknown to us, wipes out technical aids. This exchange of genetic information, personal characteristics, forms of cohabitation and coexistence on many levels is part of the transformation process that Butler embodies.[25] In Butler's concept, death is significantly delayed for human beings and their offspring thanks to the Oankali knowledge of genetics. The question is not one of eternal life; 300 years is regarded as a reasonable life expectancy.

The essence of the extra-terrestrial race is also to create, nurture and sustain life. The Oankali experience human (male) brutality as frightening and savage. Humanity is saved in the petition at the expense of several kinds of declarations of incapacity. The Oankali believe that the human species is incapable of handling the great freedom that they have previously enjoyed and therefore limit their opportunities for influence in the future world in matters of lifestyle, forms of cohabitation, definitions of good standards and what is good or bad from an ethical point of view. The variations of life on Earth appear to be extremely unique and are therefore valuable for the Oankali to preserve. Weapons and technology are banned from the future because weapons destroyed the Earth and put humanity in the state in which the Oankali found them. Metal is an unnatural material for which these extra-terrestrial geneticists have no use whatsoever.

In *Lilith's Brood*, traditional gender related expectations are simultaneously challenged and strengthened. Family life in the human-oankali-groups is 'traditional' in the sense that women care for the domestic chores and the children. while men normally hunt and wander, fight, and rape; they create weapons and build hierarchical societies. Men can choose to stay or leave in the new constellation of family groups. There "will always be many more females and ooloi than males" to take care of the offspring, Nikanj, the ooloi in Lilith's family, states.[26] The Oankali share the work and burdens as a family. The female is bigger than the male, as is often the case in the animal world. Human males are seen by the Oankali as being

extremely dangerous and difficult, and the Oankali expect very little from them.[27] They are allowed to wander, and there are few demands on them as active parents. The Oankali and the family group manage very well without irresponsible men. Nikanj and Lilith discuss the rootless men because they understand that their son Akin will become a rootless young man one day. Akin is the first of his kind and Nikanj explains to Lilith: "Did you think your children would only *look* different?"[28] The changes that Butler shapes in *Lilith's Brood* will continue to pose challenges for both individuals and groups.[29] The protagonists are experimented on in several different ways; biologically, psychologically and socially. And the 'scientists' performing the experiments, the Oankali, has no means to fully control the results.

Let us now investigate the naming in *Lilith's Brood* and which clues to interpretation Butler has hidden in her naming.

Lilith: The First Woman

What time is it, what year is it,
Who am I, what is my name?
        Erik Lindorm, *Judgment Days* [30]

In *The Rites of Passage* (1960), Arnold van Gennep argues that every culture shares a common structure of ritual practice. This structure is divided into three stages: rites of separation, rites of transition (or liminality) and rites of incorporation, which serve to prepare the initiand for change – be it socially, biologically, or culturally.[31] Applied to Butler's trilogy, each book reflects one of the three different stages of passage rites, which elucidates the becoming of a new race. Butler also engages each main protagonist in personal rites of passage, using narrative and character naming to enhance the development within each book and throughout the trilogy.

In *Dawn*, Lilith awakens disillusioned and scared, not knowing for how long she has been sleeping. She has lost everything she once knew and is now forced to leave her old life and learnings behind. According to van Gennep, the rite of separation is where the initiand goes through a metaphorical death, a clean break. Butler emphasises this through the birth of the new Lilith in a place very much like that of a womb in which she has been nurtured back to life and health. Our protagonist tries to orientate herself and make sense of everything. She finally meets another living being:

...and what had seemed to be a tall, slender man was still humanoid, but it had no nose – no bulge, no nostrils – just flat, gray skin. It was gray all over – pale gray skin, darker gray hair on its head. The hair grew down around its eyes and ears and at its throat. There was so much hair across the eyes that she wondered how the creature could see. The long, profuse ear hair seemed to grow out of its ears as well as around them. Above, it joined the eye hair, and below and behind, it joined the head hair. The island of throat hair seemed to move slightly, and it occurred to her that that might be where the creature breathed – a kind of natural tracheostomy.[32]

Lilith eventually realises that she is on an alien spaceship, surrounded by the strangest and ugliest beings she could ever imagine. She understands that what she first believes to be hair is tentacles; their entire bodies are covered in moving tentacles.

The aliens, the Oankali, inform Lilith that she has survived the cataclysmic war on Earth and that she will live. She understands that she has been chosen to be a leader of the people and the first mother of a new species: a crossbred species that is half human, half alien. Lilith learns that her future family will consist of herself and a male human, a male and a female Oankali and, finally, an ooloi. The optimal existence entails harmoniously living as part of a deep physical and mental communion with every other living being. Tucker writes:

> Butler's aliens are both colonizers and a utopian collective, while the captured/saved humans are both admirable survivors and ugly xenophobes. Lilith Iyapo, the main character in *Dawn*, is both the mother of a new race and a Judas to humanity. In the process of reading the trilogy, we confront and negotiate these contradictions, as Butler prods us to move beyond old dilemmas and imagine a different future.[33]

Lilith's mental process and training for becoming the first mother in a new, futuristic, and partly non-human world denote the take-off in Butler's trilogy.

Butler's choice of name for her protagonist associates her with the mythological Lilith, alluding to the first mythic woman, who according to Jewish mythology was Adam's first wife but was created neither as her husband's helper nor from his ribs. She was created at the same time as Adam, as a fully equal creation. The first two chapters in the Book of Genesis describe two very different and contrasting creation acts. Here we examine one verse from each chapter.

Genesis 1:27 So God created humankind in his own image; in the image of God he created him: male and female he created them.[34]

Genesis 2:23 The man-person said, "At last! This is bone from my bones and flesh from my flesh. She is to be called Woman,[35] because she was taken out of Man.[36]

In *Genesis 1:27*, the well-known lines about God creating man and woman simultaneously are found: Of mud he shaped them, in his image, and as equals they were given the land before them.

Genesis 2:23 is a different version of the same story about how Adam and Eve came into the world. However, in several modern versions of the text, Adam's surprise and joy are uncharacteristic.[37] For example, when he states that "[t]his one, at last, is bone of my bone and flesh of my flesh; this one will be called 'woman,' for she was taken from man"[38], the phrases "This one" and "at last" testify to the fact that something happened earlier that the myth does not reveal. Between the creation act described in *Genesis* chapter one and the second creation act in chapter two, the stage opens for the entrance of Lilith.

The name Lilith was first recorded in the Sumerian epic poem *Gilgamesh* and the Huluppu-Tree around 2000 BCE.[39] Her name and features are thought to derive from Mesopotamian demons called lilû (feminine: lilītu), meaning spirit. A Jewish cult existed as late as the 7th century BCE, within which the evil of Lilith was believed to have escaped by wearing an amulet inscribed with the names of specific angels,[40] and in Hebrew, the name Lilith[41] is connected to *laylah*, meaning night.

The Christian tradition has not paid much attention to the discrepancy between the two narratives in *Genesis*. However, in Jewish folklore, there are many stories about what happened at the time between the first and second acts of creation. Lilith is an important archetype in the Jewish storytelling tradition and in mysticism.[42] The earliest recorded written story about the mythological figure of Lilith is found in *The Alphabet of Ben Sira* – a Midrash from the 10th century BCE.[43] This story portrays Lilith as presumably the first wife of Adam according to early Hebrew legends and the two Genesis versions of creation. Genesis 2:22 describes how Eve was created from Adam's rib, whereas the earlier passage of 1:27 already mentions the making of a female. *The Alphabet of Ben Sira* cites the words of God in the passage of Genesis 2:18 "It is not good for man to be alone", and hence God creates Lilith, the first woman, out of clay. Adam and Lilith soon begin to fight – Lilith will not succumb to the will of Adam:

She said, "I will not lie below," and he said, "I will not lie below, but above, since you are fit for being below and I for being above." She said to him, "The two of us are equal, since we are both from the earth."[44]

Neither of them is willing to give in. When Lilith realises this, she pronounces the Tetragrammaton[45], the ineffable name of the Lord, and flies away – leaving Adam and the Garden of Eden. Adam then turns to God and asks him to send the three angels Senoy, Sansenoy and Semangelof to bring her back, to which God replies: "If she wants to return, well and good. And if not, she must accept that a hundred of her children will die every day."[46]

Genesis 1:27 and the part about Lilith as Adam's wife is re-read and further interpreted in *The Zohar* – a kabbalistic volume written by Moses de Leon between 1250–1305, based on earlier sources. In *The Zohar*, Lilith is connected to her male equivalent, Samael – one of the Devil's many names – with whom she forms an unholy alliance to produce a demonic brood. As God castrates Samael, Lilith is destined to seduce men at night to produce progeny.[47]

In the Book of Isaiah (34:14), a prophetic Hebrew writing of the Old Testament also referred to as First Isaiah (742–701 BCE), Lilith is mentioned as a dweller, and in *The Songs of the Sage* (40–10 BCE), part of the *Dead Sea Scrolls of Qumran*, the name Lilith appears in a list of demons and monsters. A few references to Lilith are found in the *Babylonian Talmud* (500–600 BCE)[48] and the belief and scarcity amongst the Babylonians also manifest in incarnation bowls (6th century BCE) inscribed with protective spells in Aramaic script, with references to the *Talmud*.[49]

The historical path of Lilith can be traced back to Mesopotamian myths and Babylonian demonology, portraying her as a demoness.[50] However, the very first mythological woman refused to submit to man and his God[51] and preferred to live outside society's admittedly safe yet controlling housing.[52] The punishment was monumental and, as a result, her reputation plummeted.[53] Lilith became a she-monster, a screech owl, a night-hag, a snatcher and a seductive demoness with a faiblesse for killing infants and exterminating expectant mothers. She was, in effect, chaos and destruction. At night she left her desolate, barren place in search of new victims, craving freedom.[54]

Lilith was eventually rejected from the mythological world until her resurrection from oblivion in the 1970s and onwards. There were only vague traces of a night demon – a grave danger to men due to its unbridled sexual appetite.[55] The consequences of this mythological distortion for narrative

traditions and interpretations of 'male' and 'female' are difficult to estimate. Other mythological role models, such as Eve and the Virgin Mary, have not been of much help to women in the world as they were designed to strengthen patriarchy.[56] Hence, the return of Lilith, re-emerging as a strong and mythical mother figure, is both inspiring and important from a feminist perspective. It is therefore only logical that the women of our time have raised Lilith from the dead. She is described as a modern woman who left the wonderful paradise, the man and his God who tried to oppress her. The punishment was in order: she became the first demon of archaic mythology. Lilith is recreated in the image of her creator. She resurrects from her long absence as a late 20th-century dream, or ideal image as a single mother, as someone who manages to pursue a career, educate, and support her children in a barren world outside the well-organised traditional society and the Garden of the nuclear family. When Lilith returns to literature it is not as man's helper. She is not created from man's ribs and does not tempt anyone with apples or any other fruit. Neither does she give birth to sons or daughters without preluding sexual intercourse.

Lilith's full name in the novel is Lilith Iyapo. Iyapo is an African male name, with the interpretation 'many hard situations' and/or 'many troubles'. The name appears in a Nigerian folktale, "Blame it on Adam", retelling the biblical tale of Adam and the forbidden fruit.[57] The moral of the story is never to blame others for the choices we make but answer to them ourselves. Furthermore, the word 'apo' (gr.) may translate to 'away from', 'descended from' or 'of origin'.[58] This connects the mythological Lilith to Butler's Lilith as ancestral mothers and alludes to the struggles in finding ways to survive despite unfavourable situations and choices. It also mirrors the complexities of hierarchical (patriarchal) structures through time; mythological Lilith is disowned because of her troubling manners (i.e., wanting to be treated as an equal to Adam), whereas Butler's Lilith is accepted by the Oankali only if she cooperates.

Lilith is a mythological figure who has been redefined with clearly stated goals to revolutionise patriarchal structures and portray women as strong and rebellious role models.[59] Hence, Lilith becomes a catalyst in which archaic, patriarchal, social, and scientific practices are revised, reformulated, and dismantled.

The Dawning of Lilith

In Theorizing Myth: Narrative, Ideology, and Scholarship, Bruce Lincoln approaches the study of myth as a category, arguing that myth is ideology in narrative form.[60] Ancient mythic narratives lost status up until the Renaissance as they were not commonly highly regarded. This led to narratives becoming folk tales or legends with a primary aim to amuse, which Christians came to set in opposition to the Bible, i.e., their authoritative non-mythical story.[61] Hence, politically, socially, linguistically, culturally, and epistemologically, myths have been used as privileged narratives on which the foundations of nations lie. Furthermore, myths reflect the innermost truth of life, which shape the human perception of reality and how and why humans behave in a certain way.[62] With this at hand, considering Lincoln's theoretical approach, the title of Butler's collection volume, *Lilith's Brood*, is multi-layered. The title refers to Lilith becoming the first mother and the story of her heirs – the future children. However, the title also refers to the demonised mythological Lilith and her heirs of demon babies. The word 'brood' derives from *incubus* (lat.) and *incubare* (lat.), meaning nightmare and to lie upon, to brood.[63] A female demon, a succubus, who seeks intercourse with a sleeping man results in demon offspring as well as the birth of witches.

'Brood' can also be interpreted as Lilith's nightmare – as she awakens and finds herself alienated from her peers and hence becomes the mother of a new breed. Just like Lilith in Jewish mythology, she must enter into an agreement with the Oankali/God. As in mythology, Butler's Lilith is viewed by human males with some scepticism in that she is powerful and dangerous and thereby unpredictable.

> It's as though there's something in her trying to get out.
> Something terrible.[64]

The agreement to breed with the Oankali is as much a choice of accepting the offer to belong and stay healthy when creating the future of genetically engineered people as it is a turning her back on human life and, hence, a self-imposed barren lifestyle. Lilith's persuasion to accept the agreement is that enslavement or imprisonment would be worse, although her bitterness at not being able to fully choose at times overrides her.[65]

This bitterness, which can also be found in Jewish mythologies, is portrayed by Lilith's urge to leave her chosen barren wastelands in search of jus-

tification for the seduction of men. Although Butler's Lilith chooses what she believes is the Garden (of Eden), which is her only way of being a part of the future, she is portrayed by resisters as a devil and deceiver who seduces other humans to persuade them to join the alien society. Resisters are those who refuse to take part in the project of miscegenation with Oankali by forming separated rebel colonies on earth. They are granted life, but they are made sterile by genetic manipulation and cannot reproduce a species Oankali consider 'flawed'.

As in ancient mythologies where the powerful female aspect is associated with death and/or destruction, Lilith envisions the female archetype of evil as she is seen as a threat to the survival of humans, breeding alien demon offspring. Lilith's human partner in the new family, Tino (Augustino), also a former resister who rethinks his possibilities in this new life situation, wonders why Lilith has not chosen to change her name, given that it is laden with bad connotations. Restituta Castiello argues that Butler's Lilith explores an unedited aspect of a mythical representation of femininity that has, alternatively in history, stood for a negative or a positive role model. Furthermore, she writes that Butler doesn't "stop by simply re-writing or re-appropriating a negative model translating it into a positive sexually powerful myth meant to represent a horizon of perfectibility for women".[66] According to Castiello

> Lilith in *Xenogenesis* is able to convey a responsible and situated account of origin stories by virtue of her being an individual who defies categorization and crosses the borders.[67]

The correlation between Lilith as succubus, devil and betrayer indicates that a woman's choice is never favourable. Luce Irigaray writes that when there is no female, divine trinity and since women lack "a divine made in her image she cannot establish her subjectivity or achieve a goal of her own. She lacks an ideal that would be her goal or path in becoming."[68] Butler challenges previous categories and makes Lilith a new kind of woman and 'first mother'.

The Aliens: Oankali and Ooloi

The Oankali are genetic masters, prone to solve the human's self-destructive lives, which they refer to as the human contradiction. They have been around the universe for aeons and consider their crossbreeding with

humans mutually beneficial. One possible interpretation of 'Oankali' is that the name of the aliens is constructed from three elements: O-an-kali. The first part is 'O' as in Omega – the last letter in the Greek alphabet. In *Revelation* 1:8, God speaks to the prophet:

> "I Am Alpha And Omega, The Beginning And The Ending," saith the Lord, who is, and who was, and who is to come, the Almighty.[69]

The next section in the word is a privative prefix, 'an-', which stems from an- (gr.), meaning 'not, without'. This prefix thus combines 'omega' with the third part of the alien's name, 'Kali'. This is one among many names of Devi, the Hindu mother-goddess, in her black-skinned death aspect. In Sanskrit, Kali translates as 'the black one',[70] which is related to the feminine aspect of 'kala' (sanskr.), meaning time (as destroyer). Kali emerged from Durga, the warrior goddess, to join her during the most intense battle against evil. which is described in the epic *Devi Mahatmyam* from about 1000 ACE.[71] In mythology and iconography, Kali is often the consort of Shiva but is never his subordinate. She is often associated with sexuality and violence, although she is also regarded as a strong mother figure. Her dual personality is part of the destroyer aspect: from destruction comes rebirth.[72] In *Lilith's Brood*, Butler mirrors the dual personality of destruction and rebirth, by giving the humans a chance to survive through the rebirth of Lilith. Also, Butler creates a narrative ending with Jodahs; the first construct.

The ooloi is the third sex of the Oankali and are refined genetic manipulators. They have made all humans sterile and breeding impossible without ooloi intervention. The word 'ooloi' could be created from the prefix 'oo-' combined with '-loi' to form a word: 'oo-' is a word-forming element meaning 'egg' or 'eggs'. It derives from ōon, (gr.) and is cognate with ovum (lat.) and egg (on), which stem from the root 'ōwyo'.[73] The word loi (fr.) translates to law, legislation and/or legal code. Connecting the name ooloi to eggs and Latin ovum in combination with French loi generates further interpretations of Lilith as the first mother and a biological carrier of a potentially prolific reproductive system, to pass on the genetic legal code.[74] Furthermore, the word 'ooloi' may be a contraction of 'Oankali', which etymologically suggests a bend or shift in genes: the left-out word, *ankah* (sanskr.) for hook, bend, or angle, makes the interpretation viable. Significant features and character traits of both intelligence and aggression exist in both '-kali' and 'Lilith' and are traded etymologically. Hence, the fatal combination of

intelligence and aggression, as put forward by the Oankali as the human contradiction, continues to challenge the alien race.

Adulthood Rites: Akin

The Oankali wait a long time for the first male construct – offspring from the unions between humans and the Oankali – to be allowed. Lilith carries and gives birth to the child. The human father, Tino, is long since dead. This child, and the protagonist in the second novel, *Adulthood Rites*, is Lilith's son Akin. As the first male human-born construct, Akin is an experiment. The Oankali are afraid of human males because of their aggressive ways and the deep conflict that they sense in them.

Butler's choice of naming Lilith's first son Akin not only elucidates Lilith as his mother by blood but also that he is the first human-born male construct.[75] His name refers to 'related by blood', as well as 'embrace differences'. The word Akin is a contraction of *a* and *kin*, meaning *of/from kin* (Middle English),[76] which indicates that the two of them are allied by nature, whereas the letter 'A', alpha (gr.), marks the beginning of everything. However, the becoming of Akin indicates that the way of living will have to change – females will raise children along with an ooloi – and a construct male will be present for mating only and will not settle:

> Most Human males aren't particularly monogamous. No construct males will be. [...] Males will come and go as they wish and as they find welcome. [...] A home like this would be a prison to them. They will have what they want, what they need.[77]

Hence, the conception of the 'new' beginning is mainly a validation for males to come and go as they please. Their non-monogamous tendencies and cravings for freedom thus become the foundation of society, where females are, yet again, allocated to breeding and raising children. The trading also included Lilith being unable to choose whether to bear children if she decided to stay amongst the Oankali.

Akin is not just *kin* to Lilith but is also *kin* to humans and the Oankali. He is kidnapped from his original parents, i.e., Lilith and the family group, as a child and is brought up among the human resisters. As an experiment, the Oankali decide to let him stay among the resisters during his upbringing as they are curious about the information and knowledge he could bring back later in life. Hence, before his metamorphosis Akin appears to be

human. All construct children experience a metamorphosis, corresponding to the puberty of humans. The process is described as overwhelming, painful, and confusing: nobody knows how the child will turn out in the end. It is an experimental process where experience is scarce for the first construct children as well as their parents who are supposed to guide the young through the process. Akin grows up to become someone who finds it difficult to belong to either of the societies; he strives to gain an understanding of both cultures and defends both ways of living. He is a genetic and socio-cultural interbreed.

> The man stood staring at him, peering first from one angle, then moving slightly to peer from another. Akin had changed after all, had grown up.[78]

> Show me your tongue.[79]

The sequence portrays Akin revisiting the town of Phoenix[80] where he was raised. Upon his return, Akin is not recognised in the village. He is asked to show his characteristic Oankali tongue, which is the only visible attribute that differentiates him from humans.

In *Adulthood Rites*, Akin learns about the differences between Oankali and humans and finds that their divergent perspectives are not compatible. He is aware that both female and male aspects are needed for one to fully become an entity and that males are not enough to create the future. Being kin to both Oankali and humans, the rite of passage for Akin is part of the liminality – he stands on the threshold of the old world and a new future. He is part of what he is leaving and part of the future as he struggles to find his identity in a society that is in as much liminality as himself. He is the beginning and the end – the Alpha and Omega united. The transition rite enables Akin to gain enough knowledge and courage to make changes for the human resisters. They are given a new home on Mars and, Akin is the one who understands human beings' desperate need to create their own lives.

Imago: Jodahs

Imago is the last novel in Butler's trilogy and marks the final stage of the reproductive process imagined in her novels. The protagonist in *Imago* is Lilith's child Jodahs.[81] Jodahs is a mistake: the ooloi has made an error and created a construct that is an ooloi. This has not yet been accepted as a next step of reproduction in society at the time of Jodahs birth. Jodahs

is Lilith's firstborn ooloi who, during the metamorphosis, becomes the third sex. However, the first construct ooloi is dangerously unknown and features human and Oankali as well as masculine and feminine aspects, in entities that combine the good and the bad from both species.

> Human-born males were still considered experimental and potentially dangerous. A few males from other towns had been sterilized and exiled to the ship. Nobody was ready for a construct ooloi. Certainly, nobody was ready for a Human-born construct ooloi. Could there be a more potentially deadly being? [82]

'Imago' is also the final stage in the rites of passage and reveals the outcome in the title. The word imago, meaning 'final or adult stage of an insect', comes from the Latin 'image, likeness', which stems from the word *imitari*, meaning 'to copy, imitate'.[83] Thus, the name is associated with the larval stage of an insect as it becomes the true representation of its species. *Yodh* is the name of the tenth and smallest letter in the Hebrew alphabet and is proverbially used in the Greek alphabet to mean the smallest/the least part of anything (iota).[84] *Yodh* may also be connected to the Sanskrit word *Yoddha*, meaning warrior, and the Hebrew name *Yodea* meaning 'the one who knows'. Allusions can also be made to the son of Jacob and the traditional eponymous ancestor of one of the tribes of Israel.

Jodahs' prime mission is to keep the peace and create an understanding between the human and Oankali cultures. This is revealed through its given name; it is a warrior of peace, i.e., a paradox of previously unknown features combining male and female aspects in a third sex. The human contradiction is no longer only human, as Jodahs is a combination of good and bad. As a first ooloi construct, it embodies the final stage of genetic engineering, a true all-seeing representative of its species and a born leader. It diplomatically intertwines the lives of Oankali families and resisters on Earth – like Akin in the all-human society on Mars – which according to the rite of incorporation is the final stage and the start of a new era as a new being. *Imago* ends with Jodahs planting the first new seeds from which a new world will grow under its supervision: "I had expelled it, I felt it beginning the tiny positioning movements of independent life."[85]

'Human beings fear difference [...] Oankali crave difference.'[86]

Throughout the trilogy, the hardships between the Oankali and humans are mediated by Akin and Jodahs as they learn about the differences in their respective customs and values. This also helps them to acquire knowledge about how to maximise any future manipulations of genetic and mental potential. The Oankali fear 'the human contradiction' as they consider it to be a fatal combination of intelligence and hierarchal behaviour that led them to self-destruction.[87] As genetic manipulators, the Oankali are in control as the creators of the future. It becomes obvious that they are afraid of the unknown as well: at first, they don't know how to deal with Jodahs at all. The Oankali experimental project is built neither on true expertise nor on proven experience. The genetic engineers are taken by surprise time after time when the offspring turns out different from the intentions.

Not all humans succumb to the Oankali way of life, they choose to live as resistors. According to Jewish mythology, Lilith is banished from the Garden of Eden, while Adam, being adamant, is granted a new and obedient wife. Like Butler's Lilith, the mythological Lilith chooses the unknown rather than an already established yet unjust existence in paradise, whereas Adam, like the resisters in *Lilith's Brood*, chooses the familiar. The Hebrew word Adam means man[88] (mankind). Although no Adam per se is present in *Lilith's Brood*, man, as in human, can be used as a metaphor for mankind (i.e., Adam), which in this case suggests that the cultural clashes between humans and the Oankali denote a fear of change and an unwillingness to cope with fear in any other way than through regression and resistance.

Lilith's children, her brood, choose change. Tucker approaches this conflict between aliens and humans,[89] by elucidating the passage in which Lilith explains to Akin:

> '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. If you don't understand this, you will. You'll probably find both tendencies surfacing in your own behavior.' And she had put her hand on his hair. 'When you feel a conflict, try to go the Oankali way. Embrace the difference.'[90]

Grown-up Akin comes to embrace differences and everyone's right to choose their way of life. He leaves Earth to give the resisters the possibil-

ity of a life set in a new world. When Jodahs' metamorphosis is complete it also understands both the human and the alien perspectives, as well as female and male ones. Jodahs comes to control the aspects of illness and health, new generations, and new worlds. It shares the features and abilities of human and alien lifeforms. In its memory all genetic knowledge the Oankali have collected during aeons are stored. With Jodahs, evolution is inevitable.

Final Broodings

The aliens in Butler's speculative fiction are living, conscious beings who want to evolve and reproduce by using human beings in their genetic trade. Though, the narrative exposes flaws in their excellence: several times the results come as a big surprise for the genetic experts. Our analyses of the names brought us to the realization that Butler's naming was carefully chosen and well thought through; the names reinforce the roles of the protagonists in the reproductive development of the novel trilogy. By naming the protagonists as well as the antagonists in this way, Butler has offered the keys to the course of action. The reader is thrown not only into a dystopian future but also into speculation about the future of humanity, in which mythologies of different religions and historical periods meet, ultimately amounting to different symbiosis and giving rise to new species on Earth and beyond.

Through the mythological exposé concerning Butler's choice of names for her characters, we found intertexts to mythologies. The only thing that was clear to us before we started working on the material was *Lilith*. Digging into Butler's way of naming the protagonists deepened our understanding of the mythological layers of her novels. Furthermore, this is an approach that may interest new categories of readers. It can also illuminate a slightly different path to interpretation. Experienced readers can directly associate the novels with the myths about Lilith. Younger and inexperienced readers seldom make these connections or find the narrative clues to significant perspectives embedded in names such as 'Lilith', 'Akin', 'Jodahs', 'Oankali' and 'ooloi'.

In *Lilith's Brood*, change is as inevitable as it is constant. The alien race admittedly saves humanity from complete self-destruction and restores the planet. The humans who are saved are sent back to their home world. The major conflict in the novels can be said to be what may happen if human

beings are not themselves the genetic engineers but those engineered upon. While the humans that the Oankali managed to save are given back their lives, they pay an extremely high price in the long-term: the Oankali cross-breeding with the humans. Those who resist are sterilised, although like all survivors they are allowed to live extremely long and healthy lives. Perhaps in this way, the two opposing human characteristics – high intelligence and hierarchal nature – as understood by the Oankali, would be either eradicated or evened out in the future.

The intricate storytelling which balances between mythology and history is elucidated by different eras and rites of passage. Butler's protagonists share the fear of the unknown, the courage to embrace change, and the means to create the future – despite cultural and social differences. The mythological Lilith was demonised and banned from Eden and had to engage in new relationships and agreements to survive and thrive as the appointed first mother to create a new breed. From a biblical perspective, the children of the night as creations of the mythological Lilith are pure evil and as unwanted as Lilith herself. Butler's Lilith is strong and adaptable and is chosen by the Oankali as a kind of ancestor of a new genus – a symbiosis between humans and the Oankali. Through her opposed life choice, Lilith is eventually portrayed by the resisters as a betrayer. Hence, Lilith can be interpreted as a mythological demon even in Butler's future world. Butler's Lilith was captured and chosen by the aliens to become the first mother of a new alien breed and genus. Restituta Castiello also argues that Lilith is a character that falls short of any expectation:

> Neither a mother goddess nor a convincing demon, neither a collaborator nor a resister. But by virtue of her being so defying and displacing, she represents the 'otherness' (or 'alienness') of monstrosity able to disclose the power of oppressive discourses wherever they are.[91]

Lilith as a mythological character throughout time and the Lilith in Butler's novels gain historic immortality as first mothers of new breeds and incubators of non-normative offspring. In order to attain a certain degree of freedom, they also choose a continued existence in an unfamiliar world – although this chosen life is controlled by obligation-laden 'agreements'. The differences in narrative perspectives are the inevitable result of ever-changing cultural norms and gender expectations throughout time, thereby dictating to whom the power of recontextualization and storytelling belongs. By portraying Lilith as a perennial antecedent,

allowing her to become the womb for future generations to come, Butler creates a metaphorical butterfly out of a mythological caterpillar – from the breaking of *Dawn*, through adolescent *Adulthood Rites*, to the final stage of *Imago*.

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