

QUEER FAMILIES IN OCTAVIA BUTLER'S SCIENCE FICTION

by

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## ABSTRACT

This thesis explores the constellation of race, gender, and sexuality in two novel series by African American feminist author Octavia E. Butler, published from the 1970s through the 1980s. The central pursuit of this project is to explore the “Butler Family,” which refers to the queer, interracial families of Butler’s fiction that contest racist, sexist, and heteronormative hegemonies. This exploration first observes how Butler’s queer characters come to understand their identities within a familial context. Next, the thesis analyzes how Butler champions queer, feminist, anti-racist constructions of family for their active resistance of oppression. The closing chapter combines theorizations of queer futurity with Afro-Futurism to explore how the children of the Butler Family secure a queer future.

To explore Butler’s progressive future, this thesis analyzes two novels of the Patternist series, *Mind of My Mind* (1977) and *Wild Seed* (1980), in addition to the novels of the Xenogenesis trilogy, which include *Dawn* (1987), *Adulthood Rites* (1988), and *Imago* (1989). Her Patternist series, which focuses on superpowered humans in the throes of a breeding imperative imposed by the antagonist Doro, presents the readers with Anyanwu, a black, bisexual shapeshifter who forms an interracial family with a female partner and defies Doro’s heteronormativity. Butler further explores issues of race and sexuality in the Xenogenesis trilogy, which follows the relationships between humans and the Oankali, an extraterrestrial, tri-gendered species that plans to incorporate humanity into its gene exchange. This series focuses on Lilith Iyapo, a black woman who participates in the first human-alien hybrid family. Through both series, Butler offers her audience a resistance literature that creates a queer, feminist, anti-racist space. This

project ultimately posits the importance of queer family structures to Butler's SF as she conceptualizes the groundwork for this progressive space.

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## CHAPTER I: THE MEDUSA FORMS A FAMILY

On February 25, 2006, science fiction (SF) writer Octavia Butler passed away. In the wake of her passing, Kodwo Eshun of *The Guardian* identified Butler as a “famously reclusive lesbian.” This news may come as a shock to those who have read Butler’s 1991 interview with Larry McCaffery and Jim McMenammin, in which Butler says the following about her sexuality:

Because of the way I looked, when I was growing up, I was called various and sundry unsavory names by people who thought I was gay (though at the time nobody used that word). I eventually wondered if they might not be right, so I called the Gay and Lesbian Services Center and asked if they had meetings where people could talk about such things. I wound up going down there twice, at which point I realized, Nope, this ain’t it. I also realized, once I thought it over, that I’m a hermit . . . At any rate, I was intrigued by gay sexuality, enough so that I wanted to play around with it in my imagination and in my work. That’s one of the things I do in my writing: either I find out certain things about myself or I write to create some context in which I can explore what I want to be. (McCaffery and McMenammin 14)

Those who used “unsavory names” for Butler on account of her appearance possess a mindset that values heterosexual orientation and gender-conforming presentation: men look masculine, women look feminine, and such categories from this perspective are “normal.” Individuals that do not fit these categories are othered by default, suggesting a lesser, alternative state for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) individuals. After rejecting the possibility of being lesbian, Butler posits “hermit” as a self-

description. We might link this idea with asexuality or see it as reaching entirely beyond available categoric labels for sexuality. And this brings her to her writing, where she finds the best place to explore identity, sexual and otherwise.

Butler's literary exploration demonstrates her curiosity about sexual expression and gender identity. This curiosity leads Butler to experiment with different interpretations of gender, and this experimentation coincides with academic and contemporary popular discourses on fluid identities. To Butler, change and fluidity as expressed through adaptation are essential for survival, as represented by this passage from her 1993 novel *Parable of the Sower*: "Everyone knows that change is inevitable. From the second law of thermodynamics to Darwinian evolution, from Buddhism's insistence that nothing is permanent and all suffering results from our delusions of permanence . . . change is part of life, of existence, of the common wisdom" (26). For Butler, static identities are not conducive to change and therefore harmful. Across eleven novels and nine short stories, Butler posits that people suffer from the adherence to permanence, such as the heteronormative imperative to maintain fixed gender roles and the marginalization LGBT people experience. The same can be said of racism, as Butler's racist characters resist change through keeping rigid boundaries between themselves and people of other races. Given heteronormative and racist resistance to change, we might even say evolution, they find no chance for survival in Butler's SF.

When we bring Butler's declarations of curiosity about and literary explorations of identity together with emphasis on the central role of change and necessary adaptability, the result is queerness. Over the span of her work, Butler uses her unique SF aesthetic to explore this queerness as it intersects with discussions of race. Many of

Butler's novels feature LGBT characters of diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds with same-sex attractions and experiences. For example, in her first novel *Patternmaster* (1976) and in her last novel *Fledgling* (2005), the black heroines, Amber and Shori respectively, gravitate towards both male and female lovers. Lauren, the black female protagonist of *Parable of the Sower* and *Parable of the Talents*, also shows attraction to men and women. Butler also reaches beyond traditional orientational categories entirely in her most famous story "Bloodchild," which follows a human male confronted with the inevitability that he will be impregnated with the egg of an alien female. Generally, Butler's works have a strong interest in queerness, providing an alternative to the heteronormative culture that proved dominant during her lifetime.

### Queerness

Before delving into a discussion of scholarship on queerness in Butler's work, my use of the terms "heteronormative" and "queer" require explication. According to feminist and queer theorist Judith Butler, heteronormativity stems from the "heterosexualization of desire [which] requires and institutes the production of discrete and asymmetrical oppositions between 'feminine' and 'masculine,' where these are understood as expressive attributes of 'male' and 'female'" (Butler, *Gender Trouble* 23). If the heterosexualization of desire institutes, or normalizes, a strict gender binary of male and female, then any expression of desire that works outside of this asymmetrical binary (in which members feel desire solely for "the opposite sex") is immediately othered by heteronormativity. Judith Butler further clarifies that because "certain kinds of 'gender identities' fail to conform to those norms of cultural intelligibility, they appear only as



developmental failures or logical impossibilities from within that domain” (24). By Judith Butler’s configuration, heteronormativity targets not only same-sex desire, but also non-binary and transgender identities. We can apply Judith Butler’s terms to the family, which functions as a site of cultural perpetuation and reproduces heterosexualization and the norms of cultural intelligibility. Once I apply this definition of heteronormativity to family construction, we are left with families made of one father, one mother, and children, all of whom operate in the gender binary of male and female.

The foundations for my application of “queer” come from Teresa de Lauretis, who claims that “queer” signals a reconceptualization of established, fixed “gay” and “lesbian” identities “based on the speculative premise that homosexuality is no longer to be seen simply as marginal with regard to a dominant, stable form of sexuality (heterosexuality) against which it would be defined either by opposition or by homology” (iii). In addition to de Lauretis, I rely on Alexander Doty’s conception of “queer,” which expands on de Lauretis’s work, clarifying that “queerness has been set up to challenge and break apart conventional categories, not to become one itself.” For Doty, “Queerness . . . is a quality related to any expression that can be marked as contra-, non-, or anti-straight” (xv).

Taking into account how queerness challenges both heteronormativity and its prescribed, static identities, my work also relies on Annamarie Jagose. In *Queer Theory: An Introduction*, Jagose claims that queerness serves as “the point of convergence for a potentially infinite number of non-normative subject positions, [and] is markedly unlike those traditional political movements which ground themselves in a fixed and necessarily exclusionist identity” (101). While Doty places queerness in opposition to

heterosexuality, Jagose characterizes queerness outside of homosexual identity. Indeed, Butler's exploration of queerness through a combination of human and extra-terrestrial characters creates some distance between her work and mainstream gay culture. In the previously mentioned example of "Bloodchild," the imagery of a female, insect-like alien impregnating a human male by burrowing her eggs into his body does not square with images associated with the Gay Liberation movement of Butler's day. This imagery cannot be described by traditional homosexual orientation.

Because one thesis cannot explore all of Butler's eleven novels and nine short stories, I have limited my study to the novels wherein queer family concerns are most apparent. The Butler works I use to study queerness and change in the family include the two novels of the Patternist series, *Mind of My Mind* (1977) and *Wild Seed* (1980) and the Xenogenesis series, *Dawn* (1987), *Adulthood Rights* (1988), and *Imago* (1989). The two Patternist novels track the rise and fall of a breeding empire established by Doro, a supernatural being born in Africa who must take over other bodies and use them as hosts to survive. He plans to create and control a race of supernatural beings through an elaborate breeding empire. He poses himself as a "Patternmaster," a being that holds telepathic sway over the super-powered members of its "Pattern." In *Mind of My Mind*, Doro's 1970s American descendant Mary becomes a Patternmaster and destroys Doro. In its prequel, *Wild Seed*, Doro, in the 1600s, enlists the aid of Anyanwu, an immortal who can manipulate organic matter to shapeshift and heal herself and others. Anyanwu learns of his violent methods but falls prey because she doesn't want him to kill her children, whom Doro threatens to consume as hosts if she does not remain compliant in his scheme.

Both of these novels include emphasis on race, gender, and sexuality, particularly as Doro's breeding empire closely resembles the Antebellum slave trade. The parallel between Doro and slavery invites us to consider how Doro exhibits the racism and sexism inherent in this institution. Doro sees himself as superior to humanity, even super-powered humans, manifesting racism akin to white slave-traders and slave-owners who saw blacks as inferior. Furthermore, Doro's perception of Anyanwu as a valuable breeding asset recalls the sexist reinforcement of reproductive gender roles present in slavery, as this institution required consistent reproduction in order to sustain a supply of slaves and frequently used rape to both sustain and justify its practices.

Through *Wild Seed*, we see how Antebellum slavery left a racist imprint on the family, already conceptualized for both slaves and free individuals as heteronormative. As dominant US constructions of family dictate, the heteronormative family must consist of a male and female progenitor, both of whom must be of the same race. It bears mentioning that Doro, a being who theorizes himself beyond human racial categories, does not object to interracial families. However, he views himself as part of a superior species compared to the human families in his breeding empire. Given how the novel connects Doro with Antebellum slavery, I view Doro's sense of superiority as a parallel with the racist logic that bolstered slavery as an institution. A queer counter to this racist, heterosexist model emerges when Butler presents queer, interracial families in *Wild Seed*. To be clear, in Butler, one's race does not delineate queerness in terms of sexual preference; however, challenging the white supremacist racial norms paralleled in Doro's breeding empire can be part of a resistant queerness. Doro represents a parasitic amalgamation of oppressive forces that hinder change through emphasis on reproduction

within families that adhere to prescribed gender roles. In contrast, Anyanwu, in the past of Africa and the African American experience of enslavement, and Mary, in 1970s America, represent the positive presence of change as they challenge Doro's demands while navigating and resisting the restrictive parameters of his breeding scheme.

My work also analyzes the Xenogenesis trilogy. In contrast to the superhuman experience of the Patternist series, Butler's Xenogenesis trilogy takes place entirely in the future and follows the extra-terrestrial Oankali's arrival to Earth. The Oankali assimilate genetic material from other species to "evolve," and struggle to bring humanity into a gene-trading partnership. Lilith Iyapo, a twenty-something African American woman, is one of the trilogy's major characters, the first to become intimately involved with this gene-exchange. The hybrid, or "construct," children that she has with the Oankali become the harbingers of change and new life in the latter volumes of the series and, thereby, queerness within the family. In *Dawn*, the Oankali preserve a handful of humans from a manmade nuclear fallout that makes Earth uninhabitable for a number of centuries. As Earth's environment becomes more sustainable, the Oankali awaken a small, carefully selected group of preserved humans (excluding most white men of former power) and attempt to incorporate them into their culture, both biologically, as they can synthesize genes from other lifeforms, and ideologically, as their ways of curiosity and adaptation are initially more fluid than humans'. According to the Oankali, humanity cannot survive on their own because of what they call the "Human Contradiction": higher intelligence hindered by hierarchical thinking. Hierarchies are central to static, normative identity construction as well as relations of power. Although the Oankali themselves assert power over the humans, they come to save the human

species from itself. Thus, towards the end *Dawn*, Lilith, with much trepidation, begins to ease into the symbiotic relationships proposed by the Oankali, which includes some level of acclimation towards Oankali breeding habits. Her perspectives become more fluid, as does her orientation and family. By the end of the trilogy, however, we discover that even the Oankali have the potential to fall into rigid, normative ideology as they take issue with the radical perspectives of Lilith's construct children.

This transition does not come easily for Lilith, as the Oankali are not only alien in their culture and biology but also in appearance, due to their tentacle-covered bodies that make telling gender and race impossible in human terms. When the Oankali revive Lilith and send one of their own to speak with her, Lilith "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, *Dawn* 11). Lilith, and humanity in general, must wrestle with this otherness. Critic Hélène Cixous poetically identifies this wrestling with otherness as a necessary task in order to break beyond the repressive, reductive history of the Other presented by the dominant power: "The Dark Continent is neither dark nor unexplorable.—It is still unexplored only because we've been made to believe that it was too dark to be explorable . . . You only have to look at the Medusa straight to see her. And she's not deadly. She's beautiful and laughing" (Cixous, "The Laugh of the Medusa" 1530). Cixous's use of the term "Dark Continent," prompts us to consider the restrictive attitudes against racial difference. We see this theme in Lilith's fellow humans who disdain the racial difference among their ranks and use this framework to craft a reactionary ideology against the special difference of the Oankali. Furthermore, "Medusa" is an apt term to describe the paralyzing fear that the Oankali

produce in Lilith, so much so that Butler uses the word herself: “When [Lilith] could go no farther, she stood against the wall, staring at [an Oankali]. Medusa” (12). Butler’s work asks not only whether her characters can find beauty and accept life with this Medusa species, but also whether we, her readers, can.

Lilith, as a black woman, has experienced alienation and otherness, unlike the white male authority figures who abetted the Earth’s destruction. This is a major reason she is chosen in *Dawn* as a first test subject by the Oankali. Anyanwu and Mary are black as well, challenging the white male norms of science fiction literature, which has often ignored the intersectional possibilities in discussions of race and queerness and how both relate to family structure. Through characters such as Lilith and Anyanwu, Butler links the queer future with the lives of queer women of color who form families that challenge racism and heteronormativity.

Further evidence of queerness as conceptualized within this thesis is found in the relationships among characters. For example, Anyanwu shapeshifts into a male form to father children and has committed intimate relationships with women. Lilith, by contrast, has a relationship that entails five partners: two females (one human, one Oankali), two males (one human, one Oankali), and one ooloi, a third gender category that synthesizes the egg of the female with the sperm of the male during intercourse. Moreover, Lilith’s first choice of a male partner in *Dawn* is Joseph, a Chinese American man. This interracial relationship alienates some of the first group to be awakened by the Oankali, queering via racial expectations a book that otherwise centers on heteronormative, if alien, relationships.

As these paragraphs suggest, queerness is a vital part of Butler's fiction, particularly in relationship to characters' sexual identities. The remainder of this chapter will review published scholarship on this subject and then move beyond it to the queer families of *Wild Seed* and the Xenogenesis trilogy to challenge heteronormative conceptions of gender, sexuality, and race in the process of achieving Butler's fluid, speculative future.

### Butler Scholarship and Queerness

Recent Butler scholarship comments amply on the presence of LGBT characters in Butler's fiction. Most of this writing provides insight into queerness through critical observations about the intersections between gender, sexuality, and race, though it bears mentioning that many of the earliest articles on Butler place more emphasis on only gender and race. One of the earliest critics to consider sexuality in Butler's work is Frances Smith Foster, a scholar in black women's studies, whose article "Octavia Butler's Black Female Future Fiction" (1982) commends Butler for her black heroines. The heroines of Butler's early novels, Foster posits, "are usually healers, teachers, artists, mothers. Yet, they are not the traditional literary Earth Mothers or Culture Bearers. They exercise direct authority" (47). Of the black heroines mentioned in the article, Foster chooses Amber of the novel *Patternmaster* for her discussion of sexuality, stating, "Not only does Butler introduce a rarity in science fiction, a major character who is an independent and competent woman, but she makes this woman bisexual . . . Butler implies that bisexuality will not be the taboo in the future that it is today [the 1980s]" (43). Here, Foster positively reflects on the presence of a bisexual character, considering

such inclusion a step forward in terms of SF representation. While inclusion better affirms the presence of queer characters of color, we can reach beyond inclusion to explore how characters like Amber directly contest the dominance of racism and heteronormativity.

Ruth Salvaggio, a professor of American studies and comparative literature, comments on *Wild Seed* in her article “Octavia Butler and the Black Science-Fiction Heroine” (1984). Salvaggio’s focus is on heroic black women characters, but, like Foster, she also reaches into gender identity. Specifically, she notes Anyanwu’s ability to “change her sex, and on one particular occasion when she does so, Anyanwu . . . becomes a prototype of Amber—this time by virtue of her androgyny . . . She is flexible and dexterous, compared to Doro’s stiffness and dominance” (81). While Salvaggio could not have utilized the contemporary language of transgender identity, her focus on Anyanwu’s “changing . . . sex” and “androgyny” addresses what we would presently call a genderfluid or non-binary experience. Ultimately, her connection between Amber’s bisexuality and Anyanwu’s androgyny addresses trans-representation, drawing our attention to queerness via gender identity and leaving room for more discussion of how these identities change our understanding of family structure.

Most generally, African American literature scholar Sandra Y. Govan praises queerness as I explore it via Butler’s work: “Difference, adaptability, change, and survival are thematic threads connecting Butler’s books as tightly as the first Pattern held by Mary [which] linked the Patternists” (1984, 84). Such criticism characterizes Butler’s work as a fight against normative absolutes including racism and heteronormativity in the pursuit of change and adaptability. One of the earliest nods to queer family also comes



from Govan, who makes the following observation on the relationship between Amber and Teray, the male protagonist of *Patternmaster*: “[T]hey respect each other, they grow to love each other, they conceive a child; yet, none of these facts sways Amber, a rather androgynous heroine, from her determination to establish her own House and be its master” (85). Govan sees what both Foster and Salvaggio see separately: the queering of sexuality and gender within non-white characters.

Govan’s emphasis on Amber establishing her own house ostensibly connects with an essay by Audre Lorde, titled “The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master’s House” (1979). Lorde states that “racism, sexism, and homophobia are inseparable” and concludes that the survival of individuals who show difference relies on “learning how to take our differences and make them strengths. *For the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house.* They may allow us temporarily to beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change” (110, 112). Lorde’s status as a lesbian of color informs her view of oppressive power systems, and Butler’s experimentation with black women’s sexuality and gender echo Lorde’s concerns. Together, Lorde, Butler, and the scholars of their time (1970s-2000s) reveal an increasing awareness of intersectionality within feminism. Moreover, they together illustrate how queerness—albeit not called such when Butler’s first novels and early criticism were written—is central to building a new, feminist space beyond the white patriarchal master’s house. As my work will show, this same strategy can be applied to building a queer house outside of heteronormative and racist dominance.

After the publication of the *Xenogenesis* trilogy (1987 to 1989), Butler scholars kept queerness in mind, especially as academic discourse on queerness progressed

through the 90s. In order to mate, the Oankali require five partners of various genders. Determining whether these mating arrangements are queer is a point of controversy. Donna Haraway, an influential scholar in gender and SF studies, claims that the Oankali's "Heterosexuality remains unquestioned, if more complexly mediated. The different social subjects, the different genders that could emerge from another embodiment of resistance to compulsory heterosexual and reproductive politics, do not inhabit this *Dawn*" (229). Haraway suggests that the Oankali do not break from heterosexuality because, to her, the ooloi is more of a conduit between the genders, as opposed to a legitimate third-term gender. Therefore, the Oankali are heteronormative, as their mating arrangement still reinforces the necessity of reproduction through fixed, normative gender roles.

Haraway only references details from *Dawn*, before Lilith has borne mixed children. Using *Dawn* as the only text from *Xenogenesis*, Haraway casts the ooloi merely as mediators instead of sexual or romantic partners because her analysis could not include the continued formation of human-Oankali relationships in the latter *Xenogenesis* novels. The inclusion of these novels, which focus more on the romantic and emotional attraction between humans and their Oankali partners, complicates Haraway's assertion. Given my interpretation of queer as contra-straight, the ooloi and the mating groups of the Oankali must be queer, because there is no room for mediation by a third, non-binary partner in the heteronormative family model or in straight reproduction.

Another challenge to the Oankali's queerness comes from pop culture scholar Frances Bonner, whose compelling article "Difference and Desire, Slavery and Seduction: Octavia Butler's *Xenogenesis*" (1990) casts the Oankali as slavers

preoccupied with eugenics. Bonner's article here represents a larger fraction of Butler scholarship that incorporates post-colonial studies in order to analyze themes of slavery and diaspora in Butler's work.<sup>1</sup> To put due focus on the power struggle between the Oankali and humans, Bonner claims that "Difference is not however Butler's dominant theme. That is power. Slavery is after all the most dramatic manifestation of unequal power" (56). While Butler herself resisted the idea that all her work could be boiled down to science fictional extrapolation of American slavery (McCaffery and McMenamin 12), issues of power are certainly key to group relationships in her novels. Moreover, my intent is not to discredit Bonner's argument that the Oankali echo the mechanisms of colonization and slavery when viewed through a post-colonial lens. Rather, I propose a reading of the *Xenogenesis* trilogy that focuses on both power and difference.

In the midst of her main argument, Bonner addresses queerness, identifying "Butler's dealing with homosexuality [as] characteristically oblique" (56). When discussing relationships in the *Xenogenesis* trilogy, Bonner finds that

love rarely effects [Butler's] power relations. The moral difficulties such unequal love creates are solved to some extent in *Xenogenesis* by the announcement that love is chemical . . . Where the slave or captive may have had no choice about

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<sup>1</sup> Govan's 1986 article "Homage to Tradition: Octavia Butler Renovates the Historical Novel" serves as one of the earliest analyses of Butler and diaspora literature. The article finds that Butler complicates the historical novel and slave narrative by presenting a historically viable, yet speculative reality that requires the conventions of historical novels, slave narratives, and science fiction to exist. Since Govan's article, many theorists have tackled the connections between Butler and postcolonialism. For further research, I recommend Bonner's article, as explored above, Maria Holmgren Troy's 2010 article "Negotiation and Genre and Captivity: Octavia Butler's *Survivor*," and Patricia Melzer's "Cultural Chameleons: Anticolonial Identities and Resistance in Octavia E. Butler's *Survivor* and *Dawn*," a chapter from her book *Alien Constructions* (2006).

bearing the captor's child . . . loving him had been another matter. The Oankali ooloi however create a chemical bond between human and alien. There is still a degree of equivocation however, for while breeders may blame the bond, not all humans succumb. The resisters reject chemical entrapment, even at the cost of infertility and avoidable ill-health. (54)

Bonner's claim that the Oankali mirror slave-owners makes sense insofar as a post-colonial reading of the powerplay between the Oankali and the humans is concerned. Though the Oankali do not directly threaten humans with physical violence, they do not present any alternatives (at least in *Dawn*) for the continuation of human life except to participate in the gene exchange. To make this aspect of their design inevitable, they deprive humans of the ability to mate on their own. Nonetheless, I find persuasive Butler's claim that when writing the Oankali, she "was writing about an alien species that was xenophilic" (DiChario 211). Xenophilia requires an attraction to strangers and "the other," an attraction that Butler characterizes as romantic and evolutionary, considering the aims of the Oankali's gene exchange and the humans' self-destructive tendencies.

Perhaps Haraway and Bonner find the Oankali's queerness hard to wrestle with because the Oankali possess more power than the humans, mimicking the power struggle between heteronormativity and queerness present in the American political landscape of Butler's time, and arguably the present as well. American author Dorothy Allison acknowledges this power struggle in Butler's fiction by claiming that much of *Dawn* concentrates on the cultural shock the humans' experience when they marry Oankali. The men feel as if they have lost authority (they have); the women feel as if they are being bred like animals (they are); and all feel some horror of what

might be hidden homosexual desires—after all, there is no way to be sure an ooloi is a man or a woman. (477)

While Allison plays fast and loose with regards to the ooloi's gender identity, she makes a salient point by observing how the humans and their heteronormativity have no power in this scenario. *Xenogenesis* imagines queerness past the transition from margin to center, a speculative arch that grants the upper hand to queerness and challenges the heteronormative model to adapt.

As with the majority of queer Butler scholarship, Allison situates queer difference as a counterpoint to this power struggle:

Without the human need to impose a hierarchical male dominant/female submissive structure on sexuality, the Oankali approach the act with a genuine sense of joy equally shared . . . Sex among the Oankali is seen as both an act of blissful biological exchange (sperm for egg) and a euphoric ritual that lovingly bonds participants—the family bond that Butler invariably emphasizes. (477)

For Allison, joy and euphoria refute the description of Oankali-human bonding as loveless and power imbalanced. Issues of choice are still at play, but not those of desire and pleasure, which may be absent from heteronormative relationships formed out of obligation as opposed to companionship. While Allison acknowledges the family bond central to my argument, she still associates Butler's challenge to tradition with sex as opposed to the larger family structure.

The closest we arrive at some sense of queer family in critical work on Butler comes from Patricia Melzer, who states in her book *Alien Constructions: Science Fiction*

*and Feminist Thought* (2006) that Anyanwu's relationships with both men and women represent

a more radical form of bisexuality, one that is constructed within a context of *racialized* power and desire: in a time period when slavery existed in the United States, she, in the form of a white man, is married to a white woman and possesses a plantation in the South. Protected by her appearance and the social status it brings, she is safe to gather her "family," her people—other blacks and the misshapen products of Doro's breeding attempts—on her property. She has sexual relations in the body of a man, and even produces children with her wife [Denice], yet both women love each other as *women*, the gender with which both characters identify. (233)

Within the category of bisexual, Melzer analyzes the complexity of queer fluidity and race. Though Anyanwu never fully dissociates from her identity as a black woman, she uses her ability to change the color of her skin in order to protect her family, a queer family in terms of diverse parentage and heritage that she has both produced and gathered with her partner Denice. In Melzer's analysis of Anyanwu, we find a queer individual who explores the fluid parameters of sexual orientation and gender identity in order to protect her family. While Melzer's work effectively explores Anyanwu's fluidity as it relates to her family, more can be said on how Anyanwu comes to understand this fluidity and how her family encourages change over stagnation. Through focusing on the individual and gradually building towards an understanding of kinship, queer readings of Butler thus far have built a substantial foundation for a discussion of the queer family in her work.

### Anyanwu, Lilith, and Their Families

While Melzer especially provides productive material for a consideration of queer kinship that links both queerness and race, her analysis draws our attention to how Anyanwu uses her identity and powers to protect her family. We can broaden our impression of Anyanwu's identity to include both protection and self-actualization by analyzing the exact moment in which Anyanwu fully realizes her identity in opposition to Doro's. As she considers the differences between herself and the patriarchal, coercive Doro, she realizes that "[s]he was not Doro, breeding people as though they were cattle, though perhaps her gathering of all these special ones, these slightly strange ones would accomplish the same purpose as his breeding. She was herself, gathering family" (Butler, *Wild Seed* 235). The word "purpose" indicates the continuous formation of families within this super-human community. With the expression "She was herself," we see Anyanwu fully realizing her identity. The fact that she discovers this identity in relationship to her family demonstrates that, for Butler, queer identity flourishes in queer kinship.

In *Dawn*, Butler once again matches queer identity with the formation of a queer family. In contrast to the research done on Anyanwu's queerness in *Wild Seed*, there is no scholarship that identifies Lilith with queerness. Nonetheless, I do see her relationship with the Oankali, especially the third-term gender ooloi, as identifying queerly. While Lilith does not express sexual interest in (human) women, she succumbs to a chemical attraction between her ooloi, Nikanj, and Joseph. Nikanj invites Lilith to sleep with "it" (Butler's pronoun of choice for the ooloi, as "they" and "them" had not yet been

popularized as the pronouns for non-binary individuals) and Joseph, asking: “Why should you be down there by yourself?” In response, Lilith thinks

there could be nothing more seductive than an ooloi speaking in that particular tone, making that particular suggestion. She realized she had stood up without meaning to and taken a step toward the bed. She stopped, stared at the two of them. Joseph’s breathing now became a gentle snore and he seemed to sleep comfortably against Nikanj as she had awakened to find him sleeping comfortably against her many times. (Butler, *Dawn* 161)

In this intimate moment, Lilith acknowledges her mutual attraction to Nikanj and Joseph by equating their physical intimacy to the intimacy she experiences with Joseph as well as the queer bond between Joseph and Nikanj itself. The realization is essentially queer as it illustrates the formation of a triad between a male, a female, and a non-binary partner. Once this triad forms, the individuals therein cannot experience attraction for each other without all partners present: “[Joseph’s] flesh felt wrong somehow, oddly repellent. It had not been this way when he came to her before Nikanj moved in between them . . . [Nikanj] had created for them the powerful threefold unity that was one of the most alien features of Oankali life” (219-20). One could easily problematize this exchange by bearing in mind that the Oankali present few opportunities for humans to dissent from these proposed Oankali-human families. As this thesis will argue in Chapter 3, the Oankali’s queerness shows an arch-like trajectory that fully terminates by the last volume of *Xenogenesis*. For the purposes of this chapter and the next, Oankali family construction remains comparatively queer in contrast to the heteronormative family model. More specific to the example above, Lilith’s lack of desire resembles individuals



who can no longer settle for heterosexual forms of intimacy after discovering their desires for queer intimacy.

Beyond sexual identity, we can consider the implications of Lilith's triad in the context of family building. Her accepted attraction to both Nikanj and Joseph signifies the beginning of an Oankali-human family, a formation that the Oankali informed Lilith of towards the beginning of the novel. In a conversation between Lilith and her fellow human Tate, Lilith suggests they "give each new set of people time to fit in and a growing structure to fit into," to which Tate says, "What structure? . . . You mean like a family . . . with you as Mama?" (Butler, *Dawn* 145). This exchange reinforces that the Oankali's queer mating arrangements are geared towards the construction of Oankali-human families. This exchange also situates Lilith as the mother of one such family, a role that she fulfills in the latter *Xenogenesis* novels. If we accept her involvement with Nikanj and Joseph as queer, then we must recognize how the intent of producing a queer family serves as the driving force behind their relationship, thus demonstrating once again how Butler connects queer identity to family.

### Conclusion: Queer Families

The scope of queer scholarship on Butler shows interest in her depictions of sexual and gender variety inflected by race and power imbalances and finds that much of her work provides an affirmative framework for queer identity politics. This framework supports the potential of studying the queering of families. The queer self in Butler's work finds fortification not through self-realization alone, but through an expanding community of queer individuals who form queer families.

As the remainder of this thesis will reveal, Butler's formulations of family contradict the restrictive prescription of the heteronormative family through their adaptability. The next chapter considers the structures and functions of the queer families formed by Anyanwu in *Wild Seed* and Lilith, and additional characters from the second Xenogenesis novel, *Adulthood Rites*. Through this exploration, we see how and why Butler establishes the differences between heteronormative and queer family units. In the third chapter, I analyze *Mind of My Mind* and the third Xenogenesis novel *Imago* in order to address how Butler uses the children of Anyanwu and Lilith to show how these queer families prove their adaptability, thus securing the possibility of a queer future. Taken together, these chapters demonstrate a deepened queer perspective on Butler's fiction, one that moves past individual identity through attention to representations of family and community building.

## CHAPTER II: RACE, GENDER, SEX, AND THE MEDUSAN MOTHER

The previous chapter introduced Butler's queer characters and how they explore their identities through family formation, enabling discussion of the ways in which Butler's conception of the queer family differs from the racist, heteronormative family model. Perhaps one of the clearest differences comes in the form of parenthood. When describing her own mother, for example, Butler admits to resenting her seemingly passive acceptance of the disrespect she received as a domestic worker. Butler says that as a child she did not blame her mother's white employers

for their disgusting behavior, but I blamed my mother for taking it . . . This is something I carried with me for quite a while, as she entered back doors, and as she went deaf at appropriate times. If she had heard more, she would have had to react to it . . . And as I got older I realized that this is what kept me fed, and this is what kept a roof over my head. (Rowell 74)

Butler's comment highlights the complex relationship between her resentment of her mother's powerlessness and the realization that her mother's "going deaf" ensured that she would be able to keep her job and provide for her family. In this complexity, we see Butler acknowledging the difficulties her mother faced as both a marginalized black woman and a single mother who had to bring up a family while operating within a racist and sexist system of power relations, a conflict also faced by many of the families in Butler's work.

While Butler's anecdote deals with racism directly, this is not the only oppressive power that affects her fictional families, as her work also grapples with the negative impact of heteronormativity. Since issues of race and sexuality are intimately linked in

Butler's work, it seems logical that her exploration of family construction addresses both. To better analyze this phenomenon in Butler's work, I follow the work of queer theorist David Eng, who states that the formation of queer families employs "the assumption of a common set of social practices or political commitments" as a means of "contesting traditional family and kinship structures" (303). From a racist, heteronormative perspective, socially acceptable families are of one race and contain a father, mother, and their biological children. The various families in Butler's fiction grapple with social practices and political structures that seek to negate formations of family that do not adhere to the racist, heteronormative model. For simplicity's sake, I will refer to the queer, racially blended families of Butler's work as "the Butler Family." I argue that the Butler Family contests traditional family structures and creates kinship structures that encourage the acceptance of racial difference and queerness.

For examples of how the Butler Family contends with the forces that try to destabilize it, I analyze the families presented in *Mind of My Mind*, *Wild Seed*, and the Xenogenesis trilogy. In *Mind of My Mind*, Butler elaborates on the origins of Doro's breeding empire, revealing how he came to view humans as inferior and purely in service to his aims of becoming a Patternmaster. Doro's emphasis on reproduction means he prizes heterosexual families, refusing any queer family formations, for they cannot pass down genetic traits he seeks to cultivate. In *Wild Seed*, written later but set earlier in time, Doro's first breeder Anyanwu offers dissent to his scheme, as she seeks to raise her children apart from the oppression of his empire. Anyanwu has children with a variety of partners, across gender and race. Being queer and interracial, Anyanwu's relationship

offers a queer counterpoint to the oppressive racism and heteronormativity of Doro's breeding empire.

In the Xenogenesis trilogy, we see Lilith bring up a human-alien hybrid family that contrasts with the pre-contact past and the future's "human resisters," who not only show heteronormative contempt for the queer family formations of the Oankali but also for the difference in the Oankali's appearance, which I read as extrapolated from racism. Introduced in *Dawn* as some of Lilith's fellow humans who were spared from the nuclear fallout that destroys most of humanity in order to participate in the Oankali gene exchange, the human resisters of the second novel *Adulthood Rites* can no longer conceive children without Oankali intervention. As a result, they are a doomed population, for they cannot reproduce. To cope with this reality, the human resisters abduct "construct" (mixed-species) children. *Adulthood Rites* follows the abduction of Lilith's construct son Akin, whose time with the human resisters offers a closer look at the impact of imposed heteronormativity on members of the Butler Family.

It bears mentioning that *Adulthood Rites* serves as the outlying novel in the Xenogenesis trilogy on the subject of human-alien relations. Whereas *Dawn* and *Imago* depict the Oankali as the force to be reckoned with, *Adulthood Rites* chooses the human resisters for its antagonists. In relationship to the Patternist novels, the human resisters differ from Doro in that they do not function as the dominant power in the Xenogenesis trilogy. Butler's move to attribute a reactionary heteronormativity to a less dominant subculture contrasts with the reader's likely expectation that heteronormativity will function as an imperative of the dominant culture. Instead, the resisters' restrictive approach to family structure represents the remnants of heteronormativity's cultural

dominance. *Adulthood Rites* also offers a close look at Oankali-human families (the Butler Family) through the eyes of the male character Tino, a former human resister who seeks out the Oankali. He joins Lilith's family and finds love and acceptance among his new Oankali partners, regardless of gender. Thus, this middle novel in the trilogy centers on male characters as they negotiate reactionary and queer-progressive options in Butler's future world.

As I will show, Anyanwu and Lilith are black women who pro-actively form families that offer accepting kinship structures. For this reason, we can identify the heart of the Butler Family as black motherhood. Black feminist critics have often focused on the figure of the black mother as vital to the black family. According to June Jordan, for example "[T]he victory of Black mothers [is] the victory of our continuation as a people in America" (69). Here, Jordan imbues black American motherhood with the importance denied it by white, patriarchal family structures, from the era of enslavement to the present. She further writes, "I am Black and I am female and I am a mother and I am bisexual . . . . I mean to be fully and freely all that I am," while refusing any man that might "presume to tell me, or any other woman, how to mother a child" (189). This statement of affirmation champions intersectional black feminism as it relates to parenthood. We see echoes of Jordan's sentiment in the perspectives of Anyanwu and Lilith, particularly as they develop queer kinship structures to contest racism, heteronormativity, and patriarchy.

### Racism and the Butler Family

Study of the multiple and intersecting oppressions that face Butler's characters requires a starting point. To start with one form of subjugation over another could convey an assumption that one is more essential than another. While this is untrue, we must begin somewhere. To paraphrase Samuel Delany, a bisexual man and a fellow black SF novelist, one cannot have race without sex (270). Delany further clarifies that "gay liberation is, in its very small way, privileged—in that there can be no advance on that front until there have been advances, changes, and material shifts on the front of both racism and sexism" (80). I thus choose racism as a foundation on which to build consideration of heteronormativity and sexism in Butler's work.

We can productively begin with a discussion of Doro's origins, set earliest in time within any of Butler's fiction. In *Mind of My Mind*, Doro explains his origins to Mary, his 20<sup>th</sup>-century descendant. As a Nubian, Doro was born black, but he clarifies, "I'm not black or white or yellow, because I'm not human" (Butler, *Mind of My Mind* 87). On account of his ability to enter other bodies, Doro distances himself from humanity and the racial identifications humans have created. Through establishing this distance, Doro also announces his superiority. Doro, like a white supremacist but at a species level, declares himself beyond race, validating his superiority and distancing himself from others, even those who might be like him in some ways and useful to him. In this way, Doro's logic mirrors the trajectory of racism, as he then uses this supposed superiority to justify the control he exerts over his offspring. To validate his perspective, Doro explains, "I started to notice the way people bred animals. It stopped being just part of the background for me. I saw different breeds of dogs, of cattle, different ethnic groups of people—how they

looked when they kept to themselves and were relatively pure, [and] when there was crossbreeding” (90). By linking different human ethnic groups with dogs (pets) and cattle (livestock), Butler emphasizes how Doro views himself as beyond humanity, hence beyond race, and how he uses this distinction to dehumanize the families of his breeding empire.

The reduction of family members to the status of domesticated animals naturally has negative implications for the family. To illustrate the harm done, Butler parallels Doro’s breeding empire with Antebellum slavery, American history’s most extreme and sustained example of institutionalized racism. Anyanwu moves to America with Doro and is quickly able to see the similarities between plantation owners who impregnate enslaved women and then sell off the children of these non-consensual liaisons and Doro’s genetic empire building. She declares:

[T]o these men, warped and twisted by their masters, children are almost nothing. They are to boast of to other men. One thinks he is greater than another because he has more children. Both exaggerate the number of women who have borne them children, neither is doing anything a father should for his children, and the master who is indifferently selling off his own brown children is laughing and saying, ‘You see? Niggers are just like animals!’ Slavery down here opens one’s eyes, Doro. How could I want such a life for my son!” (Butler, *Wild Seed* 230)

This quotation demonstrates the historical reality of dissolution that enslaved American families faced. Even more pointedly than the fictional Anyanwu, former slave, abolitionist, and writer Olaudah Equiano records this reality in his personal slave narrative, asking, “Why are parents to lose their children, brothers their sisters, or



husbands their wives? Surely this is a new refinement in cruelty, which, while it has no advantage to atone for it, thus aggravates distress, and adds fresh horrors even to the wretchedness of slavery” (60-61). No doubt pulling from the lived experiences of slaves such as Equiano, Butler demonstrates how racism dissolves black kinship by stripping the members of their human identities and their family bonds.

We see Butler addressing racism and its impact on the family in the *Xenogenesis* trilogy. However, as previously mentioned, Butler generally denied the idea that her alien characters represented people of color (McCaffery and McMennamin 12). Butler’s view of her extra-terrestrials stands in contrast to the popular metaphorization of aliens as racial “others.” Despite this, I argue that the human resisters’ disdain for the Oankali targets their alien appearance and culture, paralleling the metric by which white racists denigrate people of color. I read the human resisters as racist not through the notion that the Oankali represent people of color, but rather through the idea that their hatred for the Oankali parallels the racism they feel towards other humans.

This form of racism finds its apotheosis in the human resister Neci, one of the main antagonists in *Adulthood Rites*. When we are introduced to Neci, she observes Akin and the other construct children learning from each other, a process that requires the children to touch each other with their Oankali tentacles. Further, she says the children “[are] not like kids at all . . . They’re all over each other like a bunch of dogs” (Butler 126). Neci dehumanizes the construct children by comparing them to dogs, indicating that she views the construct children as animalistic because of their Oankali half. Neci’s conception of the children echoes how Doro perceives the members of his broods.

We see Neci further compare to Doro as she commoditizes the construct children. For example, she is described as “a woman who had always seen [Akin] as a valuable property, but who had never liked him” (Butler, *Adulthood Rites* 126). If a parental figure views their child, in this case an abducted child, as a commodity, their logic suggests that a child can be reshaped in order to improve their value, much in the same way that Doro selects specific humans for his breeding scheme. Butler demonstrates the impact of this commoditization on kinship through Neci’s suggestion to remove the construct girls’ tentacles: “Neci was doing as Akin had expected—saying over and over to different people in quiet, intense conversation that the girls’ tentacles should be removed now, while they were young, so that they would look more Human, so that they would learn to depend on their Human senses and perceive the world in a Human way” (131). Firstly, Neci’s proposal registers as a metaphor for the practice of female genital mutilation, as the construct girls’ bodies would be modified without consent in order to increase their physical appeal. Secondly, suggesting that the Oankali children have their tentacles removed, thereby supposedly making them fully human, Neci proposes isolation from their Oankali half.

By destroying this link between the construct children and their Oankali parents, Neci’s suggestion implies the destruction of their kinship with the Oankali, much in the same way that Doro’s breeding empire disrupts the bonds of kinship in his families. Furthermore, the negative implications of radical body modification without consent extend beyond appearance. The Oankali receive information through their tentacles, and the removal of these sensory centers would hinder the construct children’s ability to perceive (Butler, *Adulthood Rites* 128). The total abandon that Neci feels towards the

construct children's bodies and culture match racism's disregard for other cultural practices and racial difference.

As Butler's work demonstrates, the negative impact of racism on the family stems from the desire to exert control over those who are either viewed as inferior or feared because of their difference. Such oppression results in the objectification of individuals and the social dissolution of families, the literal destruction of their kinship. Doro, Neci, and the human resisters exemplify the process through which this oppression may come to fruition, resulting in the detriment and destruction of kinship structures.

#### Heteronormativity and the Butler Family

Racism reaches further than the effects just shown, for it enables other forms of oppression that face the Butler Family. For example, Doro's human families and the Oankali-human families are scrutinized for queerness after already being maligned or misused for their supposed racial inferiority. In general, racism and heteronormativity share a common oppressive emphasis, as both seek to stigmatize the individuals that comprise the Butler Family, dismantling the family in the process. Heteronormativity in particular denies queerness through prescribing a straight and unchanging family model and instilling the social norms necessary for perpetuating this model.

The process by which heteronormativity oppresses queer families appears potently in *Wild Seed*. In order to effectively discuss the parameters of this oppression, I begin by offering a closer analysis of Anyanwu's impression of family as a means of locating a more refined focal point for heteronormativity in *Wild Seed*. The reader will recall that part of Anyanwu's explanation as to why she protects her son from Doro's

breeding scheme emphasizes slavery's detrimental impact on black fathers. Anyanwu's emphasis on black fatherhood appears also in the following quote:

There were people here in Louisiana and in the other Southern states who bred people as Doro did. They gave a man one woman after another and when the children came, the man had no authority over what was done to them, no responsibility to them or to their mothers. Authority and responsibility were the prerogatives of the masters. (Butler, *Wild Seed* 223)

If we were to choose these comments on black fatherhood as the sole representation of racism's impact on the black family, then we could conclude that Butler's impression of family implicitly emphasizes the heterosexual model, as her critique of slavery focuses on fatherhood within heterosexual kinship models. However, we can more productively trace this type of argument to a sexist ideology that engages rather dangerously with discussions of race relations and sexuality.

In *Ain't I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism*, bell hooks comments on the sexism in analyses of slavery that favor black fathers. She finds that, "Sexist historians and sociologists have provided . . . a perspective on slavery in which the most cruel and de-humanizing impact of slavery on the lives of black people was that black men were stripped of their masculinity, which they then argue resulted in the dissolution and overall disruption of any black familial structure" (hooks 20). To hooks, such emphasis detracts from recognition of slavery's impact on black women, which we see in the experiences and suffering of Anyanwu. I suggest this critique of a sexist approach to black family structure is also homophobic, as such arguments assume that heterosexual parents and their children signify "proper" kinship, implying that the traditional European-American

family model is the only one worth protecting. We can see acknowledgement of hooks' black feminist concerns as well as elements of queer critique in Butler's fiction by considering Anyanwu's relationship with Denice, her white, female partner in *Wild Seed*. Their relationship disrupts the racist, heteronormative family model to great effect.

Doro demonstrates heteronormative and sexist ideology, as his breeding schema rests on reproduction between partners of the opposite sex, even if the individuals must manipulate their bodies in order to achieve this aim. He applies this restriction to Anyanwu because of her shapeshifting powers and her ability to copy DNA. When Doro enquires about Anyanwu's ability to reproduce with Denice, Anyanwu explains that she can copy another man's DNA so thoroughly as to produce his biological children, to which Doro replies, "That's the answer then, Anyanwu. You'll take your son's place" (Butler, *Wild Seed* 234). By commanding Anyanwu to perform in the male sexual role, Doro demonstrates his dependence on heteronormativity, as his command utilizes Anyanwu's (queer) shapeshifting abilities to engage in heterosexual reproduction. Furthermore, even if Anyanwu can father and mother children biologically, this exchange entails the essentially male Doro mandating reproduction for the essentially female Anyanwu, thus demonstrating Doro's sexism. Through his heterosexist approach to sexual relations, Doro relegates Anyanwu's female identity to the status of male breeder and leaves no room for her to participate in queer partnership. Anyanwu's resistance to Doro's heteronormative demands, however, reveals her determination to live in a more gender fluid fashion.

The Xenogenesis trilogy addresses sexism and heteronormativity as it impacts the Butler Family as well. If we consider how Doro's breeding empire places singular

importance on reproduction, then we must acknowledge this same compulsion in the Oankali, despite the comparatively queer arrangements of their families. To explicate this potential paradox, I return to Donna Haraway's commentary on the Oankali. As discussed in the previous chapter, Haraway finds the queerness of the Oankali in *Dawn* dubious as they participate in what she identifies as "compulsory heterosexual and reproductive politics" (309). I agree that the Oankali's queerness is debatable, but the trilogy does not fully explore their queerness until its final volume, *Imago*, which was not in print when Haraway published her critique (and which I will explore in Chapter 3).

Haraway finds an endgame for heterosexual reproductive politics in pregnancy, stating that "[p]regnancy raises the tricky question of . . . the humans' love of themselves as . . . the sign of the same" (309). To see "the sign of the same" means to see oneself recreated both physically and culturally in another individual, in this case a child. To Haraway, heteronormative pregnancy appears not in Oankali-human relations but in the human resisters' mission to produce "normal" human offspring, thereby maintaining the cultural dominance inherent in the sign of the same. The heteronormative family model, heterosexual reproduction, the bodies therein, and the human resisters who endorse all of these factors are confronted with liminality, first only in the appearance of and what they see as threats by the Oankali in *Dawn* and then in practice as the humans in *Adulthood Rites* are incapable of reproducing without Oankali participation. The dominance of Oankali mating culture produces heteronormative anxiety for the resisters, who then seek to dismantle the Oankali-human families.

We see this anxiety both reflected in the human resisters' response to the construct children's tentacles, discussed above in terms of race. Neci's desire to remove

the construct children's tentacles is tied not only to appearance norms relevant to discussions of race but also to the human resisters' rejection of Oankali-human mating practices, as the construct children manifest visible markers of interspecies reproduction. The resisters' anxiety thus exceeds reproduction as the tentacles are reminders that the construct children have not just one mother and one father, but two mothers, two fathers, and an ooloi parent. By removing the tentacles, the resisters would, at least visually, succeed in distancing the captive children from their queer families, if not biologically, then culturally. With human-looking children, the resister families would at least superficially reflect the straight family model.

Doro and the human resisters both favor heteronormativity, whether for reproduction or the cultural compulsion to replicate the straight family model. By using Anyanwu's abilities strictly to fulfill his restrictive reproductive binary, Doro denies her queerness, thus refusing the queerness of her family. Likewise, by wishing to eliminate the Oankali half of the construct children, the human resisters attempt to distance them from their queer families. Ultimately, both racism and heteronormativity seek to dismantle the Butler Family, as these oppressive ideologies deny the validity of the individuals that comprise these queer families.

#### The Butler Family: Multicultural Queerness

Whereas racism and heteronormativity seek to control the family through racist, sexist, and homophobic models, the Butler Family ultimately rejects such rigidity. Of the emphasis on family in her work, Butler says, "I can't help dwelling on the importance of family and reproduction . . . It is so much of what we are. Family does not have to mean

purely biological relationships either. I know families that have adopted outside individuals; I don't mean legally adopted children but other adults, friends, people who simply came into the household and stayed" (Potts 68). To Butler, the bonds of kinship go beyond genetic affiliation, mirroring the chosen families common in queer communities. The members of these families find refuge in fluid kinship not available within homophobic biological families. Such a fluid conception of family requires re-evaluation of how we measure kinship; Butler's depiction in particular effectively challenges racism, sexism, and heteronormativity. Since regressive forces seek to oppress the queer family through isolation and persecution, it stands to reason that Butler addresses both racial difference and same-sex relationships within the queer family's parameters as a means of resistance.

The Butler Family is often interracial, for example. The multiracial/multispecies challenge of the *Xenogenesis* trilogy is directly visible within family members who are Oankali, human, and bispecies constructs. By contrast, *Wild Seed* offers a more nuanced example of miscegenation-as-resistance within the Butler Family in the aforementioned relationship between Anyanwu and Denice. Anyanwu explains that even though she meets Denice while in the shape of a white man, "[Denice] could see people's past lives when she touched them . . . She knew all that I was before we married" (Butler, *Wild Seed* 232). Beneath the surface, Denice knows their relationship is both lesbian and interracial. Doro, disdainful of the bond, asks whether Denice still wanted Anyanwu after she discovered her true race and gender, to which Anyanwu responds, "Even so" (233). Butler here portrays Anyanwu and Denice's relationship as one that exists across difference among equals—a queer contrast to the racist, heteronormative family model.



The larger family Anyanwu and Denice create also rejects the heteronormativity of Doro's breeding empire. When Denice understood Anyanwu could father children using another man's DNA, she refused. As Anyanwu tells Doro, "She said she would rather have no children at all. But that sacrifice was not necessary. I could give her girl children of my own body" (Butler, *Wild Seed* 234). Anyanwu, this suggests, can engage in a form of parthenogenesis that produces female offspring only.<sup>1</sup> Thus, Anyanwu and Denice choose to have only girl children, countering Doro's demands. Through creating an exclusively female line, Anyanwu's and Denice's queer, interracial, matrilineal family counters the sexist, heteronormative imperatives of Doro's breeding empire as well as the traditional nuclear family.

In the *Xenogenesis* trilogy, Butler links the heteronormative and sexist ideology of the human resisters to what she calls "the Human Contradiction," summarized in *Adulthood Rites* as: "Intelligence at the service of hierarchical behavior" (225). The Human Contradiction represents the dissonance between humanity's capability for progressive thought and their compulsion to oppress through adherence to outdated chains of command. The all-human family that the resisters strive for represents such hierarchical tendencies, a demand to return to the patriarchal, racially homogeneous family humans knew before the Oankali's arrival. Butler challenges this tendency to rely

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<sup>1</sup> Parthenogenesis has a fruitful history with feminist science fiction. However, Butler posits parthenogenesis across race and gender, where many earlier white writers depict racially unified or undifferentiated communities—e.g. Charlotte Perkins Gilman in *Herland* (1915), Joanna Russ in "When It Changed" (1972), and James Tiptree Jr. in "Houston, Houston, Do You Read?" (1976). In maintaining her dual focus, Butler and her depiction of an exclusively female family line is more multiculturally queer than her predecessors, whose depictions are lesbian and racially uniform.

on outdated hierarchical models through incorporating interspecies and chosen families into her work, particularly as formed and led by women of color.

We see Butler's championing of the chosen family through the trajectory of the character Tino in *Adulthood Rites*, a former human resister who seeks out the Oankali and joins Lilith's family due to frustration with his parents' regressive nostalgia for Earth before the Oankali's arrival (22). Despite his change of perspective regarding interspecies bonding, however, Tino is at first hesitant to have a male partner. Lilith's male Oankali partner Dichaan assists by reorienting the discussion to affirm Tino's place in the family: "Let me try to understand you, Chkah [an Oankali term of affection for a partner] . . . I've been very glad to have you here—a Human father for the children and a Human male to balance group mating. A partner in every sense" (179-80). The emphasis that Dichaan places on Tino's decision matches Butler's definition of chosen families—those who "simply came into the household and stayed" (Potts 68). The act of finding a family elsewhere, even at the risk of severing the bonds that tether one to one's biological family, closely resembles the experience of queer persons who have been rejected by their biological family, necessitating the pursuit of new, accepting kin.

In addition to establishing Tino's family as chosen rather than dictated, Butler also casts Tino as a nurturer, standing in opposition to the emotionless, reserved father-figure common in the sexist, heteronormative family chain of command. During Tino's integration into Lilith's family, he assumes a role in caring for Akin. The child "took his first few steps toward Tino's outstretched hands. He learned to take food from Tino's plate, and he rode on Tino's back whenever the man would carry him . . . He came to trust Tino very quickly. Eventually everyone came to trust Tino" (Butler, *Adulthood Rites*

53). The hierarchy implicit in patriarchal families leaves little to no room for the father to show affection towards the children of his family, as this is the role placed on the mother. The father is traditionally more distant from his children except for cases of discipline and punishment. Butler abandons this patriarchal assignment of roles, favoring a web of affection and trust that signifies the value of a chosen family.

### The Black Mother as the Heart of the Butler Family

As I have shown, the Butler Family resists racist, heteronormative, and sexist family constructions. As contesting oppressive structures proves crucial to Butler's work, she chooses the black mother as the source of resistance. The figure of the black mother, often derided or ignored by white patriarchal histories, emerges as the voice of the queer Butler Family. In a cultural sense, Audre Lorde comments on the importance of the black motherhood. She writes of the black mother as a figure present in all humanity, clarifying that humankind evolves through the presence of such women (101). Butler demonstrates this ideal as Anyanwu and Lilith challenge oppressive hegemonies.

While the importance of black mothers may appear evident enough in Butler's selection of Anyanwu and Lilith as protagonists, critics further explore motherhood as one of the main focuses of feminist Butler criticism. For example, Dorothy Allison posits that Butler's black mothers, "who resist, struggle, adjust, compromise, and live by their own ethical standards survive to mother the next generation—literally to make the next world . . . Butler designates the mother as the civilizing force in human society—the one who teaches both men and children compassion and empathy" (472-73). To Allison, Butler's black mother facilitates change and growth through displaying and encouraging

positive characteristics within her family. This interpretation serves as a further departure from the racist, heteronormative family model, as Butler envisions black women as the site of profound cultural, interpersonal change, not exclusively biological reproduction.

Sandra Y. Govan also emphasizes the vitality of the mother in Butler's work, linking her to a broader archetype. She argues that Anyanwu has "the nurturing healing power of the archetypal earth mother" (83). Govan focuses on Anyanwu's productive powers in contrast to Doro's destructiveness, which she defines as "the more terrible power" on account of his parasitic abilities (83). Anyanwu, for Govan, is a mother who promotes growth and development. Govan establishes a view of Butler's black mothers as maternal figures with the power to heal and foster communities that embrace difference, coinciding with Allison's interpretation of Butler's black mothers as the mothers of the next world.

As examples of early Butler criticism, we may note that Allison and Govan emphasize the maternal quality of Butler's black mothers without further emphasizing the importance of race to this figure. Later critics, such as Eva Federmayer, a post-colonialist and scholar of American studies, incorporate race when discussing motherhood in Butler's work. Federmayer names Lilith as "an originary mediator whose negotiations for survival take place in the margins of hegemonic discourses, crossing back and forth across boundaries/races/genders" (115). Through Federmayer's analysis, we see how feminist Butler criticism reaches beyond the archetypal earth mother and situates Butler's black mothers as crucial figures in fostering the communities and families necessary for countering oppressive hegemonies.

Anyanwu and Lilith create such families. As Doro plots to incorporate one of Anyanwu's sons into his breeding hegemony, he declares, "Your son seems controlled—very sure of himself." She replies, "I taught him to lift his head" (Butler, *Wild Seed* 224). Anyanwu's response shows that she has taught her children self-affirmation as a means of resisting the dehumanizing nature of Doro's breeding imperative. Likewise, Lilith affirms her children's self-worth. She says to Akin, "Oankali seed difference and collect it. They need it to keep themselves from stagnation and overspecialization . . . Embrace difference" (80). Here Lilith exemplifies the notion that by embracing difference, one can "enrich [the] visions and joint struggles" (Lorde 122) experienced across racial and queer difference. Lilith's advice can be read both as an affirmation of Akin's Oankali-half, his "different" half, and an encouragement to embrace change through the exploration of difference as a means of resisting the heteronormative powers that seek to dismantle both his identity and his family. Ultimately, in Butler's rejection of oppressive power structures, she depicts the black mother, exemplified by Anyanwu and Lilith, as the culmination of affirmative discourse and the primary source of resistance.

### Conclusion: Sustaining the Queer Future

Butler's work champions families that value difference, regarding race, sexual orientation, and gender. The diversity and flexibility of these families demonstrates the awareness of difference and change valued in Butler's creative ethos. We see that the inflexibility of racist, heteronormative family structures requires constant challenge by Butler's black mothers and their families. For example, Doro's racist and heteronormative construction of family relegates its members to breeding status, thus

devaluing their identities. Anyanwu challenges this racism by participating in a queer interracial relationship that emphasizes the value of the individuals therein. The human resisters exhibit patriarchal heteronormativity by denying the validity of the Oankali-human families and by abducting their female children with the intent of reshaping their bodies to adhere to traditional human feminine norms. The black mothers of these queer families counter racism, sexism, and heteronormativity by participating in cultural exchange, embracing difference, and creating new queer families that provide a more fluid alternative to the oppressive powers that try to destabilize them.

### CHAPTER III: QUEER FUTURITY AND THE MEDUSA'S CHILDREN

At the age of twelve, Octavia Butler began writing SF after viewing David MacDonald's *Devil Girl from Mars*. The film features Nyah, the vinyl-clad Martian "devil girl," whose mission is to abduct suitable male specimens after a war of the sexes annihilates the male population on Mars, thus hindering reproduction. In response, Butler argues, "I [could] write a better story than that. So I turned off the TV and started writing what was actually an early version of one of my Patternist stories" (McCaffery and McMenamin 13). While Butler's anecdote teases at a campy, bygone era of SF, the general premise of the film suggests that patriarchal hegemony will continue into the future while reflecting the era's negative impression of female sexuality in the wicked Martian matriarch. On the battleground of such gender politics, we find compulsory reproduction, which indicates human anxieties regarding the future. How will humanity and its various cultures continue? As Butler explores through her queer families, not all pursuits of futurity are oppressive or beholden to the heteronormative history that has thus far shaped our understanding of family.

To address Butler's answer to the continuation of humanity into the future, we can turn to Anyanwu's and Lilith's descendants, the protagonists of *Mind of My Mind* (written before *Wild Seed*) and *Imago*. As a prequel, *Wild Seed* allows Butler to explore Doro's and Anyanwu's past, whereas *Mind of My Mind* shows Butler's impression of contemporary (1970s) discourse on gender and power. In *Mind of My Mind*, Doro pursues his goal of becoming a Patternmaster by continuing his breeding scheme, which produces Mary, an actual Patternmaster who can telepathically connect with a group of Doro's other offspring. Mary and her group of fellow telepaths create a "Pattern." The

Pattern and Mary's connection with its members and her partner Karl serve essentially as Mary's family. Through this novel, we see Doro's adherence to heteronormative futurity counteracted in Mary's queer futurity. Unlike Anyanwu, Mary does not form a family with a same-sex partner, nor is she of complex gender identity. However, I read her as queer because she, like Anyanwu, contests Doro's maintenance of heterosexist gender roles and compulsory reproduction. Ultimately, Mary destroys Doro, an act that symbolizes the end of his restrictive futurity and the racism, sexism, and heteronormativity therein.

*Imago* also explores the conflict between heteronormative and queer futurity, as Jodahs and Aor, two of Lilith's children, become the first construct ooloi, a new hybrid version of the third-term gender that the other Oankali feel threatened by. As the Oankali fear that construct ooloi would be unstable when manipulating the genetic material of others, they consider abducting the children and keeping them away from the gene exchange on Earth. While their hesitation towards Jodahs appears preventative, the Oankali also show metaphoric heteronormativity in their concern over construct ooloi. We learn that the improbability of Jodahs' gender results from the strict male/female binary devised for construct children, and that the ooloi have a hand in assigning gender. Jodahs' ooloi gender occurs due to a bio-chemical error on Nikanj's part. Considering the hybrid nature of the construct children, Jodahs acts as a site for gender and (metaphorical) racial queerness, and the Oankali read this queerness as the beginning of a new, potentially threatening species. The Oankali's fear of construct ooloi complicates our understanding of queerness by illustrating how a previously queer culture can acquire normative imperatives, becoming fixed. Despite the Oankali's reactionary anxieties,



Jodahs and Aaor go into hiding, find human mates, and plan to start their respective families, which will also entail appealing for Oankali mates before the Oankali Council. The novel concludes with Jodahs successfully appealing to a council of Oankali to let the construct ooloi stay on Earth to have families and participate in the gene exchange. Like Mary, Jodahs secures queer futurity through establishing a queer family, despite adversity. Ultimately, Mary, Jodahs, and their families present an essentially queer version of futurity, one that rejects sexism, racism, and heteronormativity by embracing difference and growth through change.

### Queer Futurity

Before we can adequately assess how Mary and Jodahs enable their queer futures, our understanding of the concept of futurity requires precision. My use of the term is informed by queer theorist J. Jack Halberstam who charts heteronormative futurity through cyclical periods called “the time of reproduction,” “family time,” and “the time of inheritance.” Halberstam writes,

The time of reproduction is ruled by a biological clock for women and by strict bourgeois rules of respectability and scheduling for married couples . . . Family time refers to the normative scheduling of daily life . . . governed by an imagined set of children’s needs, and it relates to beliefs about . . . healthful environments for child rearing. The time of inheritance refers to an overview of generational time within which values, wealth, goods, and morals are passed through family ties from one generation to the next. It also connects the family to the future of both familial and national stability. (5)

Halberstam's theorization of heteronormative futurity describes a future that perpetuates itself through restrictive timelines. This process of perpetuation comes at a price, as each timeline utilizes oppressive ideologies. Perhaps the most foundational of these are sexism and heteronormativity, as the time of reproduction reinforces the commoditization of women's bodies based on their fertility as well as heterosexual reproduction. These oppressions continue in family time. Halberstam focuses more on the day-to-day banality of family life that results from "healthful environments," whereas Butler focuses on the oppressive processes by which these environments are achieved. As Halberstam argues and as Doro and the Oankali demonstrate, "healthful environments" rely on sexism and heteronormativity.

Since Butler's queer families are interracial, we must reach beyond Halberstam to consider how race figures into discussion of queer futurity. With the origin of heteronormative futurity anchored in sexism, it seems viable that other forms of oppression such as racism would be built on this foundation. When considering the relationship between African Americans and slavery, for instance, bell hooks posits that the "incredible resiliency of spirit enslaved black people possessed has often deflected attention away from the legacy of psychological woundedness the experiences of enslavement generated" (*Salvation: Black People and Love* 97). Halberstam, relying on an unstated white, middle-class perspective, fails to contemplate historical woundedness in this formulation. For example, as explored in the previous chapter, slaves were forced to reproduce, and these families were often separated, resulting in familial dissolution. In the wake of this dissolution, the institutions that enable heteronormative futurity cast aspersions on black families that could not reach the standards of acceptability prescribed

by the time of reproduction and family time. As for the time of inheritance, we must move past the denials of heteronormative futurity, which either ignores African American history entirely or stops at acknowledgement of woundedness.

To better consider a black queer futurity, we can incorporate Afrofuturism into our discussion. Cultural critic Ytasha L. Womack defines Afrofuturism as a “budding culture of artists and sci-fi fans . . . using art and media platforms to explore humanity and the experiences of people in the African diaspora in futuristic works” (Womack 22). Womack argues that the importance of Afrofuturism “isn’t to get lost in traumas of the past or present-day alienation. The alien framework is a framework for understanding and healing . . . . The liberation edict in Afrofuturism provides a prism for evolution” (38). Through Afrofuturism, black families can see their legacy of psychological woundedness in conversation with a future of agency. By combining the black experience with SF aesthetics, Afrofuturist writers etch out a future space for black individuals and groups within a white-dominated genre, thus countering heteronormative futurity’s ignorance or reduction of black identity.

Beyond contesting heteronormative futurity’s psychological racism, Butler’s work speculates that reproductive futurism can be liberated from the heteronormative family model. Examples of this liberation are already present in this thesis via the family of Anyanwu and Denice and Lilith’s Oankali-human family. As beings who can synthesize or even create egg and sperm cells, Anyanwu and the Oankali have the agency to reproduce with a variety of partners, including partners of the same sex. The speculative flexibility of Butler’s SF represents how the means of reproduction need not exclude queer individuals nor refuse to foster a future in which these individuals have the agency

to explore both their individual identities and their familial/community identities.

Through a combination of queer futurism and Afrofuturism, Butler's work hypothesizes a queer future that embraces difference and counteracts the oppression inherent in heteronormative futurity.

### Doro and Heteronormative Futurity

Let's now look at the oppression that brings the need for a queering of the present and future to enable queer futurity. In *Mind of My Mind*, we are introduced to the heteronormative futurity of Doro's breeding scheme early on. When speaking of Mary, Doro says, "I'm going to try to mate her with another telepath without killing either of them myself. And I'm hoping that she and the boy I have in mind are stable enough to stay together without killing each other" (Butler, *Mind of My Mind* 9). Doro's intentions to mate his daughter with a male partner occur in Halberstam's time of reproduction. In this timeline, Mary and her perspective male partner have little agency within Doro's breeding machine.

Doro's impression of Mary and his reproductive purpose for her are further enforced by his adherence to Halberstam's family time. He draws attention to Mary's gender, saying, "I didn't want a boy . . . I've had trouble with boys . . . in the special role I want her to fill . . . I wanted a girl, and I wanted her to be one of the youngest of her generation of actives. Both those factors will help keep her in line. She'll be less likely to rebel against my plans for her." (Butler, *Mind of My Mind* 11-12). Here Doro envisions Mary as part of the newest generation of super-powered humans, ostensibly with the responsibility of rearing the generations to come. Doro's insistence that she be kept "in

line” reflects Halberstam’s emphasis on a particular environment for future generations of super-powered humans. His patriarchal desires sequester Mary into the traditionally feminine space of child-rearing.

This pursuit of control also connects with Halberstam’s time of inheritance. Mary is not seen as a person in her own right, but as experimental offspring—the “latest” of Doro’s many attempts. Doro expects Mary to inherit her telepathic abilities and accede to Doro’s demands for how she uses her inheritance. Doro’s breeding scheme thus matches each stage of heteronormative futurity’s cycle as Halberstam conceptualizes it.

In perpetuating heteronormative futurity, Doro also exhibits racism. As explored in the previous chapter, Doro’s hypothesized superiority as a Patternmaster parallels the same logic by which racists justify racial superiority. Butler more directly matches Doro’s supposed superiority with his disdain for black identity in *Mind of My Mind* even more directly than in *Wild Seed*. For example, when Mary learns that Doro’s parents were Nubian, she exclaims, “Black people! . . . You’re white so much of the time, I never thought you might have been born black” (Butler, *Mind of My Mind* 87). Doro has established a racial fantasy that denies blackness and African history as part of his identity. Beyond this, Butler depicts the racist distance Doro feels from human connection in terms of control when Mary asks him if he is creating “a race to be a part of? . . . Or a race . . . to own?” to which Doro answers “a little of both” (91). In this racist fantasy, Doro is not only separate from his own original blackness and the rest of humanity but also feels superior to it, using this superiority to justify his oppressive measures.

The racism inherent in Doro's breeding empire also corresponds with Halberstam's time of inheritance. As previously discussed, the history of enslavement and white colonizers forcing slaves to adhere to their own social and reproductive norms are a part of this inheritance. We see Anyanwu and Doro discuss this inheritance, as she explains to him that she has written a trilogy of novels that depict her history as a super-powered individual and as an Igbo elder, which Doro mocks (Butler, *Mind of My Mind* 12). Anyanwu's emphasis on her history parallels Afrofuturist interest in defining a black future by processing the experiences of the African diaspora. Doro's disregard for her interest in ancestry signifies that he does not see the importance of reckoning with the inheritance allotted black people within heteronormative futurity.

#### The Oankali and the Limitations of Queerness

The Oankali in their interactions with future Earth enact a similar Halberstamian time of heteronormative futurity. However, unlike Doro, they are generally not intended to be the antagonists of Xenogenesis. When asked if the Oankali use their methods for evil, Butler vehemently responded, "Oh, no! . . . I don't write about good and evil with this enormous dichotomy. I write about people . . . [who] set out to get something . . . [and who] set out to defend themselves from something" (Williams 164). Though Butler claims to not write about evil people, she certainly imbues her antagonists with oppressive ideas that may register as "evil" with her readers. Perhaps the better inquiry is whether the Oankali exhibit oppressive ideas, for although they start out in *Dawn* as characters trying to "get something" through symbiotic relationships with humans, by

*Imago* they have exhausted their queerness, becoming characters trying to “defend themselves from something”: change.

While reviewing *Xenogenesis*, literary critic Burton Raffel succinctly articulates the peculiar feeling readers may experience when encountering the Oankali in *Imago*: “We are to learn, in painful detail, that the Oankali are, in effect, no more ‘perfect’ than are humans” (460). As a reader, I felt the same pain in discovering the limitations of the Oankali’s queerness. If queerness springs from fluid conceptualizations and expressions of gender and sexuality across race and other differences, then the presence of institutions that promote normative, fixed models of identity logically signal the end of queerness. David Eng writes about this phenomenon in relationship to queer kinship, writing, “If gays and lesbians . . . are no longer eccentric to structures of family and kinship, we need to consider whether this reformulation of traditional social formations can be justifiably described as . . . a constrained . . . assimilation to dominant social customs” (305). Eng here posits that true queerness occurs beyond traditional family construction and kinship formation. Once these bonds adhere to dominant, fixed norms, they are no longer queer.

In *Xenogenesis*, the Oankali exhibit assimilation as they cultivate a normative culture that comes to adhere to the time of heteronormative futurity. For example, the process by which the ooloi manipulate their offspring’s gender bears clear parallels to Halberstam’s time of reproduction. While the bodies, and therefore the sex, of construct children do not fully develop until after their “transition” (a complex form of puberty), the ooloi are able to create offspring with male and female characteristics. Nikanj explains to Jodahs, “I constructed you to look very male—so male that the females would be attracted to you and help convince you that you were male. Until today, I thought they

had” (Butler, *Imago* 16). Nikanj here admits to shaping Jodahs within the parameters of heteronormative reproduction. By Nikanj’s admission, we see how it adheres to Oankali reproductive gender norms in their gene trade with humans. Unconsciously, however, it resists heteronormative futurity as an ooloi. This results in the creation of a construct ooloi offspring whose gender is masked with superficial hypermasculine traits.

In addition to insistence on restricting gender in constructs, the Oankali also evoke heteronormative futurity by cultivating a restrictive environment for family time. We see how the Oankali cultivate this environment as Jodahs considers the different measures the Oankali take against potentially dangerous beings: “Until now, no construct had become ooloi . . . 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” (Butler, *Imago* 16). The Oankali use sterilization and exile to forbid the existence of construct ooloi and to keep human-born, construct males and ooloi “in line.”

Through their adherence to heteronormative futurity, the Oankali offer Jodahs little in the time of inheritance. The inheritance allotted by the Oankali can be viewed in two parts, the first of which involves gender. When pondering gender, Jodahs states, “All my life, I had been referred to as ‘he’ and treated as male by my Human parents . . . Even Oankali sometimes said ‘he’ . . . People were supposed to feel that way so that I would be prepared for the [transition to an adult male] that should have happened” (Butler, *Imago* 15). Butler draws our attention to how both humans and the Oankali primed Jodahs for life as a male, indicating how Jodahs’s inheritance involves a rigid gender binary atypical for the Oankali before the gene trade with humans.



The second part of Jodahs's inheritance can be extrapolated from Halberstam's theorization of heteronormative futurity as it relates to race. Since Halberstam considers the time of inheritance as the point of cultural stability, we must consider how the Oankali attempt to achieve this stability by offering only a restricted space for construct ooloi. For example, the Oankali view Jodahs as

A flawed natural genetic-engineer—who could distort or destroy with a touch. Nothing could save it from confinement on the ship. Perhaps it would even have to be physically altered to prevent it from functioning in any way as an ooloi. Perhaps it would be so dangerous that it would have to spend its existence in suspended animation, its body used by others for painless experimentation, its consciousness permanently shut off. (Butler, *Imago* 21)

The emphasis placed on Jodahs being “flawed,” “dangerous,” or worth only “experimentation,” demonstrates the degree to which the construct ooloi are considered “other.” We can use Halberstam's conception of cultural stability to connect this othering to racism, as Butler's work demonstrates how the compulsory rejection of previously unencountered species parallels the marginalization of others based on racial difference. Since Jodahs represents the beginning of a new species, the Oankali reject this difference by threatening to remove Jodahs's ooloi identity and its consciousness altogether. The Oankali do this as a means of preserving their genetic experimentation with humanity—their cultural stability. In doing so, the Oankali reject Jodahs and other construct ooloi, thus blocking Jodahs from developing kinship or any sense of futurity.

### Mary and the Queer Future

If, as Doro and the Oankali show, we attain the heteronormative future through restriction and regulation to the detriment of queerness and difference, then we can attain the queer future only through measures that promote diversity and growth. Butler explores growth and acceptance through Anyanwu's descendant Mary, a black mother for the new generation of the Butler Family. In playing this role, Mary starts conversations related to race and difference. Mary states her views on racial identity when confronting Doro about his race, saying, "you don't want to admit you have anything in common with us. But if you were born black, you are black. Still black, no matter what color you take on" (Butler, *Mind of My Mind* 87). For Mary, blackness is an identity that must be affirmed to understand power relations and resistance to oppression in the creation of the future. Regarding her status as a mother, Mary initially has no children, but the inception of her Pattern and the bond she feels with its members represent kinship, particularly Butler's idea of chosen families discussed in the previous chapter. Once she does give birth late in the novel, mother and child are within an already queer telepathic family. Mary's ultimate rule over her Pattern resembles that of a caring and respectful black matriarch, contrasting starkly with Doro, the strict deracialized patriarch.

To illustrate her role as matriarch, we can observe that once Mary's telepathic powers fully develop, she feels conflicted about the exclusive power she assumes as a Patternmaster: "I realized that there was something really proprietary about my feelings toward them . . . But I also realized that I had no idea how dangerous it might be for me to hold a group of experienced active telepaths on mental leashes . . . I couldn't find a way to let them go" (Butler, *Mind of My Mind* 55). When confronted with Mary's

feelings of ownership, we may wonder whether she will acquire Doro's methods of dominance. Butler even mentions leashes, paralleling Doro's dog breeding imagery, yet Mary realizes the danger of holding such a strong degree of control over others. Mary's realization marks the beginning of how her Pattern will differ from Doro's breeding empire and grow into a more accepting kinship structure that counters the timelines of heteronormative futurity.

Mary's method for challenging the time of reproduction bears explaining, as Mary does not challenge any reproductive imperative through same-sex desire nor does she explicitly encourage the same within her Pattern. However, Mary shows contempt for Doro's reproductive measures. As he explains the compulsory breeding necessary for his plan to develop a new species, Mary clarifies that the word "breed" "didn't sound like the kind of word that should be applied to people." (Butler, *Mind of My Mind* 89). Here Butler reinforces that the time of reproduction makes breeders out of sexual partners, thus dehumanizing its subjects. Thus, we see Mary considering the groundwork for a potentially queer future. Because other novels published earlier in the series already depict the future, we will not see this aspect of queerness come to fruition in *Mind of My Mind*.

Mary also counters Doro's conception of family time. We see Mary challenge this hegemony by allowing those who fall out of the Pattern to leave. For example, the telepathic connection between Mary and Clay, one of the members of her Pattern, disappears after his powers transition from telepathy to psychokinesis. Though Mary is saddened by no longer having Clay in the Pattern, she tells him he is free to go and even wishes him good luck (Butler, *Mind of My Mind* 148). As for those who stay in the

Pattern, they either arrive with their significant others, or pursue partners of their own choice, suggesting agency; we do not see Mary place a reproductive imperative on anyone in her Pattern. Whereas Doro's environments promote heteronormative futurity through compulsory reproduction, Mary creates an environment in which participation, and therefore reproduction, become optional. In optional reproduction, we see another key facet of queer futurity, though again, Butler's execution of this idea as it relates to queerness is only implicit.

By making reproduction optional, Mary defies Doro's methods of enslavement, improving the quality of life within the Pattern. When describing the positive impact of Mary on her Pattern, the novel clarifies that "[s]he was a symbiont, a being living in partnership with her people. She gave them unity, they fed her, and both thrived" (Butler, *Mind of My Mind* 213). When Mary alerts her Pattern of Doro's plans to destroy her, she says, "I could feel their alarm . . . In the two short years of its existence the Pattern had given these people a new way of life. A way of life that they valued" (209). The positive impact of Mary on her Pattern shows an increase in compassion. Compassion facilitates the acceptance of difference and therefore plays a role in achieving the queer future. However, as with optional reproduction, *Mind of My Mind* only considers compassion without directly applying it to queerness.<sup>1</sup>

Rather, Mary's strongest contribution to queer futurity comes from her counter to Halberstam's time of inheritance. When she reaches her full potential as a Patternmaster,

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<sup>1</sup> We may look to the novel *Patternmaster*. In its future, the character Amber takes up with a male partner, Teray, who is curious about her bisexuality. As she explains her orientation, her partner shows no negative judgment and accepts this difference (Butler 133). This earlier novel illustrates that the presence of compassion in Mary's Pattern has facilitated greater acceptance of difference in the future.

Mary realizes how she defies Doro's design on her inheritance. According to Mary, "[Doro] looked worried. That was unusual for him . . . This pattern thing wasn't part of his plan, then. I was an experiment going bad before his eyes" (Butler, *Mind of My Mind* 92). Butler's use of the word "experiment" flirts with Doro's earlier use of "attempt" to define Mary. Whereas Doro hoped Mary's status as a young breeding experiment would help him keep her psychic abilities in check, she instead claims her inheritance outside of the sexist space allotted her in the time of inheritance, challenging Doro's sexism and allowing queerer agency.

As the last stage of heteronormative futurity, the time of inheritance imparts the structures necessary to maintain an oppressive future. Therefore, it is important that the children of Butler's queer families not only resist the norms of the time of inheritance but also reorganize resistance as a means of enabling a queer future. Mary treats her inheritance as the impetus for reorganizing the structure of Doro's breeding empire, thus reversing the damage he has caused. We see Mary realizing her positive impact as she prepares for the climactic psychic battle between her and Doro: "I'm going to have to fight him. I'll take from you [Karl], and from the others [in her Pattern]. But not until then. I'm not the vampire he is. I give in return for my taking . . . I've got ethics" (Butler, *Mind of My Mind* 206). Mary emphasizes that she differs from Doro and his selfish oppression of others through a greater concern for her ethics—how she treats the members of her Pattern. Butler prompts her readers to question where these compassionate ethics will lead.

### Jodahs and the Queer Future

Like Mary, Jodahs resists the strictures of heteronormative futurity. More than Mary, however, Jodahs attains queer futurity for itself and its family. Whereas *Dawn* and *Adulthood Rites* present Oankali sexuality in chemical terms from the outside perspective of a human female and an Oankali construct male, *Imago* utilizes Jodahs as a first-person narrator, allowing it to describe intimate, sexual desires. We may at first posit this desire solely in terms of individual sexual identity, but Jodahs affirms that construct sexuality must be considered in the context of both pleasure and kinship. Jodahs, as an ooloi, forms life-long kinship bonds with some of its mates. When describing the importance of sexual contact, Jodahs says, “We called our need for contact with others and our need for mates *hunger*. The word had not been chosen frivolously. One who could hunger could starve” (Butler, *Imago* 158). Sexual contact fulfills not only Jodahs’s desires but also its Oankali compulsion to seek and form kinship with mates.

If ooloi are denied sexual contact, their bodies exhibit drastic changes. For example, after a period of searching for human mates, Jodahs states “[My] body . . . was covered with fingernail-sized, overlapping scales. It was also inclined to be quadrupedal, but I had resisted that. Hands were much more useful than clawed forefeet” (Butler, *Imago* 92). Aaor shows similar changes after a period of finding no mates: “It changed radically: grew fur again, lost it, developed scales, lost them, developed something very like tree bark, lost that, then changed completely, lost its limbs, and went into a tributary of our river . . . [it had become] a kind of near mollusk, something that had no bones left” (150). These descriptions of ooloi bodies demonstrate a sort of devolution, as if the body

is not merely deteriorating, but literally regressing back to pre-human lifeforms. By using this imagery, Butler suggests that being denied the kinship implicit in sexual bonding results in regression, not progression. For Butler, the process by which we evolve towards a queer future takes place in the pursuit of kinship.

While we may feel prompted to view the deterioration of construct ooloi bodies as indicative of a biological, reproductive imperative, Jodahs still defies the time of reproduction. While sexually experimenting with a human female, Jodahs says, “She kissed me before I left her. I think it was an experiment for her. For me it was an enjoyment. [She] let me touch her a little more, sink filaments of sensory tentacles into her along the lengths of our bodies. She liked that” (Butler, *Imago* 64). This female partner does not produce children with Jodahs, suggesting that Jodahs has the agency to act on sexual desires outside of fulfilling its reproductive drive. Jodahs expresses the same sensual enjoyment when kissing its male partner Tomas (119). By presenting the reader with a non-binary character who explores sexual attraction to both male and female partners outside of a reproductive imperative, Butler allows Jodahs to suggest the possibility of queer futurity.

While building towards the queer future, Jodahs also challenges Halberstam’s notion of family time. Since the construct ooloi are a new genetic species, the Oankali initially do not consider them as a part of Oankali-human family structure. Jodahs demands the Oankali to reconfigure their standards for acceptable environments in order to mitigate an essentially new form of Oankali-human families with construct ooloi at the center. In this structure, Jodahs and its partners show the same symbiosis present in Oankali-human families without the implicit objectification of human partners in the

latter. For example, as the ooloi have the power to heal maladies through physical contact, Jodahs provides physical benefits for its partners. When kissing Tomas, Jodahs savors “the healing that had taken place so far. Invisible healing as well as shrinkage of visible tumors. His optic nerve was being restored—against the original genetic advice of his body” (Butler, *Imago* 119). This kindness is reciprocated by Jodahs’s chosen partners, who watch over Jodahs during its transition: “Tomas lifted my unconscious body, Jesusa helping him with me now that I was deadweight. I have a clear, treasured memory of the two of them carrying me into the small room . . . they handled me with great gentleness and care, as they had from the beginning of my change” (142). From both passages, we see how Jodahs has cultivated an atmosphere of trust and inclusion between itself and its partners, in contrast to the Oankali’s use isolation and sterilization as a means of creating an acceptable environment.

Jodahs also challenges the time of inheritance. Whereas the Oankali consider Jodahs a new species and offer it only isolation, Jodahs reconfigures its inheritance to incorporate both its human and Oankali halves. We see the beginning of this change when Jodahs states, “We [constructs] feel our Humanity. It helps us to understand both [humans] and the Oankali” (Butler, *Imago* 11). Jodahs’s Oankali half appears most evident when establishing a bio-chemical, symbiotic connection between its partners. Regarding the human construct children, the trilogy suggests that the human contradiction prevents humans from fully comprehending and enacting symbiosis. However, Jodahs offers a more optimistic view, stating, “To me, the conflict was spice. It had been deadly to the Human species, but it would not be deadly to Jesusa or Tomas any more than it had been to my parents [, and my] children would not have it at all” (154).



To Jodahs, humanity is not lost to the human contradiction, for it is still (part) human. Through constructs, humanity plays an active role in creating a new, symbiotic worldview suggestive of queer futurity.

Butler uses the language of comparison to show how Jodahs equates human and Oankali importance. The visual appearance of the Oankali council's tentacles connecting to each other reminds Jodahs of "Lilith's rounded black cloud of hair. Every strand seemed to go its own different way, bending, twisting, spiraling, angling. Yet together they formed a symmetrical, recognizable shape, and all were attached to the same head" (Butler, *Imago* 217). This image links the human body with the Oankali body, signifying that the barrier between what we consider familiar and alien has become thin by Jodahs' time. As opposed to the inheritance of isolation offered by the Oankali, Jodahs has reorganized its inheritance as the positive assimilation of the Oankali's and humanity's best parts.

Jodahs' approach to the time of inheritance reflects issues of racial difference as well. The above image refers to Lilith's natural hair, an important signifier for black identity, somewhat lost by the post-Civil Rights and post-feminist era of the Xenogenesis trilogy's publication. By using the image of natural black hair to describe the meeting that enables Jodahs' queer future, Butler demonstrates how race and queerness are both important parts of humanity's progress. This passage avoids the representation of racial difference by extraterrestrials, offering instead a liminal, queer perspective in which conversations about futurity include recognizable symbols of empowered blackness. In this way, Butler continues to participate in Womack's conception of Afro-Futurism: a

queer, fluid representation of a future that embraces an intersectional politics of difference.

Conclusion: The Queer Family of the Future

In embracing difference, we also embrace change. Both *Mind of My Mind* and *Imago* leave the reader with the importance of growth. For example, after Mary destroys Doro in their psychic battle, she says, “Doro was dead. Finally, thoroughly dead. Now we were free to grow again—we, his children” (Butler, *Mind of My Mind* 217). Not only does Mary invoke growth directly, but she draws our attention to the fact that Doro’s families, his “children,” are now free to produce a better future. She has enacted change by winning her battle with an oppressive, static patriarchy. The end of *Imago* also offers a hopeful look towards the future. The Oankali grant Jodahs a seed that will produce an organic spaceship like the one they arrived in. Jodahs and those who join it will leave Earth to find new partners, further queering their already hybrid identities and worldview. When planting this seed, Jodahs says, “I chose a spot near the river. There I prepared the seed to go into the ground. I gave it a thick, nutritious coating, then brought it out of my body through my right sensory hand. I planted it deep in the rich soil of the riverbank. Seconds after I had expelled it, I felt it begin the tiny positioning movements of independent life” (Butler, *Imago* 220). The image of a seed being planted signals the beginning of independent life, growth toward a new future. The queer families of Butler’s fiction have enabled this growth.

#### CHAPTER IV: CONCLUSION

As we have seen, the present conversation of queer studies on Butler's work can be expanded in order to address how Butler's characters come to understand their individual queer identities as a part of a larger family/community identity, thus offering readers alternatives to group gender/sexual imperatives. The Butler Family explores the potentialities of queer family formations. In contesting racist, sexist, heteronormative families, Butler also posits the black mother as the heart of the Butler Family, championing progressive kinship structures based on the historical present of her cultural environment as a black feminist. In order to maintain the promise of growth and diversity offered by the Butler Family, I have explored how Butler uses her Patternist and Xenogenesis novels to enable a queer future, particularly through the children and descendants of her queer black mothers, Anyanwu and Lilith. Mary of *Mind of My Mind* and Jodahs of *Imago* particularly contest the strictures of heteronormative futurity, as figured by Halberstam's conception of the time of reproduction, family time, and the time of inheritance. Ultimately, through expounding on the powers of symbiosis and change, Butler's fiction presents worlds in which an anti-racist, feminist queerness deposes heteronormativity by virtue of its compassion and adaptability, securing a queer future.

In exploring these topics, this thesis contributes to Butler scholarship by showing how her writing centers in opposition to institutions that set strict and limited parameters for gender identity, sexual orientation, and domestic configurations. In Butler, we see that the characters who resist fluidity cause significant harm to themselves, those around them, and their cultures as a whole. By contrast, characters who embrace their own

queerness—including its demands for growth and change—and make it a vital element of their family constellations create the promises of a queer futurity.

Furthermore, this thesis has interrogated race within conceptions of queerness. Through Butler's queer interracial families, we see the importance of grappling with oppression on a variety of intersecting levels. As Butler's characters contest oppressive hegemonies, she demonstrates how science fiction can denaturalize and destabilize concepts of futurity reliant on racist as well as heteronormative and sexist perspectives. By bringing Afrofuturism into discussion with queer futurity, we see how Butler's work points to paths out of oppressive social structures.

There are other points related to queerness that I have not been able to develop in this thesis. For example, given Butler's interests in biology, motherhood, and parenting, future work might explore the nature vs. nurture argument in queer studies as it relates to Butler's work. Generally, the nature vs. nurture argument considers whether different aspects of a person, such as personality, sexuality, etc., are the product of one's genetic make-up or environmental factors such as upbringing. This argument proves particularly contentious in queer studies, as many theorists and LGBT individuals believe that neither category solely encompasses the inception of queer identity. Given Butler's interests in biology, one wonders how, if at all, her work validates or challenges theories that seek to compartmentalize both gay and trans experiences into solely biochemical occurrences.

My readings and conclusions are also relevant to other works by Butler. For example, queerness and family appear in her story "Bloodchild" (1984). Here, a young boy named Gan, descended from human space explorers, lives on an alien planet that has shifted from treating humans as animals to giving them protection and some facets of

equality. The aliens care for their human families, but also use them to host their eggs, cutting out the “grub” when it reaches an age in which it would endanger human life by eating its way out. Gan faces impregnation with an alien egg in a kind of male pregnancy fantasy that queers sexual reproduction as it broaches the topic of human-alien hybrid families.

As for Butler’s later oeuvre, the apocalyptic near-future of the Parable series (two novels, published in 1993 and 1998) prompts further speculation as to whether Butler finds the queer future attainable amidst humanity’s own self-destructive actions. Here, we find Earth in the middle of an environmental collapse, abetted largely by humanity’s inability to search for solutions outside of its self-interest. In this near-future, the heroine Lauren Olamina, a powerful empath, develops a new religion called “Earthseed,” the “god” of which is “Change.” Lauren gathers a chosen family in which she forms a non-traditional relationship with an older man (in *Parable of the Sower*) while later exploring her bisexuality (in *Parable of the Talents*). At the end of the series, Lauren aims to take her religion to the stars via space travel. This move is perhaps troubling, because if humanity cannot reach the queer future on Earth, how will it do any better on other planets? On the other hand, this move demonstrates Butler’s rare optimism, as Lauren and the followers of Earthseed believe that a mantra of embracing change has enough to ensure mankind’s survival. Through this conflict between humanity’s destructiveness and change the Parable series offers rich content for discussions of the Butler Family.

In conceptualizing the queer future, Butler presents families that overcome the past and present to reach a future of change and fluidity. While her passing halted the work of a writer engaging with queerness, her literary legacy continues to inspire readers

who dive into her SF looking for an important repository of intersectional queer studies. In the final instance, literature, particularly speculative fiction such as Butler's SF, offers reflections of the present and possible futures. Understanding the potential of such writing through theoretically and critically informed close readings can inspire our individual potential to fight for a more accepting and loving future.

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