Becoming "Living Matter": Alive Things in Octavia Butler’s Xenogenesis Series

Zackary Gregory
Utah State University

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.usu.edu/gradreports

Part of the African American Studies Commons, American Literature Commons, Feminist Philosophy Commons, Literature in English, North America, Ethnic and Cultural Minority Commons, and the Other Feminist, Gender, and Sexuality Studies Commons

Recommended Citation
https://digitalcommons.usu.edu/gradreports/1727
Becoming “Living Matter”: Alive Things in Octavia Butler’s *Xenogenesis* Series

by

Zackary Gregory

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF SCIENCE

in

Literature, Culture, and Composition

Approved:

____________________
Shane Graham, Ph.D.
Major Professor

____________________
Adena Rivera-Dundas, Ph.D.
Committee Member

____________________
Ryan Moeller, Ph.D.
Committee Member

UTAH STATE UNIVERSITY
Logan, Utah

2023
ABSTRACT

Becoming “Living Matter”: Alive Things in Octavia Butler’s *Xenogenesis* Series

by

Zackary Gregory, Master of Science

Utah State University, 2023

Major Professor: Shane Graham
Department: English

This project seeks to explore the ways Octavia Butler’s *Xenogenesis* trilogy complicates humans’ understandings of subjectivity and human exceptionalism by challenging the concept of Otherness. Octavia Butler’s *Xenogenesis* series focuses on adaptability and acceptance of the nonhuman Other by depicting a forced encounter between humans and an alien species called the Oankali. Characters within the series grapple with a dynamic understanding of themselves, having to renegotiate the concept of the Other as they deal with intelligent nonhuman Beings and *animate* objects. Further, characters in the series are coerced into accepting the transformation of humanity into something other than human as they integrate into what the Oankali call a “gene trade.”

In this thesis, I seek to expand the ongoing conversation about *Xenogenesis* by applying a new theoretical perspective to the text. I specifically explore the Oankali’s ontological framework, how they define themselves in the world, by placing *Xenogenesis* in conversation with new materialist theory. I pull specifically from Jane Bennett’s *Vibrant Matter* (2010) to help readers understand the alien construction of subjecthood and their relation to the material world. I show how coupling *Xenogenesis* with this theoretical lens complicates anthropocentric ontology by highlighting the agency and
animacy of the material world. Butler’s fictional alien species questions the human notion of “matter as passive stuff, as raw, brute, or inert” (Bennett vii). Applying this theoretical lens to the series complicates reading the Oankali as villains and places the aliens in a morally ambiguous position. Further, I argue that the alien ontology becomes a hopeful alternative for human hierarchies if understood through new materialism.
DEDICATION

To the soil outside of the USU Geology building and the strawberries I ate there on the first day of graduate school orientation.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I owe my gratitude to many people and things that helped me write this thesis. I am grateful for my committee. My chair, Dr. Shane Graham, whose work as a professor introduced me to Butler’s work, and who has helped turn my unwieldy and often clumsy thoughts into writing. Dr. Adena Rivera-Dundas whose perspective and thoughtful questions helped add nuance and complexity to my thinking. Dr. Ryan Moeller for his encouragement and feedback throughout this project; his comments were always constructive and often delightful. (It’s all in the hips.) There are so many others in the English program at USU who didn’t work directly on this project but made it possible. I feel fortunate to have taken so many engaging courses with many amazing faculty members and would also like to extend my thanks to the staff members in Ray B. West.

I would also like to thank Millie Tullis and Taylor Wyatt for their friendship. Thank you, Millie, for helping me organize this project into manageable sections and providing needed encouragement with plenty of “warmups.” I owe my biggest thanks to my partner Olivia Binks who helped me develop my thinking and stay sane through this process. Thanks for skiing, biking, reading through early drafts, and enjoying morning coffee with me. On that note, I would like to thank the clay from Southern Utah that forms my favorite mug and the hands of my friend Tom who crafted it.
Octavia Butler begins her *Xenogenesis* trilogy with the words, “Alive! Still Alive. Alive… Again.” These are the first words Lilith Iyapo speaks when she is awoken inside a strange cell in an alien spaceship (*Dawn* 1). As Lilith is slowly coaxed out of her holding cell by her abductors, readers learn that life on Earth has been destroyed by atomic war, that the alien ship is in orbit around Earth, and the Oankali abducted many more humans with the intent of sending them back to Earth after the planet is rehabilitated. But there’s a catch: Lilith learns she’s “in the hands of people who manipulate DNA as naturally as we manipulate pencils and paintbrushes” (*Dawn* 188).

The manipulation of different species’ DNA is done by the Oankali as an essential part of their evolutionary process, which, unlike natural selection on Earth, is a conscious effort by the aliens. As one Oankali explains to Lilith, “We do what you would call genetic engineering… We do it naturally. We must do it. It renews us, enables us to survive as an evolving species instead of specializing ourselves into extinction or stagnation” (*Dawn* 43). The living bodies of humans rescued or captured, depending on one’s perspective, are to be used in the next evolutionary phase of the Oankali.

The Oankali can be read as an allegorical stand-in for colonial powers that established the Atlantic slave trade and forced African people into the Middle Passage, and many readers and critics have drawn this connection. Lilith’s experience in the Oankali ship parallels the experience of Africans who were kidnapped and sold as slaves. As Kristen Lillvis iterates, Butler’s work “features literal and metaphorical Middle Passages in several of her works including… *Dawn*” (81). The connections between human captives in *Dawn* and the Middle Passage are made quite clear by Lilith’s experience on the spaceship. Her sense of time is warped as she sits in a small holding
cell, “kept helpless, alone and ignorant” (Dawn 3). Further, Lilith’s autonomy and agency over her own body has been taken from her. Upon one awakening Lilith notices a new scar across her body from a recent operation. She feels as though she “did not own herself any longer. Even her flesh could be cut and stitched without her consent or knowledge” (Dawn 5). This line signifies the loss of Lilith’s subjeclhood as she “moves from black subject to black object” just as African slaves lost their subjeclhood in the Middle Passage (Lillvis 81).

The opening scenes in Dawn describing Lilith’s imprisonment speak to the direct experiences of the Middle Passage and at the same time, speaks to the generational trauma and impact of the slave trade. As the trilogy progresses, Lilith learns the repercussions of her meeting with the Oankali will not end with her own life, but “commences a series of psychological, physical and ontological shifts” that her descendants will need to negotiate and struggle with (Lillvis 82). The second and third novels can be read as allegories that pose questions about issues of race and gender under white supremacist systems constructed after emancipation as two of Lilith’s human/alien hybrid offspring are born into Oankali villages on earth.

The allegorical connections between Lilith Iyapo’s abduction and the experience of the Middle Passage are clear. However, Butler’s text doesn’t always code the Oankali as stand-ins for human cultures of domination. As science fiction author Larissa Lai points out, “the Oankali figure sometimes as white, [but] they also figure sometimes as Black. This is the beauty of allegory–positions can unexpectedly swap places if the allegory is open enough, which Butler’s are” (110). The Oankali keep Lilith in isolation, incessantly question her without responding to her questions, and, most abhorrently,
perform surgery and impregnate her without her consent. However, they also save her from a painful death on Earth which was destroyed by the nuclear war and perform surgery on Lilith to extract a deadly cancer. The Oankali provide a way to rehabilitate the Earth's ecology for a time and ensure living material will survive even after the Earth cannot support it.

Thus, Butler’s trilogy allows readers to hold two truths in their minds at one time: they are simultaneously villains and saviors. This complicates applying a racial allegory to the human-Oankali relationship. Because the Oankali are both benevolent and oppressive, applying the allegory of colonization straight across could work to present colonization as a “healing” force, as their project does save humanity from complete extinction (Miller 340). Conversely, reading the Oankali as colonizers could be a snug fit as they keep humans celibate unless humans reproduce in ways deemed appropriate by the Oankali. I agree with the claim made by Jim Miller that reading “the Oankali in the ‘masters/rapists/aliens’ triad” is reductive. Such a reading relies on ignoring the ways *Xenogenesis* “defamiliarizes the victim/victimizer paradigm and shows it to be an inadequate way of understanding oppression” (343). Dislocating the Oankali from the allegorical colonizer is not to say that Butler’s trilogy ignores issues of race and violent human hierarchical constructions. These human constructed hierarchies are a focal point in all her work, particularly *Xenogenesis*.

I intend to present another reading, however, that highlights how Butler’s Oankali provide insight into a different ontological relation to the Other juxtaposed to the human relation to the Other. I argue that both humans and aliens create subjecthood through relations to the Other. However, while human positioning toward the Other is focused on
the domination of the Other, the Oankali relation to the Other is more cooperative and integrative. This crucial difference sheds light on why the Oankali are at once oppressive and good-natured. Allowing the Oankali to remain in an ambiguous position creates what Tom Idema describes as a “genuine human-alien contact in which humanity is allowed to transform” (55).

In this essay, I examine the ways humans in the trilogy carve top-down social constructions into their new reality as they grapple with their abduction and loss of autonomy. I illustrate how human characters grasp onto hierarchies to salvage their own subjecthood by trying to reassert their domination of the Other. Additionally, I use the theoretical work of Donna Haraway and Mel Y. Chen to describe the ontological reasons why particular characters resist parting with conceptual hierarchies that fortify their sense of self. I then turn to an analysis of the Oankali concept of subjecthood. I use a New Materialist lens to argue that their ontological stance is more horizontal. I show how applying Jane Bennett’s concepts found in her book *Vibrant Matter* troubles common Western notions of subjecthood, animacy, and agency that better describe Oankali ontology. This reading shows how Oankali ontology elides anthropocentric practices of forming the subject which requires ordering reality in top-down structures and calls for a reexamination of human hierarchal structures that enable the exploitation of others. I do not mean to completely exonerate the Oankali. Instead, I wish to show how the species encounter in *Xenogenesis* asks readers to accept that human “behavior is controlled to some extent by biological forces” (Potts 333). Further, I illustrate how analyzing the Oankali ontological position can help readers “work around [human hierarchical]
programming” by presenting an alien species that challenges individualistic human subjecthood (Potts 333).
CHAPTER II MAIN BODY

Subjugating the Other and Human Hierarchies

When Lilith is first told her purpose is to resettle Earth with a group of humans and Oankali. The Oankali also tell her they see two incompatible genetic characteristics within humans. Jdahya explains humans are both intelligent and hierarchical. He states, “When human intelligence served [hierarchy] instead of guiding it, when human intelligence did not even acknowledge it as a problem but took pride in it…your people did not realize what a dangerous thing they were doing” (Dawn 41). Jdahya further explains that either of these characteristics “alone would have been useful, would have aided the survival of your species. But the two together are lethal. It was only a matter of time before they destroyed you” (Dawn 40). The Oankali claim that if humans do not correct their hierarchical thinking, they will inevitably finish the job of their own self destruction, started by the nuclear war.

Placing the Xenogenesis trilogy in conversation with a theoretical framework from Donna Haraway reveals why human characters cling to social hierarchies. Haraway explains that human top-down structures are essential in the formation of Western notions of the autonomous subject, or “the One” in her words. The self or individual arises after defining what is not the self by framing reality in top-down dualisms. What is subject stands over what is Other in this dualistic framework. Haraway describes common dualisms as “self/other, mind/body, culture/nature, male/female, civilized/primitive, reality/appearance, whole/part, agent/resource, maker/made, active/passive, right/wrong, truth/illusion, total/partial, God/man” (143) These binary constructions “have all been
systemic to the logics and practices of domination of women, people of colour, nature, workers, animals—in short, domination of all constituted as others, whose task is to mirror the self” (Haraway 143). Conceptualizing reality in a top-down dualistic structure defines the self as “the One who is not dominated” and directs that domination onto the Other. The power given to the subject by the act of dominating the Other creates the illusion of the “autonomy of the self” (Haraway 143).

Human characters in *Xenogenesis* attempt to reestablish hierarchical boundaries between themselves and the Other as soon as they are able. This is an attempt to order their new existence and revive their sense of individual autonomy. When Lilith awakens a man named Curt, his immediate questions seek to establish a human hierarchy in which he can position himself. He asks, “‘where are we’… ‘Who’s in charge here?’” Lilith tells him she is a fellow prisoner but is in charge. Curt asks, “Who are you working for? Which side?” Curt reaches for a dualistic hierarchy that he can use to orient himself in his new setting. However, the concepts Curt is used to cannot be applied to anyone aboard the ship, and Lilith responds, “‘Down on Earth… there are no people left to draw lines on maps and say which sides of those lines are the right sides’” (*Dawn* 158-159). Curt’s questions point to the human need for hierarchies in structuring reality described by Haraway. His questions also illustrate how these hierarchies can be completely arbitrary. Hierarchical constructions like nationality cannot be applied to the new reality in *Xenogenesis*. As Lilith points out, the lines “drawn on maps” and defining which side were the “right sides” were human constructions in the first place. These constructions are what justified nuclear war and the destruction of the Earth’s ecosystem.
In the absence of certain hierarchies like nationality, humans apply other hierarchical structures of gender, sexuality, and race in *Xenogenesis* to reclaim their previous sense of subjectivity. Patriarchal hierarchies arise aboard the ship and are used to justify “the most savage fights” among humans (*Dawn* 166). The “savage fights” reach a boiling point when a woman is assaulted by a group of mostly men, who insist on upholding a patriarchal heteronormative hierarchy. They attempt to force a woman named Allison into a sexual relationship. The group claims that because Allison is a woman, “It’s her duty to get together with someone… We pair off!… One man, one woman” (200). This conflict illustrates how human social hierarchies can be used to read other human bodies as “maps of power” (Haraway 146). In this case, Allison is positioned on the subservient side of the male/female dualism. Ultimately, groups of humans who reject the Oankali use patriarchal hierarchies to turn female bodies into passive objects to be ruled over by male subjects. This hierarchy presents women as having “less selfhood [and]… less at stake in masculine autonomy” (Haraway 143). Through the act of defining what is passive and without subjecthood, the patriarchal hierarchy locates men as “privileged humans [who] are granted the status of thinking subject” atop a hierarchy of other beings (Chen 43).

*Xenogenesis* complicates social hierarchies by changing how bodies are read as signifiers of power. For example, Lilith’s body becomes an anomaly within patriarchal ideals used to designate power and subjectivity because she is physically strong, and possesses more knowledge and authority than male bodies. To the resisters, Lilith’s body is an unreadable map of power because she does not fit the patriarchal construction of “femininity.” As a woman, Lilith cannot be granted more power or subjecthood within
the patriarchy even though people perceive her body as more masculine. Some characters deal with this contradiction by “telling people [Lilith] is a man,” but most decide she is not “human at all” (Dawn 164-165). Eventually resisters Other Lilith by ontologically relocating her as an Oankali “animal.” The resisters must relocate Lilith outside of humanity entirely to reduce her subjecthood. Here resisters illustrate Mel Chen’s idea that “Language users use animacy hierarchies to manipulate, affirm, and shift the ontologies that matter the world” (Chen 42). Chen uses the word “matter” here as a verb to suggest that language is a type of “alchemical magic”; it is not only a descriptive tool for reality but orders reality (Chen 23). Lilith’s human enemies use language to permanently remove her from a position of an active subject. They start to call her “Lilith-the-animal” which removes her from the position of a thinking subject (Imago 62). Their linguistic violence provides a justification for physical violence against Lilith and ultimately leads to the murder of her partner Joseph who is dehumanized for his ethnicity and for being with Lilith.

The patriarchal hierarchy that privileges male autonomy above all others is cemented as a governing ontological framework when resisters return to Earth in Xenogenesis. Resister villages maintain that men should have more autonomy and subjectivity, whereas women are turned into objects of trade. In Adulthood Rites one human village proudly named “Phoenix” is said to have “more women than any other village because it traded metal for them. It grew cotton and made soft, comfortable clothing. It raised and tapped… rubber trees, that produced a form of oil that could be burned in their lamps without refinement” (AR 107). Women are reduced to objects traded for metal and counted among other resources like cotton, rubber, and oil within
resister villages. Understanding how the role of women in a patriarchal hierarchy is reduced because people within that framework adopt definitions of women as passive objects is critical in understanding the difference between the Oankali relation to the Other and human relations to the Other (Chen 42). In the next section I turn to the material realities in *Xenogenesis* that complicate human notions of subjecthood, and by extension the objectification of other humans.

**Animacy Hierarchy**

In their book *Animacies*, Mel Y. Chen describes how humans use language to create hierarchies to order living and nonliving things on a gradient scale of animacy. Chen describes this animacy scale as a “‘great chain of being,’ an ordered hierarchy from inanimate object to plant to nonhuman animal to human, by which subject properties are differentially distributed (with humans possessing maximal and optimal subjectivity at the top)” (Chen 40). Chen’s theory of animacy relies on the human assumption that Jane Bennett describes as conceptualizing “matter as passive stuff, as raw, brute, or inert” (Bennett vii). By Western definitions, to be human is to exercise power over things found lower on the animacy hierarchy, inanimate objects, plants and nonhuman animals. Further, “When humans are blended with objects along this cline, they are effectively ‘dehumanized,’ and simultaneously de-subjectified and objectified” (Chen 40). The material world, seen as lifeless and passive, must be mastered or escaped in order to prove human autonomy and subjectivity.
Dawn illustrates how Lilith, who eventually comes to “understanding the perspective” of the Oankali, initially frames her experience on a “life-matter” binary to de-subjectify an Oankali she doesn’t like (Hampton 68). When Lilith first meets an ooloi, a third-gendered Oankali, “She took pleasure in the knowledge the Oankali themselves used the neuter pronoun in referring to the ooloi. Some things deserved to be called ‘it’” (53). Despite Lilith’s fantastic ability to adapt to the Oankali’s frightening appearance rather quickly, she still finds pleasure in categorizing the ooloi as a material object. Lilith’s enjoyment in linguistically degrading the ooloi to an object or animal speaks to Chen’s concept of linguistic animacy hierarchies. Further, it shows that Lilith still believes that the “human organism is a quantum leap about other organisms” who are closer to a dumb, brute matter (Bennett 86).

Common human notions that reduce material settings to “a background for the human subject” are challenged in Xenogenesis, since everything that happens in Dawn happens inside a living being (Alaimo 1). The spaceship Lilith wakes up in is a planet-sized living being that the Oankali have a biological affinity for and “a strong, symbiotic relationship” with (Dawn 37). Being placed inside a living world forces human characters to rethink their “habit[s] of parsing the world into dull matter (it, things) and vibrant life (us, beings)” (Bennett vii). “The ship’s own living matter” forces humans to renegotiate their relationship to the material world (Dawn 75). Lilith’s perception is challenged when she sees the Oankali manipulating the ship’s “living matter” to open walls and raise sleeping platforms that seem to grow from the floor. Lilith, realizing she had mistaken a living being for inert material, thinks back to how she had “beaten,” “kicked,” and “clawed” the walls of her cell (Dawn 31). The boundary between life and matter is fully
broken down for Lilith when she inadvertently poisoned the ship by burying an orange peel in the ship’s pseudo soil. “The soil began to smell, to stink… bubble and grow” (75). The poison spreads to the “pseudo-plants” which “darkened and lashed about as though in agony.” Lilith “focused on the fact that it was alive, and she had probably caused it pain. She had not merely caused an interesting effect; she had caused harm” (76). The scene exemplifies the vibrancy of matter as Lilith witnesses an instant material pain she caused. Further, she witnesses the pain of something that is seen as inanimate by human standards, soil. Interacting with the ship requires humans to rethink material bodies as “vivid entities not entirely reducible to the context in which human subjects set them” (Bennett 5). The vibrant material of the ship challenges humans “To begin to experience the relationship between persons and other materiality more horizontally,” but many humans refuse a more horizontal mattering of reality (Bennett 10).

Even after leaving the ship in the second book, Adulthood Rites, connections between human and alien characters and material places remain vibrant and challenge Western notions of inanimate matter. Each part of the novel is titled after different places: Lo, Phoenix, Chkakichdhak (the Oankali ship), and Home. Each place presents a different way humans and aliens interact with their material surroundings. Resister villages focus on restoring hierarchies that reestablish human Western concepts of autonomy and subjecthood. Bennett’s words provide insight into the different ways resisters reconstruct human subjecthood: “The philosophical project of naming where subjectivity begins and ends is too often bound up with fantasies of a human uniqueness in the eyes of God, of escape from materiality, or of mastery of nature; and even where it is not, it remains an aporetic or quixotic endeavor” (Vibrant Matter ix). Reviving religion
in part recreates an image of “human uniqueness in the eyes of god.” In Adulthood Rites, the resisters mint gold coins with symbols of the cross, the words “He is risen. We shall rise” stamped into them (133). By using Christian symbols, resisters equate themselves to the resurrected Christ and physically resurrect human exceptionalism by constructing old towns and cities. By building material separations between humanity and the natural environment resisters reestablish a hierarchy with the natural world after it is shaken by an encounter with other intelligent beings. In tandem with the rebirth of religion, the resisters fortify humanity’s mastery over nature through building physical barriers between humans and the natural world.

By building Western style houses, farms, and towns, resisters in Phoenix physically fence off the natural world. Their physical barriers simultaneously reconstruct the illusion of humanity as the “ontological center or hierarchical Apex” over the material Other (Bennett 11). The Oankali destroy what remains of human cities because they recognize that returning humans to former ways of living, in settlements that physically separate humanity and the material world, could lead to the fortification of human hierarchical tendencies. The aliens want to return humans to places that are “clean of radioactivity and history” to prevent the humans from reverting back to self destructive habits (Dawn 36). History represented by human cities is as dangerous as radioactivity. The cities could reinforce the idea that humans are “in a position superior to everything else on earth” (Bennett 87). Despite the Oankali efforts, the ontological conceptualization of human superiority is created in resister villages as they rebuild. When a resister named Tino visits a “trade” village from Phoenix, he imagines that the Oankali/humans would “have made a city” with their superior technology but discovers their villages are made
up of “huts with primitive gardens.” Disgusted, Tino tells Lilith, “It’s primitive! You live like savages!... You’ve got kids to plan for and provide for, and you’re going to let them slide right back to being cavemen!” (Adulthood Rites 34). In the resisters’ perspective, “When humans are blended with objects… they are effectively ‘dehumanized,’ and simultaneously de-subjectified” (Chen 40). Thus, Tino sees the closeness of the material world as a sign of corruption and contamination of the people who live in the “trade” village, aptly named “Lo.”

_Xenogenesis_ shows how framing the material Other as inert, passive, and brute can be extremely dangerous because it is rooted in hierarchical structures explained earlier such as patriarchy. These systems can easily become “oppressive conceptual framework[s],” because within them “power is understood as ‘power over’” (Alonso 217). A villager in Lo explicitly points out the connection between the domination over nature and violence against other humans when she states that “all [resisters] can think of to do is build useless houses and kill one another” (AR 35). In the perspective of the resisters, they are responding to the loss of “autonomy of Western man.” (Idema 62). They do so by rebuilding both physical and mental fortresses for their subjectivity but in doing so they also build justifications for the domination “suffered by human and nonhuman creatures labeled the _other_: women, ethnic minorities, children, nonhuman animals, and nature, among others.” (Alonso 216). Lilith points to the inhospitable environment created by social hierarchies in resister villages when she asks Tino, “‘how many of those real houses of yours were empty when you left?’” (AR 34). The empty houses and the acceptance of violence show how “patriarchy and the domination of nature, as well as other forms of oppression, are deeply intertwined” (Alonso 217). The
hierarchical structures that justify the domination of nature can also be used to justify the domination of anyone who falls lower within the conceptual framework.

While resister villages establish a dominant vertical relationship to the material world, hybrid human-alien communities interact with the material world in a more horizontal relationship based on symbiosis. The village of Lo itself is an animate being, a young Oankali ship, which slowly grows with residents and the surrounding ecosystem. The Oankali train the entity to take in material at a rate that preserves life and teach it “to provide what the animals needed in a form they would accept” (AR 69). The infant ship will take in diverse material from Earth, “a huge biological bank,” until it leaves earth with elements of earth life contained within itself (259). As an entity in “symbiotic relationship[s]” to its surrounding, Lo represents a different mattering of the world.

Whereas Phoenix is founded expressly on the ideals of escaping from materiality, the construction of Lo depends on biological mutualism. Lo intakes material at a sustainable pace that preserves plant and animal life. As a living being, Lo is in conversation with its surroundings and inhabitants. Not only does Lo provide food for the aliens and humans who live there but it also provides for terrestrial plants and animals. These symbiotic relationships foster an understanding that survival “depends on the collaboration, cooperation, or interactive interference of many bodies and forces” within the interconnected ecosystem (Bennett 21).

Living with the Oankali teaches humans the importance of “attentiveness, or even ‘respect’” for the material world that the resisters largely ignore (Bennett ix). Lilith is a prime example of one human learning to acknowledge and cooperate with the material world much like the Oankali do. Despite being raised in a city and acknowledging that
there are “other humans who already knew how to live in the wilderness,” Lilith becomes an attentive and skilled gardener (*Dawn* 35). Because Lilith is “willing to learn” what the Oankali teach, she becomes attentive to what the land needed, whether it was rest, being reclaimed by forest, or fertilized with biodiverse matter. Lilith’s image as woman gardener who cultivates a polyculture garden in partnership with the natural ecosystem. Lilith’s garden stands in contrast to the “vast farms” of Phoenix, where “Human men worked in the fields, planting something” (*AR* 107, 109). Though the text never specifies what is planted in the vast farms, the phrasing recalls the massive monocrops of wheat or corn associated with modern industrial agricultural practices.¹ Phoenix’s farming practices are rooted in a hierarchical mindset that draws lines between natural ecosystems and materials set apart for human use. These boundaries reinforce ideals of humanity’s escape from materiality and ignore relationships between what is viewed as “wild” and what is propagated by humans.

*Xenogenesis* contrasts human hierarchical societies that justify humanity’s domination over the material Other with the alien society that frames other material beings as essential cohabitants. Human resister villages lean into the “human contradiction” by reestablishing social power hierarchies as founding principles. These villages are violent, participate in slave trades, mismanage resources, and deal with constant raiding. Conversely, trade villages center human and aliens inside an interconnected tangle of other beings that are both animate and inanimate. The “trade”

---
¹ The nutrition depletion of soils due to monocropping contrasted with more indigenous practices of heterogeneous crops that build symbiotic, mutually beneficial relationships is too big of a topic to discuss here.
villages are not perfect visions of utopia and limit autonomy of human beings. However, those in trade villages live in a horizontal power dynamic created by the chemical bonds between human and alien. These bonds made by the Oankali gently coerce the Other into assimilation, rather than the violent domination of the Other seen in human villages. In the next section, I explore the aliens’ perceptions and ontology and their need to merge with difference. Though humans are coerced into the relationship with the Oankali, this merger can provide insight into a different ontological relationship to the Other. Looking into how the aliens perceive material bodies on a molecular level, including the ship, water, plants, animals, and human bodies, provides insight into how they present an image of “living together” with the Other (Idema 61).

The Permeable Self

Just as the human idea of subjecthood depends on the creation of the Other, so too does the Oankali sense of subjectivity. However, the Oankali physiology and their project of “trading” creates a different ontological stance toward what is Other and different. Instead of the idea of subjecthood arising from the domination of the Other, the Oankali sense of self arises from being materially interconnected to a network of other living and nonliving beings. In this section I examine the ways the alien ontological position is created through their physical interactions with material reality. From the Oankali perspective, the resisters’ concept of subjecthood defined as an impermeable individual that is closed off to what is different and insulated from the material world is impossible. This is because the Oankali consciously communicate with other bodies by material
chemical interchanges; these experiences with other bodies break down the boundaries between self and other. This is how human bodies operate as well, but human notions of agency and individuality are opposed to the idea of a permeable self.

*Adulthood Rites* and *Imago* provide insights into the permeable boundary between the Oankali and other material bodies. Akin specifically serves as a window into how the Oankali view their own subjecthood and individuality. In the first chapter of *AR*, Akin weirdly describes his own birth as he remembers it. Akin remembers the first sensations of being alive, and when he first perceived “himself as himself—individual, defined, separate from all the touches and smells, all the tastes, sights, and sounds that came to him” (*AR* 6). He starts to differentiate himself from the overwhelming sensory input: “Yet he came to know that he was also part of the people who touched him—that within them, he could find fragments of himself. He was himself, and he was those others” (*AR* 6). In resister terms, the bodies of the Oankali lack “uniformity and solidity of a recognizable, autonomous subject” because their bodies are “not one, but multiple” (Idema 58). The hard lines between self and other are erased because the Oankali concept of subjecthood consciously includes what is Other. They do not pretend to be singular bodies like humans but acknowledge that they are woven together with other living and nonliving beings.

The “body to body understanding” between each individual results in the complete dissolution of the self when the interactions between individuals become overwhelming (*AR* 6). Akin experiences a loss of subjecthood when he is sent to the spaceship to learn more about the Oankali. When Akin chemically connects to the ship and simultaneously all Oankali who are also connected to the ship, he is frightened by the
loss of individuality. During this experience, Akin “seemed completely blended, [into] one nervous system communicating within itself as any nervous system did.” He wonders, “How was it possible to break apart again? It was as though two containers of water had been poured together, then separated – each molecule returned to its original container” (AR 230). Akin “strove to control his own feelings, strove to accept the self-dissolving closeness” (AR 231). Nikanj describes the complete dissolution of the self through the neuro-connection as “a oneness that [humans] strive for, dream of, but can’t truly attain alone” (Dawn 214). The boundaries between individuals in Oankali society are regularly erased as they become one interlinked nervous system. The Oneness experienced by the Oankali is antithetical to the resister conceptual framework of subjecthood because it requires the melding of the self with multiple others. As Haraway suggests, in the Western framework to be Other “is to be multiple, without clear boundary, frayed, insubstantial” (143).

Chemical interactions are not limited to other living beings but extend to other forms of matter. River water in Imago is a great example of something that the Oankali witness as “aquiver with virtual force” (Bennett 57). When Jodahs goes swimming in a river and “tastes” the molecular make-up of the water, “River water… had two distinct flavors—hydrogen and oxygen?” (Imago 3). By tasting, investigating, and separating material into its basic molecules, the water itself “is figured as a vitality at work both inside and outside of selves” (Bennett 62). All matter, both alive and “dead,” becomes intertwined in a robust ecosystem in the Oankali ontological framework. Conversely, “humans need to interpret the world reductively as a series of fixed objects” (Bennett 57). The difference between the human and alien appraisal of different types of matter is
illustrated in the terms used to describe the river water. The Oankali call it “rich” while the humans call it “muddy” (Imago 4).

Alien encounters for the Oankali are essential to their survival, and their interest in diverse molecular constructions creates collaborative relationships to the Other. The yearning to seek out new biological diversity and new materials is evolutionarily hardwired into the Oankali. They use their bodies, especially the oolooi, as material archives that store molecular data from living beings and material objects. The Oankali species is itself a collection of diverse material from “from a number of other worlds,” and each body contains a collection of interconnected material collected by that individual (Dawn 11). In Adulthood Rites, Lilith sums up the difference between how the Oankali and humans frame what is different:

Humans persecute their different ones, yet they need them to give themselves definition and status. Oankali seek difference and collect it. They need it to keep themselves from stagnation and overspecialization. If you don’t understand this, you will. You’ll probably find both tendencies surfacing in your own behavior…When you feel a conflict, try to go the Oankali way. Embrace difference. (Adulthood Rites 88)

Humans focus on the domination and oppression of what they constitute as Other to define their subjecthood and power. Conversely, the Oankali need symbiotic relationships with the Other to sustain their own subjecthood.

The human project of building figurative boundaries that exclude certain people and privilege others is antithetical to the Oankali, who are able to completely lower the borders of subjecthood by immersing themselves in the experience of the material reality
of other bodies. They do not seek to prove their own exceptionalism or treat the material world or beings outside of their species as a passive backdrop. Instead, the Oankali “cultivate a more careful attentiveness to the out-side” because they can physically perceive how they are tied to other beings and how all material is a collection of small bodies. (Bennett 17). Creating the Oankali “self” is formed and sustained by biological affinities for and collaborations with what is different. As Butler points out the Oankali “can bond with anything. But they have to bond” (Potts 33). Further, because the Oankali can give each other feelings through chemical interchanges using their sensory tentacles, they do not need abstract language. Expressing how one feels for the Oankali is described as “giving” or “sharing” experiences directly through “multisensory images and signaling pressures” (AR 12).

The aliens’ ability to share each other’s experiences, to physically feel the pleasure and pain of another, raises questions about their ability to subjugate the Other. The Oankali are coercive, they reduce human freedom and induct them into the gene trade. However, the Oankali do not recognize their own ethical violations because their concept of a connected self presents an alternate view of agency. In the next section I examine how the Oankali’s ethical violations stem from a difference in ontological positioning. The Oankali sense of subjecthood is directly opposite to the human concept of self; it is based off their conscious connection to the Other and their own body’s extension into different bodies around them.

**Agency of Assemblages and Human Freewill**

In an interview published by *Science Fiction Studies*, Butler is asked about which species in *Xenogenesis* “comes off worse.” Butler responds by stating that “both species have
their strengths and weaknesses” (Potts 332). In this section, I explore how the Oankali ability to neurologically bond with their environment can be read as an ethical strength. However, their need to merge with the Other paradoxically results in their most serious human rights violations. Their biological dependence on the humans leads them to force humans to slowly accept assimilation. They hold humans on their ship and modify their bodies because they need to trade to survive. Treating humans this way certainly seems to indicate the Oankali have lied about being nonhierarchical and do adhere to an “oppressive conceptual framework” (Alonso 216). The paradox created by the Oankali “trade” and the physical bonds between species is what makes Butler’s aliens so fascinating. Their actions are morally reprehensible by human understanding of agency, freewill, and dignity. However, their need to chemically bond with the Other provides insight into their concept of agency that justifies their actions from their perspective. Their concept of agency is fundamentally different because of their need to bond. Opposite to the human concept of a free individual subject, the Oankali recognize free action as action taken by a “working group” after coming to a consensus (Bennett xvii). In the article “Treasured Strangers: Race, Biopolitics, and the Human in Octavia E. Butler’s Xenogenesis Trilogy,” Lisa Dowdall argues that “the symbiotic relationship between Lilith and the Oankali is not only a form of oppression, but also the only means of resistance available to humans within the racialized structures of a reimagined colonial system” (Dowdall 510). I agree with many aspects of Dowdall’s argument, but I do not agree that the Oankali are oppressive in the same terms as human colonial powers because of their connection to the material. Rather, I make a similar claim to Irene Sanz Alonso, who writes, “the Oankali see difference as something they can learn from. For
this reason, these aliens are unable to understand situations of oppression, such as those to which some women and hybrid children are subjected at the hands of certain groups of resisters” (Alonso 223). I agree that the Oankali don’t understand certain situations of oppression at the hands of the resisters but push this idea further by arguing that the Oankali fail to see *their* own actions as violations of human agency. The alien physical interaction with material reality changes how they understand agency, enabling oppressive situations until they learn how to interact with humans.

To better understand agency in the Oankali perspective, I apply Jane Bennett’s conception of assemblages. Bennett, following Deleuze and Guattari, chooses the term assemblage to describe the whole made up of a collection of parts; this can be individual bodies and whole ecosystems (Bennett 23). Assemblages in the New Materialist sense are “groupings of diverse elements, of vibrant materials of all sorts. Assemblages are living, throbbing confederations that are able to function despite the persistent presence of energies that confound them from within” (Bennett 24). All bodies are assemblages from the Oankali perspective because they can perceive the cellular makeup of each human. When the aliens reach out with their sensory tentacles, they find that “Each human is a heterogeneous compound of wonderfully vibrant, dangerously vibrant, matter” (Bennett 12-13). Perceptions of autonomy are altered within this perspective because the Oankali grant assemblages of tiny human cells freedom over what many humans describe as their soul or will. Through their perception of bodily assemblages, the Oankali level the mind/body dichotomy and challenge common notions of an “ensouled human organism” that somehow escapes materiality (Bennett 86). This complicates the idea that the Oankali intentionally act oppressively toward any human body and explains why their
practices seem to be at once exploitative and at the same time “therapeutic” (Dowdall 510).

Autonomy in the Oankali conception is constituted from actions not of the self but of groups of beings. This stands opposite of Western notions of autonomy that require a sole individual “actant,” “a source of action” (Bennett viii). The Oankali make decisions in accordance with a consensus among the assemblage of parts that make up a larger body. In their own society, the aliens make decisions by reaching a whole group consensus through linking material and chemical interchanges. Thus, the Oankali have a “congregational understanding of agency. While the smallest or simplest body or bit may indeed express a vital impetus, conatus or clinamen, an actant never really acts alone” (Bennett 21). Because decisions are made by coming to a group consensus, responsibility is shared across all beings who participate in a consensus. Unlike human understandings of individual autonomy that attribute credit or blame to one actant, the Oankali see autonomy happening on a species-wide scale. They “shared fault[s]” and shared triumphs (AR 55).

Understanding how the Oankali perceive agency of assemblages instead of the will of an individual changes how we read their interactions with humanity. The Oankali do not acknowledge the human hierarchical mind/body split because they operate within a framework that perceives the interconnected webs of material that make up each body. This complicates the idea of human consent because the Oankali consider the intentions of cells and molecules of a body instead of the “will” alone. They “perceived all that a living being said—all words, all gestures, and a vast array of other internal and external bodily responses. Ooloi absorbed everything and acted according to whatever consensus
they discovered. Thus, ooloi treated individuals as they treated groups of beings” (Imago 36). The fact that the Oankali interact with assemblages and not individuals creates a paradoxical stance. They are simultaneously monsters and benevolent rescuers. They do modify bodies without human consent, but it is ethically done in the alien view; the Oankali act “against one part of a [human’s] will” when the material make-up of a human body comes to a consensus (AR 55).

Decisions like the ones made in the beginning of Dawn to remove Lilith’s tumor become more understandable considering the Oankali can perceive the agency of Lilith’s bodily assemblage that “will” the removal of the cancerous cells. Further, the human notion that agency requires the mind to rule over the body is a confusing point for the Oankali. They are confronted with beings whose “body said one thing” but their “words said another” (Dawn 215). When the Oankali act in direct opposition to what humans say they want, they defend their actions by stating that they understand human bodies better than the humans do. This rationale provided by the aliens calls to mind justifications constructed by colonial powers to subjugate other people. However, colonial European powers falsely claimed to know their victim’s bodies by applying lenses of hierarchical dualisms, for example “whiteness” and “civilization.” However, Butler complicates this similarity by creating a species that biologically reads the chemicals of other bodies. The Oankali’s knowledge of human bodies does not stem from the same epistemological practice as the colonial project. Rather than using pseudo-scientific constructions and imagined categories to justify domination, the Oankali’s epistemology is based in their bodily experience. The Oankali do have the ability to perceive and understand human material bodies on a molecular level; they are able to “read human genes” (AR 255). They
do not rely on arbitrary categorizations and their understanding of human bodies is
drastically different than Western epistemology because it is rooted in “a certainty of the
flesh” (AR 255).

One of the most startling examples of the Oankali acting against human freewill is
Lilith’s impregnation. In *Adulthood Rites*, Lilith condemns the act but admits that part of
her wanted it. She states, “if I had the strength not to ask, [Nikanj] should have had the
strength to let me alone” (AR 27). By human understanding, Lilith’s impregnation is a
coercive and manipulative tool that inducts her involuntarily into the Oankali “trade.”
However, the move illustrates the essential difference between how the Oankali act in
accordance with a consensus found in a collection of small bodies that make up bigger
bodies. Through a human lens, this action is abhorrent and takes away Lilith’s agency.
However, in the Oankali view Nikanj acts in accordance with the consensus of the
assemblage, the material make-up of Lilith’s body. In other words, Nikanj is granting
agency to the confederation that makes up Lilith but bypasses the human concept of will.
After reading Lilith’s body and impregnating her, Nikanj states that it “gave Lilith what
she wanted but could not ask for” and let her “blame [it] instead of herself” (AR 55). This
tension between how the aliens and humans understand freewill is part of what makes
Butler’s trilogy so compelling. The Oankali’s actions are at once morally unforgivable in
the human perspective but when their ontology is taken into consideration, they are read
more like an amoral force.

Readers are asked to grapple with a species that does not recognize human
conceptions of agency based on a mind/body hierarchical split. Instead, the aliens
understand freedom as a consensus in assemblages. The Oankali violate human freedom,
but at the same time they grant material bodies agency that is suppressed by Western human ideals of will. This explains why the Oankali often tell human characters that their “body will tell [them] what to do” (*Dawn* 124). By accepting the trade, Lilith comes to understand the Oankali perspective of freedom does not depend on hierarchical constructs that define the subject through the domination of the Other; instead, they read material and act according to the assemblage consensus. Further, their connection to vital material assemblages means they cannot be “governed by any central head” and don’t understand humans who construct the world this way (Bennett 24).

Concerns arise dealing with lowering subjecthood into the plain of material reality because the Oankali ontology could be seen to increase the tendency for objectifying and instrumentalizing the Other. This objection can be seen as a fear “that in failing to affirm human uniqueness, [object-oriented ontologies] authorize the treatment of people as mere things; in other words, that a strong distinction between subjects and objects is needed to prevent the instrumentalization of humans” (Bennett 12). However, the Oankali perception and understanding of materiality creates a view that all assemblages are interlinked, that their survival depends on sustaining diverse culminations of life within their ship. In other words, they “raise the status of the materiality of which [both species] are composed” and in doing so disband hierarchies based on arbitrary factors (Bennett 12). Reorienting our ontological stance toward materiality does not lower the status of human beings but acknowledges the importance of their material make-up. Completely levelling hierarchies by acknowledging material assemblages creates an understanding of agency that builds nonhierarchical societies. For the Oankali, “matter itself is lively.” Further, experiencing matter as vibrant material means that not only is “difference
between subjects and objects minimalized, but the status of the shared materiality of all things is elevated” (Bennett 12-13).

For the Oankali, there is no particularly right form to a material assemblage, but resisters use the “employment of the social construct[s]” to order reality by degrees of subjecthood based on race, gender, nationality and other arbitrary hierarchical constructs that locate individuals closer to inanimate objects (Hampton xii). Human resister villagers deny the existence of assemblages and brutalize those who cooperate with things lower on the animacy hierarchy. Dominance over the lower realm of material existence is crucial in proving autonomous subjecthood. They use hierarchical construction to demonize humans who cooperate with the aliens and describe their cooperation with the alien race as a contamination of humanity. Lilith is especially targeted, and her name becomes synonymous with evil. “As mother of a new race, [Lilith] bears the brunt of radical dislocation and transformation” (Idema 61). The resisters’ framework doubles down on “the conceit that humanity is the sole or ultimate wellspring of agency.”

Further, the resisters construct a “moralized politics of good and evil, of singular agents who must be made to pay for their sins… to the degree that it legitimates vengeance and elevates violence to the tool of first resort” (Bennett 30, 38).

The vibrancy of material bodies created by the Oankali sense perceptions forms a ontological framing of the world counter to the hierarchy of humans. The Oankali revere diverse forms of life and material existence. By their acute attention to the molecular structures that create life, the Oankali construct a framework that describes “life itself as a thing of inexpressible value. A thing beyond trade. Life could be changed, changed utterly. But not destroyed” (AR 248). Their attentiveness to material structures further
places life on a horizontal plane of existence where both nonliving and living beings interact to form new assemblages. Constructing ontological centers or hierarchies would be antithetical to the Oankali project of self-creation because they are defined by an essential bond with the Other.

The new materialist lens applied to the Oankali explains why the Oankali are so slippery in the allegory of colonization. Bennett’s concept of assemblages better describes the alien ontological understanding of individual autonomy and the material Other that enables them to act both as benevolent rescuers and oppressive colonizers. Further, reading *Xenogenesis* within a new materialist framework bolsters Dowdall’s claim that Butler’s trilogy presents a “counter position [that] differs drastically from the oppositional strategies of ‘heroic resistance’ that white male [science fiction] characters so often deploy” (Dowdall 510). *Xenogenesis* presents an alternate picture of resistance that has little to do with individual acts of heroism in overcoming oppression by the Other. Instead, Butler’s future is one in which individuals need to adapt to collectivism because “you can’t take care of yourself. No one person could against what might happen out there.” (*Dawn* 174). Fortifying one’s singular selfhood only hurts those individuals because the trilogy emphasizes the “ensemble nature of action and the interconnections between persons and things, a theory of vibrant matter presents individuals as simply incapable of bearing full responsibility for their effects” (Bennett 37).
CHAPTER III CONCLUSION

*Xenogenesis* presents a species encounter as an opportunity to revive an Earth destroyed by nuclear war ultimately caused by arbitrary human hierarchies. While the Oankali can be read as an oppressive force, a better reading considers their ontological view of the self, material reality, and agency of assemblages. Such a reading makes sense of the Oankali as a vital evolutionary partner. However, in order to see the aliens as a benevolent force of nature, human hierarchies based on gender, race, and class must be rethought as well as the life-matter binary that allows some human beings to dehumanize others. Although there are other humans who also learn to live alongside the Oankali, Lilith is particularly situated to survive, and by some metrics thrive, in relationships with the aliens. Haraway (referring to Audre Lorde’s *Sister Outsider*) provides a possible reason for this by suggesting that Lilith’s identity as a woman of color might already “be understood as a cyborg identity, a potent subjectivity from fusions of outsider identities” (140). Haraway is not reinforcing colonial falsehoods that women of color are suited for suffering; rather, she argues that Lilith was never under the illusion of being an isolated subject. In pre-alien Western social hierarchies, Lilith had been Othered and defined as “multiple, without clear boundary, frayed, insubstantial” (Haraway 143). Because Western societies privilege white/male subjecthood, Lilith was robbed of agency and power within that framework. This may be why Lilith can see through the illusion of human hierarchies that privilege select groups located atop the conceptual hierarchy.

Finally, examining the Oankali worldview through a new materialism lens presents a different way to interact with the natural world and other human beings. Here it is important to acknowledge that the Oankali ontology is not a replacement for human
ontology because they have perceptive abilities not possible for humans. However, they do call attention to the interconnected web of material bodies and challenge the common human notions of passive matter. These notions of inert matter are dangerous because they enable “human hubris and our earth destroying fantasies of conquest and consumption” (Bennett ix). Adapting to an ontology more like the Oankali ontology would elevate humanity’s dependence on materials and objects. Seeing the human subject as a part of a broader material assemblage would enable “detecting (seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, feeling) a fuller range of the nonhuman powers circulating around and within human bodies” (Bennett ix). Rethinking human exceptionalism and adapting to a worldview that acknowledges the vibrancy of things and the agency of assemblages might provide a vital shift in current systems that are centered around the continual exploitation of material resources and that harm impoverished communities and the global South in the service of sustaining the Western subject.
REFERENCES


