

Octavia Butler and the Settler Colonial Speculative: *Xenogenesis* and Planetary Loss

Smaran Dayal

Introduction

As one of the two major African American science fiction writers of the late twentieth century, Octavia E. Butler is the writer—along with Samuel R. Delany—most often associated with “literary Afrofuturism” (Lavender III and Yaszek, 2020). Her most well-known work is *Kindred* (1979), a time-travel novel assigned in U.S. public schools, arguably followed up in popularity with her near-future disaster duology *Parable of the Sower* (1993) and *Parable of the Talents* (1998), which made the *New York Times* bestseller list in the particularly dystopian year of 2020. Notwithstanding the critical and popular acclaim of these texts, it is her *Xenogenesis* trilogy (1987–89) that is in some ways her most classically and genre-consistent science fiction work of literature. It includes some of Butler’s most ambitious handling of questions of human nature, identity, gender, race, reproduction, and colonialism. In this paper, I turn to Butler’s three *Xenogenesis* novels—*Dawn* (1987), *Adulthood Rites* (1988), and *Imago* (1989)—to outline what I argue is her theorization of settler colonialism in the Americas, a theory centered around the core political issues of land and sovereignty. My contention is that *Xenogenesis* can be productively read as a literary-speculative theorization—but not mimetic or historically situated representation—of the massive waves of invasion, settlement, dispossession, and forced assimilation that have swept across Indigenous nations and communities across the planet over the last half-

millennium. Rather than crafting a realist account of the experience of European colonial arrival and dispossession from the perspective of a single Indigenous community or nation, Butler deploys the generic possibilities and conventions of science fiction to help us imagine this process on a planetary and species scale. Humanity's loss of Earth to a space-faring settler species becomes the frame through which Butler paints a fantastical account of European settler colonization.

Established scholarship on *Xenogenesis* attests to the diversity and complexity of Butler's ideas, with a few scholars, including Gerry Canavan (2016), Mark Rifkin (2019), Aparajita Nanda (2020), and Gregory Hampton (2020) engaging with colonialism/colonization as an analytic in interpreting the series.² Whereas all four scholars find aspects of colonialism in the human-Oankali relation in *Xenogenesis*, only Canavan (2016) begins to extend that reading to account for a specifically settler colonial condition through a comparison with Native American history.³ This paper builds on Canavan's initial provocation of a settler colonial reading and takes Nanda's and Hampton's readings one step further by specifying the *kind* of colonialism we encounter in the series. Moreover, my focus on settler colonialism constitutes a shift to the dominant discussion of the novel that revolves around race and racism. Critics such as Mark Rifkin, Donna Haraway, and Frederic Jameson, while not in conversation with each other, all mention the thematics of race and slavery in their readings, rendering their interpretations as what I term "race readings" of African American literature. A reading of the trilogy centered on the thematics of "the afterlife of slavery" (Hartman 2007, 6), race, and Blackness is a generative way of approaching these novels. However, as I will show, it may not be able to account for what I argue is Butler's central undertaking in *Xenogenesis*: a complex speculative thought-experiment about planetary dispossession. Butler's use of the generic conventions of science fiction offers a literary-speculative theorization of the structure of settler colonialism. Drawing from theories of land and sovereignty in Indigenous Studies, this paper demonstrates how "Indigenous critical theory" (Byrd 2011, xxx) can help us better understand some of the central conceptual moves at the heart of the *Xenogenesis* trilogy.

Dawn (1987), the first of the three *Xenogenesis* novels, follows the protagonist Lilith Iyapo as she comes to terms with a new reality facing humanity, after awakening on an alien spaceship. Humans have destroyed Earth and almost everyone on it in a nuclear war. The comparatively small number of survivors of this planetary holocaust are rescued by an alien race called the Oankali. They heal Lilith and as many other survivors as they can, taking them on board their living ship, Chkahichdahk. After about 250 years of cryogenic stasis or "sleep," Lilith is awakened by the Oankali. Their plan is to train Lilith to survive on Earth with a group of other humans whom she is tasked to awaken from stasis. The second novel, *Adulthood Rites* (1988), is narrated from the perspective of Akin, Lilith's first male "construct," or part-human part-Oankali, child. By this point, the Oankali

have returned large numbers of humans to Earth and given them two options: they can either join Oankali communities, find Oankali mates, and bear construct children; or they can become “resisters” and live out their lives in human-only villages—with one catch: they will remain sterile. As the novel progresses, Akin manages to convince the Oankali to allow humans to establish a free colony on Mars, independent of the Oankali. This adds a third option for postapocalypse humanity. *Imago* (1989), the third and final novel, traces the life of another of Lilith’s children, Jodahs, who matures to become the first interspecies/construct ooloi (third-gender person). In the process of their⁴ metamorphosis into an adult ooloi, Jodahs meets two unusual humans in a forest who turn out to be reproductively capable siblings from a remote human community that has managed to regain its fertility, but at the cost of sexual violence, incest, disease, and deformity. This fertile Andean community has thus far existed as a concealed fourth option for humanity, that is, until the very end of the trilogy. The series ends with this final outpost of humanity on Earth coming into the Oankali imperial fold and deciding to form ties and interbreed with the Oankali.

Through a close reading of the trilogy, I emphasize that it is the nonmimetic representational work carried out by Butler’s fiction, through fantastic and speculative registers, that is able to forward revisionist understandings of historical settler colonialism. The generic possibilities of science fiction allow forms of expression and modes of processing historical experience that are unavailable to other genres of literature (*cf.* Bahng 2018, 7–8; Rifkin 2019, 7–8; Schalk 2018, 21–22). *Xenogenesis* skillfully mobilizes the narrative, conceptual, and world-building possibilities of the genre of science fiction to reimagine settler colonialism on a planetary scale. An extensive thought experiment of the kind carried out by these novels, which posits the existence of a space-faring species who arrive in Earth’s orbit only to settle the planet, dispossess its inhabitants of their home world, and extract its resources in the process, constitutes a form of literary world-building both contingent to and emergent from the discursive possibilities of science fiction. As Matthew Wolf-Meyer suggests, “[s]ocial theory and speculative fiction are two sides of the same coin” and the division of “legitimate” forms of social-theoretical scholarly knowledge from that produced by speculative fiction writers comes down to an arbitrary distinction based on “colonial relationships” (Wolf-Meyer 2019, 5–6). Butler’s *Xenogenesis* narrates the history of settler colonialism in a manner unavailable to nonspeculative genres of writing. It does this by revisiting and inhabiting that history (and present) *in abstracto*, powerfully liberating it (*i.e.*, the speculative literary text) from the realist compunction to accurately recapitulate the facts of particular events. It thereby enables a variety of readers to imagine themselves as its addressees. While Indigenous critical theory, Black Studies, and postcolonial theory undertake powerful revisionary work in the scholarly discourses of the humanities, Afrofuturist and Indigenous futurist fiction, I argue, undertake similarly expansive conceptual and political work, albeit in the *literary* register of speculative fiction.

Black Science Fiction and Racial Realism

Gene Jarrett, in his introduction to the *Alternative Reader* of African American literature argues that anthologists of the tradition have often allowed “race to overdetermine the idea of African American literature” (Jarrett 2006, 2). Moreover, expectations of “African American protagonists alongside certain historical themes, cultural geographies, and political discourses, or subjectivities defined by race” and overall “protocols” of authenticity collectively “contribute to the idea that... African American literature only portrays the realities of black life, or practices what I call racial realism” (Jarrett 2).⁵ Butler herself, in some cases, responded to the tendency of her work to be quickly reduced to allegories of slavery, most notably in her afterword to the title story of her *Bloodchild* short story collection (Butler 2005). That afterword is one of a number of Butler’s interventions into correcting what she saw as reductive interpretations of her work. In it, Butler specifically pushes back against readings of the story as an allegory of slavery. “It amazes me that some people have seen ‘Bloodchild’ as a story of slavery. It isn’t. [...] The only places I am writing about slavery is where I actually say so” (Butler 2005). She echoes this same frustration in an interview: “[S]o many critics have read this [Bloodchild] as a story about slavery, probably just because I am black” (Potts and Butler 2010, 66). Critics such as Jarrett have suggested that “readings of the story as a metaphor for slavery are based on extra textual reasons as much as textual ones” (Jarrett 2006, 408).

The scholarship on *Xenogenesis* is not immune from this tendency to read Black science fiction as racial realism. Mark Rifkin (2019), offering one of the most comprehensive and wide-ranging recent interpretations of Butler’s *Xenogenesis*, finds its engagement with Indigeneity largely wanting. The text’s failure to do justice to Indigeneity arises from the fact that it approaches Indigenous politics through the historical and theoretical framework of Black history. One of his primary contentions is that humanity writ large comes to occupy the place of Indigeneity. This “singularizing” of humanity is not helpful because it effaces the specificity and importance of a rigorous conception of “peoplehood” that is foundational to Indigenous politics. “[I]f humanity as a whole constitutes a single ‘people,’ with the Earth as its ‘home,’ then whatever ethical force peoplehood has in the novels attaches to its use to refer to the species as such rather than to intraspecies (political) collectivities” (Rifkin 110). The novels, he writes, offer “an antiracist account of human unity,” but fall short of representing “meaningfully distinct human ‘societies’ and ‘ways of life’” (Rifkin 110). Fredric Jameson, for his part, takes up the representation of alienness in Butler’s work.⁶ His contention is that race in SF is “relatively neutralized by the presupposition of alien life,” and that, in Butler’s fiction, alienness comes to “stand as the allegory of race” (Jameson 2005, 140).⁷ Donna Haraway, too, reads *Xenogenesis* as an allegory of race and slavery.⁸ She describes the series as figuring “deracinated captive fragments of humanity packed into the body of the aliens’ ship [which] inescapably evoke the terrible Middle Passage of the Atlantic slave trade that brought Lilith’s ancestors to a ‘New World’” (Haraway 1991, 228). Haraway even goes so far as to

describe the *Xenogenesis* series as “Butler’s science fictional ‘middle passage’” (Haraway 228).

What ties these three readings of *Xenogenesis* together is their shared sense of the trilogy as, in one way or another, predominantly (if not exclusively) about issues of race, transatlantic slavery, and/or Blackness. Such readings tend to focus on the Oankali as an analogy of Blackness, alongside their mutable and antiessentialist characteristics (they are, by definition, a species without a fixed origin as they are constantly “blending” with other species) and their praiseworthy traits: environmentalism, queer kinship formations, veganism, nonviolence, and democratic forms of communal life. However, such a focus not only elides an analysis of the structural conditions of Oankali arrival, conquest, and domination of humanity and Earth, but it also furthers the well-worn practice of reading African American literature primarily for thematics of race/racism and slavery, sometimes at the expense of aesthetic, formal, genre-specific, and other topical interpretations of the poetry and fiction of Black American authors. As I argue below, it is not primarily or only race that is Butler’s preoccupation in *Xenogenesis*. Rather, she forwards both a speculative theorization of the complex/structure of settler colonialism as well as a radically speculative understanding of race, one that goes beyond merely representing what we already know about how it functions as a system of power. Butler’s *Xenogenesis* mobilizes the speculative mode to highlight the ways in which “racializing assemblages” (Weheliye 2014, 4) remain operative even when abstracted of their contingent spatiotemporal contexts.

Science Fiction on Its Own Terms

Moving from an exclusively race-focused reading of *Xenogenesis* to a reading centered on settler colonialism requires us to answer a more fundamental question about the relation between real-world histories and their reworking and rendering in speculative fiction. What happens to histories of slavery and colonialism when they are refracted through the complex metaphors and conventions of speculative and science fiction? What we are faced with is not simply a game of metaphorical substitution, where the Oankali aliens of *Xenogenesis* come to stand in for Europeans and humans for Indigenous peoples. Instead, a sophisticated analysis of speculative fiction requires that the fantastical worlds of the novels, stories, and films we study be approached first as internally coherent totalities which invite us to parse them on their own terms. The same might be said of other genres of literature to a certain extent. However, a realist text such as Marlon James’ *The Book of Night Women* (2009) gains its coherence first through its insertion into the actually existing history of transatlantic slavery and not through a complex metaphor about alien contact that relies on the specific generic conventions of science fiction. Thus, to figure out how a work of speculative fiction approaches and renders real-world histories of slavery and colonialism without reducing their alternative worlds to what we already know demands an extra degree of analytical work. Butler consciously exploits the narrative and world-building freedom made available to her through

the genre of science fiction, I argue, in order to reimagine the history of settler colonialism on a planetary scale.

Thinking through real-world histories of settler colonialism and slavery as they relate to fiction poses a particular problem for the study of literary genres that do not have a straightforwardly mimetic relation with “real” history—genres, that is, such as science fiction. Even in the case of nonrealist genres like surrealism and/or magical realism, they still often retain a clear relation to particular, postcolonial and/or national histories—think Márquez’s *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (1970), Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children* (1981), Allende’s *The House of the Spirits* (1986), or Okri’s *The Famished Road* (1991). Speculative fiction by definition entails a more robust level of detachment from such mimetic linkages to the real world. To say that is not to claim that speculative fiction is somehow bereft of any and all ties to history, reality, context, or politics. In fact, in the case of Black writers of speculative fiction, the opposite is true.

The salient difference between speculative fictions of slavery and realist modes of narration, Madhu Dubey argues, is that the former “attempt[s] to know the past as something other or more than history” and refuses “the burden of realist racial representation” (2010, 780). Sami Schalk, in her book *Bodyminds Reimagined*, lists some of the methods employed by speculative fiction in refusing the burdens of realism: these include “the rejection of verisimilitude, the use of nonmimetic devices, the disruption of linear time, and other tropes which subvert our expectation of reality” (2018, 22). Similarly, if we turn to Darko Suvin’s canonical description of science fiction, we see that he defines the SF text as

a fictional tale determined by the hegemonic literary device of a *locus* and/or a *dramatis personae* that (1) are *radically or at least significantly different from the empirical times, places, and characters* of the “mimetic” or “naturalist” fiction, but (2) are nonetheless—to the extent that SF differs from other “fantastic” genres [...] simultaneously perceived as *not impossible* within the cognitive (cosmological and anthropological) norms of the author’s epoch. (Suvin 1979, viii; emphases his)

In other words, what sets science fiction apart from other genres of fantastic literature, on the one hand, and realist and naturalist fiction, on the other, is that it manages to both diverge from contemporary reality as we know it (“the empirical times, places, and characters” of realist fiction) while retaining a degree of plausibility from the vantage of the present. Science fiction, Suvin suggests, takes the present we inhabit and are intimately familiar with and *extrapolates* from it into another temporality or reality, most often (but not always) the future. Accordingly, faithful interpretations of Butler’s fiction, especially those works which engage the conventions and tropes of mainstream science fiction (aliens, the temporality of the future, new technology, etc.), are those undertaken with

an awareness of the specificities, limitations, and genre conventions of science fiction. *Xenogenesis*, prime among Butler's fiction, is congruent with Suvin's definition of SF, in that its description of events is "radically or significantly different from the empirical times, places and characters" of twentieth century Earth, even as it remains "within the cognitive [...] norms of [Butler's] epoch" (Suvin 1979, viii).

Planetary Dispossession

The overarching theme that ties the three *Xenogenesis* novels together is the progression of the overall Oankali project and presence on Earth, and the problematics of land and Indigeneity. *Xenogenesis*, when approached through a reading that foregrounds these problematics, amounts to nothing short of an elaborate theorization of settler colonialism.

Territoriality or land, primary among various aspects of human existence, is foundational to Indigenous politics, as well as to Indigeneity as a political and conceptual category. This for the simple reason that Indigeneity is grounded in and emerges from Indigenous nations and communities' ties to their lands. In their now-canonical essay, "Being Indigenous: Resurgences Against Contemporary Colonialism," Taiaiake Alfred (Kanien'kehá:ka) and Jeff Corntassel (Cherokee), explain this constitutive interrelation of Indigeneity and land:

The communities, clans, nations and tribes we call Indigenous peoples are just that: Indigenous to the lands they inhabit, in contrast to and in contention with the colonial societies that have spread out from Europe and other centers of empire. It is this oppositional, place-based existence, along with the consciousness of being in struggle against the demeaning fact of colonization by foreign peoples, that fundamentally distinguishes Indigenous peoples from other peoples of the world. (Alfred and Corntassel 2005, 597)

Indigeneity, precisely for its relation to land, is not always or necessarily contiguous or compatible with either Third World anticolonialism or antiracism in the West, even though their concerns are often overlapping.⁹ Formerly colonized countries like India and the Philippines, for instance, have their own Indigenous populations, distinct from their (constructed) national, ethnic, caste, and religious majorities. Likewise, antiracist movements led by African diasporic "arrivants" (Byrd 2011, xix) and immigrants of color in settler colonial countries such as the United States, Canada, and Australia often seek equality and incorporation into states that, even as they move toward some modicum of racial equality, continue to dispossess Indigenous nations and peoples, upon whose lands they exist. A reading of the *Xenogenesis* novels that foregrounds an antiracist or Third Worldist framework at the expense of a settler colonial framework risks similarly glossing over the decisive nuances between these overlapping but *meaningfully distinct* political responses to European racial and colonial domination in the

modern era. Our entire perspective on the Oankali presence on Earth—that is, whether we see them as something more or other than benevolent beings seeking to save humanity from itself—hinges on our ability to read them through a settler colonial and critical Indigenous lens.

If we turn to the field of settler colonial studies and the work of two prominent historians of comparative colonialisms, Patrick Wolfe and Lorenzo Veracini, we can likewise see the central importance accorded by each of them to land in an understanding of settler (vs. franchise or resource) colonialism. For Wolfe, land is the basis for life, and the takeover of Native lands is causally linked to Native elimination. “Territoriality,” he writes, “is settler colonialism’s specific, irreducible element” (Wolfe 2016, 34). Elsewhere he argues that “the primary object of settler-colonization is the land itself rather than the surplus value to be derived from mixing native labour with it” (Wolfe 1999, 163). Such a role for land is similarly true for Veracini’s account of settler colonialism:

[M]ore than other political regimes (and in particular *colonial* regimes, where transient colonials do not commit to remaining in any specific place, and as it dispenses with the labour of colonised Others), a *settler* colonial project is predominantly about territory. At the same time, the territorialisation of the settler community is ultimately premised on a parallel and necessary deterritorialisation (*i.e.*, the transfer) of indigenous outsiders. (Veracini 2010, 80–81; emphasis his)

The important difference being marked here by Veracini is that between franchise or resource colonialism (the extraction of resources from the colonies), on the one hand, and settler colonialism on the other (*cf.* Wolfe 2001, 868).¹⁰

Having established the foundational character of land to Indigeneity and the dispossession of land to settler colonialism, we might now turn to *Xenogenesis* for a reading enabled by this fundamental insight of Indigenous critical theory and settler colonial studies. When viewed through the lens of a settler colonial analysis, the Oankali’s designs on Earth appear in a very different, acquisitive light. Rather than accepting their ostensible desire to “sav[e] the humans from extinction” (*cf.* Magedanz 2012, 51) at face value, by centering the question of land and to whom it belongs, we are able to more clearly identify the Oankali project as thoroughly settler colonial in nature. In a passage in *Adulthood Rites*, we learn that the Oankali’s longer term plan is not only to replace humans with the “construct” descendants of humans and Oankali—humans have been made reproductively incapable without the Oankali—but also to grow ships on the surface of Earth, which will consume “much of the substance of Earth,” leaving behind “less than the corpse of a world” (Butler 2000, 365). Furthermore, if we take into account Alfred and Corntassel’s definition of Indigeneity, humanity in the novel comes to very clearly figure, in line with Mark Rifkin’s reading (2019, 110), as this speculative-futurist tale’s Indigenous subject: a people being de-

prived of their land and their right to exist there autonomously of a foreign (here: extraplanetary) power.

If there is one single issue that Butler scholars are sharply divided over, it is the question of what to make of the Oankali. Gerry Canavan (2016) argues for a revisal of what many scholars—including Donna Haraway (1991) and Nolan Belk (2008)—consider to be the benign and/or benevolent nature of the Oankali in *Xenogenesis*. In Haraway's reading of *Xenogenesis*, the Oankali's "essence," she writes, "is embodied commerce, conversation, communication—with a vengeance. Their nature is always to be midwife to themselves as other" (Haraway 1991, 227). Haraway's account of the Oankali registers all of these characteristics ("embodied commerce, conversation, communication") as unambiguously positive. From a postmodernist perspective, it makes perfect sense to celebrate the repudiation of origins and essences embodied in a species that is permanently merging with other species and adapting itself along a never-ending chain of difference. However, for Canavan, the Oankali's intentions are not as straightforward as they appear in Haraway's account. He asks, "Are the Oankali humanity's saviors or its executioners? Do they represent a deviation from the colonial and imperial history that has made human history such an existential horror, or do they rather represent the ultimate perfection of the colonial enterprise?" (Canavan 2016, 97). Whereas, as Canavan suggests, the "pro-Oankali position... is probably the 'intended' reading of the novel" (Canavan 102), I would argue that Butler intentionally foregrounds such a reading precisely to push readers to reach their own independent conclusions about the Oankali—and by extension settler colonialism, on the basis of the "facts" of the novels.

In Canavan's reading of the trilogy, if one views the basic Oankali narrative, freed of its superficial details, what you get is "a plain retelling of the brutal history of imperialism" (Canavan 106). Even the one action that appears to be unambiguously benevolent, the Oankali's decision to allow unaltered, fertile humans to settle Mars, is "structurally identical to the nineteenth-century project of Indian removal in the Americas" (Canavan 107). Building on Canavan's reading of *Xenogenesis*, I argue that the Oankali project on Earth not only lends itself very easily to a reading of the Oankali as engaged in a kind of colonialism, but that Butler's vivid portrayal of this scene of alien contact is a specific metaphor for a liberal "multicultural settler colonialism" (Byrd 2011, xx), one which bears all the traits of individual and interpersonal benignity and celebrates difference through the fluid, xenophilic and adaptive lifeways of the Oankali—all the aspects of the Oankali celebrated by Donna Haraway—but which serve to divert one's attention away from and veil a broader structural project of systematic land theft, Indigenous erasure, and genocide.

The Mars Reservation

A crucial pivot in the trilogy's narrative arc is the struggle for a Mars colony in *Adulthood Rites* (1988), the second *Xenogenesis* novel. Akin, Liliith's construct son and the protagonist of the book, after spending part of his childhood at the all-

human “resister” village of Phoenix, comes to believe that human beings deserve the choice to live free of the Oankali. The Oankali, we learn, have subdivided into three kinship groups upon their arrival in Earth’s orbit: Akjai, Toaht, and Dinso. Akjai are the single group that will not interbreed with humans. They are the Oankali’s backup plan if their “gene trading” or interbreeding with the humans goes awry. The Toaht, by contrast, will mix with humanity but leave Earth, sailing off into space in their own independent direction. The Dinso, the group we see the most of in *Xenogenesis*, will mix with humans and settle Earth, only to “grow” ships on the planet’s surface, extracting its resources, and eventually leaving it a stripped, uninhabitable rock unfit for life.

The three Oankali kinship groups and their relationship to land (Earth), in fact, come to resemble different kinds of colonial conquest. The Dinso, most obviously, can be thought to stand in for European settler colonists in the Americas, who both sought the land and intermarried with Indigenous people, even as they refused to integrate within Indigenous nations and social structures, but instead, like the Oankali, coercively assimilate those they form bonds with.¹¹ (The Dinso are the kinship group that Lilith becomes a part of as a result of her mating with the Oankali individuals Nikanj, Ahajas, and Dichaan.) The Toaht, for their part, are not unlike the administrators and bureaucrats of the late British Empire: emissaries for resource extraction, agents of franchise colonialism. They arrive, conquer, acquire, then leave, taking with them clones (“prints,” in the vocabulary of the novels) of humans with them on their subsequent travels through space. In the case of the Oankali, the resources they extract are the genetic material of humans and a planet for their Dinso (read: American) brethren to settle. Finally, the Akjai are not unlike the neocolonialists of late capitalism: they, like the Toaht, travel space for resources, conquer, but unlike the franchise colonists, don’t “bring home” any former subjects. There isn’t a Brick Lane aboard their mothership—they are only there for the resources. Akin comes to believe that just as the Oankali have their Akjai, humans ought to have their Akjai too: a branch of the species which would not have to “gene trade” with the Oankali and can continue their lives unaffected by the Oankali. Akin imagines Mars as the site for such a human Akjai.

If we take into account this aspect of the Oankali settler colonial project, we see that land is absolutely central to it, just as Wolfe, Veracini, and others argue that it is to historical settler colonialism in the Americas and Oceania. And that aspect is the question of Earth and to whom it belongs. After the Oankali join humans in the resettlement of Earth, two and a half centuries after its destruction, they essentially assert absolute sovereignty over it. Building on Nichols’ (2019) analysis of dispossession in the absence of Lockean forms of possession, we can also see how humans in *Xenogenesis*, even if they never “possessed” the Earth (how could they?), nonetheless come to be robbed of it.

Furthermore, the only place that humans are allowed to live and reproduce independently of the Oankali is on the less-than-hospitable human reservation of Mars, a space that is decidedly not their ancestral land—or here, planet. Along

these lines, the longer-term Oankali plan for Earth is to “grow” spaceships on and with the material of the planet’s surface, eventually departing on those ships, leaving behind no more than an uninhabitable, stripped rock that resembles the moon. Finally, in the process of settling Earth, we learn that the Oankali shuttles that bring the Oankali and poststasis humans to Earth intentionally land on the ruins of former human cities and settlements, consuming them and in the process erasing all traces of their precontact species history, achievements, and knowledge bases (cf. Nichols 2019, 34, 602). If this doesn’t bring to mind the nineteenth-century westward expansion of the U.S. settler state, then we are undoubtedly missing the forest for the trees.

As we saw above, Canavan reads this process of struggling for and founding a Mars colony as a direct analogy of Indian removal in North America (cf. Canavan 2016, 107). This reading becomes even more plausible by the fact that the independent human colony is specifically not to be founded anywhere on humanity’s original lands, but on an entirely separate and quite literally “alien” geographical entity: a terraformed Mars. Mars in *Xenogenesis* becomes, not unlike “Indian Territory,” lands West of the Mississippi in present-day Oklahoma to which the Southeastern Native nations were forcibly removed, a kind of “human territory”: a place where humans have so far not lived but are now assigned to as their only autonomous territory. Just as the Five Nations were presented with the option of being subsumed by the expansionary and extractive imperial nation or being removed from their homelands in order to retain some degree of autonomy, humans can stay on Earth, interbreed with the Oankali, assimilate into their social system, and enlist themselves and their offspring in what we might term, after the Oankali mothership, the United States of Chkahichdahk. Or they can permanently leave for the newly created human reservation of Mars.

Sterilization and Genocide

Genocide is a second place one might begin an inquiry into Butler’s portrayal of the Oankali project on Earth. The most striking intervention by the Oankali into human biology is the mass sterilization of every single human being that they manage to rescue from the irradiated planet after the nuclear war—“humanicide,” Lilith calls it (Butler 2000, 8)—that precipitates its destruction. When brought to their mothership, Chkahichdahk, all humans were rendered sterile by the Oankali, and henceforth only allowed to reproduce with the aid of an Oankali “ooloi,” a third-gender person essential to Oankali reproduction and sociality. We learn that the Oankali believe that humans are a fatally flawed species, characterized by two conflicting traits or features: intelligence and hierarchy. They call this the human contradiction. If humans are allowed to reproduce, the Oankali believe, they will simply repeat history and end up where the Oankali found them: in the wake of a nuclear holocaust or another similar scene of self-annihilation.

Article II-d of the 1948 United Nations Genocide Convention specifically defines genocide as the “Imposing [of] measures intended to prevent births within [a] group” (United Nations 1948). Canavan also advances a reading of

the Oankali project as a systematic genocide of humanity, not simply through the prevention of births, but a number of other factors that line up with legal definitions of genocide, such as killing members of a group, causing bodily and mental harm, inflicting conditions that would lead to the group's destruction, and the forcible transfer of children out of the group (cf. Canavan 2016, 106).¹²

A complicating factor in *Xenogenesis*, however, is that the Oankali mass sterilization of humans is preceded by humanity's own—or more specifically, the United States' and Soviet Union's—"humanicide" through nuclear warfare. In other words, humanity when viewed as a species had already attempted to commit mass suicide before the Oankali encountered them. The sterilization of rescued humans is justified by the Oankali as an act of generosity towards humanity. Its rationalization is the aforementioned "human contradiction." They deduce this arguably social and political condition afflicting humanity from their biological knowledge about human genetics. Jdahya, one of Nikanj's parents and the first Oankali Lilith encounters, tells her as much early in her stay aboard the Oankali ship:

"Your bodies are fatally flawed. The ooloi perceived this at once. [...]"

"What are you talking about?"

"You have a mismatched pair of genetic characteristics. Either 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." (Butler 2000, 38)

The Oankali claim, on the basis of their ability to perceive human DNA, to both know humans better than humans know themselves, and to know what is best for humans as a result of this knowledge. So, even as Jdahya can say to Lilith, "No one will touch you without your consent" (39), in instances when the "general will" of the Oankali (which quite straightforwardly resembles the Rousseauian political concept) has to be carried out, humans lose their ability to choose, consent, or refuse their subjection to that will.

Moreover, in the second *Xenogenesis* novel, *Adulthood Rites*, when Lilith's son Akin insists to the Oankali subadult ooloi Dehkiaht aboard the mothership that humans ought to be free to decide their fate for themselves, the ooloi's retort reiterates the Oankali belief that humans are determined by their biology and therefore cannot be free even if they think are (cf. Butler 2000, 467). Lilith's immediate interlocutor in the passage quoted above might be the particular Oankali individual, Jdahya, but he is both speaking for—and she is thus speaking with—the larger, and unaccountable, Oankali species-collective.

Settler Democracy, or The United States of Chkahlchdahk

This brings us to a further and final aspect to *Xenogenesis* that lends to the trilogy's reading as a speculative staging of settler colonialism: the political

structure of the Oankali species-collective, which it seems apt to describe as a “settler democracy.” As Patrick Wolfe explains, “For Indigenous people, the concept of settler democracy can only be an oxymoron. Their attrition at the hands of that democracy reflects a core feature of settler colonialism, which is first and foremost a project of replacement” (Wolfe 2016, 32–33). Moreover, a settler democracy, exactly like the Oankali settlement of Earth, is an expansionary project and “require[s] a constant supply of new territory with which to satisfy the proprietary aspirations of its burgeoning population” (Wolfe 2016, 80). While ostensibly highly democratic and even consensus-based, it specifically excludes humans, even as its decisions intensely impact humanity, from humans’ ability to reproduce themselves as a species to whether they can continue to exist on their own planet without biologically and socially merging with, and being subsumed by, the Oankali settlers. Akin’s attempts to convince the Oankali species-collective of the merits of a human Akjai are long and difficult and only come to be put into practice in the third novel, *Imago* (1989), at which point, we are told, the Oankali-assisted human settlement of Mars has begun. At every stage of his petitioning the Oankali collective, Akin is dismissed as naïve, overly sentimental, immature, not capable of understanding Oankali truths, and finally, he is excluded from the Oankali’s democratic deliberations on the basis of his allegedly biological incapacity to communicate directly with the species-collective.

Butler’s description of the manner in which the Oankali communicate with the species as a whole resembles modern telecommunication networks and the satellite and cable grid that currently underpins the modern Internet—technology that did not exist at the time of her writing these novels. However, as with all Oankali technology, their equivalent of the species-“Internet” used to engage in political discussions and reach consensus-based decisions about the species as a whole is grounded in biology, and not external tool- or object-based technology. Butler dedicates a short chapter of *Adulthood Rites* (Butler 2000, 469–71) to this enactment of remote and virtual Oankali democracy. The Oankali collective are referred to in the narration as “the people.”

The Akjai spoke to the people for Akin. Akin had not realized it would do this—an Akjai ooloi telling other Oankali that there must be Akjai humans. It spoke through the ship and had the ship signal the trade villages on Earth. It asked for a consensus and then showed the Oankali and construct people of Chkahichdahk what Akin had shown Dehchiaht and Tiikucahk. (Butler 2000, 469)

At different moments in the trilogy, we learn that “the people” can be communicated with through the different ship entities: the mothership, Chkahichdahk; the shuttles that ferry people between Chkahichdahk and Earth, which are kind of bonsai version of motherships grown specifically for short-

distance space travel; and the various Oankali “trade villages” on Earth, which are themselves premature versions of motherships, which will eventually consume the Earth and its resources as they grow atop its crust—not unlike the settler states that parasitically grow upon Turtle Island, feeding on its resources.

The chapter in question describes in detail the Oankali’s deliberative democracy and the process by which consensus is reached among the collective. Akin, since he is not yet an adult, is only able to participate in this process through the intermediary of the Akjai elder (*cf.* Butler 2000, 470), much as he was only able to get a taste of the experience of open space by interfacing with the shuttle that brings him up to Chkahichdahk through his Oankali father Dichaan (*cf.* 441). However, all humans share the fate of immature constructs and are biologically excluded from participating in Oankali democracy. And since Akin is the first construct male to be born on Earth, and there are only a few construct females that precede him, constructs are also *de facto* excluded from the Oankali’s political decision-making process.

We receive some insight into the functioning of Oankali democracy when we learn that it is the “majority opinion” of the Oankali that determines the path that the species-collective will take when it comes to permitting humans a Mars reservation (*cf.* Butler 2000, 471). Similarly, in other passages in *Adulthood Rites*, we learn that when Akin was kidnapped and sold to the resister village of Phoenix, it was “the people” who decided not to aid Lilit, Nikanj, and the rest of Akin’s immediate family in searching for him. When they finally did aid in his search, and Akin was found, it was only because “[t]he people believed that [Akin] had learned enough” about the humans (414). Dichaan, Akin’s Oankali father explains how this decision was reached:

“Was I left among them for so long so that I could study them?” Akin asked silently. Dichaan rustled his free tentacles in discomfort. “There was a consensus,” he said. “Everyone came to believe it was the right thing to do except us. We’ve never been alone that way before. Others were surprised that we didn’t accept the general will, but they were wrong. They were wrong to even want to risk you!” (414)

What is confusing about this explanation is that the “consensus” that is reached isn’t really a consensus but rather the mob rule of the Oankali majority. Akin’s family—those most impacted by the Oankali’s decision not to actively search for him—clearly did not consent to their child being left with the resister humans. Moreover, it is never entirely clear how “the general will” of the Oankali is constituted. Is it contiguous with “the people” as a whole? Is it a racialized or speciesized category that excludes humans, who do not count as part of that collective? And are “the people,” and the consensus they arrive at, truly inclusive of all Oankali and constructs? To return to the term I introduced above, all of these

aspects of the Oankali's political structure strongly resemble the form of rule Patrick Wolfe and others refer to as "settler democracy."

The Oankali "people" seem to have decided here to make Lilith's construct son Akin an unwitting ethnographer of the humans of Phoenix, against both his and his family's will. Stacy Magedanz (2012) has perceptively described the episode of Akin's capture in *Adulthood Rites* as an intentional allegory by Butler of the historical American genre of the "captivity narrative" in which white settler colonists wrote about being held hostage by Native Americans. Among the characteristics that Akin's captivity narrative share with early colonial captivity narratives are his captors' search for "human-looking children to sell to the childless resisters, echoing a motif of many Indian captivities, in which a white child is taken in order to replace the dead child of a bereaved Indian mother" (Magedanz 2012, 51). Moreover, the human resisters who hold Akin captive "are cast into the role of the brutal, primitive captors, displaying many of the stereotyped tendencies toward inhumanity that early American captivity narratives ascribed to the Indians" (Magedanz 2012, 51). If Magedanz's likening of the captivity narratives of Mary Rowlandson and others with Akin's captivity in *Xenogenesis* is accurate, we have yet another reason to believe that Butler was very consciously painting a speculative scene of settler conquest, even as she was subverting the genre in important ways.¹³

In a later appearance of the Oankali-collective's decision-making power, we see them exile another of Lilith's children from their Oankali village. In *Imago*, we learn that "the people" have decided that the novel's protagonist, Jodahs, Lilith's child and the first construct ooloi, must return to Chkchahchdahn, since they (*i.e.*, Jodahs) are not fully in control of their abilities and "the ship was a much older, more resistant organism" (555). Whereas Lilith's trade village, Lo, is not yet able to protect and heal itself from the injuries Jodahs inadvertently inflicts upon it, the mothership would be able to better handle these. "And on the ship, I could be watched by many more mature ooloi," Jodahs says (555). However, since Jodahs is against leaving their family and returning to the ship, "[t]he people would permit me Earth exile" (555). Finally, to return to a related moment in *Dawn*, when Lilith asks Nikanj for a pen and paper to assist her learning of the Oankali language and ways, not only is she denied, but it tells her that "[t]he people have decided that it should not be allowed" (62).

While being partially inclusive of constructs, what is most striking about these repeated invocations of "the people" and "the general will" of the Oankali-collective is that they remain absolutely unaccountable to and unrepresentative of the humans who are on the receiving end of the dispossessive and assimilatory settler colonial Oankali social system/state/society. In that way, there is a real parallel to be drawn between the relation of the Oankali society to humanity and that of settler states to Indigenous peoples of Turtle Island. What, one might ask, has U.S. democracy historically meant to American Indians? What does it continue to mean to the sovereign First Nations of Turtle Island today?

Butler is, arguably, asking precisely this question through the speculative register of her fiction. What, if anything, does Oankali democracy mean to humans? Is it beneficial in any but the most superficial of ways to humanity that this alien species appears to engage in egalitarian debate and consensus-based deliberation among themselves about their own—and, arrogantly, other subject species'—collective political futures?

The Oankali settler project, as Lilith and the various human and construct characters encounter it, operates not unlike the bureaucratic and democratic settler state that is the United States. Whether through generalizing, unaccountable language and expressions of power through the passive voice, or the fact that only constructs like Akin—and only through the intermediary of Oankali elders—and not other humans (who are described as childlike) are even allowed to address the broader Oankali species-collective, wherever you turn, humanity in the speculative world of Butler's *Xenogenesis* is found attempting to survive the onslaught of a voracious and all-consuming, colonizing settler society that has decided to make Earth its own.

Taking all of this into consideration, it is hard to see the Oankali as anything other than a superficially democratic, polite, and benevolent—read: liberal—yet structurally destructive, eliminatory, and violent speculative incarnation of the actual history of European settler colonialism in North America. They are settlers who are engaged collectively—whether individual Oankali and constructs that make up this collectivity intentionally choose to participate in it or not—in the “elimination” of the human Native (cf. Wolfe 2006).

Conclusion

I want to conclude by returning to the problem raised by Mark Rifkin in his reading of *Xenogenesis*: that in rendering humans as the Indigenous subject of the novels, it “singularizes” humanity and effaces the specificity of peoplehood. The difficulty with such a reading of *Xenogenesis* is that it sidesteps the question of genre opened up above. *Xenogenesis*, as a thoroughly nonrealist work of science fiction, does not aim for an accurate mimetic representation of any particular Indigenous nations or their singular historical experience of dispossession.¹⁴ Butler deliberately remains at a certain level of abstraction from actual history in order to advance a theory of intragalactic settler colonialism¹⁵ and planetary dispossession that helps us understand the processes by which settler colonization unfolded in the Americas. To charge Butler for “consistently orient[ing] away from engaging the politics of peoplehood,” as Rifkin does (2019, 111), is to at least somewhat misapprehend the medium and genre of Butler's art. Butler's figuration of humans as the Indigenous subject of the series cannot be interpreted outside of the genre specificities of science fiction. In fact, it is precisely the narrative and world-building freedom Butler affords herself through the generic conventions of science fiction that allows her and her readers—Indigenous, arrivant, and settler, all equally if differentially estranged by

the speculative world of *Xenogenesis*—to imagine anew the history of settler colonialism on a planetary scale. Aparajita Nanda, for instance, argues that Butler chooses science fiction to narrate the colonial history of the Atlantic for its defamiliarizing effect: “[Butler] locates her narratives, whether ‘Bloodchild’ or *Xenogenesis*, deliberately in the science fiction genre, as this genre provides an unfamiliar context, one exempted from historical baggage. [...] Her speculative treatment, not beholden to any historical era, facilitates discussion of abstract concepts and opens up interdisciplinary approaches” (Nanda 2020, 119). Butler thereby enables her readers to partake momentarily in an extremely nuanced and complex thought experiment structured by the speculative provocation: “what-if?” *What if humanity was confronted by a space-faring settler species whose only aim was to eliminate the species and its home planet?* Moreover, it is arguably the case that Butler’s choice to constitute humanity as the dispossessed subject of the novels increases the likelihood of liberal white and other non-Indigenous readers being interpellated into an imaginative scenario of planetary dispossession than a story narrated from the perspective of specific Indigenous nations. The empathic gap between the settler reader and Indigenous history—not unlike the occasional maw between the white reader and authors of color—is a reality of which Butler was certainly cognizant.

The nature of speculative fiction is to traffic in fantastic and nonrealist worlds. If, as Madhu Dubey argues, what sets “speculative fictions of slavery” apart from other genres is their “attempt to know the past as something other or more than history” and to refuse “the burden of realist racial representation” (Dubey 2010, 780), there is a strong basis to conceive of speculative fictions of settler colonialism in a homologous way. *Xenogenesis* can be read as attempting to know the past “as something other or more than history,” while refusing the dictates and burdens of realist representation. A speculative fiction of settler colonialism might not always necessitate the historically accurate (*i.e.*, realist) representation of particular peoples, events, and places. In a genre largely untethered to the world as we know it, whether through a temporal displacement or other nonmimetic and speculative narrative devices, there exists more than one way to parse Butler’s rendition of humanity as Indigeneity.

In contrast to the critical interpretations of *Xenogenesis* that read it primarily through the lens of race and slavery and thereby miss its extensive, complex, and nuanced speculative theorization of settler colonialism, how might we live up to Gene Jarrett’s plaidoyer to resist the tendency to let “race to overdetermine the idea of African American literature” (Jarrett 2006, 2)? Moreover, how might we do justice to what Katherine McKittrick refers to as the “brilliant and diasporic and multi-scalar and global intellectual worlds” of Black thought (McKittrick [demonicground] 2020)—in this case, the speculative fiction of Butler? What rearrangement of critical categories would enable us, as literary scholars, to register the capaciousness of Afrofuturist novels such as *Xenogenesis*? How might our interpretations make and hold space for the full spectrum of histories

and experiences that Afrofuturist writers attempt to render in their speculative prose—including, but also exceeding, that of the African diaspora? Finally, how might Tiffany Lethabo King's notion of the offshore formation of the "shoal" as "an analytical site" bridging Black and Indigenous life and experiences of violence speak to the text of an Afrofuturist writer like Butler theorizing settler colonialism through her fiction (King 2019, 29)?

Butler's *Xenogenesis* is an immensely rich trilogy of novels, one that projects the histories and lived realities of settler colonial conquest and Indigenous dispossession into the imaginative register of science fiction. In doing so, it works through conceptual problematics of individual and collective agency, kinship, self-determination, autonomy, sovereignty, species boundaries, and sexual, social, and political consent in ways unavailable to other genres of fiction.

Notes

¹This essay has benefitted immensely from feedback, conversations, workshoping, or simply coworking with a number of scholars, mentors, colleagues, and/or friends: the anonymous peer reviewers; the special issue editors: Hee-Jung Serenity Joo, Pacharee Sudhinaret, and Walidah Imarisha; my dissertation committee at NYU: Sonya Posmentier, Jini Kim Watson, and Jay Garcia; Dean Saranillio, S. Heijin Lee, Gene Jarrett, Uli Baer, Manu Chander, André Carrington, Lenora Hanson, Maureen McLane, Isabel Hofmeyr, Crystal Parikh, Rajeswari Sunder Rajan, Tyler Harper, Andrew Ross, Amrit Trewn, Kassandra Manriquez, Justin Linds, Nicole Eitzen Delgado, Andrés Olán-Vázquez, Xavier Wingham, Lukas La Rivière, Anneke Rautenbach, Toya Mary Okonkwo, Dominic De Martini, Khushboo Shah, Kelly Roberts, İlker Hepkaner, Avinash Rajagopal, Nerve Macaspac, Zifeng Liu, Benjamin Rubin, Manish Melwani, Zane Koss, Kate McKenna, Emily Foister, Valène, William Cheung, John Linstrom, Alex Ramos, Raj Saikumar, Reece Das, Eesha Kumar, Sonya Merutka, Cindy Gao, Minju Bae, the NYU Postcolonial, Race, and Diaspora Studies Colloquium; and the Brown Town group chat: Param Ajmera, Saronik Bosu, Sri Chatterjee, Suvendu Ghatak, Anwesha Kundu, Neelofer Qadir, Manasvin Rajagopalan, Oishani Sengupta, Jay Shelat, and Bassam Sidiki. And most of all, I thank my mother Tanmayo, whose library brought me to literature and who encouraged me—sometimes a little too enthusiastically—to write.

²Previous scholarship on *Xenogenesis* has addressed a variety of themes and issues, including Butler's contested biological determinism (Zaki 1990; Johns 2010; Vado 2020), utopia and dystopia (Zaki 1990; Brataas 2006), gender, sexuality, and eroticism (Brataas 2006; Belk 2008), sexual consent and agency (Burnett 2020), posthumanism and transhumanism (Haraway 1989 and 1991; Goss and Riquelme 2007; Jenkins 2020; Dunkley 2020), and reproduction and reproductive futurities (Bollinger 2007; Streeby 2018; Vado 2020).

³Rifkin (2019), for his part, sees a greater parallel between Third World anticolonial nationalist movements and human resistance in the novels than a settler colonial situation, while also problematizing Butler's engagement with Indigeneity. Nanda comes closest to a classically postcolonial reading of *Xenogenesis* when she states that "Butler's text deconstructs the rigid binary of oppressive, colonizing aliens and victimized, colonized humans" (Nanda 2020, 119). Hampton (2020) undertakes a comparative reading of the first *Xenogenesis* novel, *Dawn* (1987) and Aimé Césaire's *Discourse on Colonialism* (1972),

highlighting how both texts demonstrate the impact colonialism has on both the colonized and the colonizer.

⁴Butler uses the third-person singular pronoun “it” to refer to ooloi in *Xenogenesis*. In my own work, I substitute “it” with “they,” as I imagine she would have in a historical moment when the third-person plural has come to be widely used by nonbinary, trans, genderqueer, and agender speakers of English.

⁵For more on the practice of “reading for race” in the history of African American letters, see Kenneth Warren’s *What Was African American Literature?* (2011), Toni Morrison’s *Playing in the Dark* (1993), and Henry Louis Gates, Jr.’s *Figures in Black: Words, Signs, and the “Racial” Self* (1987). Gates writes, “Black criticism, since the early nineteenth century, seems in retrospect to have thought of itself as essentially just one more front of the race’s war against racism. Texts, it seems to me, were generally analyzed almost exclusively in terms of their content as if a literary form were a vacant enclosure that would be filled with this or that matter. This matter, moreover, was ‘the Black Experience,’ and an author tended to be judged on his or her fidelity to ‘the Black experience.’ This, it seemed to me, was a dead end for black literary studies.” (Gates 1987, xxii)

⁶Though he doesn’t specify, he can only be referring to *Xenogenesis* (1987–89) or Butler’s precursor short story *Bloodchild* (2005 [1995]), given the theme of alien contact.

⁷This argument parallels his infamous description of “Third World Literature” as allegory (Jameson 1986).

⁸*Xenogenesis* holds an important place in the writing and thinking of Donna Haraway, appearing in the conclusion to *Primate Visions* (1989), two chapters of *Simians, Cyborgs and Women* (1991), the revised version of her 1985 “Cyborg Manifesto,” and “The Biopolitics of Postmodern Bodies.”

⁹For a detailed articulation of this argument, see Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang’s essay, “Decolonization is Not a Metaphor” (Tuck and Yang 2012), and Haunani-Kay Trask’s seminal book *From a Native Daughter* (Trask 1999).

¹⁰In a similar contribution to the theorization of land under settler colonialism, the political theorist Robert Nichols, in his book *Theft Is Property!* (2019), demonstrates how, even if those who were dispossessed of their lands by European colonialism did not “possess” that land in Lockean terms, their dispossession can nonetheless be clearly accounted for.

¹¹In his comparative study of the distinctive ways in which US settler society has historically racialized Native Americans and African Americans, *Traces of History*, Patrick Wolfe argues that “in Australia and in the USA, White authorities have generally accepted – even targeted – Indigenous people’s physical substance, synecdochally represented as ‘blood’ for assimilation into their own stock” (Wolfe 2016, 2). The assimilation of Native Americans into white society, Wolfe notes, effectively contributes to destroying Indigenous nations as distinct and sovereign political entities. Thus, “the irreconcilable Native difference that settler polities seek to eliminate can be detached from the individual whose bare life can be reassigned within the set of settler social categories, yielding a social death of Nateness” (ibid. 186). In a similar vein, in her work on Indigenous sovereignty, possession, and property, Aileen Moreton-Robinson demonstrates the centrality of gender and “the possessive logic of patriarchal white sovereignty” to the dispossession of Indigenous peoples (Moreton-Robinson 2015, 81). The anthropologist Audra Simpson offers us a detailed example of the working of that possessive logic, describing how US and Canadian laws such as the Indian Act led to “the fomentation of a patrilineally based, heteropatriarchal property regime on the reserve,” effectively depriving Mohawk women of their citizenship rights if they married outside their community (Simpson 2014, 60).

Much as the institution of marriage has been historically weaponized by the settler against Indigenous sovereignty, we can see a similar dynamic at work in the Oankali's formation of kinship units with humans in *Xenogenesis*. It is never the Oankali who adapt themselves in any substantive way to human social structures and kinship forms, but the humans who are inserted as individuals—and not nations or communities with any countervailing claims to sovereignty and political autonomy—into Oankali society.

¹²There is a history of the use of forced sterilizations towards genocidal ends in the United States. D. Marie Ralstin-Lewis, in an article on Indigenous women's reproductive rights, describes how sterilization has been against Native women as recently as the 1970s (Ralstin-Lewis 2005, 71–72). Other scholars such as Karen Stone (2016) and Brianna Theobald (2019) have similarly demonstrated the centrality of sterilization and the control of Indigenous women's bodies to genocide.

¹³Unlike a bulk of early colonial captivity narratives, Akin is neither white nor female—he is a mixed-race (Black and Asian), mixed-species (Oankali and human) child. There is also a sophisticated complication of roles in Butler's deployment of the captivity narrative: as Magedanz writes, "[r]eaders will recognize the resisters as members of contemporary industrial society. By casting the resister humans in the role of the [supposedly] primitive social group, however, Butler calls into question the resisters' image of themselves as representatives of civilization." (2012, 51) This functions as a simultaneous critique of contemporary colonialist-capitalist American "civilization," as well as that of the Oankali's colonialist attitude towards humans, whom they "repeatedly deny...choice and self-determination." (ibid. 52) Thus, "by casting the Oankali as the dominating, colonizing social group, Butler also uses the captivity narrative genre to criticize their handling of the otherwise doomed human society they encounter." (ibid. 51)

¹⁴Butler, however, did take a genuine interest in Indigeneity in South America and conducted fieldwork in the Peruvian Andes and Amazon for *Xenogenesis*. Though not an institutional anthropologist, she was well read in the field. We know this from several sources (cf. Govan and Butler 2005; Johns 2009; Brown and Butler 2010; Hampton 2010, 146; Canavan 2016, 92; Streeby 2018; Russell 2019). In my developing book project on Afrofuturist fiction, I describe Butler's interest in anthropology and her fieldwork as "speculative ethnography." Butler harbored a lifelong dual commitment to anthropology and speculative fiction. Due to limitations of space, I defer a more extensive discussion of Butler's ethnographic practice and its relation to Indigeneity for another time and place, but wish to mark it as fertile avenue of inquiry.

¹⁵The Oankali are from another solar system within the Milky Way, but not another galaxy (cf. Butler 2000, 172).

Works Cited

- Alfred, Taiaiake, and Cornthassel, Jeff. "Being Indigenous: Resurgences Against Contemporary Colonialism." *Government and Opposition* 40, no. 4 (2005): 597–614.
- Allende, Isabel. *The House of the Spirits*. Trans. Magda Bogin. New York: Bantam. 1986 [1982].
- Bahng, Aimee. *Migrant Futures: Decolonizing Speculation in Financial Times*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press. 2017.
- Belk, Nolan. "The Certainty of the Flesh: Octavia Butler's Use of the Erotic in the *Xenogenesis* Trilogy." *Utopian Studies* 19, no. 3 (2008): 369–90.

- Bollinger, Laurel. "Placental Economy: Octavia Butler, Luce Irigaray, and Speculative Subjectivity." *LIT: Literature Interpretation Theory* 18, no. 4 (2007): 325–52.
- Brataas, Delilah Bermudez. "Becoming Utopia in Octavia E. Butler's *Xenogenesis* Series." *Foundation: The International Review of Science Fiction* 96 (2006): 84–101.
- Brown, Charles, and Butler, Octavia E. "Octavia E. Butler: Persistence." In *Conversations with Octavia Butler*, 181–88. Edited by Conseula Francis. Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi. 2010 [2000].
- Burnett, Joshua Yu. "Troubling Issues of Consent in *Dawn*." In *Human Contradictions in Octavia E. Butler's Work*, 107–20. Edited by Martin Japtok and Jerry Rafiki Jenkins. London: Palgrave Macmillan. 2020.
- Butler, Octavia E. *Lilith's Brood*. New York: Grand Central Publishing. 2000 [1989].
- Butler, Octavia E. *Bloodchild and Other Stories*. New York: Seven Stories Press. 2005 [1996].
- Byrd, Jodi. *The Transit of Empire: Indigenous Critiques of Colonialism*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press. 2011.
- Canavan, Gerry. *Octavia E. Butler*. Champaign, Illinois: University of Illinois Press. 2016.
- Césaire, Aimé. *Discourse on Colonialism*. New York: Monthly Review Press. 1972 [1955].
- Dubey, Madhu. "Speculative Fictions of Slavery." *American Literature* 82, no. 4 (2010): 779–805.
- Dunkley, Kitty. "Becoming Posthuman: The Sexualized, Racialized, and Naturalized Others of Octavia E. Butler's *Lilith's Brood*." In *The Bloomsbury Handbook to Octavia E. Butler*, 95–116. Edited by Gregory J. Hampton and Kendra R. Parker. London: Bloomsbury. 2020.
- Gates, Jr., Henry Louis. *Figures in Black: Words, Signs, and the "Racial" Self*. New York: Oxford University Press. 1987.
- Goss, Theodora, and Riquelme, John Paul. "From Superhuman to Posthuman: The Gothic Technological Imaginary in Mary Shelley's 'Frankenstein' and Octavia Butler's 'Xenogenesis.'" *Modern Fiction Studies* 53, no. 3 (2007): 434–59.
- Govan, Sandra Y., and Butler, Octavia E. "Going to See the Woman: A Visit with Octavia E. Butler." *Obsidian III*, no. 6/7 (2005): 14–39.
- Hampton, Gregory Jerome. *Changing Bodies in the Fiction of Octavia Butler: Slaves, Aliens, Vampires*. New York: Lexington Books. 2010.
- Hampton, Gregory Jerome. "Octavia E. Butler's Discourse on Colonialism and Identity: Dis/eased Identity in 'Bloodchild,' *Dawn*, and *Survivor*." In *The Bloomsbury Handbook to Octavia E. Butler*, 133–50. Edited by Gregory J. Hampton and Kendra R. Parker. London: Bloomsbury. 2020.
- Haraway, Donna. *Primate Visions: Gender, Race, and Nature in the World of Modern Science*. London: Routledge. 1989.

- Haraway, Donna. *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*. London: Routledge. 1991.
- Hartman, Saidiya. *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux. 2007.
- Jameson, Frederic. "Third World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism." *Social Text* 15 (1986): 65-88.
- James, Marlon. *The Book of Night Women*. New York: Riverhead Books. 2009.
- Jameson, Frederic. *Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions*. Verso: London. 2005.
- Jarrett, Gene Andrew. "Introduction: 'Not Necessarily Race Matter.'" In *African American Literature Beyond Race: An Alternative Reader*, 1-22. Edited by Gene Andrew Jarrett. New York: NYU Press. 2006.
- Jenkins, Jerry Rafiki. "Transhumanism, Posthumanism, and the Human in Octavia Butler's *Xenogenesis*." In *Human Contradictions in Octavia E. Butler's Work*, 121-45. Edited by Martin Japtok and Jerry Rafiki Jenkins. London: Palgrave Macmillan. 2020.
- Johns, J. Adam. "Becoming Medusa: Octavia Butler's *Lilith's Brood* and Sociobiology." *Science Fiction Studies* 37, no. 3 (2010): 382-400.
- Johns, Adam. "Octavia Butler and the Art of Pseudoscience." *English Language Notes* 47, no. 2 (2009): 95-107.
- King, Tiffany Lethabo. *The Black Shoals: Offshore Formations of Black and Native Studies*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press. 2019.
- Lavender III, Isiah and Yaszek, Lisa, eds. *Literary Afrofuturism in the Twenty-First Century*. Columbus, OH: The Ohio State University Press. 2020.
- Magedanz, Stacy. "The Captivity Narrative in Octavia E. Butler's *Adulthood Rites*." *Extrapolation* 53, no. 1 (2012): 45-59.
- Márquez, Gabriel García. *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. Trans. Gregory Rabassa. New York: HarperCollins. 1970 [1967].
- McKittrick, Katherine (@demonicground). "so many nonblack people do not want to imagine black thought as global. they perceive us as local—only knowledgeable at the scale of the body. their preoccupation with the body allows them to dismiss our brilliant and diasporic and multi-scalar and global intellectual worlds." *Twitter*, 15 December 15, 2020, 10:56 a.m., <https://twitter.com/demonicground/status/1338875649348366336>
- Moreton-Robinson, Aileen. *The White Possessive: Property, Power, and Indigenous Sovereignty*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press. 2015.
- Morrison, Toni. *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*. New York: Vintage Books. 1993.
- Nanda, Aparajita. "Teaching the 'Other' of Colonialism: The Mimic (Wo)Men of *Xenogenesis*." In *The Bloomsbury Handbook to Octavia E. Butler*, 117-32. Edited by Gregory J. Hampton and Kendra R. Parker. London: Bloomsbury. 2020.

- Nichols, Robert. *Theft Is Property: Dispossession and Critical Theory*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press. 2019.
- Okri, Ben. *The Famished Road*. London: Jonathan Cape. 1991.
- Potts, Stephen, and Octavia E. Butler. "We Keep Playing the Same Record: A Conversation with Octavia E. Butler." In *Conversations with Octavia Butler*, 65–73. Edited by Conseula Francis. Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi. 2010 [1996].
- Ralstin-Lewis, D. Marie. "The Continuing Struggle Against Genocide: Indigenous Women's Reproductive Rights." In *Colonization/Decolonization*, 71–95. Special Issue of *Wičazo Ša Review* 20, no. 1. 2005.
- Rifkin, Mark. *Fictions of Land and Flesh: Blackness, Indigeneity, Speculation*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press. 2019.
- Rushdie, Salman. *Midnight's Children*. London: Jonathan Cape. 1981.
- Russell, Natalie. "Meeting Octavia E. Butler in Her Papers." *Women's Studies* 48, no. 1 (2019): 8–25.
- Schalk, Sami. *Bodyminds Reimagined: (Dis)ability, Race, and Gender in Black Women's Speculative Fiction*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press. 2018.
- Simpson, Audra. *Mohawk Interruptus: Political Life Across the Borders of Settler States*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press. 2014.
- Stone, Karen. *An Act of Genocide: Colonialism and the Sterilization of Aboriginal Women*. Black Point, Nova Scotia: Fernwood Publishing. 2016.
- Streeby, Shelley. "Radical Reproduction: Octavia E. Butler's HistoFuturist Archiving as Speculative Theory." *Women's Studies* 47, no. 7 (2018): 719–32.
- Suvín, Darko. *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction: On the Poetics and History of a Literary Genre*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press. 1979.
- Theobald, Brianna. *Reproduction on the Reservation: Pregnancy, Childbirth, and Colonialism in the Long Twentieth Century*. Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press. 2019.
- Trask, Haunani-Kay. *From a Native Daughter: Colonialism and Sovereignty in Hawai'i*. Honolulu, HI: University of Hawai'i Press. 1999 [1993].
- Tuck, Eve, and Yang, K. Wayne. "Decolonization is Not a Metaphor." *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society* 1, no. 1 (2012): 1–40.
- United Nations. 1948. *Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide* (General Assembly resolution 260 A [III]). Accessed Oct. 12. 2020. <https://www.un.org/en/genocideprevention/genocide.shtml>
- Vado, Karina A. "'But All We Really Know That We Have Is the Flesh': Body-Knowledge, Mulatto Genomics, and Reproductive Futurities in Octavia Butler's *Xenogenesis*." In *Human Contradictions in Octavia E. Butler's Work*, 147–78. Edited by Martin Japtok and Jerry Rafiki Jenkins. London: Palgrave Macmillan. 2020.
- Veracini, Lorenzo. *Settler Colonialism: A Theoretical Overview*. London: Palgrave Macmillan. 2010.
- Warren, Kenneth. *What Was African American Literature?* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press. 2011.

- Weheliye, Alexander. *Habeas Viscus Racializing Assemblages, Biopolitics, and Black Feminist Theories of the Human*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press. 2014.
- Wolf-Meyer, Matthew. *Theory for the World to Come: Speculative Fiction and Apocalyptic Anthropology*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press. 2019.
- Wolfe, Patrick. *Settler Colonialism and the Transformation of Anthropology: The Politics and Poetics of an Ethnographic Event*. London: Cassell. 1999.
- Wolfe, Patrick. "Land, Labor, and Difference: Elementary Structures of Race." *American Historical Review* 106, no. 3 (2001): 866–905.
- Wolfe, Patrick. "Settler Colonialism and the Elimination of the Native." *Journal of Genocide Research* 8, no. 4 (2006): 387–409.
- Wolfe, Patrick. *Trace of History: Elementary Structures of Race*. London: Verso. 2016.
- Zaki, Hoda M. "Utopia, Dystopia, and Ideology in the Science Fiction of Octavia Butler." *Science Fiction Studies* 17, no. 2 (1990): 239–51.