Expanded, Changed, But Not Weakened: Posthuman Prometheanism and Race in Octavia Butler's *Xenogenesis*

Enit K. Steiner

Octavia Butler's fiction teems with bodies that metamorphose as a result of the inevitable changes imposed by environments and biology. Hence, critics more often than not recruit her novels as expressions of posthumanist yearnings. This essay follows the opposite direction investigating Butler's corrective glance towards the past. In particular, her trilogy *Xenogenesis* speaks to the void in critical awareness, by linking posthuman bodies to a progressive narrative that is rooted in Enlightenment metaphysics, the mother-narrative which posthumanism seeks to overcome. The towering figure that connects the posthuman world of the trilogy with its past is Prometheus. Butler's reworking of the myth revisits and rectifies Classical and Romantic articulations of Prometheus, while validating the past of Black America in ways that reject post-racial forms of posthumanism.

Keywords: race, posthumanism, classical and romantic Prometheus, civil rights, non-violence

> All that you touch
> You change
> All that you change
> Changes you
> The only lasting Truth
> Is Change
> God is Change.
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> Octavia Butler, *Parable of the Sower* (1993)

Few writers have dealt with the topic of change as openly as African American science-fiction novelist Octavia E. Butler (1947-2006). "God is Change" reverberates in her increasingly discussed novel *Parable of the Sower* (1993) echoed by the imperative that human action "Shape God," hence, shape change.[1] In *Parable of the Sower*, Butler constructs a narrative that cautions against the equation of change with progress and asks how human action in the midst of an ever-changing reality can bring about ameliorative change.

This is a much-debated question by feminist thinkers. Carol Gilligan in her book *The Birth of Pleasure* (2002) forcefully argues that myths have a performative influence on cultural and social arrangements. To make this point, her book explicates that obsession with the Oedipus myth has given love and pleasure a tragic name, connecting them to loss, violence and death. What, Gilligan asks, would the Western world look like if it drew on a myth where love, rather than being riveted to tragedy, is strengthened by resistance and leads to pleasure and new life? Her book embarks on a journey that explores the myth of Psyche, Cupid and their child Pleasure, as an alternative to the death-driven Oedipal map. At the end of the book, Gilligan impresses on the reader the recognition that not only do myths shape us, but that deep structural transformation involves myth-changing. This is an insight that I see at work in Butler's *oeuvre*, in particular, in her trilogy *Xenogenesis*. The trilogy made up of *Dawn* (1987), *Adulthood Rites* (1988) and *Imago* (1989) bears change in its title as an unprecedented beginning, the beginning of the strange or foreign (*xeno*). Here, Butler deliberates the inevitability and challenges of change, scrutinizing imaginatively processes of physical and behavioural transformation. Her peeks into the strange and unprecedented have earned Butler the praise of critics for whom her scenarios are intelligent efforts that seek to thread humanity's way out of the maze of the past looking ahead to cyborg imageries: imageries that contest firm boundaries, the mind-body dualism and replace a common language with what Donna Haraway calls an "infidel heteroglossia" (Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs* 181). This essay follows somewhat the opposite direction, arguing that Butler, indeed, moves humanity ahead into uncharted territories of the posthuman and post-terrestrial, however, again and again, as it advances into the unknown, her narrative throws a corrective glance

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[1] *Parable of the Sower* has gained momentum for its prophetic "Make America Great Again," the mantra of nationalist forces in the novel that was to spearhead Donald Trump's 2016 presidential campaign. The slogan harks back to anti-Roosevelt campaigns in the 1930s before being revamped as an exhortation – "Let's Make America Great Again" – by Ronald Reagan's presidential campaign in 1980.

backwards. In this sense, in *Xenogenesis*, change occurs through investigations of the past. I take the change that results from this corrective glance to be a warning sign for those too eager to recruit Butler's work as celebration of posthuman politics and aesthetics.

The posthuman is a contentious, if not ultimately, ineffable term that evades categorizing for the sake of producing the kind of inclusive fragmentation and openness that contrasts the self-contained, unified, exclusive human. There is little difficulty in accommodating Butler's novels within the notion of posthumanism understood as an umbrella term that offers "a way of naming the unknown, possible, (perhaps) future, altered identity of human beings, as we incorporate various technologies into our bodies" (Thweatt-Bates 1). On these terms, *Xenogenesis*'s genetically enhanced Humans,[2] or her human-enhanced aliens represent the crossing of boundaries associated with posthuman bodies. The difficulty arises when posthumanism stands for a progression, a moving beyond the past, most pertinently a racialized past, that dodges "a more comprehensive examination of the role of race in the human's metaphysics" (Jackson 216). As Lewis Gordon aptly puts it, posthumanism has a different valence for dominant groups whose "*humanity* is presumed" than it has for racially subordinated groups who "have struggled too long for the humanist prize" (Gordon 39). Butler's trilogy speaks to this void in critical awareness, by linking her posthuman bodies to a progressive narrative that is rooted in Enlightenment metaphysics, the very mother-narrative which posthumanism seeks to overcome. The towering figure that connects the posthuman world of the trilogy with its past is Prometheus. *Xenogenesis* premises some of its fundamental transformations on changes infused into this myth. Prometheus, identified in Ancient Greek sources as creator, liberator and father of human civilization, was revitalized with singular emphasis in the works of European Romanticism. Like some of the most influential afterlives of the myth, *Xenogenesis* retains the central concern with tyranny and Promethean freedom, but renounces the violent component of the titan's rebellion. Warfare and physical violence are etymologically linked to rebellious behaviour, but as I hope to demonstrate, Butler's fiction conceives of the Prometheus as a pacifist figure aligned with the Civil Rights movement's creed of non-violent revolution.[3] My argument unfolds in two stages: I first argue that, in its representations of posthuman

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[2] The capitalization here keeps with Butler's spelling.

[3] Rebellion shares with war the Latin root *bellum*, which is also the personification of the Greek daemon of war Polemos, or Bellum in Roman mythology.

bodies, the trilogy displays unacknowledged affiliations to key Enlightenment values such as perfectibility and *Bildung* as well as the reduction of Blacks to mere bodies. Second, these affiliations are the seedbed for Butler's reworking of the myth of Prometheus, allowing her to revisit the narrative of justice and hope through her Black Prometheus, and thus revise Romantic articulations of the myth. Ultimately, this revision validates the past of Black America in ways that contest post-racial forms of posthumanism.[4]

A few words on the future imagined in the trilogy might be helpful for the uninitiated reader to follow this essay's argument: the first book of *Xenogenesis* starts out with an Earth devastated by nuclear war and one single individual, an African American woman, Lilith, who realizes that she has been kept captive in suspended animation on a spaceship for more than two centuries by an alien race called Oankali. Not harmed, although cured of cancer through genetic modification by her captors, Lilith in exchange for her life receives the task to awaken other Humans and convince them to accept to mate with the Oankali. But the Humans, repelled by the Oankali's snake-like sensors spreading all over their bodies, reject interbreeding in order to preserve their human genetic material unchanged. Except for Lilith: in a half-willed, curiosity-driven approach, she explores Human-Oankali sexuality, which involves a human male, human female and a genderless Oankali. Later, unknowingly, she is impregnated by her Oankali partner, finding herself estranged from her human peers. With this unwilled pregnancy, a change is introduced into the order of human procreation, a change burdened by its affiliation to rape. The inception of such a new life form, the first of its kind, constitutes the cliff-hanger in book one. Back on Earth, in book two and three of the trilogy, we meet different kinds of communities falling into two groups: those made up of human-Oankali families that originated with Lilith and grow through human-Oankali reproductive intercourse, and only-human resisters' communities that live in physical stasis. Here, through Oankali genetic modification, Humans age very slowly, but despite their prolonged youth, they cannot procreate. In book three, another kind of resister community emerges: Humans, who due to unpredictable physiological changes can procreate, but because of endogamous intercourse, their offspring is malformed and sickness-ridden.

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[4] For a discussion of the limits of posthumanism as a paradigm for theorizing race see Holly Jones and Nicholas Jones.

All three books pivot on the question of futurity of a post-apocalyptic Earth and humanity, as all three must deal with the unexpected changes of interbreeding: in book one, the inception of mixed offspring; in book two, the birth of a male Human-born hybrid, the human gender feared for its violent tendencies; in book three, the birth of a genderless human-born hybrid, which signals a shift in the power relations between the races. With the birth of a genderless hybrid, or construct to use Butler's term, the Oankali lose monopoly over reproductive technologies. Up to this point, genderless Oankali have engineered the mixing of human-human, human-Oankali, or Oankali-Oankali genetic material. Now, the human-Oankali construct can engineer reproduction, and thus, be not only sexually acted upon.

By imagining a race like the Oankali – acquisitive, oriented toward collectivity, forward-thinking about preservation through change and adaptation that requires continual splitting, moving, and merging with other species – Butler's *Xenogenesis* conceives of the posthuman as a departure from Cartesian individuality. While for Humans the Oankali are unwelcome saviours who have resuscitated humanity from the ashes of self-destruction only to tamper with it and transform it into a new living thing, the *xeno*, Butler endows the Oankali with an acquisitive drive to mingle with whatever non-Oankali material comes their way, as long as it generates life. They covet any kind of life that propels the evolution and, thus, ensures the survival of all involved species albeit in new modified forms of existence. Because the unity and atomic individualism attached to Cartesian subjectivity is not part of Oankali ethos, it has been often argued that Butler breaks with the past when she parts ways with identity traits held dear by the European Enlightenment. In this vein, critics like Jim Miller understand Butler as a novelist who "prods us to move beyond old dilemmas and imagine a different future" (Miller, "Post-Apocalyptic" 340). There is little doubt about her focus on a future that differs from the past, but as for her treatment of old dilemmas, it would be hasty to speak of a move beyond them. Rather, the changes she introduces in her future scenarios result from mutations produced through the merging of old solutions with old dilemmas. Take for example her conceptualization of alien life, the Oankali race, in *Xenogenesis*. They are chiefly the reason for the alignment of Butler's novels with cyborg theories: with three partners being necessary for procreation (male, female, and genderless), they dissolve the binary reproductive scheme as we know it; the genderless partner (called *ooloi*) dissolves the impermeable boundaries of the human body, by merging the skill to act upon another body with the ability to live that body's

experience. The heterodiegetic narrator succinctly summarizes this sensory synchronicity: "What it [the ooloi] gave, it also experienced" (*Dawn* 161). And as Oankali reproductive technologies mingle with Humans, the construct family itself expands from a dualistic (one mother, one father giving birth to offspring) to a pluralistic structure (two mothers, two fathers – of each gender, one Oankali, one human – and a genderless parent, the ooloi, the genetic engineer in this pentadic structure).

Yet the Oankali are neither entirely alien, nor agents of absolute change, but rather friends or guests, the other meaning of *xeno*, from the past. They enter the scene as humanity's rescuers with a justification that looks back to Enlightenment values such as perfectibility. For the Oankali, stagnation heralds extinction, whereas survival dictates change, fusion with other species not simply to change for change's sake but to acquire better life-sustaining abilities. For Oankali perfectibility, Humans represent a boost and an impediment: they house valuable genetic material but also the hierarchical thinking that triggers violent behaviour and undermines the species' survival. Consequently, Humans should not be allowed to procreate in the absence of Oankali technologies that keep their death drive in check. In their first encounters with Humans, the "literal unearthliness" of the Oankali's bodies should not distract from the familiar goal they envisage for the Humans (*Dawn* 11). The Oankali awaken the victims of the nuclear war from suspended animation for the purpose of further development, their own and Humans' next phase of evolution. Why bother to take Humans out of the spaceship, Lilith asks, why restore their consciousness, what expects them in the wake of such desolation on Earth? Oankali's answer, "Education. Work. The beginning of a new life," unexpectedly aligns the narrative centred on an alien species with the legacy of the *Bildungsroman* (*Dawn* 10). Compelled by curiosity about terrestrial life-forms, in particular Humans, they see in Lilith a subject of study and agent of education: "You're rare," they tell her, "a human who can live among us, learn about us and teach us. Everyone is curious about you" (*Dawn* 106). Curiosity, according to Barbara Benedict, a double-edged concept first conceived as the vice causing the fall of Adam and Eve in the Judeo-Christian tradition, became linked to the spirit of inquiry that fuelled the Early Modern European explorations. At this juncture of Western history, curiosity's connection to both meliorism and transgression strengthened, while curiosity came to connote "the transgressive desire to improve one's situation in the world" (Benedict 18). Not least, curiosity emerged as the engine of scientific knowledge, or *Bildung*, that would prove humankind's propensity toward

betterment. In Butler's science-fiction, to "learn about us and teach us" captures the Oankali's *Bildung*-driven ethos.

But when the Oankali use the term "trade" or "gene trade" to describe the nature of their work, that is, interbreeding with Humans as a transaction of mutual benefit, *Bildung* hints at the dark underbelly of an acquisitive thirst reminiscent of the imperial quest that sent European explorers in search of new worlds and condoned, in the name of improvement and progress, the unspeakable horrors of the slave-trade. As Cathy Peppers rightly reminds us, the first Oankali-engineered child born to Lilith and her dead human partner cautions readers to note that "any historically accurate genealogy of African-Americans must acknowledge the spectre of coerced miscegenation at its origins" (Peppers 50). The pregnancy is a transgression that Lilith even as mother of several construct children never writes off. Impregnated by her genderless Oankali partner with the material of her human lover without her consent, she never accepts that partner's justification that her body yearned for the pregnancy against the voice of her cultural upbringing and prejudice. After years of peaceful and loving cohabitation with the Oankali, she still relives this negation of her right to choose with "flares of bitterness" (*Adulthood Rites* 25). Relating the dark genesis of her posthuman family to a stranger in the presence of her son Akin, the first male human-born construct, she asserts the value of free will that later acquires a trade-changing value for Akin:

> "They forced you to have kids?" the man asked. "One of them *surprised* me," she said. "It made me pregnant, then told me about it. Said it was giving me what I wanted but would never come out to ask for." "Was it?" "Yes." She shook her head from side to side. "*Oh, yes*. But if I had the strength not to ask, it should have had the strength to let me alone." (*Adulthood Rites* 25, emphasis added).

Encouraged by Butler's and more importantly Lilith's African-American origin, most critics consider this pregnancy, and by extension the entire interbreeding project, to be a reminder of the rapes that marked the fates of thousands of slaves in the Atlantic slave trade (Peppers 29; Boulter 175-77).[5] Perhaps because this reading relies mostly on the shocking conclusion of book one, failing to address the complexity added in book two, it comes dangerously close to injuring the very vic-

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[5] Jeff Tucker questions the accuracy of this mirror narrative, making the important point that Lilith's integration in her human-Oankali family is based on love and is "more than simple Stockholm Syndrome" (Tucker 174).

tims about whom it seeks to raise awareness. Lilith's answer to the question whether she wanted this pregnancy before it happened, a very different question from whether she grew to love the offspring once the deed could not be undone, is "Yes. Oh, yes." This answer cannot be mapped on the raped bodies of the Atlantic slave trade. Taking cue from Naomi Jacobs' astute remark that Butler is more invested in questions of "symbiosis" than of slavery, it is worth noticing the co-existence of opposites in this pregnancy which Lilith describes as a "surprise" (Jacobs 104). Recovering earlier, darker and ambivalent usages of the word, especially that of rape, Lilith's choice of the word surprise (*surprendre*, to be seized upon), draws attention to the dual nature of her pregnancy as both forced and wanted. As Christopher Miller's *Surprise: The Poetics of the Unexpected from Milton to Austen* (2015) tells us, in the works of the Enlightenment, surprise underwent a noteworthy semantic shift from rape to military ambush, violent attack – Milton writes in *Paradise Lost* about being "surprised by sin" – to signifying nothing less than a pleasurable experience. Butler's "surprise" condenses this two-century-long transition in one single ambivalent act: in days of peace and days of war, this pregnancy haunts Lilith relentlessly because the impregnation came upon her as an ambush harbouring unfathomed pleasure and desire. This unsettling mixture of desire and passivity remains for Lilith as much a source of self-condemnation as of resentment towards the alien Oankali. Insisting on free will and speech – "if I had the strength not to ask, it should have had the strength to let me alone" – Lilith pegs down a definition of free will to which Oankali technology is blind (*Adulthood Rites* 25).

My arguing against a straightforward rape paradigm of the Black enslaved body in *Xenogenesis* does not downplay the importance of race in the unwilled pregnancy of Butler's Black protagonist. On the contrary, Butler's scenario belies the post-raciality of posthumanism and exposes the latter's complicity with the racialized conception of the human deployed to legitimize the buying and selling of Blacks: when Nikanj impregnates Lilith, reading her consent in her body, Butler has her alien rehearse Enlightenment theories that conceived of blackness uniquely as embodiment, and of Blacks as mere bodies.[6] The negation of will is a wrong that the narrator never allows Lilith to forget, even when Lilith's biography follows a kind of co-existence with the Oankali redolent of what Donna Haraway calls companionship with other species (Haraway,

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[6] It would exceed the scope of this essay to address various Enlightenment representations of Blacks that recognized their subjectivity and decried their enslavement as human fellow-beings.

Companion Species 12). After this initial transgression, Butler's syntax projects this companionship of bodies necessarily as a companionship of wills. The fluidity and, therefore, ambiguity of wills in the trilogy, is announced in the sentence that concludes the disclosure of Lilith's unconsented pregnancy: "She let Nikanj lead her into the dark forest and to one of the concealed dry exits" (*Dawn* 248). Here, the narrator distributes agency among her Human and Oankali protagonists: Lilith allows Nikanj to lead and show her the way out into a new future as the first mother of a construct child. At the end of book one, Humans and non-Humans are locked in each other's wills and knowledge. This last sentence plants the seed of a struggle for re-distribution of power between Humans and non-Humans that will bear fruit in book two which steers toward the restoration of human agency projected in book one only at the syntactic level (she lets him lead her). For this, the myth of Prometheus explored in book two is crucial, as it enables the narrative to tackle issues such as self-determination, general will, and change achieved through persuasion rather than force. At the same time, by attaching a persuasive strategy to Prometheus, Butler keeps her Prometheanism rooted in the history of Black America and its post-slavery insurrection for equality.

The main Promethean figure of the trilogy is Lilith's construct son, Akin, pronounced *ah-kin*, the protagonist of book two and the first human-born male since the war. I say main because more than one character and more than one species bear resemblances to the myth of Prometheus. Nonetheless, most Promethean affiliations gather around Akin, whose very name (akin) conjures shifting resemblances in the different communities he inhabits in the book. The narrative places Akin's fate in the hands of Humans who refuse miscegenation and, therefore, were sterilized by the technologically superior Oankali. As a consequence, outside Oankali-human settlements, where construct children are born and raised, the rest of the Earth is populated by only-human settlements full of adults who wait to die without the hope of renewal through procreation. As one character summarizes the bleak situation, the Oankali have erased the future of resisting Humans: "We die and die and no one is born" (*Adulthood Rites* 107). An act of rebellion as well as Human's desperate effort to steal new life brings the human-Oankali Akin in contact with the resisters: as a young child Akin is kidnapped by sterile Humans to be sold in only-Human settlements. Even when Akin is discovered to be a construct who will shed off his human features during metamorphosis, the stage where sexual maturity is achieved, his kidnappers value him dearly, in the hope that after the surgical removal

of all Oankali physical apparatus, such as sensory spots and body tenta-
cles, what remains is the first human-looking child.

From the very first pages then Akin's story navigates the waters of
the Prometheus myth: through an act of theft, rebels bring the child
Akin to the Humans like a Promethean gift, carrying the hope of new
life. The energy of the classical Prometheus, "a thief, a rebel against
authority, creator of mankind" informs the childhood of the hybrid
Akin (Dougherty 20). At first extrinsic to Akin himself, this energy
melds with his role as a hero, a saviour, a liberator, and as the one who
restores human fertility, a second creator of mankind. The reader is
primed to expect the emergence of heroic protagonism in Akin's charac-
ter when she learns that Akin means "hero" in Yoruba. Clear-sightedly,
Akin links his physical exceptionality to his name: "if you put an *s* on it,
it means brave boy. I'm the first boy born to a Human woman on Earth
since the war" (*Adulthood Rites* 104). Hence, Akin's existence in itself
introduces a novelty in the power relations between Humans and non-
Humans which by the end of the narrative will signify the restoration of
human fertility and the rebirth of human civilization. During his stay in
the resisters settlement, tellingly called Phoenix, Akin experiences the
yearning of his human hosts for the survival of their race, which he
acutely understands to be more than about the survival of biological
material but about the desire to determine how to live and die. On the
heels of this recognition, Akin assumes the full weight of his responsi-
bility: "Giving life to a dead world, then giving that world to resisters"
(*Adulthood Rites* 225). It is equally important to note that, although a
posthuman, or construct, Akin represents a racialized Prometheus: as
the construct son of an African American mother thrust in the process
of passing as a Human during childhood, he embodies suspended and
reactivated raciality.

The Promethean exceptionality of his mission starts to unfold first in
Akin's empathy for Humans, his capacity to read like no one before
human behaviour and the centrality of free will in Humans' ways. First,
captivity makes him painfully aware of Lilith's conflicted choice as a
mother of construct children: "Lilith sometimes hated herself for work-
ing with the Oankali, for having children who were not fully Human.
She loved her children, yet she felt guilt for having them" (*Adulthood
Rites* 115). In light of his mother's hate and guilt, Akin himself a child of
guilt, increasingly questions the Oankali's decision to deprive Humans
of their ability to procreate free of the Oankali. Life among Humans
confronts him with different interpretations for the Oankali trade: to
Humans, the gene-trade is synonymous with "infect[ion]" and "af-

flict[ion]," that is, the nemesis of life (119). He starts questioning Humans' subjection to a choice between a guilt-ridden or death-ridden existence. Early socialization among Humans imbues him with an unprecedented recognition of humanity. No one before Akin had come to know Humans "as a truly separate people" (133), a recognition that fosters in him the "utter certainty" that the Oankali should not coerce Humans to either change genetically or die (133).

Due to their commitment to change, Oankali are regarded by Humans in the novels (but also by most critics) as agents of boundless transformation and difference. There are two aspects that complicate this view: first, change does not mean indefinite identity and the erasure of the past. While, unlike the Humans of the novel, the Oankali do not indulge in what Frederic Jameson calls post-modern nostalgia, the desire to return to an idealized past that never existed, this does not signify erasure of the past. On the contrary, the Oankali family, despite its construct structure, cultivates deep bonds with living and deceased generations: "these bonds expanded, changed over the years, but they did not weaken" (*Adulthood Rites* 184). Every adult and child carries in their names their genealogy, including the kin groups of every parent and their homes. The results are long names that function as identity markers. Humans expect the Oankali to drop these impractical, convoluted names in the course of the evolution set in course by interbreeding. Why would they keep record of the intricate structure of their construct posthuman families? But Oankali deny that kind of traceless change: "No. We'll change them to suit our needs, but we won't drop them" (*Imago* 7). This practice of retaining and adapting the past gives to Butler's aliens a firmness rarely recognized, comparable to the way Stuart Hall sees "post" theories operate: "as not deserting the terrain but rather, using it as one's reference point" (Hall 140). Second, Akin recognizes a deeply entrenched principle of liberty among the Oankali: the right to accept change through interbreeding or to refuse it. Not all Oankali mate with Humans. One section, the Akjai, continue unchanged, while remaining connected to the entire Oankali collective. And here resides the seed of injustice that Akin makes it his life's mission to rectify: Humans should have the right to remain unchanged by the trade just as some Oankali do (133).

The first to see the potential of liberation in this imbalance, Akin fashions himself in Promethean individualism:

> Who among the Oankali was speaking for the interest of resister Humans? Who had seriously considered that it might not be enough to let Humans choose either union with the Oankali or sterile lives free of the

Oankali? Trade-village Humans said it, but they were so flawed, so geneti-
cally contradictory that they were often not listened to. He did not have
their flaw. He had been assembled within the body of an ooloi. He was
Oankali enough to be listened to by other Oankali and Human enough to
know that resister Humans were being treated with cruelty and condescen-
sion. (*Adulthood Rites* 159)

Seeing himself as the missing link, as the right and rightful spokesperson
on behalf of Humans before the Oankali, gene-Gods and gatekeepers to
the future of the human race, Akin resembles Aeschylus' Prometheus to
the extent that he bestows hope on humanity. In *Prometheus Bound*, the
titan tells the chorus of the Oceanides that he changed Humans' destiny
by placing "blind hopes" in them and by giving them fire which would
teach them many skills (Aeschylus 250). Fire and hope meet in Akin's
narrative: he learns the human proclivity for self- determination and
hope, – at times "vain" hopes, a fitting synonym for "blind hopes" – in
the settlement called Phoenix, a name reminiscent of both annihilation
and rebirth (*Adulthood Rites* 159). Fire, and by extension warmth, as the
source of human life, together with the skills to control it are promised
by the Oankali to Akin: in preparation for the exodus of human resisters
towards Mars, the Oankali will teach Akin "the processes of changing a
cold, dry, lifeless world into something Humans might survive on"
(216). Akin's story on Earth ends with hope and fire: Phoenix, the set-
tlement divided by the prospect of Akin's Mars colony, burns. This is
also the end of book two, but in book three we learn that many settlers
rising from the ashes of Phoenix have joined Akin and for some, al-
though not all Humans, the Mars colony continues to represent the best
of all choices. In the end of book two, like Lot's wife, Akin throws a last
glance at Phoenix but that is as much the announcement of an ending as
of a hopeful new beginning.

Being that one individual who will "try to save them – what is left of
them – from their empty unnecessary deaths," Akin resembles the Ro-
mantic Prometheus (*Adulthood Rites* 182). Byron's "Prometheus" (1816)
exalts the titan as the one who changed human destiny by "making
Death a Victory" (Byron 241, line 59). This is a good moment to note
that empathy for human suffering motivates the redemptive energy of
Byron's Prometheus, as it does Butler's:

Titan! to whose immortal eyes The sufferings of mortality, Seen in their
sad reality, Were not as things that gods despise. (Byron 239, lines 1-4)

Butler's alignment with the Romantic Prometheus is not surprising. Since the Romantics, who wrote in the context of racial slavery and saw in Prometheus a potent vehicle of reform, his myth "has come to serve as something like a myth of modernity itself" (Hickman 2). But as Carol Dougherty shows in her survey of the myth from Greek Antiquity to the present, Prometheus showcases an "innate flexibility": not one of the earliest sources gives a complete telling of the myth, rather we must glean "the parameters of the Prometheus plot" from a variety of texts (15). It is a flexibility that the Romantics make their own more than previous generations. It is also a flexibility harnessed in *Xenogenesis*.

Several afterlives of the Prometheus myth coalesce in Butler's narrative: Plato's, Byron's as mentioned above, Percy and Mary Shelley's. And there is the influence of the non-violent Civil Rights movement endorsed and defended by Martin Luther King that informs the solution of the conflict between the Promethean protagonist and the power he challenges in *Xenogenesis*. As Promethean aspirations crystallize in the character of the human-alien Akin, the reader starts wondering how the narrator is going to resolve the opposition between one individual and the power structure in which he is embedded. This is also where Plato, Percy and Mary Shelley bring modifications to the myth. While Plato eschews the opposition between the titan and Zeus, the Shelleys highlight the collision of wills through the rhetoric of the curse that unravels suffering and violence. Butler's solution is a strategy of persuasion based on equal rights which are informed by empathy in their claim to remove the curse-like sterility imposed on Humans. Her Promethean Akin, once knowledgeable about human ways of life and subjection, joins the Oankali-construct community on the spaceship where all kin groups can communicate and whose consensus he must have for human fertility to be restored. First mediated by a representative of the unchanged Akjai Oankali, and then through his own reasoning and feeling, Akin pleads with the entire collective, Oankali and constructs, for an extension of empathy and equality: "Look at the Human-born among you [. . .] If your flesh knows you've done all you can for Humanity, their flesh should know as mine does that you've done almost nothing. Their flesh should know that resister Humans must survive as a separate, self-sufficient species" (*Adulthood Rites* 229).

Impassioned as this speech is, it does not meet with consensus; rather, confusion, dissension, and fear spread among the collective. Humans' fertility seems an impossible goal. But even when contemplating his failure to convince the collective, Akin never flirts with belligerence. His future attempts will go towards the honing of persuasive skills

that will win other people with whose help he can argue again in front of the collective. In face of denial and opposition, Akin's mediation then remains faithful to a non-violent ethos that not only unites a discourse of empathy with one of rationality but also acknowledges the limits of solitary Prometheanism: "Then let me [give Humans a world of their own]," he pleads "and those who choose to work with me do it" (*Adulthood Rites* 226). In the end, young Akin puts his case in the care of the representative of Akjai Oankali, who stands for full identification with the other: "If I were a Human, little construct," he tells Akin "I would be a resister myself. All people who know what it is to end should be allowed to continue if they can continue" (*Adulthood Rites* 229). The result of such non-violent perseverance is a compromise: human fertility is restored but Humans cannot be allowed to rebuild their civilization on Earth where their unchanged hierarchical thinking threatens the survival of other species. For this reason, they must be removed to Mars, where, the Oankali-construct collective predicts they will end up killing the new life the Oankali re-enabled them to create.

Butler's chosen collaboration between Akin and the collective offers a peaceful resolution to the Prometheus myth. Although the tradition of the rebellious Prometheus sparked by Hesiod and Aeschylus has had more proliferations, a joint effort to rebuild mankind between Prometheus and Zeus can be found in Plato's *Protagoras*. Peaceful, although after much suffering and obstinate longing for change (the word occurs more than twenty times), is also Percy Shelley's choice of a middle way in *Prometheus Unbound* (1820): Shelley keeps intact Prometheus' defying politics against despotism, but boycotts the discourse of hate and rebellion, when he has Prometheus renounce violence and through this very act usher a new era of hope "till Hope creates/ from its own wreck the thing it contemplates" (Shelley, *Prometheus Unbound* 286, 4. 573-75). Butler's Prometheus shares with Percy Shelley's a modification of the very concept of radical change. Its radicalism consists in going against the history of radical thinking. David Bromwich is right to read *Prometheus Unbound* as pressing beyond the ethic of revenge, the bedrock of radical thinking, attempting to make "the idea of revolution impossible to imagine in metaphors of leveling or turning-the-tables or violent overthrow" (Bromwich 241).[7] This revolutionary idea shaped when Percy

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[7] It should be mentioned that in both *Prometheus Unbound* and *Xenogenesis*, despite adherence to an ethos of non-hate, the revolutionary energies erupting from Prometheus figures do not eschew violence completely. Shelley licenses the presence of violence through the character of Demogorgon, the executor of Jupiter's destruction, while

encountered the anti-Promethean romance of Mary Shelley. *Xenogenesis*, too, reflects on lessons drawn from *Frankenstein*, in more ways than *Prometheus Unbound* does. Mary Shelley's choice to plant in the realm of the family a conflict rich in implications for mankind in its entirety, prefigures Butler's decision to plug her posthuman narrative into family networks and formulate both an ethics of empathy and justice from within these networks. Of course, *Frankenstein, or The Modern Prometheus* (1818) can hardly be praised for non-violence, but its consensus and sympathy-seeking efforts are all the more remarkable because they fail. Significantly, before vowing to persecute his creator and rob him of everyone he loved, the creature whose scientifically assembled body resembles Akin's (assembled by an ooloi), appeals to Victor's empathy and sense of justice. Murder is the consequence of Victor's failure to respond to what the creature calls "fellow-feeling in misery" and "reason."[8]

This is not the case in *Xenogenesis*, which glances back to not such a distant past. Here, the call for the exercise of fellow-feeling and reason that marked the history of twentieth-century Black America with its road to justice through non-violent participation matters. In his trail-blazing article "Non-Violence: The Only Road to Freedom," Martin Luther King affirmed his commitment to non-violent opposition writing: "The nonviolent strategy has been to dramatize the evils of our society in such a way that pressure is brought to bear against those evils by the forces of good will in the community and change is produced" (King 32). The history of non-violent opposition and disobedience is older than the Civil Rights movement and the instances of peaceful resistance in face of suffering, war and injustice are too many to be mentioned here. However, King's formulation of "the American racial revolution" that he was leading as "a revolution to 'get in' rather than overthrow" resonates in important ways with Butler's approach to power in *Xenogenesis* (King 32). Before addressing these resonances, it is worth recalling that King's commitment to a non-violent way has led critics to more readily associate Malcolm X with Prometheanism, writing of his vision of revolutionary violence as taking hold like Promethean fire prior to his resolution to join forces with King (Joseph 85).[9]

Butler surrounds Akin's pacifist negotiations with the rage and fire of Phoenix's unconvinced resisters.

[8] The creature specifically draws on these discourses speaking about having sought "fellow-feeling in misery" and "reasoned" with Victor to no avail (Shelley, *Frankenstein* 242, 192).

[9] See also Bryan Shih and Yohuru Williams.

King's non-violent "strategy for change" (a subtitle of his article) rejects rebellious Promethean politics that seek to throw out rather than get in. I understand Butler's solution to remove non-changed Humans to Mars as being informed by King's non-violent politics of change. While relocation to Mars may seem like a cutting loose from the ruling power structure, a segregation imposed by the power structure, a getting out since overthrow is impossible, Promethean Akin argues this move as a "getting in," a vindication of the same right to continue unchanged that Oankali allow themselves. It is also a "getting in" in the sense that King conceived of the non-violent racial revolution as sharing in the opportunities accumulated by the power structure in place (King 32). Although segregated because of their violent tendencies, Akin's Mars colony can survive not only through Oankali's extension of the right to procreate, but also through Oankali's active participation and sharing of the life-sustaining technologies that make Mars habitable.

The other salient aspect of this resolution is that Akin's intervention, brought about by the desire to get in rather than overthrow, rectifies the shortcomings of Mary Shelley's Prometheus. Theodora Goss and John Paul Riquelme argue for a bridge between *Frankenstein*'s superhuman and *Xenogenesis*'s posthuman that connects Romantic Gothic to technological imaginary. A key aspect of this connection is Butler's embrace of difference through the figure of the Oankali. In them Butler plants an attraction to the kind of difference that repels Frankenstein: the unexpected, immeasurable novelty of the hybrid offspring (Goss and Riquelme 441). This is largely a valid point, but there is one crucial difference that the Oankali until Akin's mediation have kept at bay by censure rather than embrace: human's tendency towards violence, a by-word for their death-drive, amply proven in the nuclear war that nearly extinguished them. Also not addressed – I think because Goss and Riquelme do not describe the bridge between *Frankenstein* and *Xenogenesis* as Promethean – is the fact that the narrative allows for enclaves of relative sameness, such as the Akjai Oankali or the Mars colony negotiated by Akin. Akin's Promethean endeavour, in the sense of the cutting-edge scientific endeavour that Western science-fiction would give it, to inhabit an inhospitable planet like Mars with the help of Oankali genetic skills, enlists the Oankali's acceptance of the nurturing role they can and, as rescuers and life-givers in a post-war reality, must play in the rebirth of humanity. They not only agree to restore human fertility, provided that Humans conduct their deadly experiment on Mars, but also provide their knowledge of making a lifeless planet liveable through Oankali-engineered, fast-growing plants and animals (*Adulthood Rites* 246). In this

sense, Akin succeeds in persuading the Oankali collective to concede to Humans two rights that Victor Frankenstein never concedes to his creature: first, the right to be nurtured after being brought to life, and second, the right to procreate. When he realizes that Victor will never live up to his duty towards him, the creature promises to segregate himself in the plains of South America with the female companion that Victor will create for him. A promise that never materializes because Victor destroys and disperses the assembled female in the waters of the Orkney Islands out of fear that "a race of devils would be propagated upon the Earth, who might make the very existence of the species of man a condition precarious and full of terror" (Shelley, *Frankenstein* 190).

The fear of terror must be faced also in *Xenogenesis*. So must the fear that the Promethean gift may be a curse in disguise. It is more a fact than a fear in some Greek sources, most notably in Hesiod's *Works and Days*, that Prometheus's intervention marks the dawn of an era of toil and hard manual labour for humankind. This awareness also weighs on Butler's Akin, who even in the hour of victory must contemplate: "He would give them a new world – a hard world that would demand cooperation and intelligence. Without either, it would surely kill them" (*Adulthood Rites* 257). The fear of violence, crushing hardship and unresolved past chastens any jubilant reading of Butler's imagined futures. In *Xenogenesis*, for Humans, a post-terrestrial scenario signifies an extension of the Copernican wound: if Copernican theory displaced Earth as the centre of the known universe, Butler's fiction displaces Earth (and its Humans) from being the sole locus of life, intention, development or kinship-based social arrangements. It is also a wound that reaches deep into the very critical thought that more often than not celebrates such displacement at the expense of engaging critically with its devastating potential; a wound that testifies to the unacknowledged seed of past dreams of perfectibility and transcendence in posthumanist thought. Butler's protagonist leaves for the Mars colony as a liberator but also as the one aware of the limited future of the Earth and the latent harm to which his exodus will expose an untouched planet and a multitude of soon-to-be-born lives. He can counter the evidence for Humans' casual and cosmic belligerence only by hoping that a new life on Mars, ironically, an environment adapted to human needs through Oankali technology, can also produce positive socio-genetic change. Such endorsement of the human, as Terry Eagleton puts it, is "hope without optimism"; sober and aware of unpredictable changes like those that gave life to Akin himself, both fearful and beneficiary, and about which Butler refuses to give calming certainties. Thus, expanded and changed,

Butler's Prometheanism, presses forward in unweakened form the chastening and hard wisdom won by some of the British Romantics: that, in order to be and remain life-affirming, the Promethean endeavour must reinvent itself in ways that resist what Réne Girard calls "the mimetic attraction of violence" (Girard 837).

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