

Metamorphosis and the Genesis of *Xenos*: Becoming-Other and Sexual Politics in Octavia Butler's *Xenogenesis Trilogy*

Ronald Bogue
Comparative Literature Department
University of Georgia, U.S.A.

Abstract

In the *Xenogenesis Trilogy* (1987-89), Octavia Butler recounts the recolonization of earth by human-alien hybrids following a catastrophic nuclear war. Although Butler never read the works of Deleuze and Guattari, her trilogy provides apt illustrations of Deleuze-Guattari's concept of "becoming." Diverse forms of becoming—becoming-woman, becoming-child, becoming-animal, becoming-molecular, and becoming-imperceptible—characterize various elements of Butler's plot, and all these becomings have ramifications in the domain of gender politics. Deleuze-Guattari valorize becoming as a mode of metamorphic invention, and they situate it within a general ontology of affective intensities, whereby human sexuality is at once fully sociohistorical and cosmic. Butler, too, imagines a world of sociohistorical and cosmic intensities, and she grants becoming a privileged role in creating new possibilities for future life. Yet she also envisions in alternative sexual, social and natural relationship the ambiguities and dangers of reconfigured networks of affectivity. Especially of concern to her are the perils of unbridled metamorphosis and the antithetical threat of addiction as a means of stabilizing the chaotic tendencies of uncontrolled processes of becoming. Ultimately, Butler's saga poses the question of free will and its relationship to biological imperatives. Deleuze-Guattari also see the dangers of anarchic becoming, arguing frequently that becoming-other must always be pursued with caution and in selected domains of activity. They do not address the topic of addiction in the same manner as Butler, but their articulation of the politics of social oppression implies a similar concern with the concept of agency in relation to desire. Finally, both Butler and Deleuze-Guattari subordinate their speculations about becoming, sexuality, politics, and sociohistorical and cosmic networks of relation to the general task of imagining a new mode of collective living, which Deleuze-Guattari call "inventing a people to come."

Keywords

Octavia Butler, Deleuze and Guattari, becoming-other, gender politics,
addiction, alternative collectivities, hybridity

During their discussion of the concept of “becoming-other” in *A Thousand Plateaus* (1980), the French philosopher Gilles Deleuze and psychoanalyst Félix Guattari remark, “Science fiction has gone through a whole evolution taking it from animal, vegetable, and mineral becomings to becomings of bacteria, viruses, molecules, and things imperceptible” (248). These words might seem a tacit tribute to Octavia Butler’s *Xenogenesis Trilogy*, were it not that *Dawn*, the first volume of the series, only appeared seven years after Deleuze and Guattari’s observation. Yet, though merely fortuitous, the conjunction of Deleuze and Guattari’s conceptual framework of “becoming-other” and Butler’s trilogy provides a particularly useful means of interrogating Butler’s novels, especially in the domains of the sexual and the political. Deleuze and Guattari see the sexual and political as interfused, such that questions of sex, gender and sexuality are always political, and issues of power, domination and sovereignty are immediately libidinal. That model of sexual politics in turn is subsumed within a broad ontology of force and affectivity that includes the human sphere, but extends beyond it to the cosmos as a whole. For her part, Butler takes as her dominant theme what she calls *xenogenesis*—*xenos*, foreigner, stranger, alien, the other (but also guest), and *genesis*, origin, birth—the continual process of emergence of the other. And throughout her trilogy, the sexual and the political are inseparable from physiological and biological processes that enmesh humans within an expanding network of multiple life forms.

Becoming Other

The becomings plateau of *A Thousand Plateaus* (“10: Becoming-Intense, Becoming-Animal, Becoming-Imperceptible . . .”) is one of the most fanciful of the book’s chapters, a section some might describe as hallucinogenic or even psychotic in its divagations through myths, films, fictions, musical compositions, works of philosophy, anthropology, biology, and so on.¹ The controlling element is the concept of “becoming,” which may be approached broadly as a general process of becoming-other. Deleuze and Guattari enumerate becomings of various sorts: becoming-woman, becoming-black, becoming-child, becoming-animal, becoming-molecular, becoming-imperceptible. Becomings entail a passage between binary opposites, a passage away from the dominant term and toward the dominated term—hence, a passage away from man toward woman, from white to non-white, from adult to child, from human to animal, from molar to molecular, from

¹ In citations, *A Thousand Plateaus* will be abbreviated as *TP* throughout.

perceptible to imperceptible. This passage is not a mimetic process, however. Becoming-woman is not a matter of imitating women, nor is becoming-animal a matter of acting like a dog, a cat or a crow. Rather, becoming-woman is something that passes between the categories of man and woman, establishing a “zone of proximity . . . an objective zone of indetermination or uncertainty” (TP 273), a “proximity, an indiscernibility” (TP 279), within which a mutative undoing of the categories of male and female may issue forth in a creative “line of flight” toward some hitherto unmapped gendering of the human, just as becoming-animal is a passage between the categories of the human and the animal toward something new. “A becoming is always in the middle; . . . it is the in-between, the border or line of flight or descent running perpendicular to both . . . it constitutes a zone of proximity and indiscernibility, a no-man’s land, a nonlocalizable relation sweeping up the two distant or contiguous points, carrying one into the proximity of the other” (TP 293).

Becomings always move away from dominant categories because such categories exist primarily to resist metamorphosis—to fix, control, code, regulate, and structure. Binaries for Deleuze and Guattari are power relations, inherently asymmetrical in their configuration and deployment. The dominant terms are male, white, adult, human, molar, and perceptible, and the only way to activate the process of becoming-other is to move from the dominant toward the dominated. Yet in becomings there is no automatic privilege enjoyed by the oppressed. Even females must work to become-woman, since the orthodox category of “woman” is structured by its controlling opposite and only an active “othering” of the category “woman” will initiate a genuine becoming-woman.² “Even blacks, as the Black Panthers said, must become-black. Even women must become-woman” (TP 291). All becomings “begin with and pass through becoming-woman” (TP 277), but all

² The dictum that women must also become-woman is perhaps the remark that has aroused the greatest hostility among feminists, who generally have found the presumption of men such as Deleuze and Guattari, telling women what they must do, to be the height of arrogance. Some feminists, however, have argued for the qualified usefulness of the concept, most notably Rosi Braidotti and Elizabeth Grosz. And after all, the idea that, in order to become-woman, women must actively “other” the concept or category of “woman” *might* seem to bear comparison with Irigaray’s notion of woman as being outside or other-than the man-woman or woman-man (hierarchical) binary in *This Sex Which Is Not One*; or Cixous’ discussion in e.g. *Sorties* of woman’s “bisexuality” as her strategy of locating herself, again, outside the traditional, logocentric and ultimately monistic, male-female or female-male binary; or (closer perhaps to Deleuze and Guattari) Haraway’s “woman as cyborg.” For an illuminating discussion of the implications of Deleuze and Guattari’s work for feminism, see the outstanding essays in Buchanan and Colebrook’s collective volume, *Deleuze and Feminism*. See also Braidotti’s *Metamorphoses: Towards a Materialist Theory of Becoming* and Grosz’s *Time Travels: Feminism, Nature, Power*.

becomings also tend toward “becomings-elementary, -cellular, -molecular, and even becomings-imperceptible” (TP 248).

The concept of becoming-other bears a vague resemblance to ideology critique, but the point is not simply to undo rigid mental categories. Becomings are processes that cut across distinctions between the mental and the physical, the natural and the artificial, the human and the nonhuman. The orchid and the wasp are engaged in a process of becoming-other, the orchid becoming-wasp in its resemblance to the sexual organs of a wasp, the wasp becoming-orchid in its pollination of other orchids, this symbiotic relation developing not through mimicry but through an aparallel evolution that produces resemblances as secondary effects. The wasp-orchid relation is a *noce contre nature*, an “unnatural” affective becoming that conjoins heterogeneous elements in a mutual undoing and reconfiguration, and such conjunctions are rife within the natural world. Deleuze and Guattari oppose the process of reproduction via becoming-other (orchid-wasp) to the process of ordinary reproduction as we would oppose epidemic to filiation, or contagion to propagation. If evolution involves any true becoming, they say, “it is in the domain of *symbioses* that bring into play beings of totally different scales and kingdoms, with no possible filiation” (238). Symbioses, in the largest sense of the word, are circuits of heterogeneous elements engaged in cohesive interaction, and symbiotic circuits may involve elements of various sorts: inorganic, organic, neural, sensate, conscious, human. In all such circuits, a process of becoming-other serves as the glue that holds the elements together. “We oppose epidemic to filiation, contagion to heredity, peopling by contagion to sexual reproduction, sexual production. Bands, human or animal, proliferate by contagion, epidemics, battlefields, and catastrophes. Like hybrids, which are in themselves sterile, born of a sexual union that will not reproduce itself, but which begins over again every time, gaining that much more ground. Unnatural participations or nuptials are the true Nature spanning the kingdoms of nature” (TP 241).

This opposition of filiation and contagion, of natural and unnatural reproduction, may seem dualistic (and the binary oppositions in Deleuze and Guattari are legion), but ultimately Deleuze and Guattari adhere to what might be termed a monistic pluralism. Their ontology is a sort of ecological panpsychism, one with prominent debts to Henri Bergson, Raymond Ruyer, and Gregory Bateson. From Bergson they derive their view of the cosmos as differences unfolding themselves in multiple life forms. From the philosopher Ruyer they take their conception of human consciousness as a specialized version of self-forming form. Subatomic particles, atoms, and molecules are self-sustaining formative forces, and

as such imbued with proto-consciousness, human consciousness being merely one manifestation of a ubiquitous process of self-forming. As a result, there is no qualitative distinction between the inorganic and organic, simply a difference in the mode of organization of those subatomic, atomic and molecular self-forming forces. And from Bateson they derive their notion of systems as interacting circuits of heterogeneities (what Deleuze and Guattari label “assemblages”). Bateson defines mind as a system attribute rather than an attribute of any one component of the system, his example being that of a human chopping down a tree: here, he says, the interactive feedback loop of human-axe-tree exhibits the quality of mind, not the human alone. What results from this conjunction of Bergson, Ruyer and Bateson is a form of vitalism, but one focused on what Deleuze and Guattari call “anorganic” (*TP* 503) or “nonorganic life” (*TP* 507), a vital mutative force of connection that, as subatomic, atomic and molecular force, is present in inorganic and organic entities alike, and as interconnecting force of becoming-other brings collections of heterogeneous elements into cohesive circuits of interaction. Ultimately, then, the distinction between contagion and filiation is subsumed within a general vitalism, both contagion and filiation being processes of the self-forming formation of anorganic life.³

Becoming, as a process, tends to efface identities, such that ultimately one should speak less of stable “things” than of flows, fluxes, currents, trajectories. Hence, Deleuze and Guattari propose that bodies (by which they mean entities of any sort) be characterized at a fundamental level solely in terms of speeds and affects. Nature as a whole may be envisioned as “a fixed plane, upon which things are distinguished from one another only by speed and slowness . . . A fixed plane of life upon which everything stirs, slows down or accelerates” (*TP* 254-5). This plane of differential speeds, of flows, currents, vectors of movement, is also a plane of relation and interaction, of elements mutually affecting one another. If a body may be defined by its specific configuration of differential speeds, it also possesses specific powers of affecting, and being affected by, other entities. Hence, a body’s becoming is always affective, “intensive.”

Implicit in this view of bodies as fundamentally affective entities is an understanding of sexuality and desire that departs from commonsense conceptions of the terms. For Deleuze and Guattari, genitally organized human sexual relations are a subset of a general affectivity that characterizes all bodies in nature. Not only are humans, in Freud’s formulation, “polymorphously perverse,” that is, possessed

³ For a more detailed exposition of this view of nature, see my *Deleuze on Music, Painting, and the Arts*, chapters one, three and seven.

of an affectivity that invests the entire body, but all natural bodies are polymorphously perverse, and polymorphously perverse in their relations with one another. Something like a universal libido permeates creation, and that libido is what they call “desire,” not desire for something that is lacking, but a positive “desiring-production” that imbues all bodies in their active, productive becoming.⁴ For this reason, conventional theories of sexuality and sexual identity must be reconfigured, for “there are as many sexes as there are terms in symbiosis” (TP 242). “Sexuality brings into play . . . a diversity of conjugated becomings; these are like *n* sexes . . . Sexuality is the production of a thousand sexes, which are so many uncontrollable becomings” (TP 278).

Becoming-Woman, Becoming-Animal, Becoming-Male, Becoming-Child

The genesis of the other commences with the opening of *Dawn* (1987), when Lilith Iyapo, the novel’s African-American heroine, awakens from a prolonged sleep in an alien space craft.⁵ “Womb,” the title of the novel’s first section, signals that Lilith’s awakening is a rebirth, but it also suggests that her alien hosts, the Oankali, are undergoing a parallel rebirth. This suggestion is made explicit when Lilith asks Jdahya, her first Oankali contact, about his home planet, and he tells her it probably no longer exists, adding that “‘It was a womb. The time has come for us to be born’” (D 37). Lilith and her fellow human survivors of a nuclear holocaust have been preserved in pod-like wombs for over two centuries while the Oankali restore earth’s ecosystems and prepare to interbreed with the humans. The Oankali are genetic “traders” whose goal is the creation of hybrid “constructs,” both human and Oankali-born. This envisioned procreative process is a general “becoming-animal,” a becoming-Oankali of the humans and a becoming-human of the Oankali, one whose product will be something between the two species. But the Oankali are already decidedly “other” within themselves, since they are “like mature asexual

⁴ For an extended exposition of the concept of “desiring production,” see chapter one of Deleuze and Guattari’s *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia I*.

⁵ All references to the *Xenogenesis Trilogy*, originally published as three separate novels, *Dawn* (1987), *Adulthood Rites* (1988), and *Imago* (1989), are to the one-volume republication of the novels, titled *Lilith’s Brood*. The novels from which the citations are taken are indicated by the abbreviations *D* = *Dawn*, *AR* = *Adulthood Rites*, and *I* = *Imago*. Among the many fine commentaries on Butler’s trilogy, I have found especially useful those of Donna Haraway, in *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*, and those of Patricia Melzer in *Alien Constructions: Science Fiction and Feminist Thought*.

animals” that “divide into three” (*D* 35): Dinso, who stay on Earth and breed with humans; Toaht, who take human partners but leave in the space ship that carried the Oankali to earth; and Akjai, physically quite distinct from the other two, who depart in a new space ship created after reaching earth. Above all, the Oankali are fascinated by difference—unlike humans, who fear it—and constitutively devoted to metamorphically becoming-other. They interbreed, or “trade” themselves, says Jdahya, because “we are powerfully acquisitive. We acquire new life—seek it, investigate it, manipulate it, sort it, use it. We carry the drive to do this in a minuscule cell within a cell—a tiny organelle within every cell of our bodies” (*D* 41).

The actual generation of constructs, however, only takes place in *Adulthood Rites* (1988), the second novel of the trilogy. *Dawn*’s focus is instead on Lilith’s increasing understanding of the Oankali and her difficult mission of preparing some forty-three humans for return to earth as colonists mated to Oankali. In a certain sense, her increasingly close relations with the Oankali may be seen as a form of becoming-woman. The Oankali characteristics coincide with those traditionally designated in human terms as female: accepting, nurturing, healing, consensual, intuitive, and integrated in sensate, affective and cognitive processing. Yet they also have “quiet androgynous voices” (*D* 97) and nothing “she recognized as sexual organs” (*D* 36). Her movement toward them, then, is toward an “othered” female identity, unsettlingly like and unlike its human counterpart. The Oankali choose her to lead the human settlers because she is a woman, and hence less dominated than males by the human contradiction—that of being intelligent but hierarchical. Throughout much of *Dawn*, the hierarchical tendency toward violence and domination is shown to be most intense in the males, who are always in danger of regressing to a primitive state. As Lilith says to the newly awakened humans following an attempted rape, “Nobody here is property. . . . There’ll be no back-to-the-Stone-Age, caveman bullshit!” (*D* 178).

Yet Lilith is not without her own hierarchical tendencies, at least from an Oankali perspective. She resents her initial dependence on the Oankali and seeks to exercise her autonomy by wandering alone from her shelter on the ship. Even decades later, after she has mated with the Oankali, she will continue to wander periodically in a vain effort to prove to herself her independence from the Oankali. The Oankali eventually come to see that humans “could not easily accept being totally dependent,” yet this remained “a characteristic of adult Humans that the Oankali never understood” (*I* 555). Though a desire for autonomy might seem admirable and without gender coding, in the world of Butler’s trilogy the impulse is

allied with a human hierarchical tendency that is markedly male. Even the construct males, whether Oankali- or human-born, will be solitary wanderers who “will come and go as they wish and as they find welcome” (*AR* 260) rather than dwell with their mates and family. As Akin, the first human-born construct male is told, “They say you can’t be bound. You were not constructed to be bound” (*AR* 465).

In this regard, Lilith’s growing acceptance of her dependence on the Oankali may be seen as a becoming-woman, a becoming even she as a woman must engage in since she possesses the hierarchical tendency that expresses itself most fully in males. But if her becoming-woman entails a surrender of power, it also brings with it an increase in capabilities. The Oankali alter her, providing her mind with an eidetic memory and her body with heightened physical strength and an enhanced ability to heal itself. When other humans first see evidence of her strength, they suspect that she is a man, or perhaps not even human (*D* 147). However, as Nikanj, the Oankali who altered Lilith, tells a human male, “I haven’t added or subtracted anything, but I have brought out latent ability. She is as strong and as fast as her nearest animal ancestors were” (*D* 156). In a sense, then, Lilith has not become more male or less human but become a female human with fully realized physical and mental potential, perhaps a hyper-woman, hyper-human. In this regard, too, her becoming-other is a becoming-woman. But ultimately, the process of becoming-other puts her outside standard categories of male/female or human/animal. As she herself says later, “I’m somewhere between Human and construct in ability” (*AR* 298). Through her becoming-woman she has entered an area between categories, “a zone of proximity and indiscernibility, a no-man’s land” (*TP* 293).

In *Adulthood Rites* the action moves to Earth decades later, after Lilith’s human-Oankali family and settlement have become well established. The central character of the novel is Lilith’s son Akin, the first human-born male construct. His is the story of a becoming-male and becoming-human. Deleuze and Guattari argue that there can be no such becomings, since male and human are dominant power categories, and hence oppressive and resistant to change. Yet Akin is not a human but a construct, someone between human and Oankali without being a simple admixture of the two. Humans are now the dominated group on earth, and even construct males are under the strict control of the Oankali. Nikanj, Akin’s ooloi parent (the ooloi being the third Oankali sex, in addition to male and female), tells Lilith that one group of Oankali “believed it would be best to dispense with Human-born males altogether.” Even that group realized, however, that they were wrong. “But they were afraid. A male who’s Human enough to be born to a Human female could be a danger to us all. We must try though. We’ll learn from Akin”

(AR 259). The wager is that the addition of Oankali genes to a human-born construct male will be sufficient to overcome the human male's innate hierarchical tendencies. The wager proves a success, for Akin eventually becomes a new kind of male, more autonomous than female and ooloi Oankali and constructs, but without any signs of a desire to dominate others. His becoming-male is, indeed, a genuine becoming-other, a movement into a no-man's land outside standard gender categories.

More important than this becoming-male, however, is Akin's becoming-human. The Oankali and their human mates are the colonists of earth, but there are also Resisters on the planet, humans who have refused to breed with the Oankali. They are the indigenous peoples under the domination of colonial powers. They wage a guerrilla war on the occupiers, but they are impotent, both reproductively (due to Oankali alterations of their bodies) and militarily. They are able to struggle against the Oankali only because the Oankali allow them to do so, preferring to wait for the humans to submit voluntarily to the occupiers rather than mate with them by force. At the age of two, Akin is abducted by a band of Resisters, and for a year he lives in a Resister settlement. Although the Oankali could have rescued him at any time, they allow him to stay with the humans, despite the fact that he is entering the crucial period of Oankali and construct development in which birth siblings form one of the fundamental bonds of the species. The Oankali intention is to gain a greater understanding of humans through Akin, and in this they are successful, but the cost is heavy for Akin, for he passes the crucial bonding period while in captivity. The Oankali eventually come to see that they made a grave mistake. Every Oankali and construct family is "interconnected, all united—a network of family into which each child should fall" (AR 332). Sibling bonding is a crucial component of the family, and, as Akin says, "late bonds are never what they should be" (AR 361). "Humans had no idea how completely Oankali and construct society was made up of groups of two or more people" (AR 437), and when Akin senses that he has lost his chance to bond with his sibling, he says the feeling is beyond loneliness: "This was more like . . . something died" (AR 397). It is this lack of connection, this profound separateness, however, that brings him closest to the human condition which, it would seem, is characterized precisely by this irreducible isolation of the individual.

Akin's separation from his Oankali/construct family and his extended exposure to human society lead him to his life's mission: to create a human counterpart to the Oankali Akjai, those Oankali who will leave Earth unchanged. "There should be a Human Akjai!" he exclaims. "There should be Humans who

don't change or die—Humans to go on if the Dinso and Toaht unions fail” (*AR* 378). Eventually Akin makes his case for a Human Akjai aboard Chkakhichdahk, the Oankali space ship. His main ally proves to be Kohj, an Akjai ooloi. Kohj is the only Akjai described in the trilogy. It is a large, caterpillar-like creature with no eyes or ears. “It was what the Oankali had been, one trade before they found Earth” (*AR* 453). The Dinso and Toaht Oankali, who mate with humans, have developed eyes, ears and mouths in order to communicate with humans, but their preferred mode of communication with one another is through direct neural contact.

The Oankali have always felt that allowing humans to breed by themselves is a morally repugnant cruelty, for humans are doomed to inevitable self-destruction by their genetic makeup—and not just by a single gene or two. As Jdahya explains to Lilith early in the trilogy, “ ‘It isn't simple, and it isn't a gene or two. It's many—the result of a tangled combination of factors that only begins with genes’ ” (*D* 39). This genetic “human contradiction”—that of being intelligent yet hierarchical—is so pervasive in humans that some Oankali fear mating with them at all, and they have become Akjai. “There was a time when that conflict or contradiction—it was called both—frightened some Oankali so badly that they withdrew from contact with Humans. They became Akjai—people who would eventually leave the vicinity of Earth without mixing with Humans” (*I* 678). Yet, despite this Akjai fear, it is the Akjai ooloi Kohj who makes Akin's case before the collective body of Oankali. When Akin asks Kohj why it had done so, it replies, “ ‘I'm Akjai. How can I deny another people the security of an Akjai group? Even though for this people it's a cruelty’ ” (*AR* 475).

The Oankali decide to allow a Human Akjai to colonize Mars, but only after considerable deliberation and the establishment of an uneasy consensus among themselves. Akin's plea, the result of his becoming-human, has introduced a becoming-other within the Oankali, one that reveals tensions already present within that species. Up to this point in the narrative, the Oankali have appeared to be an almost perfectly concordant group governed by mutuality and consensus. Yet we learn that the division of Akjai from Dinso and Toaht is not merely physiological, but motivated by fear—specifically, fear of difference and change, those characteristics usually most attractive to the Oankali. And the human desire for autonomy, viewed by the Oankali as an expression of human hierarchical tendencies, proves to be a desire the Oankali share, and hence a desire that can express something other than a power mentality. At one point, Kohj tells Akin, “ ‘You skirt as close to the Contradiction as anyone has dared to go. . . . That leaves you with your own contradiction’ ” (*AR* 475). Akin is an anomalous element, his

own contradiction, which is injected into the Oankali collectivity. He is an unsettling, “othering” element that reveals a contradiction within that collectivity and induces an unforeseen course of action.

Akin also disturbs the Oankali because, as a child, he should not be able to convey so fully and powerfully his neural experience of becoming-human. Nothing in Butler’s trilogy corresponds precisely to Deleuze and Guattari’s “becoming-child,” in that no adult actively engages in a becoming-other by way of the child, but the motif of the asymmetrical power relation of adults to children is present in each of the three novels. If the Oankali have one clear prejudice, it is that of ageism. In *Dawn*, the sub-adult ooloi Nikanj, one of the first Oankali to understand humans well, often offers the Oankali advice about their human interactions, but the advice is ignored since Nikanj is a child. When in *Adulthood Rites* Akin prepares to travel to the Oankali space ship, he is warned that, as a child, he will not be taken seriously, and he remembers “Nikanj’s stories of its own childhood—of being right, knowing it was right, and yet being ignored because it was not adult” (*AR* 430). In *Imago* (1989), Jodahs observes, “I had seen Oankali make the mistake of treating Humans like children” (*I* 566), and indeed, twice humans complain of how “patronizing” the Oankali are (*D* 50; *I* 532). In part, the Oankali attitude towards children is a function of biology. Children undergo a physiological metamorphosis when they become adults, and hence there is a clear demarcation between children and adults. (Significantly, an Oankali child is “eka: sexless child” (*AR* 450), and eka can “literally go either way, become male or female” (*I* 533). Thus, to be an adult is to be gendered.) But finally, Oankali ageism is a flaw in their makeup that leads to bad decisions and reveals a hierarchical tendency even in this highly consensual and communal species.

Becoming-ooloi

Imago, the trilogy’s last novel, revolves around the narrator, Lilith’s child Jodahs, the first human-born construct ooloi. If Lilith is an anomalous female somewhere between human and construct, and Akin an anomalous male within construct engenderment, Jodahs is an anomalous ooloi, even by Oankali standards. Jodahs represents “the premature adulthood of a new species” (*I* 742), capable not only of serving the standard ooloi function of mediating relations among human-Oankali couples but also of changing its own form, something Oankali ooloi cannot do. Before Jodahs mates, it roams the woods and allows its body to adopt characteristics of various organisms. “My body wanders,” says Jodahs, but

“Changing doesn’t bother me anymore”; then it adds, “At least, not this kind of deliberate, controlled changing” (*I* 612). In Deleuze-Guattarian terms, the emergence of this metamorphic capability is a “becoming-molecular” of the construct species. Oankali already perceive at a subatomic level. As the Akjai ooloi Kohj tells Akin, ““Even at your stage of growth, Eka, you can perceive molecules. We perceive subatomic particles”” (*AR* 454). But with the development of construct ooloi, becoming-molecular is manifested as self-metamorphosis. In the case of Jodahs’s sibling Aaor, the second human-born construct ooloi, this becoming-molecular is explicitly realized. At one point Aaor’s body wanders and it becomes a “kind of near mollusk, something that had no bones left. Its sensory tentacles were intact, but it no longer had eyes or other Human sensory organs. Its skin, very smooth, was protected by a coating of slime. It could not speak or breathe air or make any sound at all” (*I* 674). Aaor is on the verge of dissolution, its body beginning to break down into single-cell organisms that would “invade the bodies of larger creatures” and thereby “infect . . . plants and animals” (*I* 682). Deleuze and Guattari praise becoming-molecular as the end-point of all becomings, but this becoming of Aaor’s is decidedly negative. Aaor is in despair at the lack of mates, and were it to continue in its dissolution, says Jodahs, “Aaor as an individual would be gone. In a way, then, Aaor’s body was trying to commit suicide” (*I* 682). In truth, however, Deleuze and Guattari would second this negative judgment, for in their terms a primary danger in all becomings is that of descent into a “black hole,” a suicidal acceleration toward a total disintegration of form. Aaor’s becoming lacks “caution” (*TP* 160), in Deleuze and Guattari’s vocabulary, lacks control of/in its speed. Metamorphic becoming-other always requires a compensatory creation of new forms and an ongoing sustenance of cohesion among the changing components of any assemblage of heterogeneities.

Ultimately, what is at stake in this becoming-molecular is the question of identity in the midst of change. Life is metamorphosis, dissolution and re-creation of form, yet with a sustaining cohesion and coordination of elements. The “othering” of the human is inherent to the natural becoming of human beings, and Butler’s imagined evolution of humans into a new construct species is simply an accelerated version of evolutionary processes we are always already a part of. For the Oankali, identity is distributed throughout their bodies. As Jdahya explains to Lilith in *Dawn*, the Oankali possess ““a minuscule cell within a cell—a tiny organelle within every cell of our bodies,”” and that organelle is ““the essence of ourselves, the origin of ourselves”” (*D* 41). Throughout their myriad exchanges with

other species, their multiple metamorphoses, the identity of the Oankali has been preserved in this organelle.

But Aaor's problem goes beyond that of organelle identity. If it dissolves and its cells become assimilated with the environment, the Oankali essence, the organelle, will continue to exist within each life form that consumes Aaor's molecular components—and that is the ecological danger his dissolution poses. Aaor's identity requires some form of cohesion, some coordination of components governed by will. When Jodahs tries to heal Aaor, Jodahs says that "Something had gone seriously wrong with Aaor's body, as Nikanj had said. It kept slipping away from me—simplifying its body. It had no control of itself, but like a rock rolling downhill, it had inertia. Its body 'wanted' to be less and less complex" (*I* 682). What eventually gives Aaor focus and cohesion is the discovery of mates (Jodahs likewise only gains full control of its body once it finds human mates). Aaor's coherence as a single entity, in short, is a function of will, desire and social bonds. Once that coherence is established, there is no danger that Aaor's body or mind will dissolve, and it will now be able to enjoy the full participation of one being with another that characterizes ooloi connections, whether in bodily manipulation of other creatures—healing, correcting genetic errors, mixing genes for reproduction—or in neurosensory communion with them. At one point in *Adulthood Rites*, Akin is in sensory contact with two ooloi at the same time, and he fears that he will lose his identity during the intense experience. "How did they not lose themselves? How was it possible to break apart again? It was as though two containers of water had been poured together, then separated—each molecule returned to its original container" (*AR* 454). What he learns, however, is that "No matter how closely he was joined to the two ooloi, he was aware of himself. He was equally aware of them and their bodies and their sensations. But, somehow, they were still themselves, and he was still himself" (*AR* 455). Through the desiring will, a becoming-molecular is possible without self-dissolution. Beings may transcend difference without losing self-cohesion.

Ooloi are by far the most alien of the creatures in Butler's trilogy, and those who most thoroughly defy standard categories of sex and gender. Though humans often think of ooloi as male or female, they are decidedly "its." Nevertheless, they are thoroughly erotic beings. They arouse humans, constructs and Oankali alike. They are alluring and highly seductive. Their erotic power, however, is not limited to sexual activity nor concentrated on specific sexual organs; instead, it extends to virtually all spheres of interaction with others and all bodily components. The Oankali as a whole have a more decentralized sensory apparatus than humans, their

perceptions arriving not through eyes or ears but through sensory tentacles that are distributed across their bodies. From birth they relate to each other through embraces that establish multiple sensory tentacle contacts. These sensory interconnections provide pleasure, and the ooloi's neural connections with other beings, established through its specialized sensory hands, are merely a heightened, extremely intense version of these basic sensory contacts. In general, there seems to be no clear distinction between sexual pleasure and other forms of pleasure in relations with ooloi. Sex itself—or what is ordinarily called sex—between a human man and woman, when mediated by an ooloi, goes beyond mere bodily experience. When Lilith and Joseph first mate, “their delight in one another ignited and burned. They moved together, sustaining an impossible intensity, both of them tireless, perfectly matched, ablaze in sensation, lost in one another” (*D* 162). All this takes place without any physical contact between Lilith and Joseph, the ooloi providing a direct neural stimulation of the humans that allows them to transcend their bodies (although they are subsequently unable to enjoy direct physical contact with one another—a disturbing side effect of what might otherwise seem an ideal experience). When ooloi heal and comfort, they give pleasure. When Oankali and constructs explore and gather samples of different organisms, they bring the samples to an ooloi, at which point “The ooloi took the information and gave in exchange intense pleasure. The taking and the giving were one act” (*AR* 415).

In short, virtually every interaction with an ooloi is a sensual, pleasurable experience. Through the ooloi, a continuum of affectivity permeates bodies and their interactions. And that general sensual pleasure—what Deleuze and Guattari call desire—is a genuine affectivity, as Deleuze and Guattari define the term: a power of affecting and being affected by other bodies. For the Oankali, and for ooloi especially, whatever sensations they give others they feel equally themselves. When still an infant, Akin “had learned an important lesson: He would share any pain he caused. Best, then, to be careful and not cause pain” (*AR* 257). For this reason, Oankali are opposed to any form of violence. “Humans said violence was against Oankali beliefs. Actually it was against their flesh and bone, against every cell of them To kill was not simply wasteful to the Oankali. It was as unacceptable as slicing off their own healthy limbs” (*I* 564). Ooloi affectivity is simply the fullest expression of this Oankali experience of affect as mutual, nonviolent, bidirectional sensual co-participation.

Oankali and construct affectivity, then, involves the individual's entire neural being, all social relations and activities, and finally it reaches out to include the external environment. The Oankali are an acquisitive species. As Jdahya tells Lilith,

“We’re not hierarchical, you see. We never were. But we are powerfully acquisitive. We acquire new life—seek it, investigate it, manipulate it, sort it, use it” (D 41). The Oankali acquire life and make it a part of their world and themselves: they “collect life, travel and collect and integrate new life into their ships, their already vast collection of living things, and themselves” (AR 410). And the nexus of this acquisitive impulse is the ooloi, who dispenses extreme pleasure when receiving newly-discovered samples. The ooloi has a specialized organ, between its two hearts, called a “yashi,” within which it stores all its samples, and with which it makes the genetic manipulations necessary for procreation. When an ooloi reaches maturity, its parent ooloi deposits samples of the entire contents of its yashi in its offspring. When Jodahs receives the samples from Nikanj, its parent ooloi, Jodahs says the experience is “like having billions of strangers screaming from inside you for your individual attention. Incomprehensible . . . overwhelming . . . no word is big enough” (694).

Within Jodahs’ yashi, the environment as a whole becomes part of the affective life of a single organism. The Oankali’s corporate existence as a species extends from the ooloi yashi through the male collectors to connect with all surrounding life forms, including those organisms encountered in the distant past, on numerous planets, and those newly discovered on earth. This is a cosmic becoming, a becoming Deleuze and Guattari call “becoming-imperceptible,” the final destination of all becomings. By “becoming-imperceptible” they do not mean that the individual totally dissolves or becomes disembodied; rather, the individual becomes so much a part of its world that it can no longer be clearly distinguished from its environment. To become-imperceptible “is to world (*faire monde*), to make a world (*faire un monde*)” (TP 280). Their example of a creature that becomes-imperceptible is the camouflage fish: “this fish is crisscrossed by abstract lines that resemble nothing, that do not even follow its organic divisions; but thus disorganized, disarticulated, it worlds with the lines of a rock, sand, and plants, becoming imperceptible” (TP 280). In the Oankali, and in their construct children, a literal becoming-imperceptible takes place, a true becoming-cosmic.

Power, Addiction, and the Becoming of a People to Come

Affectivity permeates the Oankali and construct world, and the desiring will provides cohesion and identity for individuals as they participate with one another in various becomings, including becoming-molecular and becoming-imperceptible. In Butler’s handling of the motifs of will and individual autonomy, however, she

raises important political issues of a markedly darker cast than those related directly to the domain of the sexual. In *Dawn*, when Joseph says that he does not want erotic contact with Nikanj, he nonetheless lies down with the ooloi. Nikanj then remarks, ““You see. Your body has made a different choice”” (*D* 189). When Nikanj tells Lilith that she has been impregnated with a daughter, she is outraged that Nikanj had violated its promise to do so only with her consent. Nikanj reminds her that it promised only to wait until she was ready: ““And you are ready to be her mother. You could never have said so. Just as Joseph could never have invited me into his bed—no matter how much he wanted me there. Nothing about you but your words reject this child”” (*D* 247). In *Adulthood Rites*, when a human asks Nikanj whether it impregnated Lilith against her will, it replies, ““Against one part of her will, yes”” (*AR* 300). Nikanj then adds, ““In the first children, I gave Lilith what she wanted but could not ask for. I let her blame me instead of herself”” (*AR* 300). This sounds dangerously like the justifications of rapists who claim their victims unconsciously ““wanted it.”” And like the forced reproduction that characterizes the history of enslaved/colonized women.

The situation is somewhat different in the case of the ooloi, however, since, as Lilith says, ““they know our bodies better than we do”” (*D* 169). The Oankali communicate with one another through direct neural stimulation, unlike humans, who communicate through words. As a result, the Oankali cannot lie, whereas humans can say one thing and mean another. In *Imago*, Jodahs notes that humans often misunderstood ooloi in thinking that ooloi assess a human’s will by his or her words.

But the ooloi perceived all that a living being said—all words, all gestures, and a vast array of other internal and external bodily responses. Ooloi absorbed everything and acted according to whatever consensus they discovered. Thus ooloi treated individuals as they treated groups of beings. They sought a consensus. If there was none, it meant the being was confused, ignorant, frightened, or in some other way not yet able to see its own best interests. (*I* 553)

Perhaps the ooloi know what humans want better than they do themselves, but the ooloi’s superior knowledge nevertheless establishes a disturbingly hierarchical relationship between ooloi and humans.

What further complicates this situation is the problem of addiction. Ooloi bonds are physiological. Lilith describes bonds with an ooloi as ““literal, physical

addiction to another person” (*I* 679). Once humans bond to an ooloi, they cannot bear prolonged physical separation from the ooloi (nor can the ooloi endure that separation without serious pain). Do humans, then, choose to interact with ooloi? And, for that matter, do ooloi, and the Oankali as a whole, choose to interact with humans? The Oankali are as committed to “trading” with humans “as to breathing” (*D* 42-3). Lilith says of the Oankali, ““with their own biology driving them, they can’t not blend with us”” (*AR* 282). And although the Oankali seduce humans, they are seduced in turn. As Nikanj tells Joseph, ““A partner must be biologically interesting, attractive to us, and you are fascinating. You are horror and beauty in rare combination. In a very real way, you’ve captured us, and we can’t escape”” (*D* 153). The ooloi drive for tactile sensation and for mates is a compulsion, a hunger. Jodahs says that ““We called our need for contact with others and our need for mates *hunger*. The word had not been chosen frivolously. One who could hunger could starve”” (*I* 682).

Through chemical bonds with an ooloi, a family of humans and Oankali can be formed, and with it, a stable social order. When Jodahs is still a subadult ooloi, it finds human mates and feels jealous when Nikanj examines them. Nikanj explains to Jodahs that its jealousy is a sign of insecurity, since Jodahs is incapable, as a subadult, of forming permanent bonds with its mates. In this regard, Jodahs is like humans. ““Humans are possessive of mates, potential mates, and property because they can be taken from them. . . . Humans can take the mates of other Humans. There’s no physical bond. No security. And because Humans are hierarchical, they tend to compete for mates and property”” (*I* 595-6). Butler here is reiterating a Darwinian truism: natural selection compels males to compete for females, and such competition gives rise to stratification and hierarchical power relations in social species, such as wolves, gorillas and humans. Oankali and constructs, by contrast, can enjoy a nonhierarchical, communal social order because of these chemical bonds. We should note, however, that the price of this stable social order is a monogamous sexuality, permanently fixed by physical bonds, and hence a sexuality that restricts the play of desire.

It would seem that the moral of Butler’s fable poses a dilemma: our political alternatives appear to be those of a phallographic, hierarchical, violent social order of domination and oppression, or a peaceful, communal society of addictive co-dependence. And in both cases, the societies are structured by uncontrollable and deterministic biological drives. Such a reading, however, is shortsighted. Here again, I believe, Butler’s aim is similar to that of Deleuze and Guattari. Her purpose is to imagine alternative ways of understanding sex, gender and sexuality through

various processes of becoming-other; to envision the political ramifications of such becomings without falling into a simplistic utopianism; and finally, through such speculation, to create what Deleuze and Guattari refer to as “new possibilities for life.”

The dilemma Butler poses seems to limit possibilities, and primarily because it rests on a kind of biological determinism. Humans and Oankali alike *must* do what they do because of their genetic makeup, and the social order that emerges from their biological nature *cannot* be otherwise. Yet, if genes were destiny, and if the Oankali truly knew humans as well as they claim, the Oankali would never make mistakes. The reality, however, is that the Oankali make mistakes all the time. They repeatedly misjudge how humans will react and what the results of their manipulations of humans will be. The Oankali see the self-destruction of a Human Akjai as inevitable. Akin seems to agree with that postulate, when he tells a human that “‘Human purpose isn’t what you say it is or what I say it is. It’s what your biology says it is—what your genes say it is’” (AR 501). Yet Akin persists in his quest for a Human Akjai, and for one reason: “‘Chance exists. Mutation. Unexpected effects of the new environment. Things no one has thought of. The Oankali can make mistakes’” (AR 501-2). The future is genuinely open, unknowable possibilities exist, and only because of chance, mutation, unexpected developments and unpredictable outcomes. Ultimately, even the Oankali understand this fact. As Dichaan, Akin’s Oankali father, says, “‘No trade has ever been without danger’” (AR 444), and that danger exists because the results of a genetic trade cannot be known in advance. If indeed the future cannot be known, and if genes are not destiny, then the political alternatives of oppressive hierarchy and addictive mutuality need not be the only ones available or imaginable.

Deleuze and Guattari see the creation of new possibilities for life as one with the invention of a “people to come.”⁶ In the *Xenogenesis Trilogy*, Butler describes the literal emergence of a new people—a new construct species. Deleuze and Guattari do not offer a blueprint for the future or a detailed characterization of the “people to come”—indeed, they cannot, since the future is inherently unknowable. What they do instead is to recommend various becomings, various ways of undoing ossified concepts, structures of interaction, and ways of living, in the hope of creating a situation in which something new can arise. The risks are great, of course. Becomings may lead to worse modes of existence, but the alternative is simply to accept the status quo. Butler’s object is the same as Deleuze and Guattari’s, though

⁶ The notions of creating “new possibilities for life” and inventing “a people to come” are presented most fully in Deleuze and Guattari’s *What Is Philosophy?*

carried out in fiction. She unsettles notions of sex and gender through the “othering” Oankali and their third-sex ooloi. She posits an affectivity that transcends genital eroticism to include the entire body and its multiple pleasures, and that extends into the interpersonal realm and the environment as a whole. She qualifies and complicates this idealistic depiction of sexuality and desire, however, by adding that human mates can no longer bear touching one another once mated to an ooloi, and by limiting human sexuality to male/female relations (plus ooloi) and to sexual activity oriented toward reproduction—all of which suggests the ambiguities, perils, and mixed promises of any becoming-other. She develops contrasting models of social interaction, one hierarchical, the other communal, both informed by principles that are inseparably political and sexual, but neither of which is a utopian ideal. And she exposes complex motives in her characters, contradictions, inconsistencies, anomalies and unresolved tensions. What she offers, finally, is not a finite set of possibilities for the future—human, Oankali, or construct—but a stimulus for thinking beyond these possibilities, for imagining and creating new modes of existence for ourselves that cannot be described or known until they actually come into being.

Works Cited

- Bogue, Ronald. *Deleuze on Music, Painting, and the Arts*. New York: Routledge, 2003.
- Braidotti, Rosi. *Metamorphoses: Towards a Materialist Theory of Becoming*. Cambridge: Polity, 2002.
- Buchanan, Ian and Claire Colebrook, eds. *Deleuze and Feminist Theory*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2000.
- Butler, Octavia. *Lilith's Brood [The Xenogenesis Trilogy]*. New York: Aspect, 1989.
- Deleuze, Gilles, and Félix Guattari. *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia I*. Trans. Robert Hurley, Mark Seem and Helen R. Lane. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1977.
- _____. *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia II*. Trans. Brian Massumi. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1987.
- _____. *What Is Philosophy?* Trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Graham Burchell. New York: Columbia UP, 1994.
- Grosz, Elizabeth. *Time Travels: Feminism, Nature, Power*. Durham: Duke UP, 2005.
- Haraway, Donna. *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*. London: Free Association, 1991.

Melzer, Patricia. *Alien Constructions: Science Fiction and Feminist Thought*. Austin: U of Texas P, 2006.

About the Author

Ronald Bogue is Distinguished Research Professor of Comparative Literature at the University of Georgia. He is the author of *Deleuze and Guattari* (London: Routledge, 1989), *Deleuze on Literature* (New York: Routledge, 2003), *Deleuze on Cinema* (New York: Routledge, 2003), *Deleuze on Music, Painting, and the Arts* (New York: Routledge, 2003), *Deleuze's Wake: Tributes and Tributaries* (Albany: SUNY P, 2004), *Deleuze's Way: Essays in Transverse Ethics and Aesthetics* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007), and *Deleuzian Fabulation and the Scars of History* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2010).
Email: rbogue@uga.edu

[Received 15 Mar. 2010; accepted 8 June 2010; revised 6 Aug. 2010]