A Cyborg Performance: Gender And Genre In Octavia Butler

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> At first Reggie wearing my eyes after I expired was beautiful
>
> -- Kalamu ya Salaam

> Cyborg writing is about the power to survive, not on the basis of original innocence, but on the basis of seizing the tools to mark the world that marked them as other.
>
> -- Donna Haraway

Introduction

Donna Haraway‟s seminal article drafting the cyborg as a key metaphor for the anti-original, inherently plural, and endlessly dynamic paradigm explaining the western culture of the late twentieth century still proves a potent image that resonates in more recent decades. Haraway‟s striking metaphor becomes literally manifest and productively fictionalized in the science fictional writing of Octavia Butler. Using Haraway‟s model as the theoretical basis for analysis, this article will offer a critical reading of Butler‟s work, exploring the intersection of racial, gendered, and generic considerations.

To ground this theoretical context in the discourse of race and feminism which inevitably functions in a critical reading of Butler‟s work, I hope to productively complicate the cyborg metaphor through ideas articulated by bell hooks and Paul Gilroy. Hooks‟s writing offers a singular perspective on black feminism, which focuses on performativity as a perpetual process subverting patriarchal hierarchies of essentialism. Similarly, Butler engages with gender-based theories as she explores, exploits, and exorcises conventional gender roles and their inscription on the body. Across her fiction, Butler has created a community of women who either disguise themselves as men or take on traditionally male roles without sacrificing the stereotypically feminine attributes: seductive and erotic as well as maternal and nurturing. By portraying neuter-aliens, impregnated men, as well as masculinized women, Butler complicates the essentialist–performative binary of gender theories and subverts the very categories on which these stereotypes are based.

This disturbed binary becomes particularly powerful in the relation of gender and race. Paul Gilroy, Professor of Sociology and African-American Studies, considers the turn of black Atlantic aesthetics to science fiction and outer-space as a post-racial possibility for the fulfillment of a planetary humanism. Butler‟s own work reflects this possibility as she investigates various configurations of identity politics and places them in diverse and complex science-fictional and/or dystopian contexts. Through the inevitably sexualized role of her mainly black female protagonists, Butler contests the (im)balance of power established on the site of the body, empowering her characters by

establishing new networks of authority and authenticity. Examining her oeuvre, this article will identify and map the processes by which Butler‟s fiction embraces the possibilities conceived of in Haraway‟s cyborg.

CYBORGS: A DEADLY GAME

Donna Haraway constructs the cyborg as the transgressive embodiment of contemporary times. Primarily concerned with boundaries (literary, literal, ideological, political, biological, and physical), the cyborg becomes, for Haraway, a singularly potent political and aesthetic model for understanding, representing, contending with, adjusting to, and fundamentally surviving the conditions of late-twentieth century Western life. The premise of Haraway‟s argument suggests that the carefully compartmentalized and ordered universe which draws neat divisions between animal and humans, organism and construct, and physical and non-physical realms is no longer a viable paradigm. Instead, the cyborg, “a cybernetic organism, a hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction,” (149) manifests the crucial breakdown of boundaries that inform Haraway‟s analysis.

Haraway posits two criteria for this analysis: pleasure and responsibility, criteria that restore the comfort as well as the perspective initially stripped away by her disturbing construct. Explaining that her essay is “an argument for *pleasure* in the confusion of boundaries and for *responsibility* in their construction” ([emphasis in the original] 150), Haraway points to the possibilities offered by the cyborg, both politically and socially, but also culturally. Indeed, from the cybernetic feats of the Bionic Man (and Woman) of 1970s television, via William Gibson‟s landmark literary cyberspace cowboys in the 1980s, to Will Smith‟s left arm in the recent film adaptation of Isaac Asimov‟s *I, Robot* (2005), the image of cyborgs in popular culture has always been inflected with both a gratifying quality of liberatory imagination and an ominous sense of their destructive possibilities.

Configuring the current world order as one that has moved from the materially grounded industrial capitalism to a “polymorphous, information system” based on communication, Haraway transforms the crises of boundaries at work into a form of play; “a deadly game,” as she puts it, but one in which there are rules and broken rules, roles and new roles. This notion of playfulness, albeit one with vital consequences, enables Haraway to challenge the totalizing binaries which have generally characterized theoretical and socio-political discourses. Offering the combination of pleasure and responsibility as the framework for cyborg politics and for cyborg identities, Haraway‟s stress on playfulness is not unlike a later model of performativity developed by Judith Butler‟s, in *Gender Trouble* (1990). Here, J. Butler advocates parody (as in, for example, drag performances) as a prime mechanism of subversion: play-acting that undermines culturally pervasive gender presumptions, thus articulating a new subjectivity, empowering the subject while destabilizing the cultural

constraints within which it functions. The relevance of this comparison lies in the common disruption of essentializing and totalizing structures which both J. Butler and Haraway enact in order to challenge the structure of existing identity politics.[1] Haraway envisions the end of this challenge to be a newly acquired literacy whereby the subject powerfully reinserts herself into a cultural and theoretical discourse from which she had been virtually excluded. This redeeming literacy is manifest in Octavia Butler‟s science fiction. In her novels and short stories, Butler tests social, cultural, racial, environmental, and personal boundaries, significantly articulating the presence of the *other*.

Haraway formalizes her critique by assembling "The Informatics of Domination." Offering an altered epistemology, Haraway creates what she has called an "ironic political myth" (149), which enables her to reconfigure the terms on which feminist political and cultural discourse is conducted. The "Informatics of Domination" is a map of existing and alternative constructions of human experiences, which illuminates and erodes existing structures of hegemony. Thus signaling the intellectual context of postmodernism in which she writes, Haraway urges for a move away from all-encompassing paradigms and points to the productive possibilities her ironic stance affords.

Listing such alternatives as:

Organism	Biotic component
Depth, integrity	Surface, boundary
Perfection	Optimization
Nature/ Culture	Fields of difference

Haraway powerfully illustrates the ideological and political necessity for a structural shift in critical analysis. Her model invokes a move from a world order based on binary and organic universalities to one that acknowledges artifice, possibility, absence, and approximation as central to effect a viable world view. From these processes, four configurations, or mechanisms of analysis, can be identified: incompleteness, denormalization, inscripted biology, and network constructs. Each is effectively a function of the other, but the shifting focal point enables an alternate application the cyborg image.

The lamentable but frequent marginalization of Octavia Butler‟s work (as science fiction that is written by an African-American woman) is constantly challenged through the writing itself in a manner that closely parallels or enacts Haraway‟s own configurations. Using the image of the cyborg as a critical tool for reading Butler‟s fiction, I hope to chart Butler‟s own investment in the kind of socio-political and aesthetic effort Haraway describes.

ONCE-UPON-A-TIME-WHOLENESS

One key characteristic of the cyborg construct which locates it as central to contending with the social and political realities of the late twentieth century,

and defying existing hierarchies of a Western patriarchy, is its defining incompleteness. Necessarily bridging two worlds, embodying the breached separation between them, the cyborg resists the totalizing, all-inclusive wholeness prevalent in earlier paradigms:

> The cyborg is resolutely committed to partiality, irony, intimacy, and perversity [...] No longer structured by the polarity of public and private, [...] Nature and culture are reworked; the one can no longer be the resource for appropriation or incorporation by the other. The relationships for forming wholes from parts, including those of polarity and hierarchical domination, are at issue in the cyborg world. Unlike the hopes of Frankenstein's monster, the cyborg does not expect its father to save it through a restoration of the garden; that is, through the fabrication of a heterosexual mate, through its completion in a finished whole, a city and cosmos. (Haraway 151)

The cyborg, thus, redefines the structure of the relation of the self to the surrounding environment in a recognition of the artificiality of these polar wholes, the teleology of the Judeo-Christian mythology of salvation which dictates the ultimate binary of good and evil. This compulsive resistance of the cyborg to the Western narrative of resolution resonates in Butler‟s *Kindred* (1979) which defies such simple binary structures.

Kindred is the story of Dana Franklin, a young African-American woman living in California in 1976, who travels back in time to the first half of the nineteenth century. There, she finds her own destiny intertwined with that of Rufus Weylin, a young slave owner in the ante-bellum South. Dana discovers that Rufus is, in fact, her great-grandfather, and she is repeatedly called back through time in order to help him when his life is in danger, and thus to ensure her own blood-line. The complexity of the experience is manifold as Butler deliberately and thoroughly manipulates the reader‟s (as well as the protagonist‟s) prejudices and expectations. Encountering the harsh reality of the slave experience, Dana is startled by the inadequacy of the literary and historical accounts to prepare her for the hardship, on one hand, but, on the other, she is confounded by the unexpected density of human emotion and relationships that emerge from the experience. In circumstances more abhorrent than she could imagine, she discovers moments of comfort and sympathy that unsettle her:

> I could recall feeling relief at seeing the [Weylin] house, feeling that I had come home. And having to stop and correct myself, remind myself that I was in an alien, dangerous place. I could recall being surprised that I would come to think of such a place

> as home [...] I had been home to 1976, to this house, and it hadn"t felt that homelike. (190-1).

Butler weaves a network of links tying the past to the present and disrupting the teleology of the historical narrative. Not only do both Dana and Kevin, her husband (a white man) who is temporarily brought back with her, feel unaccountably at home in what they perceive to be the "sharper, stronger reality" (191) of Rufus"s time, but Butler none-too-subtly aligns characters from the past with those of the present. The narrator repeatedly draws attention to the similarities between Dana and Alice, her slave ancestor (and her mother before that); not only do they look alike but their circumstances are virtually identical, though located in vastly different contexts – and with different results. Similarly, Kevin and Rufus clearly serve as a foil to one another, each developing a vital emotional tie with Dana. Butler further links the two quite explicitly, with each unknowingly echoing the words of the other in an accent that grows increasingly similar as the narrative progresses.

Butler uses these reflections to confront essentialist presumptions on identity politics, in general, and gendered or racialised expectations, in particular. Adopting time-travel as the mechanism through which subjectivities can be displaced, disoriented, and "disassembled" – to use Haraway"s term, Butler reveals the inconceivable pressure applied to the subject in its configuration as an organic whole or an entirely knowable system. This process is a subtle allusion to Joanna Russ"s *The Female Man* (1975), a landmark text of feminist science fiction. In her novel, Russ offers a dramatic extension of statistic probability by effectively creating one protagonist but exploring her in four different circumstances, and then having these alternate characters meet. In both *The Female Man* and in *Kindred*, however, the exercise is one with crucial political as well as aesthetic implications. In *Kindred*, Dana is troubled by the ease with which she slips into her nineteenth-century role. "Once [...] God knows how long ago – I had worried that I was keeping too much distance between myself and this alien time. Now, there was no distance at all. When had I stopped acting? Why had I stopped?" (221). Dana gradually realises the impossibility of the historical narrative, as she had been accustomed to knowing it. Not only is the presumed linearity of this narrative literally interrupted through her journey, but it fails utterly to capture the artificiality of the divide between past and present. The blending of subjectivities and of spatial and temporal landscapes serves to intertwine these supposedly distinct realms, circulating the narrative within a new temporal discourse whereby Butler devises a model which does not seek to represent any totality, totally.

It is precisely through the links, e.g. the inexplicable connection between Dana and Alice or Dana and Rufus, the growing indistinction between what she feels is natural and what defies her natural sense, that Butler introduces a new order into the chaos of her disrupted history. Indeed, cautioning lest anti-

totalizing, anti-essentialist political and cultural efforts disintegrate into a dysfunctional celebration of difference, Haraway advocates the "task of making partial real connection. Some differences are playful; some are poles of world historical systems of domination. „Epistemology" is about knowing the difference." (161). This epistemology is manifest in Dana"s own growth, and, specifically, in her final decision at the climax of the narrative. Dana moves back and forth in time and space, observing her increasingly complex response to each environment and to the figures present in each. She is increasingly unsettled by her own ability to communicate (in Haraway"s sense of the word, i.e. to articulate a viable and valid though varying political and cultural self) in each. Nevertheless, it is at the very moment where she is most seduced by the myth of a "once-upon-a-time wholeness" (Haraway 175), that she embraces the possibilities of difference: killing Rufus rather than succumbing to the originary plot he makes available to her (*Kindred* 259-60). The price she pays for this decision embodies the disruption she enacts, as her left arm is violently fused into the foundations of the slave-plantation and severed from her body. She thus returns both part and whole: having been literally torn apart by her history, Dana has ensured her own existence but has also attained her narrative voice. There are repeated references to the processes of writing, reading, story-telling, and narration but it is only the retrospective narrative of her experiences that collate these motifs into a fully realized form.[2]

DENATURALIZATION

This underlying teleology toward articulation and literacy of cyborg narratives does not suggest the historical or organic progress towards salvation indicated in Western (Judeo-Christian) traditions. Rather, its own artifice points to the understanding of the universe as construct. Indeed, one of the striking aspects of Haraway"s argument rises from the manner in which she deconstructs or decodes the very notion of nature-as-ontology. Writing that "[a]ny objects or persons can be reasonably thought of in terms of disassembly or reassembly; no „natural" architectures constrain system design" (162), Haraway refuses the historical momentum of the move from Original Innocence to Original Sin and back towards a divine unity. Instead, destabilizing those categories generally deemed natural, she opts for a systemic perspective that focuses on optimalization and effective strategies of survival.

These processes of denaturalization and alienation, projects which question original innocence while effectively parodying genesis, are primary themes in Octavia Butler"s *Xenogenesis* series (also called *Lilith's Brood*). In *Dawn*, *Adulthood Rites*, and *Imago*, the three *Xenogenesis* novels, Butler explores the bond between organism and construct by describing the development of a new species. In the texts, Butler depicts the survivors of a post-nuclear holocaust Earth who are under the control of the seemingly peaceful alien race of Oankali. In order to exist, the surviving humans (who were saved

by the Oankali and woken after centuries of suspended animation) must make dramatic adjustments to their own sense of self and community, challenging existing social and moral codes of behavior, and accepting physical and physiological changes. The central premise of the three novels is based on a biological model of symbiosis whereby the two species (human and alien) are mutually dependent for their survival. At the heart of this mode of existence, however, lies the certainty of its result, whereby neither will exist in a recognizable form.

One of the central shifts enacted in this manufactured evolution revolves around gendered identities – together with their implications on sexuality, reproduction, and the family unit. The Oankali have three genders: male, female, and ooloi; all necessary for each of the traditionally gendered functions and it is the alienness of these gender-identities which become the crux of human resistance to the Oankali. The ooloi is neither male nor female, but mediates between the two in the family structure and during mating. As the narrator repeatedly explains, it is precisely this sexualized *otherness* – the threat it poses and its unaccountable seduction – which terrifies the humans. When re-encountering Oankali (upon being woken on the Oankali ship, all humans were initially conditioned by ooloi before being sent to Earth and given the freedom to join or resist the Oankali), even the resisters are subliminally attracted to them, though they generally become all the more resistant for this reason. Perhaps unsurprisingly, it is the male resisters who are particularly disturbed by this tension, anxious to retain their grasp on what they deem comfortingly stable and preconceived gendered identities.

This emphasis on sexuality and prejudice in human-Oankali relationships, a prejudice that is swiftly revealed as being self-destructive, becomes a direct challenge to notions of predetermined and natural categories of sexual identity. By imaginatively designing an alien sexuality, Butler erodes the basis of essentialism, that idea which presumes an organic essence and organization which direct human behavior. What is impulsively natural – preferring human relationships over those between humans and aliens – becomes decidedly *unnatural* in the encounter because in the first two novels it precludes reproduction. By means of this condition, however, Butler deliberately complicates this challenge, making it far less straightforward than the narrator would have the reader believe. In the first novel, the Oankali have imposed barrenness on the humans who refuse to join them, essentially manifesting what Haraway has called the Informatics of Domination, her name for a new system of subordination which can so easily replace the dominance of a Capitalist patriarchy. This takes place in an era when technologies of communication have opened up a virtually infinite number of interfaces with which the body/individual/role/market can interact and be penetrated, through, for example, the Internet, computer and immunodeficiency viruses, and plastic surgery.

As an alternative, she offers the cyborg: as already described, an existence that crosses the boundaries and embraces difference. Butler too privileges difference and change in response to the possibilities of domination. *Xenogenesis* indeed narrates the birth of a new and foreign people: the Oankali too must change. Despite their seemingly unconscious authoritarianism – a political structure made morally complex by the fact that their interaction with humans stems from a conviction that without their intervention humans would destroy themselves – the Oankali function through trade and exchange. Giving as much as they take and manipulating this exchange to create an optimal genetic mixture and a functional new species, the Oankali develop a human-Oankali "construct"-female, a "construct"-male, and a "construct"-ooloi.

Related in *Dawn*, *Adulthood Rites*, and *Imago*, respectively, the growth of each illuminates Butler‟s play with different forms of change and her focus on the relation of appearance to substance. Lilith, the first human to be woken and to engage productively with the Oankali, looks human but isn‟t quite. Although only genetically modified slightly to ensure her own safety, the perceived difference alienates her from other humans and comes to signify her role as the mother of a new species. Her son, Akin, the protagonist of *Adulthood Rites*, is the first construct male. Having two Oankali parents, two human parents, and an ooloi parent, but human-born, he begins by looking almost entirely human. However, due to time spent in the human communities, when he matures, Akin‟s appearance becomes almost completely Oankali. The focus on change is realized in *Imago*, where Jodahs, another of Lilith‟s children, becomes the first construct-ooloi and acquires the unique ability to change his appearance repeatedly (unique to construct-ooloi).

These physical changes dramatize and extrapolate possibilities already extant in twentieth-century America. What is traditionally deemed a crucial ethical distinction between a cosmetic and a vital operation, however, is questioned as Butler reconfigures the value of appearances to the level of the cell and to biological function. With their sensory tentacles and their extreme sensitivity to their environment Oankali do not rely on purely visual perception, reading far deeper, more subtle, chemical and biological signals communicated by humans and Oankali alike. This turn to the cell as the basis for aesthetic as well as physiological appeal, on one hand, and the alien capacity to manipulate change on this level, on the other, signal the inadequacy of the reality-appearance / essentialist-performative dualisms to explain identity or difference.

INSCRIBED BIOLOGY

Paul Gilroy considers the racial implications of contemporary genomic technology that enables investigation and manipulation on the level of the cell. Describing what he refers to as the crises of raciology (i.e. the languages, ideologies, and discourse of race) which result from dramatic bio-technological developments, he abandons race as a defining trope. Instead, Gilroy offers a utopian vision of a

planetary humanism which accounts for difference through "politics of diaspora", based on a postmodern memory of trauma. Gilroy himself foresees a growing turn of diasporic aesthetics to science-fictional sensibilities as part of the move beyond dermatological distinctions or national cultural boundaries. Together with the *Xenogenesis* novels, Octavia Butler"s *Patternist* series explores parallel alternatives to preexisting categories of self and community.

In the five *Patternist* novels, Butler"s fictional characters and societies negotiate a racial basis founded on biological essentialism with a cognitive and behavioral concept of ethnic identity. Specifically, she explores various roles of the body, its relation to gender, to history, and to structures of authority and authenticity, as well as to race and ethnic identity, as a way to transcend the binding categories of racialised history and aesthetics. Not unlike her later *Xenogenesis*, in the *Patternist* texts, Butler traces the emergence of a new species of people: people are defined by and communicate through a telepathic matrix which links them all together and bind them to the patternmaster.[3] This pattern is developed primarily in *Wild Seed* (1980), *Mind of My Mind* (1977), and *Patternmaster* (1976) and the emphasis on telepathy is meant not to obliterate but to reconfigure the inscription of biology on the body. Into these texts Butler incorporates a narrative of slavery, manipulating its images and ideologies in order to transform this shared history into a literal and binding structure of interconnectivity. Throughout *Wild Seed* and *Mind of My Mind*, Doro, the forefather of this new people, works to fulfill his perverse fantasy of solipsism, by breeding a new species. In explicit echoes of the history of slavery, people are perceived as commodities for his project; their value quantified (and their lives ensured) by their usefulness to his system. Himself virtually immortal, Doro enacts his authority through powerful telepathy and through a unique ability to move from one body to another. By being able to thus abandon his body, and subsequently killing the host of his next, Doro manifests the threat of postmodernism which, as bell hooks warns, in its urge to deconstruct the historical meta-narrative into a plethora of subjectivities, risks neglecting the pervasive presence of the body in political configurations, and the indelible marks of history etched into it.

His destructive hunger is contrasted with the matriarchal Anyanwu. Also effectively immortal, Anyanwu is a healer rather than a killer. She prolongs life (her own and that of others) by controlling and manipulating internal and external organs. Moreover she can transform her body into the shape of virtually every living being (in *Wild Seed* she changes from young to old, beautiful to homely, black to white, female to male; even adopting animal shapes). She preserves the body intact, incorporating the scars of history into her flesh, even when this is reconfigured for her own survival. The relationship of the self to the body in Anyanwu thus stands in polar opposition to that in Doro. His own impulse to abandon the body dictates, finally, that his project can only be fully realized

through his own destruction: by finally forced to abandon the body altogether and by utterly consumed by the telepathic pattern.

It is through this pattern that Butler negotiates the history of race with postmodern calls to abandon essentialist ideology. While the *Patternist* series deliberately plays with notions of inherited biological identities, the pattern destabilizes essentialist presumptions by positing conception and activity as primary defining tools. In *Patternmaster*, for example, Teray and Coransee are brothers but are vitally contrasted through their opposed view of the pattern. Where Coransee perceives it as a commodity – to be acquired, owned, and manipulated; it is, for Teray, a defining characteristic of his own existence – not separate from him. Articulating the possibilities for the individual and the community in a revised and productive view of the past, the pattern reflects the shared history of African-American experience, manifesting the „authority of experience" – a sociological term bell hooks adopts from feminist discourse. The term points to a constructive identity politics based on a shared history which is recognized and incorporated into an aesthetics which celebrates cultural possibilities within this context.

SOCIAL RELATIONS OF SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY

As part of this project of celebration (that combination of pleasure and responsibility Haraway stipulates), for so much of Butler"s writing, the notion of change becomes the crux of identification, creating a confrontation between essentialist and performative models of identity. These two structures, then, of reality and appearance, science and fiction, are neither separate nor usefully contrasted: things are not what they appear to be and yet they effect change through their appearance. Returning to *Xenogenesis*, in *Imago*, Jodahs, the construct-ooloi, comments that he "remembered [...] having a strong awareness of the way my face and body looked, and of that look being *me*. It never had been, really." (90). Throughout the text Jodahs seeks to understand and to articulate the relationship of the numerous metamorphoses he undergoes (not only the two typical Oankali processes which bring him to sexual maturity, but also the recurring changes in his physiology and in his relationships to the different characters) to his own sense of self. As the title *Imago* itself indicates, there is a deliberate and meticulous connection established between the image (appearance, perception, and representation) and identity.

Judith Butler"s focus on parody as a powerful site of contestation is never far from science fiction"s imaginative sensibilities and, indeed, in *Xenogenesis*, the perceived *otherness* of the alien species to the humans and vice versa, inevitably creates a grotesque caricature of human behavior. Butler makes this evident by repeatedly juxtaposing human with alien characters and demonstrating diametrically opposed responses (during initial encounters the humans tend to become irrationally resistant or reckless while the Oankali remain disproportionally staid). This concern with and critique of human responses to

difference is given a profound dimension through the underlying theological foundation of the series.

In post-Apocalyptic Earth, Butler creates a neo-Genesis, revisiting Judeo-Christian myths of creation and recontextualizing them to consider their cultural legacy, aesthetic potential, and political implications. Making explicit this concern, the protagonist of the first of the three novels is called Lilith, and, true to her mythical model, she is depicted and perceived as both matriarch and villain, outcast and seductress, bearer and destroyer of children. Butler"s heroine signals the reconfiguration of a theology predicated on the exclusion of an exoticized *other* into an unsettlingly literal incorporation of that *other*. In other words, where Judith Butler subverts essentialism through parody and performative, Octavia Butler uses these tools as dynamic mechanisms of identification, moving onto a constantly shifting plain that, ultimately, relies on that accumulated and recognized authority of experience – an experience based principally on social ties. Concerned primarily with the identity politics of African-American women in the context of postmodernism, bell hooks cautions against an involuntary neglect of viable models of identity in the effort to dispose of essentialist ideologies. She writes that "[p]art of our struggle for radical black subjectivity is the quest to find ways to construct self and identity that are oppositional and liberatory." (2482). To do this she suggests recognizing a shared history of African-American experience – as opposed to any organic racialized presumptions – as an alternative means of self- and communal-definition. A central effect of this model is the focus on community as inseparable though distinct from the individuated self.

Similarly, by introducing an inter-species procreation as the motivating impulse of the narrative, Butler offers a singular exploration of the processes of social interaction and the way in which they become the individuating resolution for the neo-originary constructs (by neo-originary, I refer to Butler"s characters who are both the first of their kind but, because they are products of carefully monitored and manipulated processes of genetic production they defy the innocence and primariness conventionally attributed to archetypes). Lilith, Akin, and Jodahs each becomes a realized self and reconciled to the conditions of their existence through their relations to others.

Donna Haraway"s cyborg similarly focuses on coalition and affinity, rather than identity, as the basis for a critical understanding of self:

> One important route for reconstructing socialist-feminist politics is through theory and practice addressed to the *social relations of science and technology*, including crucially the systems of myth and meanings structuring our imaginations. The cyborg is a kind of disassembled and reassembled, postmodern collective and personal self. This is the self feminists must code. ([my emphasis] 163).

This progress signals a critical erosion of the conceptual and political foundations based on binary structures. In *Xenogenesis* it leads to the creation and completion of a new kind of individuality and community, or family unit. These are not based on the dualities of gender and gender roles, essentialist or performative, appearance or reality, but on principles of exchange, empathy, compatibility, and communication.

Thus, instead of binary structures, Haraway offers social relations configured as networks, a structure which figures crucially in Butler‟s *Patternist* series. In the six novels of the series, Butler focuses on different kinds of pattern as means for comprehending and representing the nature of humanity. Exploring genetic, geographical, social, and fictional patterns, Butler introduces (and subverts) a Hegelian construct whereby power structures are naturally configured in hierarchical terms, while simultaneously and inevitably resisting these terms. These structures lend themselves to a critical examination of the socio-political formations which Butler depicts and of their (aesthetic and political) implications.

MARK THE WORLD THAT MARKED THEM AS OTHER

Haraway ultimately resists these power structures through a new type of literacy, which she refers to as cyborg writing. Cyborg writing offers an oppositional voice which manifests a pragmatic and liberatory response to the patriarchal hegemony and to the ontological struggle towards perfection of Western cultural politics (that theologically inflected vision of a viable and perfect state of innocence). “Writing is pre-eminently the technology of cyborgs [...] Cyborg politics is the struggle for language and the struggle against perfect communication, against the one code that translates all meaning perfectly” (176). Privileging noise and “rejoicing in the illegitimate fusions of animal and machine,” Haraway goes on to consider the political possibilities of cyborg writing for the subversion of existing structures of power:

> These are the couplings which make Man and Woman so problematic, subverting the structure of desire, the force imagined to generate language and gender, and so subverting the structure and modes of reproduction of „Western‟ identity, of nature and culture, of mirror and eye, slave and master, body and mind. (176).

The focus on desire as the catalyst for binary configurations of self and *other* (and for the language conceiving of it), and the privileging of writing as a redemptive tool of opposition are themes and literary tools which resonate in Octavia Butler‟s writing. In the *Patternist* series, by the twentieth century Anyanwu (now Emma) has become a writer, implicitly recording the patternist narrative, thus asserting her presence throughout the series as both witness and

author; controlling her narrative in spite of any concessions made to the hierarchical structures surrounding her.

Similarly, in *Xenogenesis*, once she has adjusted to her new existence, Lilith begins to write, to paint and to tell stories. Combining visual, oral, and textual means to recapture the past Lilith reclaims the narrative as her own and distinct from the robotic capacity for memory of the Oankali. Moreover, other humans are encouraged to write down their histories, gradually accumulating a polyvocal account of a lost history. Butler‟s latest series, *Earthseed*, offers a powerful example of the capacity of literacy and, by implication, of literature to oppose structures of domination.

In *Parable of the Sower* (1993) and *Parable of the Talents* (1998) Butler creates a dystopian future where civilization has crumbled into a chaotic landscape of violence, poverty, desperation, and destitution. In the first novel, the fifteen-year old Lauren Olamina escapes from the destruction of her home and sets out, traveling North and seeking a better life. Gradually joined by other refugees, Lauren slowly builds a community of people who follow her as she develops and begins to disseminate Earthseed – a nascent religion or philosophy that she engenders. *Parable of the Talents* continues Lauren‟s story, this time primarily through the eyes of her daughter Larkin, who describes the development of Earthseed, gradually coming to terms with her mother‟s vision.

In her perceptive *Signs and Cities* Madhu Dubey analyses how the thematic presence of textuality in *Parable of the Sower* tests the validity and implications of modern print culture in a postmodern context, addressing historically pertinent questions regarding widespread literacy, the role of literature, and of the printed work. Dubey‟s critical book provides an answer to bell hooks‟s call to address the absence and assert a black presence in postmodern discourse. Here Dubey meticulously positions Butler‟s work within a critical African-American literary tradition which she then reinserts into a postmodern discourse on modern humanism and print culture. Dubey demonstrates how Butler reconfigures the printed text as a rehabilitative force that engages in a productive (and empowering) dialogue with the possibilities and the problems of postmodern cultural and political contexts. Literally becoming a book of the living, literature saves Lauren in the most basic and explicit manner as she first learns to survive from books she has read in her father‟s collection. Teaching her about biology, physiology, geology, and geography, Lauren‟s reading habits provide her with a crucial foundation of knowledge which saves her life.

Reminiscent of bell hooks who urges for a postmodernism that destabilizes essentialism but that also takes into account and critically considers the integrity (though not to say with this the „authenticity‟ a term hooks eschews) of the *othered* voices, Butler adopts a narrative technique which becomes doubly mediated by the text: the journal entries and the novel itself. With this technique Butler‟s characters take hold of the narrative, grounding it in a tradition that had

refused to recognize their voice. Commenting on the relation of Butler‟s parables to the divine oral utterance of the biblical parables, Dubey writes that "[i]ntegrating the spoken and written word, text and interpretation, author and community, Butler‟s novel [*Parable of the Sower*] invests the writer with redemptive powers." (80). Indeed, the written word is complemented by oral readings, creating a communal literacy that withstands the postmodern crises of representation and empowers the collective, as well as the individual.

The nature of this community is not static but rests on mobility and dynamic identification. Built to enable them to survive the devastation of all pre-existing codes of behavior, Earthseed embodies Paul Gilroy‟s concept of a politics of diaspora as it moves beyond national boundaries or even Earthly ones, setting its ultimate goal as life on Mars. Although in the two published *Earthseed* novels, the characters remain Earth-bound, the juxtaposition of this constantly overshadowing displacement with the clear community-building impulse suggests a viable solution to a postmodern disintegration of societies and cultural communities and their political voice.

Of particular interest for the purpose of this article, then, is the narrative technique of the two parable texts. The narrative structure of the novels combines journal-writing with travel narratives, resonating significantly with elements of the slave narrative. This structural mixture exposes Butler‟s own engagement with postmodern paradigms encapsulated by the cyborg. The decision to deliver the narrative in the two texts through a series of journal entries by various characters inflects the texts with an autobiographical tone which both facilitates and complicates the narratives themselves. By introducing these intradiegetic narrators in a process that is simultaneously personal and private, in the journals, and public, in the Earthseed verses and in their implicit publication, Butler challenges the meaning of such a distinction. Lauren‟s double text (the verses and her journal) demonstrates the resulting political disruption, the shift to a cyborg citizenship: a "citizenship by telematics" (Haraway 171). This loyalty to a community defined not by national boundaries but by the combination of telecommunications and computing, communication and technology, is one of the guiding principles of Earthseed which, similarly, relies on fluid, dynamic, coherent, and pragmatic communication. Proclaiming that "God is Change," the narratives of the parables seek to find the language – or languages – in which to accommodate and communicate this change. As Haraway writes, "No objects, spaces, or bodies are sacred in themselves; any component can be interfaced with any other if the proper standard, the proper code, can be constructed for processing signals in a common language" (163). Hence the power intrinsic to the literacy of the people of Acorn, the community which Lauren and her followers establish, and to its articulation through the oral recitation and through the doubled text.

Madhu Dubey focuses on the technology of writing as she examines the trope of the manuscript in Butler‟s novels, rather than that of the printed book.

Adopting a narrative technique which emphasizes spontaneity, subjectivity, and contestation over design, deliberation, and ultimately conformity through commodification of the printed book, Butler"s technique transforms the text from a commodity to an epistemological script. The *Earthseed* texts literally become books for the living as Butler resists the temptation to seek the comfort of a complete and totalizing originary narrative. She offers, instead, a present-tense narrative which through its structure conveys its own temporality and, thus, further erodes the existing systems of domination.

Writing on literacy as the primary vehicle of cyborg politics, Haraway reflects that the very trajectory of history or historical narrative becomes altered, contested, and reclaimed by previously marginalized voices. She writes that,

> Cyborg imagery can suggest a way out of the maze of dualisms in which we have explained our bodies and our tools to ourselves. This is a dream not of a common language, but of a powerful infidel heteroglossia [...]It means both building and destroying machines, identities, categories, relationships, space stories. (181)

Through characters like Dana, Lilith, Anyanwu, and Lauren, Octavia Butler irrevocably shatters the inherited structured hierarchies of earlier times and resists new possibilities of domination. Casting a critical eye across Butler"s work reveals a community of women, aliens, and various human-extraterrestrial permutations who, together, develop a multivocal code, a "heteroglossia" with which they record and communicate the shifting bases of identification, fundamentally grounding this process in the cyborgian act of articulation itself.

End Notes

1. Serving here to complement bell hooks"s theory of performativity, J. Butler"s work presents a theoretical juncture where Haraway"s, hooks"s, and later Gilroy"s ideas begin to intersect.
2. I will discuss this ultimate focus of Haraway"s cyborg model on literacy and articulation further below.
3. In fact, in this series Butler introduces two additional species. The Kohn aliens appear in *Survivor* where Butler illuminates the destructive power of racial intolerance as a Human colony on another planet learn the pragmatic necessity of coexisting with the indigenous Kohns. In *Clay's Ark*, Butler describes the growth of the Clayarks – a species of humans who had been infected by an alien micro-organism, effectively transforming them into animal-like beings of enhanced physical abilities but with impaired communication skills. For the purposes of this article, however, I will concentrate on the Patternists.

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