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Thinking Alternatives in Science Fiction: Octavia Butler Meets Judith Butler

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Abstract

This paper starts from the premise that the capitalist system is inherently violent and destructive. The only way to a future lies in its abolition. With the help of capitalism's numerous gatekeepers, the system has constantly perpetuated itself. However, maintaining narrow ideologies that establish what is sold as the norm makes the system extremely fragile. I argue that tackling one of capitalism's agents, such as gender, has the potential to crush the whole system. Radically imagining different societies, worlds, and spaces, threatens capitalism's monopoly on what is sold as natural and normative. An ideal space to do that is science fiction. Octavia Butler's novels think through and beyond capitalistic notions of gender by offering alternatives. That is why I put her novels *Wild Seed* and *Lilith's Brood* in conversation with Judith Butler's binary-breaking work *Gender Trouble*.

Keywords

Science Fiction – Abolition – Gender Studies – Decolonial Feminism – Critique of Capitalism

Science Fiction to the Rescue

"We are living in a series of intersecting and overlapping catastrophes."
– Maynard, "Living in Reciprocity"[3]

The globally dominating capitalist system is in its core detrimental and life threatening to humans, animals, and nature, with its multiple "overlapping catastrophes" (Maynard 00:33:17), its "myriad oppressions" (Andreotti et al. 27). Racism, exploitation, sexism, classism, ableism, ageism, hostility towards queer people, mental health stigmas, the imminent climate catastrophe, etc., all are interlinked and relate back to capitalism, which "is the crisis" (Haiven and Khasnabish ii). Still, this inherently violent and toxic system thrives by masquerading as natural and thus unchangeable. Capitalist ideology conceals the very fact that the boundaries, borders, and limits we live in are

[3] Kameelah Janan Rasheed recommended to cite where you get ideas from (even though these are stories or thoughts rather than texts) to boost your creative process. That is why I include introductory quotes that inspired my chapters in a not necessarily obvious way. With that, I intend to challenge purely academic approaches to literary studies that claim to be objective.

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artificial, human-made inventions. Krishan Kumar remarks that "[t]he whole point about an ideology, after all, is that it is disguised, that we are the last people to know that it is working on us" (321). Capitalism's numerous gatekeepers, such as the gender binary, use this strategy of naturalization, too, which allows its "death machines and life-ending forces" to always reproduce themselves (Maynard 01:50:44).

The only way to live in a world in which "life is precious" (Simpson 00:54:41) is the abolition of capitalism. Recognizing the system's artificiality and imagining (a) beyond the status quo disrupts its self-ascribed finality and immutability. A space for radically imagining different worlds, creating, and building them, is science fiction. According to Cixin Liu, "[t]he most basic task of science fiction is world-building – that is, establishing the fundamental framework, laws, and rules of a story's imaginary world" (29). Liu distinguishes between science fiction and mainstream literature by suggesting that "there is no need for world-building [in the latter as] the world it describes already exists" (29). Approaching this from a slightly different angle, I argue that science fiction literature provides the space to think about and experiment with alternatives for the already existing world that could ultimately transform it.

Instead of tackling the whole system all at once, I narrow my analysis down to gender. My premise is that challenging one agent of capitalism has the potential to topple the whole system. (Imagine a Jenga tower: removing more and more building blocks destabilizes the entire structure until the tower finally collapses.) I will contextualize how gender relates to its larger capitalist context first. My approach to finding alternatives in science fiction is to break with what is usually thought of as primary and secondary texts and instead blur the boundaries between literature and theory. That is why Octavia Butler and her novels *Wild Seed* and *Lilith's Brood* as well as Judith Butler and their *Gender Trouble* embody the centerpieces of my theoretical framework and analysis.

The capitalist system facilitates *white*[4] supremacy and heteropatriarchy in a way that favors people who come closest to being what is sold as the norm. The invented norm, however, is neither addressed nor spoken about, but universalized, naturalized, and thus disguised. Only people who deviate from the norm are named as such. In an attempt to counter this, it is necessary to mention that I as a *white*, cisgendered, straight university student already reproduce these structures by writing this paper.

Kaleidoscoping Gender

"This world could be fed,
this world could be fun,
this should be love for everyone."
– Queen, "Heaven for Everyone"

By presenting itself as a law of nature, capitalism has managed to create a complex system of interwoven power structures, hierarchies, and pitfalls. In Ashley J. Bohrer's words, "the systems of capitalism, colonization, racism, and heteropatriarchy aren't separate systems that collide or collude

[4] To emphasize in writing that race is a political and social construction rather than a biological one, I follow the anti-racism activist Tupoka Ogette in her approach to "italicize white intentionally in order to emphasize that it is a political description, not a designation of color" (14; my translation). Ogette continues, "[t]he term People of Color and the term Black (which I also capitalize intentionally in this context) are self-designations and refer to common experiences of racism" (15; my translation).

to produce the present moment; they are mutually interlocking and reciprocally constructive. Capital *is* the colonizer, just as it *is* heteropatriarchal and racist" (xii). Focusing on gender as a separate object of study is impossible. However, addressing everything at once while being as specific as possible is a challenge, too. An approach that allows me to do that is decolonial feminism. Françoise Vergès elegantly describes the 'all of this at once' as a "kaleidoscope narrative [that] encompasses broad swatches of time and territory to valorize the unstoppable struggles that challenges the legacies of colonial slavery and racism amid a new age of endless wars" (ix). Decolonial feminism aims at "smash[ing] sexism, racism, capitalism, and imperialism" (vii), and is hence abolitional. Furthermore, it centers colonialism as the developing force for capitalism.

Colonialism enabled capitalism to rise, expand, and entrench itself globally as "it would have been impossible without the appropriation of land and resources, without the enslavement of millions of racialized people, without the introduction of a social fabric of white, European domination" (Bohrer xii). Ever since, colonizers have regarded difference as a threat to the norm they have aimed to impose in order to guarantee their superiority.[5] With extreme violence, they have assimilated whole peoples to what they deem 'the standard.' As Greg Thomas puts it, "[a] basic anthropological hierarchy cultivates the will to universalize for the benefit of white Western dominance and hegemony. The 'master race' of Europe is canonized as the paragon of social and biological development inasmuch as it pretends to embody certain universal laws" (4). Thomas continues that "[t]he white world is always renaturalized as a universal standard of human civilization" (23). As a result, humanness is measured depending on a person's approximation of what is manufactured as universal. Following this line of thought, colonizers justify violence, oppression, and discrimination towards people whom they have dehumanized in the first place.

Gender is an example of that. According to Shama Rangwala, "ancestral societ[ies] had multiple genders before colonization," which marks "gender" – specifically the gender binary – as "a colonial formation" (00:58:30).

> [The very] diversity of systems of gender, sex, and sexuality [...] around the world [...], the very fact of having a non-binary, non-patriarchal, and non-heterocompulsive social organization of sex, gender, and sexuality was used as 'proof' that indigenous communities 'needed' to be dominated by colonization, disciplined into the capitalist economy, and 'civilized' through forced conversion to Christianity. (Bohrer xii)

This exposes that gender, the gender binary, gender roles and expectations, as well as "the category of sex and the naturalized institution of heterosexuality are constructs, socially instituted and socially regulated fantasies or 'fetishes,' not natural categories, but political ones" (J. Butler, *Gender Trouble* 161). On top of this, it renders them as incredibly violent.

Though capitalism employs both race and gender as markers of difference, it is essential to acknowledge their intersections, their overlaps. Judith Butler contends that "racial presumptions invariably underwrite the discourse on gender in ways that need to be made explicit, but that race and gender ought not to be treated as simple analogies" (xvi). Therefore, I follow Greta LaFleur in her approach to avoid "'like-race' narratives" (26) and instead treat race and gender as a "vexed symbiosis that [has] bound sex to racial difference" (7). This allows for analyzing gender without "eras[ing] the history of race and empire from [its] critical frame of reference" (Thomas 4).

[5] I deliberately use the present perfect when referring to colonialism because "[c]oloniality, the structural and embedded global power relations that remained after the elimination of many (not all) forms of direct colonization, remains the condition of the possibility of capitalism's continuity" (Bohrer xii).

Butler & Butler

"Possibility is not a luxury; it is as crucial as bread."
– Judith Butler, Undoing Gender *(29)*

So far, I have used terms such as sex, gender, and sexuality almost interchangeably. That is because I follow Judith Butler who suggests in her book *Gender Trouble* (1990) "that the distinction between sex and gender turns out to be no distinction at all" (11) since both are equally constructed. Furthermore, the gender binary imposed by capitalism dictates the matrix of intelligibility and merges sexual desire to gender and vice versa. The capitalist system thrives by dividing the world into binaries. That is why non-normativity, such as being queer, "[t]he 'unthinkable[,]' is […] fully excluded from dominant culture" (99). Normativity, on the other hand, constantly manifests itself by asserting "a compulsion to repeat" (185). Like capitalism's other gatekeepers, this "process of repetition […] both conceals itself and enforces its rules precisely through the production of substantializing effects" (185), and thereby masquerades as natural. Repeating what is manufactured as the norm causes associations of how to think gendered bodies. Gender perpetuates itself only "through a sustained set of acts, posited through the gendered stylization of the body" (xv) and is consequently nothing but a performance which is culturally, socially, capitalistically, attributed with meaning. As stated by Butler, "there is neither an 'essence' that gender expresses or externalizes nor an objective ideal to which gender aspires, and because gender is not a fact, the various acts of gender create the idea of gender, and without those acts, there would be no gender at all. Gender is, thus, a construction that regularly conceals its genesis" (178).

In order to break with the system of restrictions, Butler's "aim [is] to open up the field of possibility for gender without dictating which kinds of possibilities ought to be realized" (*Gender Trouble* viii). Their approach to an alternative lies in the failure to repeat what normativity targets to implement. A way to do that is repeating what contradicts the norm, and hence repeating differently as "'agency' […] is to be located within the possibility of a variation on that repetition" (185). Changing the patterns of repetition leads to subverting the norms. In Butler's words, "[t]he more insidious and effective strategy it seems is a thoroughgoing appropriation and redeployment of the categories of identity themselves, not merely to contest 'sex,' but to articulate the convergence of multiple sexual discourses at the site of 'identity' in order to render that category, in whatever form, permanently problematic" (163). In short, Judith Butler's approach to change is to smash the categories. In line with my premise from the beginning, this *could* ultimately be a step to abolish the whole system. Continuing to open up possibilities, alternatives, and futures, they end their work *Gender Trouble* with a question, which reads, "[w]hat other local strategies for engaging the 'unnatural' might lead to the denaturalization of gender as such?" (190). My take on this question is: what other strategies might lead to the denaturalization of capitalist ideology, such as gender, that could take the whole system down? (In this paper, I cannot provide an answer to this question but an attempt to.)

Hoda M. Zaki claims that Octavia Butler "does not place gender concerns conspicuously at the center of her novels" (246). I disagree and argue instead that Octavia Butler's novels not only expose the gender binary as artificial but also provide a space to think alternatives. That her novels are widely regarded as Afrofuturist especially allows for the latter because "Afrofuturism is [not only] an intersection of imagination, technology, the future, and liberation" (Womack 9) but also "a way of imagining possible futures through a black cultural lens" (I. LaFleur 00:01:15). Afrofuturist literature radically imagines alternatives to the current system. Max Haiven and Alex Khasnabish define radical imagination as "the ability to believe that things can be better" (iii).

Khasnabish further specifies that "our capacity to conceive of the world as it might be otherwise" implies the possibility of social change (1). I extend their argument by contending that radical imagination has the potential to abolish gridlocked structures of gender *by* thinking alternatives. This, however, does not imply that Octavia Butler's novels exist in a vacuum untouched by reality. *Wild Seed* and *Lilith's Brood* still exhibit existing power structures, such as heteronormativity. Leaving binary thinking to capitalism, perpetuating capitalist notions of gender *while* offering alternatives for them is possible at once. To express this, I use Vanessa de Oliveira Andreotti et al.'s vocabulary for decolonizing the university and adapt it to science fiction novels. I focus on the 'beyond-reform space' that recognizes "that the modern system itself is perceived as inherently violent, exploitative, […] unsustainable," and therefore unsavable (27). This entails "three primary responses: system walk out, hacking, or 'hospicing'" (27). Especially the first two responses bear the risk of "reproducing modernity's violence" (27). Still, I will employ these 'responses' as methods that enable me to read Octavia Butler's suggestions for alternatives.

Most of the secondary literature I have read on Octavia Butler was concerned with interpreting what she might have wanted to address with her works. However, Butler is the only person who could have spoken for herself. That is where literature as a medium comes to the rescue since it allows for many possible readings, of which my reading only constitutes one such possibility. Instead of completely abandoning the author, however, I experiment with putting Octavia Butler and her novels in conversation with Judith Butler and their theoretical work. This means that I will read Octavia Butler as a theorist and accordingly the novels both as theories as well as literary works.

Wild Seed: Wrenching from the System

"A poem in which yesterday never comes; a poem in which we love at the speed of utopia, leaving our shipwrecked country no time to begin anew."
– Belcourt, "Hypotheses" (68)

My first associations with science fiction are other worlds, aliens, and the future. *Wild Seed*, however, is set in the past of this world. Published in 1980 as the fourth book of the *Patternist* series, it is chronologically the first one in the series. Starting in 1690, it covers a time span until the mid-nineteenth century. Placing the setting of a novel that offers alternatives to thinking gender in the past already shatters the standardized, universalized, western version of history by suggesting that other ways of living have always been possible. Especially *Wild Seed*'s community of outsiders to the system is an example of what Andreotti et al. call 'system walk out.' Though the novel perpetuates heteronormativity to an extent, it employs system hacking by completely subverting the gender binary.

System Walk Out

According to Andreotti et al., "[s]ystem walk out […] enunciates a commitment to develop alternatives to modernity" (27). These "[a]lternative communities […] are developed or reclaimed in spaces that may be external or marginal to mainstream institutions, either as supplementary, transitional, or wholesale alternatives" (27). *Wild Seed* embodies such a wholesale alternative by constructing a community of outsiders. At its center are the two protagonists and shifting focalizers Anyanwu, a shapeshifter, who can transform her body into other humans and animals, and Doro,

who can take over people's bodies. While Anyanwu has a body of her own, to which she can make changes using a DNA-sample of another living being, Doro is dependent on finding new bodies to live in. The moment he inhabits a body, the person inside this body dies. The body follows suit once Doro takes on a new one. Together with the other characters, whose abilities include mindreading, manipulating and sensing emotions, seeing the past, controlling the winds, etc., they contradict society's norms and expectations and are thus perceived as witches. Society's take on difference poses a risk to the characters' lives. Showing their abilities, as Isaac (one of Doro's sons) does in New York Harbor, could lead to him being "shot out of the air or trapped, jailed, and eventually executed for witchcraft" (86).

Doro, on the other hand, deliberately searches for people with "witchcraft or the potential for witchcraft. […] [P]eople possessed or mad or just a little strange [who] heard voices, saw visions, other things" (160). Though they are being taken without their consent, the "seed villages" (3), such as Wheatley, provide a safe space in which they can express themselves without being persecuted. While "blackness [is imposed as] a mark of slavery" (101) by settlers all over Turtle Island, Wheatley refrains from structuring its community along racist hierarchies. Anyanwu realizes soon after her arrival in New York harbor that "this is not an easy place to be black" (84). Doro, however, assures her that she can be herself "with [him], and with [his] people [as] [o]nly [his] people live [in Wheatley], and they do not enslave each other" (84). The novel's settings, Wheatley being located somewhere "up the 'Hudson River'" (83), Doro's ship, and Anyanwu's "[plantation] in Avoyelles Parish in the state of Louisiana" (180), promote this reading of an alternative community at the margins of society. They are predominantly enclosed areas – geographically within the system but ideologically breaking with it. Anyanwu's safe space, which she creates after fleeing from Doro, represents an even more ideal community. As her farm is a plantation disguise only, she, too, takes in people who otherwise would have been "put in an asylum" (192) for being mad, or she frees enslaved people by buying them (187). Doro threatens people in order to subdue them, whereas Anyanwu heals people who want to stay with her voluntarily.

System Hacking

Andreotti et al. describe system hacking as "creating spaces within the system, using its resources [which] requires 'playing the game' of institutions at the same time that rules are bent to generate alternative outcomes" (27). *Wild Seed* exemplifies system hacking by using the concept of marriage but breaking with its association of strict monogamy. In "Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State," Friedrich Engels identifies the idea of monogamous marriage as patriarchal as it "comes on the scene as the subjugation of one sex by the other" (129). Moreover, the concept of monogamy is interwoven with enslavement and property from the start. Engels states that "the existence of slavery side by side with monogamy, the presence of young, beautiful [enslaved women] belonging unreservedly to the man, that stamps monogamy from the very beginning with its specific character of monogamy for the woman only, but not for the man" (129). That gender and race are too merged to ever be separated is illustrated in *Wild Seed* by Anyanwu's remark that "[w]hite men leave brown children all about, but a white woman who does this becomes almost an animal in the eyes of other whites" (194). Given that *white* men have been the ones in power, the property owners, *white* women are regarded as property that needs to be defended. Hence, "[w]hite women must be protected" (194) and "[p]reserved for the use of owners alone" (194). Black men and women are regarded as property, too. On top of that, *white*s dehumanize and objectify Black people and use them as ultimate others, as "sentient beings against which Humanity is defined" (Wilderson 167), to justify enslavement.

Doro's communities depict monogamous marriages only on first sight. On closer inspection, both men and women have sex outside their marriages – not for pleasure but for procreation. Doro's focus on genetic pairing defies the capitalist concept of monogamous marriage by employing polygamy. It is doubtful, though, if the idea of having human property in any way – even if it's not structured along race and gender – ever is an alternative. *Wild Seed* reconsiders gender more radically, which requires us to first analyze how the novel perpetuates what it capsizes.

Reproducing Heteronormativity

According to Veronica Hollinger, "[a]ll too often, heteronormativity is embedded in both theory and fiction as 'natural' and 'universal,' a kind of barely glimpsed default gender setting which remains unquestioned and untheorized" (23). *Wild Seed*'s character constellation that mainly depicts gender conforming characters, in its center the protagonists, who desire the respectively opposite of the two genders (male, female) designates that. In Judith Butler's words, "institutional heterosexuality both requires and produces the univocity of each of the gendered terms that constitute the limit of gendered possibilities within an oppositional, binary gender system. This conception of gender presupposes not only a causal relation among sex, gender, and desire, but suggests as well that desire reflects or expresses gender and that gender reflects or expresses desire" (*Gender Trouble* 30). An example of that in Octavia Butler's *Wild Seed* is when Anyanwu changes her body to become "thoroughly male" (14) to repel Doro and "beg[ins] to grow breasts" (20) when wanting to be desirable for him and his male body. Furthermore, she is disgusted by Doro's idea to have sex while "[he] will become a woman and find out whether [Anyanwu] make[s] an especially talented man" and regards that as "abomination" (89). This expresses the "totalizing ideological hold heterosexuality has on our culture's ability to imagine itself otherwise" (Hollinger 24).

This heteronormativity affects the character construction, too, as characters follow gender expectations that "restrict […] the meaning of gender to received notions of masculinity and femininity" (J. Butler, *Gender Trouble* vii) and the stereotypes that come with that. The very first sentence of the novel is already loaded with masculinist notions: "Doro discovered the woman by accident when he went to see what was left of one of his seed villages" (O. Butler, *Wild Seed* 3). 'Discovering' grants Doro the role of the active subject while the unnamed woman (who turns out to be Anyanwu) stays passive. Moreover, the 'seed villages' evoke associations of the ascribed 'male' part in reproduction. In line with that, Doro's character is patriarchal in that he expects his wife to "obey" him (34), acts based on his own selfish needs, and uses others as he wishes. In order to fulfill his breeding project, he kidnaps people and demands their "loyalty" (10), which is a gaslighting way to say subordination. The depiction of female characters, such as Sarah Cutler (98), is an example of that. Stereotypically, they cook, clean, and care for their children and husbands within the private sphere of the household.

Despite all this, I agree with Hollinger who claims that "[s]cience fiction would seem to be ideally suited, as a narrative mode, to the construction of imaginative challenges to the smoothly oiled technologies of heteronormativity, especially when/as these almost invisible technologies are pressed into the service of a coercive regime of compulsory heterosexuality" (24). *Wild Seed* is such a space because it tackles heteronormativity by exposing the gender binary as an artificial construct.

Subversion

Wild Seed undermines the heteronormativity it perpetuates on several layers. First, Doro's character construction as a patriarch is challenged by Anyanwu being a protagonist, too. Over the course of

the novel, her character develops, becomes more and more independent, so that she is not only equal to Doro but convinces him to consider the violence he commits. Second, *Wild Seed* macerates gendered stereotypes by constructing Anyanwu as "as strong as many men" (55), which emphasizes that "'sex' imposes an artificial unity on an otherwise discontinuous set of attributes" (J. Butler, *Gender Trouble* 146). Third, institutional heterosexuality is split open by Anyanwu being a woman who can shapeshift into a man and "ha[ve] wives" (O. Butler, *Wild Seed* 237) while keeping she/her pronouns. Though she had referred to the idea of having sex as a male body with a woman as 'abomination' and was not able to feel pleasure the first time Doro forces her to do it (142), she remarks that "[her wife Denice] was a good woman [and they] pleased each other" (192).

Wild Seed does more than challenge heteronormativity. It disrupts its very foundation: the body. The only thing that points to Doro's and Anyanwu's respective gender are their pronouns that do not change throughout the novel no matter what their bodies look like. Their bodies are completely flexible in their physical appearance. Consequentially, a body cannot be seen as a fixed entity or reflection of a person's gender. The protagonists' abilities destabilize any reading that determines the body along the lines of tracing gender back to what genitalia a person is born with. That is expressed by Doro "wear[ing] his body like a cloth" (11). With a new body, Doro completely adapts to that body's biological outset. He takes over the bodies of women, too, as he expresses that "[he] ha[s] been a woman often enough to know how uncomfortable women's clothing can be" (87). This proves his intentional failure to adhere to one of the two genders and, thus, disrupts the entire binary. Anyanwu and the enslaver Daly perceive Doro as unhuman, a "spirit" (11) or "the devil himself" (37), because of his ability. This indicates that "the very notion of 'the person' is called into question by the cultural emergence of those 'incoherent' or 'discontinuous' gendered beings who appear to be persons but who fail to conform to the gendered norms of cultural intelligibility by which persons are defined" (J. Butler, *Gender Trouble* 23). While Doro's ability to take over bodies breaks the gender binary open, Anyanwu's shapeshifting completely subverts it. She can *trans*form her whole body into other humans or animals by changing parts of her body. These changes happen externally, such as turning her hand "to bird claws, long-fingered, withered, and bony […] to grow smooth and young-looking" (O. Butler, *Wild Seed* 13) again or "absorb[ing] her legs almost completely, leaving only the useless detached hip bones natural to her dolphin body" (77), as well as internally, such as being able to "father a child" (14) or becoming infertile by "disconnect[ing] the two small tubes through which her own seed travelled to her womb" (108).

Accordingly, "gender is always a doing," as Judith Butler writes in *Gender Trouble* (33). It is not something biologically determined but performative. Gender is rather "manufactured through a sustained set of acts, posited through the gendered stylization of the body. In this way, it showed that what we take to be an 'internal' feature of ourselves is one that we anticipate and produce through bodily acts, at an extreme, an hallucinatory effect of naturalized gestures" (xv). Thus, "'[i]ntelligible' genders are […] thinkable only in relation to existing norms of continuity and coherence, are constantly […] produced by the very laws that seek to establish causal or expressive lines of connection among biological sex, culturally constituted genders, and the 'expression' or 'effect' of both in the manifestation of sexual desire through sexual practice" (23). In other words, the protagonists' doing of gender along the lines of being male and female is not in any way determined except by what societies deem as natural. On top of this, their ability to take on, to be, any gender illuminates that "if the category of 'sex' is established through repeated acts, then conversely, the social action of bodies within the cultural field can withdraw the very power of reality that they themselves invested in the category" (158). In *Wild Seed*'s case, it is not about

repeating differently but debunking the need to repeat, to fit into invented categories that have been instituted to uphold power structures.

Lilith's Brood: Thinking Change

"LET'S START WITH THE END of the world, why don't we? Get it over with and move on to more interesting things."
– Jemisin, The Fifth Season *(1)*

Octavia Butler's Xenogenesis Trilogy *Lilith's Brood*, consisting of the novels *Dawn*, *Adulthood Rites*, *Imago*, is set in the future long after humanity has succeeded in destroying the earth. An extraterrestrial species, the Oankali, save the few human survivors and revive the planet by establishing a completely different society. "[T]rading villages" (271) are the setting of this new society, in which humans and Oankali form families and have children with each other. These children of human and Oankali parents are called 'construct children.' Lilith, one of the human survivors and protagonist of *Dawn*, and Nikanj, her Oankali partner, are one of the first characters to have construct children together. Two of their construct children are the protagonists in the latter novels, Akin in *Adulthood Rites*, and Jodahs in *Imago*. Hence, *Lilith's Brood* employs system 'hospicing,' which entails "sitting with a system in decline, learning from its history, offering palliative care, seeing oneself in that which is dying, attending to the integrity of the process, dealing with tantrums, incontinence, anger and hopelessness, 'cleaning up,' and clearing the space for something new" (Andreotti et al. 28). Applying this to science fiction literature, it resembles what Connor Pitetti calls "[p]ostapocalyptic [n]arrative [or] 'To Pull Something Out of the Ashes'" (444). As stated by Pitetti, "postapocalyptic narratives [such as the Xenogenesis trilogy] do justice to history by pointing beyond themselves to a world that is more dynamic and complex than their own limited textual frames can adequately contain" (451). Combining Pitetti and Andreotti et al., I argue that *Lilith's Brood*, as a postapocalyptic narrative, uses system hospicing in order to think gender differently, and with that radically imagines an alternative society.

Rethinking Gender

In *Lilith's Brood*, the foundation to an alternative, which is not repeating the gender binary but extending it, features the Oankali who have a third gender beside male and female: the ooloi. Ooloi are neither masculine nor feminine and use the pronoun 'it.'[6] The only first-person narration in the novel is by Jodahs, the first human-Oankali ooloi. The agency that comes with the first-person narration breaks with any associations of objects or things relating to the pronoun 'it' (523). Furthermore, Oankali children as well as construct children are initially sexless, not having "any sex at all" (562) until they enter their metamorphosis (427). Their appearance does not reflect their gender. In their sexless phase as a child, everyone assumes that Jodahs will become male (including themself) – except for Nikanj, who remarks that "you were never male, no matter how you looked" (536). This transformation of the body, of becoming an adult, of being one of three genders, happens when "their bodies are ready, not at some specific age" (528). Up to this point, it is unclear

[6] Though ooloi refer to themselves with the pronoun 'it,' I struggle with repeating that and instead will refer to them with a singular they pronoun. This is not to diminish the validity of persons' pronouns but an attempt to counter the discriminatory and dehumanizing use of the pronoun 'it' for non-binary people in the current world, of which I am part.

"if [a construct] become[s] female" (473; compare 370) or male. Their gender is not biologically determined but something they are able to choose. An example of this is Ayre, who can decide whether they "want to be male" at all (435). That is why being a child is accompanied with gender uncertainty. This concept, however, is hard to grasp for humans who ask a construct child if "[she] will be a woman someday," to which they can only respond with "I don't know" (581). While in Oankali language there is a word to describe sexless children as "eka" (536), humans use the pronouns he or she because they are familiar to them. This implies that pronouns are not fixed either but flexible, changeable. As soon as the children determine their gender in metamorphosis, the pronouns change in accordance with their decision, and everyone goes along with it.

Rethinking Family and Relationships

Thinking gender alternatively affects families, too. Family structures are expanded and entirely abandon the liberal idea of a nuclear family. Instead of having a "two-atome molecule: one man and one woman" (Engels 164) who have children together, the novel's 'construct families' consist of a human male and female, an Oankali male and female, and an ooloi. All children of the family are considered siblings and all parents are equally responsible for their upbringing. Éva Federmayer suggests that the "trilogy apparently foregrounds the maternal qualities of birthing, reproduction, nurturing, caring, healing, and symbiotic relationship, traditionally attributed to women" (111). However, *Lilith's Brood* does not exclusively focus on the mother as the primary caregiver but extends the responsibilities to all parents – male, female, ooloi. All three genders are required for procreation, too. The ooloi inhabits a special position, since sex can only happen when they are present, otherwise men and women cannot touch each other without feeling repulsed. Jim Miller claims that this "goes beyond traditional notions of sex and gender [because] sex with the ooloi puts the male in a passive position" (344), for the ooloi is the active agent who mixes the genes of the fetus. In addition, "sex with the Oankali involves more than two people and gives a kind of pleasure that was previously unimaginable for humans. […] This letting go, this loss of selfhood is a kind of polymorphously […] transcendent moment that is not only beyond the 'natural' heterosexual experience, but beyond the human" (344). I follow Miller who concludes that "the non-gendered ooloi who bring pleasure to all are the ultimate cyborgs, existing at the boundary between/beyond gender" (344).

The first experiences with humans in Oankali families on the ship also demonstrate that family is not biologically dictated but rather an emotional bond that can grow without being related. When an Oankali family adopts a human survivor into their family structure, Lilith is outraged that he is all alone and "had nothing" (101). Nikanj responds that "[y]et [the Oankali] are his family […]. They have accepted him and he has accepted them. He has no other family but he has them" (101).

Rethinking Society

Being structured into smaller family units that are equitable and interdependent already suggests the structure of the larger society. Oankali, as a species, embody an antidote to capitalism at its core because they are designed to promote life with every part of their being – even their ship is alive (O. Butler, *Lilith's Brood* 30). Oankali describe that as being "powerfully acquisitive [in that they] acquire new life – seek it, investigate it, manipulate it, sort it, use it" (31) since "[l]ife was treasure. The only treasure" (564). They cannot help but live in symbiosis with the planet and other living beings. This necessitates respect, appreciation, and empathy for others, which is expressed by them

"[e]mbrac[ing] difference" (329) and valuing consent. For instance, Lilith is assured that "[n]o one will touch [her] without [her] consent" (39). This enables them to lead the system hospicing, to clean up the world, allow it to heal, and implement alternative, non-destructive ways of living. Hoda M. Zaki describes their "model of community [as] a cooperative society which emphasizes the organic nature of its ties and the overriding importance of the common good, enjoys a high degree of unity and cohesion, and is liable to no serious tension between the individual and the larger community" (245). This entails abandoning capitalism's striving for individualism, which induces selfish, profit-based behavior rather than focusing on a collective of living beings. While capitalism functions by exploiting bodies and nature for the sake of the benefitting few, Oankali are ready to put themselves in – to "trade [them]selves" (24) – to do the work. According to Sarah Outterson, their "enforcement of radical change on the humans in Xenogenesis propels them together and brings them to a more welcoming and intersubjective community" (442). This, however, applies only to the Oankali-human community.

Since the Oankali-human community does not enforce participation, there are humans who refuse to mingle with the Oankali. The so-called resisters display that change is not easily realized but hard work that is connected to "tantrums, incontinence, anger and hopelessness" (Andreotti et al. 28). In resister communities, violence, hierarchies, rape, weapons, and death prevail. The ideologies, socializations, and norms the capitalist system enforced on them, hold them captive from experiencing something new, possibly better, definitely different from what they know. Therefore, they hold on to the familiar, for example patriarchy. Instead of accepting that the gender binary is not set in stone but that there is a third gender physically in front of them, they continue to universalize man as the standard of humanity and misgender the ooloi as male because they "look too much like a man" (O. Butler, *Lilith's Brood* 581). Furthermore, they cannot grasp the idea of "ethical political and social models that value interdependence and reciprocal care" (Obourn 111) for they "had no idea how completely Oankali and construct society was made up of groups of two or more people" (O. Butler, *Lilith's Brood* 437) and what harm they cause by refusing Akin this community.

This brings us back to Pitetti's concept of postapocalyptic narratives: Pitetti argues that they "are necessarily destabilizing. […] [T]hey offer only the obligation to find a way to engage with contingent processes of change. At the same time [, they] open […] up an endless series of opportunities to participate in those processes and contribute to determining the always-changing shape of the open-ended future" (451). Change does not come with an easy step by step instruction. Quite the contrary, changing is hard work, it is frustrating, it hurts and there is not even a guarantee that "it will make us better […] [o]nly different" (O. Butler, *Lilith's Brood* 34). However, *Lilith's Brood* illustrates that transformation can start anywhere with embracing difference, disrupting gridlocked notions of gender, with valuing life. As humans are "filled with so much life and death and potential for change" (80), we may not even need an extraterrestrial species for that. We can start now because "[w]ays of living must change" (160).

Conclusion

"The world don't change. People change it."
– Angel Evangelista, "In My Heels" (S2 E10 of Pose*)*

Reading Octavia Butler's novels as theories hand in hand with Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* not only allowed me to explore in detail how much of an invention capitalism is but also to think more hopefully about abolishing it. Octavia Butler's novels do not romanticize change nor the alternatives that come after. They rather "stare […] into the abyss of the dystopian future and reinvent […] the desire for a better world" (Miller 336). My analysis has proven that her novels experiment with alternatives to the system, with what change, abolition, and transformation could look like. This is an example of science fiction as a space for "try[ing] on new narratives about the future and consider various alternatives" (338). It is not a "soften[ed] […] critique that situates [Octavia Butler's] utopia beyond human reach" (Zaki 247) but radically imagining possible futures. In case it is not obvious by now, I love quoting. I admire how people use language in such beautiful and yet to the point ways my paraphrasing of their words could never add up to. To be consistent, I end this paper with Liu's quote:

> There are many sf settings […] that confront the reader with challenges to [their] own values – such as settings with multiple genders, multiple selves, or question of rulership (humanity ruled by a more advanced or mechanical civilization). Diving deeper into these imaginary worlds, we can see that, when faced with the cold laws of the universe, things that had previously been accepted as utterly inviolable can collapse at the first cosmic blow. (30)

As they should.

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