

2010

Shifting Concepts of the "Other" in Modern Science Fiction

Robert Hunter
University of Redlands

Follow this and additional works at: https://inspire.redlands.edu/cas_honors

 Part of the [Fiction Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Hunter, R. (2010). *Shifting Concepts of the "Other" in Modern Science Fiction* (Undergraduate honors thesis, University of Redlands). Retrieved from https://inspire.redlands.edu/cas_honors/65



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial 4.0 License](#)

This material may be protected by copyright law (Title 17 U.S. Code).

This Open Access is brought to you for free and open access by the Theses, Dissertations, and Honors Projects at InSPIRe @ Redlands. It has been accepted for inclusion in Undergraduate Honors Theses by an authorized administrator of InSPIRe @ Redlands. For more information, please contact inspire@redlands.edu.

Bobby Hunter

May 6, 2010

Shifting Concepts of the “Other” in Modern Science Fiction

Let me paint you a familiar picture; perhaps you’ve seen it before in science fiction novels, movies, or other media. Space is the backdrop. A blue-green jewel of a planet dappled with white clouds hangs in the foreground. It is beautiful and definitely not Earth. Some manner of spacecraft zooms toward the planet. It could be a lone vessel or part of a flotilla. The ship(s) land on the planet and disgorge settlers usually accompanied by armored, weapon-laden soldiers. The settlers begin to create a new home for themselves; their motives for coming to the planet are irrelevant. The only important thing is that they are making a home for themselves, learning to master their new environment.

Chances are you already know what’s going to happen. There is an intelligent species already living on the planet, one that does not take kindly to strangers moving in. Most likely the native species looks nothing like the human colonizers; the novelist/filmmaker/etc. gives them a grotesque appearance to highlight how different they are from humanity. The natives fight back against the colonizers, probably in a terribly gruesome manner that appalls the sensibilities of the reader or audience. The soldiers rally against their inhuman and incomprehensible foe and before the movie (or other media) is over, the handsome low-ranking main character will have come up with a daring plan to finish the natives off once and for all. The story of intrepid settlers colonizing a hostile planet is not a new one in the realm of science fiction. In fact, it’s pretty close to being a staple. While this plot might be perfect for summer blockbusters, it does contain one major flaw – its basic plot elements are thoroughly entrenched in imperialism and

colonialism. This is dangerous because imperialism and colonialism are discourses built upon the domination and control – economically, socially, religiously – of one group over another.

The history of the genre of science fiction is worthy of an entire essay of its own, but for brevity's sake, I will briefly touch on some of the more salient points from the genre's evolution using John Rieder's book *Colonialism and the Emergence of Science Fiction* as a resource. As an official caveat before truly beginning: in this essay the definitions for the terms colonialism and imperialism render them virtually interchangeable in the sense that they are both referring to the specific phenomenon of European expansion across the globe in the nineteenth-century. Imperialism will be used when the stories and concepts I address explicitly deal with the term empire. While Rieder comments that some scholars turn to tales of marvelous journeys coming out of Europe in the seventeenth-century, modern science fiction's roots go back to the nineteenth-century Europe. Some consider Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* with its plot of constructing an artificial human a work of proto-science fiction; however others tend to cite authors like Jules Verne or H. G. Wells who were active in the latter half of the century as the founders of science fiction. Whoever is cited as the "Father [or Mother] of Science Fiction"¹ (Roberts 3) is technically irrelevant (at least for the scope of this paper) because it's not the who that's important, it's the when because from the beginning, science fiction has responded to contemporary political and scientific contexts, whether it is the theories of Darwin, galvanism, or colonialism.

This intertwining of science fiction with colonialism occurs because according to Rieder, science fiction emerged as a genre right when European colonialism was reaching its peak, while at the same time certain sciences like anthropology were emerging: "The complex mixture of ideas about competition, adaptation, race, and destiny was in part generated by evolutionary

theory [...and] forms a major part of the thematic material of early science fiction” (Rieder 2). Those theories that he mentions all come from countries “most heavily involved in imperialist projects” including France and Great Britain, and then eventually the United States and Germany. As modern scientific paradigms became more dominant in those countries, it followed that their fiction would begin to appropriate some of the scientific discoveries and theories floating around, or even sociological theories like Social Darwinism. The use of exotic settings like outer space, underwater, or the future i.e. *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea* or *The Time Machine*, is an extension of the drive to explore and conquer that is a part of colonialism. As Europeans mapped more and more of the world, there were fewer uncharted locales left to capture that sense of exotic exhilaration, so the genre had to turn to speculative locations instead. This drive to chart previously uncharted territories – either literal or metaphorical – clearly shows that “it is not a matter of asking whether but of precisely determining how and to what extent the stories engage colonialism” (Rieder 3).

To answer the “how and to what extent” part of Rieder’s argument, I turn to Edward Said’s book *Orientalism*. Said argues that the Orient is a concept constructed by Europe and the West where Europe is considered normal, white, masculine and strong while the Orient is portrayed as exotic, effeminate and weak: “Orientalism was ultimately a political vision of reality whose structure promoted the difference between the familiar (Europe, the West, ‘us’) and the strange (the Orient, the East, ‘them’) [...] Orientals lived in their world, ‘we’ lived in ours” (Said 43-44). He describes the way that the West and the East interact as a “relationship of power, of domination, of varying degrees of a complex hegemony” (Said 5). According to postcolonial theory, what this relationship does, what Orientalism does is create absolute identities based on a binary system. It is only either/or – self/other; there is no middle ground.

So in a colonial setting there are only the colonizers and the colonized. But what is even more important is the fact that this binary system of identity is gendered. The West is seen as an active agent, the *male* colonizer while the Other and the Orient (both people and places) are depicted as passive, subservient, and *female*.

According to Said, Orientalism affects almost every single aspect of Western society: culture, art, literature, and science. He names works “of genuine scholarship like [...] Edward William Lane’s *Account of the Manners and Customs of the Modern Egyptians*” in order to show how Orientalism influenced scientific texts (Said 8). Now if science fiction incorporates elements of science in its stories, and it emerged as a genre during a time of rapid colonialism, then it stands to reason that Said’s description of Orientalism can be extended to the way science fiction treats alien species; they are the Other. The Other is one part of binary definition of self/other, where each half is dependent on the other one for constructing their identity. Othering is used particularly in colonial settings as a way of differentiating between colonizers and natives, masters and slaves, and more importantly, “us and them.” What this does is create a violent system of domination based on power and difference. The masculine self is seen as fully human and possesses agency and power, while the feminized Other is seen as less human and powerless because of its difference. One of the ways this plays out is in violence that plays out on gender lines and is directed against women. In a lot of mainstream of science fiction stories, other species are often portrayed as exotic, mysterious, and Other. Because of this distinction and their difference, this ultimately makes them exploitable.

But in a world where post-colonial theory is a legitimate field of study, where does the science fiction genre find itself? How easy would it be to just collapse science fiction and colonialism into each other and say the two are synonymous? That smacks of mindless

simplicity because “colonialism is not simply the reality that science fiction mystifies” (Rieder 15). To claim that would be to define the genre in an absolute way that runs contrary to the limitless possibilities that the genre tries to express. But on the other hand it would be impossible to deny those concepts’ influences on the genre. So that leaves the question, is there science fiction that challenges the disturbing ways the Other is usually portrayed? As dominated hand more importantly deserving of domination because in the colonial paradigm, it is “natural” that weaker, lesser beings take on the subservient role. In order to explore the gender and power relationships between self and Other in science fiction, I will take a two-pronged approach. First, I will turn to a respected, established text in the science fiction genre, Frank Herbert’s *Dune*, in order to show that when looked at with a critical eye it contains aspects that are colonialist in nature, especially with regards to the portrayal of the Fremen – the natives of the planet Arrakis and the way female identities are constructed in the *Dune* universe with an emphasis on the character of Lady Jessica. Second, using the themes explored in *Dune* as a jumping off point, I will explore Octavia E. Butler’s *Xenogenesis* trilogy (compiled as *Lilith’s Brood*) to show how gender, identity, and power in this trilogy deconstruct the paradigms expressed in *Dune*. This needs to be done in order to show how science fiction is able to and should challenge its own past by deconstructing the concept of the gendered Other, by breaking down that binary definition that creates distinctions like colonizer and colonized, and male and female. Science fiction might not be an academically studied genre, but it is wildly popular. If all it does is just repeat the same stories and reinforce the same paradigms, then we run the risk of having readers unthinkingly swallow stories that uphold the same cycles of violence that colonialism creates.

In many ways, *Dune* is a novel that revolutionized the science fiction genre and is one of the best-selling science fiction novels of all time. While there are six novels in the series written by Herbert plus sequels and prequels written by his son Brian Herbert and Kevin J. Anderson, I will only focus on the first one because it is the most well-known and the most intellectually engaging. To this day, the *Dune* universe is a stunning example of physical world building with the titular planet's ecology being exquisitely planned out, but I'm going to focus on issues of politics, power, and the role they play in the novel since it is through politics and power that the novel portrays the construction of identity. The overarching governmental structure in the novel is an empire ruled by the Padishah Emperor Shaddam Corrino IV. Because of the governmental structure, every world within the empire is a colony under the jurisdiction of the ruling House Corrino though they may be given to other Great Houses to control like feudal fiefs. The politics of empire and the imperial discourse contribute to the process of "Othering" that takes place during the course of the novel.

At the start of the novel the Emperor gives House Atreides control of the harsh, desert-planet Arrakis, the only planet in the known universe that contains melange or the spice, a substance that almost becomes a currency in and of itself. The fact that it is spice that is the Imperium's most sought after commodity can be read within the novel as representative of colonial power because the search for spices was one of the major reasons behind European colonial expansion. In *Dune*, the Combine Honnete Ober Advancer Mercantiles or CHOAM is a chartered company that controls all interplanetary commerce in the Imperium with the Emperor having a controlling stake in the company. While CHOAM is ostensibly a company, it also influences the Imperium's political sphere: "CHOAM was the key to wealth, each noble House dipping from the company's coffers under the power of the directorships. Those CHOAM

directorships – they were the real evidence of political power in the Imperium” (Herbert 20). Politics and commerce unite to create a type of power that is strikingly similar to the power wielded by the British East India Company. Like CHOAM the Company was formed for trade purposes but became something more, a commercial-political entity that ended up controlling and colonizing large swaths of India before being replaced by the British Crown in 1858. The universe of *Dune* with its incessant desire for spice, while being light years away from our Earth, is similar to the colonial system employed by the British East India Company searching for spices in India. Because of its exorbitant price whichever House controls Arrakis and the melange flow is set up to make themselves immensely wealthy. Kevin Williams in his essay “Imperialism & Globalization: Lessons from Frank Herbert’s *Dune*” reads melange as an analogue for oil because “like oil, the spice is a commodity over which people will wage war” (Williams 3). Whether or not his reading is accurate, the spice represents a resource that the rest of the universe finds beyond valuable: “The Harkonnens took ten billion solaris [currency] out of here every three hundred and thirty Standard days” (Herbert 86). Fictional exchange rates between solaris and dollars aside, the point is that off-worlders under imperial decree rule Arrakis solely because of the presence of the spice. The desires of Arrakis’ native population, the Fremen, are not factored into the Emperor’s decisions about who gets to rule the planet because for the purpose of extracting wealth in the form of natural resources, colonies are things to be conquered and possessed, and in the science fiction genre, planets are things to be exploited.

Because the main power structure in the novel is an empire built from exploited, subjugated colonies much like the British Empire during the nineteenth century, the background context of the novel’s plot is clearly rooted in imperialist discourse. However, the main plot of

the novel upholds colonial paradigms because of the way the Fremen are presented as the exotic Other in *Dune*'s imperial society. In short, after a series of betrayals, the main character Paul Atreides and his mother are forced to flee into the deep desert and seek refuge with the native Fremen desert dwellers. The "civilized" Great Houses describe the Fremen as barbaric because they believe that "A man's flesh is his own; the water belongs to the tribe" (Herbert 215). The rest of the universe looks down on what they consider a cannibalistic practice even though the Fremen are only replicating what they see the Arrakeen fauna do (Herbert 136). The Fremen remove all the blood and bodily fluids from their dead and convert it into drinkable water to be shared among the tribe because water is so scarce on Arrakis. Off-world travelers refuse to take part in this practice and condemn it in the same way that indigenous religious and cultural practices were suppressed during the European colonial period. According to Said "The Oriental is depicted as something one judges" (Said 40). In *Dune*, the Imperium judges Fremen cultural practices because the Great Houses and the Emperor can be read as metaphors for a colonial system. The colonizer's perspective is seen as correct and the native's is seen as wrong; never minds the fact that the "Fremen scum drink[ing] the blood of their dead" keeps them alive (Herbert 137). Importing water is what is considered normal and right; whereas in the eyes of the imperial settlers the Fremen's custom is wrong and abnormal. According to the views espoused by the Imperium, the Fremen are just the barbarians that live in the desert; Arrakis's only redeeming feature is the spice.

However it is important to note that the Fremen are the "good guys" in the novel. Taken at face value, it seems as if Herbert is fighting against colonial stereotypes because the Emperor, his allies, and his legions are the main antagonists. One could very easily argue that Herbert redeems himself because ultimately the Fremen adopt Paul and help him avenge his father's

death. Together they overthrow the corrupt Emperor and place Paul on the Golden Lion Throne. Williams argues that *Dune* and more importantly the rest of the series is a successful critique of imperialism because it shows how it can be overcome “by the cultivation of an emancipated populace that has little need for hierarchical leadership, only an enlightened leadership [...] when people resist and transcend the need and desire to place leaders and/or systems above themselves” (Williams 2). Williams looks at the entire series as a whole and notes that it ultimately offers a way to “act for the good of the species [...] If such an option is chosen, the cycle of downtrodden-dominator explicated in *Dune*, and played out on earth, may be broken” (Williams 5). However I would argue that *Dune* may offer a way to break the cycle Williams discusses but not successfully especially when we look at the Fremen as an a large scale example and Paul’s mother Lady Jessica as a small scale one because despite the novel’s “happy ending” the Fremen never gain the choice to choose their own identity in the universe and female identities are confined to the roles of wife and mother.

By the middle of the novel, the Fremen adopt Paul and his mother into their tribe, even going so far as to give him a tribal or “sietch” name: “You shall be known among us as Usul, the base of the pillar. This is your secret name [...] We of Sietch Tabr may use it, but none other may so presume” (Herbert 306). He also adopts an everyday-use style name too, Muad’Dib. The Fremen who gives Paul his sietch name must have been a tiny bit prescient because the name chosen is completely appropriate. By the end of the novel, Paul leads all of the Fremen and is the base of the pillar of their fighting capabilities. He literally embodies his Fremen name; it is his strength that unites them into a formidable fighting force. But deep down, Paul is still an off-worlder, a foreigner. He is *not* a Fremen no matter how thoroughly he embraces their ways

and they embrace him. The scene that dramatizes this fact most forcefully comes when it is time for Paul / Muad'Dib to rally the Fremen before their final battle to liberate the planet:

“Who rules here?” Paul asked. He raised his fist. “I rule here! I rule on every square inch of Arrakis! This is my ducal fief whether the Emperor says yea or nay! He gave it to my father and it comes to me through my father!”

[...] In one blurred motion, Stilgar had his crysknife out and pointed over the heads of the throng. “Long live Duke Paul-Muad'Dib!” (Herbert 428).

Paul claims he rules Arrakis by imperial decree and heredity but his claims are contradictory because he says that he rules even if the Emperor disagrees, but the Emperor is the one who installed his father as the Duke of Arrakis in the first place. Stilgar's draws his knife as part of saluting his ducal lord, but at the same time it carries a threat of violence. No Fremen can stand up to Paul in single combat and because of the fact that he has prophecy on his side, means that Paul is uncontested while he makes his claims. Nowhere in the novel does he say that he rules with the consent of the governed; he rules through force and with the fervor of religious fanaticism (see the article on Fedaykin in the “Terminology of the Imperium” Appendix). Paul and his father the late Duke Leto are outsiders appointed, and given CHOAM directorships, to be colonial stewards in the same fashion that Britain ruled over its empire with a vast number of bureaucrats.

At the end of the novel, Paul and the Fremen defeat the Emperor's forces and Paul ascends the throne. Conventional science fiction readers would rejoice at this conclusion because the arrogant, oppressive Emperor is defeated, but in reality Paul's coronation changes nothing. The interstellar governmental system is still an empire. The only things that will change will be the Emperor and the location of the seat of imperial power. The promise he made

to transform the surface of Arrakis into a green, temperate zone stays unfulfilled because Paul is dependent on the spice to fuel his prescient visions. And the fate of the Fremen? When questioned Paul declares, “The Fremen are *mine* [...] What they shall receive shall be dispensed by Muad’Dib” (Herbert 489, emphasis mine). By referring to himself by his Fremen persona, Paul claims that he is Fremen enough to speak for them and dispense judgments. The Fremen do not get to voice their own opinions or make decisions about their fate. Yes they now occupy a higher social station, no longer considered blood-drinking savages, but they don’t rule themselves. As Williams puts it when he is describing the phenomenon of imperialism, “imperialism demonstrates a pattern in which the downtrodden, once placed in power, may become themselves imperialists” (Williams 7). Briefly breaking from my vow to only look at *Dune*, I will remark that Williams’ prediction is entirely accurate. The jihad Paul spends the entire book trying to prevent from happening happens once he becomes Emperor. *His* Fremen spread across the galaxy and murder billions in a religious crusade. Any elevation they received at the end of *Dune* came only from Muad’Dib, from Usul their pillar of strength, from Paul -- the outsider, the Emperor. To Paul, the Fremen are possessions and do not even deserve a voice. Like the Orientals fabricated by Orientalism, the Fremen (despite being the Imperium’s most formidable fighters) are said to possess an “intrinsic weakness” that a stronger power – Paul – must know them and speak for them (Said 45). This erasure of voice and subjectivity is the type of feature that post-colonial theory criticizes. A post-colonial reading of *Dune* might acknowledge that the novel revolutionized the science fiction genre in certain ways, yet it also represents a repetition of the same. Paul comes to power as the next in a long line of Emperors and the cycle repeats itself; those he will undoubtedly oppress will rise up against him.

If the treatment and Othering of the Fremmen are read from a post-colonial standpoint on the macroscopic level as representing the effects of an unequal power relationship in an imperial system, then the character of Jessica represents how this system affects women on a more personal, microscopic level. In *Dune* it appears as if there are only three positions a woman may occupy: witch, wife or companion, and mother. When the reader is first introduced to Jessica, she occupies all three: “And the way she called his mother Jessica like a common serving wench instead of what she was – a Bene Gesserit Lady, a duke’s concubine and mother of the ducal heir” (Herbert 4). While this description is filtered through Paul, it still highlights the three social positions available to Jessica. From the way he takes offense at the way his mother is treated by another Bene Gesserit, it is clear that Paul considers his mother as a woman of power and status, but this reverence does not last for long. Paul only obeys her and respects her power because at the start of the novel he is only fifteen and not fully a man. It is implied that as soon as Paul matures, he will be the one to inherit his father’s ducal fief and all the power and agency that goes with it. His mother is expected to remain the duke’s concubine (not wife) because he needs to remain available for a potential political alliance: “As long as [the] Duke remains unmarried some of the Great Houses can still hope for alliance” (Herbert 64). It seems as if women are only to be used as bartering chips in a grand political game between the male leaders of the other Great Houses. In fact the other members of the nobility the reader encounters are all men: Baron Harkonnen and the Emperor.

So far Jessica is both romantic companion and mother, but she also has a third role, one that is more complicated. She belongs to a secretive sisterhood that has existed in the *Dune* universe for millennia known as the Bene Gesserit. Colloquially the members of the sisterhood are referred to as witches with all the evil connotations that word carries. What makes these

women special is the incredible amount of physical and mental control they have over their bodies. At the highest levels of their training, a Bene Gesserit takes on the title of Reverend Mother and gains an even more extraordinary ability; she can look inside herself along genetic lines to possess all the knowledge of her ancestors. But this power comes with a catch:

“When a Truthsayer’s gifted by the drug, she can look many places in her memory – in her body’s memory. We can look down so many avenues of the past...but only feminine avenues. Yet there’s a place where no Truthsayer can see. We are repelled by it, terrorized. It is said a man will come one day [...] He will look where we cannot – into both feminine and masculine parts” (Herbert 13)

Every bit of power a Bene Gesserit obtains from their training and teachings is always undercut in some fashion. They always need to be in control of their bodies and their desires which stifles feminine agency. Also despite the amazing ability to look into their genetic memories they need a man to truly unlock the full potential of that gift. Only a man can look down both avenues. Instead of using their abilities overtly to give themselves voice on a galactic level, the sisterhood stays in the shadows manipulating genetic lines to try and create their perfect man, the Kwisatz Haderach. They desire to control their perfect creation but as the novel develops it becomes clear that Paul is the Kwisatz Haderach and since he eventually becomes Emperor, it stands to reason that he will not be controlled. Even the power they might have gained because of their breeding program is undercut by a superhuman that refuses to be controlled by “old witches.”

Again going back to the ending of the novel: Paul rallies the Fremen, overthrows the corrupt Emperor, and secures his place as ruler of the Imperium by marrying the Princess Irulan. However Paul does not love her; his heart belongs to a Fremen woman, Chani, he met in the desert. The very last lines of the novel are a discussion between Chani and Jessica after Chani

turns down Paul's offer to make her the "royal concubine." Paul promises that Irulan will only take his name but none of his love and affection. He swears that he reserves those things only for Chani, but still she remains unconvinced until Jessica steps in:

"Think on it, Chani: that princess will have the name, yet she'll live less than a concubine – never know a moment of tenderness from the man to whom she's bound. While we, Chani, we who carry the name of concubine – history will call us wives" (Herbert 489)

On the macro level, the ending re-inscribes colonial political paradigms by simply changing the person who sits on the imperial throne. It is assumed that Arrakis is now liberated from the evil Harkonnen and imperial oppressors, but what of the other planets in the Imperium? There is no mention of any of them. On the micro level, the ending also re-inscribes heterosexual oppressive gender roles. Jessica defied the Bene Gesserit sisterhood by having a male child instead of a female one, but she fades into the background while her son ascends the throne. Chani is assured that she should be happy in her role as a concubine because in reality she is the true wife, but again that places her subordinate to Paul. The colonial system is a gendered one, and *Dune's* ending reinforces this fact. Paul, the male Kwisatz Haderach, is in a position of power controlling countless worlds and his own private Fremen army, while the women of the novel are told to be content in subservient positions with little power. Since *Dune* is one of the best-selling science fiction novels of all timeⁱⁱⁱⁱⁱⁱ, its message reached a huge number of readers and it is a shame that many readers were most likely content to just accepted the presented ending.

In the late 1980's Octavia E. Butler released *Dawn*, *Adulthood Rites*, and *Imago*, collectively known as the *Xenogenesis* trilogy. This trilogy successfully challenged and criticized science fiction staples and laid the groundwork so that collections like *So Long Been*

Dreaming have a legitimate and respected place within the realm of science fiction. One of the reasons the conclusion to *Dune* doesn't work from a postcolonial standpoint is because it represents a repetition of the same oppressive power structures that pervaded throughout the novel. The endless cycle masquerades under the misnomer of progress. Butler critiques this false sense of progress in her trilogy by deconstructing a dichotomized identity between humans and aliens in her text.

Dawn, the first novel in the trilogy, opens with a woman named Lilith Iyapo being held captive by a race of aliens called the Oankali after humanity destroyed itself and decimated the environment during a nuclear war in the late 1980's. Luckily for humanity, the Oankali showed up just in time to rescue a small number of survivors. The Oankali want to help humanity learn how to survive on the Earth's changed surface. But in order to do that the Oankali have to trade genes with humanity to create a new hybrid species. This trade represents a critique of a natural dichotomy between self and other because the lines between the two polar extremes blur within the new human-Oankali hybrids. In the trilogy, gender functions in way that further disrupts the self/other dichotomy that colonialism reinforces. The Oankali are a species with three sexes: males, females, and the ooloi. The ooloi are the ones who have the ability to shape and mold genes; they are the ones who enact the actual genetic trades and "the teaching of new species" (Butler 71). By using the ooloi's unique talents, the Oankali blur the line that separates them. They've done this blending countless times in their species' history: "We trade the essence of ourselves. Our genetic material for yours" (Butler 40). The use of the word essence is important because it deconstructs the notions of racial purity. If a race or species' essence is something that can be traded over and over then it does not really exist. The Oankali define their essence as that malleability; their essence is a non-essence, mutational ability and change. Once the trade is

complete and the new hybrid children are born, it will be impossible to definitively say whether they are completely human or Oankali. Colonialism creates “pure” identities based on the self/other split, but the Oankali and more specifically the ooloi show that this is doesn’t have to be the case. In a colonial system the self is racially (or in the case of science fiction pure along species’ lines) pure while the Other is polluted, impure, and unnatural. Also since the Other is feminized, by extension, women are impure and polluted when compared to their male counterparts. The ooloi cause a blurring of the lines between males and females and between colonizer and colonized. This genetic trade turns science fiction colonization tropes on their head because according to the binaries that govern the way colonialism works, the Oankali should want to stay separate from the humans, not blend with them. Lilith’s Oankali companion Jdahya explains how the trade will work: “Your people will change. Your young will be more like us and ours more like you [...] Different, not quite like you. A little like us [...] We are committed to the trade” (Butler 42). What Jdahya and the Oankali propose is something so new to Lilith (and the reader) that she can’t even comprehend it. The Oankali are in the solar system to effectively colonize Earth, but they don’t do what is expected of normal colonizers, i.e. alien species depicted in novels like H. G. Wells’ *War of the Worlds* or even the film *Independence Day*. The Oankali don’t try to wipe out humanity entirely; they don’t segregate themselves from the “subjugated race.” Or like the British East India Company, they don’t create a commercial-political regime based on the trade of commodities. The line that demarcates self and other will be completely erased when the new hybrid human-Oankali species is created. It has to be an ooloi that first mates and bonds with a human because it makes sense that the third sex, the sex that exists between male and female, should be the one to help shape the species that will blur the lines between Oankali and human – “us” and “them.” The Oankali make these genetic trades

because the driving force behind their entire species is change; they continually resist overspecialization and stagnation by embodying change.

That's the paradoxical way that the self/Other dichotomy functions in this trilogy. Both the humans and the Oankali are Other to each other, but Butler subverts the dichotomy by giving subjectivity to characters of all three species: human, Oankali, and human-Oankali hybrid. The narratives in the trilogy bring the three species together and together they are able to subvert and deconstruct the dichotomy. The Other described in this paper and in postcolonial theory is a colonized Other, they come to represent the progress of colonialism. The self/other split is created because the Other represents all that the self/colonizer is not. They are dominated, passive, and known by the colonizer but not given a chance to define themselves, with their own less absolute distinctions. But if colonialism really encompasses just an endless repetition based on static identities then what changes? Nothing; it is just a constant back and forth where the only thing that changes is who is "us" and who is "them." Butler represents the Oankali in such a way that they break free from this method of identity construction by making them biologically driven to constantly trade genes with other species. By physically becoming the difference they see in other species, the Oankali keep themselves alive. Their offspring are not othered because they are something else entirely, a way out of the binary system. Critic Erin Pryor Ackerman discusses this phenomenon in her essay "Becoming and Belonging: The Productivity of Pleasures and Desires in Octavia Butler's *Xenogenesis* Trilogy." Ackerman states that in the trilogy, humanity's identity is static while the Oankali are constantly in a state of flux because of their need to make genetic trades. She brings up the ideas of Deleuze and Guattari who explain how they define these two different ways of constructing identity or "subjectivity." The Oankali's subjectivity is "molecular:"

This molecular subjectivity is what Deleuze and Guattari term a “becoming,” a subjectivity that is not a “correspondence of relations” between two stable, unchanging molar subjectivities but instead a multiplicity “composed of heterogeneous terms in symbiosis [that] cannot lose or gain a dimension *without changing its nature*” (Ackerman 3, emphasis in original)

Ackerman states that the Oankali are a multiplicity because every time they do a genetic trade (or gain a dimension) they do change their nature. This means any change they make actually is real change. Because they change so drastically with each trade, it is impossible to repeat past mistakes as well as past identities because literally the “new” Oankali that result from the trade are a new species. The Oankali species is comprised of successive iterations that change based on “its encounters and experiences, [and becomes] a subjectivity that exists only in the act of becoming itself” (Ackerman 3). In the novel when Lilith asks one of them about memories of their homeworld and if they ever return to it, the Oankali replies: “Go back? [...] No, Lilith, that’s the one direction that’s closed to us” (Butler 36). They can’t go back because their homeworld is not for who they are in the present, but that doesn’t mean that they lack a past. Their species had a starting point so to speak, but the Oankali refuse to cling to that identity when clearly it does not suit their needs in the present. They constantly change but without a teleological goal because their essential nature is becoming. They embody the process of becoming while according to Ackerman, humanity is stuck in its “molar subjectivity” that “relies on binary thinking” (Ackerman 2). Humanity is mired down with its unchanging, teleological subjectivity because it only accepts progress toward some sort of imagined, ideal perfection but inevitably (as evidenced by the nuclear war that prefaces the trilogy) it tends toward self-

destruction. Butler deconstructs the notion of progress by making the fluidity that the Oankali possess impossible for humanity to obtain without the genetic trade that they offer.

The Oankali are not a typical science fiction “alien” species. The way they act while strange at first eventually makes more sense than mankind’s stubborn resistance against the Oankali’s new way of existence. Humanity refuses to see that difference is not detrimental to subjectivity, that difference does not have to be a defining characteristic, as Lilith explains to one of her part-human, part-Oankali “construct” children: “Humans persecute their different ones, yet they *need them to give themselves definition and status*. Oankali seek difference and collect it. They need it to keep themselves from stagnation and overspecialization” (Butler 329, emphasis mine). This is significant because Lilith, a biracial woman, is the first human awakened by the Oankali. As a black woman, Lilith is a metaphor for the people repressed by colonial systems like for example how Europeans colonized Africa and India. Even her name is a metaphor for the biblical Lilith, the first woman who was shunned for considering herself Adam’s equal (Osherow 70). A woman or a colonized individual who challenges the patriarchal system is considered polluted and unnatural. Lilith is the woman who refused to accept a submissive role and in an almost direct refutation of *Dune’s* ending, she is the one who blurs the lines between the biblical “anti-Eve” Lilith and Eve the mother by becoming the origin point for a new species. As Michele Osherow puts it, “This Lilith actually assumes Eve’s functions as the mother of all. She embodies the most significant traits of Lilith and Eve” (Osherow 76). She is the human personification of difference and it makes sense that she is the first one to meld with the Oankali to give birth to the new species that is the synthesis of the two older ones. The Oankali may always represent some form of Otherness to the humans they rescued, but their children become something else entirely as shown in the second and third books in the trilogy

which focus on Lilith's "construct" (the term used to describe the human-Oankali hybrid) children. The fact that both human females and Oankali females are able to give birth to construct children highlights the omission of difference. It does not ignore the fact that humans and Oankali are not the same species, but instead transcends it.

Lilith's construct male child Akin and her construct ooloi child Jodahs are the main characters in *Adulthood Rites* and *Imago* respectively. They occupy unique positions because of their hybrid nature; especially Jodahs because it is the first construct ooloi ever. Their place as members of the new construct species lends them a special liminality when it comes to deal with both humans and "full-blooded" Oankali (in terms of the type that humanity encounters and interacts with). Critics Gregory Hampton and Wanda Brooks give the most concise summary of how Akin and Jodahs' liminality is able to help others around them grow:

The ability of both characters, human-Oankali constructs, to act as go-betweens and bridges between human and non-human difference suggests a new way of thinking about the figure of a multiple-referenced identity. Akin's ability to understand humanity's need to survive independently and Jodahs' ability to shape and color its body to please its partners all suggest that being in a state of ambiguity is a positive attribute that should be sought after instead of avoided (Gregory Jerome Hampton and Wanda M. Brooks 4-5).

Jodahs' ability to pass for human or mostly human resonates with texts like Schuyler's *Black No More*, except in Jodahs' case, he doesn't just change his skin color or hair. He changes his entire physiology in a way that deconstructs fixed notions of race. He exists in a state of perpetual ambiguity much like the Oankali but his ambiguity extends to the physical shifting and shaping abilities of his body.

In *Adulthood Rites* Akin is captured by resisters (humans that don't want Oankali mates) and ends up living with them for some time. Several times they remark how human he looks and some of them end up trusting him because of his liminal status. However because he is a male, he can't change his physical appearance like his ooloi sibling Jodahs. Jodahs can completely break out of the self/Other dichotomy because he is not part of the male/female dichotomy due to his ooloi gender. Even though he is not an ooloi, Akin is an entirely new being with a new form of subjectivity, the human resister society is a replica of the pre-war (1980's capitalist) society which makes it simply another repetition of the same, enslaved by the same dogmatic ideas of identity formation that doomed the human race in the first place. The resisters value their "freedom" from having to take Oankali mates but as Rachel Greenwald Smith puts it, "expressions of human freedom and progress in the trilogy tend to result in repetition, stasis, and the production of competition-based value system [...because] humans seek difference for purposes that remain the same. Oankali seek difference and allow what they encounter to change them on the level of their very flesh" (Smith 557). Akin's difference, from both his human and Oankali parents, is what allows him to bridge the gap between the two cultures. In a traditional science fiction story, where the aliens are clearly the "bad guys" out for domination, Akin would have instead used his special position to force the resisting humans to join and mate with the Oankali. Or like Paul in *Dune*, he could have co-opted the resisters for his own purposes and led a resistance movement that ultimately would change nothing. Instead he puts his "ambiguity" to good use by dedicating his life to making sure that humans who want to have human children be able to do that. Again this deconstructs the colonial themes upheld in *Dune*; choice always remains an option. By the end of *Adulthood Rites*, Akin convinces the Oankali and constructs that there should be a pure human colony on terraformed Mars: "They [the Oankali] would

never offer your Mars. I offer you Mars. [...] Because I'm part of you. Because I say you should have one more chance to breed yourselves out of your genetic Contradiction" (Butler 501).

According to the Oankali, humanity carries a contradiction within its genes; humans are both intelligent as well as hierarchical in nature. This flaw is more than a simple character flaw because the Oankali say that humanity carries it in its genes and they say with absolute certainty that humanity is destined to repeat its own mistakes; that is why they won't let a pure human race continue. However Akin realizes that the Oankali's stance is unfair because it deprives humanity of a choice much like the way Orientalism takes away agency from its subjects. It infantilizes them, makes them something other that does not know how to make proper decisions. Said demonstrates this property when he summarizes the views of British politician Evelyn Baring, Earl of Cromer speaking about Egyptians and other colonial subjects: "Subject races did not have it in them to know what was good for them. Most of them were Orientals, of whose characteristics Cromer was very knowledgeable since he had experience with them both in India Egypt" (Said *Orientalism* 37). The Oankali's "knowledge" of humanity is constructed much in the same way that Cromer's was. They've experienced humanity's genes and "know" the Contradiction carried within, but Akin disagrees on the grounds of evolutionary theory because "Chance exists. Mutation. Unexpected effects of the new environment. Things no one has thought of" (Butler 501). Akin knows that humanity should be able to decide for itself what it wants to do because there is always the off-chance that it won't repeat past mistakes, that it won't create a future "that is a repetition of identities" and will "[offer] instead a version of futurity that sees life as full of potential for surprise, difference, and rupture" (Smith 552). The full-blooded Oankali do value difference and seek meaning and identity within it but the scope of

their vision is limited because they look at humans in a very deterministic manner, like in the way Cromer looked at his subject “Orientals.” So while in certain cases the Oankali don’t behave like colonial masters, in others they do. But of course the fact that they move between both identities only reinforces their ambiguity. It is in the ambiguity that a new kind of fluid identity can be formed that breaks free from the absolutes leftover from the colonial system. Jodahs is ambiguous because he is the first ooloi that is able to alter its own physical appearance: “I had grown breasts myself, and developed an even more distinctly Human female appearance. I neither directed my body nor attempted to control it” (Butler 601). The fact that Jodahs shifts in response to those it is with is a definitive blurring of the line between self and Other. How can one be Other when both the self and Other look exactly the same? Gender is no longer an absolute divide and Jodahs is able to maneuver between the two poles. This maneuverability deconstructs the fixed gender roles that were upheld in the ending of *Dune*. Just as the old hierarchal system disappears with the arrival of the Oankali, with Lilith’s and her children’s help gender dichotomy shall disappear as well.

Akin’s own ambiguity, born out of his hybridity, makes it so the Oankali and the resisters both listen to him. He is the perfect one to end the standoff between the two species, and unlike in my crude example of a traditional science fiction plot, Butler’s fiction does not end in a “guns blazing” finale. That kind of ending is too simplistic and does not transcend the genre’s colonialist past where a violent ending would be perfectly acceptable. However, some reviewers criticized the trilogy for being too bleak and not utopian enough, Butler herself mocks the notion of utopia in the afterword to her story “The Book of Martha:” “Personally, I find utopias ridiculous. We’re not going to have a perfect human society until we get a few perfect humans, and that seems unlikely” (Butler *Bloodchild*). Humanity needed to mix with the Oankali; it

won't make a perfect new species, but the fluidity given to humanity by the Oankali and their construct children will ensure that humanity survives in an altered form. Unaltered humanity had its chance and lost it when they destroyed Earth in a nuclear war. The utopian desire on the part of some readers to want humanity to just rebuild after being saved by the Oankali is foolish. That path would lead to stasis, repetition, and divisions drawn up along absolute lines built around dichotomy. It has to be a construct ooloi born from a mixed race woman that deconstructs the remnants of the past and destroys the ties that bind humanity to systems of domination and control. In Butler's universe, lines drawn by species or by a person's status in the colonial hierarchy – simple binaries -- don't hold up in her fiction.

Many science fiction stories take their cues from the genre's colonialist beginnings, and even modern writers fail to realize what troubling images of the Other they're putting forth with their writing. In *Dune* the Fremen are portrayed as a type of noble savage living in harmony with their harsh environment. While some scholars claim that it successfully challenges colonial systems of power, it does not succeed because the same imperial system of control remains intact at the end of the novel with every character settling in to their "accepted" roles. Men are the ones who get to have political agency while the women are confined to marriage and motherhood. In the *Xenogenesis* trilogy, Butler takes those systems of gender and control that remain unchanged in *Dune* and deconstructs them. Gender is broken down by the inclusion of a third sex – the ooloi and the dichotomy of self and Other is also deconstructed with the birth of Lilith's brood – her mixed-race construct children. Liminality, ambiguity, and change are traits that are emphasized in the trilogy and they are upheld as keys to breaking down monolithic colonial power structures. Literature, film, and even videogames are all guilty of over simplifying relations between different sets of people, be they human or non-human. For the

most part these relations fall into a binary system based around concepts like us and them, self and Other. But there are some writers out there that are expanding the genre, making it move beyond its narrow, binary scope. Octavia Butler with her *Xenogenesis* trilogy and others like her paved the way for more authors to follow by creating characters that represent “multiplicities” and dynamic identities. Science fiction has always been a type of literary laboratory for exploring new ideas, but those ideas usually focused on the “science” part of the genre’s title. Writers like Butler were the ones responsible for exploring new ideas related to the “fiction” side of the genre’s title. Yes their texts deal with aliens and far away planets but they are still grounded in our reality because the writers live on Earth just like their readers. The genre and we as humans need to do more to challenge ourselves to look beyond simple definitions like self and Other. Science fiction is such a widely read genre that it needs to expand beyond simply repeating the dichotomy between self and Other because this runs the risk of indoctrinating impressionable readers with messages that unknowingly uphold outdated and unjust paradigms. If anything science fiction should be the genre leading the way to show us that everything is never clearly black and white.

Works Cited

- Ashcroft, Bill, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin. *Post-Colonial Studies: The Key Concepts*. New York: Routledge, 2001. Print.
- Butler, Octavia E. *Lilith's Brood*. New York: Warner Books, 1989. Print.
- . "Afterword to 'The Book of Martha.'" *Bloodchild and Other Stories, Second Edition*. New York: Seven Stories Press, 2005. Print.
- Hampton, Gregory Jerome and Wanda M. Brooks. "Octavia Butler and Virginia Hamilton: Black Women Writers and Science Fiction." *The English Journal*, Vol. 92, No. 6 (Jul., 2003), pp. 70-74. Print.
- Osherow, Michele. "The Dawn of a New Lilith: Revisionary Mythmaking in Women's Science Fiction." *NWSA Journal* 12.1 (2000). pp. 68-83. Print.
- Pryor Ackerman, Erin M. "Becoming and Belonging: The Productivity of Pleasures and Desires in Octavia Butler's *Xenogenesis* Trilogy." *Extrapolation* 49.1 (2008): 24-44. Research Library Core, ProQuest. Web. 11 Nov. 2009. Print.
- Rieder, John. *Colonialism and the Emergence of Science Fiction*. Middeltown: Wesleyan University Press, 2008. Print.
- Roberts, Adam. *Science Fiction – The New Critical Idiom*. New York: Routledge, 2000. Print.
- Said, Edward W. *Culture and Imperialism*. New York: Vintage Books, 1994. Print.
- . *Orientalism*. New York: Vintage Books, 1979. Print.
- Smith, Rachel Greenwald. "Ecology Beyond Ecology: Life After the Accident in Octavia Butler's *Xenogenesis* Trilogy." *Modern Fiction Studies* 55.3 (2009): 545-565. Print.
- Williams, Kevin. "Imperialism & Globalization: Lessons from Frank Herbert's *Dune*." *Reconstruction: Studies in Contemporary Culture*. 3.3 (2002): 1-9. Print.

ⁱ See Adam Roberts *Science Fiction – The New Critical Idiom* for a more in-depth discussion of this.

ⁱⁱ Touponce, William F. (1988), *Frank Herbert*, Boston, Massachusetts: Twayne Publishers imprint, G. K. Hall & Co, pg. 119, ISBN 0-8057-7514-5. *Locus* ran a poll of readers on April 15, 1975 in which *Dune* "was voted the all-time best science-fiction novel...It has sold over ten million copies in numerous editions."

ⁱⁱⁱ "SCIFI Channel Auction to Benefit Reading Is Fundamental". Retrieved July 13, 2006. "Since its debut in 1965, Frank Herbert's *Dune* has sold over 12 million copies worldwide, making it the best-selling science fiction novel of all time."

