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Re-writing the Bhabhian “Mimic Man”:
Akin, the Posthuman Other in
Octavia Butler’s *Adulthood Rites*
Aparajita Nanda

Cultural critics have sought to define the term posthuman¹ as primarily a condition that does away with hierarchical forms of power and control. It recognizes a transformation of the human species into a subject position that moves from an oppositional politics of segregating the human “self” from the “other” to one of acknowledging the “other” as part of the human “self.”² With the advent of the posthuman condition comes the need to re-define human rights in a posthuman context. Octavia Butler’s science fiction novel *Adulthood Rites*³ introduces us to Oankali, gene-trading aliens who travel through space. They intercept and save the human species that is dying in a world ravaged by nuclear war. The Oankali mission of salvation has a hidden agenda,⁴ though: whoever opts to be saved needs to forgo the right to reproduce. Reproduction, in this new world where human beings are a salvaged species and not the predominant one, is on the terms laid out by the Oankali aliens. The terms of Oankali reproduction that start off with genetic modifications of the human Lilith, the Oankali nominated progenitor of the posthuman in *Dawn*, enforces the birth of a hybrid—a human-alien construct, Akin, who is related to both humans and aliens, the posthuman other. Built on a “postcolonial” definition of a “mimic man,”⁵ a product of what Bart Simon and Jill Didur call “critical posthumanism,”⁶ who sees the other *in* the self, Akin modulates and modifies his sense of agency and choice as he contends with complex political and ethical issues. Deployed as an Oankali informer among humans, Akin ultimately emerges as the savior, a spokesperson for the human species who adroitly balances contradictory roles in a culture seemingly “colonial” in its intent.

As gene-trading aliens, the Oankali evoke the European traders when they made their initial forays into establishing a colonial empire

(Goss and Riquelme 448). They seem to disguise their intent, the enforcement of a total denial of human reproductive rights, in a rhetoric of altruism, salvation, and apparent choice. Read one way, this mission of salvation recalls the civilizing mission of colonizers replete with demeaning assumptions that formed the heart of “civilizing” campaigns. And yet the intent behind the Oankali genetic trade is one of producing a “different” species for the future⁷ and they promise “a utopian collective,” for after all the Oankali seek and embrace difference. The text denies an easy reading between categorized knowledge of oppressive Oankali and victimized humans (Miller 339). It brings in “ambivalences within these definitions of power ... mapped by the structures of control and interdependency which are in turn subject to the demands of compromise and survival” (Boulter 176–77). Confronted with this complex situation, Akin remains undecided about the Oankali because he is uncertain whether they are progenitors of an altruistic symbiotic mode that ensures human survival or predators of an egoistic discourse that intends to bring about human extinction. His divided loyalties bring on further complications when Akin, though nurtured by the Oankali as a “mimic man” becomes not an “idea-driven puppet who do[es] only what their creators think the plot requires” but begins to take on a life of his own (Raffel 457). He requires extraordinary finesse to reach his goal of convincing the apparent “colonizer”⁸ aliens to restore reproductive rights to humans, who by nature are discriminatory and violent. With rare cognitive skills, Akin embraces a transformative potential nurtured by a sense of intimacy and complicity that refutes discourses of hierarchical power and control essential to the imperialistic imperative. It enables him to communicate, adjust and adapt to the changing dynamics of the aliens and humans. In his flexibility, Akin re-writes his role. He brings in a rare complexity to definitions of postcolonial difference and hybridity. It is my contention that this posthuman other, a cross-cultural product, builds on the “both/and”⁹ politics of species and keeps evolving as he tackles critical situations. He remains an identity-in-the-making,¹⁰ who manipulates every situation even as he justifies his moves.

II.

The posthuman other, in its human–alien construct goes back to Donna Haraway’s “cyborg,”¹¹ the bio-technological modification of man and machine that is “a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction” (*Simians* 149). As “social reality” is based on “lived experience,” the cyborg (for Haraway also a metaphor for women of colour) breeds on change, a change that in its flexibility and adaptability makes a radical statement in its bid to survive (*Simians* 149). Cyborgs remain permanently “committed to partiality, irony, intimacy, and perversity” and in their flexible and permeable identity politics look at a subjectivity that refuses both gender fixations as well as any political affinity (*Simians* 151). In their cyborgian existence, they become potent signifiers who exemplify the constructedness of nature as “a crucial cultural process for people who need and hope to live in a world less riddled by the dominations of race, colonialism, class, gender, and sexuality” (*Simians* 2). Haraway’s “cyborg” brings up issues of technological infiltration and re-shaping of nature in its aftermath that includes a virtual induction of technology into nature to create a novel, autonomously functioning organic identity. The cognitive skills of this posthuman other partake of both realms of its existence—human and technological—as it moves into a new phase of its evolution.¹² Especially interesting in this evolved metaphor of humanity is the role of human choice and of political and ethical questions such choices may or would entail. The product of a fusion between humans and non-humans, animals and/or machines, the posthuman deals with permeations of human and non-human physical and mental boundaries. As physical boundaries collapse and require re-alignment, on the level of mental capabilities the posthuman other brings on a unique epistemological discourse scripted on “a greater intimacy and complicity with environment and artifact, a true interdependence in which human nature is no longer characterized through mastery and exclusion of its designated others” (Graham, “Post/Human” 13).

These hybrid creatures are not products of mechanical grafting; in their births they defy all forms of purity. They demarcate the next phase of human evolution—a type of Homi Bhabha’s “mimic man” whose semblance of mimicry becomes a potent site of negotiation and resist-

ance molded by his own needs.¹³ Part of the “critical posthumanism” type of this “mimic man” in his transformative abilities questions the essential boundaries of human nature as he celebrates the “borderland” identity of the “human and unhuman collectives” (Haraway, “Promises” 328). He analytically seeks to critique the “fault-lines ... of discursive technologies ... [as he] realize[s] the power of technologies [that] reshape our worlds and ... our very selves [stipulating that it] is a matter of human agency and choice rather than technological inevitability” (Graham, “Post/Human” 18–19). Augmenting the posthuman other that admits residence in the liminal zone demarcated between an advocate and an opponent, where questions of agency and choice become important, is also a sense of spirituality. And yet, I would like to differ with D. F. Noble when he situates the inspiration of the posthuman “in an enduring, other-worldly quest for transcendence and salvation”¹⁴ (3).

In Butler’s *Adulthood Rites* these quests, though lasting in intent and admittedly driven by a sense of salvation, are not “other-worldly” as Noble points out. In fact, these posthuman others, I feel, often seek validation in a “this-worldly” context drawing from an extended web of relatedness to other human and nonhuman beings. In “Frankensteins and Cyborgs: Visions of the Global Future in an Age of Technology,” Elaine Graham points out that these posthuman others are “reflexive phenomena ... possessing the capacity to shape, in turn, the environments and cultures we inhabit” (“Frankensteins” 43). Interactiveness and relational dynamics form the crux of this posthuman world, a world where hybridity demands complicity of component cultures. Thus in their posthuman identity, these others not only eschew “ontological purity” but breed on “multiple allegiances, contingent identities and nomadic sensibilities” that offer novel insights into what it means to be posthuman and thereby open up new possibilities (Graham, *Representations* 234).

III.

This “process of emergence” of the posthuman that aims to become “a potential antidote to destructive hierarchical attitudes and behavior” traverses an interesting trajectory in Butler’s trilogy *Xenogenesis* (Goss

and Riquelme 435). The genesis of the “xeno” (the stranger, the other)¹⁵ begins in the first book of the trilogy, *Dawn*. As the book introduces the reader to the human Lilith Iyapo, now genetically modified by the alien Oankalis, designated to be the mother of the human-Oankali construct, it ushers in a dawn of the posthuman other. The narrative begins with the trope of re-birth, a coming into life validated by a sense of relief conveyed by the exclamation mark:

Alive!
Still alive.
Alive ... again. (9)

The Oankali relief speaks of Lilith’s “awakening” from a death-like state of suspended animation, a state in which her genetic composition has been changed. Morphed into this state by the Oankalis, Lilith is deployed by the aliens to persuade the dissenting humans to comply with the Oankali option of controlled human reproduction. She is told this is the only viable way for human survival.

Modeled in the mold of the Oankalis, by way of her genetic modifications, Lilith is therefore human and alien. She is the “enabler”¹⁶ essential to both Oankali and human survival. The Oankali need her to convince humans to comply with their agenda. The humans need her too, as they are dependent on her for their survival in Oankali land. Situated on this fulcrum of the human/alien equation, Lilith qualifies as the first Bhabhian “mimic man” who transcends the programmed entity to a borderland identity that enables her to understand the Oankali intent and yet retain her humanity. Her perception of the organic entity of the ship leads her to understand the relational dynamics that flow through the ship, as Jdahya explains, “Flesh. More like mine than like yours. Different from mine, too, though. It’s ... the ship” (33). An active participant in the symbiotic bonding between humans, animals, plants, and machines, Lilith is essential for human survival. Her realization of this theory of relatedness makes her an intermediary whose philosophy of salvation, rooted in a “this-worldly” context, advises fellow humans to interact and assimilate with the Oankalis, if only to learn their colonizing mind-frame in order to survive their dominance.¹⁷ And yet even

as she acknowledges the human part of her self, she rationalizes that if the “Human Contradiction” (a combination of intelligence and a hierarchical tendency that desires to control and destroy) is not genetically resolved then humans would destroy themselves and as a species be eradicated forever. Lilith is only the first stage, the transformed entity that anticipates her child, the posthuman Akin, a genetically mutated “construct.”

Akin’s rite of passage from birth to adulthood is based on a relational dynamic where “self” is defined human *and* alien in his “posthuman” being. The third-person voice that registers the “birth” of the posthuman other recalls “his stay in the womb.” The remembrance is fraught with a dawning awareness of “sounds and tastes . . . [that] meant nothing to him, but he remembered them. When they recurred, he noticed.”

When something touched him, he knew it to be a new thing— a new experience. The touch was first startling, then comforting. It penetrated his flesh painlessly and calmed him. When it withdrew, he felt bereft, alone for the first time. When it returned he was pleased—another new sensation. When he had experienced a few of these withdrawals and returns, he learned anticipation. (251)

A “startling” touch that becomes “comforting” even as it “calms” him initiates a sense of desired bonding and leaves behind a strong void in its withdrawal as “he felt bereft, alone for the first time.” The desolation etched into loneliness indicates an anticipation to connect with “others,” a connection that seeks fulfillment in a sense of “wholeness,” one easily understandable by the diversity of his multiple parenthood. His two sets of parents—human and Oankali—open up the traditional one set parenthood by insisting on a sense of polyvalence that works across the coupling of different species. Akin’s multi-parenting accords equal status to both sets of parents, diluting in the process any sense of inherent hierarchy that seeks to segregate and ostracize the other. By seeking to prioritize this new sense of relationality and interconnectedness, Butler further introduces the ooloi, a subadult Oankali, essential to mating and reproduction, with ambiguous if variable gender, a facilita-

tor who bridges and yet monitors the coitus of the two species, to form a triadic arrangement.

In her essay for the 2001 United Nations Racism Conference, Octavia Butler wrote that she wanted to write about a “civilization in which people somehow felt—that is, they shared—all the pain and all the pleasure they caused one another.” “The point,” she said, “was to create, in fiction at least ... a world in which people were inclined ... to accept one another’s differences” (“A World without Racism”). Butler’s desire is embodied in Akin; his body a site in which opposing differentialities merge and collapse to make him realize that “he was also part of the people who touched him—that within them, he could find fragments of himself” (253). Despite these realizations, the mergings evident in Akin’s physical transformations and mental agility are never absolute. His own psyche becomes a battleground for understanding, as well as the impetus and agency for individual thinking that ultimately transpires to make him an “intra-species” instrument of salvation (Tucker 168). His dual allegiance leads to the personal struggles that Akin later faces as he tries to negotiate between the two species. As the posthuman other, he builds on this relatedness, taking on as his life’s mission the restoration of the human right to reproduce.

Any discussion on rights and privileges easily recalls its ties to humanism and the “speciesist structure of subjectivization” that situates the concept of rights as a natural human prerogative built on “an overarching ‘logic of domination’—all compressed in what Derrida’s recent work [‘Eating Well’] calls carnophallogocentrism” (Wolfe 8). With the advent of liberalization of humanist concepts came the idea of “emptying of the category of the subject” (Wolfe 8). In other words, any form of subjectivity was to be understood regardless of any race, gender, class or species categorization. However, as Wolfe points out, “the category of the subject was *formally* empty in the liberal tradition, it remained *materially* full of asymmetries and inequalities in the social sphere” (8). Posthuman subjectivity, it was contended, would displace the sense of a liberal humanist self. It is my contention that Akin, in his bid to restore the reproductive rights of humans, re-writes traits of the liberal humanist subject into his posthuman self; he initiates “a dynamic partnership

between humans and intelligent machines [read aliens/Oankali] [that] replace the liberal humanist subject's manifest destiny to dominate and control nature" (Hayles 288). When Akin promises freedom and a restoration of human rights, we see a re-writing of humanist, even liberal humanist notions on the question of rights. Instead of the humans claiming their rights, it is the posthuman Akin, who decides to retrieve the human right to reproduction. What Akin argues for is a chance for humans to continue their genetic stock before their contact with the Oankalis. As the Oankali had kept a part of their species intact in its purity, with no mixing of human genes, Akin calls for a similar and equal "right" to be restored to the humans.

Part of the colonial agenda was to manage sexual relationships that included not only the colonized but the colonizer as well as the hybrid or mixed race product of such a union. Interestingly, this latter category included "men who had 'gone native' or simply veered off cultural course, of European children too taken with local foods, too versed in local knowledge" (Stoler 2). The management of sexuality between these groups was critical as they were the charged sites in which racial categories were redefined. They became primary concerns of the colonial policy in their intricate and complex existences. On the one hand, the colonizers needed to secure borders and avoid contagion in their endeavor to retain sexual purity. Yet, on the other hand, heterosexual union was an imperative for which they accepted (or even deliberately ignored) liaisons with coloured women.¹⁸ Naturally the domestic arena where such contact was easy became a primary focus of colonial administration that fretted over "affective ties" that produced "cultural defections ... the instabilities and vulnerabilities of colonial regimes" (Stoler 7, 10). So Akin in the affective ties he creates in his sojourn with the human resisters, emerges as a complex troubled site for the Oankalis. The "chromatic crafting"¹⁹ of Akin is further problematized as we realize that Oankali, despite their colonizing traits, have mitigating qualities. The human resisters, again, cannot be sympathized with completely as helpless victims because of their discriminatory behaviour towards difference as well as a hierarchical, violent mind frame that does not even stop at self-destruction. Playing along the narrative, however,

are nuanced definitions that contribute to the ambiguity of the text. For example, when Sherryl Vint points out that despite Butler’s critical attitude towards humans, she never endorses the “genetic essentialism perspective of the Oankali” because she never rules out the “possibility that genetic information could be used in socially repressive ways” (68, 77). Akin then, by virtue of his birth and his sentimental allegiance, portrays “the ‘polyvalent mobility’ of racial discourse and what might be gained by attending to racial discourses as historical processes of rupture *and* recuperation” (Stoler 19).

In African communities the infant “is believed to have been commissioned to come to the world and accomplish a particular mission or project, and often ha[d] a great message to deliver” (Ampim). In fact the infant’s name is a reflection of the infant’s personality or of his life mission. Akin’s name foreshadows and presages his purpose. His name has multiple meanings but the meanings all work symbiotically. A “kin” to Oankalis and humans, Akin is “akin” (not “a-kin” to any one species). By a phonetic extension of his name “ah-keen” signifies a loud, wailing lament for the demise of “pure breed” humans. And yet in his other role, as protector and savior of his kin, Akin transforms this discourse of death into one of life. In fact, the literal meaning of Akin’s name synthesizes these two meanings: “It means *hero*. If you put an s on it, it means *brave boy*. I’m the first boy born to a human woman on Earth since the war” (344). Thus Akin’s mission is spelled out and prefigured in his name like Christ, the first-born son of a human woman, meant to save mankind, meant to be a hero. Furthermore, the s, an additive to Akin’s name, pluralizes the kin indicating his dual origins, a literal illustration of the necessity of Akin to become someone brave and heroic on behalf of his kinsmen, his kinsfolk.

This realization in Akin is not easy to come by. He is “frightened and miserable and shaking with anger” when he is a captive of the human resisters. Initially he is shocked at the “mix of intense emotions” till a chance remembrance dawns on him. He remembers Lilith’s anger, one that “had always frightened him, and yet here it was inside him” (321). As he strives to understand this very human emotion he remembers his mother’s words:

Human beings fear difference.... Humans persecute their different ones.... Oankali seek difference and collect it. They need it to keep themselves from stagnation and overspecialization.... You'll probably find both tendencies surfacing in your own behavior.... When you feel a conflict, try to go the Oankali way. Embrace difference. (321)

A closed mind-frame, typical of resister humans, which breeds on fear and leads to persecution of the other, is rejected by Akin as he goes the Oankali way. He embraces "difference," leading to a positive perspective that seeks to understand the other, the human part in him.

His shock of realization indicates how disconnected Akin is with his human self. Human emotions are alien to him up to this point. And though he had recognized and seen it in others, he had never felt or understood it. Experiencing these emotions makes him realize the other *inside* him, the human part of himself. Despite his initial incomprehension of this new emotion (anger), Akin's experience allows him later to empathize with the anger and hopelessness of the human resisters at Phoenix, as well as the fears and violent reactions that stem from these emotions. He comes very close to acting as a human, hoping that his captor and Tino's (a human father figure to Akin) assailant, Damek, "would die ... [and] suffer ... [and] scream" when he lays injured (350). Though Akin restrains himself, the emotional turmoil later allows him to understand the sporadic irrationality of human behavior. Thus when Dehkiat, his ooloi, tells him that humans would not survive their self-destructive instincts if they were not genetically modified to purge the "Contradiction"—Akin replies, "[L]et them fail. Let them have the freedom to do that, at least" (456).

Akin's first taste and experience of death also comes at the hands of humans. Not only does he experience the death of one of the captors who mistreated him, he also witnesses the death of Iriarte who was kind to him. On both occasions, Akin feels a deep sense of unnecessary loss as he muses: "It was *wrong* to allow such suffering, *utterly wrong* to throw away a life so unfinished, unbalanced, unshared" (319). Akin's knowledge and understanding of death is essential for they awaken his desire

to save and empathize with humans, an empathy that engenders a reciprocal feeling in him despite the Phoenix humans being his abductors: “Akin tried not to feel the anguish that came to him reflexively when he saw a Human suffering” (350). The pain he feels generates the wish to alleviate it and forces him to question why humans choose death and reject the Oankali option of genetic healing. More importantly, the suffering and death that humans choose to endure eventually provides Akin the impetus to understand how vital the right to reproduce is for humans. In fact, it is here that the dream of a human future is born—a future “somewhere,” as Tate puts it, “we could live, and ... have children” (399); a hope made so much more compelling by a beckoning of freedom, the freedom to go back to a state of being before the Oankali intervention.

Embedded in Akin’s mind is another hope too, a hope to connect to his Oankali counterpart, his sibling, a connection essential for attaining maturity and growth in the Oankali world. Interestingly, another name for Akin is “Eka.” The Sanskrit meaning of the word evokes a sense of loneliness and alienation that haunts Akin. The saga of Akin is a story of desired bonding, a bonding with the “other,” to alleviate his loneliness, to set up familial bonding through his knowledge not only of the Oankali part of him but also of the human part of his identity. Akin in the arms of the human Tate, presents a tangible image and gives form and voice to the intangible sadness, an engulfing sense of seclusion and alienation that seek to overwhelm him. The lonesome sigh that escapes Akin, on a more wistful note, brings forth his desire: “I want to know the Human part of myself better” (398).

An integral part of Akin’s rite of passage involves his coming into knowledge—getting to know the human part of himself. As a captive in Phoenix, Akin learns more about his “alien Humanity” even as he listens to the human complaint: “We die and die and no one is born” (438,347). The wistful sense of regret needs to be read critically though, given the novel’s critique of humanity. Similarly Akin’s bonding with the human Tate and Gabe, a quick replacement for what was to have been the Oankali way of bonding with his sibling, needs to be seen in perspective. Though it makes Akin’s connection with the humans

even stronger, as if *they* were his sibling, one cannot ignore Nikanj's ejaculation: "The people deprived Akin of closeness with his sibling and handed him a compensating obsession" (417). In fact, "[a]nything to do with Humans always seems to involve contradictions" (418). And yet it starts him off in his mission: "that Humans should be permitted ... their own hedge against disaster and true extinction ... and their ability to reproduce in their own way restored to them" (395). It also makes him desperately seek a spokesperson in the Oankali fold for the humans until his ability to find one appropriate for the cause makes him realize that he is the ideal candidate: "He was Oankali enough to be listened to by other Oankali and Human enough to know that resister Humans were being treated with cruelty and condescension" (396).

As Akin responds to human suffering and grief, he becomes a type of Christ,²⁰ a savior for humanity. In fact, Akin comes face to face with his archetype, Christ, when he enters the salvage site at Phoenix. Images of Christ are prolific and scattered throughout the site. That the salvagers collect images of Christ indicates their desire to be saved from total extinction. Akin's presence at the site is importunate. As he enters the house,

Tate, who had reached the house before him, took one of the moving pictures—a small one of Christ standing on a hill and talking to people—and handed it to Akin. He moved it slightly in his hand, watching the apparent movement of Christ, whose mouth opened and closed and whose arm moved up and down.... He tasted it—then threw it hard away from him, disgusted, nauseated. (380)

Tate's act of handing a picture of Christ to Akin seems to induct him into the vortex of the human desire to survive. The picture, interestingly, is one of "Christ standing on a hill and talking to people" that presages Akin's role as the one to convince the Oankali to give the humans another chance (380). The silent communication—"Christ, whose mouth opened and closed ... Akin did not understand"—indicates a transference of the mantle of the savior, followed by a deeper understanding of the pain and suffering of Christ, a suffering Akin must endure in his attempt to save the "Humans and ... the Human part of" him (380,

447). Though his nausea and sickness are a reaction to the poison in the picture’s plastic, subtextually, readers can also perceive his reaction as a response to the knowledge of, or more specifically, to *knowing* and *tasting* Christ’s suffering in an immediate and tangible way, as Akin attains knowledge and experiences through his mouth. His tasting the picture then, as well as his reaction afterwards, illustrates a very significant aspect of Akin—the literal and metaphorical act of tasting collapsed for him. He acquires knowledge literally through tasting, through using his tongue to collect, comprehend, and communicate information the Oankali way. In this instance, Butler through Akin, as she had done with Anyanwu in *Wild Seeds*, challenges the mind/body divide in any epistemological discourse “suggesting that corporeality, like culture, is coded and bodies, not just minds, have the power to interpret these codes” (Alaimo 128). Using a variant on the Biblical metaphor of eating the forbidden fruit of the Tree of Knowledge, Butler literally transforms the “tasting” of knowledge in the Bible, noted as the cause of fall and death, to a necessary means of life and restoration.

In a direct reversal of the failure of Adam and Eve, Akin uses the knowledge he acquires to connect with the resisters—to understand and bear their condition and affliction—and then to transmit this experience, as well as his own personal turmoil from this experience, *directly* to some individuals, such as Dehkiaht and Tiikuchahk—“[t]hen, carefully, in the manner of a storyteller, he gave it the experience of his own abduction, captivity, and conversion[and] made [Dehkiaht and Tiikuchahk] understand on an utterly personal level what he had suffered and what he had come to believe” (456). The same experience Akin conveys *organically* to all the residents of Chkahichdahk through Akjai:

The Akjai spoke to the people for Akin. Akin had not realized it would do this—an Akjai ooloi telling other Oankali that there must be Akjai Humans. It spoke through the ship and had the ship signal the trade villages on Earth. It asked for a consensus and then showed the Oankali and construct people of Chkahichdahk what Akin had shown Dehkiaht and Tiikuchahk. (457)

What Akin and the humans suffered at Phoenix as well as what Akin had learned there about humans—their dreams, their hopes, and their fears—reflexively *becomes* the *experience* of everyone at Chkahichdahk, not simply a story told about the experience of the “other.” For a moment, the human experience becomes the experience of all—made known to all, Oankali and constructs alike, *through* experience. Akin teaches Akjai and others that they “should at least know [the human resisters] before [they] deny them the assurance that Oankali always claim for themselves” (456). Thus Akin’s own experience of knowing his “other” is passed on, like a story is passed on, to augment the Oankali vision with that of a human’s, breaking the binary and self-containing message of the Human Contradiction: “Perhaps next time their intelligence would be in balance with their hierarchical behavior, and they would not destroy themselves” (455). His mission becomes to give “life to a dead world,” to restore life on a new planet for the resisters, an untampered life, the one they had before Oankali intervention.

The task demands total physical and mental investment from Akin. As he transmits his story to the Oankali Akjai, he perceives through the latter. The trajectory of exchange depends on mutuality and adjustment to the pace of the relay, “drawing back whenever the transmission [gets] too fast or too intense” (457). Perceptions of closure, of “people ... turning away” make Akin “communicate his confusion” to the Akjai (457, 458). Momentary insularity, as the Akjai fails to notice Akin’s “wordless questioning” (458), gives way to paving the path for Akin directly to “broadcast his bewilderment, letting people know they were experiencing the emotions of a construct child—a child too Human to understand their reactions naturally. A child too Oankali and too near adulthood to disregard” (458). The whole process of communication draws heavily on Maurice Blanchot’s discourse of proximity, one that calls for a blurring of identity, where the self and the other virtually merge.

It also requires mental agility, a quick uptake, improvisational in nature, to convince the Oankali to grant the humans their right and freedom, to “give us the tools we need, and ... give the Humans the things they need. They’ll have a new world to settle He stopped. He could have gone on, but it was time to stop. If he had not said enough, shown

them enough, if he had not guessed accurately about the Human-born, he had failed” (458–59). The success of Akin’s mission lies in his art of convincing, his use of rhetoric and his sense of timing to make appropriate political decisions. Though resisted by many in Chkchichdahk, Akin’s story prompts “Human-born constructs to start to think, start to examine their Human heritage as they had not before” (459). Akin’s story awakens that human other that had been dormant and neglected, that had thus far only been perceived by the Oankali self. The bond that Akin creates with humans is one that the Akjai is able to translate in its bond with Akin, and the message received and given is significant and far-reaching, transforming the power discourse that stems from the limiting and debilitating vision of the Human Contradiction to the profession of a sermon of hope and futurity: “All people who know what it is to end should be allowed to continue if they can continue” (459).

The success of Akin’s mission depends equally on his ability to convince the humans. “I came back to tell you,” Akin tells Tate, “I’d kept my promise to you. I don’t know if you and the others can accept what I have to offer, but it would mean restored fertility and ... a place of your own” (472). His tentative brooking of the subject elicits a wide-eyed response from Tate but a skeptical rebuttal—“Where!”—from her husband, Gabe. “‘Mars,’ [Akin] said simply.... The narrator continues: “He did not know what they might know about Mars, so he began to reassure them. ‘We can enable the planet to support Human life. We’ll start as soon as I am mature. The work has been given to me. No one else felt the need to do it as strongly as I did’” (473). Akin understands that he needs humans to trust him, to believe in the sincerity of his cause so that they may convince other human resisters. The point to be noted is that Akin’s potential to convince others depends not only on his status that straddles the human and Oankali worlds but also on his ability to maintain a flexible mind frame that refuses to be trapped in dualistically defined segregatory politics. Akin acknowledges the human and Oankali divide but inhabits the interim space, a Bhabhian “third space,”²¹ that borrows from both and retains the possibility of constant growth fuelled by the indeterminacy of the moment. Thus Akin in essence as well as in his success can only be defined by the “plasticity” of his being (Goss

and Riquelme 441), a “plasticity” determined and molded by a constant inflow of information, the equivalent of the Derridean “*différance*,” that makes for meaning.

Adulthood Rites ends with the burning of Phoenix, and Akin’s metamorphosis. Both are indicative, more precisely, reflective of the impending state of change and rebirth. Phoenix lies in flames, while Akin, in a sense, rises out of the fire—out of his metamorphosis—into his new, external self. Akin as an Oankali, in the body of an Oankali, starts off on his mission to save humanity as he and the resisters begin their journey away from their old home to their new world. The physical image of Akin as he transforms into his new body slung on the shoulders of the human Gabe, “watch[ing] as the others fell in, single file” emphasizes the hope of a symbiotic relationship between the two species (504). The humans are as necessary to Akin as Akin is to the humans. It is here that Akin re-writes²² the ideals of a Biblical/Christian rendering of Christ as the savior of sinners; one who has come “[not] to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance” (Luke 5.31–32). In his posthuman manifestation, Akin has the power to heal and guide the human resisters to a new, more purposeful life, but he is also dependent on the humans for a purpose and mission in his own life.

By leaving readers with this last—and lasting—image of difference as coming together, of difference as augmenting and transforming the essence of the “other,” transvaluation becomes a dynamic state of dependency that in its fluid condition not only draws on both states of being but keeps changing as the need arises. It is this fluctuating live intent, a continuum kept alive by deferred possibilities, that keeps the posthuman other alive as one looks forward to the ultimate posthuman construct, Jodahs in *Imago*. Jodahs, the ooloi construct, goes beyond Akin in retaining a permanent instability and deferred context. Refusing gender categorization, a typical ooloi trait, Jodahs goes on to augment its genetically engineered construct identity with organically proliferant possibilities (Goss and Riquelme 443). As it implants a seed extracted from its body “deep in the rich soil of the riverbank,” Jodahs keeps the promise of freedom alive: “Seconds after I had expelled [the seed], I felt it begin the tiny positioning movements of independent life” (726).

The promise of proliferating new life emanates from the “third space of enunciation, which makes the structure of meaning and reference an ambivalent process” (Bhabha 37). In this space of ambivalence is born a discourse that acknowledges the exploitative nature of colonial control in all its nuanced manifestations and moves on to seek a redress by redirecting it to create a new world in another planet, a world of possibilities, of complexities that admits a past but promises a future of regenerative hope.

Notes

- 1 See Bukatman, Latour, Fukuyama, Halberstam, and Livingstone.
- 2 For discussions on the posthuman as a state of “difference” that exists in the human, see Badmington, Hayles, and Rutsky.
- 3 See Butler, *Xenogenesis*, a trilogy comprised of *Dawn*, *Adulthood Rites*, and *Imago*.
- 4 Critics differ in their analysis of the Oankali aliens and their motives. While Jacobs reads “a less absolutist, more relational way of being and acting in the world” (109), Zaki sees a fascist intention behind the Oankali maneuvers.
- 5 Bhabha in *Location* describes the mimic man as the “reformed, recognizable other, as a *subject of difference that is almost the same, but not quite* ... constructed around an *ambivalence*; in order to be effective, mimicry must continually produce its slippage, its excess, its difference” (86). This “disciplinary double ... does not merely ‘rupture’ the discourse, but becomes transformed into an uncertainty which fixes the colonial subject as a ‘partial’ presence ... ‘incomplete’ and ‘virtual’” (86).
- 6 See Simon 2 and Didur 101.
- 7 See Jacobs and Tucker.
- 8 Holden also calls them “imperialistic colonizers” whose desire to embrace difference is a possible tactic for “consumption of difference” (51). Yet, as Holden points out, there are mitigating traits of the Oankali as “they do not understand competition or war ... have a special reverence for anything living ... [and] are attracted to difference” (51).
- 9 See in this context the concept of the rhizome as explicated by Deleuze and Guattari in *Anti-Oedipus*.
- 10 Identity-in-the-making is my variant on Minh-ha’s “subject-in-the-making” (102) that draws on the concept of the Derridean “*différance*.” Hall in “Cultural Identity and Diaspora” explains: “to capture this sense of difference which is not pure ‘otherness’, we need to deploy the play on words of a theorist like Jacques Derrida. Derrida uses the anomalous ‘a’ in his way of writing ‘difference’—*différance*—a marker which sets up a disturbance in our settled understanding or translation of the word concept. It sets the word in motion to new meanings

without erasing the trace of its other meanings [It] challenges the fixed binaries which stabilize meaning and representation and show how meaning is never finished or completed, but keeps on moving to encompass other additional or supplementary meanings ... what is then constituted within representation is always open to being deferred, staggered, serialized" (115).

- 11 Refer to Haraway's *Simians and Modest Witness*.
- 12 Warwick in *I, Cyborg* discusses the enhancement of human physical and mental attributes by way of genetic modifications. This posthuman condition has been acknowledged as "a new phase of human evolution" in which human choice plays an important role.
- 13 Gilbert in her article on Manjula Padmanabhan's *Harvest* makes a similar point about Jeetu, a bio-technologically transmuted man.
- 14 I am indebted to Elaine Graham for this idea. Refer to Noble, qtd. in Graham, "Post/Human Conditions" 23.
- 15 The American Heritage Dictionary defines "xenogenesis" as the supposed production of offspring markedly different from either parent.
- 16 Osherow points out that "Lilith's position as enabler was thrust upon her by her captors," typically, I think, in the ways the colonizers groomed a native in their mold and mind frame to create a "mimic man."
- 17 Goss and Riquelme in "From Superhuman to Posthuman" compare Fanon's position of the native intellectual in "On National Culture" to that of Lilith (450). The initial assimilative period, according to Fanon, is replaced later by a rejection of the dominant culture. Lilith's behavior resembles that of "a colonial subject." In order to survive the alien oppression, Lilith advises humans to "Learn and run," that is to "take what they need to know from the Oankali in order to escape their dominance."
- 18 Stoler points out "European manhood in the colonies, whether measured by 'character' and civility or by position and class, was largely independent of the presence of European women" (1), as European women often followed men much later. The women came to the colonies only after the place was declared "politically, medically and physically 'safe'" (2). Among other reasons the sheer absence of European women often led to relationships between European men and colored women. Ackerman recalls Jesser's point that "the sexual biology in Butler's story is remarkably fixed" as she comments on the fact that Butler's "narrative never presents an erotic scene with an ooloi and two individuals of the same sex/gender." To Ackerman's observation that "part of the emphasis on heterosexual sex can be due to the trilogy's broader focus on biological reproduction" (39), I would like to add the colonial support for heterosexual unions, where even illegitimate relations were condoned to counter what Stoller calls the "more dangerous ... carnal relations between men and men" (2). Vint talks about the "anxiety about homosexuality [as] one of the key triggers for the anti-Oankali response on the part of Resister humans" (73), which problematizes

- any easy polarizing of the Oankalis as colonizers and the humans as colonized. Constantly playing within the narrative, in its depiction of both the Oankalis and the humans, is an inherent ambivalence that refuses categorization and threatens constant slippages.
- 19 My connotation of the term borrows from Stoler’s comment that “in histories situated on the peripheries of empire ... [where] ‘whiteness’ was a palpable obsession, the crafting of chromatic identities has long been a troubled subject” (13).
- 20 Lee mentions that though Akin like Christ mirrors a “dual” nature (Akin’s Human/Oankali and Christ’s Human/Divine) the duality, with its hierarchical divides, is breeched in Akin by a relatedness that builds on reciprocity between the human and the alien Oankali as it makes a bid for immortality.
- 21 For Bhabha “the non-synchronous temporality of global and national cultures opens up a cultural space—a third space—where the negotiation of incommensurable differences creates a tension peculiar to borderline existences... Hybrid hyphenations emphasize the incommensurable elements as the basis of cultural identities” (218).
- 22 Peppers points out that *Xenogenesis* is a “cyborg” origin story. It plays with minimal origin stories of the West—the Biblical, sociobiological, paleoanthropological—only to re-write them “from within, using the very power of these discourses to help us imagine the origins of human identity in other ways” (49). This re-writing, even as it creates “xenophilia in place of xenophobia” (60), also, I feel, continues the tradition of the typical post-colonial “resistance” writing as it appropriates established Western tropes or narratives to interpolate them with its own discourse, establishing a form by which, to borrow the title of Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin’s book, “the empire writes back.”

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