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# "Nolite te bastardes carborundorum": Reproduction and Resistance in Octavia Butler, Margaret Atwood, and the Alien Series

Amandine Faucheux

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“Nolite te bastardes carborundorum”: Reproduction and Resistance in  
Octavia Butler, Margaret Atwood, and the *Alien* Series

by

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THESIS

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Requirements for the Degree of

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## **Dedication**

I dedicate this thesis to my husband Matthew, whose constant support was indispensable to my work. Thanks to my family for their patience and understanding. Thanks also to my friends Lauranne and Kristin for bearing with me for all those months.

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**“Nolite te bastardes carborundorum”: Reproduction and Resistance  
in Octavia E. Butler, Margaret Atwood, and the *Alien* Series**

**By**

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**M.A. Comparative Literature and Cultural Studies, 2014**

**ABSTRACT**

This thesis proposes a comparative study of Octavia E. Butler’s *Xenogenesis* trilogy (1987-89), Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale* (1985), and the *Alien* series (1979-97). I argue that these three texts resist patriarchal oppression upon the female fertile body. I examine how they rewrite and subvert such institutions as motherhood, the family, and the heterosexual couple, in order to redefine and empower woman. In the first chapter, I argue that Octavia Butler rewrites Western origin stories in order to put woman and people of color at its center, which provokes a redefinition of the essential woman. In chapter two, I examine how Margaret Atwood criticizes both patriarchal and feminist ideologies in a satirical, pessimistic tale. She represents the patriarchal rule as absurd and makes reproduction ironically futile. In the final chapter, I demonstrate that the *Alien* series and in particular *Alien: Resurrection* (Dir. Jean-Pierre Jeunet, 1997) represent patriarchy as a failure and empower the liminal woman.

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## Introduction

“Don’t let the bastards grind you down,” Margaret Atwood’s famous pig-Latin mantra from *The Handmaid’s Tale*, works as well within the narrative as outside. The purpose of this project is to analyze how women’s science fiction works to resist patriarchal oppression upon the female body. Science fiction is perhaps the most interesting genre for exploring social anxieties, because its reliance on both realism and fantastic elements allow for the most grotesque—and thus revealing—representations. One of the prevailing issues in science fiction is the theme of reproduction, pregnancy, and gender relations. This project explores the representation of the (fertile) female body, and the coercive forces that promote—or subvert—motherhood and the family. In particular, I will examine Octavia E. Butler’s *Xenogenesis* trilogy (also called *Lilith’s Brood*) (1987-1989), Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale* (1985), and finally the *Alien* film series (1979-1997). I argue that these three texts—where a series is understood as a global text—create subversive alternatives to, and fight against oppressive social institutions such as motherhood, reproduction, and the heteronormative nuclear family.

Darko Suvin has famously described science fiction as the genre of cognitive estrangement. In other words, SF is perhaps the only genre within which to explore alternative realities that confront or subvert the hegemonic order. Because SF relies both on realism and fantastic elements, it convincingly creates worlds in which gender, class, race, and sexuality, are revealed as artificial constructs vector of oppression. Science fiction is thus probably the most adequate genre to analyze feminist resistance to patriarchal structures<sup>1</sup>. Secondly, and because it is partly fantastic, science fiction allows for the most grotesque and absurd distortions of reality. For example, Octavia E. Butler’s *Xenogenesis* contains

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<sup>1</sup> I understand feminism as a movement of resistance based on intersectionality, which fights equally against sexism, homophobia, racism, and classism.



obscenely detailed descriptions of hybrid, monstrous bodies; children with tentacles for hair, serpentine tongues that can penetrate the flesh, a breathing-and-living ship. Butler takes pleasure in mixing the monstrous with the erotic and the alien with the familiar when she describes alien-human sexual encounters, families, and communities. The *Alien* series represent both the phallic and the vaginal as monstrous in the shape of its “xenomorph,” a grotesque, insect-like alien creature. The films constantly position the alien as an external and internal menace: the alien could be behind you, the alien could be *you*. The purpose of these representations is all at once to produce strong emotions in the readers/viewers (revulsion, horror, strange desires), and to question and subvert the limits between the self and the other, the normal and the abnormal, the desirable and the repulsive. These texts reject fixed identities and sublime liminality.

I argue that *Xenogenesis*, the *Tale*, and the *Alien* series are resistant texts against patriarchal pressures upon and oppression of the female body. These texts rewrite and subvert the nuclear family, gendered parenting roles, heterosexual relationships, as well as the possibility of a white idealized progeny. In all three texts, similar tensions are at stake. For the three powerful heroines of these universes, motherhood is a site of loss (a child has died outside of the frame of the narrative), and it is also highly desirable, either for personal reasons, or for social capital. However, motherhood is also coercive means for larger political aims, such as the survival of a species in Butler, the return to a Biblical patriarchy in Atwood, and a means to obtain weapons and money in *Alien*. The coercive nature of motherhood is illustrated by metaphorical or physical rape, an omnipresent theme in all three texts. Another interesting parallel, specifically in *Xenogenesis* and *Alien*, is the association between the fertile female body and hybridity/loss of self. In those two texts, being pregnant also comes to signify becoming alien, as the infant the characters carry is both human and alien. After giving birth to a hybrid individual, the woman also becomes hybrid. The similarities in

themes across the three texts is important because it underlines the increasing anxieties of the 1980s around hot topics such as women's rights, reproductive politics and reproductive rights, and other social factors such as immigration and a growing number of single mothers.

The 1970s and the 1980s were two very important decades for women's rights and reproductive politics. Second-wave feminists and women of color fought for gender equality and legal rights, and the progress of certain contraceptives such as the Pill (introduced in 1960) allowed for more independence for women. Many feminists argue that reproductive rights are a key to accessing legal equality, because women need to have full control of their bodies and their fertility before they can access the same rights and privileges as men. How exactly is this "control" defined depends on intricate and complex power relations at the political and social level. In *Pregnancy and Power: a Short History of Reproductive Rights in America*, Rickie Solinger examines the rhetoric behind reproductive politics, which she defines as a question "who has power over matters of pregnancy and its consequences?" (3). The answer is never only "the woman," even in the best of circumstances, because the decision of becoming a mother (giving birth to as well as raising the child) depends on many socio-economic factors—financial means, social status, family, work, state structures, and the access to education, medical structures such as clinics and doctors, etc. In addition, the woman must be able to make her choice freely.

Solinger criticizes the discourse of "choice" surrounding in particular abortion debates, because it is used to veil social issues such as the fact that not every woman has the privilege of "choice," and if she did it would still be inadequate to reduce such a complex problem to individual "choice." Furthermore, Solinger makes the compelling argument that reproductive politics always include racial double standards. She argues that while white women are pushed towards certain decisions (motherhood, adoption) by anti-abortion and other moral discourses (i.e. motherhood is a duty, contraceptives are sinful), African-

American and Latina women are shamed into contraception, infertility, and giving up their children for adoption, a point also acknowledged by Rebecca Kluchin in her book *Fit to Be Tied: Sterilization and Reproductive Rights in America, 1950-1980*.

Kluchin points out that before it became a contraceptive method, sterilization was used by eugenicists to separate the “unfit” mothers (poor, prisoner, non-married, non-white) from the “fit” (white, middle-class, married). She writes, “Eugenicists considered ‘fit’ women’s reproduction to be productive, healthy, and beneficial to the nation. They viewed ‘unfit’ women’s reproduction as destructive, unhealthy, and debilitating because the children ‘unfit’ women bore were tainted by inherent defects that would cause them to become dependent upon the state for assistance” (2-3). The fit/unfit discourse is coherent with the theme of the good/bad mother often used in literature and television—the good mother is passive and nurturing, the bad is the active and archaic/phallic mother (the original mother who wants to devour the lives she has given). It also illustrates the stereotype that women are unable to make rational decisions for themselves, and that consequently the state must intervene upon women’s reproduction. In reality though, reproductive politics in America determine a woman’s life and social position more than it protects them or their children. In her introduction to *Historical and Multicultural Encyclopedia of Women’s Reproductive Rights in the United States*, Judith Baer (the editor) writes, “Many controversies over reproductive rights originate in society’s efforts to use women’s childbearing function as a justification for depriving them of rights or burdening them with duties. It is important to remember that these restrictions are not imposed only on women who are actual or potential mothers. They are imposed on all women” (xxiv). It is thus clear that far from acting only in terms of reproduction or population control, reproductive politics influence women’s rights in general and the social spheres in which they can access to equal rights and privileges as men: work, education, politics, etc.

While I could have cited here many more important studies, I emphasized Solinger's and Kluchin's contributions because they refuse to engage only in debates such as the right to abortion; instead, they compellingly unveil the rhetoric that makes such debates the central focus, instead of women's rights as citizens. Both books seek to uncover the power relations that actively shape reproductive politics in America. Moreover, Solinger and Kluchin, like many other scholars in the field, agree to the fact that reproductive rights and reproductive freedom have yet to be achieved for women. The progress attained in reproductive politics is neither fixed in time, nor is it definitely granted. Despite the legalization of abortion, for instance, many states have put in place constraining laws and strict regulations on abortion. Texas recently voted a law pertaining to admissions of clinic doctors performing abortions into hospitals, which according to the *New York Times* has resulted in the closure of six clinics so far, and pushed some women living in one of the poorest regions of the country to travel for hundreds of miles to get access to care<sup>2</sup>. Moreover, the emphasis put on fetal personhood—a discourse that, according to Solinger, was created some years after *Roe vs. Wade* (1973) by anti-abortionists (*Pregnancy* 233)—is still persistent today, and constantly threatens to overpower women's rights as citizens in the collective consciousness. The perception of the female body as a receptacle for something more precious—progeny—is a constant theme in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*, Octavia Butler's *Xenogenesis*, and the *Alien* series. The historical and cultural contexts in which these texts were created are teased out in the narratives in the form of conflicting tensions, between desire and coercion, between freedom and choice, and oppression, between resistance and acceptance.

Each text creates a subversive vision of the conflicts and contradictions within the patriarchal system, a vision that empowers women—and in the case of Octavia Butler, people of color. Each text resists, succumbs to, and/or criticizes patriarchal and oppressive

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<sup>2</sup> Eckholm, Erik. "Court Panel Upholds Texas Law on Abortion." *New York Times* 28 March 2014 : All. Print.

conventions and structures. In Butler, Western foundational origin stories are re-written with gendered and racialized Others at the center of a (re)-creation of the Earth. Reproduction becomes the means to transcend humanity's flaws—high intelligence and hierarchical tendencies—in an embracing of hybridity and difference. Atwood's *Tale*, on the contrary, is a bleak and satirical warning tale against both oppressive reproductive politics, and feminist discourses. Reproduction in the *Tale* is impossible because of the absurdity of the patriarchal rule. The *Alien* series also reject a heteronormatized reproduction scheme by representing the failure of patriarchy, and consequently the obsolescence of its social structures—reproduction, motherhood, the family, and heterosexual relations.

In a period in which reproductive rights and freedom have not been achieved, and in which the legal—relative—equality between men and women is constantly threatened, it is crucial to revisit such texts that create resistance and subversion to patriarchal structures. In this project, I examine how *Xenogenesis*, *The Handmaid's Tale*, and the *Alien* series as cultural texts reinvent subversive structures that empower woman over her own body. How do the texts play and subvert the binary between nature and culture? How is “Nature” defined in relation to culture? What kinds of implications does this definition have for woman? What role(s) does hybridity play in the narratives? How do the texts explore different social structures than the nuclear family and its associated gender roles? What does “motherhood” come to signify?

In the first Chapter, I examine Butler's *Xenogenesis* trilogy. I argue that Butler rewrites foundational Western origin stories in order to place women and racialized Others at the center of the creation of human history. Such a rewriting, as I shall demonstrate, has for consequence the empowerment of woman. Reproduction in Butler is only possible with the alien—hybridity is thus praised over stasis. I shall argue that reproduction is therefore used as a means to transcend humanity's inherent flaws. In Chapter two, I turn to Margaret Atwood's

classic *The Handmaid's Tale*, which I analyze as a warning tale against both the intervention of the state upon the female body, and feminist essentialist discourses about motherhood. In the *Tale*, as I will show, reproduction is impossible because the patriarchal rule absurdly refuses to recognize the function of man in reproduction. Atwood's powerful claim in the *Tale*, like Butler in *Xenogenesis*, is the fatalistic argument that society will never improve and that minorities will always be oppressed. Such a rhetoric is extremely relevant today because it warns us against "post-feminist" perception that everything has now been accomplished and that everything will forever remain the same. My analysis of the *Alien* series in Chapter three is a rightful conclusion to my project, as I argue that the final movie of the series (*Alien: Resurrection*, 1997) has the woman-as-hybrid finally win over patriarchal oppression. Throughout the series, as my close reading of the films will demonstrate, patriarchy is repeatedly portrayed as a failure. As a consequence, structures such as the family, the heterosexual couple, and the possibility of progeny are no longer relevant. The cyborg woman is allowed to stay in a permanent state of liminality, symbol of postmodern ambitions.

## Chapter 1

### The Genesis of the Other: Subverting Motherhood Discourses in Octavia E.

#### Butler's *Xenogenesis*<sup>3</sup>

“What I hope to wind up with in my work are a series of shadings that correspond to the way concepts like ‘good ‘ and ‘evil’ enter the real world—never absolute, always by degrees”<sup>4</sup>  
 --Octavia E. Butler

Octavia E. Butler is one of the first (and few) African-American woman writers of science fiction. Her work makes a unique contribution to a genre that is both male-dominated and white. It also gives voice to women of color within white feminist discussions of the female body, reproduction, and motherhood. Butler's fiction offers no easy solutions, no straight answers, and it does not pretend to solve social anxieties. Yet, novels such as *Xenogenesis* provide perhaps what is more important—subversion, resistance, and rewriting. *Xenogenesis* is composed of three books—*Dawn*, *Adulthood Rites (Rites)*, and *Imago*, respectively published in 1987, 1988, and 1989. The story starts as a post-apocalyptic narrative. The Earth has been destroyed in a nuclear war, and only a handful of humans have survived. The reader follows Lilith, an African-American woman who wakes up on a spaceship 250 years after the war. We learn with her that the survivors have been rescued by the Oankali, an extra-terrestrial race whose purpose is to restore the Earth and give it back to the humans. The price of this generosity, however, is high—the Oankali are a race of genetic “traders” who survive by mixing their genes with other species. They demand a “trade” with

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<sup>3</sup> The trilogy has now been renamed *Lilith's Brood*. I choose to name it by its original title *Xenogenesis* both because Butler was made to change it by her editor, and also because it relates much more to the central questions of this chapter.

<sup>4</sup> Kenan, Randall. “An Interview with Octavia Butler.” *Callaloo*. 14:2 (1991) : 494-504. Print.

the humans to produce mixed-species children. Those who refuse are rendered sterile. *Dawn* ends on the news that Lilith is pregnant of a “construct” child (human-Oankali). *Rites* starts with this construct infant’s conscious memories of being inside Lilith’s womb. The narrative now centers on Akin—his name, meaning both “a hero” or “heroic” in Nigerian, but also of course “a kin”—who experiences captivity on Earth at the hands of human resisters (those who refused to mix with the Oankali, and now live by themselves, infertile), and who then convinces the Oankali to allow the humans the possibility of living freely and reproducing on Mars. The Oankali, whose sole purpose is to create and foster life, at first refuse to let the humans recreate their civilization only to destroy it again. To them, the humans have a dual quality that make them so promising and at the same time violent and self-destructive—high intelligence and hierarchy. However, it is Akin’s mixed-species individuality that prevails, and the Mars colony is founded. *Imago*’s main protagonist is Jodahs, the other child of Lilith and her partner Tino. After its metamorphosis, Jodahs unexpectedly turns out to be olooi. It is the first olooi “construct” (human-Oankali) ever born. Jodahs could potentially be dangerous because of its human heritage and the “human contradiction” (intelligence and hierarchical tendencies). In the end, however, it is Jodahs who proves to be more adept at understanding human behavior, and the trilogy ends on it building a new town, at peace with human beings as sexual partners.

The complexity of the plot reflects the complexity of the themes and questions at stake in the books. Although a large amount of scholarship is dedicated to her oeuvre, there is no consensus on the interpretation of her work. Scholars cannot easily provide a unilateral understanding of Butler’s novels, very simply because there is none. Butler’s work, like the opening-quotation implies, is contradictory in nature. In this chapter, I propose to observe the ways in which Butler understands motherhood, especially in the context of rape and coercion. The intervention of a superior alien race into a world destroyed by human activity necessarily



redefines the history of humanity and society. In this post-apocalyptic world thus, gender roles, the institution of the family and the heterosexual couple are redefined as inherently linked to the aliens. The Oankali are therefore capital to our understanding of *Xenogenesis*, and especially as they are defined both by their inherent hybridity, and their obsessive need to reproduce. The Oankali are a race of genetic “traders” that consistently and historically mixed their genes with any promising species they could find across the galaxy. Therefore, they have no concept of “pure” races, for to them any species represent the promise of evolution. The aliens must also and inexorably reproduce themselves. This is a classical trope in science fiction, in which the alien race is constantly portrayed as menacing precisely because of its aggressive desire to “impregnate” human beings and reproduce itself in an often insect-way (see for instance the *Alien* series, analyzed in Chapter 3). Yet, Butler rewrites entirely this trope with her superior aliens, who offer nothing more dangerous than an increased, disease-free existence and unlimited knowledge. Moreover, and contrary to the alien of most science-fiction stories, the Oankali’s principal purpose is to nurture and foster life, to the point where disease and death (even of their enemies) is a blasphemy. The originality of Butler’s aliens complicates our reading of their intervention in the narrative: do they symbolize, as many scholars see it, colonizers? Do humans become their slaves from which to acquire more cattle? In order to understand the purpose of the Oankali, it is important to analyze the ways in which the text rewrites origin stories. In the first part of this chapter, I shall argue that the Oankali stand as God in the Biblical story. In a world in which “God” is a fundamentally hybrid entity, people of color, such as Lilith, her lover Joseph, and a Hispanic Mary are put at the very center of the creation of humanity. Moreover, Butler’s rewriting of the origin story has as its purpose the annihilation of the idea of the “essential” woman as pure and whole. As a consequence, as I shall demonstrate in a second part, institutions such as the heterosexual couple and the family are re-imagined in a context where woman-as-mother is not subjugated

or burdened by her biological fate. However, Butler's insistence on biological determinism, as well as the importance of rape and coercion throughout the narrative, beg for a more nuanced interpretation of the text. In a third part, I will provide some potential answers to the ending of the trilogy, in which the Oankali, through biological coercion, subjugate human beings.

One of the most important foundations to Western thought is the origin story. The Bible tells the story of Adam and Eve being expelled from the Garden of Eden because of the original sin, the acquisition of forbidden knowledge. In Greek mythology, the Titan Prometheus, who created man from clay, is banished from Mount Olympus for offering the gift of fire to mankind, which marks the beginning of progress and civilization. In the secular origin story, civilization is possible through Jean-Jacques Rousseau's social contract, in which a society acknowledges the power and authority of a government, at the forfeit of a certain equal amount of rights and duties. All of these stories have for common point the concept of a pre-social world, a world without "society" or "civilization". The existence of a mythical "pre-social" world is important in part because it justifies the concept of "human nature" and certain human behavior. For instance, the theory of the survival of the fittest, based on evolutionary theories, served for a time to explain and justify imperialism and colonialism. Post-structuralists and anti-essentialists such as Judith Butler criticize this pre-discursive myth as a means to naturalize the domination of man over nature, or culture over nature. In fact, post-modernists such as Donna Haraway deconstruct the idea of "nature" altogether, arguing that nature is socially constructed in order to justify hierarchical relations. For Haraway, the nature/culture binary is the structure on which all other binaries are constructed (male/female, sex/gender, white/non-white, etc.). Therefore, the deconstruction of the binary nature/culture would in theory, if not annihilate, at least underline the artificiality of man/woman, sex/gender, etc. What is interesting to me in this first part, then, is

to understand how Butler subverts this pre-social mythical world *in order to* deconstruct the concept of the essential woman. In her introduction to *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: the Reinvention of Nature*, Haraway asks “How did nature for a dominant cultural group with immense power to make its stories into reality become a system of work, ruled by the hierarchical division of labour [sic], where the inequities of race, sex, and class could be naturalized in functioning systems of exploitation?” (2). Butler, in response to this question, asks: what happens to “woman” if nature, as understood as a pure entity by the origin story, is rewritten by a race of aliens?

As a superior extra-terrestrial race, the Oankali put in question the primacy and uniqueness of the position of humanity in the universe, especially in a theological sense. In *Xenogenesis*, the Oankali take the role of God. Firstly, they quite literally recreate the Earth from its ashes. The original sin, in the genesis of the Other, is not the acquisition of knowledge but the self-destruction of the human race, and the Earth. The Oankali recreate a paradisiac Earth, undisturbed by human activity and perfect in its natural state. Ironically, the Oankali-engineered world is thus a mockery of a “pre-discursive” world, where humans do not yet exist. However, this newly-reformed Earth is not “pure”; the Oankali have planted alien forms of life within its ecosystem, for example the “breadnut” tree, from which Lilith and the others eat delicious nuts. Some species, like dogs and cats, have not been restored at all. Secondly, in a reversal of the Biblical origin story, the alien spaceship on which *Dawn* is set represents the Garden of Eden, but this Garden is only a temporary place on which the humans are trained physically and mentally to survive and dwell on Earth. Only carefully “selected” humans can be brought back from their suspended sleep to be put on the planet. Contrary to the biblical story then, the Earth is a gift to be bestowed upon certain humans, not a banishment from paradise. Finally, the Oankali recreate man in their own image; they are given special abilities, like Lilith and Joseph, and later if they decide to live their lives with

the aliens, they create alien-human children—“constructs”—which are a perfect mix of both cultures, thus reflecting the Oankali’s way of understanding reproduction as necessarily hybrid. In becoming “God,” the Oankali redefine the concept of humanity. Their re-creation of the Earth represent a world of new possibilities for the meaning of being human, as well as human relations.

It is therefore significant that Lilith, an African-American woman, is put in charge of this selection. Butler empowers her main character with a multiplicity of Biblical roles as a means to subvert a story which has explicitly excluded both women and people of color from major positions in the myth of the creation of Earth. Critics have argued that Lilith is chosen by the Oankali because of her qualities as mother, especially because of Kahguyaht’s remark: “I believed that because of the way human genetics were expressed in culture, a human male should be chosen to parent the first group. I think now I was wrong” (*Dawn* 111). Many scholars interpret this as a realization that women are better suited to “mother.” Yet that is not what Kahguyaht is saying; he says “because of the way human genetics *were expressed in culture*”. He cannot mean the ability to mother, because from studying humans it is quite obvious that this role is reserved for women. What he means is the ability to lead. He realizes that Lilith is best suited to be at the head of this new human society *because* she is a woman. In this sense, she takes on the role of Adam, not Eve. As Adam, Lilith is charged with awakening other humans “deserving” of Earth, of educating them<sup>5</sup>, and of preparing them to the contact with the alien. In addition, because she is the first human and the one chosen for the role of Adam, the knowledge and vocabulary used by the other humans also derive from her. However, Lilith also embodies other Biblical roles. As her name indicates, she is the first wife to Adam, the rebellious woman who rejected her husband’s authority in refusing to lie

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<sup>5</sup> Although not entirely, as she does not yet reveal the plan of the Oankali to reproduce with them. In choosing to reveal only partly the truth, and in further choosing the Oankali’s ways, she also takes on the role of Judas in the eyes of the resisters. Ironically, in choosing the side of the humans’ “makers,” she becomes a traitor.

on her back during sex. In the Judaic tradition, Lilith is the mother to demons, which is exactly the way later generations of humans on Earth understand the Oankali. Lilith's rebellion in the narrative is her repeated refusal to first lie with the Oankali, and then to bear their children. However, in the end she does not become "free" like her namesake, but accepts—or is coerced into accepting, rather—the Oankali's ways. In addition, Lilith's role as mother to the first construct-children make her, in a perverted way, Eve, though an Eve who symbolizes the end of the human race as it is<sup>6</sup>. The multiplicity of Lilith's character is an important element of Butler's subversion of the Biblical story, because it places a woman of color at its very center. In "The Dawn of a New Lilith: Revisionary Mythmaking in Women's Science Fiction," Michelle Osherow writes, "The Liliths we meet in S/F works are not ideal as mothers, lovers, or alien others. Instead, they demonstrate women's ambition and ability to support others without sacrificing or disempowering themselves. These new myths move Lilith into a respected and essential category of female representations that is difficult to dismiss" (81). The new Lilith rejects stereotypical representations from the binary of good versus bad women. However, Butler's fatalism also subdues this effort, as the role of Lilith in this new Earth is eventually tainted by the coercive nature of the Oankali.

Furthermore, two other biblical roles are given to characters of color. Joseph, Lilith's first lover, is a Chinese-Canadian man who is murdered by humans because of the enhanced healing ability the Oankali have given him. Joseph's relationship to the "divine" creatures are the reasons for the humans' antagonism and aggressiveness. The figure of Mary is represented by the first fertile woman from the Hispanic community of the mountain resisters in *Imago*, who gives birth to a whole generation of deformed, sick, and dying interbred children. She becomes holy because her rape—another subversion of the Catholic

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<sup>6</sup> Though where Eve is condemned by God to give birth in pain and be tainted by menstrual blood, Lilith, by staying with the Oankali, is literally condemned to the opposite: painless pregnancy and birth-giving: "[a child's] birth hurt Lilith, but Nikanj always took away her pain" (*Rites* 332).

immaculate conception—results in the first, entirely human infant on the new Earth. At the same time, ironically, “Mary’s” holy children are not a promise of future generations, but they rather doom the entire community to disease and death. The mountain resisters’ community is punished because of their inbreeding, which symbolizes genetic stasis and racial “purity.” Joseph’s and Mary’s characters and stories in the narrative are moral tales to signify the humans’ rejection of difference—Joseph is murdered, Mary’s interbred progeny condemns the community to death and disease.

The redistribution of Biblical roles to people of color is a criticism of the racism of Christian visual representations of the Bible, in which all major characters are systematically represented as white. In putting non-white characters at the center of the Biblical story, and in endorsing a woman with the role of Adam, Butler is re-inventing a foundational myth in Western culture. In addition, the figure of God, the ultimate white patriarchal representation, is displaced onto a race of alien whose principal core is racial (species) hybridity and a rejection of hierarchical power relations. I have demonstrated the apparatuses Butler uses in her fiction to re-invent origin stories—the empowerment of minorities, and the displacement of the traditional Christian image of God onto hybrid and non-hierarchical creatures. However, what does the Oankali’s engineering of the new Earth mean to our understanding of “nature”? I have already facetiously remarked that the new Earth’s entirely “organic” and wild status is ironical, since it stands precisely as the mythical pre-discursive world that Western philosophy bases its fundamental nature/culture distinction.

Yet, can this wild world upon which no humans have yet set foot be considered “natural,” as it has been literally constructed by a civilized society? Before I expand on this point, I want to underline the nature—no pun intended—of the Oankali race itself. The aliens have reached the zenith of “civilization”—in the sense of superior intelligence, upward development, peaceful communities, and even colonial expansion—by getting rid of

industrial technology (the application of science onto dead matter) for “biological” technology. In other words, every “technological” apparatus they possess is based on the same genetic trade they hope to accomplish with humans; their “machines” (the ship, their transportation devices, even Lo) are actually living creatures. Therefore, the Oankali are organic in the most literal sense. Yet, they are undeniably an extremely evolved civilization. Furthermore, the Oankali’s ability to control, modify, and re-create living organism—they can cure cancer by modifying the cells’ behavior, they can create “prints” of human beings, etc.—also signify their God-like ability to control nature. Thus, the Oankali are an extreme representation of “Nature,” yet a Nature with a consciousness and political purposes. Butler thus subverts the binary nature/civilization in that her alien race is *both*, and therefore something different and hybrid at the same time. The new Earth cannot be “natural” because it has been engineered *by* civilization. Simultaneously, the Earth has never been more “natural,” since any technology is organic. Butler’s intricate world deconstructs the limits between nature and culture, by making everything constantly of mixture of both.

There are thus two important moves underlying the Genesis of the Other. The first is the rewriting of the origin story, and thus the subversion of a fundamental patriarchal institution. In displacing the role of God onto a race of hybrid aliens, Butler necessarily allows for the second subversion, the destruction of the binary between nature and culture, which is, according to Donna Haraway, the basis of every other binary system (man/woman, sex/gender, white/black, etc.). The consequence of the disappearance of the limit between nature and culture is thus the reinvention of woman outside of an essential sex. In this new genesis, human beings can no longer remain “pure,” as they must embrace hybridity under the form of human-alien identities. As a consequence, the possibility of an aliened Other is annihilated; everyone is alien, everyone is human, and every new generation will be a constant mixture of both identities. Therefore, sexed and gendered categories as they exist

within power relations become obsolete. Moreover, the Oankali's basic familial structure does not allow for gendered positions of power, because it is fundamentally non-hierarchical. In the *Xenogenesis* world, the nuclear family with the patriarch at its head is irrelevant. The family unit formed with humans is composed of two Oankali, an olooi, and two humans, all of whom are parents to every child. Akin's parents, for instance, are Lilith, Tino, Nikanj, Dichaan, and Ahajas. Of these parents, no parent alone cares for Akin. Part of it is because the Oankali society, despite its gendered divisions, does not associate child-rearing with any gender in particular. The Oankali are by nature nurturing; their entire society is based around reproduction and nurturing of progeny. As the Grand Central press version of *Lilith's Brood* phrases it, the Oankali are "driven by an irresistible need to heal others." Not only do they make healing their vocation, but they also thrive to educate and guide their youth, to protect their family, and they are also powerful home-makers ("Akin could not help knowing when he passed the borders of Lo. ...The vegetation that touched him made him cringe at first because it was abruptly not-home" *Rites* 303). Butler creates an alien race that lives to nurture precisely in order to displace the constraints of motherhood from females unto others. In addition, the gendered concepts of the home-maker and the financial provider can no longer exist. Everyone in the community has the power to create "homes," because they can directly control Lo to form habitats, and they can add the "scent" that mark their family onto anything. The human-Oankali constructs are also almost immediately independent, and their genetic abilities instinctively allow them to provide for themselves by picking the appropriate nutriments from their environment. Their self-sufficiency thus does not require a provider of any sort but themselves.

Such a re-construction of the family is in itself based on the subversion of heterosexual relationships. Monique Wittig has famously argued that society is based on a "heterosexual contract" which guarantees the creation of gendered individuals. For Wittig,



the individual is sexed/gendered to ensure heterosexual relations and the production of children for the state. The Oankali's natural heterosexual polyamory (a male, a female, and an olooi, as well as an Oankali couple) intrinsically subverts the heterosexual contract, and consequently, the male-female social and sexual relation. It also subverts the gender roles within the family unit. The relationship that Lilith entertains with her family is composed of two male individuals who accept each other's presence and even engage in sensual acts with each other, yet do not compete for females or for the patriarchal position. Lilith and Ahajas (the Oankali female) live in equal harmony. In *Imago*, Lilith says to Jesusa "Look at my family... There's closeness here that I didn't have with the family I was born into or with my husband and son" (671). The closeness Lilith feels within her family group is perhaps enjoyed because she has an equal place within the unit; there is no unique "male" to be inferior to. However, the Oankali's polyamorous system is based on heterosexuality, as its primary purpose is the production of children. It is also strictly restricted to the members of that family only. Humans like Oankali are literally unable to have sexual relations with any other olooi (who is indispensable to any sexual act), as its "scent" make it impossible for them to be aroused by other olooi. In other words, the Oankali-human polyamory only works paradoxically through strictly exclusive wedlock, which is a fundamentally heterosexual convention. As Foucault has outlined in his *History of Sexuality*, the creation of the modern family as state apparatus in the 18<sup>th</sup> century required monogamy in order to protect the family capital. The emphasis on female virginity as well as the moral condemnation of extra-conjugal relationships for women in particular, were meant to prevent the production of illegitimate children, which would threaten the inheritance of goods between blood-related individuals. Therefore, the emphasis on an inherent "monogamy" (an exclusive relationship, for lack of a better term) within the familial structure in *Xenogenesis* belongs to a heterosexual tradition. Butler's rewriting of the family and of heterosexual relationships is

powerful, because it subverts gendered stereotypes and refuses to subjugate the woman in her role as mother. However, Butler's insistence on compulsory heterosexuality<sup>7</sup>, and her heterosexual-based society is a drawback on these subversions, as it places reproduction at the center of any relations.

Despite Butler's conservatism and compulsory heterosexuality, the polyamorous relationship is nevertheless subversive because the olooi is at its center. The olooi provides constant sexual pleasure and gratification without failure, demanding nothing in return, and at the same time produces timely, perfect children. In other words, the olooi annuls a heteronormatized sexuality, and at the same time decentralizes reproduction from the woman. Butler cleverly diverts her reader's sexist expectations by creating a third "neutral" gender, one onto which we cannot easily apply stereotypes, in order to displace gender roles from females and males unto another, profoundly alien entity. Reproduction is no longer the duty or sole concern of woman, since the olooi is the controller of fertility and genetic engineering of the offspring. Finally liberated from a reproductive burden, woman can enjoy sex on the same level as man. Despite its third gender, a number of scholars (and probably readers as well) however interpret the olooi as masculine. In a *New York Review of Science Fiction*<sup>8</sup>, for example, Traci Castleberry argues that the olooi represents homosexuality. Yet, she only uses examples of human males (such as Joseph or Tino) rejecting the olooi, and never assumes that Lilith could act the same way. Clearly, the assumption is that the olooi in fact represents *male* homosexuality. I strongly disagree with this interpretation because the texts explicitly use compulsory heterosexuality and do not include any non-straight characters. As Nancy Jesser writes, "It is striking that in the Oankali's 250-year study of human behavior and human culture, they never came across a reference to 'faggot' and need to ask Lilith what it

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<sup>7</sup> Compulsory heterosexuality is the belief that heterosexuality is the norm by default of human sexuality.

<sup>8</sup> "Twisting the Other: Using a 'third' Sex to Represent Homosexuality in Science Fiction"

means” (“Blood” 46-47). The olooi cannot stand for queerness because, in the world of *Xenogenesis*, queerness simply does not exist. Man and woman are exclusively attracted to one another, and the Oankali-human polyamorous family unit is a perfectly heterosexual mirror. Butler’s rewriting of sex and sexuality is thus a surprising mix of conservatism—the sin of the flesh is no more, the production of children is the individual’s duty—and eroticism—unparalleled sexual pleasure is a necessary condition of reproduction. The olooi is a site onto which physical sexuality as well as the burden of reproduction can be displaced.

However, the price of this displacement is the destruction of humanity as it is, which is expressed in the form of the monstrous offspring, and the monstrous body. Reproduction in the world of *Xenogenesis* has become synonymous with the loss of humanity as a pure category, as the only possible children are human-Oankali constructs. The anxiety surrounding hybridity is represented by the fear of the monstrous. Lilith’s apparent prime concern is not her imposed pregnancy, but the idea that the fetus is not human: “‘But they [our children] won’t be human,’ Lilith said. ‘That’s what matters. You can’t understand, but that *is* what matters’” (248 italics in the original). When she was first introduced to the idea of pregnancy by Jdahya, she had a vivid image of the potential construct children as “Medusa children” (42). This image is repeated twice in the space of two pages: “Medusa children. Snakes for hair. Nests of night crawlers for eyes and ears” (43). The trope of the monstrous baby has at all times been a recurrent theme in science fiction and horror (see for instance *Rosemary’s Baby*, the *Alien* series, *Dawn of the Dead*, *The Walking Dead*, and so on), and it signifies two anxieties. First, the monstrous baby represents the fear of miscegenation (*Dawn of the Dead*, for example), or it is a punishment for woman’s infidelity (*The Walking Dead*). The monstrous baby is the consequence of a breach in the patriarchal social order, especially if it is incited by the sexually active woman. Secondly, the creation of the monstrous baby is possible because woman possesses a creative power that man does not. Woman’s pregnancy

and birth-giving power is only available to her, and therefore the production of the infant is under her sole control. In addition, the process of life-giving is mysterious and linked to the abject, as the infant is expelled from her body through the vagina. Consequently, the creation of the infant has potential for monstrosity.

The anxiety surrounding the possibility of a monstrous child is thus linked to the female body; she is the creator of life, and for that reason her body is mystique and abject at the same time as it is desirable. The news of Lilith's pregnancy illustrates the juxtaposition between pregnancy and revulsion and horror. Her reaction to the news of her pregnancy is violent: "she starred down at her own body in horror" (247). Because of the fetus inside her, Lilith suddenly realizes her power of conception, and this conception is exclusively linked to the creation of monstrosity in the form of an alien-human offspring. The superimposition of pregnancy with hybridity or non-humanness is allowed by the impossibility for a human to conceive without the Oankali, which makes it impossible to dissociate pregnancy from alienness. Arguably, the mountain resisters, who are the only ones to have somehow kept their fertility, can produce "purely" human offspring. Yet in their case, incest (and perhaps the rape of the original "Mother"<sup>9</sup>) results in extremely-diseased children, and their entire community is condemned to death because of this inbreeding. Therefore, the female body becomes monstrous because it bears the possibility of a non-human progeny. On a deeper level, what the pregnant or fertile body represents is monstrous in itself, because it involves the passage from one individual to two. Woman has a capacity that men will never have, to literally become two individuals in one body, in other words to achieve hybridity. Thus, woman's body and her reproductive power have the capacity to transcend the limit of the self in the most fundamental way. The recurring trope of the monster-fetus inside the woman's belly (as in for instance *Rosemary's Baby*) signifies the fear of the fetus/pregnant-woman

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<sup>9</sup> Rape is a constant threat in Butler's fiction. Lilith avoids rape from Paul Titus, and she prevents Alysson from being raped in the room of the Awakening.

symbiont as Other, an Other that is never fixed, that constantly threatens the reality of fixed identities.

The female body in *Xenogenesis* is inherently linked to hybridity and alien-ness, and it possesses the monstrous capacity to produce a monstrous progeny. The theme of loss of humanity and the possibility of a monstrous, half-human future is a central theme to the narrative. I have argued that such a theme is linked to anxieties around the female body and its capacity for the production of life. In addition, I would like to argue now that this theme is also linked to the progress of reproductive technologies and the ensuing debates contemporary to the creation of *Xenogenesis*. By the end of the 1980s, the debates around new technologies such as Assisted Reproductive Technologies (ART)—in-vitro, surrogacy, sperm conservation, etc.—as well as their advertisement by medical professionals were still extremely controversial. In *Xenogenesis*, the Oankali’s genetic “engineering” is specifically assimilated with some of these technologies by Paul Titus:

They [the Oankali] took stuff from men and women who didn’t even know each other and put them together and made babies in women who never knew the mother or the father of their kid—and who maybe never got to know the kid. Or maybe they grew the baby in another kind of animal...Maybe they just scrape some skin from one person and make babies out of it—cloning, you know. (*Dawn* 94)

The intervention of reproductive technology produces a strong social anxiety around the definition of the fetus created as well as of the pregnant woman’s body. The emphasis made by Titus on the “loveless” reproduction or the horror of a completely artificially engineered baby (cloning) illustrates the threat posed by technology upon humanity. In other words, can a baby produced in part or totally by technology be defined as fully human? What are the consequences of the intervention of technology into the “natural” process of reproduction? In *Xenogenesis*, the answers to those questions is intentionally ambiguous. The fears linked to “unnatural” children evolve throughout the trilogy. Where in *Dawn* they are a major concerns of all the characters, who refused to accept even the possibility of the human-Oankali

reproduction scheme, in *Rites* the birth of Akin is celebrated, and Lilith exclaims “He’s beautiful...He looks completely Human” (254). After she learns that Akin is actually “less human” than her daughters will be, she realizes “They can’t help what they are...what they become” (255). Akin significantly looks perfectly human, except for his inhumanly long and purple tongue, which can evidently be easily hidden. In both *Rites* and *Imago*, the shift to the main protagonist (from the mother to her children) signifies the evolution of the understanding of those engineered children. *Rites’* and *Imago’s* premises focus primarily on the acceptance of Akin by the human resisters, and in the last opus, of the advocacy for such reproductive means to the resisters by Jodahs. The Oankali’s reproductive engineering is thus gradually integrated as an inherent part of the newly founded society on Earth.

The relationship between pregnancy and alien-ness, reproduction and monstrosity, and reproduction and technology are the major themes behind the plot of *Xenogenesis*. I have demonstrated that while Butler proposes a positive redefinition of the family unit and of gendered relationships, this change came at the price of the creation of the monstrous. I have also shown that the concept of the monstrous hybrid creature was gradually integrated into the narrative as an inevitable evolution, which results at the end of the trilogy in the end of humanity as such and the creation of a perfectly hybrid society. However, this ending is problematic, because it underlines the many ethical problems behind Butler’s narrative. First, how must we account for Lilith’s resignation to her forced role as mother and concubine? How must we understand the theme of rape of both female and male humans? Finally, how can we understand the ultimate defeat of humanity and its lack of freedom?

Lilith, who the reader primarily identifies with in *Dawn*, is the first one to be coerced by the Oankali, who impregnate her against her will. However, this traumatic experience is ellipsed from the narrative; we read the news and Lilith’s reaction at the end of *Dawn*, but *Rites* starts with the birth of Akin, thus erasing Lilith’s experience from the story. Moreover,

Lilith's reaction to this coercion evolves from resistance and rebellion to resignation. Her character goes from a rejection of the Oankali's ways, to advocating in their favor. When she learns that she is pregnant in *Dawn*, Lilith reacts violently. She is revolted at having been betrayed, and horrified at the idea. In *Adulthood Rites*, though, her attitude changes:

'It [Nikanj] made me pregnant, then told me about it. Said it was giving me what I wanted but would never come out and ask for.'

'Was it?'

'Yes...Oh, yes. But if I had the strength not to ask, it should have had the strength to let me alone.' (274)

In *Imago*, she tells Jesusa that she has forgiven Nikanj: "I've understood it. I've accepted it" (671). Lilith's slow resignation to her condition is coherent with Butler's understanding of human nature as doomed when left to itself. Human beings will destroy one another; the human race is doomed if it does not embrace hybridity and if it does not embrace the Other as salvation. Jodahs's successful Earth colony, and the resisters' almost nil resistance to it in *Imago*, demonstrates that there is no hope for the human race to remain as it is. Accordingly, woman's decision-making, especially regarding her body and her reproduction—and especially a woman of color—has no power on its own. In fact, the narrative frame gradually erases the presence of Lilith: in *Rites* and *Imago*, she becomes only a secondary character. Those two texts significantly emphasize Akin and Jodahs, Lilith's offspring. The transfer from a one character-focused narrative to another is not only a clever way of renewing the plot, but it is also a subtle criticism of reproductive politics. The 1980s were marked by the advent of reproductive technologies, and the aftermath of *Roe vs. Wade*, which for the first time in history propelled fetal personhood upfront in the collective consciousness. As the fetus was enlarged to maximum proportion in the debates around abortion, the woman and her reproductive rights became increasingly smaller and insignificant. Lilith's gradual disappearance from the narrative frame therefore signifies the insignificance of the woman

behind the children she produced. In *Rites* and *Imago*, Lilith's secondary characterization renders her secondary to the main frame of action, that is to the development of the world she helped create. Therefore, it represents both her resignation to her condition, and the natural lack of agency of woman and people of color.

Furthermore, Lilith's fate, like that of the other humans, is directly intertwined with rape. In *Xenogenesis*, both man and woman must submit themselves to the will of the Oankali. I have already pointed out that the olooi "scent" enclosing the family unit prevents humans from being attracted to any other olooi. The same scent, which is irresistible to humans, is used to coerce them into having sexual relationships. In addition, the more humans participate in sex with the olooi, the more they become "addicted" to it. In fact, going away from the olooi for too long would make them sick. This is one of the ethical problems at stake for Jodahs in *Imago*, who refuses to tell his human partners about this addiction, thus thwarting their freedom of decision. Significantly, Lilith also refuses—after much deliberation—to inform them of this fact, despite her rage in *Dawn* when Nikanj had not told her about it. The concept of "scent" in the texts has two meanings. First, it is coherent with Butler's insistence on monogamy, and the linkage she makes between love and addiction. Secondly, and more importantly, the "scent" belongs to Butler's fatalist and pessimistic representation of the world. People will inevitably play a part in an evolution within which humanity as it is cannot exist, because of its inherent flaws. Women in particular will become mothers no matter what. Lilith secretly craved to be a mother again, but she did not accept the conditions of a pregnancy (hybridity and the creation of the monstrous). The olooi Nikanj nevertheless realized her secret wish by "reading" it from her mind. The olooi's ability to "read" people, even in spite of their own expressed opinion, thus flirts closely with rape culture and biological determinism (Nikanj read in Lilith her biological fate to be a mother).



Rape culture defines a society's ability to blame rape victims instead of rapists. Lilith's body "wanted" to be pregnant, therefore it justifies overpassing her expressed opposition to it.

Interestingly, the coercion of Lilith into pregnancy is explicitly linked to the "rape" of Joseph. When Lilith learns that she is pregnant at the end of *Dawn*, she says to Nikanj "'I'm not ready! I'll never be ready!'", but the olooi replies a little later "you are ready to be a mother. You could never have said so. Just as Joseph could never have invited me into his bed—no matter how much he wanted me there" (*Dawn* 246-47). Lilith's situation is compared to Joseph's refusal, because it is rape in both cases, as in both cases a rape-culturist justification is provided: Joseph's body "wanted" to have sex with Nikanj, therefore it justifies Nikanj's coercion of it. Lilith secretly "desired" to become a mother, therefore it is just to impregnate her despite her voiced refusal. The comparison made by Nikanj is significant, because it illustrates how both women and men are powerless to the Oankali. The theme of rape in Butler's work is of course not a glorification or justification of real-life rape per se. What it signifies is again the inevitableness of the destruction of the human race. In other words, the extinction/evolution of the human race will necessarily take place, but it is also for the best, as this pessimistic perspective is neither whole nor simple. Hoda Zaki reads Butler as a "peculiar mix of utopianism, anti-utopianism, and ideology" ("Utopia" 247). The utopic element in *Xenogenesis* is the capacity for the human race to reinvent itself, to continue to exist, but under an altered form. For Butler, humanity can only improve through the transcendence of its own flaws—high intelligence mixed with hierarchical behavior. By embracing hybridity with the Oankali, humanity resolves this conflict, even if it means the end of human beings as they are. The dying mountain resisters of *Imago* are a last representation of the dangers of rejecting this evolution, which also means extinction. However, for Zaki, the utopian possibility of the texts is thwarted by the fact that this capacity for evolution is outside of human reach, and necessitates alien intervention.

Therefore, Butler's pessimistic point of view about the human condition is bitter-sweet; it is not entirely dystopian, it is actually filled with hope of a better life in which human beings have become something else, in which they have transcended their natural contradiction that pushes them to self-destruction. Moreover, the fact that *Imago* features an olooi—a gender that does not exist in our reality—as the main protagonist and as the establisher of a new world is a symbol of the obsolescence of a gendered binary system, and the hope for a universe in which such difference would not exist.

## Chapter 2

### “Don’t let the bastards grind you down”: Reproduction, Production, and the Female Body in *The Handmaid’s Tale*

Despite apparent differences in genre between Butler’s *Xenogenesis* trilogy (1987-89) and Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale* (1985), the two stories are surprisingly similar. They are both set in post-apocalyptic futures—the Republic of Gilead in the *Tale* is a post-US totalitarian state—brought forth by man’s negative intervention in nature. In *Xenogenesis*, the Earth has been destroyed by a nuclear war; in the *Tale*, man’s pollution has rendered the majority of Americans sterile. In both universes, these events result in reactionary policies: in *Xenogenesis*, humans rebelling against the Oankali return to a sort of primal patriarchal society, while in the *Tale*, a fundamentalist Christian group takes over and reinstates the Scriptures as law—literally. Beyond the characters’ attempts to enact Biblical patriarchy, both texts rely on and rewrite in different ways the Biblical narrative. Atwood’s use of the Bible is more explicit; the *Tale* imagines the consequences of taking the Bible—and conservative, anti-feminist ideologies—literally. The plot is based on the story of Rachel and Leah (Genesis 30:1-3) and plays on other religious tales.

Within the narratives, the similarities between the main protagonists are even more striking. Both Butler’s character Lilith and Atwood’s character Offred are caught between the desire for motherhood and the imposed patriarchal duty to produce children. Both have to face rape (psychological for Lilith, physical for Offred) and the coercion of their own bodies and reproductive rights. Like Lilith, who is forced into pregnancy, Offred’s sole social function and reason for existence is the production of children. Moreover, there exists in both texts an anxiety around the concept of hybridity—for Lilith, the fear of an alien-human identity is at the center of the narrative, but a slow evolution throughout the trilogy eventually

makes hybridity triumph over genetic stasis. For Offred, the fear of the possibility of the “Unbaby”—an infant declared not to conform to Gilead’s standards and described as a monstrous, half-human, half-animal creature -- constantly looms over pregnancy.

However, what is particularly interesting in this comparative study is the way in which these texts work around and resolve essentially the same conflicts differently. I have argued in the previous chapter that Butler astutely rewrites the Genesis story both to empower the racially othered female, and at the same time to negate the possibility of an essential woman. I have also shown the ways in which Butler negotiates the trope of the monstrous body and the monstrous infant. The *Tale* works with different criteria: opposite to the powerful, strong-minded and rebellious Lilith, Offred—a white, middle-class woman—is the ordinary woman who passively accepts her condition in Gilead. In addition, while *Dawn* is a third-person linear narrative, the *Tale* is told through the restricted perception of Offred, in a non-linear, almost atemporal narrative. Overall, *Xenogenesis* follows the narrative conventions of the science-fiction/fantasy novel. The *Tale* is disturbingly personal, like a diary, and confusing in its constant interventions of the past into the present. Furthermore, while *Xenogenesis*, with its aliens and genetic magic, is clearly fantastic, the *Tale* is acutely realistic. The subjective introspection provided by Offred as well as the realism of its settings, are what makes Atwood’s story unique in its resolution of the problems common to both texts.

Like *Xenogenesis*, *The Handmaid’s Tale* responds to the increasing use of reproductive technologies in the 1980s. Such medical inventions as the in-vitro technique, test-tube babies, and surrogacy sparked debate at the national level, and in particular among feminists. Do these technologies represent a progress over reproductive rights for women, or are they on the contrary a veiled apparatus that guarantees more population control for the state? In her book *Women As Wombs: Reproductive Technologies and the Battle Over*

*Women's Freedom*, Janice Raymond makes a scathing criticism of reproductive technologies. She writes, "Because all [reproductive] technologies, drugs, and procedures violate the integrity of a woman's body in ways that are dangerous, destructive, debilitating, and demeaning, they are a form of medical violence against women. Some of these, such as reproductive contracts (surrogacy) create a traffic in women's bodies" (viii). Reproductive technologies participate in the discourse of "choice" that veils the fact that some women do not have the privilege of "choosing," and that the central problem is not so much choice as it is women's rights over their own bodies. Other feminists, in particular liberals, see those technologies as progress, because it allows one the best information to make appropriate decisions about one's fertility.

The debate around reproductive technologies is only a part of a bigger debate, the power of the state over the individual's body, or biopowers<sup>10</sup>. In other words, in what ways does the State use female bodies in particular to control population? Rickie Solinger demonstrates at length the different reproductive politics used by the State upon white middle-class women, and poor women of color<sup>11</sup>. She argues that while the government promoted ambiguous information about contraceptives, anti-abortion politics, and emphasized adoption or the moral duty of motherhood on white women, on poor African-American women it promoted abortion, contraceptives and infertility, in particular through welfare and social services. Solinger's impressive study underlines the stakes of reproductive rights, and the ways onto which women's "choice" is dependent on State policies. In her *Tale*, Atwood explores these problems by creating a dystopian world in which reproduction of a particular population is the main priority of the State.

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<sup>10</sup> Foucault's term designates the techniques of subjugation of the State to control bodies and population.

<sup>11</sup> *Pregnancy and Power: a Short History of Reproductive Politics in America*

The narrative follows Offred, a woman living in the Republic of Gilead, a totalitarian monotheist regime located in on what used to be the USA. Offred—“Of Fred”, her designated name signifying her status as property of a Commander—narrates her story as a Handmaid, a woman appointed to a well-to-do elite couple for the purpose of producing a baby. Due to a variety of environmental problems, the birth rate of the American population has decreased alarmingly, and most people are sterile. An extremist religious group called the Sons of Jacob leads a coup, annuls the Constitution, and declares reproduction the moral duty at the foundation of this reborn Christian nation. The new political system relies on the reproductive mandate to deny women fundamental rights, such as the right to work, to possess property, to read and write—in short, anything allowing them power or independence. The women of Gilead are classified under five categories (from the highest social rank to the lowest): Aunts, in charge of the military “education” of women, Wives, Handmaids, Marthas (domestics), and Econowives (wives of lower-status men). Handmaids are chosen solely for reproductive purposes. All other women—lesbians, feminists, nuns, etc.—are declared “Unwomen” and sent to work in forced labor-camps where they clean up toxic waste or pick cotton. The narrative of the *Tale* is complex; as Annette Kolodny has pointed out, Atwood is an expert at weaving past and present in her fiction in a surprisingly realistic way. We thus learn about Offred’s “Before Time,” in which she was a wife to Luke and a mother to a daughter. Offred’s past influences her present in Gilead, and since her past is our “present,” the story produces the uncanny impression of retrospection upon our own society. Furthermore, another complexity of the narrative is the unreliability of Offred as narrator. We learn at the end of the novel that Offred recorded the story on tapes, which were discovered nearly two hundred years later by historians. These academics reconstituted the narrative, but we do not know to what extent they edited it—or even put it in the correct order. Moreover, Offred claims several times that she is changing reality and that she does not want to “tell this story.”

The ambiguity of the text allows for a multiplicity of answers to the intricate and multilateral problems at its center. Like Butler, Atwood does not provide for unilateral solutions—the ending of the novel, in particular, demands the reader’s interpretation and reflection. In this chapter, I propose to analyze how Atwood plays with the same concerns at stake in *Xenogenesis*. Firstly, how is “woman” created in the *Tale*? How does Atwood understand “woman,” and how is her understanding different than Butler’s presentation of “woman”? I argue that Offred is the only realistic female character in the book—all others (Moira, the mother, Serena Joy) are constructed as romantic stereotypes, idealized versions of woman that she cannot be. In other words, Offred is constructed in parallel to novel heroines; she represents a non-romantic mirror image that the reader can identify with. But as the narrative unfolds and the fate of these characters is revealed, Offred, like the reader, struggles to continue to see them as heroes. Because they are romanticized heroines who do not accept their fate (like Offred) and fulfill their function within the system, these characters are eventually annihilated. Moira, the radical feminist, ends up working as a prostitute in the elite’s private club. She will be killed as soon as she becomes too old. Offred’s mother has been sent to the Colonies as an Unwoman, and is condemned to die within three years. Serena Joy, the Commander’s Wife, is condemned to a purposeless domestic and repetitive existence. Later on, Offred suffers the same destiny—the sexist academicians from the future who read her records mock her and reduce her experience to a mere subjective, useless tale.

The second set of problems at stake in the novel is the juxtaposition of nature/culture onto body/mind. How does Atwood subvert the myth of “Nature,” and how does she rewrite the relation established between woman and Nature? The central, overarching ideology in Gilead is functionality. Bodies, and specifically the Handmaids’ bodies, are reduced to their function as wombs. The self is destroyed for the purpose of sublimating the body. In the second part of this chapter, I analyze the ways in which functionality works to create the

female body as the producer of a perfect product: the child. In the *Tale*, Handmaids are constantly under the threat of producing an “Unbaby,” or an infant that does not correspond to Gilead’s criteria. This is the true force behind the *Tale*, because this creation of a criteria-specific object, the infant, is ironically produced by a discourse of “natural” childbirth and pregnancy. The return to “Nature” in Gilead, claimed as a response to the problem of infertility, is actually an ironical reversal in which patriarchy produces “nature” and the “natural” pregnant woman in order to create a child that is indeed a manufactured product.

In *The Handmaid’s Tale*, women are reduced to and constrained by their social function, which makes female unison against patriarchy impossible. The Aunts serve as military “educators” of handmaids-in-training, and they also maintain power over women in general. They are dressed in brown military uniforms. The Wives, dressed in blue, are the spouses of the elite—domesticated women who have no other purpose. Handmaids are the surrogate mothers assigned to elite childless couples, and they wear blood-red. Marthas in green are domestics, while Econowives are wives to the lower classes of men, and they also work. Significantly, their attire is a patch-worked dress of all other colors (brown, blue, green, red) to designate their multi-functionality. These color-coded social roles are important because they reflect the actual reduction of women to producers of certain very specific tasks. Yet, they also signify the complex social relations between the women of Gilead. These groups are established so that no fraternity or “sorority,” as the text suggests (11) can be possible between them. In other words, the economic and social status of these individuals prevents their unison against the oppressor. For example, Offred explains how Rita judges her because she is a Handmaid (10), and generally blames her for the Ceremony (81). Atwood’s astute tactic is but an exaggerated version of the very real fact that “women” do not identify as a class because there exists no common denominator to all women. In addition, there is a subtle racial subtext underlying these tensions: while the Marthas are brown, the



Handmaids are exclusively white (Offred, the two Ofglens, Janine, etc.) so that they can produce the elite's idealized "baby". Atwood is portraying a certain type of white feminism by constructing these radically defined social categories: the women cannot resist against the totalitarian system of Gilead because they are being profoundly divided among themselves by this system.

The demeaning of women to their sole, belittling social functions (house-chores, housewifery, surrogacy, etc.) also serves the purpose of dehumanizing them entirely. The main female characters of the novel are made into paper-cut dolls, two-dimensional figures that underline the absurdity of the Gileadian system. Offred, as the main character, is the most realistic. Scholars have often criticized the protagonist for being extremely passive and naively romantic. In their analysis of resistance in the *Tale*, Peter G. Stillman and S. Anne Johnson even argue that Offred's transgressive escapades with Nick only work into the politics of Gilead, and therefore "powerfully construct her as a being who defines herself by her body." (76 "Identity") To them, Offred's definition of herself as a body is "precisely the identity Gilead requires" (76). Although I agree with the fact that Offred does reduce herself to being a body, I argue that this is precisely the way in which she survives. When taken in the context of the narrative's violent events, Offred's actions represent what the majority of people would do: survive by any means possible, avoid pain, respect the rules, adapt, and make the most of every opportunity. She "chooses" to be a Handmaid because it is easier and relatively painless. She does not help Moira escape from the Center because she does not want to be beaten up. She stops listening to Ofglen's plans because it is too dangerous. Offred is thus not a novel-like heroine because she stands as the persona with whom most people would identify in the context of coerced choice. There is evidence enough of this fact in that we never learn her name, and that even her physical description is as generic as possible: "I am thirty-three years old. I have brown hair. I stand five seven without shoes..." (143). As

many scholars have pointed out, Offred's own resistance is her narrative; but the fact that it was never published in the immediate post-Gilead period (if she did survive long enough, that is) suggests that the tapes were intended for herself only, as a reflection on her own experience. It is also a reference to Orwell's *1984*, the classic that inspired Atwood's *Tale*—Winston Smith's illegal recording of his thoughts on paper is an act of resistance against the totalitarian state of Oceania. Like with Offred however, in the end this personal narrative is meaningless because the all-powerful state consumes all individuality.

The other characters—Moira, the mother, and Serena Joy—are all made to fit into cultural stereotypes of women. Moira and Offred's mother (also nameless) represent the two ends of a same spectrum, the rebel-feminist heroine. The mother is most likely a first-wave or second-wave feminist; we learn through a video shown to the Handmaids that she participated in the abortion rights movement. Towards the end, Moira reveals that she has been sent to the Colonies (252). Moira stands as the new, radical feminist: she writes papers on "date-rape," she participates in the Underground Femaleroad, she rebels against the Handmaid-system. However, like the mother, she ends up tragically as a resigned prostitute at Jezebel's club. Jennifer E. Dunn argues that both Moira and the mother are written as heroes, in order to offer positive images of women and counter-examples to Offred ("Feminism" 85). As heroes, they are believable only in the context of romance, and Offred struggles to continue to see them as such: "I don't want [Moira] to be like me. Give in, go along, save her skin...I want gallantry from her, swash-buckling, heroism, single-handed combat. *Something I lack*" (249 emphasis added). Offred wants heroism from Moira, and she wants to tell her mother that she was right, that she finally understands her critique of patriarchy. Significantly, when Offred learns that her mother is working in the Colonies, she exclaims "Thank God!" Moira remarks that she should not be grateful because that fate is terrible, but Offred's utterance could be interpreted as gratitude that her mother is fulfilling her heroic

destiny as a martyr (when Moira is clearly not anymore). Katherine V. Snyder argues that Moira and Offred's mother represent Offred's ego ideals. She writes "Just as her romantic relationships with men...are self-destructively framed by the generic and emotional constraints of the fairy tale romance and Hollywood movies, so too are her romantic investments in her significant other women" ("Screen Memories" 190-91). Therefore, Moira and the mother represent something that Offred is not yet and perhaps wishes she were.

The most flagrant of this reduction of women into papier-mâché figures is perhaps Serena Joy. She stands as the housewife condemned to the domestic realm, married to an infertile and unfaithful husband. Before Gilead, we learn that Serena Joy used to be a TV personality who preached for "traditional" family values. The Gileadian system reconverted her to the role of Wife to a Commander, and Offred ironically reflects, "she's been taken at her word" (46). The transition to housewife-hood is underlined by the change of her name, from Pam to "Serena Joy." In becoming Serena Joy, she also becomes a mere image: "Serena Joy, what a stupid name. It's like something you'd put in your hair...in the time before, to straighten it. *Serena Joy*, it would say on the bottle, with a woman's head in cut-paper silhouette on a pink oval background with scalloped gold edges" (45). Offred's reflection is significant because Serena herself embodies this paper-cut figure: she is no more realistic than Moira or the mother. Offred writes: "[Serena's] face is no longer a flawless paper-cut profile, her face is sinking upon itself, and I think of those towns build on underground rivers, where houses and whole streets disappear overnight...Something like this must have happened to her, when she saw the true shape of things to come" (46). In other words, "Serena" is but a shadow of her former self, she has "disappeared." In fact, she is a mockery of a stereotype of a 1950s housewife. Condemned to the house, she displaces her "maternal" instincts onto her garden, which is both the symbol of fertility and blood in the text. Offred mocks her knitting of scarves for the Angels (the military) (13), which represents the

immanence and futility of her position (“I think these scarves aren’t sent to the Angels at all, but unraveled and turned back into balls of yarn, to be knitted again in their turn” (13). Serena thus stands as the opposite of the Moira/mother hero ideal; she is the nightmarish concept of housewifery, without the children.

Moira, the mother, and Serena Joy are shadows in this narrative because they do not fulfill the one and only function of the female body, to produce the manufactured infant. Even Janine (a.k.a Ofwarren), who is the most docile and subjugated of all the handmaids, does not manage to produce this perfect infant: her pregnancy results in an “Unbaby.” Consequently, she also disappears; by the end of the novel, she is insane. The failure of fulfilling woman’s primary function, motherhood, thus results in a death sentence: those who do not abide or fail to do so are condemned. In “Maternity and the Ideology of Sexual Difference in *The Handmaid’s Tale*,” Janet J. Montelaro applies Luce Irigaray’s work to the *Tale* and argues that the reduction of woman to her biological fate eradicates her sexuality and is a means for patriarchy to subjugate woman. To her, the scene of the Salvaging of the “adulteress” Handmaid who is hanged means that the refusal of maternity signifies death in patriarchy. She writes “In Gilead, to deny maternity is ‘to be made into an angel,’ to become frozen in death” (247). Indeed, to fail at maternity, to produce a defective infant-product, is to be “frozen in death.” Woman in the *Tale* is constructed as a productive object, a machine-like womb. If the female body does not fulfill its purported function, it is either secluded outside of Gilead (Moira, the Mother), or in the realm of the domestic and insanity (Serena Joy, Janine). Offred’s obedience and passivity allow her body to signify the possibility of function—but this is limited in time, as the Handmaids only have three chances at conceiving. Ultimately, as I argue later, the function of the female body is ironically made void, as male infertility is declared illegal and woman is made to be the sole responsible for reproduction. The task of woman to conceive the infant-product is an impossible one—as

demonstrated by the absence of any successful pregnancy in the novel—because the participation of men in the reproductive process is not recognized. In other words, woman's function to produce an infant is preposterous because men are infertile, and it is ironically condemning them because male infertility does not exist in Gilead.

Instrumentality is expressed everywhere in the novel. From the objects to the shops, to the people, everything in existence must fulfill its particular function. In the chapter introducing the world of Gilead, there is an emphasis on function: the bed is made for sleep only, the flat-heeled shoes are only meant to save the spine, and the red clothes define Handmaids (8). This minimal functionality is omnipresent in the Republic of Gilead: the shops are minimalized to their core function—"All Flesh," "Milk and Honey," etc.—which are represented by images. Since women are now forbidden to read, logically every signifier is reduced to the simplest element, a bare image. Significantly, in the Historical Notes we learn that Limpkin (who may or may not be Offred's Commander, but who in any case is one of the founder of the Gileadian system) is credited with the phrase "Our big mistake was to teach them how to read. We won't do that again" (307). Reading means interpretation, diversion, thought; simple visual signifiers call to none of this. They, like the human bodies, fulfill their primary, core function—significance—and nothing else. Evidently, the most remarkable of these reductions to functionality is the names of the characters themselves. Offred, like the names of all of the Handmaids, is a slave name indicating the status of being possessed. "Serena Joy" is a pseudonym that sounds like a cosmetic product—exactly what Serena is, truly. Even the Commander and Offred's mother do not get a real name. Although we learn in the end that Offred used these terms to perhaps protect her own identity from potential repercussions, Gilead itself named their agents only by their function: "Eyes" for special agents, "Angels" for soldiers (an ironical poke at the military, creator of angels?), "Econowives," etc.

The functionality of objects and people is superimposed with the function of the female body, the production of children. The objectification of the body is emphasized throughout the novel, and so it suffices to give a few examples. When Offred and her mate Ofglen see Janine for the first time, and before recognizing or even acknowledging her, it is her pregnant belly that they perceive first: “One of [the two women] is vastly pregnant; her belly, under her loose garment, swells triumphantly” (26). Janine is not the subject of this triumph; the belly is emphasized over her. It becomes the object of envy and jealousy for the other Handmaids; for Janine it is a token of pride and superiority. In Gilead, the body becomes a more important signifier than the self, and what it signifies is the fulfillment of function. Later on in the narrative, as Offred visits the doctor, she says “Covertly we regard each other, sizing up each other’s bellies: is anyone lucky?” (59). Menstruation, on the other hand, means failure (73). Another example of the primacy of the body over everything else is the Ceremony itself. The ritual rape orchestrated between the Commander, his Wife, and Offred is set during the time of her ovulation. Offred says, “It’s my fault, this waste of [Rita’s] time. Not mine, but my body’s, if there is a difference. Even the Commander is subject to its whims” (81). Offred’s body not only controls her; it determines the most important social ritual of the new family unit. The female body thus takes primacy over any other social event, to its gratification or detriment. During the Ceremony, Offred is laid down on the couple’s bed, unable to move, entirely passive. Serena is the one in control “of the process, and thus the product. If any” (94). Her body is only used as a means through which to obtain this “product.” In this scene, the self and the body are distinguished: the Commander is “fucking the lower-part of [her] body” (94). Moreover, Offred explicitly signifies the construction of her body as reduced to its function. Before Gilead, she “used to think of [her] body as an instrument,” but now it is merely “a cloud, congealed around a central object, the shape of a pear, which is hard and *more real than I am* and glows red

within its translucent wrapping...” (73-74 my emphasis). The uterus thus defines her, but also becomes more “real” than she is.

This body is directly constructed by Gilead in order to maximize its production of offspring. The reduction of the self to the body’s function is emphasized by the long periods of waiting that Offred suffers. Handmaids have literally no other function than reproduction. The narrative of the novel resists linearity in time, because Offred’s life is so literally devoid of any activity that she is forced into a state of retrospection. Throughout the novel, the reader is made, like her, to reflect upon the time “before” Gilead through Offred’s memories. However, anything unnecessary to reproduction has no value. Infertile women are sent to the Colonies, where they are not expected to live beyond three years (248). When Moira tries to escape the first time, her feet are so badly beaten that she can no longer walk, because, as Aunt Lydia says “For our purposes your feet and hands are not essential” (91). The Red Center, where Handmaids are taught their new function, also trains them in preparation for pregnancy—they follow breathing exercises for birthing, they are taught rules to maximize conception, etc. In addition, everything is made to protect the body, but only inasmuch as its reproductive functions: Handmaids are forbidden coffee, liquor, and cigarettes (14), they must go to the doctor’s every month (59), they have to bathe but only for hygiene’s sake (62), they must exercise daily but not strain themselves, they eat according to a precisely designed diet. The carefully planned attention to the female body signifies its objectification: the female body must be protected in order to ensure its productivity. In addition, here is clearly a concept of purity in the treatment of the female body—it must be protected from polluting influences such as alcohol or tobacco, it must not be strained, but rather remain in an effortless immanent state, and so on. Even the chaste Ceremony (everyone is fully clothed, the Handmaid keeps her veil, no kisses or touches as allowed, etc.) emphasizes a certain ‘purity’ applied to coerced sexual relations. In order to maximize the body’s production of

elite children, the female body must be kept into a state of chastity, both physical (diet, exercises, etc.) and moral (sexual chastity). However, the definition of “purity” in Gilead is tainted: handmaids are both prostitutes and chaste reproducing-wombs; both a pride and a symbol of social capital, and shameful. In “Feminism and *The Handmaid’s Tale*,” Jennifer E. Dunn remarks “The red material [of the Handmaids’ clothes] is meant to represent the blood of the womb and the sacred rite of reproduction, yet this symbolically resonant color retains historical connotations of both sexual allure and sexual shame” (77). Her analysis is important because it underlines the blurred lines between purity and impurity: nothing is either one or the other in Gilead, but perpetually both. The absence of definite limits between the two is a criticism of the hypocrisy of a society that both hyper-sexualizes women and at the same time demands sexual purity from them. Jezebel’s Club for example, the secret brothel to which the Commander takes Offred, symbolizes the double-standards of the totalitarian state.

Significantly, the body is also possession. The penalty for the rape of a Handmaid, ironically, is death. Adultery is also punishable by death. As a means to produce progeny, the body becomes rare and valuable, and as such it is more important than the self. The privatization of the body is explicit in the Handmaid’s newly given names, which represent their belonging to their Commander, and by the attendant elimination of their birth names. In many ways, this is a critique of the Name of the Father—with the exception that in Gilead monogamy is abolished for the elite. Nevertheless, and because it is so highly prized, the body also becomes a means of empowerment for the woman. The most decisive act of subversion for a Handmaid is suicide, as it literally destroys the body, producer of children. Yet the body can be used on a daily basis for small acts of rebellion. Even when it is entirely covered, Offred uses her body to provoke the guards. She looks at one of them directly, and moves her hips as she walks. “I find I am not ashamed after all. I enjoy the power; power of a



dog bone, passive but there” (22). Sensuality and sex thus become subversive acts in this world of functionality. Offred’s relationship to Nick exemplifies this point, as it allows to feel alive again. Before Nick, her body was estranged to her: “My nakedness is strange to me already. My body seems outdated...I avoid looking down at my body, not so much because it is shameful or immodest but because I don’t want to see it” (*Tale* 54). Her sexual affair with Nick gave her body back to her. In other words, sex and sensuality in the text are means to regain control and power over Offred’s body<sup>12</sup>. Furthermore, Offred can submit her body for certain benefits. She accepts Serena Joy’s offer to help her conceive by seeing Nick secretly, in exchange for a favor. Offred is given a cigarette and a match for accepting the deal, and while it may seem like a small reward for the surrender of her sexuality, the match itself becomes the symbol of much more: potential fire, potential suicide, in a word, destruction. Even if she does not act upon it, the match exists as an open possibility.

In Gilead, the self is destroyed to be replaced by function: women are made to fit into positions that shatter their self-identification; they become mere images. In addition, for Handmaids the body takes primacy over the self. The womb, essential to reproduction, is maximized and protected at all costs, while the individuals become but a shallow envelope surrounding it. And what the womb is meant to produce is a specific, perfect object: a white, healthy infant. The child is classified as Baby or Unbaby according to criteria that are never revealed to the reader. I argue hereafter that the child-product is a white, perfect progeny. However, this progeny is impossible because reproduction is made the entire duty of the woman. In Gilead, it is illegal to mention male infertility, which is considered inexistent. As a consequence, absurdly, Handmaids who do not succeed in conceiving the perfect child-product are sent to their deaths in the colonies. The grotesque reproductive politics of Gilead

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<sup>12</sup> However, her relationship with Nick is also a criticism of Offred’s passivity. She abandons any idea to connect with the underground Femaleroad with Ofglen, because her life is made bearable by her escapades with Nick. Atwood is here representing the idea that people will accept anything, as long as they have a minimum of comfort.

are an exaggerated representation of real-life politics, in which the woman is made sole responsible of contraception, conception, and child-rearing. Nevertheless, in Gilead these politics are a result of a discourse of “Nature” and “naturalness.” Gilead made reproductive technologies illegal and promoted a return to “natural” conception, pregnancy, and childbirth, which I argue is deeply ironical. The conception of the desired future generation is impossible because of the lack of appropriate technology and basic sexual education knowledge.

In *Mother Matters: Motherhood as Discourse and Practice*, Andrea O’Reilly criticizes the re-appropriation of the term “childbirth” by the medical profession. To her, the word has become a signifier in a Barthesian sense. In other words, the word has become devoid of its original meaning to signify a different set of practices entirely. The influence of the “childbirth”-myth thus created is so strong that the majority of women feel compelled to go to hospitals to give birth. For O’Reilly, the feminist efforts to redefine childbirth as “natural,” with woman in control over her own experience, is empowering, although ultimately she criticizes these attempts as equally tyrannical. O’Reilly’s analysis is particularly interesting when put in parallel to *The Handmaid’s Tale*, because in the world of Gilead it is *patriarchy* that reinstates childbirth as natural and outlaws technology linked to reproduction. The government of Gilead promotes a return to “nature,” which is compatible with their effort at “purifying” the female body. However, like the concept of “purity” is tainted in the text, so is the definition of “nature” and “natural.” The return to a natural reproduction produces, paradoxically, the monstrous Unbaby instead of the perfect product demanded by patriarchy. The idea of Unbaby is terrifying and traumatizing for the Handmaids. As Janine is about to give birth, Offred wonders, “What will Ofwarren [Janine] give birth to? A baby...or something else, an Unbaby, with a pinhead or a snout like a dog’s, or two bodies, or a hole in its heart or no arms, or webbed hands and feet?” (112). This image

of a monstrous child is comparable to Lilith's fear of the hybrid infant in *Xenogenesis*. The idea of producing an Unbaby is so repulsive to Offred that when she learns that Janine's infant was indeed categorized as such, she thinks "I feel an illness, in the pit of my stomach...I don't want to know what was wrong with it [the baby]...To go through all that, for nothing. Worse than nothing" (215). The idea expressed here is not so much that conceiving an Unbaby is horrible, but that *the process of production* resulting in "nothing" is horrible. In other terms, pregnancy is understood as a long and pernicious process that should be rewarded by the creation of an adequate product. If the product is an Unbaby, then the process was in vain, there was a fault in the production. Therefore for Offred, the Unbaby is monstrous not so much because it has brought about by coercion and rape, but because she has been made to go through an unwanted pregnancy and yet the results are "fruitless." In addition, despite Offred's imagined Unbaby, the reader never does have access to a description of it. Did Offred's vision come true? Because of the ambiguity of the narrative, and because of the white Christian eviction of people of color and Jews from Gilead, it is possible to imagine a racial dimension to the division baby/Unbaby.

Annette Kolodny argues that the purpose of Gilead is the reproduction of the white race. Gilead has expelled African-Americans, and has exterminated the Jews. Brown women have become servants. In addition, the links between Gilead and fundamentalist Christianity reinforce the idea of an attempt at generating a pool of a "pure" white generation. In the Historical Notes, we learn that the infertility caused by pollution particularly touched white men (it was the age of "plummeting Caucasian birthrates" according to the Professor, 269). Can we interpret, then, the Unbabies as other than white? The monstrous appearance of Offred's imagined Unbaby certainly suggests a creature not entirely human. Moreover, the reader discovers that it is common practice in Gilead to use men other than Commanders to induce pregnancy. For example, Offred's doctor offers to "help" her, and Serena organizes

her secret visits to Nick for that very purpose. About Janine, Ofglen says, “She thinks it’s her fault...For being sinful. She used a doctor, they say, it wasn’t her Commander’s at all” (215). Here, there is a juxtaposition of adultery with the creation of the Unbaby. Janine is punished for her cheating by the creation of a faulty product. Adultery resulting in imperfect or abnormal infants calls to mind the “milkman’s baby” trope, or the fear of the mixed-race child. In Chapter 1, I have mentioned that the monstrous baby is a common trope in science fiction and horror, and in particular in punishment of a woman’s sexual behavior (being too active, or cheating). The absurdity of the *Tale* is that women must have recourse to adultery in order to survive the grotesque demands of patriarchy, and still then, the conception of the child-product is impracticable. Patriarchy’s claim to a return to “natural” childbirth and pregnancy thus results in a monstrous product, an undesirable.

The Unbaby represents the nameless, a monstrosity that transcends description and must be eliminated immediately. Yet, this monster progeny is constructed through “natural” childbirth, which is the irony Atwood is playing with. Gilead’s claim to a return to “natural” childbirth is doubly ironical. Firstly, because reproduction is imposed on women under the penalty of death, which subverts the term “natural” understood as what comes naturally, without artifice. Secondly, because the cause of infertility in the former US is the *pollution of nature*. Offred writes that “The air got too full, once, of chemicals, of rays, radiation, the water swarmed with toxic molecules...they creep into your body...Who knows, your flesh might be polluted, dirty as an oily beach, sure death to shore birds and unborn babies” (112). The next paragraph even mentions atomic power plants exploding, and a mutant strain of syphilis. The pollution of nature by men is an extremely important theme because Gilead’s immediate reaction is to return to a “pre-technological” reproduction. Gilead is not devoid of technology (there are still computers, credit cards, etc.) nor is it against medicine, yet it outlaws reproductive technology. The rhetoric behind this rejection of reproductive

technology is that in order to re-establish the essential, subjugated woman, we must also go back to “natural” reproduction. In other words, the rape of nature has resulted in the castration of white men (the impossibility to reproduce), and as a consequence it is necessary to re-establish “nature” through woman. Woman must return to her original state of subjugation in existing only as a tool for reproduction.

It is important to underline how nature is constructed in parallel to woman: the body has become a “dirty as an oily beach” which kills both birds and unborn babies. The rape of nature/woman by man results in the death of their offspring. Yet, “purity” is constantly subverted in the *Tale*, because it is inextricably attached to ‘impurity’: reproduction/prostitution, chastity/rape, reproduction/adultery, etc. Likewise, the attempt at “naturalizing” woman is equally double-edged; childbirth is ‘natural’ (without the aid of technology), but it is coerced and the mother-infant relationship is made impossible. There is something uneasy about Offred’s description of Janice’s childbirth scene:

It’s hot in here, and noisy...In the corner of the room there’s a bloodstained sheet...The room smells too, the air is close...The smell is of our own flesh, an organic smell, sweat and a tinge of iron, from the blood on the sheet, and another smell, more animal, that’s coming, it must be, from Janine: a smell of dens, of inhabited caves, the smell of the plaid blanket on the bed when the cat gave birth on it, once, before she was spayed. Smell of matrix. (123)

The description evokes a stuffy, smelly room; even the rhythm of the last sentence brings to mind a staccato, breathless speech. Roberta Rubenstein writes “...in the perverse relations of Gilead, the distinctions between ‘natural’ and ‘unnatural,’ between human and non-human, are grotesquely inverted or reduced” (“Nature and Nurture” 107). She argues that in the novel, the unnatural is expressed by the constant descriptions of people as animals, and she draws attention in particular to the way smell and taste are used to signify the polluted state of Gilead. She writes “The air of Gilead is stagnant, suffocating, oppressive: literally, the polluted atmosphere; symbolically, the claustrophobia and oppression by its unwilling female captives” (109 “Nature and Nurture”). Therefore, even as pregnancy and childbirth are

reconstructed by Gilead as “natural,” they are both polluted and polluting. On one hand, the claustrophobic description of Janine’s childbirth indeed represents the forced pregnancy imposed on them, which creates a bad smell of “matrix” like that of a cat. The other women are stuck in this nauseating room, to assist at a scene of childbirth that will result in a polluted product in itself, an Unbaby. On the other hand, it is possible to interpret this scene as an attempt at subverting patriarchy itself: childbirth is not a pristine, beautifully “natural” process; it involves blood, pain, smells, feces. In writing this scene, Atwood is also debunking the stereotypes that the myth of “natural” pregnancy could induce in men.

Moreover, in order to understand how the opposition between the “natural” and “non-natural” is inverted and thus subverted in the text, it is necessary to analyze and understand Janine’s birth-giving scene as compared to the birth-giving of “before”. Offred’s memory of childbirth in the “time before” offers a capital parallel with the present scene; she talks about a film the Handmaids were made to watch at the Red Center:

a pregnant woman, wired up to a machine, electrodes coming out of her every which way so that she looked like a broken robot...Some man with a searchlight looking up between her legs, where she’s been shaved, a mere beardless girl, a trayful of bright sterilized knives, everyone with masks on. Once they drugged women, induced labor, cut them open, sewed them up. (114)

The passage dehumanizes the woman completely, as it clearly associates her with the machines she is linked to. She becomes an object, a mere cocoon from which to extract the desired product (“cut them open, sewed them up”); her body is transformed to fit this operation (“she’s been shaved”), she is made into a girl. The film is evidently meant to be understood as a vision of horror of how poorly women were treated in the pre-Gilead world. However, Janine’s preparation for birth bears some striking similarities: two women “grip” her hands, while a third woman pours baby oil on her belly rubbing “downwards.” Aunt Elizabeth, representing the military in her khaki dress and her “severe” chin, stands at her feet (117). This composition clearly gives the impression that Janine is framed on all sides by

people, with Aunt Elizabeth embodying the man “looking up between her legs.” In fact, this scene also calls to mind Offred’s Ceremony—Serena is holding her hands, the Commander is “fucking her lower-body,” violating her in the same way Aunt Elizabeth metaphorically does. Janine does not look like a “broken robot,” but she looks like she is held prisoner by the other women, unable to move or to escape. Technology and “nature” for Atwood are thus part of a false dichotomy, both utilized by patriarchy to co-opt women’s reproductive rights. O’Reilly writes that “Obstetrical literature...views the birthing woman as a machine, her labour [sic] as a form of factory production that must be supervised, managed, and controlled” (“Mother Matters” 32). Yet in Janine’s birthing scene, she is equally supervised and controlled—in fact, patriarchy immediately takes away the product of her pregnancy. In order to produce the perfect product, the woman’s pregnancy must thus be supervised by the most competent of observers: the women whose lives depend on the quality of the production. Janine is only the factory of this product; in fact, her childbirth does not even belong to her. The Wife “frames” Janine and acts as if she is the one who is giving birth; she also gets to decide the child’s name. All the Handmaids present chant in unison birthing exercises “Breathe, breathe...hold, hold. Expel, expel, expel” (123), which turns the scene into an almost religious ritual. The childbirth is their “orgy” (125). They also feel and experience psychosomatic pains in their bellies and breasts (124) and they produce milk (127). In the end, and foreshadowing Janine’s baby herself, the Handmaids hold a “phantom, a ghost baby” (127). Yet Janine’s baby is not a human being, it is an object: “The Commander’s Wife looks down at the baby as if it’s a bouquet of flowers: something she’s won, a tribute” (126). The resulting product of this “natural” childbirth is an object that the Wife has won; soon it will be devoid of its humanity and become an Unbaby. In the *Tale*, a story about women’s rights to their own bodies and reproduction, the sole “natural” pregnancy of the narrative creates a monster that does not deserve a description—a failure of patriarchy. Moreover, there is a veritably the irony in the

*Tale*: because men wish to reconstruct the essential, subjugated woman as the only producer of fecundity, they thwart any possibility of reducing her to motherhood. Because male infertility is ‘illegal’ in Gilead, there is consequently no solution to it. Even when Handmaids use other men than Commanders—which suggests, by the way, an ironic hierarchy in Gileadian infertility: high-ranking, powerful men are impotent while illegal lovers are still fertile—their pregnancy is unfruitful or disastrous.

In imagining a society in which women are only defined by their bodily functions, Margaret Atwood criticizes the emphasis put on the biological “duty” of women. In “Popular Culture and Reproductive Politics: *Juno*, *Knocked Up* and the Enduring Legacy of *The Handmaid’s Tale*,” Heather Latimer argues that recent movies dealing with unwanted pregnancies recycle, in fact, the same reproductive politics at stake in *The Handmaid’s Tale*, in particular the emphasis on fetal life over maternal voice. In a subversive twist, Atwood’s unmistakable irony reverses the return to “natural” practices preached by certain feminists of the time and construct a natural childbirth that results in a monster. At the same time, successful pregnancy is impossible in Gilead because of the pollution of nature. For Atwood, reproductive technologies and other forms of “natural” reproductive techniques advocated by feminists are equally totalitarian, and there is no clear distinction made between an “inherent” desire for motherhood and society’s demands and co-option of women’s bodies to produce children. In the end, the Historical Notes leave us doubting whether any change is possible in patriarchal culture for women. Yet, as the ambiguous ending of Offred’s narrative leaves the reader to interpret for herself or himself the meaning of the *Tale*, the epilogue makes us reflect on the way we interpret history and warns us against the dangerous notion of thinking that “everything has been done already.”

While Octavia Butler’s ending in *Xenogenesis* is a mixture between utopianism (the human race will evolve and transcend its flaws) and fatalism (the intervention of a superior



race is necessary for this transition, and the human race must be altered dramatically), Margaret Atwood offers a more nuanced perspective on the reproductive rights debate. To Atwood, *both* reproductive technologies *and* the return to “naturalness” advocated by certain feminists are equally subjugating women. Atwood’s *Tale* offers no solution to the problem, and on the contrary to Butler, she doubts that history will ever improve. Offred’s tale is not only decomposed, edited, and transformed, it is also not taken seriously. The academics read her story as an interesting historical or literary artifact, but they do not see the political tropes behind it, nor do they understand the oppression that Offred lived through. In fact, they justify it: “Gileadean society was under a good deal of pressure, demographic and otherwise, and was subject to factors from which we ourselves are happily more free. Our job is not to censure but to understand (Applause)” (267). The implication here is that this modern society is unlike Gilead because they are not subjected to such “pressure” and “factors.” They understand *because* they would most likely resort to the same techniques is “pressured” enough. Octavia Butler, like Atwood, knows that history repeats itself and that hierarchy will always favor oppression, but she imagines a solution outside of the loop: transforming humanity into something else, something alien and better, using reproduction. Atwood offers an ambiguous ending, with no reassurance even as to the fate of her characters. The fact that there is no reproduction possible in the *Tale* signifies that the point of the novel is not so much to enter the debate of “choice” or even of women’s rights, but to act as a warning tale against both debates.

### Chapter 3

#### “Father’s Dead, Asshole”: The End of Patriarchy and the Beginning of the New Woman in the *Alien* Series

The *Alien* franchise started in 1979 with Ridley Scott’s *Alien*, one of the first science-fiction horror films. James Cameron’s sequel *Aliens* (1986), although made as an action movie, is equally critically acclaimed. The two subsequent movies, debutant David Fincher’s *Alien3* (1992) and French director Jean-Pierre Jeunet’s *Alien: Resurrection* (1997), have achieved far less recognition—Fincher’s film is widely considered a disaster while screenwriter Joss Whedon, who wrote *Resurrection*, called it the worst mistake of his career<sup>13</sup>. Two additional films using the Alien race belong to a related franchise, *Alien vs. Predator* (with two films, *Alien vs. Predator* in 2004 and *Alien vs. Predator: Requiem* in 2007), although they have been firmly condemned by critics. However, the *Alien* franchise continues to intrigue fans, especially after Ridley Scott’s blockbuster “prequel” *Prometheus* (2012). Academics have created an immense discussion about the themes of reproduction, motherhood, and gender representation around the four films, which often stand as primary examples of the postmodern concerns and anxieties at stake in science fiction and horror. However, the purpose of this chapter is not to discuss the representations of both mother and father, as well as pregnancy and motherhood, but rather to examine how the films consistently *resist* these themes. The *Alien* series as a whole is particularly important to my project because it entirely rejects institutions such as the family, motherhood, pregnancy, and progeny. While Octavia Butler in *Xenogenesis* embraced reproduction as a means for

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<sup>13</sup> “Joss Whedon Reflects on What Went Wrong with *Alien: Resurrection*”  
<http://www.comicbookmovie.com/fansites/JoshWildingNewsAndReviews/news/?a=77814>

evolution, and while Margaret Atwood in *The Handmaid's Tale* created a universe within which reproduction was impossible, the *Alien* series goes beyond: it repeatedly makes these institutions irrelevant and obsolete. In the films the woman-as-hybrid is not the resigned heroine of *Xenogenesis*, nor is she the ambiguous survivor of oppression like in the *Tale*: she is the victor who has transcended all previous institutions.

Lieutenant Ellen Ripley (Sigourney Weaver), the main protagonist of the four films, is a unique character in the Hollywood tradition. She is continually strong and independent, consistently more intelligent and courageous than male characters, highly identifiable and yet not hyper-sexualized, and she embodies the trope of the reluctant hero who saves the world. Like Lilith in the *Xenogenesis* trilogy, Ripley is singled out by the company as its only hope in *Aliens*—though only after everything else has failed. Also like Lilith, Ripley is confronted with a race of aliens that are so radically inhuman that the mere sight of them is revolting. Although the Oankali and the alien race in *Alien* are very different (the former being noble and good-intentioned, the latter violent and destructive), they have the same unique, obsessive goal of perpetuating their race. For both alien races, this can only be achieved with and through human beings. In *Alien*, the aliens lay eggs that only open when a living host is found. The larvae contained in the egg—called a ‘facehugger’—attaches itself to a human face to impregnate its victim. The implanted larvae matures within the host and is born by devouring its way out of the thorax. Furthermore, the character evolution of both Lilith and Ripley is equally similar: from a blatant rejection of the aliened Other, to an embracing of hybridity in the end.

The theme of rape, like in *Xenogenesis* and Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*, is also omnipresent. Ripley is metaphorically raped by Ash in *Alien*, and a group of prisoners attempt to rape her in *Alien3*. Like Lilith and like what could/would have happened to Offred in the *Tale*, Ripley is impregnated against her will by the alien in 3. In the *Tale* and *Alien*,

rape or the threat of rape is caused by patriarchal structures—the government and the military. In all three texts, it is also a means of coercion always linked to reproduction. The series works with complex and intricate themes of motherhood and mother-daughter relationships. One of the primary common points between the heroines of the three texts examined in this thesis is the concept of motherhood as a site of loss. Lilith, Offred, and Ripley have all lost their child outside of the narrative frame—Ripley’s daughter has died in between *Alien* and *Aliens*, as Ripley was stuck in hyper-sleep for 57 years. As a consequence, motherhood is both highly desirable and at the same time a threat to the individual’s integrity and the limits of the self. In the *Alien* series, pregnancy exists only under the form of an alien impregnation, and with the certainty of death to the “mother” caused by the alien fetus. Furthermore, even when pregnancy does not result in death in *Resurrection*—the fetus is extracted from Ripley before it can kill her—the female body itself becomes alien: Ripley has alien blood in her as well as enhanced super-human capacities. *Alien*, thus, like *Xenogenesis*, juxtaposes pregnancy with hybridity; in other words, the consequence of reproduction is always intertwined with a necessary redefinition of the self, and in particular of the self as human.

However, the *Alien* series presents some obvious differences from the two other texts. Firstly, the medium of the film creates a very different set of signifiers. The film represents by showing, while the text describes and leaves to interpretation. Furthermore, the cinema “sutures” the viewer to the film; the viewer “cannot” escape the film, and she/he cannot control what she/he sees---the point of view of the view is that of the camera. In addition, the Hollywood tradition is that of economy—everything on screen signifies something to the story. This difference in medium is even more significant within the science-fiction horror genre. As a non-realistic genre, science-fiction horror allows for the wildest, most violent representations of social anxieties. Caroline Joan Picart writes that “cinemyths are public

performance spaces within which patriarchal and matriarchal myths compete with each other, and where conservative and progressive ideological forces struggle against each other in working through collective anxieties, traumas or aspirations” (“Ripley as Interstitial Character” 1). Because of the suture intrinsic to the cinema, horror is particularly efficient in manipulating the viewer’s emotions. In addition, horror exults in breaking of taboo, in reveling in the abject, and in subverting boundaries. As a result, the shocking images produced in the genre are revelatory of those limits.

Secondly, the *Alien* series is unique because it is imagined and produced by four different directors, which allows the overarching plot as well as the character of Ripley to evolve in interesting ways. Thanks to the difference in perspective of both the directors and the writers, the story created by the four films is quite complex and contradictory. The *Alien* series proposes different possibilities than the other texts analyzed in this project, to the problems at stake in the texts: rape, bodily rights, reproduction, and hybridity. I have argued that Octavia Butler rewrites Biblical myths in order to displace conventions of motherhood and the family in her text. In Atwood’s *Tale*, reproduction is made impossible by the rape of nature by patriarchy—women are incapable of producing the desired progeny-object because the patriarchal rule is absurd: male infertility is no longer recognized, despite the fact that it is the sole responsible for the failure of reproduction. In this chapter, I want to take a step back from academic debates on the signification and representation of the mother in *Alien*, but rather observe how the films *resist* motherhood, reproduction, and the family.

Barbara Creed’s article “Horror and the Monstrous-Feminine: An Imaginary Abjection” (1986) is one of the key texts in the discussion around *Alien* and gender. Creed applies Julia Kristeva’s theory of the abject to explain the movies’ horrific representation of childbirth, genitalia, and the mother. The abject is represented by social taboos about bodily fluids (pus, vomit, blood, feces, urine, etc.) that need to be expelled in order to define the

subject. The abject is thus the “not-I,” representing the limits of self. It is also the limit of the symbolic order. As such, the mother becomes ‘abject’, for she, too, needs to be rejected by the subject in order to embrace the father’s symbolic order. Creed argues that *Alien* repeatedly portrays the primal scene as horrific, and understands the alien and its environment as a representation of the archaic mother and the phallic woman. In particular, she makes a compelling analysis of the film’s settings as vaginal (the ship, the alien planet) and of the numerous phallic images throughout the movie. Finally, Creed interprets the end of the movie as a successful repression of the dangerous desire of the archaic mother—to devour the life she has created—as Ripley kills the alien and returns to the pristine sleeping pods of the ship, both reassuringly feminine and nurturing towards the ship’s cat. Although Creed’s article has forever shaped the way in which we read horror movies, many scholars have since criticized her work and proposed alternative interpretations.

In particular, Catherine Constable challenges Creed’s Kristevan reading of the movies, which she analyses as a whole<sup>14</sup>. For Constable the alien craft is a tomb rather than a womb. The alien egg represents the womb seen from inside, while the facehugger represents the placenta and its tail the umbilical cord (179). Therefore, the scene of the facehugger’s attack on Kane (John Hurt) (the first victim of the crew) is shocking because it puts the inside of the body outside, and it covers the face which is the primary site of individuation (181). To her, the movie illustrates Kristeva’s theory of the body as container, in which the alien serves as limits. Moreover, Constable adds a careful analysis of *Resurrection* to her argument, which makes Creed’s reading (albeit only of the first opus) more complex. She argues that *Resurrection* effectively blurs the limit between the self and the alien, as Ripley becomes all at once clone, alien, and human. Therefore, *Resurrection* does not conform to the structures

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<sup>14</sup> “Becoming the Monster’s Mother: Morphologies of Identity in the *Alien* Series” (1999)

of the Kristevan abject, for in the movie Ripley must embrace the abject (the alien) as part of herself.

Both interpretations underline key elements and important themes of the films. It is undeniable that the mother as depicted in the franchise is a representation of what psychoanalysis has revealed about the process of subject-formation. Other scholars have provided useful insights to the discussion, debating the relevance of Creed's interpretation now that the series is more complete. However, it is important to step back from too close a look at representations of motherhood, and observe instead how motherhood is perpetually annihilated. Despite the evident themes of the series, it is crucial to understand the different texts' constant rejection of the possibilities of progeny, the nuclear family, and the pregnant body. It is often noted that any attempt at a romantic subtext—in *Aliens* and *Alien3*, in particular—is always nipped in the bud (i.e., Ripley's lovers die), and that in fact, none of the four movies of the series has any remotely sexual scene. This is even more surprising in that blockbuster science fiction movies usually include at least one—one needs only watch trailers to have access to it. While many scholars see in this fact the desire to create a perfectly asexual female mother-heroine, I want to expand on this rather simple explanation to suggest that the texts actually create a universe in which sexuality, traditional motherhood, and reproduction are irrelevant to woman. Each and every one of the movies perpetually annihilates the possibility of progeny. In *Alien*, "Mother"—the computer controlling the ship—is destroyed, and Ripley kills the alien, whose principal threat is the production of more aliens. In *Aliens*, Ripley's daughter, of whom mention was never made in the original movie, is dead when Ripley comes back to Earth. The purpose of this elimination of Ripley's progeny is twofold: first, it justifies in part her decision to go back to the alien planet (since she no longer has emotional ties to Earth). Secondly, Ripley's daughter was created by Cameron in order to explain Ripley's maternal attachment to the little girl Newt (Carrie

Henn), the only survivor of the colony. Yet, Newt is immediately eliminated in the first ten minutes of *Alien3*, because Ripley needed to be set as an outcast for the purposes of the movie. In the same film, Ripley kills herself in order to escape “giving birth” to the alien parasite inside her. In addition, Ripley perpetually murders the progeny of the alien Queen throughout the series. In a telling scene in *Aliens*, she burns an entire nest of alien eggs. Finally in *Resurrection*, Ripley murders her own alien-human infant in a shocking abortion scene.

The constant annihilation of the possibility of progeny is reinforced by the death of the nuclear family. In *Aliens*, Newt’s family—mom and dad, and little brother—all die. Ripley’s potential family—with romantic interest Captain Hicks (Michael Beihn) and Newt herself—also dies at the beginning of *3*. In addition, “mother” and “father” are two figures that are repeatedly killed throughout the series, either metaphorically or literally. The possibility of the heterosexual couple is also equally eliminated: in *Resurrection*, the couple Captain Frank Elgyn (Michael Wincott) and Sabra Hillard (Kim Flowers) (whose most sexual scene is a foot-rub), both die. Despite the different directors and writers in each film, these consistent tropes of elimination cannot be ignored, especially in a discussion about reproduction, motherhood, and the female body, and especially considering the happy-ending scene of *Resurrection*. The possibility of progeny, the nuclear family and the heterosexual couple, as well as the pregnant body, are repeatedly rejected. Patriarchy is repeatedly shown as a complete failure because it can neither hear nor understand the voices of its Others. However, as a result of this failure, and within the postmodern possibilities of space, a variety of counter-discourses are produced. Social structures such as the family, the heterosexual couple, mother and father, as well as sex and sexuality, become irrelevant to the story and to the heroine. In the world in which Father has died, the woman can exist and survive in her state of liminality.



In the *Alien* series, patriarchy—represented by the company and military groups—never succeed in the colonization of the alien race. Their plans are persistently annihilated by Ripley. The failure of patriarchy in controlling either the aliens or minorities, as I shall argue, is one of the key element to understand how the series resist structures like the family. In 2122, the *Nostramo*, a commercial ship working for the Weyland-Yutani corporation, is returning to Earth after a hauling mission. On the way back, Mother, the ship's computer, detects a transmission from a nearby planet, LV-426. First interpreting it as an SOS, the *Nostramo* is by law required to engage in a rescue-mission and to investigate the planet, despite the complaints of the crew. Weyland-Yutani—"the company"—requires all its ships, no matter the function, to investigate potential alien life. We learn later in the movie that the company orders Ash, the ship's scientist and android, to bring back the alien at all costs, including the lives of the crew. The overarching plot of the movie is thus set upon commercial interests—the company wants to exploit the alien for their weapons industry—at the cost of human life. Numerous scholars have discussed the opposition between the capitalist mega-corporation and the blue-collar crew, as well as the underlying Marxist themes of the movie, but for my purposes it suffices to identify the theme of capitalist exploitation of the workers and the aliens as a potential to create arms of destruction. However, the company constantly fails to achieve their goals. On a global level, the company fails to capture the alien in the first three movies, every time because of Ripley. She cleverly uncovers their plan in *Alien*, she denounces the treacherous company man Burke (Paul Reiser) in *Aliens* and convinces the crew to destroy the aliens, and in *3* she sacrifices herself—and the alien in her—in front of the company itself, despite their promises (having her life back, having children). The company finally manages to produce the alien through a resurrected Ripley-clone in *Resurrection*, but their attempt at controlling it is a disaster: every scientist and every soldier die painfully (significantly, by being penetrated by the alien's tail

through the head). At the beginning of *Resurrection*, Wren (J. E. Freeman), one of the scientists says, “And the animal itself is wondrous. They'll be invaluable once we've harnessed them,” to which Ripley replies “It's a cancer. You can't teach it tricks.” This passage is significant because it illustrates the desire of the company to dominate and control the alien like an animal. This theme of domination is the main purpose of the discovery of alien life—colonization through knowledge. Yet, Ripley laughs at the presumption, because she knows that such a domination is naïve and impossible. As the four movies repeatedly demonstrate, patriarchy's attempts at colonizing the aliened Other is a complete failure.

The desire to dominate and control is patriarchal, and it is explicitly exemplified in *Aliens*, set almost 60 years after the first installment. In this opus, the company deploys a colony on LV-426 in order to examine the alien of Ripley's story. In one of the earliest scenes of the movie, a happy white nuclear family is shown travelling on the planet in a truck. There are several shots of the inside of the truck, in which the mother is scolding her little boy and girl (who turns out to be Newt), while dad is driving. The familiarity of the scene is reassuring even in this alien environment. Suddenly, the truck comes in front of a vast mount, which the viewers of *Alien* recognize as the aliens' hatch. After the father proposes to go inside the mother asks, “Shouldn't we call in?” to which he replies, “Let's wait till we know what to call it in as.” This scene, and in particular the father's remark, is extremely significant to what the alien means to the company. The father does not want to inform anyone of their discovery before he can *name* it, and thereby appropriate it. The act of naming is the privilege and duty of Adam in the Biblical story, who gives names to everything Eve points at. Language is a prime tool of patriarchal hegemony that defines and constructs thoughts and things. Language—at least, English—also works in binary systems (woman/man, white/black, etc.), which defines everything in opposition to an Other. The father's desire to name the alien discovery is therefore an act of domination. Yet

significantly, the alien never does acquire a name—even the movies' titles refuse to name it—and in the following couple of scenes, the father is the first one to be attacked by a facehugger. This scene in *Aliens* is indicative of both the presumption of the patriarch to dominate the fundamental Other, and at the same time what such a presumption will result in—the father dies because he refuses to acknowledge the danger of the alien.

The desire to dominate the alien is conflated with the desire to control woman. In *Resurrection*, when Ripley laughs at Wren's suggestion to tame the alien, he quips “why not? We're teaching you [tricks].” Clone-Ripley is treated like the alien: put in a cage, she is taught how to speak, how to behave. She is explicitly associated with an animal, as she is put in shackles. Furthermore, the company's repeated attempts to bring back aliens to Earth via women, in *Aliens* and *3*, exemplifies the ways in which the female body signifies an empty, disposable carrier of a much more precious product—progeny, weapons/money. Like in the *Tale*, Ripley's body comes to represent a means to access a desired product. This product can be attained by rape, a constant theme throughout the series.

In one of *Alien*'s key scene, a rape attempt takes place between Ash (Ian Holm) and Ripley. Ash represents the thoughtless, corporate-driven employee who obeys orders at the cost of his humanity. She has just discovered his plans to bring back the alien for the company, and confronts him. Extreme close-ups alternate between Ripley's and Ash's face, gauging each other. A close-up shows Ash's hand pulling hair out of Ripley's head. The next shot is a canted angle of Ripley struggling on the floor. In the following sequence, shots switch from a low-angle of Ash, to a straight-on-angle of Ripley lying on a bed. Ash takes a rolled *Playboy* magazine and stuffs it down Ripley's throat, a symbolical rape. Behind Ash are pictures of naked women from magazines. The irony is that Ash, as an android, cannot feel sexual urges. What he really does is mimic the heteronormative male dominance over women. Interestingly, it is the *Playboy* magazine—object representing the hyper-

sexualization of women—that he uses, as if to remind her that her role as a super-heroine winning over men in the film is not what is expected of her. Finally, Parker (Yaphet Kotto) and Lambert (Veronica Cartwright) are able to save Ripley from Ash’s grip. A fight between Parker and Ash ensues; Ash firmly grips Parker’s breast, and Parker eventually half-decapitates him with an iron bar. A high-angle shot shows the decapitated Ash on the floor, the fight apparently over. Yet, this is only a classical red-herring and the monster rises up again to attack Parker. A straight-on-angle reveals Parker on the floor, Ash struggling between his legs in an explicitly rape-like position. Finally, Lambert has to impale Ash with a tube to finish him. When Parker stands up, his shirt is torn and he is covered in the milky substance of Ash’s “blood.” The explicit images of this double-rape are shocking, and it represents the ultimate attempt at body subjection from the company. Yet, the point of the scene is that the rapist is decapitated, annihilated. In the next sequence, Ripley probes through Ash’s body with metallic instruments, perhaps the most intimate violation possible to exert on an android. She only reanimates his head to obtain information, which symbolically castrates him. Rendered impotent, he lies on the table like a grotesque doll. The destruction of Ash and his reduction to an object in parts only symbolizes the power and superiority of both victims over their aggressor. This victory is even more significant as technology is consistently portrayed as superior to human beings in the sequels (Bishop is stronger and faster than the men of the crew, Call is the one to save humanity).

The association between Parker and Ripley is meaningful in the context of their struggle against patriarchal structures. Despite the many racist problems within the series<sup>15</sup>, teams such as Ripley, Lambert and Parker are significant, because they are the voices that are not heard. One of the principal reasons of the failure of patriarchy is its self-representation as

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<sup>15</sup> The characters of color in the stories are stereotypical at best, and they inevitably die. As Caroline Joan Picart has remarked, it is only upon white female bodies that the possibilities of liminality can be expressed (“Ripley as Interstitial Character” 8).

rational and rightful, and of minorities such as women and people of color as useless. One of the first scenes in which Ripley takes action is set right after the first exploration of the planet. Crew member Kane has been attacked by a facehugger, and he is brought back to the ship by the captain and Lambert. Ripley refuses to open the hatch lest the ship be contaminated, a decision which is not only her due right as next-in-command of the ship, but also perfectly sane and rational. Nevertheless, Ash overrides her order and opens the door, which literally launches the entire series of disasters that form the narrative. In the same manner, Parker repeatedly recommends that Kane be 'frozen' (put in hyper-sleep), in order to wait for a safer environment to extract the parasite—which is keeping him alive—from his face. Once again, this seems like the safest, most rational decision to be made. But the captain refuses to listen, which results in the alien being set free in the ship. Parker and Ripley are not listened to or obeyed, and the result is mayhem. The very same trope is used in *Aliens*, in which Ripley observes powerlessly the insouciance of the new crew in a parallel to the breakfast scene of *Alien*. In this scene, the viewer, who has presumably watched *Alien*, is put in a paradoxical position of dramatic irony because of her/his identification with Ripley and her previous experience. She repeatedly tries to warn them of the danger of the alien race, but they ignore her in their self-confidence and put everyone at risk. Therefore, it is because it ignores the rational voices of minorities that patriarchy fails again and again.

Moreover, patriarchy's failure is continual not only to its refusal to listen to Others, but because it fails to understand them. Because the company keeps thinking of the alien as an animal to be controlled for war purposes, it cannot comprehend the alien nor its purposes. In *Resurrection*, a particularly telling scene exemplifies this fact. Dr Gediman (Brad Dourif), the principal scientist of the ship, observes a group of aliens in their cage, behind a glass window. One alien comes close to the window, and a pan shot shows the alien and the scientist face to face. They start moving their heads rhythmically, and it is unclear who is

mimicking who. Gediman closes his eyes and kisses the window sensually, to which the alien responds by hitting the window with its independent mouth within the mouth. Gediman punishes the creature with a stream of icy air. By this technique of assimilation, Gediman seemingly teaches the alien to behave. Yet, some scenes later the aliens escape, and as a military man enters the cage, an alien hits the icy-stream button, which reduces the man to icy bits. The scientists of the company do not understand the behavior of the alien, and they greatly underestimate its intelligence. Cameron's *Aliens* in particular wrote the alien race as intelligent as—or even superior to—the human beings<sup>16</sup>, but this fact is never considered by the company, even two hundred and fifty years after the first encounter. This failure to recognize the aliened Other as non-animal, that is intelligent at a human level, is the other main reason why the company consistently fails to achieve its colonization aims.

The presumption of the scientists to “teach [the alien] tricks” is thus blind and sterile because it implies the refusal of the recognition of the Other as an equal entity. In addition, and because minorities' voices are unheard within the conflated patriarchal world, its enterprises are doomed to fail again and again. The patriarchal desire to name the Other—alien or female—is also void because of the truncated perception of the Other as inferior. The series thus consistently portrays patriarchy as irrelevant to the postmodern universe. Nevertheless, the failure of patriarchy to dominate and control its Others is productive of anti-discourses. It offers possibilities to create non-hegemonic structures in a space in which rules and conventions, such as the objectivity of science, the strong male hero, etc., do not have any meaning. In a world in which patriarchy is a complete failure, the family, the role of reproduction, and parenthood become irrelevant institutions; they can no longer be imposed

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<sup>16</sup> See for instance the aliens' plot to gather all the humans in one place, then hide until they can attack them all at once. Another example is when the aliens cut the electricity of the ship in the same movie.

by or stand as state apparatuses, because the constant colonization of humans by aliens redefine the meaning and limits of the self.

Many scholars, such as Barbara Creed, have interpreted the premise of *Alien* to be a fight between the “good” mother and the “bad” mother, the innocent asexual mother versus the archaic/phallic mother, etc. When taken in context, though, the entire series demonstrates that Ripley never does become a mother. Her two daughters—the unknown daughter and Newt—die from directorial decisions, and she has at least two abortion scenes—in *3* when she kills herself in a pit of lava, and in *Resurrection*, in which the Newborn is excruciatingly, and bit and bit, expelled into space. In fact, throughout the movies, Mother is constantly killed. In *Aliens*, the Queen mother is also expelled out into space, while her entire progeny is burnt by Ripley. In *3*, Ripley herself carries a Queen, and therefore she is exterminated by fire. Finally in *Resurrection*, the Newborn devours its biological mother’s head, and while it does not try to kill Ripley (its human mother), it is Ripley who rejects motherhood by killing it. Even “Mother,” the computer of the *Nostromo*, is destroyed. The repeated elimination of Mother, whether it be by meta-narrative incentives, or within the narrative itself, suggests the obsolescence of a structure—motherhood—in a world in which woman-as-alien is the savior. In the context of the academic discussion surrounding the movies, *both* the grotesquely archaic, biological mother is repeatedly assassinated, but also the “good” mother that Ripley represents, through the elimination of her progeny or the potential of a progeny. As a matter of fact, “mother” is removed from Ripley’s body when the alien Queen is extracted in *Resurrection*. Ripley remains alien, but she has made the “gift” of the human reproductive system to the Queen. The capacity to reproduce has been symbolically displaced onto the alien, who is destroyed by its product, the Newborn. The only other woman who survives with Ripley, Call (Winona Ryder)—an android—despite her nurturing propensities, is symbolically shot in the belly. Ripley perversely penetrates the hole left by the bullet, which

is both sexual and at the same time mocking of the perpetual “hole” now left there. Therefore, both Mother and progeny or the potential of progeny are repeatedly annihilated in the movies. Consequently to the failure of patriarchy, Father is also killed at length, despite the religious thematic of 3 in particular. In *Resurrection*, “Father” is the name of the computer controlling the ship. As the film uses a subverted Frankenstein myth, in which science creates an alien woman, “Father” represents the figure of patriarchy. Yet, towards the end, Call, the android who is more humane than human beings, hacks “Father” to prevent Wren from stealing the *Betty* (their escape ship). From a high-angle shot, Wren asks Father to allow him in, but gets only silence. He repeats anxiously, mouth quivering: “Father?” Wren’s last quivering supplication is definitively the symbol that Father/God is no longer in control. Maliciously, Call says “Father’s dead, asshole.” Indeed, Father has been co-opted by the female android, and there is no longer any hope for the scientist.

The death of Mother and Father becomes even more symptomatic, as the nuclear family is also annihilated<sup>17</sup>. As previously stated, Newt’s perfectly typical, white American family and its accompanying clichés (dad drives, siblings fight, mother scolds—even down to the typical family trip in a sci-fi version of a family car) is brutally eliminated from the narrative. The viewers have access to the father’s death, face covered with the parasite, but we do not even know what happened to the rest of the family. This is in itself somewhat surprising, as a simple flashback could have appealed to the viewers’ sympathy, and the death of the little boy is even more atypical. It is crucial to emphasize what Newt’s family represents for the viewer. As a traditional white 2.5 children-family, the Jorden family stands as suburban middle-class family at its finest. A classic American trope in science fiction or action movies is often that such a family thrives and survives the tests of the narrative, and emerges reinforced and reunited. Yet in *Aliens*, the family is mercilessly annihilated, which

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<sup>17</sup> In *Aliens*.



signifies the ultimate failure of patriarchy, and at the same time the impossibility of its structures in a space that is profoundly liminal.

Yet, perhaps the most interesting subversion of family conventions is the character of Newt herself, and her relationship to Ripley. Newt is the sole survivor of the entire colony established on LV-426. Although it is not exactly clear how, we learn later that part of her survival was her faculty of adaptation and her understanding of aliens' ways. She is the one who guides Ripley's crew through the tunnels with perfect precision, and she also tells them the habits of the aliens to come out at night. Most importantly, Newt is extremely rational. When the aliens take down the shuttle sent to save the crew, she reasons "I guess we are not going to be leaving, now." In fact, she is set in opposition to marine Hudson (Bill Paxton), who becomes hysterical after the wreck of the shuttle. While he is screaming and raving, she calmly proposes to get back inside. Newt thus defies the conventions of the little-girl role, in which the child stands for innocence and must be saved. Newt saved herself the entire time before the crew arrived, and now she serves as guide to the others. Moreover, her relationship to Ripley is not a traditional one of mother-daughter. In "Adoptive versus Biological Mother in *Aliens*," Robin Roberts argues that Ripley's and Newt's relationship are that of equals, because Newt does not need Ripley to survive. Roberts understands the alien queen as a representation of the danger of biological motherhood, while she sees Ripley as an adoptive mother. In other words, the mother-daughter relationship between Newt and Ripley defies norms and traditions. The adoptive family, based on skills and trust, is valorized over the traditional nuclear family, which cannot survive. In addition, the relationship between Ripley and Newt is that of a single mother to a child, but nothing in their relation requires the need for man as husband-father.

Furthermore, it is important to look more closely at Newt in order to understand the important subversion made to the construction of the woman-subject. Before the alien

invasion, Newt belonged to the cliché of the American family. Her experience after it and because of it, though, has made her into another person. This transition is illustrated by the picture that Ripley finds in her cache, which reads “Rebecca Jordan: Second Grade Citizen Award.” The girl is depicted as a smiling, little blond angel—the radical opposite of the filthy person unable to talk that the crew finds. Rebecca was the “citizen,” Newt—the first word she pronounced, a name chosen by herself—is the survivor. Significantly, as Ripley is washing her face (which a close-up reveals as cold and unblinking), she says “it’s hard to believe there’s a little girl under all of this,” and indeed, no little girl is left. Newt’s difference in terms of subject-formation is further apparent in the important motherly scene of Ripley tucking her in bed. As Newt tells Ripley she does not want to sleep because of the bad dreams she has (another parallel with Ripley), Ripley tells her that Stacey, her doll, does not have bad dreams, and that she should try to “be like her.” Psychoanalysis understands dolls as devices onto which children project both the ego, via identification, and the phallus in the case of little girls. But Stacey is only a doll’s head, symbol of the fragmented ego that Newt can only construct out of “Rebecca.” Furthermore, Newt pragmatically replies to Ripley’s identification plea “She can’t have bad dreams because she’s just a piece of plastic.” Newt’s refusal to identify with the doll is the first step for the little girl to reject the necessity of the phallus.

In the next shots, shown from the point of view of Ripley, she denies the truth inculcated by her mother—monsters do not exist—and forms her own opinion (there are real monsters). This is the second step in the subject-formation. Finally, Newt confronts Ripley on the subject of the primal scene, which she conflates with the alien parasite: “isn’t that how babies come? I mean, people’s babies. They grow inside you.” A number of scholars have pointed out that the alien’s way of being born comes from the myth that children often have, that babies grow inside the mother’s stomach, and get out from the navel. Ripley replies that

it is “very different”; yet, by the end of the series in *Resurrection*, the alien Queen has adopted a mammalian reproductive system, and she, like Ripley, gives birth to an alien-human creature. The alien childbirth scene, which obsesses Ripley through nightmares throughout *Aliens* and 3, has become ‘human’ and produces half-human babies. As Ripley is about to leave, and in a strange reversal, Newt plays the “gotcha” game upon Ripley. Newt takes on the role of the mother for a brief moment, while Ripley, like a child, falls into the trap and laughs. Scenes later, when Ripley comes back into the room to sleep with Newt, she discovers her under the bed. This is significant to Newt’s refusal to go back to a comfortable existence; she can no longer be Rebecca, she must always be Newt.

Newt’s subversion of the role of the child attests to the new rules and conventions of family relations. She is equal to Ripley in terms of experience and maturity, and her process of subject-formation rejects phallogocentric exigencies. Since the nuclear family, with Mother and Father at its head, is no longer relevant or possible, the formation of the child, and particularly of the female child, conforms to different systems and regulations. More importantly, and in the larger context of the series as a whole, Newt represents the formation of woman as a decisively liminal character, an entity which refuses fixed categories and embraces fully postmodern.

Many scholars have argued about the importance of *Resurrection*, not only within the global narrative of the series, but also in the ways it constructs woman as fundamentally hybrid. As in *Xenogenesis*, hybridity and liminality are simply the necessary process for survival in a technological world. *Resurrection*’s Ripley is the fundamental liminal character; she is all at once human, alien, and clone. In the first scenes of the movie, the camera glides slowly into the ship, doors opening onto a younger, hairless body of Ripley in a tube (such as the ones in which the aliens are kept in *Aliens*). Two scientists—a woman and a man—frame the scene, creators of the new Ripley. As the camera closes-up on her slightly changing face,

a voice-over of Ripley quotes Newt's affirmation from *Aliens* "My mommy always said there were no monsters, no real ones, but there are." But in this new context, it is unclear who the monsters are: Ripley? The scientists? The aliens? Clone-Ripley is by essence monstrous, as her alien-ness is apparent both physically and psychologically. Her hair is pulled back and gelled up, her costume resemble the skin of the alien, her nails are long, sharp, and painted green. Even the way she moves is not exactly human—she almost slithers. In addition, the Ripley-clone has enhanced alien capacities, such as super strength, acid blood, and invulnerability. In a memorable scene, alpha-male Johner (Ron Perlman) challenges her in basketball, but cannot even touch her. He ends up thrown against a wall, powerless. However, Ripley is also profoundly human. She sides with the crew and helps save the Earth. More revealingly, she chooses to abort her human-alien child because of its grotesque alien-ness and its potential for destruction. In "Alien, (M)Others, Cyborgs: The Emerging Ideology of Hybridity," Patricia Linton argues that only hybrid characters can survive in *Resurrection* (177). She reads Johner as a "human whose size and unusual facial contours...gesture towards human/animal identity" and Vriess (Dominique Pinon)—who is in a wheelchair—as a human/machine identity. Linton writes that the message of the film "is that survival of the fittest favours the cyborg" (177). This fact is linked to the emphasis on the superiority of technology over humans already mentioned. Much like the subtext of *Xenogenesis*, hybridity is the means through which survival and the future are possible.

The scene in which Ripley discovers her clones establishes the profound humanness and at the same time alien-ness of Ripley. As the crew attempts to leave the ship, Ripley is seemingly attracted to a door marked "1-7." A shot from behind the door shows Ripley's face marked with the numbers, which represent her genesis—the seven previous attempts at cloning the Lieutenant Ripley. As she enters into the room, the camera alternates between shots behind her, meant for the viewer to empathize with Ripley's traumatic experience, and

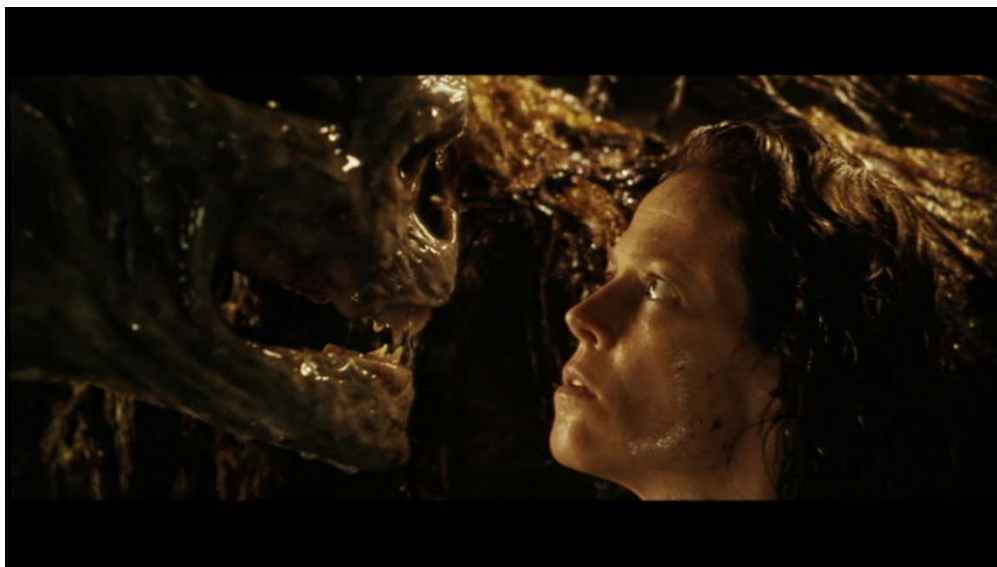
medium-long shots to close-ups, displaying the wide range of emotions she experiences—disgust, empathy, pain, grief. This is the very first time in the movie that Ripley is shown having any type of human emotion, and it is also the most poignant. The monstrous clones are displayed one by one. The first is a fetus-looking creature with scales. The second looks almost like Ripley, with its long, dark hair, but it has two horrific mouths. The third has the morphology of an alien in human flesh. One other clone resembles a distorted Ripley, with long, impossibly crooked fingers. The clones represent the monstrous potential of cloning and of hybridity, and of technological pregnancies. Finally, clone 7 murmurs to Ripley. She is the only one alive, and the closest representation of Ripley, although her limbs are all enormously emphasized and crooked. Her naked body is inflated, covered in scars and veins. Seven's body is a grotesque representation of the body deformed by pregnancy and age. The clone whispers "kill me," to which Ripley very emotionally obliges. She torches the entire lab in a cathartic moment. This action bears several important meanings. Firstly, it proves once and for all Ripley's humanity; the killing of seven is an act of compassion and empathy. Secondly, Ripley destroys her genesis as a synthetic being. In embracing her humanity, she necessarily has to reject the synthetic nature of her creation—in killing seven and the other clones, she kills parts of herself. Moreover, the clones stand for the horrors of hybridity gone terribly awry. Ripley annihilates the creatures whose hybridity was imperfect, who could not survive, so that she—a perfect symbiosis—could live in their stead. Yet, in killing these necessary experiments that led to her creation, she is also forced to face her own alien-ness, as it is literally displayed in front of her as repeated evidence of the dual nature of her identity. Ripley number eight is also number one to seven, and more. What the monstrous clones broadcast so effectively and horribly are the elements that constitute Ripley's identity inside.

Moreover, Ripley not only has to face her own alien-ness, she also must embrace the abject inside herself. Throughout the entire four movies that constitute the *Alien* franchise, there is not one establishing shot of Ripley and an alien looking at each other. Frequently, the director uses shot reverse-shots to film her interactions with the monster. While the viewer understands what Ripley and the alien are looking at, the point is that the series never establishes a shot in which both characters are seen looking at each other. In fact, there are at least two instances in which Ripley directly refuses to look at the alien. The first happens towards the end of *Aliens*. The Queen pursues Ripley onto the platform from which the ship is ready to leave. Ripley is holding Newt, and thinking that this is the end, as the ship is nowhere in sight, she closes her eyes. Significantly, she tells Newt to imitate her (“Close your eyes, baby”). The second instance, perhaps even more remarkable, happens in 3, as Clemens has just been taken away by the alien. The creature looms over Ripley, who is powerless, its face inches from her. This is one of the most famous scenes of the franchise.



Ripley's face is turned towards the camera, and her eyes are closed. I insist on this refusal to look at the monster in light of Linda Williams' famous argument in her essay "When the Woman Looks" (1986), in which she compellingly argues that woman cannot look at the monster without being punished. The camera reveals the monster before the woman sees him,

which forces the viewer to identify with the monster, rather than with the victim. The point of Williams' article is that the monster and the woman represent the same threat to the vulnerable man, that of sexual difference. In looking at the monster, the woman recognizes herself in the eyes of the male, and at the same time she is faced with her own castration. Williams' essay is extremely interesting when applied to the *Alien* series, precisely because Ripley never does look at the monster (despite having fought and killed it repeatedly!), until the very end.



The first and unique establishing shot (see above) that we have of Ripley looking at the monster is when the Newborn seeks her affection. For the first time then, the alien and Ripley are put on the same level, they are equal, they reflect each other, and it can only happen after the Newborn chooses Ripley over the alien Queen, and in so doing, chooses humanity. The act of looking signifies Ripley's final acceptance of her hybridity. The Newborn is a mirror-image of herself; it is, like her, human and alien, and it is, like her, conflicted between its allegiances to both aspects of its heritage. Yet, it is also monstrous both in appearance and behavior; it violently kills both alien (the Queen) and humans (Distephano), which is why she must reject and abort it. In looking, Ripley accepts that she is,

like the clones and like the Newborn, the monster. However, she is not punished for looking; on the contrary, her self-identification with the Newborn completes her identity as forever liminal and transgressive, both alien and human, both self and abject.

In “Monstrous Bodies, Monstrous Sex: Queering Alien Resurrection,” Brenda M. Boyle understands Ripley as fundamentally queer, not in the sense of sexuality, but rather in the ways in which she rejects categorization and fixed, single identities. She argues that it is “Ripley’s human/alien status, her confounding of all boundaries in a confounded world” which gives her power (169). *Alien: Resurrection*’s force is precisely in the accurate representation of postmodernity pushed to the extremes. As the series consistently rejects such institutions as the family, Mother and Father, and the possibility of heterosexual relationships, it shapes in the meantime a hybrid, liminal woman who rejects and refuses all categories of identity. In a world in which such a woman not only exists, but survives and is left unpunished, then, such concerns around reproduction, gender, and sexuality become irrelevant. However, and for the first time in the series, an alien—Ripley—is indeed going to come back home. How can we interpret the return of Ripley to Earth? While she has proven her humanity throughout the film, her alien-ness remains a threat, especially as her invulnerable, eternal female body signifies the possibility of reproduction. As she stands with Call at the window of the ship, looking down on Earth, smiling enigmatically to herself, the viewer cannot help but wonder whether the series concludes on a happy-ending (the heroine has saved the world), or on a horrible one (the alien reaches Earth). Or both.

Where both Butler’s *Xenogenesis* and Atwood’s *Tale* pessimistically predicted the unchanging nature of patriarchal oppression, the *Alien* series concludes in the victory of the woman as hybrid, the “queer” entity that rejects fixed categories of identity and simply exists in between. Ripley’s enigmatic smile at the end of *Resurrection* is the ultimate signifier of the resistance of the texts: it is a screw-you note to resolutions, happy-endings, and expectedness.



Resistance does not have to mean the end of humanity as it is as with *Xenogenesis*; nor does it have to be futile like in *Tale. Alien: Resurrection* represents difference and liminality as hopeful.

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