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**PRESER-
VATION AS
METAMOR-
PHOSIS**

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PRESERVATION AS METAMORPHOSIS

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Imagine waking up in a room with no door, in a bare cell with no openings, no view of anything beyond your immediate surroundings. Confined to an infinite instant. Imagine waking up and suddenly being cut off from everything you have ever known, suspended in the claustrophobic totality of a reality completely alien to you, surrounded by greyish walls and ghosts of impossible interpretation. At the mercy of what cannot be predicted. Without control. Yet you are lucid, present in all your sensations, restless and a witness to your restlessness.

You lie down. You invent ways to pass the hours. You stretch yourself out on the bed and on the floor available. You jump to expend the energy coursing through your body. Your flesh trembles with pent-up anxiety. So much life overflowing in every instant lived in the emptiness of your new reality. You glimpse the possibilities, study your confinement, spiralling, spiralling until you are no longer alone. You come across another presence. You calculate all the angles. That which you cannot recognise is there before you. Unavoidable. You cannot avoid facing what you must. You are tired of asking yourself questions. You look at the creature as it looks at you. You've lost what you never had. And what you never asked for will become yours.

Because change prevails.

To walk on the ground of a shifting territory, beyond the realm of promised stability, it is necessary to sacrifice the domains of property, sovereignty and self-possession. This is the dilemma faced by Lilith Iyapo, the main character of *'Dawn'*, the first book of Octavia E. Butler's series *'Xenogenesis'* or, as it is also known, *'Lilith's Brood'*.

After waking up repeatedly in a cell without doors, in the custody of a power she is unable to recognise, in a historical period she has no means to describe, Lilith recognises that 'reality was whatever happened, whatever she perceived.'¹ From this vow of complicity to herself – which is not predicated on a sense of self-determination since it emerges, on the contrary, from the vulnerability of her condition – she finds herself once more alive.

Waking up is not easy because to confront the reality of whatever might occur, of what is unpredictable, of the unprecedented situation in which she finds herself is not easy. As Lilith wakes up she finds herself exposed to the difficulties of a situation which, as she will soon realise, reaches far beyond her individual power: the kidnap-rescue of the survivors of a human extinction at the hands of a species alien to humanity, an 'other' in the human social lexicon, the *oankali*.

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P. 5 *Dawn*, Octavia E. Butler, Open Road Media, 2012.

Lilith's encounter with these beings does not take place in the open; rather she is imprisoned, subject both to the power relationship established by her enclosure and to her own interpretation of the circumstances. Lilith is a black cis woman from the end of time, a student of anthropology, a survivor of nuclear war. Her initial perceptions are formed by the interpretive tools available to her from her previous life. Therefore, Lilith fears the difference of the first *oankali* she meets not only because of the power imbalance between them, but also because the shape of this being, at first sight, is incomprehensible, an entity unfit for a human relational experience.

'A true xenophobia' is how Lilith describes the sensation running through her as she considers the prospect of living surrounded by beings like Jdahya, the first *oankali* she meets. She is disturbed by the shape of this being, and cannot find comfort in the general situation she faces. Lilith fears Jdahya because even before having revealed his purpose, he announces the disintegration of the human social pact: the impossibility of a collective existence centred on the paradigm of humanity.

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Imagine now that you have learned to open some doors, yet none of them lead back home. Home is beyond you. The point of return doesn't lead you back. Everything to be rescued has been projected into the future. You have learned to recognise the world around you, but this recognition will never cease to puzzle you. Alive, after all. Alive again. You have accepted that which was not an option and surrendered your destiny to this impossibility. You advance while fertilising the path. You were possessed by this improbability and have surrendered to it.

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Lilith had wanted to die. No, she didn't want to die. During a fight, she asked Nikanj, her *ooloi partner*: 'Why don't you just kill me?' Her aim was not so much to die, but to question the self-destructive dimension of her mission.

Lilith was given the task of waking a group of human beings to this new reality which she herself was struggling to accept. They were on a ship that was also an organic symbiont entity with the *oankali*, ready to undergo a kind of training to facilitate the re-inhabitation of a partially recovered planet earth, a few centuries after it had been destroyed by a series of atomic explosions triggered by human war.

The recovery of the planet, however, did not imply the restoration of the previous planetary form from before the natural collapse and atomic explosions triggered by human supremacy. Rather, the planet had been recreated from samples of different terrestrial life forms mixed with elements from the vast genetic database collected and archived by the *oankali* during their intergalactic wanderings. The principle guiding such processes was not one of disinterested solidarity, but part of a plan to establish the conditions for genetic exchange between species and thus for the co-mutation of humans and *oankali* into a third species.

In this sense, the task assigned to Lilith by *oankali* society was essentially a task of self-destruction: preparing the remaining members of the human species for something that challenged the very definition of humankind as the centre of the universe and the universal mediator of life on earth. Without the earth at their disposal as a resource, and with the myth of

self-possession shattered by the inescapable submission to the *oankali* project, how to invent a human community capable of regenerating the ways of being that had led humanity to the limits of its own destruction? How, in the face of the anthropocentric collapse of humanity and the earth, would they be able to return home?

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You are tired.

1

Ooloi is one of the three naturalised sexes in *oankali* society. They are beings that belong to family units and are responsible for reproductive processes by means of delicate genetic and sensory engineering. Outside the economies of masculinity and femininity, *ooloi* is a third sex, anatomically differentiated by the existence of two sensory organs which allow them not only to read any form of life on a genetic scale, but also to modify it.

Nikanj is *ooloi* and the bridge between Lilith and the *oankali* world, just as Lilith is the bridge between the *oankali* and the human world. Together, they are the bridge to the unknown future of both species. They form an embodied portal with several entry and exit points, articulated through a variety of life forms. At the crossroads of these lives is the fecundating drive of forces and forms that are destined to simultaneously exceed and contain human and *oankali* multiplicities.

3

The theme of extinction runs through the entire narrative of Butler's *Xenogenesis*: it can be found in the plot background, in the nuclear disaster which brought the human world to its knees, and it unfolds throughout the human-*oankali* encounter and the impossibilities this generates. The surviving human community, rescued and partly kidnapped by the *oankalis*, does not unanimously support the destiny offered to them. For many characters, to subject themselves to hybridisation with *oankali* and allow themselves to be so deeply transformed by such an encounter, is to consent to human extinction. In this view, preservation necessarily entails the maintenance of a certain integrity, a principle of authenticity based on a supposedly self-identified character of human reproducibility.

Lilith will go another way, not without contradictions or moments of repulsion for her destiny. She will inhabit the crises and tensions of this very movement, and will stage battles in her own body through which the human community will again be divided. Her name will be cursed by all those who defend the notion that preservation is negated by change. Although Lilith's path is also one that seeks to avoid the extinction of humanity, her gesture towards this other figuration of continuity is interpreted as a betrayal.

She loses her human status and allows herself to be transformed by this loss, though never conceding to the anti-human role attributed to her. Her gesture cannot be inscribed in the field of refusal as performance. Lilith is not given a choice, and accepting this is her starting point. Her performance is that of a surrender and for this reason she will be judged as less than human, for abandoning the narrative of heroic resistance and self-determi-

nation to instead fecundate uncertainty with the key of her double refusal: of the imposition of the *oankali*, and of the human desire of re-imposition.

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You were born. Countless times. You fertilised a garden and a labyrinth in the improbable. You learned to read with your tongue, to breathe underwater, to speak through touch, to feel colours as compressed information; you accumulated narratives, planted trees beyond your own enclosure, tasted poisons, missed your home, walked for days on end to create distance.

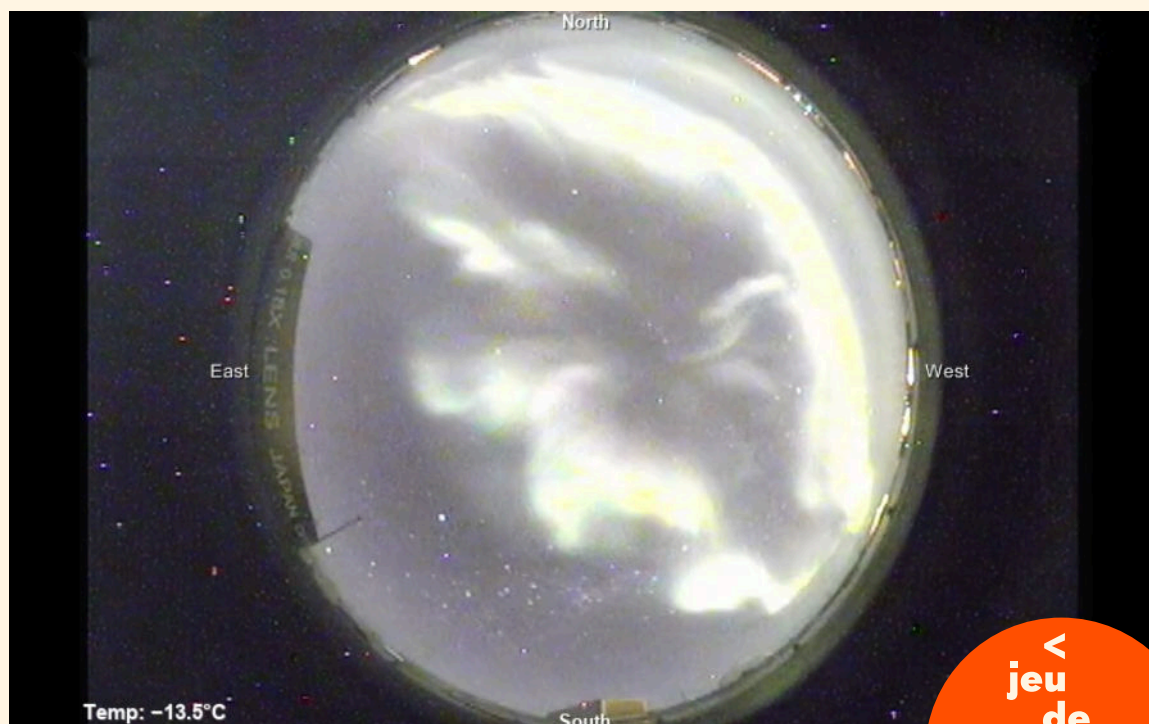
You shifted the axis of the world and welcomed the fracture.

You re-founded possibility and disappeared into that forest.

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NULL NULL ISLAND

Une œuvre de Letícia Ramos



Présentée dans le cadre du projet en ligne

FUTURS D'AVANT.

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**A DÉCOUVRIR SUR L'ESPACE VIRTUEL
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