The “Othering” of Queerness in Science Fiction

Since its conception beyond those geared specifically towards the LGBTQ+ community, the presence of characters who deviate from Western societal expectations in regards to gender, sexuality, or romantic inclinations (or queer characters) in science fiction (sf) literature has been one of the most prevalent in a genre. Sf that explores the dynamics of historically disadvantaged populations has a unique standpoint in which to discuss such topics, as the subjects they broach are not bound by the societal norms of the times in which they were written. Anna Gilarek, in her article “Marginalization of ‘the Other’: Gender Discrimination in Dystopian Visions by Feminist Science Fiction Authors”, through her reading of Woman on the Edge of Time, discusses the unique role of the “other” in sf—specifically, a poor, non-virginal woman of color—in sparking discussion about a society without the constraints the of the modern world. However, her failure to acknowledge queerness as an aspect of “othering” leads to a need for critical analysis of sf to do so.

Octavia Butler’s Dawn, the first novel of the afrofuturistic Lilith’s Brood trilogy, stands as one of the most prevalent literary voices of human concern over the ramifications of genetic modification on the free will of the modified. However, Dawn also examines the cultural issues of the time period, tackling underlying subjects such as the roles race and gender play at the root of human nature. Dawn, as a novel of historical sf significance, provides the perfect stage for a discussion of the role of sexuality and gender outside of Western norms and a way to spark greater engagement in these issues more broadly within the genre. Scholars have examined Butler’s work, in majority, for its smooth integration of issues of race and gender into the argument of caution in regards to genetic modification and what the perspective of a woman of
color provides to both deepen the conversation and create new ones surrounding diversity issues. Despite the ability for sf to explore beyond human biological and psychological constraints, the inherent abnormality and alien nature of queerness in science and speculative fiction such as *Dawn* demonstrates a failure to acknowledge the presence and prevalence of gender, sexual, and romantic minorities in human society.

The alien race of the Oankali serve as the epitome of the “other” figure in Butler’s work. The Oankali enter *Dawn* as figures who are initially suspected to be human. However, upon fully realizing that they are not human in any aspect, the people whom the Oankali encounter are repulsed by their abhorrent strangeness to the point of feeling immense discomfort in their presences. It is within the punctuated points of their pure alienness that Lilith first approaches the issue of gender. Jdahya, the first Oankali whom Lilith meets face-to-face, scolds her for her ingrained assumptions, saying, “It’s wrong to assume I must be a sex you’re familiar with… but as it happens, I’m male” (Butler 11). Jdahya’s stance points out the ignorance in assuming a gender binary, especially in people other than Lilith herself, but his stance is somewhat dismissable purely because he is an alien, and a strange, repulsive one at that. Lilith points out that her disgust with Jdahya rests in “his alienness, his difference, his literal unearthliness” (Butler 11). Nothing Jdahya or any of the Oankali says about the assumptions and narrow-mindedness of humanity from thereon out is neutralized by the fact that they are starkly inhuman. The introduction of the ooloi, the third sex (other than male and female) of the Oankali, is therefore intrinsically made strange and even repulsive in concept to the humans kept in their care.
The trope of “queer as other” is pervasive throughout sf literature, not just in Butler’s otherwise culturally powerful works. Lesley Henderson and Simon Carter discuss the same implications of (literally) alienating queer characters or drawing lines in how queer characters can be in an acceptable sf universe. They discuss the polyamorous, visually alien Phlox from the TV show Star Trek: Enterprise, who explains that his romantic inclinations are normal and preferable within his species’s society. Henderson and Carter astutely highlight the same weakness in Star Trek that is present in Dawn: That “[Phlox’s] status as an ‘alien outsider,’ visually marked as different, on board the Enterprise means this estrangement is narratively present, but effectively neutralised” (Henderson and Carter 280). Since Phlox’s polyamory doesn’t prescribe to commonly-held beliefs that align with the WASP idea of normal, it is “othered” and associated with Phlox’s alien nature, allowing readers to automatically dissociate and fail to empathise with him. Likewise, as Butler’s Oankali are coded as repulsively alien, their strangeness and anything associated with it, including the ooloi gender classification, may serve to invoke conversation about queerness, but they are ultimately dismissable in conversation about human nature due to the inherent inhumanity of being aliens. Thus, discussion about their queerness, though perhaps intended to mirror the alienation the LGBTQ+ community faces within our society, is sidelined in favor of analyzing the traits and behaviors ascribed to human characters.

Dawn’s shortcomings in the approach of gender remain present despite Lilith’s attempts to condemn the narrow-mindedness of her peers. An argument can be made that Lilith’s position as a widow, a former mother, and woman of color, displaced and decimated human society (as is Connie from Gilarek’s analysis), allows her to understand the abnormalities placed upon the
Oankali from the human perspective as she learns to tolerate them. Her staunch defense of the ooloi Nikanj’s gender identity, rather than that imposed upon it by the considerably more experienced in Oankali socialization Paul Titus, points to the ability for a member of Gilarek’s “othered” gender, the female, to sympathize with the frustration experienced by “others” when their stance is misunderstood. Paul Titus purposely misgenders Nikanj as male to fit into his understanding of human gender, whereas Lilith understands the distinction present both biologically and culturally in the Oankali. However, Titus’s understanding of Oankali gender is grounded in a fundamental misunderstanding of human society first: That the gender binary does not apply to all *humans*. Lilith’s ability to understand that the Oankali do not subscribe to the human-constructed binary may stem from her status as an “other” and therefore an ally to other “others,” but *Dawn*, in condemning Titus’s misunderstanding for the wrong reasons, fails to adequately point out why his understanding is so narrow-minded. He insists that the ooloi gender, to him, must conform to human standards as if people who identify as other than male or female don’t exist in *human* society as well. That the Oankali are inherently othered by their alienness makes it more difficult to apply a more open mindset to the reality of humanity.

Failure to acknowledge the presence of the gender spectrum in modern society serves to continue the false assumption that not adhering to the binary is only possible to an “other” outside of the currently culturally acceptable understanding of the human race. Sf is in a unique position to introduce alien species, artificial intelligence, and otherwise supernatural creatures in a futuristic society to allow critical thought and analysis to both move beyond the limitations of modern human society. Sherryl Vint compares the general moral stance raised within sf to the core arguments of material feminism, which takes a focus on the role of capitalism and
patriarchy in the oppression of women. She states that, “Material feminist theory emphasizes the agency of the world of matter, refuses to privilege human over other kinds of life, and demonstrates ways humanity itself can change into something new if humans transform their senses of place within the rest of the material world” (Vint 373). The statement makes an argument for the juxtaposition of nonhuman beings as models for how humanity can and should change as the horizons of our reality are stretched beyond what we know. The conversations that can arise about why Butler may have chosen to create a third gender for her grotesquely alien race are absent, because as of yet there has been little conversation as to why that is the case. Taking an intersectional, material feminist eye and turning it on the same parts of *Dawn* that garner critical attention in the realm of afrofuturism, gender, and race allows for conversation about how a patriarchal, heteronormative, and WASP-favoring Western society naturally refrains from discussing the natural place of LGBTQ+-identifying individuals in human society.

Science and speculative fiction is the platform most easily utilized for the emphasis and celebration of diversity, especially when that diversity is spread beyond the constraints of the human race and what is currently accepted as a possible way to live and experience life. Human diversity is infinite, but bounded within our understanding of humanity. SF allows that infinite possibility to express uniqueness in upbringing to expand into imagination, creating endless possibilities about the expression of culture and background. However, to properly celebrate that diversity and to foster conversation about where society fails (and where that failure is expanded to extremes in dystopian literature), it must first be acknowledged that queerness is fundamentally present in human society. The exclusion of people who identify outside of the gender binary and do not adhere to sexuality norms is inherently a product of traditional Western
control over the popular media, even when authors who are themselves a part of minority communities are the ones writing. As Lidia Yuknavitch notes, “disenfranchised people are only the topics of discussion as they relate to the success of white Western progress” (Kehe). LGBTQ+ characters exist to prove that Western society is moving forward; not that they are members of that society and that they have been there all along. Whether it be through representation of sexuality or gender, sf has a duty to represent humanity as it is to foster proper discussion about how it can improve itself in the future.

We’ve established that, within *Dawn* and the critical conversation surrounding it, there is a fundamental lack of representation of gender and sexuality beyond cisgender, heterosexual expectations within characters considered to be “normal” members of human society. The inherent harm of not representing a comparatively small portion of the worldwide population—as of May 2016, 3.8% of the United States who are comfortable reporting as such identify as LGBTQ+ (Same-sex)—is that a failure to accurately acknowledge the existence of members of the population creates the false belief that, though not a part of the majority of a potential cast, they simply do not exist among humankind the future, or, more severely, that they have no place either in the real world today or in the imagined worlds of years to come. The harm of such a mindset extends beyond the LGBTQ+ community when consideration of the gender binary and heteronormativity brings with it inherent biases about the behavior of people who are coded as male and/or heterosexual and those who are coded as not. The humans stranded aboard the Oankali’s spacecraft, knowing that they belong to a very small number of survivors of the Earthly nuclear fallout, pair off in the belief that it is their duty to reproduce and repopulate the species. The shift from a desire to do so versus an imperative shifts their already
narrow perspective on the roles of women, dangerously, into the stereotype of existing solely to produce children. The attempted rape of Allison before Lilith’s intervention highlights exactly how, driven to desperation and limited in perspective to the assumed “normal” of their group, the humans have created an “other” to further narrow the category: The “other” being a woman who does not exhibit the extremely heteronormative desire to find a (male) mate and produce children. “What the hell is she saving herself for?” a woman named Jean asks, consent absolutely absent from her consideration as a right (Butler 117). The danger of the gender binary makes itself painfully noticeable when there is no LGBTQ+ person to protest that their sexual attraction, their gender identity, or even their genitals do not align with the declaration that humanity must pair off into groups of a man and a woman each out of duty to their species.

The reading that I have applied to *Dawn* has begun to emerge in television in particular, with notable examples including the *Doctor Who* spinoff *Torchwood*, with its openly pansexual protagonist and his relationship with a male member of his team, and the critically acclaimed Netflix series *Black Mirror* and its Emmy award-winning episode *San Junipero*, which featured a same-sex female couple at the heart of its story. However, *Torchwood* ended its run in 2011. The most recent season of *Black Mirror*, despite the universal success of its LGBTQ+-themed episode, failed to include more than a few seconds reference to a non-heterosexual relationship. Transgender or nonbinary characters are still not presented in science fiction except to highlight the advances of medical technology or the strangeness of alien species. In effect, the exclusion of such characters, despite an increase in effort to present characters who do not adhere to cisgender and heterosexual standards, remains prevalent in modern times as well. Still, a queer character is not capable of being described as anything than “other” when present in science fiction, and the
implications of such are becoming more noticeable as more attention is brought to the lack of LGBTQ+ representation in the genre in which it makes perhaps the most sense to exist.


Same-sex Couple and LGBT Demographic Data Interactive. (May 2016). Los Angeles, CA: The Williams Institute, UCLA School of Law. [https://williamsinstitute.law.ucla.edu/visualization/lgbt-stats/?topic=LGBT#density](https://williamsinstitute.law.ucla.edu/visualization/lgbt-stats/?topic=LGBT#density).