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## “Take Root in the Stars”: Black Women’s Speculative Fiction as Liberation Biomythographies

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*“TAKE ROOT IN THE STARS”:*

*BLACK WOMEN'S SPECULATIVE FICTION AS LIBERATION BIOMYTHOGRAPHIES*

by

ROSLYN NICOLE SMITH

Under the Direction of Elizabeth J. West, PhD

ABSTRACT

For over 200 years, Black women authors in the United States have cautioned that erasing the perspective of Black women also potentially obliterates the communities Black women have historically held together, and the roles these women have played in spearheading and supporting socio-political movements. This erasure also, as it relates to this dissertation, dismisses the art forms — such as literature — that reflect the related triumphs and struggles associated with the ways Black women engage the interlocking oppressions of race and gender. This this study proposes that Black speculative fiction written by women can be considered liberation biomythographies that offer a unique contribution to the legacy of Black women

employing the written word as a tool of liberation. This argument will be supported by employing Audre Lorde's biomythography *Zami* as a womanist, literary, theory that illustrates self-actualization as a starting point for Black women's liberation. The efficacy of *Zami* as a womanist theoretical framework will be illustrated through an analysis of the Black women protagonists in Octavia Butler's *Xenogenesis* and Nnedi Okorafor's *Lagoon*.

INDEX WORDS: Afrofuturism, Archetype, Black Speculative Fiction, Octavia Butler  
Audre Lorde, Science Fiction, Speculative Fiction, Nnedi Okorafor,  
Womanism

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ROSLYN NICOLE SMITH

A Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

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Georgia State University

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## DEDICATION

I dedicate this dissertation to you, my mother, Dr. Roslyn Goode Smith. You were my first model of how to be an innovator, teacher, scholar, friend, and comedienne. I hope that as I continue to age, my light shines as brightly as yours always does. I also dedicate this dissertation to you, my grandmother, Mrs. Lillie Jo Suber Goode Greer. You were mine and mom's prototype for inner beauty, compassion, intellect, gravitas, steadfastness, gratitude, love, face powder...and a red lip.

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The often-cited African proverb informs us that it takes a village to raise a child. I would extend that sentiment to earning a PhD and assert that it takes a village – or in Audre Lorde’s terms – a zami, to nurture an academic.

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## 1 CHAPTER ONE/INTRODUCTION: A WOMANIST SPECULATIVE ARCHETYPE

“What if,” we considered Black women intrinsic to the survival of humanity rather than marginal? This query echoes a perspective, Black women writers in the United States have asserted since the publication of Phyllis Wheatley’s 1773 collection of poetry, *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral*. Nineteenth century writers such as Harriet Jacobs, Anna Julia Cooper, and Ida B. Wells; twentieth century writers such as Barbara Christian, Audre Lorde, Nikki Giovanni; and twenty-first century writers such as Roxanne Gay insist that Black women’s voices and experiences are integral to the narrative of the United States. For over 200 years, Black women authors have cautioned that erasing the perspective of Black women also potentially obliterates the communities Black women have historically held together, and also threaten to diminish the roles these women have played in spearheading and supporting socio-political movements. This erasure also, as it relates to this dissertation, dismisses the art forms – such as literature – that reflect the related triumphs and struggles associated with the methods Black women employ to combat the interlocking oppressions of race and gender. As such, Black women writers and activists are well-acquainted with the societal paradigms these injustices impose on Black women’s sustainability. For example, writer and scholar Anna Julia Cooper, one of the progenitors of Black feminism (Guy-Sheftall 12), writes in her 1892 essay, “The Status of Women in America,” that Black women are, “...confronted by both a woman question and a race problem and is as yet an unknown or an unacknowledged factor in both” (45). Black women, continues Cooper, are an overlooked resource in an America poised – at the time of her writing – to enter a new century (44-47). In 1949, labor activist and

prominent member of the Communist Party, Claudia Jones, asserted in her text, “An End to the Neglect of the Problems of the Negro Woman! “...that Black women are the backbone of the Black culture, and to ignore her is to ignore the experience and wisdom Black women have cultivated as the caretakers of the race (Jones 108).

Assertions such as the ones written by Cooper and Jones not only reflect Black women’s experiences with the intersectional oppressions of race and gender, they also illustrate ways in which Black women, because of their experiences with oppression, are well-equipped to discuss methods for building equitable components of a society. The Combahee River Collective’s statement echo this sentiment. This Collective, named after Harriett Tubman’s 1863 Combahee River raid which freed more than 750 slaves, was formed in 1974 by Barbara Smith, Beverly Smith, Demita Frazier and other peers (Price). The founders of the Collective sought to form an organization that developed progressive strategies for social change that included a consideration for Black lesbians’ perspectives on strategies for dismantling racial and gender-based systems of oppression (comabaheerivercollective). One of the lasting contributions of the Collective is their seminal Black feminist text, “A Black Feminist Statement” wherein they declare, “If Black women were free, it would mean that everyone else would have to be free since our freedom would necessitate the destruction of all the systems of oppression” (Phillips (Maparyan) 217). This poignant statement reflects the paradoxical capacity for equal rights that liberatory practices of Black women create for society as a whole. The aforementioned representative statements from Black women writers support a standpoint that identifies Black women’s solutions for liberation as an ideal template for liberation from intersectional oppression or intersectionality.

Kimberle Crenshaw originated the term *intersectionality* in her 1989 essay, “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics.” In this article, she explains the need for an analytical framework that centers Black women rather than one that, “sets forth a problematic consequence of the tendency to treat race and gender as mutually exclusive categories of experience and analysis” (139). This “single axis,” writes Crenshaw, is most prevalent in antiracist politics, antidiscrimination law, and feminist theory (139). Viewing the oppressions against Black women through a lens of gender *or* race does not address the specific oppressions they suffer as people who are both Black *and* female. Black women writers of non-fiction and fiction interrogates the dismissal of Black women’s experiences with intersectional oppression in American culture in general and in American literature specifically.

Toni Morrison analyzes White authors’ unwillingness to include Black characters as integral components of their fiction in her text, *Playing in the Dark*. Here she writes that the absence of Black people within the pages of American fiction paradoxically speaks to the importance of their presence in American culture (5-6). This dismissal reads as a willful attempt to erase Black people from the history and narrative of American culture. The repeated instances of expunging by White authors, means Black writers bear the responsibility of writing literature that integrates or centers the Black perspective (5-6). Morrison writes of Black writers’ efforts in this regard: “Living in a nation of people who *decided* that their worldview would combine agendas for individual freedom *and* mechanisms for devastating racial oppression presents a singular landscape as a writer” (xii). Morrison also notes that writing both “within and without” of

this literary landscape presents an opportunity to consider the “resilience and gravity, the inadequacy and the force of the imaginative act” (xiii) of non-Black writers. As a genre that offers authors opportunities to reconstruct reality, Black speculative literature written by women offers a unique response to such dismissals. At the same time, the genre participates in the tradition of Black women writers who radically imagine strategies for engaging oppression through writing. Literature based in realism is confined by societal constraints and constructs that define reality and dictate whose perspectives are authoritative representations. Within the realm of realist narration, authors must construct solutions to their fictional conflicts that are consistent with accepted perceptions of reality. This perspective extends to how an author presents their characters as well. If society constrains the social, political, economic movements of Black women – as Cooper, Jones, and the members of the Combahee Collective indicate – then a Black woman character in fiction based in realism must also be constrained. Otherwise, the story will not be viewed by readers as believable. Authors are still able to empower their Black female protagonists in these texts, and these stories are important to an ongoing conversation about Black women’s liberation. At the same time, however, Black speculative fiction allows the author to push beyond the real or contemporary moment and disturb or disrupt reality. Darko Suvin, an early proponent of the science fiction genre as an academic area of study, refers to this disturbance of reality as, “cognitive estrangement” (Nodleman 24). A move away from reality allows the writer and reader to construct identities outside of mainstream narratives of acceptable Black female behavior and, in doing so, examine intersectional oppression through a fictional medium. The speculative genre enables these writers to design

worlds where Black women are chosen to be the heroines and their efforts are recognized as integral to the viability of their world. As such, the protagonists model a reality that the dominant narrative of American literature often disregards.

Reading these woman-authored texts through a womanist lens enables the reader to hone in on the ways these stories privilege Black women's roles as central to the success of building new communities. Alice Walker introduced the term in her 1979 short story, "Coming Apart," and later defined the word in 1983 in her text, "Womanist." She developed the term *womanist* during the second wave of the feminist movement, a time that ranges from the 1960s to the 1980s. Walker's term provided an antidote to the dismissal of Black women's concerns and experiences during the second wave feminist movement. Authors such as Chinkwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi (1985) and Clenora Hudson-Weems (1989) have published works that expand Walker's definition by identifying the ways in which Walker's definition applies to women's concerns throughout the African diaspora. However, as the geographical focus of this project is the United States, the analysis will engage Walker's initial definition of this term. In her text, "Womanist," Walker writes of the importance of Black women loving and valuing themselves as well as their communities. The adoration Walker promotes in her definition of womanism extends to Black culture, Black histories, activism, sexuality, and mental health. Her metacognitive term not only described how Black women struggle with oppression but also how they endure within the struggle.

At its inception, womanism operated outside of an existing paradigm that undervalued Black women, even within the women's movement. However, the term continues to represent varying modes of activism in a larger contemporary context

beyond the feminist movement. These areas include theology, psychology, academia, and literature. Delores Williams writes that Walker's definition of womanism possesses cultural codes that are "female-centered and...point beyond themselves to conditions, events, meanings and values that have crystallized in the Afro-American community around women's activity and formed traditions" (118). Walker illustrates this perspective in her essay "In Search of our Mothers' Gardens" with the following statement:

And so our mothers and grandmothers have, more often than not anonymously, handed on the creative spark, the seed of the flower they themselves never hoped to see: or like a sealed letter they could not plainly read...I have absorbed not only the stories themselves, but something of the manner in which she (her mother) spoke, something of the urgency that involves the knowledge that her stories - like her life - must be recorded. (240)

One of these traditions expressed in Walker's definition is love. Walker writes that a womanist, "Loves music. Loves dance. Loves the moon. *Loves the Spirit*. Loves love and food and roundness. Loves struggle. *Loves the Folk*. Loves herself. *Regardless*" (xii). Audre Lorde, a contemporary of Walker, echoed the importance of loving one's self even when the larger culture tells you, you are not worthy of such love. Walker and Lorde's perspectives incorporate and move beyond the feminist goal of equal rights which, in practice, often centers on the concerns of White, middle-class women. In contrast, Walker and Lorde's viewpoints include a conversation connected to healing from historical traumas such as slavery, Jim Crow laws and systemic racism, which specifically affect Black women. The abstract nature of parts of Walker's definition of womanism – "Loves the moon. *Loves the Spirit*." - invites the imaginative language

and concepts that the Black speculative fiction genre offers to engage the process of healing. This study employs Lorde's biomythography *Zami* as a womanist, theoretical example of an otherworldly, mythic, approach to engaging the intersectional oppressions of racism and gender in a manner that reflects the aesthetic, celestial, communal nature of Walker's womanism.

Lorde's text illustrates her quest towards self-actualization as dictated by her intrinsic desires. She indicates in her "Introduction" that while she always possessed an intrinsic sense of the desires and qualities that defined her personhood, she also understood early on that this selfhood ran counter to societal constructs of womanhood. This dissertation performs a womanist reading of *Zami* as a liberatory text wherein Lorde creates a counter-narrative that enables her to unearth, construct, and nurture her personhood.

The mythos element Lorde employs to communicate her real-world journey towards constructing her identity positions her narrative as an ideal womanist, Black speculative, theoretical template. Audre Lorde's eponymous revisionist myth *Zami* presents the author's own coming of age experiences as inseparable from her sexual, socio-political, and personal liberation. In this manner, Lorde presents her life experiences as a heroic womanist, African diasporic quest towards an empowered and non-conforming identity, rather than as a tale from a survivor who struggles to navigate a Western, oppressive socio-political narrative of someone else's design. Her resulting text reconstructs conventional, hegemonic, racial and gendered elements of the myth genre. Using *Zami* as a template, one is able to frame the mechanisms woman-authored Black speculative fiction use to center Black women as important actors in the

American literary landscape. This dissertation frames *Zami* as biomythography that provides a theoretical lens through which one is able to read Black speculative fiction written by women as liberation biomythographies. Lorde's revised African diasporic and Western hybrid mythos genre, with Black feminist underpinnings, results in a womanist speculative archetypal heroine within a liberation biomythography who presents self-actualization, redefined gender roles, and reconstructed communities as key components towards creating her personal liberation from gendered and racial oppressions.

Lorde's womanist speculative archetype interrupts the mythos literary structure wherein the woman's role is a, "hidden agenda of gender norms, where 'adult' means learning to be dependent, submissive, or 'nonadult'" (Ball 16). The author's resolution of the heroine's quest in *Zami* offers an integral illustration of this interruption. According to Carl Jung and Joseph Campbell, in the traditional – *read* male – quest narrative the signal that the hero has resolved the quest would be a sacred marriage (Ball 62). This, "sacred marriage," would take place between the hero and a "sacred divine female figure who represents his anima or his soul" (62). Lorde's text subverts this hallmark of the myth genre as this sacred union takes place in *Zami* between two women -- Lorde and Kitty, the shortened moniker of Afrekete (Lorde 247-251). The name Afrekete comprises the numerous, varied characteristics and diasporic iterations, of the African deity represented as Esu/Elegbara in many West African and related diasporic spiritual traditions (Provost 46-51). Of these deistic characteristics, Provost writes that the, "...verbal dexterity, indeterminacy, gender ambiguity, and ability to mediate seeming contradictions...offer Lorde both a model survivor/fighter and

particular linguistic strategies which aid her struggle against oppressive beliefs and behaviors" (47). So, to unite with Kitty is to unite with more than Lorde's soul; it is to connect to multiple layers of herself that exist beyond time, location, and social constructions of identity.

As Lorde and Kitty join in a same-sex, loving and intimate manner, Lorde supplies the reader with imagery that connects the reader to these blossoming layers of selfhood with words that are bountiful and lush and reminiscent of the tone in her description of Carriacou, her parents' birthplace and also a place that resonates with Lorde as home. In describing Afrekete's effect on her Lorde writes, "There are certain verities which are always with us, which we come to depend upon. That the sun moves north in summer, that melted ice contracts, that the curved banana is sweeter. Afrekete taught me roots, new definitions of our women's bodies - definitions for which I had only been in training to learn before" (249). Later she describes their love making using similar language related to nature and growth. Here, Lorde's description of her visit to a market with Kitty transitions to a description of time they later spent together: "There were green plantains, which we half-peeled and then planted, fruit deep, in each other's bodies until the petals of skin lay like tendrils of broad green fire upon the curly darkness between our spread thighs" (248). In comparison, when Lorde thinks of home, her parents' birth country Carriacou, and even her mother, she sometimes represents these views with similar nature imagery, albeit not as erotic. Of her mother Lorde writes, "She breathed exuded hummed the fruit smell of Noel's Hill (an area in Carriacou) morning fresh and noon hot, and I spun visions of sapodilla and mango as a net over my Harlem tenement cot in the snoring darkness rank with nightmare sweat"

(176). And when she describes Carriacou, a place she had not seen yet as child, did not yet exist on a map, and only knew from her parents' descriptions, Lorde writes, "But underneath it all, as I was growing up, home was still a sweet place...It was our own, my truly private paradise of blugoe and breadfruit hanging from the trees, of nutmeg and lime and sapodilla, of tonka beans and red and yellow Paradise Plums" (256). These similar imageries indicate that Lorde's intimate encounters with Afrekete offer her a path to a complete, synchronized self that comprises Lorde's Carriacou ancestry, her Blackness, her woman-ness and her sexual orientation - that is ultimately home.

Lorde's revisions of Western mythos conventions illustrate Annis Pratt's perspective on archetypes as, "an original, of a series of variations" (3). Pratt describes and analyzes the various representations of archetypes in women's fiction definition as archetypal patterns - the focus of the author's studies. Pratt writes that archetypal patterns, "represent categories of particulars, that can be described in their interrelationships within a given text or body of literature" (5). As such, these archetypal patterns are not rigid categories imposed on literary texts, but rather fluid categories that are inductive from within literature (5). Pratt seems to understand the need for this revised view of archetypes when she notes that, "quest patterns described by Jung, Campbell, and Frye" compared to, "plot structures of women's novels...create narratives manifesting an acute tension between what any normal human being might desire and what a woman must become" (6). Pratt proposes that one of the reasons women's fiction differs so radically from that of men is that women's efforts for personal development are encumbered by societal conventions (6, 168-169). As such, she argues that women's, "desire for responsible selfhood, for the achievement of

authenticity through individual choice, comes up against the assumption that a woman aspiring to selfhood is by definition selfish, deviating from norms of subservience to the dominant gender” (6). Further, from a Jungian perspective, in literature the feminine only serves, “as exterior containers for male projections or subordinate elements of the male personality” (8). Conversely, Pratt argues, “women authors treat the domestic enclosures that women accept as a condition of social survival” (9). In her review of three hundred years of women’s fiction, Pratt finds that Western bildungsroman heroines who resisted these roles usually became societal outcasts whose fate ended in madness, maiming, or death (9). Throughout her text, Pratt identifies science fiction as a genre that enables women to create these new images of heroines or heroes without concerns of social retaliation. Heroines in women’s science fiction pursue self-actualization and societal goals (36), “to realize and exercise his (or her) inner powers” (36) without societal retribution. Pratt also notes that, “When a woman sets out to manipulate language, to create new myths out of old, to write an essay or to paint a painting, she transgresses fundamental social taboos in that very act” (11). For instance, Pratt writes, “Only in the fantasy cultures of science fiction does she retain freedom to control her own body and to fulfill an adult social function” (168). This control often extends to the authors’ approach to presenting their protagonist’s sexuality.

Pratt indicates that within science fiction, authors such as Ursula K. Le Guin, Joanna Russ and Anne McCaffrey create heroes who decide not to be female, “transcending the gender limitations characterizing more conventional novels” (35). This notion is true for individuals as it relates not only to gender, but also to race

and sexuality. Extending Pratt's analysis to race and sexuality, then, calls for analyses of Black women writers' texts which combat these representations of oppression from racial and gendered perspectives. As Lorde writes, "To examine Black women's literature effectively requires that we be seen as whole people in our actual complexities -- as women, as human -- rather than as one of those problematic but familiar stereotypes provided in this society in place of genuine images of Black women" (287). Science fiction written by women therefore, enables the heroine to complete a fully realized bildungsroman where her choices to achieve a full personhood are not limited (35) by prescribed gender roles of mother, wife, daughter, crone. Although Lorde bases her biomythography in reality, she employs the cognitive estrangement Suvin references in two ways. First, she illustrates, in her narrative, how she crafted her own intersectional identity in opposition to social constructs and constraints related to her gender, race, and sexuality. Secondly, she relates her narrative of self-actualization through an Africanized, feminist version of the Western myth trope of bildungsroman. Her reality-based, disruption of reality positions her text as one that straddles literature based in realism and literature, such as science fiction and speculative fiction, which is not always based in reality. As Lorde illustrates in *Zami*, and as my examination of the texts illustrate, defining one's personhood from a combination of one's innate desires and lived experiences, rather than from society's social constructs of race and gender initiates individual and community healing.

To clearly connect Lorde's term and manifestation of biomythography to Black speculative fiction an understanding of the terms *speculative fiction*, *Black speculative fiction*, and *Afrofuturism* is imperative. As with Walker's definition of womanism, the term

*speculative fiction* has evolved from the original definition. Robert Heinlein first used the term *speculative fiction* in his 1948 essay, "On Writing of Speculative Fiction" (Jackson and Moody-Freeman 2). Heinlein describes, "speculative science fiction" or the speculative story as one that considers how people engage new technology or science (2). He writes, "science and established fiefs are extrapolated to produce a new situation, a new framework for human action. As a result of this new situation, new human problems are created--and our store is about how human beings cope with those new problems" (2). Judith Merrill, noted science fiction writer, offers an expanded definition in 1966 that considers – more closely – the creative and writerly mechanisms that encourage the instructive nature of speculative fiction. Merrill writes that speculative fiction is a genre, "...whose objective is to explore, to discover, to *learn*, [sic] by means of projection, extrapolation, analogue, hypothesis-and-paper-experimentation, something about the nature of the universe, of man, or reality" (*Science Fiction Encyclopedia*). David Wyatt's 2007 text suggests that the speculative fiction genre offers liberation because it specifically challenges cultural hegemonies. Wyatt describes the genre as, "...a term which includes all literature that takes place in a universe slightly different from our own. In all of its forms it gives authors to ask relevant questions about one's own society in a way that would prove provocative in mainstream forms" (qtd in Jackson and Moody Freeman 2). Wyatt goes on to name speculative fiction as a, "literature of freedom" for the author and reader who are able to speculate outside of conventional ideas for societal change (2).

Of these definitions, Wyatt's consideration of speculative fiction is most relevant to this project. His view of speculative fiction as liberatory suggests limitless

opportunities to reimagine one's place in, and significance to, local and global communities that combat intersectional oppression and suggests the usefulness of Suvin's cognizant dissonance description of science fiction. However, when employing this genre to address intersectional oppression, it is important to connect extrapolation and exploration to a specific socio-political concern. The product of this necessary fusion of terms for Black writers of speculative fiction is *Black speculative fiction*. Sheree Thomas, editor of the first comprehensive collection of the genre, titled *Dark Matter* (2000) describes Black speculative fiction as, "a diverse range of speculative fiction from the African diaspora" (Thomas xii). The synchronicity of *speculative* and *Black* also supports a view of Black women speculative writers as explorers presenting unique methods for engaging oppression that open a dialogue, outside of their fictional texts, for sustainable, imaginative solutions to racial and gendered oppressions in the real world. This study not only considers the intersection of Womanism and Black speculative fiction, but also considers Afrofuturism as components of a liberation biomythography that illustrates modes of Black liberation through the mechanism of a womanist speculative archetype.

In her study focusing on the term Afrofuturism, Lisa Yaszek writes that, "In its broadest dimensions, Afrofuturism is an extension of the historical recovery projects that Black Atlantic intellectuals have engaged in for well over two hundred years" (4). Therefore, writers of African descent who employ speculative and Afrofuturistic tropes to engage gendered and racial oppression, do so to seek alternative options for liberation and/or survival against the rippling effects of geographic, personal, and social displacement. Displacement, then, emphasizes the fluidity and dynamic nature of

speculative literature written by women in the United States as an ongoing legacy of Black women employing writing as a tool for engaging intersectional oppression using speculative tropes. Viewing female-authored Black speculative texts in this manner offers an opportunity to name displacement as the condition that acts as a catalyst for redefining selfhood in the real world and also symbolically in the person of fictional Black female protagonist who helps to refashion humanity. The Afrofuturistic strategy employed in these Black speculative texts extends that tradition by, “reorienting the intercultural vectors of Black Atlantic temporality towards the preoptic as much as the retrospective” (Eshun 289). Often the writings illustrate methods for expanding or recreating their notion of selfhood, as well as navigating and surviving an initially arbitrary alien community. The writers also learn to create new, or participate in existing, communities to sustain this new selfhood. Additionally, they often choose to avoid or eschew those communities that are detrimental to the journey towards wholeness that their womanist survival approach has yielded. Species survival in the context of liberation biomythographies also requires an ideological investment in the future of the African diaspora. Kodwo Eshun’s definition of Afrofuturism presents a manifestation of this proposition: “Afrofuturism may be characterized as a program for recovering the histories of counter-futures created in a century hostile to Afro Diasporic projection and as a space within which the critical work of manufacturing tools capable of intervention within the current political dispensation may be undertaken” (301).

Eshun describes this task of futuristic speculation for writers of African descent as a practice that is not compulsory, but rather essential (289) and refers to Afrofuturism as a “field” that “does not seek to deny the tradition of counter memory (289). Eshun’s

view stresses the importance of considering the harrowing reverberations of the past on the present, as well as how these time frames contribute to a vast, diasporic cultural database. This examination potentially reprograms members of the African diaspora's response to contemporary and future concerns in a manner that reflects radical imagination. Likewise, Lysa Rivera offers the perspective that "Afrofuturist writers and texts recognize that just as history is a contested discursive terrain, so too is the concept of futurity" (159) and presents the future as a plain that must be cultivated and tended. Tending the future requires, in part, an artistry that is a generational part of Black women's creativity as executed - in part - in Black women's writing. In this way, many Black women rewrite their female ancestors into existence even while continuing the work of projecting themselves, and future generations into the future. Creating liberation biomythographies is not just women's work, this is Black women's work.

Susanna Morris refers to the writings of Black women from the Afrofuturistic genre as "Afrofuturist feminisms." In her text, "Black Girls are from the Future: Afrofuturist Feminism in Octavia E. Butler's *Fledgling*," Morris argues that people of color who write vampire stories, use these texts to interrupt the dominant trope of whiteness, power, fantasy present in most vampire texts (145-146). Morris offers an analysis of Butler's novel *Fledgling*, as an example of how a Black woman writer accomplishes this task through a "...black feminist Afrofuturist epistemology that transgressively revises the contemporary vampire genre" (145-146). Morris titles this epistemology, "Afrofuturist feminisms," a term, that highlights the theoretical characteristics that Afrofuturism and Black feminist theory share (153). This project extends Morris's perspective of the similar points of discourse between Afrofuturism and feminism. It presents an

Afrofuturistic/Womanist analysis of Black Speculative Fiction. In other words, this analysis broadly uses the Afrofuturist theoretical lens, but within that framework, employs a Womanist focus. To this end, this study proposes Audre Lorde's text *Zami* as a speculative text that offers a womanist literary theory of how to achieve self-actualization in a socio-political environment that only promotes an ill-fitting mythical norm of what phenotypes and attributes are deemed valuable. Any attempts to mature and develop outside of this mythical norm paradigm are viewed as deviances that must be corrected or dismantled. For this reason, the terms liberation biomythography and speculative womanist archetype aptly encapsulate the Black speculative genre as well as Afrofuturistic theories and methods.

There are many science fiction/speculative fiction tropes that could echo Lorde's journey towards self-actualization and serve as the fictional framework for an allegory of Black women's liberation. This long list includes time travel, superpowers, apocalypse, and fantastic journey. However, of the available tropes, the trope of alien abduction and alien invasion provide the most hyperbolic backdrop against which one may reconstruct more than Black women's identity. In the context of an alien invasion, the author and reader are able to witness a Black woman help reconstruct the global society in which she lives. Within this new societal paradigm, the Black woman becomes world builder, heroine, and is able to reconstruct an origin story and social mores that ameliorate the causation of, and her experiences with, intersectional oppression. Within the speculative fiction/science fiction genre, authors employ alien engagement as a literary mechanism to examine, redefine, or uphold contemporary definitions of humanity in the face of the alien other. The particular alien threat presented in a given speculative or science

fiction text is often representative of a specific social and/or political concern (Jackson and Moody-Freeman 128). Stories about alien invasion written by Black women tend to not only privilege concerns around social, cultural, and political structures, but also present the alien invasion as an opportunity to restructure society from the perspective of a character who is often doubly (as Black and as a woman) oppressed both within and outside of the text. The radical resolution that the authors provide in these liberation biomythographies often begin with a Black woman at the center of the birth of a new post-invasion society who ushers in a resolution to the story that reflects a “womanist survival ethic” (Jones).

Esther Jones describes a “womanist survival ethic” in Black women’s speculative science fiction literature as: “liminal identity, spiritual worldview, and empathetic action...the idea that the health and wellness of the human community as a whole...is predicated upon understanding the interdependence of all people, regardless of our perceived differences, in order to avoid self-destruction” (“Africana Women’s Science Fiction and Narrative Medicine”). This approach to alien invasion also suggests a view of this trope that considers dynamic factors that radically change the *dénouement* of the story. These include a redefinition of humanity that incorporates the biological and societal influence of aliens; protagonists who are not white and male; and/or a geographic location for the alien invasion other than the United States or Europe.

Lorde and Butler’s literature are part of the, “new role and prominence Black women writers began to achieve in the 1970s,” in the American literary communities in general and the Black literary communities specifically (Gibney 102) and who were writing in response to what many such as Alice Walker, Toni Morrison, and Toni Cade

Bambara saw as a vacuum in the Black Arts Movement in the, “treatment and comprehension of Black women” (Gibson 102). While Butler’s literature is in the science fiction genre, and many of her literary peers participated in the, “American realist tradition,” all of the authors featured protagonists who are, “usually intelligent, emotionally resonant Black women, who are outsiders one reason or another” (103), Butler’s literature also came about during a time when science fiction was undergoing a shift in themes and many science fiction women authors, such as Ursula Le Guin and Joanna Russ, operating in the context of the second wave of feminism, encouraged a move away from SF stories that focused mainly on technology, machinery, and gender roles and instead develop stories that considered futures where, “sexual, gender, and social politics as we know them were radically altered” (107). While Butler’s work certainly participated in this approach to science fiction as with her white female counterparts, she also stands out among them as one who included considerations of race in the future as one of the socio-political concerns she addressed. This examination is often through the experience of Black female protagonists (108). Gibney writes that Butler’s use of a protagonist that is Black and female is a tacit critique of the emerging second wave feminist movement which often focused on the concerns of white middle-class women (108).

Exploring how these stories act as liberation biomythographies, provides a tangible method for positing that, “Blacks will exist in the future, as opposed to being harbingers of social collapse...(and) insists that Blacks fundamentally are [sic] the future and that Afro Diasporic cultural practices are vital to imaging the continuance of human society” (Lorde 153). Highlighting new ways of existing outside of, rather than in

communication with, racial oppression requires a new vision and a new language. Audre Lorde's demonstration of the term biomythography in her novel *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name* provides an example of this approach. In *Zami*, Lorde explains that in kindergarten she never remembered to include the letter "y" when she wrote her name "Audrey" because since the age of four, she had always loved the uniformity of "AUDRELORDE" (24). In this manner she begins the journey of literally recreating how she is represented and sets a lifelong precedence of recreating herself for the sake of her own liberation. Lorde's example is reflective of the argument for this dissertation. It also illustrates that contrary to what many of the alien invasion stories that operate within a Western, white, male, heteronormative paradigm may tell the reader, invasion is not always an either/or proposition that results in total annihilation of the conqueror or the conquered; it is sometimes a both/and proposition that results in a myriad of consequences. The only true constant of the alien invasion is that the experience will change both parties. The two novels presented for analysis in this project, *Xenogenesis* by Octavia Butler and *Lagoon* by Nnedi Okorafor, present this paradigm of mutual change.

Butler and Okorafor's texts each offer unique perspectives on alien abduction in that they engage mythos elements. In Butler's trilogy *Xenogenesis* the heroine, Lilith, offers the most literal representation of my argument. As her name portends, Lilith becomes a transgressive first-mother of a new alien/human hybrid community bound for earth. And, like her seeming namesake from Jewish mythology, Lilith is doomed to be the mother of monstrous children. Butler's overtures towards myth within *Xenogenesis* map onto an analysis about reconstructing myth. *Lagoon* provides a unique perspective

to alien invasion because, unlike many Western alien invasion stories, this text is set in an African country. Although the location of the invasion is not in the United States, the author, Nnedi Okorafor is a first-generation Nigerian-American. In *Lagoon*, Okorafor employs the mythos element of shapeshifting and also explores how an alien invasion not only interrupts social constructs but belief constructs also. A key way that each novel also challenges the paradigm of mutual change is to present aliens who *choose* the Black female protagonists because she possesses unique qualities that will contribute to the post-invasion society. Inside these authors' liberation biomythographies, the Black women protagonists are not bound to a marginalized position in society and are often at the epicenter of a reimagined world, revised society, and/or reconstructed species. Each character becomes a liaison and a key player in determining and managing an evolution of human biology and consciousness. As such, these stories become liberation biomythographies that radically imagine a Black woman in a leadership position during a tumultuous moment. Presenting a Black woman as the person chosen to press the reset button for humanity in a novel or short story, creates space in the real-world, collective, human consciousness for a Black woman to run a city, state, country or international coalition. These Black speculative novels not only move Black women to the center of reconstructing a new society; but also provide insight into how notions of community, gender, and identity shift in the context of a womanist, Afrofuturistic, ethos.

This notion of looking beyond the writer's current experiences with intersectional oppression is a recurring theme in Black women's writing. In colonial and early American literature, these otherworldly solutions often manifested as spiritual

experiences and religious imagery as shown in the writings of women such as Phillis Wheatley who published her book of poetry in 1773 and Rebecca Jackson who was writing in the middle to late 1800s (Walker "Gifts of Power" 71-82). These otherworldly solutions also manifested in speculative texts as experiences and imagery that reflected, or were inspired by, myths and spiritual beliefs throughout the diaspora such as in Pauline Hopkins's novel *Of One Blood* (1903), one of the earliest publications of Black speculative fiction by a Black woman, which harkened to Egyptian mythology and history, or were influenced by a more secular scientific hypothesis that human beings are not alone in the universe - as illustrated in Octavia Butler's *Xenogenesis* series.

While her focus on African spirituality in Black women's writings is not specific to speculative or Afrofuturist genres, Elizabeth West's examination of an African ethos in black women's creative imagination resonates across genres. She writes that there is a, "tradition of spiritual musings," in African American women's writings that, "draw on the physical and experiential to explore matters of spirituality," and are "guided by four principles central to re-Middle Passage African cosmology" (11). These principles are: "1) the value of memory to both individual and group well-being; 2) the belief that community represents the essence of human existence and being; 3) the view that nature--both animate and inanimate--represents divineness; and 4) belief in the interconnectedness of worldly and otherworldly beings" (11). West presents these four principles as "shaping a tradition of spiritual exploration in Black women's writing" (11). The fourth principle offers an opportunity to consider the legacy of Black women's otherworldly writing in the context of speculative fiction. As part of a tradition of spiritual writings that presume a connection to something outside themselves, Black women's

speculative fiction can also be viewed as a metaphorical charge, to echo Butler's protagonist Lauren in *Parable of the Sower*, to "take root among the stars" (77) beyond their current temporal and real-world realities when considering paths to liberation. This tradition and charge also harken to Walker's definition of a womanist as one who loves the moon and loves the spirit (cite).

One of the most impactful methods for exploring the "What if," question as it relates to *liberation biomythographies* and the *womanist speculative archetypes* queries the impact of Black women authors who construct signs and symbols that support new paradigmatic templates for liberation. Roland Barthes, cultural theorist, philosopher and linguist, offers an explanation of the connection between cultural signs and symbols, and the cultural myths these semiotics are engineered to uphold. Writing in 1960s France, Barthes, analysis of semiology was a reaction against signs and symbols of the bourgeoisie. Because he believed they were only invested in the sustainability of their own class, he proposed that people often change words into signs that then become translated into symbols of a given societal myth. Any item or concept, believed Barthes, can be mythologized because anything in the world has the possibility of moving from a static object to what he calls "an oral state" (218). This movement of a word from concept to symbol shapes it into, "open to appropriation by society" (218). Barthes also writes that "Every object in the world can pass from a closed, silent existence to an oral state, open to appropriation by society, for there is no law, whether natural or not, which forbids talking about things...it is human history which converts myth to speech, and it alone rules the life and death of mythical language" (218). This phenomenon, writes Barthes, is not just confined to oral speech but includes all texts, including those that

are written (218). Barthes' views on signs and symbols of oppression provide an important entree into considering the role of signs and symbols in the larger culture in advancing oppressive views; however, his theory does not provide a solution to this phenomenon. He points out that while considering myth as semiology system that is potentially in constant flux, this approach to ordering cultural signs and symbols can be limited by insufficient cultural, material, or historical contexts (221). In an asterisked note, he explains, "Here I am, before the sea; it is true that it bears no message. But on the beach, what material for semiology! Flags, slogans, symbols, signboards, clothes, suntan [sic] even, which are so many messages to me" (221). Arguably, Barthes's theory is limited because it relies only on tangible objects such as photography, paintings, or movies. In this manner, Barthes view of signs and symbols offers an example and an opportunity to further his analysis. Feminist archetypal theory and Lorde's biomythography are apt antidotes to Roland Barthes' theory on the pitfalls of myth as signs in popular culture because each convention provides the author opportunities to create new signs and symbols in an effort towards external and internal liberation from the hegemony of the dominant culture. The womanist speculative archetype presents as an ideal example of restructuring entrenched Western signs and symbols that support oppressive, homogenized cultural myths.

Lorde, the archetype, begins her quest towards liberation with a series of rhetorical inquiries about who shaped her voice and her strength. She writes: "To whom do I owe the power behind my voice, what strength I have become, yeasting up like sudden blood from under the bruised skin's blister...to whom do I owe the symbols of my survival...to whom do I owe the woman I have become" (3-5). The answers that

follow these three questions paint a picture of someone who consciously works to grow and nurture her authentic self and who is on a constant journey to curate and honor the, "...journeywoman pieces," of herself (5) that compose her identity. Not only does she address her opening chapter to this moniker she confers upon her emerging self, but she also extends the description of her continually developing identity as one that is, "Becoming," or in evolution, and later addresses the outcome of this emerging self as "Afrekete" (5), signaling to the reader the ultimate goal of her heroine's journey, and concurrently foreshadowing the union that will signal the completion of this goal.

Lorde provides details of her personal zami, or community of women, in her epilogue: "Every woman I have ever loved has left her print upon me, where I loved some invaluable piece of myself apart from me - so different that I had to stretch and grow in order to recognize her" (255). Of the women she lists, there are four who stand out as models for developing Lorde's sense of herself and who, as presented in her preface, bolster this sense of individuality. These are: Linda, Lorde's mother; DeLois, a woman in the community; Genevieve also known as Gennie and Lorde's first love interest; and Afrekete, the woman who represents the end of Lorde's goal of self-actualization. Lorde's mother and DeLois cultivate different aspects of Lorde's views of individualism, community, and gender roles. Gennie represents sexual awakening, and a moment in Lorde's life when she intentionally began to contribute to the development of a community of like-minded people. Afrekete represents Lorde's anima, as suggested by Jung and Campbell, but represents the author's personal liberation rooted in something deep, fluid, ancient, spiritual, and African. In each instance, Lorde's experiences with these four women reflect both the womanist survival ethic of

interdependence and a concern for the well-being of the community as a whole, and provide a template for how to view the liberation biomythographies for the female protagonists in *Lagoon* and *Xenogenesis*.

Lorde's parents, particularly her mother Linda, were the author's earliest models of individualism. The influence of Lorde's mother on her early perspective of herself and the world around her are characterized within the context of loss and revision. These attitudes were an especially useful method of survival for Linda as an immigrant. Linda arrived to New York with self-awareness; however, everything she knew about herself was connected to Carriacou, not Harlem. Thus, she had to recalibrate, acquire new knowledge, new smells, and new tastes that would encourage survival for her and her family in her new, alien home. This new knowledge included learning how to navigate racism. As such, Lorde's mother modeled her methods of survival in an oppressive environment. Of the methods Lorde references, the two most relevant to this study are Linda's penchants for reframing reality when circumstances were less than ideal, and projecting an air of confidence - even when she felt none. Lorde writes that from her mother she learned, "...all manner of wily and diversionary defenses learned from the white man's tongue....She had to use these defenses, and had survived by them and died by them a little at the same time" (58). Lorde also depicts her mother, Linda, as her earliest example of how to present oneself as an authority despite possessing attributes that are devalued in the default culture - being Black, a woman, and later, gay. Lorde writes: "Strangers counted upon my mother, and I never know why, but as a child it made me think she had a great deal more power than in fact she really had" (17). Linda instilled this attitude in Lorde also. When Lorde complained

to her mother about the racist treatment she often received in elementary school, her mother replied, "What do you care about what they say about you anyway? Do they put bread on your plate? You go to school to learn and leave the rest alone" (60-61). Her mother had a similar reaction when Lorde announced she would run for sixth grade president and later cried when she lost. The summation of the verbal and physical beatings Lorde received in connection with her reaction to the election results were that she should not involve herself in white people's business and should only worry about completing her education. Linda at one point chastises Lorde for expecting fairness from the, "good-for-nothing white piss-jets," who would "pass over some little jacabat girl to elect you anything?" (64-65). What Lorde intimates during this aspect of her story is that her mother's reaction denotes an effort to protect Lorde from the hurt and rejection of racism (58, 61). Further evidence of her mother's attempts to shield her from racism are illustrated on the streets of Harlem.

Lorde shares that while Harlem was racially diverse during her childhood, 1936-1938, the reality of diversity seemingly did not translate to the concerns of store owners who did not welcome Black patrons (17). Those merchants who acquiesced, served Black customers with reluctance and overcharged them (17). It is in this climate that Lorde experienced what she later learned was visceral racism. Lorde recalled that as a child, her mother would reframe the act of people spitting at them as they walked in various parts of Harlem. Instead of acknowledging the act as racist, Linda tells her daughter, "'low-class people who had no better sense nor manners than to spit into the wind no matter where they went,' impressing on me (Lorde) that this humiliation was totally random" (17-18). It wasn't until years later that Lorde realized that her mother's

characterization of this racially charged disparagement was a ruse created to protect a young Lorde from such imposed hatred. She said of her mother, that Linda's method of engaging people who spit on her children because they were Black was to change the perception of the reality by asserting that this issue was one other than racism (18).

The effect of Linda's authority on others was also a reality in Lorde's daily life. For a young Lorde, her mother's authority was uncontestable even to the point of overruling authority figures outside the home. There is another moment in the novel when her mother admonishes the nun/teacher, because the teacher punished Lorde for not following directions (24-25). While on the face of this story, Lorde seems to be resisting an authority figure, the reality is that she did follow directions from an authority, her mother. At that time, it was the only voice of authority a young Lorde recognized. At five, Lorde had learned at home that she should *only* write on certain types of paper using a pencil (25). Initially, when her teacher asked her to practice writing her letter "A" on lined paper that - to a young Lorde - looked like a music sheet or to use a crayon rather than a pencil: Lorde refused. It wasn't until her teacher threatened to tell Lorde's mother about her seemingly willful behavior that Lorde actually began to work on the assignment with the given tools (24-25). In the context of *Zami*, Lorde gained an early understanding that Black women could be authoritative figures and work in equitable relationships with men. This early introduction to her mother's method of projecting power and protecting Lorde's innocence against racism arguably shaped Lorde's early sense of herself as formidable. These early representations from her mother also established a foundation that later encouraged Lorde to root her evolution in her understanding of the type of person she was naturally driven to become. While Linda

was an early domestic model of formidableness despite societal apathy or disdain, DeLois was a model of this characteristic outside of Lorde's home.

DeLois was shunned by the neighborhood women, and described by Lorde as having, "crispy hair" that "twinkled in the summer sun as her big proud stomach moved her on down the block" (4). Lorde writes that she loved DeLois because she, "moved like she felt she was somebody special" (4) and she, "moved like how she thought god's mother must have moved, and my mother, once upon a time, and someday maybe me" (4). Note here that Lorde casts DeLois in an ancient, spiritual context that flows through a matriarchal line. Once again privileging Blackness as important, Lorde writes that she also loved DeLois because she was, "big and Black and special and seemed to laugh all over" (4). This woman, eschewed by members of the community, was seen by Lorde as an ideal to aspire to, someone who was self-actualized, and also someone to be loved, and - to a degree worshipped. Lorde emphasizes her reclamation of what represents strength and beauty by providing an example of DeLois's strong, unapologetic sense of individualism. The author recounts an incident wherein a local man, driving a car, berated DeLois as she was crossing the street at a, "slow and deliberate" pace (4). Although he yelled at her, "'Hurry up you flat-footed, nappy-headed, funny-looking bitch!'", DeLois maintained her stride and never acknowledged him (4). Lorde never explains or makes apologies for DeLois because to do so would be to undermine the quest of self-actualization that Lorde, the heroine, has begun in *Zami*. Throughout the text, Lorde strains with the effort of finding synergy between who she instinctively understands herself to be and how that intrinsic belief should manifest in her outward appearance and behavior. To dedicate space in *Zami* apologizing for

DeLois would implicitly apologize for Lorde, herself. Instead she invites the reader to accept DeLois as the woman presented herself to the public. This action also presents DeLois as a revered member of Lorde's own zami. Linda and DeLois represent for Lorde a small window of time in her early, impressionable life where she did not have to form an identity in reaction to racialized and gendered disrespect. Quite the contrary, these early experiences supply a powerful impression of how to claim and protect her personhood. Lorde's descriptors of both her mother and DeLois indicate an awareness that what she witnessed in both women was a strength and self-determination to be admired and emulated. The outgrowth of this early modeling was a woman who worked to nurture and protect her right to negotiate the world with a clear sense of her core self as well as with the aspects of herself that were evolving. She was also able to, because of her early modeling, find, develop, and sustain communities that existed outside of a mainstream society that did not value them because of race, gender, or sexual orientation.

Lorde's template for a liberation biomythography requires a womanist speculative archetype who is on a quest for self-actualization, a quest that enables this person's journey to self to unfold without the social or biological confines of gender, and a community to support and nurture this journey. This project will analyze liberation mythology through the actions of the texts' womanist speculative archetype. More specifically, the analysis will examine how Black women, and the communities they engage, are able to free themselves of racial and gendered oppressions. To this end, the alien invasions provide a new myth within which to examine a womanist speculative

archetype's journey and her reconsideration of gendered roles as an element of the journey to self-actualization.

In Black feminist theory, there is an emphasis on community building that incorporates creation of a viable community, advocacy for survival of the community, and shared values that reflect a new set of perspectives connected to managing the community. These shared values, in the context of Black feminist theory, are centered on each individual defining the person's knowledge of self and then defining the role that individual will play in the community. These aspects of community building are reflected in *Zami*, *Xenogenesis* and *Lagoon*. Given the context in which Butler, and arguably, Okorafor are writing, it is no surprise that even in the face of an alien invasion, when the human race faces an uncertain future, the Black female protagonists in *Lagoon* and *Xenogenesis* still have to interface with gendered oppression. Chapter three will interrogate the manner in which an alien invasion forces dynamic reconsiderations of existing constructs of gender and gender roles. In each text, the protagonist encounters these reconstructions and gender renegotiations on personal and community levels. In *Dawn*, the first book of the *Xenogenesis* trilogy, when Lilith begins to consider which of the humans she will awaken first from animated suspension, she eventually decides to awaken three women before she reanimates any men, because she has suffered attempted rape from another human man on the Oankali's ship. In *Lagoon*, one of the moments that marks the beginning of the alien invasion is Adora's inhuman resistance to her husband Chris who has been advised by Father Oke, a local evangelist to, "Break her with your hands, then soften her with flowers" (38).

From less personal aspects, the alien invasion positions each protagonist into a leadership role to help remake the community in the aliens' vision which means that traditionally held gender roles, which are human structured constructs, become obsolete. In the case of *Xenogenesis*, gender roles are reimagined in terms of family and reproductive structures. The alien invasion in *Lagoon* becomes a catalyst for renegotiating roles as the protagonist battles several instances of chauvinism, and homophobia in the text. For example, the alien ambassador, Ayodele, who insists that she be able to speak to the population through a national telecast and meet with the President takes the shape of a woman. In the context of the novel these two occurrences are radical revisions of which gender should assume leadership roles. When considered as liberation biomythographies, these new takes on gender roles provide metaphorically unique ways to reconsider traditional gender roles in ways that combat gender inequities.

In terms of identity, these novels are liberation biomythographies about what makes Black women valuable; this is the aspect of the analysis chapter two will address. Of all of the people the aliens could have chosen to be a bridge between themselves and humanity, the aliens chose Black women. Essentially, it is their perceived defects and later career choices that allow these Black female protagonists that make them valuable, powerful, and positioned to imagine a more equitable society. In this manner Okorafor and Butler advance the plot in their respective novels with the notion that the female protagonist was predisposed to perform the leadership mantle the aliens placed on each of their shoulders.

In the case of *Lagoon*, Adora was born with webbed feet and hands that had to be surgically separated. The career she chooses to pursue as an adult is a marine biologist. As such, she is a perfect candidate for one of three people who make up the delegation between the humans and the water-based aliens. In *Xenogenesis* the protagonist is a burgeoning cultural anthropologist who experienced the tragic, unexpected death of her husband and son before the war. Additionally, she is from a family with a history of cancer and, thanks to a procedure performed by the Oankali, is a cancer survivor. Because these aliens are gene traders, they are fascinated with cancer cells and because she has survived the traumas of death and war Lilith – like Adora -- is a biologically and socially ideal liaison.

Society, or community, in each of the novels are restructured and enhanced. Chapter four will illustrate that, in each case, the new community the protagonists initially find solidarity in is a community of women, or zami. The alien ambassador in *Lagoon* who engages the human delegation led by Adaora elects to initially take the form of a woman who Adaora names after her childhood best friend, Ayodele. The person who films the video of Ayodele's speech is Adora's young daughter. In *Xenogenesis* the first men who are awakened from suspended animation, rouse to a community of women. However, as each novel progresses, the definition of community expands according to the needs and concerns of aliens invading earth. As the saviors of humanity and earth, the aliens in Butler's trilogy *Xenogenesis* determine how community is constructed. However, it is Lilith who they charge with preparing the first group of humans to participate and thrive in this new community. While the aliens in *Lagoon* do not unilaterally determine the new social structure of humanity, they do

enhance and influence the society, and integrate themselves in various communities as they negotiate the relationship between themselves and the humans. They accomplish this task by shapeshifting into humans, sea animals and in one instance, a god. This transformation is ushered in and overseen - in part- by Adaora. From the standpoint of biomythography, as illustrated in *Zami*, and Black feminist theory, these newly structured communities are also created out of an experiential, integrative, communal sensibility rather than one that is separatist.

## 2 CHAPTER TWO: SELF-ACTUALIZATION: A WOMANIST SPECULATIVE ARCHETYPE'S JOURNEY TOWARDS PERSONHOOD

A Black woman who embarks upon a quest to become self-actualized also commits to the discovery of her intrinsic personhood, despite dominating, marginalizing societal narratives that undermine Black women's humanity. Through a range of literary genres, Black women writers explore these quests for self-assertion that their peers navigate. The groundbreaking 1861 slave narrative by Harriet Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, is one such example. Jacobs's text illustrates the methods she employs to retain her personhood, despite the institutionalized efforts designed to diminish her humanity. Similarly, and more than a century after Jacobs, in her 1987 Black speculative, neo-slave novel *Beloved*, Toni Morrison shares the story of a Black woman's journey toward self-actualization. In the case of *Beloved*, the text is fictionalized history, and the protagonist, Sethe, is constructed through an amalgamation of history and imagination. *Beloved* offers a Black speculative perspective of the 1856 true story of Margaret Garner. An escaped slave, Garner attempted to kill her children and herself when faced with recapture. She killed her two-year-old daughter and wounded her other four children. In the tradition of the speculative genre, Morrison's novel begins with a "what if" question. She asks, "what if" Garner's slain daughter were to return as a ghost to hold the mother accountable? Morrison then seeks out an answer through Sethe, her fictional recreation of the real-life Garner. Sethe's resolution at the end of the novel illustrates the journey the protagonist undertakes to repair the damage rendered to her *self* as born out of the traumas of slavery. Sethe heals the wounds of her trauma and begins to work towards recovering

her personhood. In both Jacobs and Morrison's texts we encounter metanarratives wherein these Black women writers and their protagonists reflect their counter narratives. In part, these narratives of resistance are directed against centuries-long portrayals of Black women as insignificant contributors to the fabric of the Western culture. Additionally, their texts illustrate the significance of considering the *self* as an integral force in engaging oppression. In this respect, Sethe and Jacobs's journeys exemplify bell hooks's arguments regarding self-recovery as a liberatory act (7-9). hooks writes, "Before many of us can effectively sustain engagement in organized resistance struggle, in the Black liberation movement, we need to undergo a process of self-recovery..." (7). Self-recovery and self-actualization both speak to the process of connecting, or reconnecting, to one's inner compass as a mechanism for navigating external environments. As revealed in many texts by Black women authors such as Jacobs, Morrison and Lorde, once a Black woman decides to follow her internal compass towards self-actualization, her intrinsic desires define her approach to achieving full personhood despite external environments that invalidate their humanity.

These intrinsic desires guide their actions just as longitude lines on a map conventionally point true north; true north is, however, more than a physical direction point. For Jacobs, true north culminates into a literal journey north towards freedom; for Sethe, true north points towards spiritual freedom. Sethe searches for a path of forgiveness: most importantly she seeks to be forgiven and to forgive herself for a heinous act committed in love. While there is value in discovering how Black women employ this type of agency in their counter narratives, reading these works from a theoretical viewpoint such as womanism also offers invaluable benefits. A womanist

lens provides the reader with the analytical language to frame these authors' counter-narratives, as liberation biomythographies that reflect the authors' and/or protagonists' intrinsic identity. A womanist reading of these texts also opens the way to viewing these heroines' journeys as a synergistic relationship between recovering or discovering one's self and engaging one's outside environment. Black heroines such as Jacobs and Sethe must surmount hurdles that originate in a western ethos that denies their consciousness and ability for self-reflection and self-actualization. Given this reality of such an obstacle, there is a need for alternative ways of understanding Black female interiority as represented in American literature. Pratt writes of these protagonists, that when one considers a young Black heroine's, "...attempts to achieve a full personal development (she is) hampered at every turn" (32). Arguably, the Black heroine's diminished development in American literature reflects the degrees of unworthiness and inhumanity extant in American culture. As such, through the conventional lens of the American literary imagination, the Black female protagonist "...faces a double alienation" in that she is encouraged to adhere to the standards of purity and decorum as represented by "white femininity" while understanding that according to a master narrative, she is inherently impure (Pratt 32). Dr. Kim Marie Vaz's analysis offers a useful perspective regarding how a womanist framework ameliorates the Black heroines' paradoxical condition. She writes that womanists, "...concoct something that makes sense for how we are living in complex gender, racial, and class social configurations" (234). In other words, womanism does not offer a static approach or critical lens for understanding self-actualization. Instead, womanism reveals the shifting systems of healing that constitute a multiplicity of responses to a dynamic and often

pernicious environment. More specifically, womanism emphasizes that an evolving self, based on an internal compass rather than a response to external influences, is one such scenario. To this end, the analysis that follows in this chapter examines the ways in which a womanist reading can offer a more expansive and nuanced analysis of Black women's speculative narratives. Through a womanist lens, this chapter explores the protagonist's experience as a journey towards self-actualization, highlighting a path to liberation through counter-narratives that contest interlocking modes of oppression. Specifically, this analysis identifies the main characters' approaches to create or discover their intrinsic personhood as a counter narrative to racial and gender inequities through the use of a heroic womanist speculative archetype.

Audre Lorde exhibits this synergistic approach to self-actualization in her autobiographical 1982 text *Zami*. Throughout this work that she identifies as biomythography, Lorde presents herself as a Black woman whose quest towards self-actualization requires acts of racial and gendered liberation. Indeed, *Zami* represents Lorde's ongoing interrogation of racial and gendered systems of interlocking oppression. Five years before Lorde published her biomythography, she produced a printed rebuke, "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House." In this text, Lorde cautions the organizers of the 1979, "Second Sex Conference" against upholding a narrative that marginalizes people who are not white, heteronormative, and members of the middle or higher class. Her speech was precipitated by the lack of diversity among the panels at a conference slated to presumably address *all* women's concerns. Lorde asks in this text, "What does it mean when the tools of a racist patriarchy are used to examine the fruits of that same patriarchy?" (111). The answer to

her query, writes Lorde, is that “only the most narrow perimeters of change are possible and allowable” (111). In other words, one cannot purport commitment to the liberation of women while narrowly designating which women merit liberation. One year later, in her 1980 essay, “Age, Race, Class, and Sex: Women Redefining Difference,” Lorde designated the “tool of a racist patriarchy” she discussed in her earlier text as part of a “mythical norm” (116-117). Lorde also argued that those who exist within this mythical norm view others as different or deviant. An extension of this limited viewpoint, Lorde continued, is the belief that all members of any of these othered groups share a homogenized experience of oppression (116). In this example, all women’s oppression becomes subsumed under one purview - white, middle-class, and women’s oppression. Lorde’s overarching argument in these two essays, as well as in *Zami*, supports the indeterminable value of a womanist perspective which connects Black women’s worth to a praxis of empowerment as represented in the *womanist speculative archetype*.

When readers encounter Lorde as the womanist speculative archetype in her counter-narrative *Zami*, they witness Lorde implementing her theories of rejecting both the master's tools and the mythical norm. The author enacts this effort by changing her name to a term that represents women in community and by curating an evolution-focused narrative. These two strategies signal Lorde’s commitment to proposing a new paradigm of how Black women reclaim their personhood. Collectively, these two strategies exhibit three attributes of Walker’s definition of womanist - *adaptability*, *universality*, and *boldness*. These characteristics undergird womanist-based, tangible approaches to disrupting interlocking oppression and are common traits authors infuse into their womanist speculative archetypes. A brief overview of how these

characteristics serve to create and incubate Lorde's intrinsic sense of self *Zami* will support further analyses of how the protagonists of *Xenogenesis* and *Lagoon* present similar womanist characteristics.

Lorde first signals the imperativeness of self-actualization by boldly renaming herself in the title of her biomythography: *Zami: A New Spelling of my Name*. *Zami* is a Carriacou term used to describe, "women who work together as friends and lovers" (Lorde 255). This definition of Lorde's new name signals interdependence a key component of Lorde's evolution. Secondly, the structure of Lorde's narrative illustrates her intentional approach to self-actualization. Rather than present a narrative shaped solely by time, Lorde presents a hero's narrative primarily framed in the order of self-discovery. While chronology certainly exists in this narrative, time does not drive the evolution of the text or the heroine's journey - Lorde's personal metamorphosis does. As a result, the reader engages a womanist speculative archetype's quest towards self-actualization, rather than a survivor's tale of navigating an oppressive socio-political climate.

Before Lorde can earnestly begin a quest of self-discovery, she has to recognize the connection between recovering her *self* and survival; the first step of this process is valuing her uniqueness. Therefore, although - as discussed in the "Introduction" of this project - Lorde naturally exercises her bent in *Zami* towards individuality at an early age, she does not consciously and actively view herself and her actions as different until adolescence. It is during this time that she begins to clearly exhibit the three characteristics that center the womanist ethos: *adaptability*, *universalism*, and *boldness*. Once Lorde begins high school, she comes to understand that she is unique, "...not

because I was Black, but because I was me” (82). It is important to note here that this revelation does not disregard her Blackness, but places equal importance on her intrinsic need to be herself as it includes her Blackness. Lorde’s response to this revelation was to locate like-minded people - regardless of race - rather than to suppress her unconventionality. She eventually joins a group of young women who have named themselves “The Branded” (Lorde 81). The author characterizes The Branded as, “a sisterhood of rebels” who were united by the differences that separated them from others (81). Lorde also describes the group as, “The Lunatic Fringe, proud of our outrageousness and our madness, our bizarre-colored inks and quill pens” (81). Establishing solidarity with this network of young women, allows Lorde to employ the womanist view of universalism. Her interdependent approach to community supersedes any concerns about their dissimilarities. Lorde’s friendship with The Branded precipitates the boldness she will need for the next leg of her journey towards personhood. At seventeen, an adolescent Lorde finds that in order to continue her transformation she needs to move into her own apartment. As she began to pursue her authentic personhood, her home environment became a battleground where her need for privacy and introspection were constantly under attack. Lorde writes of her family, “A request for privacy was treated like an outright act of insolence for which the punishment was swift and painful” (Lorde 83). The stress of this seemingly interminable battle on Lorde was telling. When she slept at night, she would often experience nightmares and wake up to her, “pillowcase red and stiffened by gushing nosebleeds during the night, or damp and saturated with the acrid smell of tears and the sweat of terror” (Lorde 83). Thus, Lorde learns at a young age that sometimes adapting to a

condition means exercising the audacity to move outside of it. Walker includes this observation in her definition of womanist of a woman who is: “Not a separatist, except periodically, for health” (“Womanist” xi). Lorde says of her move that while she was nervous, she was also committed to, “an adolescent's wild and powerful commitment to battling in my own full eye, closer to my own strength...” (104). These early experiences of the dissonance between an emerging self and a restrictive domestic environment seem to shape Lorde’s steadfast commitment to creating her own spaces for transformation, no matter the cost. As a result, any adversities Lorde faced after leaving her parents’ home - whether it was poverty, an abortion, another move - Lorde adapted. She remained committed to creating a literal and figurative space where she was able to have solitude to write, to be depressed, to socialize with members of The Branded — in essence, and to self-actualize.

At one moment in the text, she goes to work, two nights after an abortion, to ensure her ability to pay her expenses for the month. A maid whom Lorde encounters sees Lorde’s wan complexion and fatigued posture, evidence of her pain and blood loss, and says to Lorde, “Chile, why don’t you go on back home to your mama, where you belong?” (114). However, what the maid could not know was that Lorde was responding to the internal map lines that would lead her true north, towards self-actualization. As sickly and despondent as Lorde may have appeared, any alternative - such as going back to her mother - would have been even more detrimental to her sense of self. In this regard, Lorde, was exactly where she belonged. One year later, Lorde’s continued boldness and mutability drove her to move from New York to Connecticut to work in a factory, and at nineteen, to fly to Mexico to live and study as an

independent student. In each of these spaces she engaged or created zamis that, similarly to *The Branded*, bonded because they understood that their personhood existed outside of the mythical norm. The efficacy of these groups to Lorde's sustained personhood will be explored further in chapter four. However, all of these experiences indicate the *adaptability, universalism, and boldness* that informed Lorde's early sense of the person she was becoming.

As with Lorde in *Zami*, Lilith in *Xenogenesis* (1978) and Adaora in *Lagoon* (2014) exemplify this womanist framework as they adapt to radically new environments introduced by aliens. Like Lorde, Lilith and Adaora learn the nature of - and navigational methods for - their new environments. It is true that a radical change to the outside environment precipitates the protagonists' evolutions; however, the sense of displacement was always present based on pre-invasion, interlocking social oppressions. Therefore, for the speculative womanist archetype, a radical change in the outside environment allows the protagonist to re-emerge in an environment where the characteristics that would be devalued would be viewed as leadership potential. An integral part of the protagonists' evolution is their ability to nourish innate talents in and of themselves because, "Revolution," writes Toni Cade Bambara, "begins with the self, in the self" (133). Bambara continues, "The individual, the basic revolutionary unit" must debride the ego and heart of toxins that "...assault...and threaten" them (133). Otherwise the poison will spread to subsequent "units," such as relationships, families, and communities (133). Because these heroines nurture their own inner revolution, they are then able to create communities that nourish their proficiencies and interface with groups that value them as assets. Lorde, by necessity, leaves the familiarity of home to

create her own new and uncharted environment, while Lilith regains consciousness in a new environment created by the alien Oankali.

“Alive.” (Lorde 153). “Alive!” (Butler 9). For Audre Lorde, the word *alive* speaks to the moment her journey towards authentic personhood leads her away from an emotionally toxic relationship towards an international journey - at the age of nineteen - to Mexico. Butler’s protagonist, Lilith, speaks this word as she awakens from a 250-year chemically-induced sleep that followed an apocalyptic nuclear world war. While the circumstances connected to each iteration of “Alive” differ, the most obvious being the genres, one may extrapolate a similar meaning from each heroine’s statement from a womanist standpoint - it is time to adapt. As Lilith’s exclamation mark indicates, her utterance of the word is an emphatic confirmation of her renewed existence. She speaks herself into existence and ignites her journey towards self-actualization. Once Lilith realizes that she has indeed survived the nuclear war, she begins to reorient herself to her new environment. This practice of assessment and then reorientation is an important aspect of Black women’s agency as writers and/or activists. Often times, they describe injustices in a clear and unadulterated manner as a call to action or as a precursor to identifying a prescription for how to solve the problem. We see such an approach in Lorde’s texts, and the reader witnesses it again in Lilith’s approach to engaging her new environment. Upon awakening, Lilith considers whether she had been drugged, she contemplates the dimensions of the room and she considers the practical question of whether there are clothes for her to wear, etc. (5-11). These early assessments provide Lilith the opportunity to evaluate her environment and the resources available to her. In this regard, central to Lilith’s dawning awareness of her

new surroundings is the understanding that what she perceives is the reality (5). She employs this perspective as she takes stock of her new conditions and later centers her training philosophy on this notion. Thus, Lilith's attempts to come to terms with her reality also signals that her self-actualization will also mean a complete transformation of her personhood and perception of herself within a new world. Understanding her reality underlines Lilith's commitment to realism continues to serve her well as she meets her Oankali handler, Jdahya. Her ability to leave the isolation room the Oankali placed her in rests solely on Lilith's ability to accept Jdahya's appearance, tolerate being in close proximity to him, and agree to her assigned task. Adapting to this new species would be no small feat. Butler describes Jdahya's appearance as a, "humanoid, but it had no nose - no bulge, no nostrils - just flat, gray skin" (12). Lilith also learns that what originally appeared to be hair growing out of his head, around his eyes, from his throat, were actually tentacles (12-14). Her eventual adjustment to the dissonance of this new environment and an alien race is taxing but not fearful. Lilith says of this new experience, she has had many fears to overcome already, "She was not afraid...The unknown frightened her. The cage she was in frightened her. She preferred becoming accustomed to any number of ugly faces to remaining in her cage" (12). From this perspective, Lilith's decision to remain grounded in the environment she could engage with her five senses, rather than to pretend or imagine she was somewhere else, is an exercise in boldness and adaptability. Lilith's perspective reflects an aspect of womanism that Layli (Phillips) Maparyan, editor of *The Womanist Reader* defines in part as, "a social change perspective rooted in Black women and

other women of color's everyday experiences and everyday methods of problem-solving" (xx).

As Lilith becomes accustomed to her liaison Jdahya, he explains the job the aliens have assigned to her. He informs Lilith that her task is to, "...Awaken a small group of humans, all English-speaking, and help them learn to deal with us. You'll teach them the survival skills we teach you" (35). When Butler presents Lilith as the human the Oankali choose to prepare the first group of humans to travel to earth, she ensures that the reader understands the significance of the alien's choice. The reader learns that after interacting with humans for over 200 years, Lilith was the only one the Oankali viewed as equipped to assist them in forming sustainable earth-bound family units with humans (31-32). A close reading of the text provides a view of Lilith as conflicted about accepting this role. A deeper reading of Lilith's job assignment offers an opportunity to evaluate her position as antithetical to the mythic norm as represented in American literature and especially science fiction. As a Black woman protagonist, Lilith is moved from the margins of the text to the center as the womanist speculative archetype. As the archetype the aliens' task to guide the renewal of earth, the re-imagined planet reflects a womanist, commonweal approach towards humanity.

There are several characteristics that mark Lilith as an ideal candidate to prepare humans to integrate with a select group of Oankali and return to earth. In addition to her training as an anthropologist, she had been a mother and a wife until her family perished in the nuclear war. These characteristics frame her as a nurturer. Additionally, she has a family history of cancer which, for the Oankali, means she can regenerate cells easily. The Oankali find this aspect of Lilith's DNA almost mesmerizingly seductive

because regenerative cells mean the Oankali, adept at biological engineering, gain access to new biological possibilities-- such as regenerating limbs. Lastly, she is adaptable. Lilith has been willing to develop an openness to learn about her new, alien environment. Lilith's decision is bold, for she understands what this compliance means in terms of her future children: "Medusa children. Snakes for hair. Nests of night crawlers for eyes and ears" (43). Lilith also understands that her acquiescence will signal, for some of the humans that she has taken on the role of a "Judas goat" or Oankali sympathizer (66). Once Lilith decides to comply with the Oankali demands, they remake her. The Oankali enhance her biologically as a defense mechanism to be stronger than the humans she will awaken. They also adjust her chemical makeup to enable her to open the ship doors with her saliva which, until this point, could only be controlled by Oankali secretions. Lilith's name also changes. Unlike Lorde, Lilith does not choose her new name; the Oankali rename her. Lilith *Iyapo* becomes *Dhokaalteeiinj-dahyalilith eka Kahguyat aj Dinso* (64). Her Oankali name informs other Oankali that Lilith is an adopted member of the Oankali species and is now part of a specific Oankali kinship group (64). Lilith's new name signals to humans as well that the Oankali have co-opted her into their social and familial structure. It is important to note here that, despite what many of the humans may think of Lilith, her decision to comply with the Oankali does not also indicate her apathy to restoring or preserving humanity. Quite the contrary, she also complies because as an anthropologist she cares for humanity and wants to have a hand in her species' survival.

Once she understands how she is unique among humans and orients herself to her new environment, she then, like Lorde, has to connect to like-minded people. This

task is especially difficult for Lilith because, unlike Lorde and her group, The Branded, Lilith has no existing group of people she is able to connect with; she has to select the people she will awaken from suspended animation. Once Lilith strategically chooses the humans, she will awaken there are two characteristics that the group have in common. Everyone, including Lilith, is eager to move from the Oankali ship back to earth. Secondly, as Lilith suspected, many of the humans view her as a traitor to her kind. This is arguably a position Black woman are sometimes faced with, the eagerness for the principle they are advocating to be achieved, but the contempt - or in some cases erasure - they have to face in order to be effective. bell hooks addresses this concern when she writes:

If you think about the brave books dealing with Black womanhood from the 1960s and 1970s, so many of them had to span pages and pages dealing with the 'Are you Black first or are you a woman first?' question...(we) will not be able to address our lives and our mental and physical health adequately if we cannot address the interlocking systems. (157)

Throughout the *Xenogenesis* trilogy, Lilith continues to be vilified as a traitor to humankind among the group of humans called the resisters. These humans refuse to create interspecies families with the Oankali even though the Oankali have rendered them sterile and unable to produce children without capitulating to the Oankali family structure (268, 281).

Despite the criticism Lilith receives from the human resisters, she displays her love and concern for her own humanity and that of the resisters. Viewed in a womanist context, Lilith displays the characteristic of a universalist. Patricia Hill Collins

interpolates Walker's meaning of universalist as the belief that everyone can co-exist equally, no matter their differences (10). Therefore, she nurtures her own humanity by taking moments for herself - an action that harkens back to Walker's view of a womanist as one who values the need for solitude. During these sojourns she travels out beyond the Oankali camp to be alone and to plant edible crops for human resistors. Their unwillingness to literally, and figuratively, partner with the Oankali means most of the humans are unfamiliar with the altered, edible vegetation on the Oankali-restored earth. Lilith, more than anyone, understands how her decision to comply with the Oankali could be viewed as reckless, rather than bold. She often felt that way about the decision herself. But she did not view the decision as one made without love for humanity. Arguably, the ongoing conflict she displays throughout the trilogy about the family she is creating is proof of her love for humanity, her womanist sense of universalism. She even supports the idea of a human colony on Mars led by one of her construct children, even though the Oankali believe sending humans to Mars equates leaving them to humans' fatal flaw that dooms them to hierarchical behavior and thus potential annihilation of the human race (561, 474 - 475). Lilith's universalist approach to the Oankali, human and her hybrid children are necessary to serving her environment. Her universalist approach is also how her commitment to survive her new environment manifests.

While Adaora, the protagonist in *Lagoon*, does not utter a word to mark the moment the protagonist declares her intention to survive, there is a word that marks the moment Adaora intends to adapt to a new environment, "Awake..." (Okorafor 10). This word is spoken by the shapeshifting alien who returns Adaora, along with her two

companions, back to Bar Beach in Lagos, Nigeria after their abduction. The alien's voice is the first Adaora hears after regaining consciousness. She and her soon-to-be compatriots, Agu and Anthony, will not remember what happened on the underwater ship until later in the text. However, immediately after she regains consciousness, Adaora, proceeds to engage the alien, at some point chastising herself for not being able to think clearly, as her scientific training would dictate (10). Soon after awakening Adaora, the alien begins to shapeshift into someone that reminds Adaora of her best friend. Adaora names the alien Ayodele after this childhood playmate (11-12). Just as with Lorde and Lilith, naming for Adaora indicates the inception of the womanist speculative archetype's synergistic fusing of an intrinsic self and the changing environment. Whereas Lorde and Lilith's names signal that this transformation begins within themselves, Adaora's bestowal of a name upon the alien signals her alignment with a change already in motion.

One of the ways this change manifests is through the aliens' decision to designate a group of Earth ambassadors. When the *Lagoon* aliens simultaneously abduct Adaora, Agu, and Anthony, the extraterrestrials create the first of many dynamic conditions that build common experiences and a collective with whom Adaora will navigate the alien invasion (46-48). For example, the first time Adaora, Agu, and Anthony meet the aliens, they are collectively seized by a, "fist of water" that sucked them into the sea (5). The narrator emphasizes the group's unity once they all arrive at Adaora's home-based marine biology lab to discuss their capture and subsequent meeting with the aliens, "All three of them stayed together. All three of them were in" (13). The groups' abduction experience illustrates their immediate connectedness.

There are other signals throughout the text that indicate a predetermined relationship among the three compatriots, before the aliens' arrival. For example, each member of the group possesses a name that begins with the letter "A". Furthermore, the reader learns that each member of this group owns a supernatural trait that influenced their career choice, but that they also kept hidden (160-162, 167-168).

Most relevant to this study are Adaora's attributes. She was born with webbed fingers and joined legs that were all surgically separated when she was a child (251). The implication of Adaora's experience is that she was born as a mermaid and was surgically enhanced to appear human. The reader may not only infer that, intrinsically, she was still a mermaid, but that this intrinsic reality impacted her choice to become a marine biologist. Therefore, later in the text, when Adaora visits the aliens underwater they transform her into her original mermaid form, with the addition of gills, so that Adaora can breathe and navigate in the ocean (245). She returns to her human form once she returns to land. Adaora's physical transformations enable her to share a kinship with Lorde who experienced physical changes related to her sexuality, and Lilith, who experiences chemical and physical changes when the Oankali enhance her physical abilities. The profound changes these womanist speculative archetypes experience underscore the notion that a radical new environment necessitates a radical transformation on the biological - even cellular - level. These changes also represent a synergy of their intrinsic needs and these archetypes' environmental changes. Therefore, it is not surprising that Adaora's first reaction when she comes back to consciousness is to think, not to panic. Okorafor writes of Adaora, "She shut her eyes, forcing herself to think analytically, calmly, rationally, like the scientist she

was” (10). This rationality reflects the protagonist’s audacity, or boldness, as she establishes a personal connection to the alien.

Many characters in *Lagoon* view the aliens as different and view that difference as a deviance that must be managed or destroyed. For example, Father Oke, who acts as a spiritual leader to Adaora’s husband Chris, calls Ayodele a “marine witch” and declares that she must be saved (55, 25). Chris later hurls the same insult at Adaora because he has witnessed her newfound powers of physical transformation. For Adaora, along with her compatriots Agu and Anthony, this designation is not an insult -- it reflects who she has always been and connects her to the dynamic environment the aliens sheppard into Lagos. In fact, towards the end of the novel, as Adaora reviews her experiences with the aliens, including the moments they transformed her into a mermaid she whispers to herself, “I am a marine witch” (273). But for those humans, such as Father Oke and Chris, who are invested in a mythical norm, their views may prove to be detrimental to the wellbeing of anyone who publicly aligns with the aliens. Father Oke, Chris, and other humans who regard the aliens as aberrant, mark themselves as humans who are unwilling to partner with the aliens who have indicated that they are on earth to stay. Nevertheless, Adaora boldly accepts the alien’s request to act, along with Anthony and Agu, as liaison and stays committed to connecting the aliens and humans in a bid for a new, universalist, interdependent community. Like Lilith and Lorde, Adaora understands universalism’s importance to helping humanity navigate this alien invasion. As a result, she enlists the help of a variety of people and resources in her surrounding community. All of these actions indicate that Adaora is not only willing to adapt to change in a bold manner, but that she is also willing to

understand, like Lilith, the impending universality that will occur with the arrival of this new species. Rather than act as adversaries, Adaora, Agu, and Anthony form an alliance that might be likened to Lorde's *The Branded*. Through their group they will work to unite the aliens and Lagotians on the basis of what they have in common rather than the elements that mark their differences.

For the womanist speculative archetypes in *Zami*, *Xenogenesis*, and *Lagoon*, survival is the catalyst that propels them towards actualizing their innate desires. The impetus for this catalyst is new environments. In Lorde's case, she seeks out new environments that support her ability to survive the racial and gendered counter narrative she is creating regarding her personhood. In each new environment, Lorde connects with women who reify her innate sense of self as antithetical to racial and gendered social constructs. Lorde's journey towards self-actualization yields more than one way to define herself. Decades later, Lorde would define herself not only as the eponymous *Zami*, but also as an assemblage of names: Black, lesbian, mother, warrior, and poet. All of these names represent a collectively whole Lorde. For Lilith and Adaora, aliens choose the protagonists' new environment. The new earth becomes a crucible wherein they are forced to reconsider who they will become. In each case, the end result is, like Lorde, multifaceted. Lilith becomes a doula that ushers in Oankali-human families; she also becomes a betrayer of humanity. Adaora, who is already a marine biologist, also becomes a marine witch. In each case, self-actualization for these archetypes does not mean distilling the expression of their intrinsic desires into one label. Rather, the journey to self-actualization results in a unique, genuine expression of oneself in presentation and expression.

### 3 CHAPTER THREE: GENDER EXPRESSION

Lorde centers her narrative of self-actualization around her quest to freely express her sexuality and gender. As early as adolescence, Lorde seeks out communities and spaces where like-minded people support her right to nurture a personhood that runs counter to social constructs of gender and sexuality. Lorde's efforts serve as an example of Anias Pratt's conclusions regarding authors who write lesbian fiction. Pratt writes in her text, *Archetypal Patterns in Women's Fiction*, "...when novels depict women loving women, or seeking Eros and rebirth in solitude, women authors must create new spaces and new worlds of habitation" (94). Pratt's assertion points to the need for women authors to create areas, figuratively or literally, where their female characters can fully realize their personhood outside of the heteronormative social constructions of gender. As the heroine of her mythic autobiography, Lorde possesses the same need. The speculative nature of Lorde's biomythography presents her with the opportunity to actualize Pratt's notion of "new spaces and new worlds of habitation" as a lived body experience (Young 16).

Iris Marion Young, political philosopher and feminist theorist, offers an explanation of the "lived body" as, "a unified idea of a physical body acting and experiencing in a specific sociocultural context; it is body-in-situation" (16). In other words, one balances the material aspects of the body – e.g. cisgender, skin color, height, weight, abilities, etc. - with how one chooses to, "construct herself in relation to this facticity," or material reality (16). The lived body as a concept presumes that one has a choice in how they define themselves based on how they experience their body. Young further asserts that such an approach not only benefits the individual but also the

wider community, "...because the category of the lived body allows description of the habits and interactions," of people of multiple genders and sexual orientations, "in ways that can attend to the plural possibilities of comportment, without necessary reduction to the normative heterosexual binary of 'masculine' or 'feminine'" (18). One of the outcomes of Young's perspective, of course, is that the wider community would need to orient itself around a common ethos that privileges universalism and interdependence. Under this womanist, revised social structure, the unifying principle would maintain individuals' well-being by also supporting diversity. In practice, the universalist characteristic in Young's lived body theory not only aligns with Lorde's journey towards self-actualization, but also with Patricia Melzer's approach to queer identities.

Like Melzer, Lorde's approach to gender advocates an alternative view of sexuality that operates outside of the "classic feminist" approach to gender criticism (Melzer 220). Melzer argues that the stable sexed body views the material body in a "sex/gender/sexually correlation" that privileges a male/female binary. As a result, even some speculative texts that aim to interrogate gender biases remain confined within this binary (217). Melzer writes that in order to escape the boundaries of heteronormativity, one must view sexuality as fluid. Considering gender as a shifting concept corresponds with Young's consideration of gender and provides a recognition of the adaptive nature of lived body as a condition of gender expression. For Lorde, viewing gender expression as interrelated outcomes of both her intrinsic personhood, and of her lived experiences supplies the tenacity and sense of freedom that informs her journey towards self-actualization. Lorde's experience with negotiating gender expression also provides an apt framework within which to examine the impact of the alien invasions on

gender roles in *Lagoon* and *Xenogenesis*. Just as Lorde constructs a personalized gendered expression that reflects her environments and experiences, members of the revamped, alien-influenced human communities must reconsider their expression of gender. In each novel, the aliens' vision for humanity render the existing gender roles as obsolete. Considering Lorde's early influences for her unique expression of gender provides an entry into how her experience frames those of the characters in *Lagoon* and *Xenogenesis*.

Lorde's parents unwittingly informed her understanding that gender could exist outside of the cultural binary of man *or* woman. Unlike the patriarchal stereotype of a 1920's familial household, Lorde's father did not make unilateral decisions regarding the family's domestic or business affairs (15-16). Lorde writes: "Whenever anything had to be decided about any one of the three children...they (her parents) would go into the bedroom and put their heads together for awhile...Then the two of them would emerge and announce whatever decision had been arrived upon" (15). She further notes that her parents' collaborative voice was an, "unfragmentable and unappealable voice" throughout her childhood (15). This shared responsibility between her parents led Lorde, as a child, to believe that her mother was, "other than woman" (16) and yet, not a man. At the same time, Lorde writes that she always believed her father was an early influence on how she treats women. Additionally, in the "Prologue" of *Zami* Lorde also expresses a desire to incorporate aspects of the female and male gender into her *self*. She writes: "I have always wanted to be both man and woman, to incorporate the strongest and richest parts of my mother and father within/into me--to share the valleys and mountains upon my body the way the earth does in hills and peaks" (7). As these

examples illustrate, the author's development of an integrated, authentic expression of gender drives her womanist, archetypal heroine's quest in *Zami*. She creates spaces and exists in communities that welcomes the gendered expression Lorde constructs. Gay and lesbian bars such as the Bagatelle offer such spaces. They provided a refuge of protection and freedom of expression for a twenty-something Lorde seeking safe spaces in 1950s New York (Stein 28). Lorde explains in *Zami* that the unconventional condition of being a Black lesbian in the 1950s meant that, "...you had to have a place. Whether or not it did justice to whatever you felt you were about, there had to be some place to refuel and check your flaps" (225).

In this quest Lorde's friend/lover Gennie helps her facilitate a mobile, carnivalesque version of this space. She and Gennie dress in costume, experimenting with alternative identities, thus allowing themselves to experience being someone else. Lorde recalls this role playing in a tone that reveals a sense of adventure and even joy: "...we spent the next few hours deciding what she (Gennie) would wear, and who we were going to be for the world on that particular day" (87). Their costumes included, "Bandits, Gypsies, Foreigners of all degree, Witches, Whores, and Mexican Princesses..." (88). In whatever roles they shape-shifted, they traveled to, "...the appropriate places in the city to go to play them all out" (88). This play acting included singing union songs if they were dressed as factory workers (88), or sometimes they, "...roamed through the Village (Greenwich) in dirndl skirts and cinch-belts, with flowers in our hair, taking turns strumming Gennie's guitar and singing songs which we adapted from Pablo Neruda's early poems" (88). Here we see clothing and attitudes as byproducts of the character they play - gender is incidental. And while gender fluidity

does not appear to be the main concern during these public improvisational moments, the public expression of transgressive, mutable identity represents the pair role-playing lived body experiences. Pretending to adopt alternative, potentially contravening identities in such an open and committed manner illustrates, in Lorde, a willingness to express her own authentic self in a similarly open manner. These early experiences with Gennie also indicate that Lorde, and members of her inner circle and wider friends, will be comprised of a community of women whose sense of self was a manifestation of their individual and collective needs rather than societal expectations connected to varying aspects of identity, including gender.

Lorde's lived body experiences do eventually translate to an integrated perspective of the public performance of gender as it relates to sexuality. Lorde writes: "In a paradoxical sense, once I accepted my position as different from the larger society as well as from any sub-society -- Black or gay -- I felt I didn't have to try so hard...To look femme. To be straight. To look straight..." (181). Lorde realized, in retrospect, that her more immediate concern became survival rather than acceptance (181). In her essay, "Race, Sex, and Class," Lorde writes that to be seen as different in society is to be viewed as deviant (285). This dispersion of difference as a pretense for inequality becomes a societal, institutionalized practice rather than an engagement of difference as a pretense for developing, "patterns for relating across our human differences as equals" (Lorde 285). Lorde recounts her experiences with prejudice from those who viewed her as racially or sexually different/deviant (181). These infractions ranged from an anonymous gift of a straightening comb by her Black female co-workers - a not-so-subtle suggestion that she press her hair, to the larger violation of an attempted rape by

a man (181). Her acknowledgement of the perceived deviance or difference and the subsequent abuses, in these mainstream cultural and social spaces, reinforced her need to align herself with like-minded people in supportive, safe spaces.

Through her refusal to conform to gender performance stereotypes, and her participation in communities that reinforce this choice, Lorde also embraces an aspect of Esther Jones's womanist survival ethic, wherein the, "wellness of the human community as a whole...is predicated upon understanding the interdependence of all people, regardless of our perceived differences, in order to avoid self-destruction" ("Africana Women's Science Fiction and Narrative Medicine"). This synthesis of her gender and sexuality manifest as one aspect of her identity, not fragmented pieces of herself. In her journey towards a holistic, integrative, non-binary expression of her gender, Lorde discovered/conflated her private expressions of gender and sexuality with her public expression of gender - a synthesis ultimately recognized and celebrated in her sexual union with Afrekete/Kitty. As Lorde intrinsically develops an interstitially gendered self-based on her lived body, she embodies her parents' examples of the fluidity of gendered domestic roles and works to publicly exist in a lived body social paradigm. She also personifies the non-conformist approach to gender represented in feminist science fiction that provide a, "reconception of gender relations...and...envision worlds not organized by the gender binary" (Melzer 223). The characters Chris and Jacobs in Nnedi Okorafor's 2015 *Lagoon*, and Akin and Jodhas in Octavia Butler's 1987 *Xenogenesis* experience their own difficulties with new constructions of gender expression. Although in their cases, aliens have created new social mores that require the characters to negotiate their expression of gender. In previous chapters, and

subsequent chapters, this analysis emphasizes the willingness of the womanist speculative archetypes to create a new personhood that reflects their changing environment. Therefore, in this chapter, examining characters who are subject to more radical augmentations of their gender expression would yield an analysis that aligns more closely with Lorde's experiences. Of the two texts, gender expression of two of Liliith's children are most reminiscent of Lorde's desire for a non-binary gender expression.

In *Xenogenesis*, Akin and Jodhas have the opposite experience. Akin and Jodhas are Liliith's children; both are also part human and part Oankali. Each child also has the distinction being the first of its kind. Akin is the first Human/Oankali male child and Jodhas is the first Human/Oankali ooloi. Although the Oankali initially express concern about what they consider an unstable mixture of Oankali and human genes, they eventually bring a universalist, womanist approach to Akin and Jodhas. That is the Oankali community collectively agree to support the two hybrid children's survival and commonweal. As such the experience and fate of Akin and Jodhas provide an example of the outcome of allowing different gender expressions to thrive.

The Oankali are a species of gene traders who value a good trade. For them this means that the species identified as the trade partner receives biological benefits, the Oankali receive biological benefits, and the constructs the ooloi create constructs represent the best of both species. In this way we see that the Oankali, "live in a symbiotic relationship with their surroundings" (Melzer 235). This concept is most evidenced when the Oankali are on their mothership Chikahichdahk which orbits earth. In *Adulthood Rites*, after Akin and his sibling Tiikuchahk board Chikahichdahk, they ride

an Oankali engineered animal, a tilo that displays some of the same characteristics as the Oankali. Butler writes, "The animal was curious and sent up pseudotentacles to investigate them" (436). Then Dichaan - Akin and Tiikuchahk's Oankali father - says to the siblings, "This one's never carried an Earth-born construct before...taste it. Let it taste you. It's harmless" (436). The tilo, stands as one of many examples throughout *Xenogenesis*, of successful gene trades. Therefore, the assumption that the reader gains throughout the trilogy about the Oankali history of gene trade reflects successful biological engineering resulting in constructs that were accepted by the trade partner with little to no struggle and within a small window of time. However, with the human species, the trade takes place over the span of 250 years and must be coerced. The Oankali attribute most of this difficulty to what they refer to as the, "Human Contradiction" (442).

The Oankali believe humanity practically annihilated itself during a nuclear war because they are genetically programmed allow a biological need for hierarchy to interfere with their inherent intelligence. From the Oankali perspective a human disregard for life that includes violence, human disregard for life, human wars - including the nuclear war that destroyed earth - are direct results of this genetic condition. As a species biologically driven to gene trade, the Oankali value life and view the human contradiction as an abominable trait. Consequently, the Oankali believe that humans cannot be allowed to procreate without Oankali genetic engineering as the human gene will perpetually manifest and always result in the human species' self-destruction. To this end, the ooloi literally insert themselves into human sexual and reproductive interactions and unwittingly bring about the actual dismantling of the system of gender

construction by dismantling the notion of the stable, sexed body relationship among humans.

As the gender-neutral segment of the Oankali race the ooloi are responsible for biologically constructing life, healing, and storing biological information. As a result, they are the biological engineers of the Oankali species and perhaps draw the most ire from the humans. The human anger and distrust of the ooloi are two-fold. The first concern is the Oankali approach to sexuality. The fluid sexed body of the Oankali does not conform to human notions of social structures built on and sustained “through political and social powers...(that) privilege heterosexuality” (220). Secondly, the Oankali also insert themselves into human reproduction in that they render humans sterile if they decide not to conform to this imposed Oankali family structure. Akin acknowledges this approach when he and his sibling are sent to the parent ship Chkahichdahk which is orbiting earth, “Of course. You controlled both animals and people by controlling their reproduction - controlling it absolutely” (437).

The combined effect of the Oankali perspective of the human contradiction and Lilith’s concern around some humans’ inability to unequivocally accept their alien environment at face value come to a head for the reader when Lilith meets Titus. He is the first human she has interacted with after successfully enduring the first phase of her Oankali immersion training. Titus, an adult male who has been adopted by an Oankali family, and lives on the Oankali mothership, was a preteen when the nuclear war happened. Although he has physically matured, emotionally and mentally he remains a preteen. He has not been around many other humans because Titus’s Oankali family will not return to earth; consequently, he has neither interacted with humans nor come

to full terms with a life that does not include an earth that includes roller coasters, cotton candy, hamburgers, and sex. While Titus's stunted emotional growth certainly has a variety of damaging implications, his adolescent, heteronormative, expectation of sex from a woman looms as a more serious detriment. This expectation grows out of his earth-informed expectations, "I never got to do it before,' he whispered. 'Never once with a woman...They said I could do it with you...' (96). Lilith wonders to herself, "How much of Titus was still fourteen, still the boy the Oankali had awakened and impressed and inducted into their own ranks?" (*Dawn* 93). The abhorrent result of these conflicting circumstances is that he attempts to rape Lilith. Arguably, Titus represents those men throughout the trilogy who do not, or choose not to, concede to the Oankali social/sexual structure and who view the Oankali mandate for how to have sex and children as emasculating.

In *Dawn*, the first book of the *Xenogenesis* trilogy, Gabe who has reluctantly agreed to be matched with an ooloi describes the resentment men like Titus may feel. He says, to Lilith, "Look at things from Curt's point of view...He's not in control even of what his own body does and feels. He's taken like a woman...He knows the ooloi aren't male. He knows all of the sex that goes on is in his head...Someone else is pushing all his buttons. He can't let them get away with that'" (203). In other words, for many men the decision to allow an ooloi to be the controlling center of their sexual and reproductive practices, was a decision to render themselves powerless. Many times, these men turn to physical and sexual violence presumably as an abortive method of reaffirming a sense of control within an antiquated, heteronormative, human social structure. Oankali/Human constructs are created in sibling pairs and born to their

human and Oankali mothers around the same time. After birth they establish a connection and so that they will one day establish a connection with a non-construct ooloi and create their own family unit. Each member of the pair is born androgynous with the potential to develop into a male or female construct. The parent they are drawn to determine their identity: if as children they are drawn to their male Oankali and human parents, their maleness will manifest; should they be attracted to their female Oankali and human parents, the femaleness will manifest. The ooloi have maintained strict control over this manifestation of familial structures. They cannot predict how their lived body experiences will manifest and whether they will harm or benefit the Oankali/human gene trade or symbiotic environment. These include human-born male/Oankali constructs and Oankali/human ooloi. However, much to the Oankali's initial chagrin, these two types of constructs, Akin and Jodhas are created. They are then placed under environmental conditions where their experiences, particularly as they relate to gender, develop and evolve different from the Oankali's expectations.

Just as Lorde experienced in her real life, Akin's and Jodhas's metamorphosis towards self-actualization coincides with their sexual maturity. Also concurrent with Lorde's experience, Akin's and Jodhas's unique biology lead them to environments that amplify a new lived body experience and requires a new space, as Pratt describes. For instance, even though the Oankali culture offers a variety of freedoms, including sexual, to adolescent Oankali and Oankali/human constructs (287), they are fairly rigid in the roles these individuals play in the Oankali society after they complete metamorphosis - roughly the Oankali version of puberty. Although the Oankali are open to gene trading and the myriad species manifestations that it brings about, they are only open to these

arrangements as the ooloi - with Oankali communal consent - orchestrate them. Any products of this arrangement that are not purposefully designed by the ooloi, for the supposed good of the community are viewed as aberrations - deviances - to be managed and destroyed. Similarly to Lorde, who moved out of her parents' home at sixteen, Jodhas and Akin, eventually strike out on their own to follow their own innate desires. The added benefit is that each being proves how their uniqueness can benefit the Oankali.

Akin is the first human male/Oankali construct considered somewhat successful in *Xenogenesis*. Before metamorphosis Akin aesthetically appears as a human boy. He possesses the Oankali tentacles, but Akin's are in his mouth; they replace the human tongue. People from the human resisters camp often kidnap human-looking Oankali babies. As a male construct, humans find Akin especially valuable because they retain a false hope that once he grows up, he will be able to impregnate one of the human women. Humans kidnap Akin when he is nine months old and try to sell him to various human communities. As a construct, Akin possesses more faculties than a human child of the same age. He speaks in full sentences, has a full set of teeth, and easily distinguishes edible plants from poisonous ones. Akin's kidnapping has a profound effect on who he views as his community and how he expresses his sexuality. Akin's environment radically changes over the course of Butler's second book in the *Xenogenesis* trilogy, *Adulthood Rites*. Firstly, although the Oankali learn which human camp Akin and his captors live in, they decide - against the wishes of Akin's family - to leave him in Phoenix for one year to study the human resisters (414). Ultimately, the Oankali only agree to help Akin's family look for him once they believe he has learned

enough and understand that they have, regrettably, “deprived (him) of his sibling” (414). Once found, Dichaan, Akin’s Oankali father says to Akin, “There was a consensus...Everyone came to believe it was the right thing to do except us...Others were surprised that we didn’t accept the general will, but they were wrong. They were wrong to risk you!” (414). Later, Akin would describe the result of the separation from his sibling as an act by the Oankali who had, “chosen to break me from my nearest sibling” (458). Eventually Akin’s Oankali/human family rescue him from the Phoenix human camp and return him home. This break or separation from his sibling Tiikuchahk was not just unfortunate or an error of judgement, it altered a major biological and social structures erected to guide the sustainability of Oankali/human society.

The change in environment precipitates a change in Tiikuchahk’s and Akin’s lived body experiences and the intrinsic desires each wants. Rather than gravitating towards the Oankali mother in response to Akin’s male orientation, Tiikuchahk begins to spend time with their Oankali father, which meant that Akin’s sibling would mature, after his metamorphosis into a male, rather than a female mate (480-481). Akin, “...watched this sadly, knowing that he was losing his closest sibling for the second time, the final time” (481). Tiikuchahk and Akin’s revised relationship does not throw the Oankali society into chaos, as they will assume useful roles in the Oankali society. However, the intrinsic value of their story lies in its example of how a gendered expression that does not reflect a prescribed social and/or cultural role can exist and thrive in a society that does not attach power structures to gender roles. In the Oankali society, “There is no self without desire for, and affirmation with, the other” (Melzer 237). Thus, the interdependent, symbiotic nature of the Oankali society extends to Oankali gender

identity that, “develops through physical affirmation with a same-gendered/sexed parent, not psychologically through rivalries and the rejection of the other” (237). Jodhas, who is featured in the third book of the trilogy, *Imago* represents the ideal approach to non-binary “sex/gender/sexuality correlation” that Melzer describes. Akin’s relative Jodhas experiences a recalibration of its biological programming because of its lived body experience. Nikanj, who possesses no gender identity, creates Jodhas with the same intention it does the family’s other children. However, rather than Jodhas spending time with a same-sex parent, it spends time with Nikanj which orients its body towards becoming ooloi or non-gendered. The Oankali - especially the ooloi - view Jodhas as simultaneously dangerous and significant. For the ooloi who are responsible for creating life among the Oankali, a hybrid Human/Oankali ooloi should ideally be created by its ooloi parent with special attention and care to the child’s biological-engineering capabilities.

This extreme caution becomes especially important when one considers the human contradiction which makes the human species unpredictable. This gene expression presented most dynamically in male constructs born from human women. Akin was the first human born, male construct to successfully complete metamorphosis and locate mates. However, as described above, this experience was not without resistance from the Oankali based solely on the principle of the unpredictability of the expression of Jodhas’s lived body experience. As a version of a construct that the community did not discuss and collectively decide to engineer, the Oankali are afraid that Jodhas’s existence carries very real consequences to the Oankali societal structure and harm to the symbiotic environment. The ship they live in on earth, called Lo, is a

living being. Jodhas calls it, “parent, sibling, home” (554). However, after metamorphosis, Jodhas constantly causes the ship harm simply by being in contact with it: “Lo’s natural color was gray-brown. Beneath me, it turned yellow. It developed swellings. Rough patches developed on it” (554). In each case, Nikanj heals the damage. Even so, Nikanj says in one instance, “You’re healthy...Your development is exactly right. I can’t find any flaw in you” (538). Later Nikanj reiterates, “There is no flaw in you...you should be aware of everything you do. You can make mistakes, but you can also perceive them. And you can correct them, I’ll help you” (546). Eventually, even the Oankali accept Jodhas with the caveat that it will exist under the watchful eye of Nikanj. The group most hopeful about Jodhas’s successful maturation and integration into Oankali society are the ooloi as they are the only segment of the Oankali-Human community who have not been able to reproduce offspring because of the aforementioned concerns of the Oankali community. Jodhas’s success essentially means the beginning of more Huma/ Oankali n ooloi construct children.

Jodhas represents an extreme scenario of how a lived body experience can be detrimental without the right environment to help hold one together. Both Jodhas and the optimal environment for his survival post metamorphosis are experimental. He learns that his survival means that he must have two human mates. Jodhas’s sibling pays one of the highest costs for the innovative family unit or space as it must learn how to interact with a sibling who will not be its mate. Even though Jodhas’s journey signals the most radical societal changes among the four characters discussed in this chapter, Jodhas’s journey illustrates the most ideal outcome for one who reaches sexual maturity and finds that their lived-body experience does not reflect a hegemonic approach to

how they express their sexuality. Although both Jodhas and Akin are born into bodies that their community did not anticipate and subsequently shaped by their environments in life-altering ways, their gender expression does not forfeit their lives. These outcomes are not the same for Jacobs and Chris in the midst of the alien invasion Lagos, in Okorafor's novel *Lagoon*.

When readers encounter the city of Lagos, the aliens are in the process of altering the city's environment and inhabitants. The alien presence in *Lagoon* acts as a catalyst to reconnect the city and its animal, human, and spiritual inhabitants with their collective, interdependent lived body experience. The environmental and species transformation begins where the aliens land their ship: in the sea, near Bar Beach, in Lagos. After landing the aliens build a coral reef-like habitat in the ocean and begin to cleanse and molecularly restructure the ocean life who request such transformation (172). A sea creature supplies the readers' first extended introduction to the aliens as we share its physical transformation into a creature that considers its lived body. The animal morphs from a generic swordfish into a creature that reflects its past lives, its needs for survival in waters polluted by oil rigs in Lagos, and a reclamation of the ocean for sea creatures. Okorafor writes of the swordfish, "They (the aliens) made her eyes like the Blackest stone, and she can see deep in the ocean and high into the sky...she can make spikes of cartilage jut out along her spine as if she is some ancestral creature from the deepest ocean caves of old. ...She is a monster. (Location 84 - Kindle). Before her transformation, the creature formerly known as a swordfish, witnesses the transformation of an octopus with one missing tentacle into one that, "grows brilliant pink-purple and straightens all its tentacles. Then right before her eyes, it grows its

missing tentacle back and what look like bony spokes erupt from its soft head” (82). Such changes portend the types of dynamic changes possible for the human species. Jue writes that, a “politics of the possible” manifests in Lagoon through indigenous cosmologies together with the idea of the novum, which combine in the figure of the shape-shifting aliens who “precipitate a radical shift in Nigeria’s ecological, economic, and social well-being” (172-173). An aspect of this recalibration is an atmosphere where characters can reconsider their gender expression. Chris, the protagonist Adaora’s husband, and Jacobs, a conflicted member of the LBGQT+ community offer dynamic examples of how humans reconsider gender roles in the aftermath of an alien invasion.

One of the ways this potential of change manifests is through gender power dynamics and, in a related manner, gender expression. There are several examples in the text where women are underestimated or underrated. Father Oke tells Chris that his wife Adaora, a microbiologist and liaison to the aliens, is just like other women who are, “weak vessels...She could not change herself if she tried” (28). Moziz says of says of the alien Ayodele as he plans a kidnaping scheme, with his friends, “Na who no ‘gree? She just woman; she no dey harm” (51). An extension of this attitude is the expression of gender roles. If women, by these examples are inconsequential, easily overpowered, then one who chooses to visually shapeshift into a woman - e.g. a man who dresses as a woman - is, using Lorde’s view in her essay “Age, Race, and Class,” a deviant, someone who must be corrected or obliterated. Nowhere is this view more apparent than it is for the character Jacobs, who cross-dresses and as such engages in a form of “gender queer” shapeshifting (227 Melzer). Jacobs lives a double life where he publicly

identifies with a group of male friends who create and participate in cons and scams. However, in private he enjoys dressing up in women's clothing: "He (Jacobs) loved the colors, the feel, the material, the creativity, and, ooh, the fit" (67). Jacobs also participates as a member of an underground LGBTQIA+ advocacy group, the Black Nexus. The duplicity Jacobs experiences as it relates to gendered expression becomes even more evident in his separate interactions with each group when viewing the video of Ayodele shapeshifting. Jacobs first sees the video along with his friends Troy, Tolu, and Moziz. Philomena, Moziz's girlfriend - and caretaker of Adaora and Chris's children - secretly recorded Ayodele shapeshifting and showed it to Moziz at his apartment. After viewing the video, Moziz invites the other men to his home where he initiates a plan to kidnap Ayodele for money. Moziz tells the group, "See...We catch am, carry am, come my place. We go be rich before sun go down" (Okorafore 51).

During this initial viewing of the video, Jacobs sends the file to himself to share with the Black Nexus. The group dynamics and reaction are much different when he shares the video with his LGBTQIA+ friends: "...he (Jacobs) was wearing his favorite long Black dress and high heels...he couldn't show up to this meeting speaking the Pidgin English he spoke with the guys, nor could he arrive *dressed* [sic] like a 'guy'... He needed to show he was serious and unafraid" (64). Whereas the reaction of Moziz and his other male friends to the video is to hatch a kidnapping scheme; the Black Nexus views the alien invasion as an opportunity to highlight the LGBTQIA+ cause. Rome, one of the more vocal members of Black Nexus exclaims after seeing the video, "Hey! We should go see her. Get her on our side...The Black Nexus can come out of secrecy for this. Who better to understand than a shape-shifter?" (67-68). Melzer's

analysis about the ooloi in Butler's *Xenogenesis* trilogy proves useful here. Melzer writes that, "The unstable relationship of body to identity is threatening to the status quo which relies on a dual gender concept; it enables transgressive forms of rethinking gender relations and challenges the structure of power between them" (227). Jacobs then, in the context of Melzer's perspective embodies gender transgression, a potentially life-threatening contravention to established, gender constructs in Lagos. No one understands this supposed transgression more than Jacobs who is determined not to relinquish his dual performance of gender.

According to Lindsey Green-Simms, in her 2016 article, "The Emergent Queer: Homosexuality and Nigerian Fiction in the 21st Century," "While in the past twenty-five years, African writers tended to gesture toward homosexuality in their work or assign any extended references to same-sex relationships to the influence of Western moral depravity, a third generation (of writers)" are writing about taboo topics such as queerness (141). Green-Simms also notes that the highly lucrative, immensely popular Nollywood (Nigerian Hollywood) film industry can be viewed as a current collection of societal perspectives on homosexuality. LGBTQIA+ characters in these films are often portrayed as the villain and/or as lecherous. They often meet one of three endings: death, imprisonment, or reformation - wherein they become born again and subsequently become heterosexual (143). This cinematic representation of the fate of non-binary gendered people are a reflection of the same-sex laws in the country. In 2014 in Nigeria, the Same Sex Marriage Prohibition Act was signed, a law that would "expand on long-standing colonial sodomy laws" (141). This law prohibits, "...a range of activities, mandating up to fourteen years in prison for same-sex couples who cohabit or

enter into marriage, punishing those supporting gay organizations with a ten-year prison sentence, and making any same-sex public displays of affection illegal” (142).

The artistic representation and the legal concerns around members of the LGBTQIA+ community explain why Jacobs initially determined that he could continue to be closeted in the dynamic environment the aliens ushered into Lagos. He determined he would earn money from the kidnapping plans developed by Moziz *and* participate in the revolution the executive board of the Black Nexus planned (Okorafor 68-69). Even though Jacobs watches the video, “over fifty times,” of Ayodele shapeshifting from a middle-aged woman to a woman who was, “old and bent” (66) he still could not envision a life for himself where he could openly shapeshift between male and female expressions of gender. In the end, when Jacobs comes simultaneously face-to-face with his two identities, Moziz - a metaphor for Nigerian society - does not offer Jacobs the opportunity to integrate the two.

As the gathering in front of Chris and Adora’s home transforms into a riot, Jacobs is forced to come to terms with public expressions of non-binary gender that reflects the experiences of the lived body. When Jacobs arrives at the gathering with Moziz and his other friends, they encounter a crowd in front of Adaora and Chris’s house. Moziz asks Jacobs to investigate the reason for the crowd, the gathering has thwarted their kidnapping plans. When Jacobs walks into the crowd, he sees, “...bright flashes of color a few yards away” (84). As he moves closer and realizes the flashes of color with the Black Nexus, his, “entire body” goes “cold” (85). Among the nine in the group were two members who, “looked like they wanted to creep right back into their closets, but they held their chins up” (85). As Jacobs approached them, he had a very real concern that

the members of Black Nexus, who approached the gathering in a mini processional that included, “music, confetti, and a great big rainbow-colored sign with a giant BLACK NEXUS painted in the center,” were putting their lives at risk (85). In this moment we again see Jacobs as conflicted between his two groups of friends. Jacobs actually wanted to join the Black Nexus, “...but he didn’t want Moziz, Troy, and Tolu, who knew nothing about his cross-dressing, to see....For the first time in his life, he was immensely proud and intensely ashamed at the same time” (86). Although Jacobs chose money and a commitment to seeing the kidnapping scheme through over the Black Nexus, he did not rest easy in this choice (93). Jacobs experiences inner turmoil about his refusal to align himself with the members of the Black Nexus as he watches them endure verbal and physical assault during the gathering. After the hastily-convened assembly, Jacobs and his kidnapping comrades, unsuccessful at their plan to kidnap Ayodele, unexpectedly retire to Jacobs’s apartment where they discover Jacobs’s dresses. Moziz derisively questions Jacobs’s sexual orientation (179). Moziz’s reduction of LGBTQIA+ identities to a homophobic stereotype further devolves to violence as he shoots Jacobs (180). This decision reflects Greens-Simms perspective on the cost of transgressing entrenched gendered norms as reflected in Nigerian legislation and pop culture. However, Moziz does not escape retribution for his choice. As he threatens to kill Rain, the literal alien other, who is also with the group, Rain instead kills Moziz (180-181). Her action condemns Moziz’s murder and reaffirms for the reader that the alien invasion brings winds of change that push against these outcomes with gendered oppressions.

The same gathering that precipitates Jacobs's crisis with his lived body experiences, provides a backdrop for Chris to return from a skewed relationship with his lived body experiences. As chapter one of *Lagoon* opens, the reader learns that after several years of marriage and two children, Adaora's husband Chris has physically abused her (Okorafor 1). This physical abuse resurfaces later in the novel at the gathering/concert at Chris and Adaora's house when he confronts her about kissing Agu, one of the liaisons to the aliens (101). What precipitates this abuse is that Chris, after having survived a plane crash, has experienced a religious conversion influenced by the self-titled, Father Oke. This minister, shows himself later to be a misogynist and philanderer who physically abuses members of his congregation, and lives a lavish lifestyle supported by his less wealthy parishioners. Father Oke assuages Chris's concerns about mortality with a misrepresentation of Christianity that serves to save and preserve the preacher's status quo and ego rather than his parishioners' souls. Before his conversion Chris, an accountant, supported Adaora, in her career and as an equal partner in the family. As such, he never sought to control her movements. After the aliens land, his lived body experiences in relation to the aliens he returns to his original, gender-equity relationship with his wife.

The gender inequity between Chris and Adora displays as violence. As a result, Adaora, the woman protagonist in *Lagoon* and Chris's wife, begins to re-evaluate the power dynamics between her and her husband. On the day of the alien invasion, Chris hits Adaora because he insists that she not attend a music concert. Chris physically abuses Adaora under the direct influence of Father Oke who has directed Chris to, "Break her with your hands, then soften her with flowers" (38). However, Adaora's

response reflects the influence of the ripple effect of the aliens as she physically defends herself (2). She hits Chris back and holds him down with a physical power that she did not possess before the invasion. When Chris recounts him and Adaora's altercation to Father Oke, he presents an emphasis on his efforts to subdue his wife, per Father Oke's instructions. Conversely, in the language Adaora employs as she considers their confrontation, the reader perceives a more complex picture of a woman defending herself physically in an effort to moderate the balance of power that was beginning to slide towards an uneven dynamic informed by ill-advised patriarchal notions of dominance. Three things happen to Chris to make him begin to change his perspective. Once he sees Father Oke in a different light during the riot/concert. The membrane of delusion precipitated by fear of mortality is lifted. Also, when one of the soldiers mistakenly shoots Chris and Adaora's daughter Kola and inflicts a potentially fatal wound, his concerns seem to distill down to a parental concern for his child's well-being. Okorafor signals the beginnings of a re-established relationship between Chris and Adaora when she writes of this moment, "They looked into each other's eyes for several seconds. Then Chris nodded at Adaora and she nodded back" (130). A related cause for Chris's changed viewpoint may have been when he sees Ayodele heal Kola, even though at this point in the story she decides that, "hates humans" (134). Arguably this close up interaction with an alien makes him more comfortable around the alien Elders, which explains why in later interactions with he no longer thinks of the beings as evil, but as entities who are integrating themselves into the earth's human, environmental, spiritual and environmental ecosystems (173-175). At this point in the novel, Chris seems to awaken from a trauma-induced trance and to consider the aliens

as more than beings to be objectified. He no longer prioritizes “managing” Adaora because of her gender. The reader understands that Chris’s lived body experience causes him to unhitch himself from notions of male gender expressions connected to controlling women and dismissing their talents and to prioritize the well-being of his children. Chris’s revised perspective manifests as he proudly watches Adaora standing beside the President of Nigeria during a broadcast press conference (272-273). At this moment he remembers Adaora as a fully realized person with her own talents rather than a gendered construct of a wife that belonged to him. As the novel ends, Okorafor does not offer a clear indication of whether Chris and Adaora will reconcile. The uncertainty indicates that the resolution of their marriage does not rest in a storybook version of a repaired relationship. Further, a womanist reading of this open-ended status of Chris and Adaora’s marriage promotes the perspective that the healing of the people inside the marriage, as well as equalized power dynamic, supersedes the healing of the marriage.

Gender is a societal construct that hegemonic paradigms and cultural values often promote as inflexible. As Lorde’s narrative illustrates the factualness of an intransigent, binary gender does not take into consideration what the individual desires or their lived experiences. To consider these concepts as integral to a true reflection of how a person expresses their gender, is to encourage participation in, or creation of, a network of people who practice a womanist, universalist approach to community.

#### 4 CHAPTER FOUR: COMMUNITY

In *Zami*, Lorde discusses her community in the context of an anachronistic collective that spans across space and time. The diverse community of women Lorde references in her biomythography exists as a cohesive concept for the author, in part, because each member of her collective, or zami, shares one common goal: supporting the development of the intrinsic needs of the individuals within the collective. A more succinct way to think of this goal is survival. This steadfast objective supports the lasting viability of the heterotopias within Lorde's expansive collective and, as such, exhibits an aspect of the "communitarian" view of community (Maparyan xxv). The term *communitarian*, Maparyan writes "...refers to the fact that womanism views commonweal as the goal of social change" (xxv). This womanist view of community is not one-dimensional because the idea is grounded in Black feminist thought, writes Maparyan. Rather, a communitarian consideration of community begins with Black women because "Black women are the place where this particular form of thinking about commonweal originates" (xxv-xxvi). In this regard, while Lorde's race does not always determine which groups she engages, one may view her race as informing the ethos that frames her intent as she participates as an active member of the group. The term commonweal is also wide-ranging in this womanist context and ultimately extends to other living entities. When viewed from a literary perspective, Maparyan's communitarian concept can also be viewed as what Esther Jones calls a "womanist survival ethic" (Jones "Africana Women's Science Fiction and Narrative Medicine"). Jones describes this ethos as an acknowledgment that "the wellness of the human community as a whole...is predicated upon understanding the interdependence

of all people, regardless of our perceived differences, in order to avoid self-destruction” (Jones “Africana Women’s Science Fiction and Narrative Medicine”). In her biomythography, Lorde illustrates how her movements among communities help her to create a network of women-centered collectives, each of which is invested in the survival of the individuals of that community as well as the community itself. It is not Lorde who keeps the community sustainable, but the community members’ investment in their own well-being, an investment that they, as communitarians, extend to everyone that they welcome into their community. Lorde’s approach to community in *Zami* reflects a womanist survival ethic in that continuance undergirds the group members’ investment in the communities. This perspective does not ensure that individuals within the community will not still experience mental and emotional hardships. Nor does it predict how long the community will be sustainable. However, survival as a requirement for the community’s viability presupposes that individuals will receive as much support as group members are able to offer. In this manner, Lorde’s experiences offer a valuable way to map Adaora and Lilith’s approach to community development and viability.

However, because *Zami* is based in large part on real-life events, the extent to which Lorde’s narrative can fully engage the all-encompassing nature of a communitarian approach to community is also limited. As speculative texts, Butler and Okorafor’s alien invasion novels do not suffer from this limitation and provide an opportunity to consider the effects of a womanist approach to community-building on humans as well as on other species. Here, a return to Maparyan’s extended definition of the commonweal aspect of a communitarian view of community proves useful. It is

confluent, an all-embracing context, that eventually encompasses all humans and all living beings, e.g. animals, plants, etc. (xxv-xxvi). Lorde's journey, as the womanist speculative archetype, can be said to illustrate Maparyan's communitarian view of community from a more nuanced perspective. The reader witnesses Lorde's evolutionary journey towards self-actualization as well as the communities she creates along that journey. The written record she presents in *Zami* bears witness to the recurrent ways these women-centered communities independently and collectively impacted her journey towards self-actualization as she, in turn, impacted these communities (3-6, 118, 255-256). This chapter will analyze these intricate, womanist views of community through three practices that contribute to making Lorde (*Zami*), Adaora (*Lagoon*), and Lilith's (*Xenogenesis*) communitarian relationship to their community a lasting influence on their individual quests towards self-actualization: interdependence, sustainability, and decentralized networks.

While Lorde is not the linchpin of each of the heterotopias she engages, temporally transcendent community ushers her continued transformation towards self-actualization. As a result, we witness Lorde's metamorphosis, in large part, through interdependent participation in varied communities. Lorde is the thread of connectivity among her outwardly disparate network of women. The natural outcome of this dynamic is that there is no top-down consideration of how the groups should be managed or operated. Yes, Lorde is the person relating the different group dynamics in *Zami*, but in her narrative, she is never the nerve center of any group. In other words, the viability of the group does not rely on her physical presence. This type of communal engagement helps her find community among a variety of groups including with Gennie

- her first love, The Branded in New York, and the American women expatriates in Mexico. In her relationship with Gennie, they each shared a common yearning to nurture the innate desires that represent their lived body experiences. Because their desires and experiences ran counter to heteronormative social constructions, both Lorde and Gennie understand that they can only share this impulse secretly. The covertness of their self-discovery and the vibrancy with which they express themselves create a condition for a camaraderie that also creates community between the two young women (85-92). The Branded demonstrated the same levels of support but, because there were more members, it was from a larger perspective. This community demonstrated interdependence throughout their high school tenure and for several years after graduation. Post high school, several members of the group continued to interact and provide support for one another up until their early 20s. This camaraderie manifested in the members of The Branded who often flowed in and out of Lorde's apartment (118-120). While this community is fluid and sometimes experiences conflict, they are able to exist sustainably for a period of time because they - like Lorde and Gennie - have a common concern, their mutual survival. Many of them understand the agonizing isolation of navigating self-actualization alone and are aware of the most detrimental outcome of this experience.

For example, Lorde decides to move from New York to Stamford to earn money and to, "escape emotional complications" that include her then-girlfriend Maxine and her failing grades in college (118-123). It is important to note here that Lorde keeps her apartment in New York open and available to members of The Branded by giving them the combination to the lock on her apartment door (121). Such a gesture offers another

example of the womanist survival ethos of interdependence she extends to community. Whether Lorde is physically in New York or not, she seemingly understands that the needs of her community there do not change --especially the need for a safe space to exercise self-actualization.

Once Lorde moves to Stamford, Connecticut she eventually becomes part of a new community that encourages her to continue manifesting the self Lorde intuitively herself to be (128-131). This community consists primarily of Ginger, a fellow factory worker, and her family. Ginger even gives Lorde a nickname, "slick kitty from the city" (128). Lorde says of Ginger that she came to rely on Ginger for human contact in Stamford. Eventually, their relationship moved from platonic to romantic, with Lorde spending nights with Ginger at the co-worker's family home (141-142). During her brief time in Stamford, Ginger, a Black woman, became the first female lover with whom Lorde experienced intercourse. (135-139). Lorde writes of the experience, "So this was what I had been so afraid of not doing properly. How ridiculous and far away those fears seemed now, as if loving were some task outside of myself, rather than simply reaching out and letting my own desire guide me. It was all so simple" (139).

This first type of sexual experience with a woman moves Lorde's theoretical belief in her instinct that she is a woman who loves women, sexually and non-sexually, (Walker), towards a lived body experience of her natural inclination. While Lorde had participated in, "kissing and cuddling and fantasizing" with her high school friends, she had never had intercourse with any of them (135). She spent so much time there among Ginger, her brothers, and Ginger's mother Cora, that Cora views Lorde, almost, like family. At one point Lorde writes of Cora, "With her typical aplomb, Cora welcomed

my increased presence around the house with the rough familiarity and browbeating humor due another one of her daughters” (142). Cora says to Lorde at one point, “And when she (Ginger) gets home don’t be thumping that bed all night, neither, because it’s late already and you girls have work tomorrow” (142). Therefore, Lorde’s move to Stamford signals a metaphorical and literal expansion movement in her journey towards self-actualization. These movements prepared her for the subsequent experience that arguably prepared her to spread her wings even wider and to continue her metaphorical and literal journey to Mexico the following year.

In Cuernavaca, Mexico, Lorde locates a community of American expatriate women within which she finds support and a launchpad into her next stage of growth (156 -159). Lorde writes of this city, “After the day spent in the easy beauty of Cuernavaca and easy-going company of Frieda and her friends, it took little urging on Frieda’s part to persuade me to consider moving down...” from Mexico City (157). Cuernavaca, a “small beautiful town” that had “earned a name as a haven for political and spiritual refugees from the north a place where american middle-class non conformists could live more simply, cheaply...(158). In other words, Lorde found a community. While Lorde joined a community of mostly white, middle-aged women, her youth and race did not make her feel like an outsider. Lorde writes of her experience, “It was in Mexico that I stopped feeling invisible” (173). She writes that she felt this way in the public places in Mexico and, “in the particular attention within Eudora’s eyes” (173). Eudora was her lover in Cuernavaca, who Lorde describes as the first gay women she had known to call herself a lesbian, and “the most fascinating woman I had ever met” (162). Eudora was also a forty-eight-year-old journalist, born in Texas, who was also

the first woman to attend the University of Texas. (165-162). Eudora, like most of the women in the Cuernavaca community, was vastly different in many ways from Lorde - aside from one characteristic: the need to survive. Once again, as with *The Branded*, she had found a community with a myriad of differences, but one single strand of similarity that encouraged them to operate within a communitarian ethos.

In each of these examples, Lorde's experiences do not provide an expansive example of the commonweal. For example, her engagement with any of the communities she dwells within and contributes to does not impact *all* aspects of that community such as local politics, local economies, flora, and fauna. However, she does contribute to the communities' womanist survival ethos which validates individuals' lived body experiences. Because of this contribution to her adopted communities, Lorde also collectively participates in alliances that support and nurture this perspective of one's personhood. In this way, Lorde builds her community of groups of women that she references as past and present influences on her journey towards self-actualization. Consequently, when Lorde returns to New York, she has moved further along the continuum of her own personal development. Lorde writes of her return, "...I returned full of sun and great determination to re-order my life and someday get back to Mexico and, of course, Eudora" (184). Her growth is integral to who she views as her community because to align herself with people who do not represent her current perspective of her journey towards selfhood would be to stymie her evolution. This is a lesson Lorde learned early, and which precipitated her move out of her parents' home. Lorde can make these decisions about who she creates a community with and when because she is the creator of her own narrative - literally and figuratively. In other words, she is not

looking to anyone else to guide her or tell her when or how she should develop; she is following her own map lines of self-discovery to her personal true north. As a result, there is no inherent, centralized power structure in any of the communities she navigates in, creates, or supports. In this way, the support within, and evolution of, her zami remains fluid and relevant to supporting her transformation.

Whereas Lorde seeks out and creates communities as spaces for survival, Lilit and Adaora, are forced to help create a new community. In each protagonists' case, the aliens have invaded earth and humanity will be altered. Similarly in each case, the communities the aliens introduce exhibit many hallmarks of a group that is communitarian. As such, the aliens' approach to the interdependent wellbeing of the community includes humans, animals, plants, and to some degree in *Lagoon*, spiritual beings. Therefore, the reality the protagonists must negotiate on behalf of humankind is how to best engage the alien encroachment. To paraphrase Maparyan, in each of these cases, the survival of the human species means their own survival. In this regard, they need to learn to survive and teach others to do the same. A consideration of how these womanist speculative archetypes learn to negotiate their alien environments through re-envisioned personhood invites an examination of how these communities present a womanist, commonweal, and approach to community. Maparyan writes that at the center of a communitarian approach to community is the Black woman. Black women penned *Xenogenesis* and *Lagoon* and, in each case, developed a Black women heroine to negotiate first contact with the aliens. This analysis applies Maparyan's notion of centering the Black woman in conceptualizing a communitarian community and extends it through authorship, to the protagonist, to the ethos of the alien community. In other

words, one views the ethos of the alien community through a womanist, communitarian lens. Based on this womanist analysis, one can also examine the ways in which a commonweal approach to community manifests in the Oankali community and alien community in Lagoon as communities that are interdependent, sustainable, and possess a decentralized network.

In Butler's trilogy, the earth and humanity have been ravaged by nuclear war. The devastation caused by this nuclear holocaust provides a window of opportunity for the Oankali to conquer the planet and its inhabitants. One benefit from the generations of gene trading is that the Oankali have developed an intricate, sustainable, ecosystem. At one point, Lilith answers an inquiry of one of the humans she awakens, "Yes. This ship is alive and so is almost everything in it. The Oankali use living matter the way we used machinery" (137). Indeed, earlier during her training, Lilith learned first-hand the intricacies and interconnectedness of the Oankali ecosystem. She had been told by Nikanj, her ooloi, that when she was finished eating her fruit she should bury the peelings in the soil on the ship. Then, the "tendrils of the ship's own living matter" will breakdown the debris (67). However, in one instance she strayed too far from her family's section of the vast Oankali mothership, and buried the orange peelings from Kaal in foreign soil, on another section of the mothership (68-71). The result was that she poisoned this area of the ship (70-71). Because of the sophisticated communication aspect of the Oankali ecosystem, the Oankali were able to immediately communicate this portion of the ship's distress to an experienced ooloi. The ooloi healed the ship's injury (68-69). These early previews of the manifestations of these gene trades, such as the living Oankali ship, the leaf-like pods the humans are stored

in, and the animals the Oankali use for transport, are an indication of the Oankali commitment to gene trade and interdependence. Subsequently, it is also a foreshadowing of how the commitment will subsume and recalibrate humanity.

As Lilith's mishap illustrates, it is not enough to understand the value of interdependence within your community. One has to also understand how to support the community ecosystem -- or at minimal -- do no harm. When Lorde joins various communities she encounters in her heroine's journey, she has learned how to be a sustainable member. Communication and genetic memory support an intuitive understanding among the Oankali about how to support the aliens' ecosystem. This genetic memory is kept, nurtured, and disseminated in large part by the ooloi - the bioengineers and healers in the Oankali community. This designated role, along with the Oankali genetic memory, are key reasons why the Oankali are able to sustain their community for generations and across galaxies. These attributes prevent incursions into any Oankali community. Species who are integrated into an Oankali community have to be endowed with the biology to navigate within the community. The very anatomy of the Oankali speaks to this. For example, the Oankali tentacles allow them to communicate soundlessly with one another and if need be with the ship. They also communicate through smells and control the ship using bodily fluids. This system of communication is exclusive to species who are born with these appendages. Alternatively, the aliens can bio-engineer non-Oankali species to navigate the Oankali ecosystem in a limited capacity. Such limited access provides substantial protection for the Oankali and an efficient method for communicating information among the aliens. Anyone without these attributes forfeits their ability to participate as full members of this

community. This Oankali ecosystem reflects the commonweal aspect of Maparyan's communitarian view of community.

Inherent in a communal perspective of community is a decentralized network of community management. This method of governance is not unusual in human history. For instance, the traditional, pre-colonial system of Igbo governance was decentralized and, "cephalous" or having many heads (Ibenekwu 4). In many ways, the larger Oankali community mirrors the traditional Igbo approach to governing. In this organizational strategy, "The basic unit was the family, the most operative unit being the kindred, then the village, then the town...the function of the government was carried on by a council of elders who shared in power with various other groups" (Chikendu qtd. in Ibenekwu 4). Similarly, the Oankali do not have an individual who operates as the nerve center of their community. The Oankali's genetics act as the primary lever for how the community manages itself. The driving biological forces for the Oankali are gene trading, curiosity, and the preservation of life. There are three kinship groups among the Oankali: the Dinso, the group of Oankali who are preparing to go to earth, "...changing itself by taking part of humanity's genetic heritage" (Butler 64); the Akjai, those Oankali who do not mix with humans and not go to earth (678); and the Tohat who want to trade with humans, but who also live on Chkahichdahk, the mothership (608). The ooloi act as a council of sorts as the bioengineers and the keepers of genetic and biological memory, and as healers. Even when the Oankali designate a human to act as a liaison and trainer, this designation occurs through consensus; and as the liaison/trainer she is not the ruler, she a de facto midwife for the humans she will awaken. As soon as the humans learn what they need to survive on the earth, they will

be allowed to exercise free will. Once they return to the planet they could choose to not join the Oankali -- the cost of which will be their ability to reproduce. From an Oankali perspective, this act is not a bid to subdue humanity, but to protect the human species from its fatal flaw of the contradictory characteristics of intelligence and hierarchy.

In book two, *Adulthood Rites*, the Oankali make several important decisions about Lilith's son, Akin, through consensus. Akin is the first viable human/Oankali male construct who is allowed to live. Later when Akin is kidnapped, the Oankali decide through consensus that he should be left with his human captors so that he can observe them and provide information to the Oankali. The Oankali also decide by consensus to allow him to set up a new community on Mars where the humans could procreate without Oankali interference. This community would basically be a new earth. An additional example relates to Jodhas, the first human/ooloi construct the ooloi Nikanj creates by mistake. It is the consensus of the Oankali, on earth and on the ship that supports allowing it to live on earth and learn to survive rather than to send Jodhas to the main ship to be studied and carefully monitored in a safe contained environment. In each of these scenarios, these Oankali decisions not only affect the present Oankali community, but also future considerations of how they will manage gene trading. Therefore, it is notable that even these impactful decisions are determined through consensus.

To the human eye, these aspects of the Oankali community - the biologically-driven need to gene trade in an interdependent ecosystem, the strict monitoring of who can and cannot be biologically equipped to navigate in the sustainable Oankali ecosystem, and the ability to communicate through their decentralized network - may

seem oppressive and constrictive. However, when considered from a communitarian perspective, these strictures ensure a commonweal approach to creating community.

In *Lagoon*, the reader does not gain an insight into the history of the aliens, also called the Elders, who invade Lagos. Also unclear is their motivation for coming to earth. The only information the reader receives is the Elders' reason for landing in Lagos. Ayodele, the aliens' ambassador says, they chose Lagos because the land and water, "seemed like good places for us" (34). Ayodele also comments that the aliens, "can work with you people..And we will. We're coming" (34). Ayodele also says later that some of the aliens even decided to live among the sea creatures (233). Ayodele's comment that they, "are coming" is not an ominous statement, but a point of fact. She tells Adaora, Agu, and Anthony that the aliens landed in the water and first communicated with, "other people there" meaning the ocean life (31). They are now ready to communicate with, and solicit assistance from, the people on land (31). As a result, we are forced to focus on the characteristics of the aliens and determine their approach to community by how they form and support community with earth's sentient beings. Interdependence is their cornerstone to forming community.

Once the Elders come to earth, they declare that one of their key objectives is to bring change, and to integrate with, humans. We witness this most clearly in two ways. One is towards the end of the novel when the aliens walk, en masse, from their underwater ship onto the earth. Unlike the Oankali, when the Lagosian aliens come to earth, they shapeshift into humans who would be recognizable to their Lagotian human hosts. Agu sees them and describes the scene as such, "As he sat, he saw shapes in the water...They grew, rising out of the waves, coalescing into recognizable shapes.

Human shapes. They were people, hundreds of people walking straight out of the ocean onto Bar Beach” (109). The shape-shifting Elders were dressed in a variety of clothes, police and military uniforms, traditional clothes, and Western clothes (114). While most of the aliens were African, there were some who were Asian, and one who was white (114). This myriad of clothing and skin tones indicate a purposeful intention to live among the human Lagosians. This view is further supported as Okorafor writes in subsequent scenes where the Elders ride in cars with humans - who only realize later that the woman or man they’ve provided a ride to is not human (173-174). Or when nine aliens arrive at Chris’s home for respite and to visit (275 - 278). Even more interesting is the Lagosians who welcome the aliens. For instance, when the aliens come to Chris and Adaora’s home, his aunts cook a feast for the visitors. Chris notes that they do so regardless of their beliefs because the alien arrival is a fact that overrides belief systems, family traditions, and religion (276). This sense that this moment is bigger than themselves is a sentiment that follows the Nigerian President’s speech, which is televised on all Lagosian screens: computer, phone, and television. At this point in the novel, he has been healed from his heart condition by the Elders and met with the Elders, in their ship, underwater. The message he essentially brings to his constituents is that the aliens are here, and they mean no harm. He also invites his fellow Lagosians to be open to how the aliens will integrate among them as a positive influence, “Listen to your own hearts and look around you...let our minds clear. And see” (271).

However, that awareness and protectiveness is only a fleeting condition if it cannot be sustained. The Oankali in *Xenogenesis* create a new community and sustain

it with their ethos and genetic memories. In contrast, in *Lagoon*, the aliens' goal is to become a part of the existing environment. They sustain the environment by encouraging all species to tap into their innate desires. The implication is that tapping into these desires will create a balanced, new environment. As you continue to self-actualize, you will inherently protect your environment. Not in hate, but in self-preservation. For example, at some point, the ocean becomes hostile to humans who have been unkind to the ocean (233). The sea creatures have changed and so they alter their environment. Once Ayodele experiences human hostility for the second time (259-263) she comes to understand that her people cannot thrive because they see her difference as a deviance that must be contained. In one sense, the aliens' molecule manipulation enables the aliens in *Lagoon* to integrate seamlessly with the Lagosians environment. Thus they can help to improve and sustain their environment. This is an ability that humans do not have - a true reflection of Butler's sentiment that all that you touch you change. Existing she disperses her molecules in the environment. However, as seen in *Zami* and in *Xenogenesis*, there must be a way to sustain interdependency. For Lorde sustainability meant understanding the ethos of the community; while for Lilith and her human community, sustainability meant understanding the ethos and social structure of the Oankali as well as integrating with the alien community chemically and biologically. For the Lagosian humans, the new interdependence the Elders bring will be sustained with a literal integration of the aliens with the humans on the cellular level.

Ayodele has witnessed and suffered from the violence of humanity. When Ayodele is beaten by the soldiers, she allows herself to be beaten when she could

single-handedly defeat the members of the military. Ayodele has come to the same conclusion the Oankali have come to, humanity has a fatal flaw that drives them to self-destruct. She says to Adaora, “You people need help on the outside, but also within...I will go within” (262). Adaora later notices, “...a white mist swirled, as if a fog had rolled in off the water...And instinctively she knew that this fog was rolling like a great wave over all of Lagos...And everyone in Lagos was inhaling it” (263). The reader sees the change immediately in the soldiers whose facial expressions transform from aggression to shame for beating Ayodele so viciously (263). Therefore, unlike the Oankali who seek to integrate humans into their alien community, the Lagos aliens seek to co-create a new community that encourages humans to live a life that reflects their lived experiences. One reading of Ayodele’s action is that because most of the humans were amenable to the winds of change the aliens brought, she must make the environment pliable for the changes the aliens bring. In other words, her essence encourages the harmony her diplomacy could not. This act once again taps into the idea that their ability to manage molecules is the way they keep their environment sustainable.

As with Lorde’s community, and the network of Oankali, there is no central power structure discussed among the Lagoon aliens. There is no one alien or council of aliens to whom Ayodele defers. Unlike the Oankali, there is also no mention of a segment of the Elders who keep and monitor the groups’ proverbial institutional or genetic memories. Collectivism or collective consciousness are the closest analogies one can draw to the manner in which the Elders seem to communicate and make decisions. Collective consciousness describes, “the totality of representations which are collective in the sense that they are present in several minds” (Némedi 42). This summarized

definition of sociologist Emile Durkheim represents an often-cited definition of this concept from Durkheim (42) and aptly describes the social structure of the Elders, as presented in *Lagoon*. Historically, aliens that present as collectivists are also deemed as possessing evil intent towards humans or species that are not a part of their collective. Donald Hassler argues that often times, these stories are written by men (124-126). Early notable women science fiction authors such as Joanna Russ and Ursula K. Le Guin did not view collectivism as a threat to individualism (Hassler 124-125, Sinnreich 5671). Rather, they wrote about aliens who were cooperative collectivists who, like the Oankali, and the Elders created an interdependent environment wherein to harm humans, would be to harm themselves. In other words, these cooperative collectivist aliens, the Elders, are committed to co-creating a commonweal in Lagos with its human and non-human inhabitants.

The reader witnesses the outcome of the aliens' collective consciousness rather than the method of their decision making. For instance, Ayodele tells Adaora that the Elders chose her as an ambassador and she later tells Adaora that the Elders chose her. In another instance, Ayodele tells Adaora that the President of Nigeria must meet the Elders. Lastly, Adaora, Agu, and Anthony all go to the Elders on two occasions. In each of these instances, the reasons for the meeting are connected to determining how the Elders will integrate into and co-exist in humanity. The previously mentioned en masse migration from their underwater ship to earth also represents a collective consciousness or collectivism. In this way, the Elders also reflect a womanist ethos which acts as a guide to reimagining the Lagos community.

While this chapter examines the notion of a speculative, interdependent, community, there are echoes of this concept currently in existence. One example is “Black Twitter.” This community operates in a framework of decentralized power - there is no one leader in the community; there are diverse roles in the community, such as activists, comedians, scholars, politicians, and historians. And when there are social justice issues that affect the community as a whole, Black Twitter either organically generates hashtags to signal outrage such as #WeAreTrayvon or #HoodiesUp and encourage additional activism or amplifies the hashtags of other organizations and movement such a Black Lives Matter (#blm) with an eye towards activism.

The Afrofuturist platform Ingrid LeFleur’s created for her 2017 Detroit, Michigan mayoral campaign offers another example of a potential community grounded in commonweal. LeFleur, a Detroit resident, who has worked as a schoolteacher, artist, and curator and whose work, “is infused with the philosophy and aesthetic of Afrofuturism” (Marcus), translated her philosophy of Afrofuturism into a plan for community sustainability that includes a human-centered ecosystem, and investment in and implementation of blockchain technology -- the technology behind cryptocurrencies such as bitcoin. She describes the benefit of this decentralization of the financial system as such: “There is an opportunity essentially to construct a financial and governmental structure that exists outside of a system that continuously penalizes and criminalizes Black and brown bodies” (Marcus). Theoretically, this platform could become a template for managing cities using an Afrofuturistic standpoint.

This view is forward-thinking and anticipates an existence for Black women beyond oppression. In this sense, Black speculative texts, such as Butler’s

*Xenogenesis* and *Okorafor Lagoon*, are radical tools for radically imagining strategies for healing the self and the community. A key component of their interdependence seems to depend upon earth species' willingness to self-actualize. The reader sees the limitless possibilities of this view of community in the ocean creatures. Once they become self-actualized, they become more protective of the purity of their environment. This can be read as analogous to the Black community. The more self-aware we become about the best way for us to survive and thrive, the more protective we become about an environment that supports this survival.

## 5 CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION

In 1984, Audre Lorde wrote of Black women's texts, "Recent writing by many Black women seems to explore human concerns somewhat differently than do the men. These women refuse to blame racism entirely for every Black aspect of life...Freedom and future for Blacks does not mean absorbing the dominant white male" [sic] (*Black Women Writers at Work* 113). One of the methods for combating this concern is through the radical imagination expressed in Black women's Black speculative fiction. This analytical approach of this genre of Black women's writing does not propose an *us* versus *them* stance that discounts important works by male Black speculative authors such as Samuel Delany who address gender in their work. Rather it suggests a continued conversation about how a womanist-focused analysis of Afrofuturistic ethos in Black speculative fiction synthesizes to imagine a womanist framework for the future. This bold, adaptive, universalist, framework, encourages writers of all genders to envision communities that are informed by the individuals' decisions about self-actualization rather than societal constructs that excise difference.

Lorde echoes this sentiment in "Uses of Anger" where she says if the Black woman is not free, no one is. At the same time, Lorde writes, Black women are not martyrs who feel no anger. They have just learned to use that anger in a way that is productive and that helps them to promote their cause (127-123). As writers such as Cooper, Jones, and Lorde argue, Black women's response to this oppression has often been to organize whether within their family, community, or within formal organizations. Generations of Black women have modeled how to support Black liberation at various levels of organizing - in a way that reflects a womanist ethos. The

things that they are maligned for are the things that make them powerful and valuable to the community. The value of non-fiction texts such as these is that they challenge the status quo in terms of how Black women are viewed, treated, and valued. They demand a revised vision of Black women as integral parts of society rather than a group of infinitely relegated to a supporting role. Corollary to these views are fictional views of women who are strong, round characters who navigate society. Even more specific to this are characters who are charged with recreating society from a Black woman's point of view – a view that could also be framed as forward thinking, or futuristic.

Of course, fiction as an artistic and political drafting board for problematizing oppressions and/or trauma is not unique to this dissertation project. Richard Iton, in his text, *In Search of the Black Fantastic: Politics and Popular Culture in the Post Civil Rights Era*, presents popular culture - which includes fiction - as a place where Blacks are able to express concerns about political issues virtually uncensored. There was a time, Iton reminds us in his text, when activists often intertwined their socio-political leanings in artistic endeavors. This is certainly true for the transnational, anachronistic, intergalactic texts of many Black speculative fiction stories. For example, Martin Delany a Pan Africanist and abolitionist wrote the alternative reality story *Blake and the Huts of America*. Initially published serially between 1859-1861, *Blake* addresses slavery in an alternate reality wherein Black people successfully plan an international slave revolt. Published four-six years before the 13<sup>th</sup> Amendment abolished slavery in 1865 in the United States, the story offers a departure from slave narratives as a method for protesting slavery and, as such, looks to speculation to imagine how the planning of this revolt would manifest. A more recent example lies in Okorafor's novel *Lagoon* where

she presents Lagos, Nigeria as a location for an alien invasion. This novel reflects her personal investment in expanding the conversation in science fiction and speculative texts about what people of color are doing in the future or and/or in alternate realities by actively including them in the conversation of re-imagined futures. So, while this project is not suggesting the notion of, art as political, as an innovation, it does propose to expand Iton's idea by focusing specifically on the value of speculative fiction to this endeavor.

Renina Jarmon declared in 2009 that “Black girls are from the future” [sic] (Blackgirlsarefromthefuture). Many people, including academics, have repeated this mantra on social media, on paraphernalia, and in academic articles. Jarmon’s phrase is also a cleverly concise and complex manifestation of what Black women authors have explicitly or overtly argued in writing for centuries. Because of their unique, lived body experiences with interlocking oppression Black women are distinctively able to imagine equitable societies. I argue that the equitable societies many Black women authors promote, reflects Maparyan’s description of the communitarian community wherein members welcome diversity and collective consciousness. In many regards, this view of community is futuristic in that it is not solely defined by developing a counter-narrative to a mythic norm. Much like the aliens in *Xenogenesis* and *Lagoon*, a womanist, communitarian view of an equitable society regards the diverse lived body experience of members of the community as opportunities for innovation. This view is forward thinking, and anticipates an existence for Black women beyond oppression. In this sense, Black speculative writing by Black women is a radical tool not solely because of

its content but because the genre also projects strategies for healing the self and the community.

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