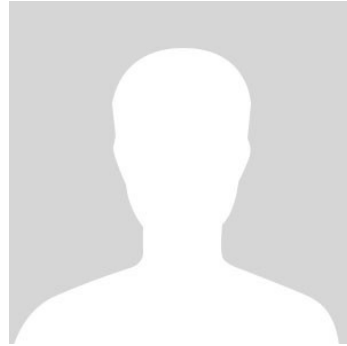


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American Architecture as a Settler Colonial Project: Octavia Butler's Afrofuturism

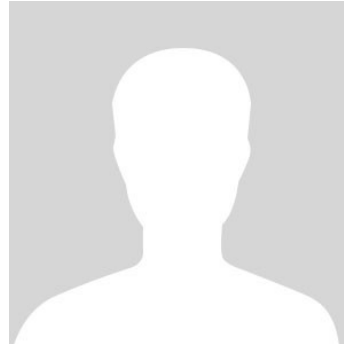
Participants:



Host

Lisa Ramsburg

Student at Princeton



Host

Chris Loofs

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Links and References:

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Additional Resources

Black Futures by Kimberly Drew and Jenna Wortham <https://www.penguinrandomhouse.com/books/553674/black-futures-by-edited-by-kimberly-drew--jenna-wortham/>

Octavia's Brood: Science Fiction Stories from Social Justice Movements
<https://www.akpress.org/octavia-s-brood.html>

Octavia Butler Strategic Reader
<https://store.alliedmedia.org/products/octavia-butler-strategic-reader?variant=20740509377>

Interview between Moya Bailey and adrienne maree brown about the Octavia Butler Strategic Reader
<https://adanewmedia.org/baileybrowntranscript/> Black Female Science Fiction Authors

N.K. Jemisin - <https://nkjemisin.com/>

Nalo Hopkinson - <https://www.nalohopkinson.com/> Nnedi Okorafor - <https://nnedi.com/>

Karen Lord - <https://karenlord.wordpress.com/>

Episode Music

Umlungu by John Bartmann https://freemusicarchive.org/music/John_Bartmann/Public_Domain_Soundtrack_Music_Album_One

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American Architecture as a Settler Colonial Project: Octavia Butler's Afrofuturism

Transcript

Lisa & Chris:

Hey, this is Lisa, and this is Chris, and we are two graduate students of architecture here at Princeton University.

Chris:

What are we talking about today, Lisa?

Lisa:

Today I'd love to talk about a science fiction trilogy that I can't get out of my mind. It was written by Octavia Butler, the first black woman to be a well-known science fiction author. The trilogy was originally called Xenogenesis but was republished in 2000 as Lilit's Brood. The first book in the trilogy is called Dawn and it was published in 1987. Next was Adulthood Rites in 1988 and finally Imago in 1989.

Chris:

Well, I'm excited. You know I love science fiction, but what is it about this trilogy that is important to talk about?

Lisa:

Honestly, there is so much. But what we'll focus on today is the way that the books set up a critique of settler colonialism through the use of an extra-terrestrial species, the Oankali, intent on interbreeding with humanity to create a hybrid race. Told from the perspective of Lilit, a black woman held in captivity by the Oankali, the books give a nuanced view of resistance and survival. At the same time, Butler positions the Oankali in contrast to humanity as a way to critique hierarchy, war, and environmental destruction. And one of the ways this manifests is through architecture.

Chris:

Look, I'm already hooked, but before we really dive into it, let's establish some definitions up front. Based on Ania Loomba's book Colonialism/Postcolonialism, Colonialism can be thought of as "the conquest and control of other people's land and goods". Settler Colonialism is a specific type of colonialism in which colonizers move to the colony in large numbers, take control of the land, and decimate indigenous populations. The United States is an example of a settler colony in which relentless westward expansion forced Native American's off their land.

Lisa:

And in Lilit's Brood, the Oankali would be the settler colonists.

Chris:

Gotcha. Okay so can you give me an overview of the plot?

Lisa:

Yes definitely. This is going to contain a lot of spoilers. You have been warned. To set the stage a bit, the books were written in the late 80's towards the end of the Cold War following a period of increased tension. In an interior with Motion Magazine, Butler says, "I got my idea for the Xenogenesis books from Ronald Reagan because he was advocating [building the U.S. nuclear arsenal]. I thought there must be something basic, something really genetically wrong with us if we're falling for this stuff."

So, the premise of the books is that a nuclear war has wiped out most of humanity and left the environment completely inhospitable. Enter the Oankali, an extraterrestrial species that rescues all the survivors and brings them onto their ship. The Oankali are able to do like real time genetic engineering, and they start restoring Earth to be habitable again. Meanwhile, they select a few humans that they want to use for specific work. One of these is Lilit. They cure her cancer, make her strong and fast, and enhance her memory so that she never forgets anything she learns.

Chris:

Wow, they sound like incredibly generous extra-terrestrials...

Lisa:

Yeah, but it's not so simple. Lilit soon learns that there is a "price". The Oankali call themselves "gene traders" and it turns out that they saved humanity and restored Earth so they can interbreed with humans and recolonize the earth with communities of the new hybrid race. The Oankali think of this interbreeding as mutually beneficial, and specifically see it as a way to "fix" what they perceive as humanity's incompatible and destructive genetic combination of being both intelligent and hierarchical. Sandra Cox points out in her paper Sparks from the Tail of a Comet that Lilit and other humans are given "a choice that is not actually a choice: assimilate or perish."

Chris:

Okay now I'm picking up on the Settler Colonialist narratives. Nothing is really ever a choice when the other option is to perish, but this idea of assimilation is incredibly important.

Patrick Wolfe discusses this in his paper, Settler Colonialism and the Elimination of the Native, where he makes a fantastic (and rather science fiction sounding) observation; "Invasion is a structure not an event." (388) This structure, in settler colonialism, often involves the forced assimilation of indigenous groups over generations. As one example, in her paper, "The State is A Man", Audra Simpson outlines the way that indigenous women in Canada lost their status and claims to land if they married a white man. These types of legal and social structures are means to systematically disenfranchise

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indigenous populations. Often, colonizers justify their actions by claiming that they are helping by introducing a modern lifestyle, capitalism, and industrialization. From what I understand, this is exactly how the Oankali operate, viewing themselves as the saviors of the Earth that will fix humans and teach them how to properly manage Earth's resources. It's kind of like a

cover for their end goal, which in their case is the use of Earth and humanity to further their own race.

Chris:

So how does Lilith react to all of this?

Lisa:

Lilith is a really complicated, powerful character. The tone of the first book, told from her perspective, is overwhelmingly bleak. She's a captive, and she resents the lack of agency she has over her space, her body, and her future. And yet, she chooses to survive. Even more than that, she chooses not to turn away from love, comfort, and morality.

Here's a moment in the beginning of Dawn that I think describes Lilith really well. It happens the first time that Lilith is in the same room with one of the Oankali. Her body reacts instinctively with revulsion to the alien's humanoid body covered with grey tentacles that are actually sensory organs. She recognizes that what she feels is xenophobia and thinks, "If this were what a phobia was like, it was something to be gotten rid of as quickly as possible."

So despite the fact that she is a captive of the Oankali, she recognizes that her instinctive reaction to be repulsed by difference is wrong. She does manage to overcome this xenophobia and over time forms incredibly strong bonds with the Oankali.

Chris:

Is that ever perceived as Lilith giving in?

Lisa:

I actually see it as a form of resistance. Meghan Hurley-Powell specifically calls it feminist resistance. In her essay "We're Never Trapped by Power": A Plurality of Feminist Resistance in Octavia Butler's Dawn, she talks about the way that "feminist modes of resistance are often trivialized or dismissed in favor of more obvious resistance strategies, such as simply extricating oneself from the problematic environment or overthrowing a corrupt government (xxii)". In contrast, working within a system in order to work against it is a way of finding power in the act of survival. That's very much what Lilith does. At the end of Dawn, she thinks to herself "If she were lost, others did not have to be. Humanity did not have to be." Another way to view this mindset is through adrienne maree brown's framework of "emergent strategy". Based on the leadership of strong black woman characters in Octavia Butler's work, brown describes emergent strategy as "understanding and respecting change" "Instead of linear, hierarchical, outcome-oriented strategies and strategic plans that can't adapt to changing conditions."

Chris:

So it's almost like within this ultimatum that Lilith is given to either assimilate or perish, she finds a third option. She chooses to survive and adapt and in doing so she continues to stay vigilant, looking for even the smallest moments where she can carve out a future that is different from the present.

Lisa:

Yeah, it is resistance that happens over generations. And we see it play out. The second book, for example, is told from the perspective of Akin, Lilith's son. Akin convinces the Oankali that humans should have the choice to live independently and he helps a group of resisters establish a colony on Mars. This type of long term feminist resistance is something Butler came to recognize in her grandmother, mother, and other black folks facing systematic oppression and racism. As she discusses an interview with Project MUSE, she remembers as a child witnessing her mother's employers talking to her mother in disrespectful ways. When she was young, she blamed her mother for accepting such behavior. But in the interview she says, "as I got older I realized that this is what kept me fed, and this is what kept a roof over my head." Her mother was faced with one of these choices that was not really a choice: put up with blatant racism, or lose her job. Her mother, like Lilith, chose to survive but never stopped looking for a different future.

Chris:

When Octavia Butler started writing science fiction, she knew of only one other black science fiction author, Samuel R. Delany, and no other black women science fiction authors. Yet she saw the potential in the white male dominated genre to craft stories that reflected her experience of being black in America, a practice that she often referred to as "writing herself in" to the story. There weren't characters like her or her family in the science fiction she was reading, so she created them. "Imagining possible futures" is one of the defining features of Afrofuturism, a movement that is about the intersection of technology and black diasporic culture. Afrofuturism is a term that was coined by Mark Derby in 1993 in an article called Black to the Future. In the article, Derby interviews Samuel R. Delany. Delany says, "The historical reason that we've been so impoverished in terms of future images is because, until fairly recently, as a people we were systematically forbidden any images of our past" (191). As artist Alisha B Wormsley puts it, the idea of Afrofuturism is simply that "There are black people in the future". Hip-hop artist Gabriel Teodros also has a quote that I really like, which is "If we don't write ourselves into the future, we get written out of tomorrow as well." I think this mentality of "I'll do it myself" that is born out of a frustration over a lack of representation really resonates with a lot of people today; and we are finally starting to see the result in literature, art, and cinema as well with movies like Black Panther.

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Lisa:

Octavia Butler's work is considered seminal to Afrofuturism. At the time Derby's article was written, she had been publishing science fiction for almost two decades. And while her work often centers multicultural communities, she writes about strong, emotionally rich black female protagonists that labor to realize their visions for the future.

Chris:

Okay, so we've talked now about how the book critiques settler colonialism and how the work of Octavia Butler relates to Afrofuturism. But what about architecture? How do these themes manifest in the spaces the characters inhabit?

Lisa:

Yes okay, I'm excited to talk about this. Because while Butler uses the Oankali to critique settler colonialism, when it comes to architecture, she positions them as kind of opposite from humanity as a critique of the way that we are destroying the environment.

This plays out most clearly in the second book that takes place 50 years after the first groups of humans and Oankali land back on the restored Earth. Some of the humans, like Lilith, live in communities with the Oankali, but others form resistor communities and live independently. In the human-Oankali communities, the architecture is similar to that of the Oankali spaceship- it is alive, planted from a seed and then grown and trained to respond to those living in the community. The one that Lilith lives in is called Lo and it provides everything from walls and furniture to food. The relationship between Lo and the inhabitants is symbiotic, they nurture it and it nurtures them. In resistor communities, humans salvage metal and plastic from ruins. They build factories to manufacture glass and process trees into dimensional lumber with which they construct single family homes arranged along streets.

Chris:

So they basically just start building in the same way they were before the war.

Lisa:

Yeah, and moreover, they talk pejoratively about the architecture of communities like Lo. In one part of the story, Tino, who grew up in a resistor village, comes to Lo and questions their way of life. In describing his resistor village, he says, "I helped build the houses. Real houses, not huts. We even had glass for windows... You people have all the advantages. The Oankali can get you anything. Why do you live this way...It's primitive! You live like savages!"

Chris:

That's really interesting because words like 'primitive' and 'savage' have historically been used by colonizing nations to refer to indigenous architecture. They became part of the justification for assimilation and domination that spread industrialization and capitalism around the world.

Lisa:

Right. Even with this chance to start over and rebuild, we see humans falling back on stereotypes they held before the war. But through the architecture of the Oankali, Butler paints a picture instead of what it might mean to change the way we build, the way we relate to the environment, and a way to envision possible futures by learning from indigenous knowledge. I'm reminded of a beautiful paper written by critical theorist Elizabeth Povinelli called Transgender Creeks and the Three Figures of Power in Late Liberalism. In the article she shares indigenous knowledge about a girl dressed as a boy who becomes a creek called Tjipel. Tjipel's existence, like Lo's existence, challenges the strict binary between life and non-life that is fundamental to capitalism.

Chris:

So we've covered a lot today, and I'm sure there is a lot more we could discuss. Where could listeners look if they want to learn more?

Lisa:

A great place to start would be to pick up any of Octavia Butler's books or to read her critically acclaimed short story "Bloodchild" that deals with some of the same topics we have discussed today. Also, Adrienne Marie Brown and Alexis Pauline Gumbs have assembled the Octavia Butler Strategic Reader that has really thoughtful questions to guide you through the work and spur conversations with your friends and families. Although Butler was the first well known black woman writing science fiction, many have followed. Check out the works of N.K. Jemisin, Nalo Hopkinson, Nnedi Okorafor, and Karen Lord, just to name a few.

Additionally, while we have briefly discussed Afrofuturism in the episode, there is so much more that we didn't have time to talk about. If you want to learn more about the artists and authors we mentioned in the podcast, check out the show notes for links to books like Black Futures, edited by Kimberly Drew and Jenna Wortham.

And finally, support the work of the people of color in your community that are change-makers, whether they be activists, filmmakers, actors, artists, or writers.

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Settler Colonial Project:
Octavia Butler's Afrofuturism*

Chris:

That's all for this episode, thanks for tuning in!