Hybrid Children, Queer Futures
The Subversive Power of the Symbolic Child in Popular Culture

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Metaphor is one of thought’s most essential tools. It illuminates what would otherwise be totally obscure. But the illumination is sometimes so bright that it dazzles instead of revealing.

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Curiouser and Curiouser:
The Cult of Childhood and Reproductive Futurism

In the 21st century, it is almost impossible to refer to the future without calling into the mind of the reader the image of future generations—of children. Whether this image is evoked in a hopeful way or an ominous one, the fact remains that the child now stands as a powerful symbol of human potential, especially in popular culture. Contemporary culture’s obsession with the futurist potential of the child is by no means recent. This image of the child is part of a long and complicated history of childhood. The “cult of childhood,” wrote George Boas in 1966, “has reached amazing proportions” (8-9). By this he meant that Western society’s obsession with the true nature and social rights of the child, and its unquestioning acceptance of the period of life known as childhood, had reached a height previously unheard of. Boas saw this obsession with the child as a relatively recent phenomenon. Before the 17th and 18th centuries, he argued, children were not viewed very favourably, when they were considered at all, but the 20th century saw a marked increase in Western society’s interest in both the child and the nature of childhood. Boas initially set out to study this cult of childhood because of his interest in the history of cultural primitivism, and modern Western society’s presentation of the child “as a paradigm of the ideal man” (9).1 In his view, it was the perceived innocence of the child that formed the primary focus of society’s praise, justifying a more general “vogue of innocence, naïveté, freshness, and kindred qualities” (101). In Boas’s time this cult of childhood had proceeded so far that scholars like Norman O. Brown, quoted in Boas, argued that “life will conquer death only when we accept the [...] vision of the child as final” (Boas 102). In addition to this view, in which children form the ultimate goal for the future, other scholars saw the child as central to our most

1 For a more extensive history of the cult of childhood, see George Boas, The Cult of Childhood (London: The Warburg Institute, 1966).
important questions about ourselves in the present. Virginia Blum states that the entire field of psychoanalysis “is the story of the adult’s relationship with an internalized, repudiated, but nevertheless ceaselessly desired child” (Blum 23). This rise of the cult of childhood is part of a greater movement in the early 20th century, marked in 1900 when oft-quoted Swedish theorist Ellen Key predicted that the 20th century would come to be the ‘century of the child’, in which an increase in children’s rights would help usher in a new era of tolerance and equality for all mankind.

In the late 20th and early 21st centuries, many scholars also reacted against this cult of childhood, which they found especially problematic given childhood’s socially constructed character. If childhood and the image of the child are constructed, then someone must be behind this construction—if not a single individual, then a cultural system. This cultural system is built on contributions from all members of society, but its products are determined by the cultural majority, and as such they tend to have a normative impulse. Because of the increasing importance of children and childhood in the 20th century, a number of scholars saw the image of the child as normative, and symbolically dangerous because of the child’s association with the future. If a certain characteristic is not part of a culture’s ideas about the child, it cannot be part of that same culture’s ideal image of the future. Some of the first to take direct action against this cultural cult of childhood were scholars of marginalised identities, including queer theory. Of these scholars, Lee Edelman is one of the best known within a discussion of the symbolism of childhood, and he takes an especially strong stance against “the image of the Child, not to be confused with the lived experiences of any historical children” (11). In his 2004 book No Future, Edelman states that “the Child has come to embody for us the telos of the social order and come to be seen as the one for whom that order is held in perpetual trust” (11). For him the symbolic child has become the be-all end-all of Western social order and cultural production. He sees this overprivileged place of the child as problematic within the context of queer theory (and cultural discourse in general), for the primary reason that:

On every side, our enjoyment of liberty is eclipsed by the lengthening shadow of a Child whose freedom to develop undisturbed by encounters, or even by the threat of potential encounters, with an “otherness” of which its parents, its church, or the state do not approve, uncompromised by any possible access to what is painted as alien desire, terroristically holds us all in check and determines

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2 Due to the limited scope of this thesis, a complete discussion of the sociologically constructed nature of childhood and the child is not possible. For a more complete sociological analysis, see Allison James and Adrian James, Constructing Childhood: Theory, Policy and Social Practice (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), Allison James, Chris Jenks and Alan Prout, Theorizing Childhood (New York: Wiley, 1998).
that political discourse conform to the logic of a narrative wherein history unfolds as the future envisioned for a Child who must never grow up (21).

While the language of this statement is clearly hyperbolical, the assertion behind it is still familiar. Edelman's argument that the Child serves as a proscriptive agent of normative forces is disturbing if correct, though by focussing so intensely on the negative aspects of the child as a symbol, Edelman also overlooks the possibility that the child might be a positive agent in the advancement of a queer or otherwise marginalist agenda. Edelman's theories thus prove a useful starting point for an examination of children and the cult of childhood in 21st-century popular culture, both because they stand against the view of the child as a normative symbol, and also because his arguments are based on contemporary Western awe of the ‘good’ child, which, as Boas rightly points out, is far from the only representation of the child in Western culture.

In my view, theories about the normative symbolism of the child certainly hold true for many appearances of the symbolic child in both politics and popular culture. They do, however, ultimately fail to account for a number of contradictory examples in contemporary literature, film, and other media. In these examples the child is still representative of a future ‘held in perpetual trust,’ but by raising questions about the nature of humanity and our expectations for the future, the form and purpose of this perpetual trust are questioned. I would like to suggest that this narrative tactic in fact transforms the child into a new kind of symbol, a site of otherness, uncanniness, and ‘queerness’. In this thesis, I will explore the extent to which the child can be a queering symbol of the human in contemporary culture and critical theory, and how it might further futurism without that futurism becoming exclusionary.3

In their 2004 book Curiouser: On the Queerness of Children, Stephen Bruhm and Natasha Hurley (like Edelman) present a view of the child in which it “is the product of physical reproduction, but functions just as surely as a figure of cultural reproduction” (xiii), though they add that a normative reading of the Child is precisely that: one of many readings. They argue that if one looks at things diﬀerently, the children depicted in popular culture and narrative are often “curiouser than they’ve been given credit for” (xiv, original italics). In the book’s collection of essays, childhood is examined from a historical point of view, questioning the mechanisms that cause us to see the child as a symbol of normativity. This is done with the aim of exposing the agency of children as their own separate entities, at once outside of and yet inevitably part of the

3 For Edelman the child often becomes synonymous with the foetus, and for Boas the child is arbitrarily defined as anyone under the age of sixteen. For the other scholars cited in this thesis, the definitions of what constitutes a child are equally varied. In order to work thematically rather than sociologically, and to make use of the theories of such a diverse group of scholars, in this thesis the definition of the precise age range that can be referred to as a child is left purposely vague.
adult world. In other words, though children may someday become us, we should by no means assume that they are already just like us or will become like us.

As in Bruhm and Hurley, this thesis will use the term queer in its “more traditional sense, to indicate a deviation from ‘normal’” (x), whether that deviance takes sexual, racial, or other forms. While Curiouser approaches the symbolic child directly from the perspective of sexuality and queer theory, I hope to emphasise yet another aspect of the child as a queering symbol—namely that, as David Sullivan and Jeff Greenberg argue, the “fear of monstrous children is inseparable from fear of mortality and the breakdown of cultural strategies for repressing this fear” (114). To explore the idea that monstrous children can also represent a kind of queerness or otherness, motivated by fear, I will take examples of what Karen J. Renner calls “evil children” (Renner “Evil Children I” 79) as my starting point, moving away from the idealised, inherently ‘good’ child. I will use instances of animal-human hybrid children, a subtype of the evil child, to explore how the fear and violence that these ‘evil’ children inspire in many texts is far more reflective of the culture that surrounds and moulds them than of the children themselves.

Hybrid children are useful examples in a discussion of childhood’s symbolism because they are at once human and inhuman, and can represent both traditional and marginalised identities. My analysis will include an examination of Jeff Lemire’s post-apocalyptic comic book series Sweet Tooth (2009-2013), which follows the exploits of a half-deer mutant boy, and of Vincenzo Natali’s Splice (2009), a film about two scientists who combine human and animal DNA in an experiment to create a monstrous hybrid child.

A theme that appears again and again in these texts regarding queer children is that of apocalypse, which is a narrative motif but also a theoretical concept that is closely linked to questions of humanity, otherness, utopia, and futurism. Edelman also makes the argument that children are vehicles for something he calls “reproductive futurism” (3). Reproductive futurism is the idea that every decision made in the present must be weighed based on its consequences for a future held in trust for an imaginary and symbolic child. According to Edelman, this child not only represents the future that we in the present are commanded to create, it also conforms to the ideals and ideologies of the status quo, creating a future where there is no room for difference.

The term ‘reproductive futurism’ is a play on words, indicating that the symbolic child initiates a kind of futurism that continually reproduces itself, and suggesting that the only group allowed to participate in this self-replicating future are those who can and do reproduce in the traditional way. Edelman’s solution to this reproductive futurism is the rejection of utopia and futurism altogether, refusing “the insistence of hope itself as affirmation, which is always affirmation of an
order whose refusal will register as unthinkable, irresponsible, inhumane” (4). According to Edelman, although standing against hope seems absurd and impossible, we can no longer rationalise using hope for the future (through the symbol of the child) to dictate action in the present. Instead, we must take the seemingly impossible position of standing against the child, and thereby against the future. To explore this apocalyptic reasoning, I will conclude this thesis with a brief exploration of apocalyptic theory and an analysis of (post-)apocalyptic children, in which I will more explicitly relate the above discussions of evil children, reproductive futurism, and the nature of childhood. The textual examples in this discussion will be the childbirth narrative in P.D. James’s 1992 novel The Children of Men (and the 2006 film adaptation), in which one man is tasked with protecting what is possibly the last fertile woman on earth and her unborn child. Finally, I will return to my discussion of hybrid children in an examination of Octavia Butler’s Xenogenesis trilogy (1987-2000), a revisionist narrative about a human woman and her half-alien offspring.

Though all the texts I will examine are clearly works of fiction, and do not directly shape political, social, or cultural policy, they are all popular works that form and reinforce an important part of who we are and how we think and act in Western culture. Additionally, as Ellen Pifer points out in her book Demon or Doll: Images of the Child in Contemporary Writing and Culture (2000), fictional characters are “images of human beings implicitly existing as ideas or inventions. They are the product not only of a writer’s talent, voice, and vision but of the social forces influencing both writer and reader” (4). Ultimately, I hope to show how the children in these works of genre fiction are directly linked to the symbolic child in contemporary cultural and political discourse, and how they provide potential solutions for dealing with the relationship between the evil child, the idealised child, and the self. ‘The Child’ can be just as limiting and normative as Edelman suggests, but our ever-changing sense of what it means to be human can also offer productive uses for the child. The symbolic child is situated at the vertex of identity studies and broader theories of history and culture. There has been a great deal of research into concepts of the child and of childhood in many different fields, but by looking at where these studies intersect I hope to produce a new and productive way of critically reading this symbolic figure in literature and other media. In better understanding the significance of the child, we can also come to a clearer understanding of the role of the self, and of how the social order is constructed, helping us to redefine the boundary between the self and the Other in all fields of research.
Only Natural
Evil Children and the Queerness of Hybrids

This chapter will contribute to my argument that children can and do serve as subversive representations of the self, and will do so through an examination of the evil child in popular culture. Idealised children show us an equally idealised (and often exclusionary) view of the future, but just as the line between a utopian narrative and a dystopian one is often very fine, narratives of innocent childhood can easily become narratives of monstrosity. As Boas points out, this symbolism is largely based on contemporary society’s primitivist view of the child as a blank slate—the ‘natural’ state of humanity. One category of monstrous children in fiction is that which Karen J. Renner loosely terms “the evil child” (“Evil Children I” 79). Though Renner admits that this term is disappointingly vague considering the widely varying definitions of ‘children’ and ‘evil’, she maintains that all children who fall under this category nevertheless “force us to consider the age-old question about the nature of mankind” (“Evil Children I” 84) in some way. Renner locates the first real obsession with images of evil children in the fiction of the 1950s, though examples of evil children in what we might call ‘popular fiction’ are certainly found much earlier.4 Henry James’s The Turn of the Screw, published in 1897, already represents a very developed instance of this trope.

Evil children are as powerfully symbolic as idealised children, but instead of embodying the normative force of reproductive futurism, they embody a kind of futurism that is ultimately destructive. They represent a vision of humanity in its primitive state that is barbaric rather than progressive, thus coming to stand in for a ‘fear of mortality’ and the ‘breakdown of cultural strategies for repressing fear’ cited by Sullivan and Greenberg. As Ellen Pifer suggests in Demon or

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Doll: Images of the Child in Contemporary Writing and Culture (2000), “The fate of the fictional or literary child, in particular, says much about the way we view our own nature and destiny and even, as many works of contemporary fiction attest, our chances for succeeding as a species on this planet” (Pifer 16). Evil children often expose the fear that we as a species are doomed, and that human success up to this point has been based not on human culture and the strength of the human spirit, but on an accidental evolutionary impulse or instinct.

Despite this aspect of fear and destruction associated with the evil child, evil children in popular culture also show us how the stereotypical ‘blank slate’ of childhood makes children all the more subversive as symbols. They reveal the alien nature of childhood in general, and make us feel closer to the animal than we might be comfortable with. In addition to acknowledging the futurist potential of the child, Pifer notes the subversive element the child’s changing image can bring. The “sacred soul or self” that makes the child such a powerful image of “human creativity and potential” is precisely what makes the evil child such a terrifying figure (15). Evil children represent our fears, but in some cases they are still able to elicit sympathy from readers and viewers simply by being children. Because they show us something we fear in the form of something we idealise, evil children are especially disturbing. They highlight contemporary society’s perception of the wrongness of corrupting an innocent child, and the resulting difficulty of depicting any child as truly ‘evil’, but they also expose the inherent otherness of childhood. As Pifer rightly points out, whether the child is imagined as being sacred or evil, in both cases it “represents the other side—original or shameful, beautiful or monstrous, forgotten or repressed—of the adult self” (16). In Imagining the Child in Modern Jewish Fiction, Naomi Sokoloff also notes how images of children are always images of otherness in a sense, because the “sensations and perception of childhood are to some extent always irretrievable to [adult] memory and articulation” (3). Children are figures of otherness in the sense that the experience of childhood is essentially impenetrable (and thus necessarily constructed).

To examine the difficulties of depicting children as evil, and how the evil child exposes the otherness of childhood in general, we will follow Renner’s method of focussing on a specific ‘subtype’ of evil children. In a second article entitled “Evil Children in Film and Literature II: Notes Toward a Taxonomy”, Renner examines the relationship between the subtypes of the possessed child and the feral child, arguing that the figure of the possessed child represents failures and fears on the level of the family, whereas the feral child takes these fears and failures to

5 For the rest of this thesis, I will use the term ‘reader’ to indicate someone who interacts with and interprets any kind of text—and here I mean text in the broadest sense of the word, representing textual media but also film, art, and other visual media.
the level of society in general (“Evil Children II” 177-78). Because the category of evil children is so broad, encompassing everything from feral children to foreign children, and because each subgroup necessitates its own set of approaches, Renner’s method will allow a more thorough study of the relationship between these symbolic children and the culture that produced them. In this chapter, I will use the subtype of the hybrid child—part human, part something else—to explore contemporary ideas (and fears) about human nature, with the aim of moving away from the normative impulses often read into examples of idealised children.6 Hybrid children are a common trope in science fiction, a genre famous for subverting the reader’s understanding and expectations about their own culture and society. Hybrid children come in many varieties: take the half-animal ‘children’ in H.G Wells’s The Island of Dr. Moreau, the machines with the souls of children in the film Ghost in the Shell: Innocence, or the half-alien children with strange powers from the cult television miniseries V: The Final Battle, for example. Despite this variety, hybrid children all have a binary, paradoxical nature that is essentially similar in that they are at once human and inhuman. Because hybrid children are only part human, they represent an especially interesting category of evil children for the purposes of this discussion. As it is often unclear which aspect of these children (human or non-human) the reader should sympathise with and which aspect the should fear, both aspects become at once sympathetic and strange.

To address Boas’s statements about childhood as a basic animal state, I will look more closely at two contemporary texts that feature human-animal hybrid children, starting with Vincenzo Natali’s 2009 film Splice. Splice is a Frankenstein narrative that replaces the allegory of male childbirth (male scientist creates new, male life in the laboratory) with that of unnatural female childbirth (female scientist forgoes traditional reproduction to create female animal-human hybrid).7 After hearing that her animal hybrid project is going to be shut down, Elsa, a female bio-chemist, deliberately combines her own DNA with the genetic material of various non-predatory animals, injecting the mixture into an empty ovum. This experiment ultimately results in the birth of Elsa’s hybrid ‘daughter’ Dren, who grows at an abnormally quick rate, moving from infant to teenager to adult in a matter of weeks, and undergoing an unpredictable variety of mental and physical changes along the way. Dren also exhibits abnormal sexual desires,

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6 Of course, it is also very possible to read these same texts and idealised figures in a very different light. See, for example, Holly Blackford’s article on ‘coming out’ narratives in the Harry Potter series. Holly Blackford, “Private Lessons from Dumbledore’s “Chamber of Secrets”: The Riddle of the Evil Child in Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince,” Literature Interpretation Theory 22.2 (2011).

7 The names of the main characters, Elsa and Clive, are even tongue-in-cheek references to the actors in James Whale’s classic horror films Frankenstein and The Bride of Frankenstein.
seducing Clive, Elsa’s husband (and metaphorically Dren’s ‘father’), and later under undergoing a change of gender, at which point the male Dren sexually assaults Elsa. Dren is also physically monstrous, with unusually wide-set eyes, no hair, legs that bend in the wrong direction, and a prominent tail with a stinger at its tip. Unable to speak in any human language, Dren produces disturbing animal noises that further serve to establish her as the film’s antagonist.

The second text I will examine, Jeff Lemire’s 40-issue comic book series *Sweet Tooth* (2009–2013), follows the story of a 9-year-old boy named Gus. Gus is a half-deer child whose condition is the result of a virulent disease that is slowly destroying all human life, while also causing the new generation of children to be born half-animal. These children are hated and feared by the fully-human characters in *Sweet Tooth*, a fear that is compounded by the fact that most of the half-animal children have not learnt to read or write. Some cannot even speak. Most seem to only understand basic words and commands. Although the half-animal children are certainly innocent in the sense that they lack the fully-formed ethical systems to actively choose to do disturbing things, their often-violent animal nature frequently marks them as evil children. In Issue #13, the leader of a gang that worships the hybrids is shown with a group of dog-children he refers to as his “boys”. We later discover that these are indeed his biological children, but that they have a terrible origin—they ate their human mother after she gave birth to them (#16). This violent act was committed purely out of animal hunger, as without feeding the dog-children would have starved (and the father hints that she gave her life to save theirs), but to *Sweet Tooth’s* readers this is clearly still an abomination. Likewise, when a young woman is about to be assaulted by a group of human animal-worshippers, the dog-hybrids attack them, which could be seen by the reader as a benevolent act. After rescuing this woman, however, the dog-hybrids proceed to tear the assaulters to pieces in a display of violence that outdoes anything the would-be rapists could likely have concocted (#15, p. 6).

Both *Splice* and *Sweet Tooth* approach the human subject from a biological perspective in order to answer ethical questions. By likening children to animals, the texts indirectly highlight animalistic aspects of human nature. For example, though Dren is clearly not entirely human, her human side is emphasised throughout *Splice*, and it is hinted that her humanity (and not her animalistic side) is the true basis of the demonic creature she eventually becomes. When noting Dren’s aggressive physical characteristics, such as her poisonous tail, Elsa is initially puzzled. None of the animals they spliced together to create the hybrid had predatory characteristics. To this, Clive replies: “Well, there’s the human element.” Likewise, in *Sweet Tooth* the juxtaposition of the half-animal children with the animalistic behaviour of the adult humans is central to the text’s
exploration of the borders between human and inhuman. In sharp contrast to the majority of the half-animal children, the human characters embody the “harsh and terrible world” (TitanBooks.com) beyond the woods where the story begins. In the post-apocalyptic world of *Sweet Tooth*, a group of humans has taken to running in packs, wielding spears and wearing animal masks. They are attempting to return to what they believe are their natural animal origins, in the belief that the half-animal nature of the post-plague children is some kind of sign, there to show “the way out of all this pain and sickness” (#14, p. 8). Their belief is that “soon the world will be returned to the animals... the innocents” (#28, p. 4). These images of humans as animals complicate the depictions of evil children in these texts.

Both *Splice* and *Sweet Tooth* feature animal-human hybrids created under ‘unnatural’ circumstances, and these unnatural births prove disastrous, but through the metaphor of childhood the reader is asked to identify with the hybrids, and ultimately to embrace otherness. *Splice* uses all the typical language and imagery of childbirth, combined with the narrative of genetics in a way that draws attention to the alien nature of birth and childhood itself. Once the animal-human hybrid has been artificially born, the original script for *Splice* goes out of its way to point out that its cries are “like the cry of a bawling baby” (Natali, Terry and Taylor 31), and when discussing whether to reveal Dren to the other scientists Elsa asks “Do you think they can look at this face and see anything less than a miracle?” These two married scientists, Elsa and Clive, act out a parody of motherhood and fatherhood as they create the hybrid, joking that their little creation is “one in a million”. Though unable to speak, a young Dren quickly masters the use of language in a limited way, writing out words in Scrabble letters and drawing pictures to make her desires and opinions known, and her intelligence and eagerness to learn makes Elsa proud and excited as well.

*Splice* illustrates the futurist potential of children and childhood, but also the danger that can result from these things being placed into the wrong hands—in this case, human ones. As Steffen Hantke asserts, “*Splice* is a film in which parenthood and family are not the solution but the problem” (109). The film invites us to read the child (even the monstrous child) as alien but innocent, corrupted only by human malice and hubris. This becomes explicitly clear in the repetition of two lines. The first line is introduced in a scene following the hybrid’s relocation from the lab to an abandoned barn, where Clive and Elsa are about to have sex. Clive, reacting to Elsa’s concerns earlier in the film about getting pregnant, asks whether they shouldn’t use protection, to which Elsa replies “what’s the worst that could happen?”. This is a reference to the fact that Elsa has already ‘given birth’ to Dren, and thus no longer fears reproduction, but also to
Elsa’s reckless pursuit of her own desires without thought of the ultimate consequences. At the end of the film we learn that Elsa is pregnant by Dren, and attempts to save the situation by salvaging genetic material from both Dren and her as-yet-unborn child, which she will carry to term and then presumably sell. As Elsa signs the contract with the research centre, a company representative reminds her that she does not have to go through with any of this if she doesn’t wish to. Elsa replies “What’s the worst that could happen?”, demonstrating that she has learnt nothing from her experience with Dren, and that this disaster might well happen all over again.

The second line that demonstrates how the actions of Elsa and Clive are responsible for Dren’s monstrous behaviour is also uttered by Elsa, who is attempting to make amends with Dren after unfairly and irrationally taking away her only friend—a cat. “You’re a part of me,” she says, “And I’m a part of you... I’m inside you. I’ll always be here for you. Always.” Though the sentiment expressed in these words is sweet, at this point in the film it is already clear that Elsa and Dren’s relationship is not healthy. Unable to connect with the adolescent Dren, Elsa reverts to calling her ‘it’ and ‘the subject’. Elsa becomes increasingly more domineering and abusive, eventually strapping Dren to a laboratory table and performing a brutal removal of her stinger. Elsa’s allegation that she is ‘inside’ of Dren thus comes across here as ominous and claustrophobic rather than kind, and this reading is reinforced at the very end of the film. After being shamed, brutalised and mutilated by Elsa, and then mistaken for dead, Dren undergoes a transformation into a vengeful male version of herself. Dren then attacks Elsa who, trapped and terrified, asks “What do you want?” In response, Dren utters his first words: “Inside you”. Dren then sexually assaults his creator ‘mother’ and murders Clive, before finally being killed by Elsa. In *Splice*, we see how ‘evil’ children are not born monstrous, but are made monstrous by humans (making the humans seem monstrous in turn). The repetition of these two lines reminds us that Dren’s fate was largely determined by the actions of Clive and Elsa. Dren starts out as a ‘miracle’ and a hope for a better future, but is quickly reduced to a monster and a mistake in the way she is viewed by her human parents.

“Why did you want to make her in the first place?” asks Clive upon discovering that Elsa has used her own DNA to create Dren. “For the betterment of mankind? You didn’t want an normal child because you were afraid of losing control. But an experiment. . . that’s something else.” *Splice* questions human motivations for procreation, addressing the fear that our children will become us—that if left unchecked, we will not revert to a base state of innocence, but rather to brutality and primal violence. It also hints that the harder we try to control the ‘natural’ progression of the future (in this case, in the form of the child) the quicker things will take a turn
for the worse. For example, Elsa rejects the idea of having children with her husband and research partner Clive. She states: “I don’t want to bend my life to suit a third party that doesn’t even exist yet. I want control over my life. You know how important that is for me” (Edwards). Despite this rejection of traditional maternal instincts, Elsa and Clive work together to create Dren by combining the DNA of multiple organisms, and this hybrid ‘child’ subsequently takes over their lives in a deeply sinister way. They neglect their work on other projects to care for Dren, leading to their experiments failing horribly, and they are forced to keep her existence a secret, leading to their estrangement from their friends and family and eventually their voluntary exile to an old abandoned barn.

_Sweet Tooth_ is a different kind of narrative altogether, though it shares many themes with _Splice_. Like Dren, Gus—nicknamed ‘sweet tooth’ because of his love of chocolate—is also depicted as a stereotypical, innocent child. The first ten issues of _Sweet Tooth_ are all from Gus’s perspective, and though Gus’s language is as naïve and unrefined as Gus himself, it is eloquent in its own direct and childlike way. In an interview, creator Jeff Lemire commented that “by his very nature [Gus] is completely innocent. There is nothing cynical about him. It’s hard not to root for him” (TitanBooks.com). Gus’s naïveté is emphasised to the point where it is almost parodic, but it nonetheless serves to engender the reader’s endearment from the very first pages. Of all the half-animal children in _Sweet Tooth_, not many seem to be intelligent enough to speak in the way that Gus can, but most have been abused and treated like animals since they were born. Of the handful that can speak, still fewer have had the luxury of an upbringing like Gus’s. Wendy, a half-pig girl that Gus meets at a testing facility, was taught to read and write by her mother, and is nearly as eloquent as Gus, leading the reader to believe that environment is the key factor in the other children’s muteness. As in _Splice_, the blame for all the violence and destruction in _Sweet Tooth_ is placed on the human characters. During the course of _Sweet Tooth_ it is also revealed that even the disease was not directly caused by the hybrid children. The outbreak of the apocalyptic disease was not caused by a genetic mutation, which coincidentally led to the birth of human-animal hybrids—instead, it was the creation of half-animal hybrids by reckless human scientists that led to the outbreak of the apocalyptic disease, and the subsequent mutant births.

In _Sweet Tooth_, the relationship between human and animal takes a slightly different form than it does in _Splice_, partly because each the half-animal children has two human parents. The implication is that the animal DNA must have come from the humans themselves. The existing similarities between animals and humans are also continually emphasised. For example, at one point early in the series, Gus’s protector Jeppard comments that Gus “should’a been born half
pig” (#3 p. 14) because of the way he eats, and the joke draws attention to the parallels we already draw between animal and human. The human characters often describe feeling like animals, as is the case where a woman named Lucy talks about being treated like an animal by the scientists and doctors who later took her half-animal child away (#18, p. 12). Gus is the most human-looking of the half-animal children, despite his antlers and oddly floppy ears. His facial features are all nearly human, though the wide spacing of his large eyes gives him a rather alien appearance. Though short on dialogue and exposition, *Sweet Tooth*’s powerful imagery does an equally good job of communicating its message to the reader as its written portions, using the characters’ eyes to give indications of humanity. Close-ups of the eyes are common in *Sweet Tooth*, perhaps because of their convenient connotation as ‘windows to the soul’. The book frequently displays Gus’s wide brown ‘doe eyes’, and the contrast between his intentionally sympathetic gaze and the eyes of other characters in the narrative is often telling. In a comic book in which the eyes play a vitally important role, it is naturally significant to note that Abbot, the head of the laboratory ‘preserve’, hides his eyes behind reflective sunglasses with blood-red lenses, and Johnny, Abbot’s younger brother, who tends to the children and later helps them escape, wears thick glasses that make his eyes seem unusually small. The leader of the animal gang is nearly always drawn as having one eye larger than the other (#16). Large eyes are often associated with children, whether in art or advertising campaigns, but are also common among cartoon animal characters (see Figure 1). This is something that *Sweet Tooth* often plays with, drawing yet another parallel between children and animals.

In *Sweet Tooth* and *Splice* alike, children are metaphorical figures standing for the two extremes of humanity, animalistic and civilised, and also for the two basic forces thought to shape human development, nature and nurture. Genetics are an important factor, as becomes especially

*Figure 1. Gus and the cartoon deer in his dreams look into each other’s eyes.*
clear through Dren’s predatory physical characteristics and Gus’s capacity for human speech, but both texts seem to argue that environment and upbringing trump biological predisposition. Edelman argues that the child “marks the fetishistic fixation of heteronormativity, an erotically charged investment in the rigid sameness of identity that is central to the compulsory nature of reproductive futurism” (Edelman 21). Evil children, however, are often depicted as the result of the heteronormative drive rather than its initiators. For example, at one point in Splice Elsa gives Dren a Barbie doll to play with, saying “Hi there. I’m Barbie. I like cute guys, fast cars and funny little creatures like you.” Between Elsa’s comparisons and the mirror in her room, Dren quickly discovers that she does not fit the model of a typical human girl at all, and in a moment of mute frustration she smashes the mirror with the doll. Like Frankenstein’s monster, Dren’s transformation into a killer only comes after she is rejected by the society to which she does not conform.

In Sweet Tooth, a great deal of emphasis is placed on the idea that we are shaped by how other beings see us. All of the characters in the comic see Gus as they want to see him, whether this is as an animal, human boy, messiah, or avenging demon (see Figure 2). That Gus can be all of these things and more is a testament to the power of the story, but also to the symbolism of the child. Edelman states that “the cult of the Child permits no shrines to the queerness of boys and girls, since queerness […] is understood as bringing children and childhood to an end” (Edelman 19), but as we have seen, this is not necessarily the case with hybrid children in 21st-century popular culture. Both Dren and the half-animal children in Sweet Tooth are queer, other, and even ‘evil’ in many senses of the word, but are still able to elicit the reader’s sympathy in a moment of self-identification as real as that inspired by idealised children. Whether the half-animal, half-human nature of hybrid children causes readers to identify something of themselves in the animal
other or to recognise the potentially animalistic side of human nature, in texts like *Splice* and *Sweet Tooth* the absence of such clearly-defined borders between ‘self’ and ‘other’ make a normative reading of the child difficult. Now that we have demonstrated that there is space for difference and queerness in interpreting the figure of the child, we can begin to explore ways of looking at the child that do not lead to an exclusive kind of reproductive futurism.
3 Post-Apocalyptic Reading
Revising Reproductive Futurism and the Cult of Childhood

In this chapter, I will examine texts that re-write the figure of the child in ways that allow both children and the future to remain central, while still allowing room for queer and marginal readings. One might argue that due to the place of the child as a symbol in 21st-century culture, all texts centering on children contain a futurist impulse, whether or not this impulse is explicit in the text itself. In my view, there is a way to reject reproductive futurism without rejecting either the future or the child. To illustrate my point and offer an alternative to anti-futurist perspectives, I will examine two apocalyptic works of fiction. In each of the two texts, humanity is doomed to extinction because all members of the species are incapable of reproduction.

The uses of the child and the uses of apocalypse in popular culture are very similar, in that both help us to redefine the present by imagining the future. In the first text, P. D. James’s *The Children of Men* (1992), the removal of children from the narrative also removes the future, revealing humanity’s literal and symbolic dependence on children for that future. This novel spawned a 2006 film adaptation: Alfonso Cuarón’s 2006 film *Children of Men*, which is loosely based on James novel but draws more explicit link between children and mainstream identities. As other scholars argue, to a certain degree these texts further a radical pro-life viewpoint, advocating reproductive futurism and excluding marginal identities by affiliation. I will demonstrate how an alternative reading is also possible, in which the link between children and the future is not normative or self-replicating, and in which children can be read as symbols of hope for readers of all identities, marginal and mainstream alike. The second text I will examine is Octavia Butler’s *Xenogenesis* trilogy. In this series of (post-)apocalyptic novels, the human race has already destroyed itself once, and been sterilised to stop this from happening again. In *Xenogenesis*, the future will not be a human future: humanity’s only hope of survival is to mate
with the race of aliens that saved them, and their children will be half-alien hybrids. This text invites us to think of the future as a place of difference, belonging to the other. In *Xenogenesis*, it is only by embracing this difference (and these strange children) that humanity will survive at all. This text is an example of a narrative that focuses almost entirely on the child as a futurist symbol, but does so in a way that allows for the participation of marginalised groups in its shaping and retelling.

Because both of these examples question the meaning of generations as well as the symbolism of childhood, it is useful to refer to some of the key ideas and terminology of sociologists such as Karl Mannheim, Shmuel Eisenstadt, and Matilda Riley et al. These scholars explore concepts of age and generations in great detail, and help clarify the link between an understanding of children and childhood and the ability to shape the future. As Eisenstadt states, “[a]ge and differences of age are among the most basic and crucial aspects of human life and determinants of human agency” (21), and as Riley et al point out, “age stratification, like divisions based on class or sex or race, for example, is essential for understanding important aspects of social structure and social change” (Riley, Johnson and Foner 452). Any discussion of the child (and whether or not a future must be held in trust for it) should consider these essential factors of age and generation.

It is inevitable that children will be a part of the future. As Mannheim argues, new generations in the form of children are crucial in the continual change and renewal of human culture and society. He writes that “with the advent of the new participant in the process of culture, the change of attitude takes place in a different individual whose attitude towards the heritage handed down by his predecessors is a novel one” (Mannheim 384). Without this new perspective society would stagnate, and it is the current generation's task to pass on the present (and the future) to the next generation. I argue that questions regarding the function of the symbolic child can be answered not by rejecting the future entirely, but rather by becoming more aware of the narratives and systems underlying our entire conception of age, generations, and individual identity. The more we know about and understand these things, the more we will be able to shape and re-write them.

Our project as scholars, as well as the project of marginalised groups, must thus becomes one of ‘revisionist mythmaking’ rather than apocalyptic anti-futurism. Anne Ostriker writes that whenever a writer “employs a figure or story previously accepted and defined by a culture, [the writer] is using myth, and the potential is always present that the use will be revisionist: that is, the figure or tale will be appropriated for altered ends” (72). Though originally a term from
feminist and gender theory, revisionist mythmaking is equally effective when considering narratives of the child. Whenever writers make use of the figure of the child, they are potentially adding to or altering the way that figure is perceived by the mainstream reader and opening new possibilities for revision. Writers depicting evil children are potentially engaged in revisionist mythmaking, but so are scholars studying the normative or subversive potential of children. As fairy tale scholar Derek Brewer points out, “just as every retelling is an interpretation, so every interpretation becomes a retelling” (25).

‘I Am Alive’: The Children of Men and the Pro-Life Problem

The Children of Men is a 1992 novel by P. D. James. Set in England in 2021, it depicts a world in which humanity faces imminent extinction as the result of mass infertility. Special privileges are accorded to members of the youngest generation, and the elderly are expected either to fend for themselves, or participate in mass suicide rituals at the age of 60. The totalitarian government enforces mandatory fertility testing and restricts personal liberties, on the basis of guaranteeing “freedom from fear, freedom from want, freedom from boredom. The other freedoms are pointless without freedom from fear” (P. D. James 98). In the novel, the cultural and political effects of this infertility are apathy, complacency, and resigned hopelessness. Some characters even express contentment with the way things have worked out in a very anti-futurist fashion. Jasper, former tutor of the protagonist Theo, pessimistically states:

On the whole, I’m glad; you can’t mourn for unborn grandchildren when there never was a hope of them. This planet is doomed anyway [...] If man is doomed to perish, then universal infertility is as painless a way as any. And there are, after all, personal compensations. For the last sixty years we have sycophantically pandered to the most ignorant, the most criminal and the most selfish section of society. Now, for the rest of our lives, we’re going to be spared the intrusive barbarism of the young, their noise, their pounding, repetitive, computer-produced so-called music, their violence, their egotism disguised as idealism. My God, we might even succeed in getting rid of Christmas, that annual celebration of parental guilt and juvenile greed. I intend that my life shall be comfortable, and, when it no longer is, then I shall wash down my final pill with a bottle of claret. (P. D. James 45)

In other words, once children are no longer a consideration, people can get down to doing what they want to do rather than what they have to do to insure a bright future for the next, ultimately ungrateful generation. The novel often problematises the categories of youth and childhood in themselves in this wry, sarcastic fashion. The message the reader takes away from the above quote is not that we should do away with the future (and with all children) because the selfish
individual will be better off. Instead, the reader is reminded that despite the disdain the old stereotypically display for the young, children are vital figures in contemporary culture.

Additionally, without them the future (and thus the present) is meaningless, because there will be no future.

Lee Edelman uses the powerful symbolism of the child in *The Children of Men* to embark on an analysis of children in contemporary society. He takes Theodore Faron’s words in *The Children of Men* at face value: “Without the hope of posterity, for our race if not for ourselves, without the assurance that we being dead yet live, all pleasures of the mind and senses sometimes seem to me no more than pathetic and crumbling defences shored up against our ruins” (P. D. James 13). According to Edelman, this quote, as well as a later passage in which Faron remarks that “sex totally divorced from procreation has become almost meaninglessly acrobatic” (167), represents a direct link between heterosexual reproduction and the continuation of the future. This excludes the homosexual reader, but also the infertile or celibate reader, suggesting that because they do not reproduce ‘naturally’, there is no place for them in the future. It also contributes to a certain political discourse in which granting rights and voice to marginalised figures like homosexuals is depicted as a danger to the very fabric of society. He states: “there are no queers in that future as there can be no future for queers, chosen as they are to bear the bad tidings that there can be no future at all: that the future, as Annie’s hymn to the hope of ‘Tomorrow’ understands, is ‘always/A day/Away’” (Edelman 30, original emphasis). By failing to create children in the ‘natural’ way, Edelman argues, these marginal figures are not only painted as being the enemies of children, but enemies of the future itself. According to Edelman, because of this transposition of the symbolic child onto the future by the mainstream, to do anything other than reject the symbols of the future and the child entirely would be to deny these marginal groups a place in the real present and future. For this reason, we must take a stand against the symbolic child, and against the future—“the Child as futurity’s emblem must die” (31). As a solution Edelman quotes queer theorist Guy Hocquenghem, who proposes a politics that “is unaware of the passing of generations as stages on the road to better living. It knows nothing about ‘sacrifice now for the sake of future generations’” (Hocquenghem 147). In other words, we must not build our society on the basis of a better future, but must instead focus only on the here and now, rejecting the symbolism of the child, as well as the future held in trust for it.

Edelman’s reading of *The Children of Men* is insightful, but it fails to take into account several key factors that transform *The Children of Men* from a text that openly advocates reproductive futurism into one that warns against it. To demonstrate, it is useful to compare *The
Children of Men to its 2006 film adaptation, which takes several liberties with James's original that help clarify my point. For example, the film is able to make use of certain audio-visual techniques to make certain aspects of the story more explicit. At several points in the film we hear a high-pitched ringing sound, which is explained as the result of the viewer witnessing an explosion, gunfire, or another destructive act from Theo's perspective. Julian explains to Theo that it's "the sound of the ear cells dying. Like their swan song. Once it's gone, you'll never hear that frequency again." The audience is invited to experience this swan song with Theo, and to connect it both to death in general, and to the death of humanity as a whole, as they watch the needless acts of violence that are committed in the name of childlessness. At the very end of the film, as Theo dies and the ship Tomorrow appears through the mist, the last sound we hear is the high-pitched wailing of baby Dylan, and the credits roll to the noises of children laughing and playing. After the events of the film, it is certainly not a stretch to read these sounds as the resounding swan song of humanity itself.

Cuarón's film adaptation also imagines humanity's reaction to mass infertility much more radically than does James's original. As Heather Latimer argues in a 2011 article on the film's politics of "bio-reproductive futurism", "in the film infertility, if not directly leading to, has certainly played a considerable part in the spread of world war, facism, and terrorism" (52). In the film, the world is transformed into a war zone, and the revolutionary Fishes organisation (which only has five largely compassionate and idealistic members in the novel) becomes a violent, sprawling network. The violent decline of humanity is thus directly linked to the inability to reproduce in the traditional, heterosexual way—far more so than in the novel, in which it is clear that society's apathy and complacency were already a problem long before infertility deepened them. Additionally, questions of artificial or aided reproduction are never really taken into consideration in the film, which is odd considering that here it is not the egg or the sperm that is defective (as is the case in the novel), but simply the mother's ability to carry a baby to term.

Several additional differences between the film and the novel make the film's more radical futurist position abundantly clear. Firstly, in Cuarón's adaptation, the character of Julian Taylor, the white, middle class activist who unexpectedly becomes pregnant in the novel, is replaced by Kee, the West African refugee who becomes pregnant in the film. In the film, the character of Julian becomes the former love interest of Theo, the protagonist, and it is revealed that Julian and Theo had a son together, who died young. This change allows for the creation of a narrative not present in the James text, in which Theo's quest to save Kee and her baby becomes a symbolic gesture to restore the family that Theo lost. This means that the (hetero)normativity Edelman
sees so strongly in James’s novel has an even stronger presence in the film. In her article “(Re)Conceiving the Surrogate: Maternity, Race, and Reproductive Technologies in Alfonso Cuarón’s *Children of Men*," Sayantani DasGupta sees the same symbolism, and goes so far as to state that when Kee names her baby Dylan after Theo’s lost son at the end of the film, the idea of “the white, happy, heterosexual family unit is saved, as the (live) Black female child is symbolically transformed into the (dead) White male one” (195). In DasGupta’s reading of the film, not only does the substitution of Kee for Julian reinforce exclusionary politics of gender and sexual orientation, but also of race.

Clearly, Cuarón’s film takes reproductive futurism to a new level, explicitly linking the future to the nuclear family and the child—or fetus. Cuarón’s film supports some of the more radical statements and rhetoric made by the same American pro-life movement that Edelman rejects, something that already becomes clear from one of the film’s promotional posters, in which a perfectly-formed fetus floats freely in a glowing orb against a black background, independent of the womb that presumably contains it. Accompanying this image is the text “In 20 years, women are infertile. No Children. No Future. No Hope. But all that can change in a heartbeat”, which not only equates hope for the future with the heartbeat of a fetus, but also, as Heather Latimer suggests in her article on the film’s politics of ‘bio-reproductive futurism’, “the degree to which pro-life discourse has so saturated public thinking about the fetus as to now set the terms of that discourse” (Latimer 61). People who see this poster must actively remind themselves that a free-floating ‘fetal subject’ does not actually exist in such a form in the real world, entitled to all the rights of independent individuals.

The film also actively engages with a conservative, pro-life symbolism of the child at the narrative level, painting the fetus (and the child by extension) as “the natural inspiration, if not the solution, to a world of terrorism, despair, and fascism” (Latimer 65). Other than Kee’s brief consideration of suicide before Theo meets her in the film, throughout the story no one questions that the birth of her child will be a positive thing. This is once again in contrast to the novel, in which James raises concerns about what will happen to mother and child if it turns out that the pregnancy is an accident, and is impossible to duplicate. Instead, pregnancy is portrayed here as a universal joy, and Theo’s friend Jasper, so ambivalent in James’s novel, tells Kee: “Your

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8 For an excellent analysis of American anti-abortion politics and rhetoric, see Barbara Johnson, “Apostrophe, Animation, and Abortion,” *A World of Difference* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987). Edelman also gives her glowing praise, stating that “in a dazzling analysis of anti-abortion polemics like this, [Johnson] has demonstrated how they borrow and generate tropes that effectively animate by personifying the fetus, determining in advance the answer to the juridical question of its personhood by means of the terms through which the fetus, and therefore the question, is addressed” (Edelman 15)
baby is the miracle the whole world has been waiting for”. At one point Kee relays to Theo how her pregnancy imbues her with a higher purpose, stating: “Then the baby kicked. I feel it. Little bastard was alive, and I feel it. And me, too. I am alive”.

Latimer neatly links Kee’s pro-life attitude to Edelman’s argument about how the child is the single figure worth protecting politically and legally, stating that “Kee’s reproductive function in the film is to facilitate futurity; it therefore matters little what she thinks or has to say, or what happens to her, as the focus is her future child and futurity itself” (Latimer 66). Though several characters insist on telling Kee things like “This is your decision” when discussing the future of her fetus, their dismissive actions and reactions to her decisions always prove otherwise, and become eerily similar to the proclamations of the quietly insistent ads for a brand of suicide pill called Quietus, which read: “It’s your life. It’s your choice.” This use of a phrase commonly associated with anti-abortion (or ‘pro-choice’) groups for what, in the film, is a grim euthanising agent, also draws parallels between the advocation of abortion and the taking of an adult human life, something that is not as straightforward as the film suggests.

Crucially, an element missing from the film is the character of Xan, Theo’s cousin, who is the dictator of the novel’s totalitarian Britain. He makes a very brief appearance in the film, but plays a much larger role in the novel. Though this character, James explores how tyrants arise, and how power comes to be accumulated and abused. “Man has no hope of reproducing himself if he doesn’t copulate” says Xan, “Once that goes totally out of fashion we are lost” (P. D. James 103). Xan himself uses reproductive futurism combined with the threat of dissolution of order to gain power, and later to condone the forced indentured servitude of immigrants and encourage the suicide of the elderly. He also insists to Theo that he is not “a tyrant”, but that “[w]hatever is necessary to do, I shall do” (104). It is hinted that Xan’s motivations for promoting the child at the expense of personal happiness might be related to his poor relationship with his father, who was gay, and married his mother purely out of a sense of respectability (103). In any case, he plans to use Julian’s baby to strengthen his policies, and deepen his already-firm hold on England.

When Theo asks Xan, who was once uninterested in politics, why he became England’s ruler, Xan answers: “At first because I thought I’d enjoy it [....] I could never bear to watch someone doing badly what I knew I could do well” (101). When asked why he continues to rule even when the enjoyment of power has faded, Xan replies, “Have you ever known anyone to give up power, real power?” (101). Theo understands the deeper implications of this question, and relates its lesson to the group of resisters that hopes to overthrow Xan and his tyrannical government. “If you did succeed,” Theo says, “what an intoxication of power!” (108). At the end
of the novel, when Xan is killed and Theo presumably takes his place as ruler of England, these words remain with us, ambiguous. As P.D. James said in an interview marking the novel’s release, “[t]he detective novel affirms our belief in a rational universe because, at the end, the mystery is solved. In The Children of Men there is no such comforting resolution” (C. James). Far from promoting reproductive futurism, The Children of Men shows the danger the symbolic child can represent when used in the wrong way, and with the wrong intentions. It reveals that the real evil is complacency and lack of vigilance in the face of intoxicating power.

Not even the film adaptation is as entirely unambiguous as it is typically read. According to Latimer, the film’s reliance on reproductive futurism is the reason it can make sense despite its ambiguous ending, where Theo dies before Kee is delivered to the Human Project, and before we see who and what the Human Project actually is (or whether they even exist). She cites Cuarón’s argument that Theo “doesn’t need to see the Promised Land. He recovered what he was looking for, which was his sense of hope. And as long as you have that sense of hope, then you do not need confirmation of things” (Roberts). In Latimer’s words, through “the story line’s reproductive futurism, the film accesses a nostalgia for the future that creates its own fulfillment, as futurity, hope, and the sanctity of heterosexual reproduction are reinstated” (68). She argues that the open ending of Children of Men is irrelevant, because in metaphorically saving the nuclear family, humanity is effectively saved as well.

At the end of Children of Men, as in James’s novel, the viewer is allowed to conclude what they want to conclude. There is no evidence in the film to suggest that anything is restored through the birth of Dylan aside from Theo’s sense of hope. In fact, there are many hints to the contrary. It is optimistic to assume that the Human Project will be able to offer any answers to the world’s infertility problem, or that there will be anything left of the world for these children to inherit. The most adamant supporters of the Human Project are the militant Fishes, most of whom betray Theo and Kee. Children of Men also makes clear that the world is in a state of chaos. London is apparently one of the most civilised places left on earth, and in one of the film’s first scenes a terrorist detonates a bomb in a crowded café, killing the people inside and throwing yet more rubble onto the already-cluttered streets. Finally, very early in the film, Theo speculates on the existence of the Human Project, and whether or not it matters, saying “You know, even if these people existed, with these facilities in secret locations [...] even if they discovered the cure for infertility... doesn’t matter. Too late. The world went to shit. You know what? It was too late before the infertility thing happened, for fuck’s sake” (Cuarón).
The statement that texts like *The Children of Men* use children as symbols of reproductive futurism is thus not as straightforward as it might seem. When we see the difference between the portrayal of the child in the novel and its film adaptation, it becomes clear that the novel (and in some ways the film as well) actually shows how children are wrongly used to justify the totalitarian, exclusionary society that Edelman also rejects. In *The Children of Men*, the link between children and the future is not normative or self-replicating. Instead, it suggests that a world without children (and without a future) is potentially not very different from our own if we continue to use the child as an excuse to abuse, deceive, and oppress others.

**Saving the Future: Xenogenesis and Revisionist Mythmaking**

Octavia Butler’s *Xenogenesis* series of novels was first published in three parts as *Dawn* (1987), *Adulthood Rites* (1988), and *Imago* (1989). In this trilogy, Butler uses a post-apocalyptic future to revise and rewrite humanity’s past, “transforming our own present into the determinate past of something yet to come” (Jameson “Progress Versus Utopia; or, Can We Imagine the Future?” 152). In other words, she makes our present into the origin story of the future. Origin stories, like futurism, are potentially limiting to marginalised groups—Michel Foucault cautions against the ‘pursuit of origin’ in a way that recalls Edelman’s argument in *No Future*, defining it as “an attempt to capture the exact essence of things, their purest possibilities, and their carefully protected identities”, and thereby assuming “the existence of immobile forms that precede the external world of accident and succession” (Foucault 78). For Foucault, the symbol of the Original is just as potentially dangerous as the symbol of the child is for Edelman because, as with reproductive futurism, looking to the distant past requires suppositions about the present that may be incorrect or exclusionary. *Xenogenesis* offers readers an origin story in a futurist world (or perhaps simply a world with a future), where the figure of the child is central to that future, but does not reproduce the same normative systems or shut out difference. In doing so, it provides a model for imagining a future in which everyone can participate.

Critics like Hoda M. Zaki read *Xenogenesis* as dystopian and essentialist, arguing it reflects Butler’s belief that “human nature is a biologically-determined entity” (Zaki 241). Zaki states that the way the trilogy represents “unmediated connections between biology and behaviour” mean that “Butler believes that human nature is fundamentally violent,” and that xenophobia is “innate” (242). There is no denying that many of the events and ideologies in the

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9 This science fiction trilogy was also re-published under the title *Lilith’s Brood* in 2000 after the original *Xenogenesis* collection went out of print.
trilogy are dystopian, but as Cathy Peppers points out in her influential essay “Dialogue Origins and Alien Identities in Butler’s Xenogenesis”, traditional origin stories often “reproduce the logics of domination by positing ‘natural, original’ gender and race differences”, though at the same time, if used to “denaturalize the dominant accounts,” can “partake of the enabling power that marks all discourse about origins” (Peppers 48). It is precisely the juxtaposition of this stereotypical story of ‘human nature’ with the alien origin narrative of the Oankali that allows Butler to keep both the narratives of biology and spirit, nature and nurture, side-by-side.

Xenogenesis does something unusual with the traditional origin story, in that in this case, the narrative is set in the future, and not in the distant past. In the words of Jim Miller, Xenogenesis is a dystopia “motivated out of a utopian pessimism in that [it forces] us to confront the dystopian elements of postmodern culture so that we can work through them and begin again” (Miller 337). The trilogy begins when a woman named Lillith (named after a character from Biblical mythology who gave birth to demons) awakens aboard a spaceship to learn that Earth has been rendered uninhabitable following a terrible war between the United States and Russia. Xenogenesis details the history of the human race’s near extinction and subsequent contact with a race of aliens called the Oankali, a term Naomi Jacobs ominously notes “recalls the Hindu goddess Kali, emblem of creative destruction; adorned with skulls and dancing upon dead children” (Jacobs 96). In one sense, this association is proven accurate, because the Oankali have disturbing plans for humanity.

The Oankali are an intelligent and powerful race of biological traders, who continue their species by merging with other species. Their plan is to produce a race of human-Oankali hybrid children, meaning that in a sense the human race will carry on, but in a very real way these children will not be human—their “hierarchical tendencies will be modified” (Butler 42), and they will have male and female Oankali parents in addition to human ones. The Oankali will eventually allow humans return to Earth, but those who choose not to reproduce with the Oankali will be sterilised. There is no alternative—having already saved the human race from extinction once, the Oankali effectively see allowing humans to reproduce human children and human biology as assisted suicide, something their life-worshipping culture does not allow. They are capable of sensing things at the genetic level, and are “powerfully acquisitive” (41). The Oankali have a special organ for storing the new biological information they encounter, and are driven to seek out difference and join with it by their very nature. Though this boldly exploratory nature might seem to readers like something the Oankali share with the humans, the books make this very clear that where the Oankali embrace difference, humans reject and fear it.
The premise that drives the *Xenogenesis* trilogy is that society and humanity as a species might eventually survive, but only if they give up an essential part of what makes them human—namely either intelligence or, preferably, hierarchical behaviour. The Oankali call this combination of traits in human nature the Human Contradiction, and perceive it as a fatal flaw. They describe it as a “mismatched pair of genetic characteristics” of which either alone “would have been useful, would have aided the survival of your species. But the two together are lethal. It was only a matter of time before they destroyed you” (Butler 38). This contradiction first repels the Oankali, much as the bodies and ideology of the Oankali continue to repel the humans in *Xenogenesis*. After the initial shock, however, this extreme difference between the hierarchical humans and the consensus-based Oankali makes humanity biologically irresistible—“frightening and seductive [...] Deadly and compelling” (257).

In a number of ways the trilogy subverts traditional notions of reproduction, sexuality, and childhood, without rejecting any of them entirely. Each of the three books in the *Xenogenesis* trilogy explores different perspectives on children and the vision of the future they inspire. In *Dawn*, the first book, this vision is largely one of horror, as humans resistant to the extreme otherness of the Oankali try to come to terms with the idea that they will have to reproduce with creatures they find cruel, oppressive, and physically revolting. The idea of ‘different’ or ‘monstrous’ children repulses them, as does the idea that their children will not share this aversion to what they so strongly perceive as alien. Unable to identify with their own offspring, the symbolic power of the child for futurist ends will be lost, because these children will not represent a human future.

The theme of alternately embracing or rejecting difference is something the *Xenogenesis* trilogy also considers extensively in its second book, *Adulthood Rites*. This book tells the continuing story of humanity’s rehabilitation from a different perspective: that of Akin, Lillith’s half-alien infant son, who is the book’s narrator. Riley et al describe how in a normal society a “sense of trust (or of distrust) of others will later become entwined with the child’s emerging sense of self” (467). This trust (or distrust) is valid because, as renowned scholar of psychology James Baldwin notes, ‘self’ and ‘other’ are “born together” (Baldwin 15), meaning that as we come to know ourselves, we also understand ourselves as different from ‘others’. In *Xenogenesis* self and other share one body in the hybrid children of the humans and Oankali. As the Oankali describe it, these children are “Different... Not quite like you. A little like us” (Butler 44). As Cathy Peppers puts it, Lillith gives birth “to herself as other” (Peppers 47). Akin wavers between
the Oankali embrace of otherness and human distrust of difference. He is alien to both his family, and to the human resisters living outside the Oankali camps.

Early in the novel Akin is kidnapped by the human resisters, who cannot have children of their own. At first he is appealing to the humans because of his outwardly human appearance, but they quickly discover his physical and mental differences, abusing him for them. In the end, though, Akin is able to come to terms with both sides of his heritage, and when he becomes an adult he even convinces the Oankali that humans should be allowed to start over anew on a terraformed Mars, and have human children—despite the biological likelihood that they will only destroy themselves. In this way Akin, a half-alien hybrid, metaphorically becomes humanity’s future, giving them the chance for human children on Mars. The hope is that humans will have learned from this encounter with themselves and with the Oankali, and that they will follow Akin’s own example, putting aside their differences and hierarchical natures to help humanity move beyond its genetic contradiction. As Akin makes clear to them, this is their only chance of survival. Here Xenogenesis juxtaposes two seemingly contradictory narratives, the story of the human spirit and the story of human biology, weaving them together without forcing the reader to choose between the two. By leaving both options open, Butler creates a space for difference in the novels, both literally and interpretively.

When read in the light of the Xenogenesis trilogy, Edelman’s allegations about the place of the child in The Children of Men are very relatable to the statements of the human resisters in the novels, who exclaim: “We don’t get old. We don’t have kids. Nothing we do means shit” (Butler 402). These resisters are also unwilling to accept the future that the Oankali, the very literally pro-life force in the novels, are offering them. “Who would, after all, come out for abortion or stand against reproduction, against futurity, and so against life?” asks Edelman (16, original emphasis). The resisters in Adulthood Rites, for one, who refuse to have children unless they will be human children—the hybrid offspring of Lillith and the other Oankali ‘collaborators’ are unacceptable alternatives. Instead, they would rather resign themselves to no future at all. The Xenogenesis trilogy depicts this as a highly individualistic and ultimately very naive way of thinking.

Imago, the third and final novel in the series, is the culmination of the themes that run through the rest of the trilogy, and it also heavily incorporates these questions of individuality versus community. In entomology, the word ‘imago’ refers to the adult phase of an insect’s life, and the word is also a term used in Jungian psychology to describe a way that people form their personality by identifying with the collective unconscious. Both meanings of the term are very
indicative of how the novel envisions the ultimate future of humanity. The term ‘xenogenesis’ means “the production of offspring different from either of its parents” (Peppers 47), and Jodahs, the first-person narrator of *Imago*, is certainly very different from both its Oankali parents and its human ones.\(^\text{10}\) It is most different from its human parents in that it represents the third Oankali gender, called ooloi—the gender most feared by both races. Ooloi are feared by the humans because they are both the most alien and the most powerful, and the Oankali fear construct ooloi like Jodahs because they represent a new and uncertain evolutionary step, capable of creating wonderful things, but also of destruction on a grand scale.

At first, it seems as though the Oankali fears about the construct ooloi are correct. Once Jodahs enters puberty, it must leave the village because it keeps accidentally making people sick. Crucially, as it develops Jodahs discovers that unlike any of its parents, it physically needs to be in the presence of other beings; to interact with and learn from them. When it does, it takes on the form of those it is near. In *Imago* Jodahs often changes its outward appearance from male to female, human to inhuman, black to white. When separated from people, on the other hand, Jodahs loses its form. At one point Jodahs grows webbed feet and scales after an extended period away from its family, almost losing itself entirely. Jodahs is literally dependent on others, as many (and as preferably as different) as possible, to define itself. Through others, Jodahs also learns to control its abilities, and becomes capable of amazing things its parents could never have imagined. At the end of *Imago*, and of the *Xenogenesis* trilogy, we are shown a world in which human and alien live in harmony, and where someday soon a new hybrid version of humanity will leave Earth, seeking a future of exploration and discovery among the stars.

As in *The Children of Men*, the ending of *Xenogenesis* is open for interpretation. On the one hand we have the narrative of the human remnant, beginning anew on Mars with human children in an existence that will likely (but not certainly) end in destruction. On the other hand we have the narrative of Jodahs and the other hybrid children, constantly exploring and changing like their Oankali parents, while also retaining the very best of what they have learnt from their human parents. To most readers, the hybrid future is the clear preference, though at the same time it seems more likely that real-world humanity will continue on the more destructive path of the human resisters. This is where *Xenogenesis* subverts the reproduction of a normative future. After showing us several possible futures to our real and current present (as well as working through the most likely future), *Xenogenesis* shows us a better future—all through discussions of

\(^\text{10}\) Throughout *Imago*, Butler uses the pronoun ‘it’ to refer to Jodahs because it does not fit into the category of male or female. The same tactic will be used throughout this thesis.
the child. This better future is made possible by consciously choosing difference, for our children and ourselves, but enacted through consensus rather than negating individuality.

In the ideal future Xenogenesis proposes, everyone has the right to (re)produce their own future. It marks a return to what Marcuse once called the utopian imagination, characterised by Jameson as “the imagination of otherness and radical difference” (Archaeologies 289). The stories a culture tells itself about the possible future can be vitally important in creating the actual future, and a good way to create space for otherness in the actual present is by imagining a space for it in the virtual future. As Jameson puts it:

Utopian form is itself a representational meditation on radical difference, radical otherness, and on the systemic nature of the social totality, to the point where one cannot imagine any fundamental change in our social existence which has not first thrown off Utopian visions like so many sparks from a comet (Archaeologies xii).

When such texts combine this utopian impulse with the symbolism of childhood, they still invite us to create the present by imagining the future, but in these texts the future and the child are one and the same. This symbolism can lead to reproductive futurism and the replication of a mainstream ideal, but it can also create space for the consideration of marginal identities, and endless possibilities for imagining difference. Xenogenesis calls for a queer Utopia, where a recognition of the self in the other and a belief in a better future might eventually bring that future to life. In one sense is an apocalyptic narrative, a dystopia, but because the story does not stop with the death of the human, the reader is instead invited to read it as something Tom Moylan calls “critical dystopia”. In a critical dystopia, the hope of escape from the dystopic world of the text exists within the text itself, often in the form of “figures of hope” that contribute to “the open space of opposition” (Baccolini and Moylan 14)—represented in Xenogenesis by the hybrid children. In effect, this transforms the narrative into a kind of utopia, “motivated out of a utopian pessimism in that [it forces] us to confront the dystopian elements of postmodern culture so that we can work through them and begin again” (Miller 337). Crucially, it is only by working through our problems (rather than denying or ignoring them) that we can actually solve them.

While this ideal future may be no more than a false utopia, it is still vitally important to create and consider such alternative futures. Cathy Peppers states that “the kinds of identities we can imagine are dependent on the kinds of origin stories we can tell” (9), and one could also argue that the kinds of identities we can imagine are dependent on the kinds of children we can imagine and accept. We inevitably define ourselves in relation to the generation that came before.
us, and the imagined generation that will follow. This does not need to be restrictive, unless we
assume that past generations and future generations will be like us, and that we are capable of
speaking for them directly. This also does not mean that representations of the child need to be
entirely alien—after all, “What could constitute a discourse entirely (of the) other?” (Berger 13).
The ‘normal’ always defines the abnormal, though what we define as ‘normal’ is constantly in flux.
We cannot describe or understand something we know nothing of, and attempts to do so quickly
come self-defeating. We as readers must simply be careful that our focus on the self does not
limit our interpretations of other, a category into which the child also falls.

As Andrew Gibson points out in his book *Towards a Postmodern Theory of Narrative*, “if
power increasingly determines interiority and individuality and seeks to attach all singularity to
known and recognised identities, the thought of monstrosity is a liberating thought. It affirms the
right to difference and variation, the possibility of becoming other” (271). By this he means that
recognising and accepting otherness in ourselves is the first step in initiating change in both
present and future. As long as we are capable of envisioning ourselves as monstrous or aberrant,
we are capable of transcending ourselves and the boundaries imposed on those selves by systems
of power. We can all potentially become enabled readers (and agents of change), if only we
remain open to otherness in ourselves and the world around us.
Images of otherness are as old as literature, and though images of childhood, particularly in association with otherness, do not extend back quite so far, this history still plays a key role in our contemporary view of the child. Even the examples of children in popular fiction presented in this thesis are deeply rooted in literary and historical tradition. Representations of children and childhood in culture are rarely straightforward, but a dialogue on the extent to which our view of childhood is socially constructed is relatively new. In 1962, Philippe Ariès’s groundbreaking *Centuries of Childhood: A Social History of Family Life* was one of the first critical works to assert that not only have we viewed children in different ways throughout history, but the essential experience of childhood has not always been the same as it is now. Several years before this, Peter Coveney published the first edition of what would later become *The Image of Childhood*, a study of changing depictions of the child in modern (post-Romantic) literature in which he contrasts the “cult of sensibility” and images of the “romantic child” (37).

Hybrid children also represent two images of the child in conflict. On the one hand we have the popular perception of the child as innocent and inherently good, and on the other hand we also find the view of the child as alien and inherently bestial. Both of these images can be found far back in history. From Erasmus, who emphasised the need to educate the child and the role of the family unit in doing so, to Locke and Rosseau, and finally to Wordsworth, who, we can easily trace images of the innocent child. Running counter to this Romantic ideology of childhood is the view of the child as a smaller, less civilised adult. In the 16th and 17th centuries this view of the child can most prominently be found in Protestant and Puritan literature,

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11 For an excellent overview of Western perceptions of the child, see Hugh Cunningham, *Children and Childhood in Western Society since 1500* (New York: Longman Group Limited, 1995).
stemming from an emphasis on original sin. In the 18th and 19th centuries, this view was
complemented and eventually replaced by criticism of the child’s growing economic power, and
a Darwinian view of the child as savage or primitive. Here, as well, the idea of the child as a being
separate from the adult—classless, genderless, and apolitical—reached its height.

In any case, as we can see from examples of hybrid children like those in *Splice* and *Sweet Tooth*, the interplay between these two conflicting images of the child in contemporary Western
society opens new possibilities for queer readings of children and childhood. This in turn allows
us to re-examine our definitions of ourselves, and to question our claim on either the present or
the future. Some texts, like *The Children of Men*, are open to multiple readings of the symbolism
of the child, some more subversive than others. As both *The Children of Men* and *Xenogenesis*
make clear, however, a rejection of the normative symbolism of children, embodied in
reproductive futurism, need not equal the rejection of the child or of the future entirely. Instead,
we as readers and critics must continuously interpret and re-write our own narratives about
childhood, and when given the choice, we should encourage a reading that embraces otherness.
A normative reading only reproduces more of the same, and reinforces potentially exclusionary
structures of power.

There are many opportunities to explore the two conflicting views of children and the
symbolism of children (and potentially to contest these things) through future research into the
image of the child in popular culture. Not only is more research into the different manifestations
of the evil child in literature and other media needed, but a re-analysis of typical representations
of the ‘good’ children could also offer productive results. It would also be productive to explore
the subject in children’s literature, as most of the work currently circulating is on the image of the
child through the eyes of the adult. In any case, the ever-changing image of the child and
childhood, and its cultural and political implications, is likely to keep scholars occupied for many
years to come.

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12 Whether these two conflicting views are directly tied to the history of Christianity is a matter of debate. Coveney
argues that Christianity is responsible for the association of the child with ‘original sin’ (Coveney 33), as opposed to
the Rationalist view of the child as a blank slate and ‘natural’ precursor to the adult. Hugh Cunningham argues that
Christianity is actually responsible for the view of the child as ‘sacred’, as opposed to the Roman ‘infanticidal
mode’ (20). It is likely that both arguments are true to a certain degree. Even within Christianity opinions differed. In
a famous argument, Augustine argues that humans are born with original sin, and need to be baptised to achieve
salvation, countering Pelagius’ allegation that infants are born inherently good and only corrupted by sin later in life.

13 J.H. Plumb writes about England: “in 1730 there were no specialized toy-shops of any kind, whereas by 1780 toy-
shops everywhere abounded” (310)
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