

Apocalyptic Becoming: Virus, Borders and Symbiosis in Butler's *Clay's Ark*

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Abstract: In Octavia E. Butler's 1984 novel *Clay's Ark*, an extraterrestrial microorganism causes transformative effects on human bodies and societies. Set against the backdrop of an impending large-scale infection, the novel deconstructs societal hierarchies faced by marginalized people. By employing Deleuze and Guattari's generative thoughts, this paper examines different communities like enclaves, car family, and ranch to highlight how viral outbreaks catalyze significant changes. The *Clayark* virus functions as a vector of escape, breaking away from conventional norms and structures, and fostering the emergence of more rhizomatic communities. Haraway's concept of "companion species" is employed to investigate the symbiotic relationship between humans and viruses, envisioning a brighter posthuman society. Butler's writings challenge conventional science fiction clichés, examining how individuals on the margins navigate and resist systemic oppression, and presenting a symbiotic solution to transcend barriers in the apocalyptic setting.

Keywords: Octavia E. Butler, *Clay's Ark*, Line of Flight, Symbiosis.

1. Introduction

In Octavia E. Butler's *Clay's Ark* (1984), an extraterrestrial microorganism transforms human bodies and societies, serving as a powerful metaphor for racial and gender boundaries in American society. As the narrative unfolds, the alien pathogen not only induces physical and psychological mutations in its hosts but also catalyzes the formation of new communities that challenge existing social hierarchies. Through this science fiction lens, Butler allegorically sets the story in a world on the brink of a global pandemic, reconstructing the myriad boundaries faced by especially a group of black people during a plague to explore the possibility of transcending these boundaries and achieving self-awareness, and expertly weaves together themes of survival, identity, and moral responsibility.

As famous sf writer Ursula LeGuin observes, science fiction does not possess the power "to prophesy the future, nor can it forecast the future—it is intended to represent reality and the present [8]." By embracing this genre, Butler's novel surpasses traditional science fiction clichés to explore how individuals on the fringes maneuver and challenge systemic oppression. Through the application of Deleuze and Guattari's generative concepts, and Haraway's theories on companion species this paper examines three different social formations in the novel: modern American society, the car family, and the excluded enclave, and how significant changes can viral outbreaks catalyze. Through these narratives, the study delves into themes of racial, gender, and species boundaries, ultimately breaking these constraints to achieve self-liberation within a reimagined posthuman community.

2. Rigid Segmentary Societies and the Escalating Vulnerability

In *Clay's Ark*, the reader is taken on a journey through a richly woven tapestry of narratives that explore the multifaceted and intricate dynamics of various communities, which serve as the intricate backdrop against which the escalating vulnerability

of the characters unfolds. Butler's meticulous portrayal of these societal structures offers readers an insightful glimpse into the complexities of human behavior and the intricacies of societal constructs, particularly when individuals are faced with challenging situations. The novel intricately intertwines the personal struggles of its characters with the broader implications for society, how individuals and communities respond and adapt to crises. Butler's work is not merely a superficial exploration but delves deep into the psychological and sociological underpinnings that drive human actions and interactions within these groups.

In a parallel to Butler's exploration of societal dynamics, French philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari introduce a philosophical framework in their seminal work, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. Within this work, they delineate three distinct kinds of lines that serve to describe different modes of social organization and interaction. These lines include the rigid segmentary line, the supple segmentary line, and the line of flight. The rigid segmentary line refers to a form of social organization that is characterized by clear and fixed boundaries, often seen in traditional or conservative societies where roles and hierarchies are well-defined and resistant to change. The supple segmentary line, on the other hand, allows for more flexibility and adaptation within social structures, enabling societies to respond to various challenges while maintaining a degree of coherence. The line of flight represents a departure from established norms and structures, embodying a movement towards new possibilities and often associated with processes of transformation and revolution.

The novel unfolds against the background of the contemporary American West, somewhere near Los Angeles, where exists some rigid segmental communities. These communities exhibit a highly rigid social stratification, dividing society into numerous distinct groups and segregated segments. In these places, men and women, the rich and the poor, the white and the colored are highly distinctive, cutting by "all kinds of clearly defined segments in all kinds of directions, which cut us up in all senses, packets of segmentarized lines" [3]. The Maslins' family use to live in

the Palos Verdes Enclave, the place belongs to the rich and the privilege before they are kidnapped by the Eli's people. Like most enclave parents, Doctor Blake had done all he could to ensure that his twin girls can live in a safe world, an enclave or island "surrounded by vast, crowded, vulnerable residential areas through which ran sewers of utter lawlessness connecting cesspools—economic ghettos that regularly chewed their inhabitants up and spat the pieces into surrounding communities [2]p.36". These communities are characterized with strict social stratification and limited contact with the outside world. The cities, such as Los Angeles, are rife with chaotic cesspools, teeming with gangsters and sewer rats. Blake's black wife Jorah who used to teach cesspool kids and devoted to cure the "diseases of a society [2]" and believed "old-fashioned, long-lost causes -- human rights, the elderly, the ecology, throwaway children, corporate government, the vast rich-poor gap and the shrinking middle class [2]" was blew away most of the back of her head with a new submachine gun by a young sewer slug. Despite their proximity to the cesspools, the enclaves remain akin to two parallel lines that never intersect, preserving a distinct hierarchy. Both the enclave inhabitants and those of the cesspools are bound by their respective stringent rules and taboos.

Due to the rigid segmentary nature of modern society, certain groups are more vulnerable and susceptible to lethal viruses. Those who are suppressed, marginalized, and excluded are disproportionately affected by the virus. Undoubtedly, black people in America belong to this most vulnerable and susceptible group, and the resurgence of white supremacy exacerbates the psychological harm they endure. Moreover, during pandemics and similar disasters, black women are even more vulnerable than black men, as shown many times. They are often the first to be hit and are placed in the most desperate situations in the entire social hierarchy. Therefore, black women not only have to fight against a highly contagious virus but also against the dominance of powerful males, showcasing remarkable resilience and a strong sense of self.

As the younger daughter the mix-raced family, Keira suffers from a fatal disease, acute myeloblastic leukemia. Her vulnerability is starkly portrayed through her battle with leukemia, an illness that not only threatens her life but also serves as a metaphor for the susceptibility of black women to systemic neglect and medical marginalization. Her illness is described as an "adult disease" [2], highlighting the incongruity of her young age with the severity of her condition, which is both a physical and societal burden. The indiscriminate nature of the disease, affecting individuals regardless of age or racial background, underscores the inherent susceptibility of humanity. However, this universal vulnerability is experienced through the distinct prism of a young African-American girl's perspective in this novel.

The rigid segmentary structure of society further emphasizes Keira's physical vulnerability. Her susceptibility to the harsh desert environment and violent encounters with armed men is a direct result of her marginalized position. Her fragility is contrasted with the rugged landscape and the brutishness of her captors, highlighting her vulnerability to both natural and man-made dangers. The narrative describes her as "thin and

frail," and "ethereal, not quite of this world" [2], which not only speaks to her physical state but also to an otherworldly quality that seems to invite protection. Yet paradoxically, she is frequently subjected to harm.

The rigid segmentary nature of modern society profoundly exacerbates the vulnerability and susceptibility of marginalized groups, particularly black women. The novel's exploration of rigidly stratified communities, such as the Palos Verdes Enclave and the chaotic cesspools of Los Angeles, illustrates how clear and fixed social boundaries create environments where certain individuals are disproportionately affected by crises. Black women, already facing multiple layers of oppression, are especially vulnerable to both biological threats and social injustices. Through the character of Keira, Butler highlights the intersection of physical and systemic vulnerabilities, emphasizing the need for a deeper understanding of the complex dynamics that shape human experiences in rigidly segmented societies. In addition to highlighting the resilience and strength of marginalized individuals, Butler advocates for a critical examination of the social structures that perpetuate their vulnerability.

3. Ample Communities: Car Family and Primitive Ranch

In reality, the narrative of this novel unfolds in settings that are far removed from the bustling and well-known urban centers. It takes place in fringes like Mojave Desert or some dirty roads diverged from the expressway, the vast, arid regions known for their extreme temperatures, sparse vegetation and harsh wilderness. In these places, there exist some car families and a isolated ranch. They are more like community in primitive status in Deleuze and Guattari's sense which have "no fixed, central State apparatus and no global power mechanisms or specialized political institutions" [2]. The car family in the novel possess several characteristics that align with that of primitive society in this sense, including polyvocal codes, itinerant territoriality, and adaptability.

The car family in the novel refer to a group of people who live and travel together in a convoy of vehicles, often modified for off-road capabilities and self-sufficiency. They are depicted as a semi-nomadic group that operates on the rims of society, surviving through acts of theft, robbery, and other violent means. Upon encountering a family of car raiders at a roadside station one day, Meda is angered by their actions and accused them, saying, "[e]ven the rat packs usually leave [the station] alone" [2], showing her disgust of the car family. It is not a rigid, fixed entity but a dynamic and flexible group. Members can join or leave the group based on their needs and the group's requirements. Roles within the car family are not strictly defined and can shift based on the situation. The car family members are loosely bound. This complex web of relationships forms a polyvocal code, where multiple roles coexist. Individuals such as Badger assume leadership and protective responsibilities, whereas others fulfill various roles in the acts of killing and extorting ransom. The car family leads a nomadic lifestyle, constantly moving to find resources and avoid threats. This mobility is a key aspect of itinerant territoriality, where the territory is not fixed but shifts according to the group's needs. They travel through deserts,

mountains, and abandoned towns, always seeking water, food, and targeted pray. This fluidity in their territorial claims allows them to adapt to changing environments and survive in an apocalyptic world.

The same adaptability and suppleness lies in the isolated ranch family where Meda and the six other family members used to live in the isolated wood-and-stone house, coexisting with the car family and other communities. The ranch was once a primitive community, with Meda's father serving as the "white-haired patriarch of the household—a stern man who believed in an outdated, wrathful God and was proficient with a shotgun" [2], reflecting both his adaptability and that of the ranch.

It is later transformed and reorganized by Eli the carrier of an alien pathogen. The patient zero Eli brings the microbe to the remote tribe-like ranch, and the microbe causes all men there died, descending the place into a more primordial and even matriarchal state. The Clayark virus enables Eli the only men within the infected community. In order to thrive the community, he impregnates the women left and kidnap more male. The ranch has opened its doors to new members, no longer operating as an exclusive group. This openness is evident when Eli considers actively find even kidnap some new individuals, say Zeriam or the Maslin's, to join, recognizing that the group's strength lies in its diversity and adaptability. This inclusiveness further underscores the supple nature of their segmentary structure, where the group's boundaries are permeable and responsive to external influences.

Gradually, the virus-contaminated community is even more like a rhizome, to use Deleuze's term. Unlike tree structure, rhizome structure has the characteristics like non-hierarchical, heterogeneous, and reproductive. Eli's newly established community operates without a centralized authority, reflecting the non-hierarchical nature of a rhizome. In the novel, Eli, although a leading figure, does not exert control over the ranch in a traditional top-down manner. Instead, the female members of the community interact and make decisions collectively, much like the interconnected strands of a rhizome that have no single point of command. This is evident in the way they work together to survive and adapt to their new reality, post-infection by the alien microbe.

Butler's creation of these communities is to explore the potential for new forms of social organization that transcend traditional boundaries. By depicting the car family and the primitive ranch, Butler highlights the importance of flexibility and mutual dependence in maintaining coherence and functionality in the face of adversity. Besides, Butler emphasizes the critical role of women in these communities. Women in these communities often take on multiple roles, providing medical care, emotional support, and strategic insights. Their resilience and adaptability are crucial to the group's survival, challenging traditional gender roles and demonstrating the strength and agency of women in navigating and resisting systemic oppression. These groups not only survive but also thrive, offering a compelling contrast to the rigid, segmented societies that are ill-equipped to handle the unpredictability of a world transformed by the alien pathogen. This flexibility allows them to navigate the

complex and dangerous post-apocalyptic world more effectively than rigidly structured communities.

4. Clayark Virus as a Line of Flight

Normally speaking, infectious virus infiltrates the lives of human, and forces people to confront the deep-rooted complexities of their social interactions and moral beliefs. The organism's invasive presence thus serves as a powerful metaphor for the disruptive forces that can shatter the status quo and drive humanity towards a future that is both terrifying and unpredictable. We can constantly know these lethal viruses that cause widespread societal chaos and results in catastrophic loss of life in post-apocalyptic novels such as *Earth Abides* and *The Stand*. Yet, the virus portrayed in *Clay's Ark* has a markedly distinct impact on human. Rather than causing widespread destruction and death, this virus is non-fatal and has the potential for enhancement. It bestows human several animal-like qualities, such as cravings for raw meat and physical contact. The infected mankind become "[i]nhumanly fast, inhumanly strong" [2], and they also possess the capability to see clearly in the night.

The transformative power of the foreign microbe serves as a flight line of departure and deconstruction. The line of flight, or lignes de fuit, "covers not only the act of fleeing or eluding but also flowing, leaking, and disappearing into the distance [4]." It emphasizes breaking free from constraints and moving towards a new life, escaping from forms, structures, and other limitations. Deleuze and Parnet in *Dialogues* describe the line of flight as "a third kind of line, which is even more strange: as if something carried us away, across our segments, but also across our thresholds, towards a destination which is unknown, not foreseeable, not pre-existent. This line is simple, abstract, and yet is the most complex of all, the most tortuous: it is the line of gravity or velocity, the line of flight and of the greatest gradient... [3]" We can generalize the transformative, disruptive and uncertain qualities that the line of flight could probability possess. Similarly, the extraterrestrial microbe in the novel also enable itself to escape many limits and transcend the barriers through its contagious characteristic through touching. So it acts as a pivotal line of flight, breaking through the intricate web of segmented society, creates more rhizomatic networks, subverts power dynamics, and facilitates emotional transmission.

In contrast to some air-travel pathogens, the contamination of Clayark microbe spreads through direct physical contact. Through the sense of touch, people aim to forge deeper, more intimate connections, akin to a intricate web that is interwoven and tightly bound together. This tactile interaction serves as a fundamental means of human connection, fostering a sense of belonging and mutual support that is essential for emotional well-being and social cohesion. Thus, the virus emerges as a powerful agent of cohesion, serving to solidify and unite the new community in a profound sense. It acts as an invisible bond, bringing individuals in the enclave together in a shared struggle and common purpose. This unexpected force of nature, despite its destructive potential, inadvertently fosters a sense of solidarity and mutual support among the members of the community. they discover a sense of unity as they distinguish themselves from those outside, thus reinforcing the social structure and fostering a more

robust and interlinked community.

In addition, the Clayark virus, as a line of flight that breaks through the patriarchal structure, also provides the black women with an opportunity to escape from diseased bodies and liberate themselves. Thus, “becoming” emerges as a means for vulnerable women to evade and oppose, as well as a form of de-territorialization from the precious gender structure. Keira is a timid and weak girl who is gradually wasting away due to leukemia, and “see herself gradually disappearing” [2]. Butler uses the infection of Keira as a soft approach of “becoming” as a strategy of resistance to the control of the patriarchal system. The invasion of the Clayark virus do not further harm Keira, rather it restore her health, empowering her extraordinary strength and perception and gaining equality and respect from the ranch people. The virus as a line of flight saves Keira from the brink of death and enables her to rediscover herself in the borderland between life and death.

It also propels humanity into an uncharted and uncertain domain. This alien entity, with its mysterious and potentially transformative properties, becomes the catalyst for a radical departure from the established norms and structures of human civilization. So the Clayark virus is “not only a matter of adding a new segment on to the preceding segments on the line (a third sex, a third class, a third age), but of tracing another line in the middle of the segmentary line, in the middle of the segments, which carries them off according to the variable speeds and slownesses in a movement of flight or of flux.”[3]. Butler employs the concept of a foreign virus to explore the reconstruction of gender and racial boundaries, aiming to create a Utopian society liberated from gender-based oppression. Through this, Butler offers us an opportunity to reexamine modern American society, articulating her fierce critique and resistance to the status of women within patriarchal and racial systems, and conveying her hope and aspiration for a harmonious future society.

5. Becoming Symbiosis

As Susan Sontag notes in her influential book *Illness as Metaphors*, illness has always been used as “metaphors to enliven charges that a society [is] corrupt or unjust [9]” But the pathogen from the *Clay's Ark* exhibits a more dynamic and constructive nature, transforming human into becoming-animal within the apocalyptic world, thereby blurring the boundary of humanity. The ranch people has been transform into more man-like animals physically, while the car family are more animal-like human. That is the effect the contagion brings about, which is a simultaneous process of “an animal peopling, and the propagation of the animal peopling of the human being [4]” This has evolved into a metaphor through which Butler expresses her perspectives on matters concerning race, gender, and species.

The Clayark virus transforms gender roles and blurs the boundaries between men and women within the ranch. According to traditional gender roles, men are always seen as brave and strong, while women are portrayed as weak and in need of protection. However, after being infected with the virus, women also display astonishing strength and speed, eliminating the binary opposition between men and women,

allowing women to escape the original gender boundaries. Under the influence of the Clayark virus, the original gender boundaries are dismantled, allowing black women to reconstruct their self-subjectivity in a new way. The infected individuals are unable to suppress their desire to infect normal people, and the gender imbalance forces the infected female within the ranch to kidnap men. The reversal of gender roles in the novel showcases Butler's idealistic quest for black women to transcend the constraints of reality and establish a diverse, fluid postmodern female self-identity.

gender, the “boundaries” Butler seeks to transcend through the virus metaphor also refers more the unjust boundaries exposed by the plague against ethnic minorities as Keira is an obvious “mulatto.” Butler also employs this narrative of contagion to metaphorize historical racial discrimination in the United States. She critiques human colonization of outer space, which could similarly endanger human society and lead to conflicts between civilizations, subtly alluding to Western history's biases and rejections towards colonizers.

The barriers shattered by the plague in the novel exist not merely between gender and race. Butler also crosses species boundaries by establishing symbiotic relationships between humans and viruses, and humans and new species, advocating for mutual connection and co-creation between humans and non-humans. Haraway emphasizes species symbiosis, “co-constitutive companion species and co-evolution are the rule, not the exception.” [6]. When depicting the Clayark plague, Butler also presents a future of human-virus symbiosis. “The organism doesn't use cells up the way a virus does. It combines with them, lives with them, divides with them, changes them just a little. Eli says it's a symbiont, not a parasite [2]” The invisible invaders from the *Clay's Ark* have “become an intimate part of all the cells of the infected bodies, changing human beings at the level of their most basic selves [7].”

When the alien virus invade the human body and reprogram human DNA, the ranch people begin to exhibit a series of animal characteristics with sharpened senses, increased strength, enhanced reaction speed, and activated sexual desire. Upon the Maslins' initial encounter with Eli following their abduction, they felt a strong sense of repulsion and fear towards what they witnessed. Yet, Rane and Keira respond differently towards Jacob, who a new human-animal hybrid species mutated by the Clayark virus. Rane dislikes Jacob, but Keira treat him more gently at the first meet. She describes him in a very positive way. “Jacob's beautiful, ... The way he moves catlike, smooth, graceful, very fast. And he's as bright as or brighter than any other kid his age [2]” Jacob also likes Keira a lot. He even risk his own life to help Keira when she is caught by the car family by using his extraordinary strength and speed. Jacob becomes her own companionship after she gets to know the death of her father and sister. At the moment, Jacob and Keira becomes companion species literally and metaphorically.

The reason why Keira and Jacob can form a kind of companionship is that they are in a similar marginalized state. Unlike her father and sister, Keira tends to identify with the self that was once ostracized by mainstream society because of her more obvious skin color and the fatal disease. “She

knew about ugly reactions. Probably Jacob knew more, or would learn more, but walking down a city street between her mother and her father had taught her quite a bit [2]” Due to some shared experiences, Keira shows an empathy-based inclusiveness towards Jacob.

In fact, human do not want to see any form of humanity in the new species represented by Jacob, fearing they will a treat to humankind and humanity. Even Eli cannot accept his son as a quadruped even though beautiful, he tries to teach Jacob to walk upright, for “[a] human child walk[s] upright. A boy, a man, walk[s] upright. No son of Eli’s would run on all fours like a dog [2]” It is the attitude represented by human that reflects our species-based discrimination and fear of the alien. So Butler ends the novel with the Keira’s pregnancy and cohabited peacefully with a kind man Kaneshiro in the mountaintop ranch. The baby they are expecting is undoubtedly a Joach-like species. Butler’s portrayal of this harmonious yet uncertain post-apocalyptic world resonates with Haraway’s concept, which advocates for a symbiotic relationship between humans and animals, namely “companion species.” This viewpoint necessitates the transcendence of species boundaries, fostering mutual understanding and support in a precarious world. Beyond the companionship between humans and microorganisms, Butler envisions a future where humans form symbiotic relationships with hybrids and the environment. She advocates for a post-human society in which multiple species coexist harmoniously, reflecting a broader vision of border-crossing that encompasses not only gender and racial equality but also the harmonious cohabitation of different species.

6. Conclusion

Through the Apocalyptic Clayark virus, Butler uses a powerful metaphor for exploring gender, racial and even species-specific boundaries in modern society. Through the narrative of an extraterrestrial microorganism that transforms human bodies and societies, she allegorically sets the story in a world on the brink of a global pandemic, reconstructing the myriad boundaries faced by particularly a group of marginalized people to explore the possibility of transcending these boundaries and achieving self-awareness.

In Butler’s work, rigid segmental societies exacerbate vulnerability, particularly among marginalized groups like black women. And alternative forms of community organization emerge in fringe areas like the Mojave Desert or isolated ranches. These communities, such as the car family and the primitive ranch, are characterized by flexibility, mutual dependence, and adaptability. With The Clayark virus acts as a line of flight, it breaks free from constraints and moving towards new possibilities. It also provides an opportunity for vulnerable individuals, to liberate themselves from many institutional constraint. The final bondage formed between species leads the apocalyptic world into an uncertain yet promising future, through which Butler challenges traditional science fiction tropes to examine how marginalized individuals navigate and resist systemic oppression. Butler presents a vision of a posthuman community that transcends many boundaries.

Butler illustrates an apocalyptic crisis that exceeds the

capacity of both the individual and the collective to rectify. And this apocalyptic vision is often used when the author believes that “some utter disruption of the current state of things could create the conditions for the restoration or establishment of right order.” [1]. So presenting this apocalyptic story for Butler is not merely for consoling but “a matter of apprehending the current state of the world as unsustainable, incoherent, and evil [1].” The evil of racial discrimination, gender abusing and animal mistreatment and etc. In the novel’s irreversible posthumanist trajectory, Butler’s readiness to transcend interspecies boundaries holds out the promise of a harmonious coexistence that could be advantageous to black women and humanity as a whole. The forward-looking nature of her works is rooted in a deep concern for human survival and prospects, highlighting the cautionary and serious aspects of science fiction. Perhaps for Butler, the act of writing serves as a means to attain a condition of indistinguishability and deterritorialization, and “the deterritorialization of the becoming-animal is absolute; the line of escape is well programmed, the way out is well established [5].”

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