

Excursions

Volume 2, Issue 1 (June 2011)



Neeraja Sundaram, "From Contamination to Community: Octavia Butler's *Clay's Ark*", *Excursions*, 2, 1 (June 2011)

URL: <http://www.excursions-journal.org.uk/index.php/excursions/article/view/31>

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From Contamination to Community: Octavia Butler's *Clay's Ark*

'It's something like a virus,' she said. 'Except that it can live and multiply on its own for a few hours if it has warmth and moisture.'

Then it wasn't a virus, he thought. She didn't know what she was talking about.

Contamination had probably been inevitable, however. The disease could be studied, understood, stopped, or at least controlled -- and it had to be. The disease was only a disease. It was the willing human carriers intent on spreading it that made it so deadly.

Octavia Butler --- Clay's Ark (1984)

In Octavia Butler's 1984 science fiction novel *Clay's Ark*, an alien virus manifests as a border organism that produces new forms of human. *Clay's Ark* tells the story of the eponymous starship, whose crew becomes infected with a deadly and contagious virus on their voyage to Proxima Centauri. The Ark crashes into an isolated part of the Barstow desert upon its return to Earth and Eli, a black man, is the only survivor. Eli wanders across the Barstow desert to find a human settlement that he infects with the disease and later transforms into a 'community' of infected carriers who struggle not only to contain the beginnings of an epidemic but also the total loss of their 'humanity'. The extraterrestrial disease organisms cause several physical and emotional transformations, such as four-legged mutant children and an irrepressible desire to infect others, that leaves the host 'other' than human.

Butler's extraterrestrial disease organism is invested with a narrative 'agency' in the novel that performs a crucial role in transforming subjectivities and distorting the boundaries between 'human' and viral 'other'. My argument in this paper is thus two-fold: firstly, the trope of the viral agent in Butler's *Clay's Ark* reconfigures the 'self' (the human) and the 'other' (the virus) at the level of the material and the discursive, leading to a reconceptualisation of the epistemological and ontological basis for the definition of and distinction between the two. Human and virus increasingly resemble each other as the virus disrupts and distorts traditional

categories of healthy/sick, immune/vulnerable, strong/weak, to create new subjectivities for the patient/victim/carrier and in the process, the virus itself. Secondly, the diseased, contagious self in *Clay's Ark*, is subject to neither 'containment' nor quarantine, but is instead the basis for the formation of a new social contract in a world that is soon to be ravaged by an extraterrestrial epidemic.

The virus in popular narratives has been studied as an agent of social change (Schell 1997: 96). The virus's disregard for order and boundaries often evokes anxieties about our inability to retain national, racial and sexual categories in the face of a viral menace. In her essay about virus discourse in the Biothriller genre for instance, Ruth Mayer (2007: 2) argues that Biothrillers should be viewed as 'testimonials of larger transformation in our political unconscious'. Butler's *Clay's Ark* performs a similar cultural function in its rendering, like any other science fiction text, of a story of cultural contact between human and extraterrestrial. The trope of infection therefore, as Mayer reminds us quite rightly, is a significant aspect of any discourse of cultural contact. Though the trope of the virus may be utilised for several ends in a narrative, this paper studies only one, albeit significant, implication of the viral agent – that of contagion and the epidemic. The etymology of contagion (from 'con' meaning 'together' and 'tangere' meaning 'to touch') illustrates effectively how contagion can, quite literally, put us in touch. Marilouise and Arthur Kroker (1987:12) have demonstrated that American cultures in the twentieth century have been informed by worries about infection and contamination. This worry has become central to popular cultural forms in the late twentieth century. Writing about the hysteria surrounding clean bodily fluids in postmodern America, the Krokers (1987: 12) argue that this 'Body McCarthyism' that polices the transmission of bodily fluids 'feeds parasitically on generalised panic fear about the breakdown of the immunological systems of American society'. They provide a new

dimension that is crucial for any discourse of contagion: the question of immunization not only for the individual, but the community.

Popular narratives about the virus often articulate an anxiety about the threat of contamination faced by members of a community from without, from ‘other’ communities peopled by less-than-human, contaminating and immunocompromised subjects. The question of immunization and the community is especially significant in an age of the ‘politicization of biology’ or biopolitics, which can be defined as the rising concern of power with the life biology of its subjects. In his introduction to the work of Roberto Esposito (2006: 2), Timothy Campbell (2006) describes the basis of Esposito’s reading of modern biopolitics. He argues (2006: 4) that the modern subject, enjoying civil and political rights is an effort to become immune against the contaminating possibility of community. Immunization, for Esposito, is the ‘negative form of protection of life’ (2006: 24), where immunization saves and preserves life, not directly or immediately but by subjecting an organism to a condition that simultaneously limits its power to expand. The meaning of immunity is also thus most accurately inscribed in the reverse logic of community, since being immune is the ‘non-being’ or ‘not having’ anything in common. Immunity is therefore not a defensive apparatus that is imposed on the community *externally*, rather it is an *internal* mechanism that protects the community from itself, ‘sheltering it from an unbearable excess’ (2006: 28). Popular texts, thus not only seek to understand the ‘truth’ about an epidemic but also simultaneously and inevitably construct a ‘community’ that faces the threat of contaminating contact with other ‘communities’ that are coded as lacking immunity or endangering it on the grounds of specific cultural practices, belonging to a different class, nation, race or species.

A clarification of my use of the term ‘viral agent’ in studying the trope of the virus in *Clay’s Ark* is in order here. Endowing the virus with agency and human actor-like qualities like motivation and a desire for conquest and survival is not uncommon to contagion/infection narratives (Schell 1997; Belling 2003; Mayer 2007). Moreover, laboratory science has been greatly successful in ruling out or restricting multi-factorial causes for contagion, personifying it thus, as critics like Paula Treichler and Donna Haraway have argued in the case of the HIV virus, as a ‘top-flight secret agent’ that ‘hides out’ in healthy human cells, waiting to attack and kill (Treichler 1998: 31). Margaret Pelling (2001: 16-17) notes a historical transformation of contagion from ‘germ’ to being equated, on account of bacteriology and popular culture, to (fully formed) ‘disease-causing’ organism. ‘Germ’, which is originally a term that circulated in discussions about germination, growth and differentiation, was borrowed by nineteenth-century writers not to indicate a fully-formed organism but to mark the possible outset of a disease through a combination of factors. The convenient labelling of a discrete entity makes possible a definitive test to ascertain its presence, while simultaneously establishing it as a ‘scientifically-known’ entity.

Personifying the virus thus and investing it with a measure of agency that is sometimes not only on a par with but vastly surpasses that of human actors in a narrative, reveals a politics of literal and metaphoric language in virus discourse. Popular representations of the virus exploit the polyvalence of terms like ‘communication’, ‘transmission’, ‘immunity’ and ‘infection’. These terms find expression in both literal and metaphoric language in popular texts. Pernick (2002: 861) emphasises a shifting relationship between the literal and metaphorical usage of contagion, perhaps illustrated best by recent molecular biologists’ claims that genes and viruses are bundles of exchangeable information. This shifting relationship or perhaps convenient

slippage between ‘literal’ and ‘metaphoric’ informs the ‘popular’ discourse of the virus and contagion. Catherine Belling (2003: 89) argues that narratives of infection have to often shift between ‘microscopic’ and ‘human-scale’ domains to retain the microscopic in narrative view. These narratives, she suggests via James Elkins, are marked by a ‘visual desperation’ that has its roots in the epistemological problems caused by the discovery of microscopic living creatures in the eighteenth century. Representing the microscopic therefore always necessitates analogies, as it is the ‘microbiographer’s’ (Belling’s term) resistance to the ‘visual desperation’ arising from having to conceive of and portray that which is unseen.

The ‘viral agent’ or microscopic in Butler’s *Clay’s Ark* necessitates a movement from the individual to the community and reconfigures traditional categories of healthy/sick, immune/vulnerable, strong/weak to create new subjectivities for the patient/victim/carrier as well as the virus itself. The virus is a literal and metaphoric border organism that mediates between ‘host’ and ‘alien’, ‘self’ and ‘other’, ‘human’ and ‘foreign’ and constructs new forms of the individual, the family and the community.

Viral Cultures and the Making of New Subjectivities

The viral agent in *Clay’s Ark* disrupts epistemological and ontological categories of the human and the virus at the level of the material and the discursive. The material nature of the body’s experience of illness is situated in *Clay’s Ark* as being outside the realm of medical science. Van Loon (2002: 144) describes the ‘violation’ caused by infection as that which not only violates the body’s boundary to threaten integrity and autonomy but as something that also opens the body up to medicine, causing it to become an ‘indiscrete’ component of medical technoscience. Butler, however, places the ‘infected body’ out of the reach of medicine, making

sense of it instead, as ‘common’ perception or lived experience. Eli is therefore the ‘authority’ in terms of the workings of the disease, while Blake, a doctor practicing in the year 2021, can make no sense of it, even with his highly advanced, futuristic medical scope. Blake and his daughters, Keira and Rane are abducted by Eli’s people who try to ‘contain’ their appetite for contaminating others by infecting a few at a time, thereby preventing an epidemic and attempting to retain a boundary between those infected and others at risk.

Soon after their abduction, Blake and his daughters struggle to make sense of their captors’ visibly abnormal physiology. Attempting to understand their physical differences (emaciated appearance, premature age lines, excessive sweating), Blake struggles to make sense of it medically:

Diaphoresis, Blake thought. Excessive sweating - symptomatic of what?
Emaciation, trembling, bad coloring, now sweating - plus surprising strength,
speed, and coordination. God knew what else. *Symptomatic of what?*

(Clay’s Ark, p. 27)

The physical symptoms exhibited by the Clay’s Ark virus carriers defy Blake’s understanding of a ‘diseased’ self. Blake’s computerised medical scope responds with the message ‘unidentifiable microbes’ when he analyses tissue, urine and blood samples from one of the carriers. What the computer visualises for him, is even more perplexing because he finds that ‘according to the computer’ what he thought may be a virus is a more complete, independent organism that has made itself at home in human cells in a way ‘that should not have been possible’ (*Clay’s Ark*, p.51). The ‘unidentifiable microbe’ therefore, remains an ‘elusive protagonist’ in a narrative that

shifts between the human-medical domain and the microscopic to keep the microscopic in view.¹ The physical manifestation of the disease on the human body confuses the traditional categories of ‘healthy’ and ‘sick’, making infected persons appear emaciated and thin externally but simultaneously endowing them with great strength and agility.²

The viral agent operates at the level of the discursive through the carrier’s ‘lived experience’ of the disease, a kind of particularized knowledge that is at odds with Blake’s initial attempts at a generalized medico-scientific classification. Eli’s knowledge of the disease, though partly influenced by autopsies conducted on the first victims on the starship now disseminates purely as a method of survival, a way of ‘living’ with the disease. This way of living is however, a way of preserving the individual’s identity as human. Upon his return to Earth, Eli ‘learns’ about the disease through his experience of the ‘unnatural tastes and drives’ that it encourages:

Since his return to Earth, he knew he preferred his food raw and unseasoned. It tasted better. Yet he would go on eating cooked food. It was a human thing that he clung to. His changed body seemed able to digest almost anything. It tempted him by making nonhuman behavior pleasurable, but most of the time, it let him decide, let him choose to cling on to as much of his humanity as he could.

(Clay’s Ark, p. 73)

Though usually a subversive infiltrator, here the virus interestingly offers the human a ‘choice’.

Eli is able to ‘decide’ to be human, though he has to ‘learn’ what it means anew after his

¹ Belling describes the virus as an ‘elusive protagonist’ in contagion/infection narratives on account the difficulty arising from the human and the germ occupying the same narrative frame (2003: p.87).

² Butler, like in her Xenogenesis trilogy (*Dawn* 1987, *Adulthood Rites* 1988, *Imago* 1989), appears to be providing two codes for contagion here, good and bad, good in terms of benefits like immunity to other diseases, superhuman abilities and bad in terms of a loss of ‘humanity’, a regression into an almost animal-like state.

transformation by the virus. What constitutes the ‘human’ is now reconceptualised in opposition to the ‘viral’. Eli therefore, teaches the people he infects to ‘cling on to their humanity’, to overcome the ‘compulsions’ caused by the disease by ‘converting’ more people who are similarly ‘taught’ to cope with the disease.

Following the example of Eli, the individuals that comprise his ‘community’ of infected carriers also communicate a notion of being ‘human’ through heredity. Therefore, the next generation of mutated children, despite lacking a human form, inherits an ideology of the ‘human’ from their parents. For instance, anxious about his young daughters’ safety, when Blake questions Meda about their whereabouts she describes the community’s ‘ethics’ to him,

‘It’s true. Our men don’t rape. They don’t have to’. ‘You haven’t had to do any of the things you’ve done’. ‘But we have. Like I said, you’ll understand eventually. For now, you’ll just have to accept what I tell you. We’re changed, but we have ethics. We aren’t animals’.

(*Clay’s Ark*, p. 39)

The Clay’s Ark patients are thus distinguished by their ‘humanity’ rather than their disease-induced mutation.

Butler’s fictional virus thus not only divides the human race into categories of ‘infected’ and ‘at risk’ but also explores the *differences* present within these categories. Among the infected for instance, there are varying degrees of dependence on and symbiosis with the Clay’s Ark virus. This in turn determines the degree of humanity that the infected are capable of retaining after exposure to the virus. Similarly, amongst the uninfected humans at risk from the viral invaders, only a few are suitable hosts for an organism that threatens the boundaries of what defines the

human. There are those uninfected humans for instance, who are portrayed as far more degenerate than the ‘gentle’ and ‘caring’ invaders (the Clay’s Ark disease carriers) that populate Eli’s community. Writing about disruption caused by the virus to established meaning-making systems, Ruth Mayer (2007: 7) suggests via Deleuze and Guattari that the virus follows a ‘subversive’ order of infiltration, spread and takeover rather than a ‘filial’ order of heredity. Rothleder makes a similar claim for the subversive potential of viral production in an exploitative system of capital production. Working with the biological idea of a virus as capable of taking over the reproductive functions of a cell to force it to produce the virus instead, Rothleder explains the subversive potential of viral production thus –

Where phallogentric reproduction requires a mediating other to make the same, viral production requires a mediating same to make the other. In this way, the terms of production are, as it were, stood on their heads. There is still making, but it is the making of the other rather than the making of the same.

(‘From False Consciousness to Viral Consciousness’, n. pag.)

The virus can thus be disruptive of the ‘terms of production’ of the ‘human’ by controlling its processes of meaning generation (at the level of the material and the discursive) and subversively producing the viral ‘other’ through a collapse of distinctions between ‘human’ and ‘other’.

The victims of the Clay’s Ark virus gain immunity against all other filial drawbacks and genetic defects in their affiliation with the ‘other’. However, interestingly, the subversive potential of the humans’ viral production of the ‘other’ is diminished by the filial communication of the discursively produced ‘human’. While virally producing the ‘other’ therefore, the

individual prevents the viral proliferation of what it means to be ‘human’ by maintaining a filial transfer of human ‘values’.

From the Individual to the Collective, Stage I: The Family

Individuals infected with the Clay’s Ark disease cannot survive alone. After surviving the starship’s crash, Eli is offered shelter by a family who subsequently contract his deadly disease. Many members of the family die from being unable to cope with the disease while Eli grows stronger and becomes dearer to the surviving members of the family – now infected and conflicted by their transformation. The few that survive, are ‘shepherded’ by Eli, and organised into a transformed family:

They huddled together, not knowing what to do. They were fearful of going near outsiders with their painfully enhanced senses and their odd compulsions, but Eli was one of them.....

He found comfort in shepherding them. It was as though in a very real way, he was making them his family - a family with ugly problems.

(Clay’s Ark, p. 71)

Eli, the first carrier of the disease, thus significantly, first comes into contact with a ‘family’. This isolated family, takes him in at time when ‘it was a dangerous practice to take in strays’ and by communicating a disease to them, he becomes ‘one of them’ but first by transforming them into what he had become.

Heather Schell (1997: 122) identifies the importance of community in the face of infection and subsequent transformation in science fiction narratives. She argues that unlike journalists and academics, science fiction writers celebrate transformation by disease as a gain. Rather than experience a sense of loss at the dissolution of home and self, unlike their academic

and journalistic counterparts, protagonists of science fiction virus narratives (interestingly also people who are already dislocated or marginalised in a prevailing social order and thus stand to gain from the reversal or subversion of this order by a virus) yearn for community, ‘the tight-knit society that infection offers’. Eli’s community in *Clay’s Ark* is indeed tight-knit and essential for its members’ survival. As one of its members aptly describes their transformation into almost superhuman beings with near-telepathic ability, ‘Among ourselves, it’s communication. With strangers, it’s protection’ (*Clay’s Ark*, p. 38).

The virus, moreover, perpetuates a family structure, making the carrier desire ‘survival’ and consequently, progeny. One of the carriers in Eli’s slowly growing group of ‘converts’, explains to Rane why they love their ‘four-legged’ children, after the disease has ‘changed’ them:

Makes you like having kids. Makes you need to have them. And when they come, you love them. I wonder...What’s the chemical composition of love? Human babies are ugly even when they’re normal, but we love them. If we didn’t our species would die. Our babies here - well, if we didn’t love them, if we weren’t damn protective of them, the Clay’s Ark organism on Earth would die. It isn’t intelligent, but by god is it ever built to survive.

(*Clay’s Ark*, p. 93)

The organism thus makes humans desire its survival, because ‘humanity’s’ survival now depends on it.

Moreover, arriving as it did in a planet already contaminated by violence and disorder, it offers an ideal ‘family’ to belong to, an alternative that many converts claim to have ‘chosen’ as a better life. Lupe, a convert woman, speaks to Rane about her past life when she was part of a ‘cesspool’ and carried two guns along with her truck’s ‘usual defences’, leading a life of constant

peril after her family died in a gang war. Now the disease, makes her feel like she's part of Eli's family, makes her feel like 'defending' him against his enemies and the 'slimy maggots' of her past (bike packers, car bums and rogue truckers). Eli's people are not that bad, she later says, referring to her husband, now converted, earlier in a gang: 'Take away the gang and give him something better and he turns into a person. A man.' (*Clay's Ark*, p. 85). The viral agent here is 'something better', transforming the infected individual into an active/productive member of a family that 'shares infection' but also 'shares immunity' to those outside the family that are seen as rejecting these 'shared' human values of 'loyalty' and 'community'.

While they appear to be diseased and other than human, Eli's 'Ark' seems to offer a 'secure' alternative to the life outside that is increasingly losing its humanity. In addition, the discourse of contagion in the novel appears almost to privilege an invading 'human' over an invading virus or disease. When Eli first explains the infected starship crew's choice of an isolated area to land on Earth, he says:

'We could no more imagine ourselves dying than we could imagine not coming straight in to Earth. It was a magnet for us in more ways than one. All those people....all those.... billions of uninfected people.' 'You came to infect...everybody?' she whispered. 'We *had* to come. We couldn't not come; it was impossible.'

(*Clay's Ark*, p. 75)

The crew decides however, to land in a place where they could be isolated and 'infect a few at a time'.

Eli's description of Earth as a magnet is similar to Meda's description of her dreams of walking through 'crowded streets' of uninfected people and this seems to privilege one kind of

invasion over the other. Eli's 'converts' for instance, appear to constantly make a distinction between their purportedly 'contained' invasion and the threat of 'cesspools' and 'sewers' and potentially 'unstable' victims in the early stages of their infection who may not be strong enough to retain their 'humanity', may succumb to the organism and escape from the ranch to cause an epidemic. So while Eli offers a secure family for the victims of the disease, this family is regulated in terms of a normative structure, helping its members preserve their humanity by controlling their efforts to go outside it.

The deliberate positioning of 'choice' as determining how much 'humanity' one can retain despite the illness exposes a politics of agency. The humans cannot exercise agency with respect to the transformation brought about by the Clay's Ark disease. By making a 'choice' *not* to infect the rest of the world therefore, on grounds of retaining their 'humanity', Eli and his people try to restore sovereignty to their bodies. They attempt to control what is communicated to people 'outside' (knowledge about the disease) as well as 'inside' (i.e. a filial transfer of human values to future generations). The diseased community's way of life disciplines disease-induced compulsions to help them preserve and disseminate an ideology of the 'human'.

Differences within the categories of 'infected' and 'at risk' are highlighted precisely because the community of 'infected' humans and those at risk are sheltered from an unbearable excess - they are protected from the contaminating possibility of assimilation with the 'other'. The 'other' in the narrative is no longer only the 'viral', it is rather, uninfected humans who now resemble the 'viral' in their lack of human values. Each category thereby paradoxically seeks immunity from the other by limiting its potential for expansion.

From the Individual to the Collective, Stage II: The Community

The Clay's Ark virus forms a 'community' of carriers. Several communities are, however, pitted against each other in the narrative, communities in the 'cess-pools', sewers, car-families and bike gangs. These communities are coded as being 'high-crime' and significantly 'non-human'. When Eli and the survivors of the first infected family are looking for 'new victims', one of them, Lorene, discusses what kind of victims they should choose from:

‘And there are more people on Forty and Fifteen,’ Lorene said. ‘Real people, not just sewer rats. I could get an honest hauler or a farmer or a city man.’ She sounded like an eager child listing Christmas possibilities.

(Clay's Ark, p.107)

Those who are 'chosen' to be infected, therefore, have to be of a particular nature. 'Sewer rats' who are already given over to unnatural, animal-like passions and desires, whose criminal activities make them less human, would not survive the initial 'test of humanity' that the organism posed. A crucial element in the novel's construction of the 'conversion' from human to 'other' subsequent to exposure to the Clay's Ark microbe, involves a detailing of the 'struggle' to retain the 'human' – a struggle that has varying degrees of success for converts. Blake, Keira and Rane's period of 'conversion' is similarly explored in individual circumstances to foreground this 'particularity' of the struggle to retain one's 'human' self.

Blake and his daughters, after exposure to the deadly virus, manage to escape from Eli and his 'family' only to be kidnapped again by a 'car gang', whom Blake describes as nonhuman. The car gang treats Blake and his daughters ruthlessly, while holding them hostage for a possible ransom, completely unaware of the disease they now carry. Despite his earlier conviction in a

medical or legal solution to the epidemic and his relative certainty by this time of its deadly and highly contagious nature, Blake does not reveal information about it to their new captors.

Spreading the disease to the car family ‘voluntarily’ is justified because they would be unable to comprehend the explanation, if provided. The car gang is however, as much a ‘family’ as Blake and his daughters, Eli and his people. Not yet under the compulsion of the disease, Blake still breaks his resolution about getting help to control the epidemic on the grounds that the car family, being as innately violent and uneducated as they were, possibly *deserved* to be exposed to a deadly virus.

Eventually, Blake and his daughters decide to privilege the ‘humanity’ demonstrated by Eli’s people over the ‘inhuman’ car family, causing the destruction of the entire family for the purpose of ‘containing’ the spread of the virus. Convincing her sister of the superior nature of a life of disease with Eli, Keira says:

‘Rane.....so what if you were sort of...seduced by Eli’s people. I was, too. All it meant to me was that they weren’t really bad people - not in the way rat-packs are bad. They’re different and dangerous, but I’d rather be with them than here.’

(Clay’s Ark, p. 153)

Embracing the ‘difference’ that Eli’s people exhibited, therefore, still preserved ‘humanity’ better than the violent rat-pack.

In a final destructive move, Blake manages to contaminate someone driving on the highway before dying and before he could be stopped by Eli. After having completely wiped out the car-family, Eli now braces himself and his ‘family’ for the inevitable spread of the disease to the rest of the planet. Their children, now more likely to populate the planet and endowed with

greater physical prowess and immunity will be more 'human' than those that remain in the world. The discourse of contagion thus equates 'humanity' with 'survival', coding an ideological construction of 'human' as something that hierarchises immunity. Those that are most 'human' therefore, preserve their identity, their immunity, albeit via a necessary transformation: by perpetuating the essential pre-condition of being 'human', coded as not being 'animal' or 'alien'. At the novel's end, significantly, Keira is the only one who survives despite being the least likely to, given her incurable leukaemia. Both Rane and Blake, after their infection and subsequent transformation are portrayed as unsuitable to deserve a place in Eli's 'new' community. Keira, in contrast, is seen as more willing to embrace the 'otherness' of Eli's community, while Blake and Rane express resistance to the idea of integration with the 'other'. Eli's 'community' of converts thus assimilate the 'other' through a 'communicable' discourse of the 'human'.

Priscilla Wald's (2002: 665) study of sociologist Robert E. Park's *The City*, examines a similar process of assimilation and containment operative in early twentieth-century America. Park and his contemporaries, Wald argues, were responding to the ideas of communication and contamination thrown open by the massive immigration in 1915 from the peasant cities of southern and eastern Europe that was changing demographics of eastern US cities. The absorption of these 'foreign' immigrant neighborhoods like the inevitable integration of the human with the fictional microbial invader in *Clay's Ark*, threatened to make America unrecognizable, and as Park and his contemporaries understood it, Wald demonstrates, unless these 'foreigners' were assimilated, they would in turn 'foreignise' us (2002: 666). The 'ghetto' of foreigners becomes a model of containment, Wald argues, because the threat of social contagion it poses, *transforms* into social communication, when it is assimilated by a 'communicable americanism' (2002: 675). In the light of Wald's argument, the discourse of

contagion in Butler's *Clay's Ark* makes an interesting move. The extraterrestrial Clay's Ark disease is paradoxically governed by human social norms. Eli's community restricts their potential to expand and contaminate by imposing 'humane' standards for the transmission of the disease. Their model of containment thus transforms the threat of contagion posed by the Clay's Ark virus by 'communicating' not just a disease to the new converts but also a 'human' way of life.

Conclusion

The source of the virus' power has been studied as mirroring and being inseparably connected with, a fundamental power in our own system that similarly escapes control and classification (Schell 1997; Parikka 2005; Mayer 2007). Butler's *Clay's Ark* represents a particular strain of the popular contagion/infection narrative's demonstration of viral power. While the novel performs the cultural function of reinstating marginalised, 'othered' subjectivities (the patient, the virus) at the center of the narrative's revised social order, Butler also suggests a politics of such narrative attempts to reconcile the human and the viral. Butler's *Clay's Ark* can perhaps best be classified as a 'narrative of resistance' as defined by Catherine Belling (2003: 100) in her study of 'microbiographies'. Such narratives, Belling identifies, have their roots in the impossibility of narrative reconciliation with the infectious microbe. Butler has perhaps suggested the more pervasive influence of the epistemic and discursive formulations of the 'human' in a social order transformed by viral invasion.

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