

Article

# Body Horror in Octavia E. Butler's *Clay's Ark*

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**Abstract:** African American science fiction writer Octavia E. Butler's works have attracted a great deal of academic interest since the 1990s onwards. *Clay's Ark* (1984), however, has not gained as much scholarly attention as some of her other novels, and the centrality of Gothic aspects, in particular those related to body horror, has not been addressed. By focusing on how these aspects inform the structure, setting, and characters' actions and relationships in this novel about an extraterrestrial infection that threatens and changes humanity, this article demonstrates how Butler employs and adapts strategies and conventions of Gothic horror and body horror in order to explore various attitudes towards difference and transformation, paralleling these with a particular brand of antiblack racism growing out of American slavery. Although the 1980s are already receding into American history, and a few aspects of the imagined twenty-first century in this novel may feel dated today (while many are uncomfortably close to home), *Clay's Ark* is a prime example of how aspects of popular culture genres and media—such as science fiction, the Gothic, and horror films—can be employed in an American novel to worry, question, and destabilize ingrained historical and cultural patterns.

**Keywords:** Octavia E. Butler; *Clay's Ark*; American Gothic; body horror

## 1. Introduction

Although uncomfortable with genre labels, African American Octavia E. Butler described most of what she wrote as science fiction, but talked about her neoslave narrative *Kindred* (1979), which features time travel, as a “grim fantasy” and her vampire novel *Fledgling* (2005) as a “science fantasy” (Kenan 1991, p. 495; Snider 2004, p. 218). Today, when—instead of being considered as the specialized fare of smaller groups of science fiction or fantasy readers and fans—science fiction and fantasy are ubiquitous in mainstream culture and seen as worthy of study in academia, Butler's entire oeuvre is often regarded as speculative fiction: a term that encompasses science fiction and fantasy as well as certain forms of the Gothic. This umbrella term covers, but perhaps also covers up, Butler's intricate use and combination of elements from different literary and popular culture genres. So, while academic work on various aspects of Butler's writings has increased exponentially since the 1990s, there have only appeared a few articles and book chapters—besides those that discuss *Fledgling* in terms of vampire fiction—that specifically examine the Gothic aspects of some her novels, in particular the *Xenogenesis* trilogy (1987–1989) (Goss and Riquelme 2007; Riquelme 2019; Parker 2020) and *Kindred* (Ford 2020).

Whereas some of Butler's novels have spawned an overwhelming number of scholarly articles and book chapters, this is not the case with *Clay's Ark* (1984), which is part of her *Patternist* series (1976–1984), and one of the four *Patternist* novels collected in *Seed to Harvest* (2007). As far as I have been able to determine, this novel is the sole focus of only one article, Sherryl Vint's “Becoming Other: Animals, Kinship, and Butler's ‘Clay's Ark’” (2005), and one short book chapter: Beth A. McCoy's “*Clay's Ark*: Teaching Butler's Vision Beyond Liberal Consent”, in *Approaches to Teaching Octavia E. Butler* (2019). *Clay's Ark* does, however, figure prominently, together with other science fiction novels, in three articles: one on symbiotic bodies and evolutionary tropes (Ferreira 2010); one on sybiogenesis and selfhood (Bollinger 2010); and one on American germ culture (Diehl 2013). Among



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other things, these articles refer to biologist Lynn Margulis's theories on evolution through symbiotic incorporation, as well as Donna Haraway's "The Biopolitics of Postmodern Bodies: Constitutions of Self in Immune System Discourse" (1991). Haraway spends a page on *Clay's Ark* in this chapter (Haraway 1991, p. 226), and the three articles published about a decade later usefully extend Haraway's discussion of this novel, which like many of Butler's other novels and short stories is concerned with biological transformations, as well as transgressions and violations of various boundaries. In *Clay's Ark*, many of these transformations, transgressions, and violations, I suggest, are conveyed through the use of Gothic horror.

The term *Gothic* has been monstrously productive in scholarship on literature and other media, but is seldom sharply defined (Lenhardt 2020, pp. 27–28). As Teresa A. Goddu puts it, "despite its easily listed elements and effects—haunted houses, evil villains, ghosts, gloomy landscapes, madness, terror, suspense, horror—the gothic's parameters and 'essence' remain unclear. [. . .] [O]bsessed with transgressing boundaries, it represents itself not as stable but as generically impure" (Goddu 1997, p. 5). In terms of genre distinctions, in their introduction to a recent collection of essays on American horror, Mark Storey and Stephen Shapiro admit that it may be difficult to make a clear distinction between Gothic and horror. They claim that "'horror' remains Gothic's embarrassing twin—sometimes synonymous, sometimes a subcategory, sometimes a different thing altogether" (Storey and Shapiro 2022, p. 2). In this article, I regard horror, and in particular body horror, as part of American Gothic. The horrors of American Gothic often consist of bodily horrors, and, in this context, Storey and Shapiro's underlining of the immediacy and materiality of horror is especially useful to my examination of *Clay's Ark*: "we suggest that horror points us to a more historically immediate and materially present form of experience" (Storey and Shapiro 2022, p. 3). So is their view of "horror as the name of something corporeal and modern-facing" (Storey and Shapiro 2022, p. 3). This definition of horror corresponds to Butler setting *Clay's Ark* in a near future extrapolated from her present in the early 1980s.

*Clay's Ark* depicts an alien infection, caused by a microorganism from another planet, that changes not only people and their lives, but also turns their offspring into quadrupeds, who think that "uninfected people smell like food" (Butler 1985, p. 200). The novel alternates between chapters entitled "Past" and "Present" and ends with a short epilogue that indicates the chaotic consequences of the pandemic caused by the uncontrolled spread of the microorganism. The chapters focusing on the past follow the black astronaut Eli after his returning spacecraft, *Clay's Ark*, crashed and killed the rest of the crew, while the chapters with the heading "Present" focus on the abduction and subsequent infection of the white physician Blake Maslin and his two mixed-race teenage daughters, Rane and Keira, by Eli and his community, who try to keep the alien infection from spreading uncontrollably. The setting is similar to the near-future dystopic twenty-first-century setting of Butler's two *Parable* novels (1993, 1998): a parched Southwestern American landscape where fresh water is scarce and violent criminal gangs, roaming around in cars, are constant threats to the lives, livelihoods, and property of both inhabitants and other travelers. When trying to escape from the ranch belonging to Eli's community, Blake, Rane, and Keira are captured by one of these gangs, a "car family", who has taken over another ranch, raping, mutilating, and killing the family who owns it. The chapters that focus on Blake and his daughters' interactions with the car family are filled with graphic descriptions of bodily harm, and the monstrous violence inflicted by humans on other humans' bodies, including the severing of Rane's head. Moreover, the extraterrestrial microbe changes the human bodies it infects in ways that make the survivors—and far from everybody survives the infection—less human in the eyes of uninfected humans, and the survivors' offspring nonhuman; it also enhances its hosts' hearing, sense of smell, vision, strength, and speed, as well as their hunger and sexual urges which, unchecked, threaten to overrun all social taboos.

This article will examine Butler's use of Gothic horror, and in particular body horror, in *Clay's Ark*, and show the ways in which this type of horror is central both to narrative strategies and to how the novel portrays various attitudes towards difference and trans-

formation, changing and decentering humanity. In the novel, some of these attitudes are paralleled with a particular brand of antiblack racism growing out of American slavery, as Butler employs and problematizes Gothic horror tropes and narrative strategies that resonate with US culture and history, including notions of, and laws against, miscegenation. In what follows, there is first a section where I relate *Clay's Ark* to theoretical discussions on body horror and American Gothic. My subsequent reading of the novel encompasses sections on the fearful world of the novel, contagion as body horror, monstrous kinship, and gruesome bodily harm.

## 2. Body Horror and the American Gothic

The bodies of human characters in many of Butler's narratives are subjected to various violations, take-overs, and transformations. Some of these cause death or mutilation; some involve crossbreeding or genetic mixing, with or without consent, resulting in hybrid offspring. In a recent discussion on American horror in science fiction, Betsy Huang proposed that Butler, employing horror as a disruptive "intersectional, anticolonial aesthetic", confronts "the horrors propagated by traditional SF [...] head-on in all of her writing" and that she "routinely evokes the 'horror' of racial mixing and miscegenation in theme, plot, and characterization as a way of normalizing hybridity" (Huang 2022, p. 173). In his 1996 article on what he calls Butler's miscegenate fictions, Roger Luckhurst points out that her 1984 award-winning short story "Bloodchild" "slyly rewrites the gendered anxieties of the 'body horror' genre by initially appearing to repeat the scenario of the implantation of alien eggs into the male human body, the visceral description of male birthing echoing scenes from films like *Alien* [1979] and *The Thing* [1982]"; Butler's short story, however, concludes on a totally different note than the films do (Luckhurst 1996, pp. 28–29). I will have reason to return to Luckhurst's article, but what is significant here is Butler's employment of body horror in a short story published the same year as *Clay's Ark*: these two narratives appeared in a period—the 1970s and 1980s—that was rife with cinematic body horror including, for example, David Cronenberg's *The Parasite Murders* (1975), *Rabid* (1977), and *The Fly* (1986), as well as the two sci-fi horror films mentioned above.

Throughout this article, I will draw on Xavier Aldana Reyes' work on body horror. According to him, the term *body horror*

describe[s] a type of fiction or cinema where corporeality constitutes the main site of fear, anxiety and sometimes even disgust for the characters and, by extension, the intended readers/viewers. Its workings involve the inscription of horror onto the human body by virtue of a change, or series of them, that transforms the perceived 'normal' body into a negatively exceptional and/or painful version of itself. Mutilation, degeneration and transformation (often hybridisation) are the main catalysts [...]. (Reyes 2020, p. 393)

Reyes distinguishes between two types of body horror: the first is "driven by gore and violence, namely, the type of horror that generates fear and disgust through attacks on the bodies of fictional characters", which, I suggest, is at the forefront in the section that involves the car family in *Clay's Ark*; and the second "relies on either (super)natural transformations or the voyeuristic attraction of those that are differently abled. In the [second], horrific scenarios stem from either the decay of the body, its gradual or sudden loss of humanity (physical and/or moral), its uncontrollable nature and desires or else the feelings of disgust it can arouse" (Reyes 2020, p. 393). While the first type is localized to a certain section of *Clay's Ark*, an engagement with this second type of body horror is apparent throughout Butler's novel, which, more or less, covers the whole range of scenarios in its depiction of the effects of the contagion and the responses to those who are being or have been transformed by the microbe.

Body horror coupled with biological science fiction can of course be traced back at least to Mary Shelley's Gothic science fiction novel *Frankenstein* (1818). Jack Halberstam, in *Skin Shows: Gothic Horror and the Technology of Monsters* (1995), examines late twentieth-century American horror films against a background of nineteenth-century British Gothic

novels. Gothic fiction, according to Halberstam, “is a technology of subjectivity, one which produces the deviant subjectivities opposite which the normal, the healthy, and the pure can be known” (Halberstam 1995, p. 2). As my reading of *Clay’s Ark* will show, Butler probes this technology of subjectivity through different focalizers’ responses to their own and others’ transformations. I will also suggest that the structure of *Clay’s Ark* is similar to the new cyclical narrative form that Halberstam has observed in horror film about chains of infection (Halberstam 1995, p. 158). He moreover claims that, in modern horror films, filmmakers tend to avoid creating racialized monsters, most likely because European antisemitism and American antiblack racism “are precisely Gothic discourses given over to the making monstrous of particular kinds of bodies” (Halberstam 1995, p. 4). As an example of the difficulty “to show and punish racism simultaneously” in horror film, Halberstam brings up *Candyman* (1990), which, despite its apparent attempts at social criticism, ends up “stabiliz[ing] [the horror] in the ghastly body of the black man whose monstrosity turns upon his desire for the white woman and his murderous intentions towards black women” (Halberstam 1995, pp. 4, 5).

The business of making particular racialized bodies monstrous, generating Gothic horror as well as racism, has been pervasive in American culture from colonial times onwards (Goddu 1997; Lenhardt 2020). In *Gothic America: Narrative, History, Nation* (1997), Goddu sets out to show how the Gothic is an integral part of American history and canonical literature, which are haunted by racism and slavery, and argues that using the term Gothic to investigate various kinds of American narratives is illuminating. She does, however, also point to the double-edged nature of the Gothic: “while the gothic reveals what haunts the nation’s narratives, it can also work to coalesce those narratives”, which the example of *Candyman* demonstrates. “[T]he gothic serves as the ghost that both helps run the machine of national identity and disrupts it” (Goddu 1997, p. 10). Nevertheless, she concludes, “While the gothic as the site of excess, haunting, and ill health, threatens to resurrect a history that can never be exorcized, it also offers a way to signify against that history” (Goddu 1997, p. 155), and gives examples of how authors such as Harriet Jacobs and Toni Morrison have used the Gothic to “haunt back”.

Underlining the “bitter history of the scientific and medical animalization of people of African descent” in a chapter on race with the somewhat unwieldy, but Gothically inflected, title “Universal Donors in a Vampire Culture: It’s All in the Family. Biological Kinship Categories in the Twentieth-Century United States”, Haraway points out that, at the end of the twentieth century, “*Miscegenation* is still a national racist synonym for infection, counterfeit issue unfit to carry the name of the father, and a spoiled future” (Haraway 1997, p. 258). In addition to bringing up racist notions against interracial couples and their children, Butler’s *Clay’s Ark* deals with an actual infection that spoils the future of humankind, as we know it, and produces nonhuman offspring.

Incest is another type of body horror that also figures in the more Gothic aspects of American history and literature, including *Clay’s Ark*, and it is sometimes conflated with miscegenation. This conflation obviously grows out of American slavery. In his book on interracial literature, Werner Sollors has a chapter on incest and miscegenation in American literature and other discourses (Sollors 1997, pp. 286–335). He points out that the word *miscegenation* was coined in 1863 (p. 287), and this term was then used in anti-miscegenation laws from the postbellum period in the nineteenth century up until 1967 when the US Supreme Court ruled these laws unconstitutional. Sollors discusses the conflation of miscegenation and incest in the USA in various kinds of literature and other texts, including some legal documents. For example, “the Mississippi law of 1880 prohibiting miscegenation called interracial marriages ‘incestuous and void.’ Many other laws combined the prohibition of marriage by consanguinity and miscegenation” (Sollors 1997, p. 299). Like Sharon P. Holland later does in *The Erotic Life of Racism* (2012), in which she also addresses the conflation of incest and miscegenation, Sollors prominently brings up William Faulkner’s *Absalom! Absalom!* (1936), a novel that is often seen as an important example of Southern Gothic.

More recently, in *Savage Horrors: The Intrinsic Raciality of the American Gothic* (2020), Corinna Lenhardt argues that while “there is no typical Gothic manifestation that is not already racialized or racializing”, the Gothic “must be understood as an ultra-adaptable, discursively active writing strategy whose racialized (and racializing) quality can also be employed creatively and critically by historically and culturally marginalized groups and individuals” (Lenhardt 2020, pp. 15, 16). Lenhardt examines an African American Gothic tradition “born in 1789 in the Black Atlantic” that “actively” and “strategically” responds to “the WASP American Gothic tradition from the 1830s onward” (Lenhardt 2020, p. 19). She sees the established discursive pattern, or what she calls the “Gotheme”, of the Savage Villain/Civil Hero (SV/CH) as intrinsically racialized since, in the American context, the Gothic imagery of the evil, savage villain increasingly accrued racialized connotations, “producing a perfectly horrid image of darkness: the Africanist Savage Villain” (Lenhardt 2020, p. 18). At first glance, in *Clay’s Ark*, if Butler’s novel is read as Gothic science fiction, the juxtaposition of African American Eli and white Blake Maslin may seem to fit this Gotheme, but Butler complicates and problematizes this discursive pattern. Although the black astronaut brings the extraterrestrial contagion to Earth, his thoughts and actions do not make him a savage villain, and the white physician does not manage to heroically fight the disease and save humanity; on the contrary, he is the one who causes the pandemic at the end of the novel.

### 3. A Fearful World

The world of *Clay’s Ark* is fearful and graphically violent, but also uncannily recognizable in certain ways, as it is set in a speculative version of the US in 2021. With what could be seen as close to prophetic foresight, Butler sets this novel that ends with a pandemic outbreak in a year that for today’s readers was indelibly marked by the COVID-19 pandemic. Other aspects of the setting of this novel are also uncomfortably close to home, such as the on-going and worsening environmental and climate crises, and the ever-widening gap between the rich and the poor. Butler had originally set *Clay’s Ark* in the present of the 1980s, but then moved it thirty-eight years into the future: “as she said to her editor, thirty-eight years ago ‘Hiroshima was bombed, TV was about to come into its own, jet planes existed and had been used, and Southern California had a water problem’—a world that was both remarkably similar and remarkably different” (Canavan 2016, p. 86). As Gerry Canavan puts it in his biocritical book on Butler, “Thirty-eight years was enough time for the world to be transformed yet still recognizable, enough time for the problems we are ignoring in the present to have grown into insolvable crises” (Canavan 2016, p. 86). Choosing this temporal setting for the novel is an example of Butler’s work as HistoFuturist, a term she invented in the early 1980s (and, like her communication with the editor, was found among Butler’s Papers at the Huntington Library). A HistoFuturist, as Shelley Streeby explains, “extrapolates from the human and technological past and present by [...] working over research materials to speculate about possible futures that might materialize on their foundations” (Streeby 2018, p. 721). Like a modern-day Janus, Butler was looking backwards and forwards from her own present when writing this novel set in a dystopic near-future USA.

Born on July 4 in 1977 (Butler 1985, p. 9), one year after the bicentenary of the USA, Blake Maslin has the longest personal-temporal perspective of the four characters that serve as focalizers in *Clay’s Ark*; the other three are Eli, Rane, and Keira, who are all younger than him. Remembering his African American wife, Jorah, Blake thinks back to the time they met at UCLA: “He was going to fight diseases of the body and she, diseases of a society that seemed to her too shortsighted and indifferent to survive. She preached at him about old-fashioned, long-lost causes—human rights, the elderly, ecology, throwaway children, corporate government, the vast rich-poor gap and the shrinking middle class . . .” (Butler 1985, p. 159). Her family, “who had worked themselves out of one of the worst cesspools of the southland”, does not approve of her marrying “a white man who had never suffered a day in his life” and who believes that social causes are “passé” (Butler 1985,

p. 160). The Maslin family lives in a walled enclave: “Enclaves were islands 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” (Butler 1985, p. 32). It is in this protected environment Blake and Jorah’s two daughters are raised, and “Like most enclave parents, Blake had done all he could to recreate the safe world of perhaps sixty years past for his children” (Butler 1985, p. 32). While his wife is still alive, Blake does, however, begin doing some work at one of the “cesspool” hospitals: “It was like trying to empty the Pacific with a spoon, but he kept at it—as she kept at her teaching until a young sewer slug blew away most of the back of her head with a new submachine gun” (Butler 1985, p. 160). The word used for areas outside the walled enclaves not only underlines Blake’s ideological views but also the parallel between the human body and society; in this diseased society, poor, unsafe, and dangerous living areas are routinely called “cesspools”—places for what is regarded as human waste, the abject—where what was once part of society has been “chewed up” and expelled, only to return as a deadly threat: a dark depiction of society expressed in a highly Gothic vocabulary.

Highways, roads, and city streets are also potentially deadly, and described in similar language; moving along these “sewers” are “sewer rats” and “sewer slugs”, such as the thirteen-year-old “sewer slug” who blows off the back of Jorah’s head. Studying a map, Meda, one of the women in Eli’s community, states, “What this highway really is at this point is a sewer. From what I’ve heard about city sewers, the only reason they’re worse is because they have more sewer rats. But the gangs here are just as dangerous, and the haulers . . . body-parts dealers, arms smugglers [. . .]” (Butler 1985, p. 102). The use of words such as “sewer rats” and “sewer slugs” is a way to de-humanize people, to make them Other; in Vint’s words, they “recall how the category of the animal is used to mark the boundary between those people who ‘achieve’ humanness and those who do not” (Vint 2005, p. 290). In American history, as well as elsewhere, this Gothically inflected strategy has been used to set up hierarchies and boundaries between different groups of people.

The gangs and haulers referred to by Meda are undoubtedly dangerous. Towards the end of the novel, Keira, searching for her injured father, runs towards a truck and muses on the likelihood of a driver picking up “strays” (people who for some reason are trying to get a ride): “People who picked them up might be only dangerously naïve or they might be thieves, murderers, traffickers in prostitutes, or, most frighteningly, body-parts dealers—though according to her father, involuntary transplant donors were more likely to come from certain of the privately run, cesspool hospitals” (Butler 1985, p. 192). The fear of body-parts dealers, of becoming an involuntary transplant donor, contributes to the body horror of this novel: the fear of mutilation. Keira’s reflection on what her father has told her about some privately run hospitals in economically deprived, vulnerable areas also points to the horror of relentless capitalism.

The state of the world in this novel by the turn of the century is what triggers the space program that results in the *Clay’s Ark* expedition to Proxima Centauri Two. There were “religious overzealousness on one side, destructive hedonism on the other, with both heated by ideological intolerance and corporate greed” (Butler 1985, p. 154). The people behind the space program “feared humanity would extinguish itself on Earth, the only world in the solar system that could support human life” (Butler 1985, p. 154). So, ironically, instead of finding a new place for humanity in the stars, the spaceship brings back an extraterrestrial microbial invasion that threatens to bring on the end of humanity.

#### 4. Contagion as Body Horror

While uninfected, violent humans are definitely sources of fear and horror in *Clay’s Ark*, contagion constitutes the greatest threat not only to many of the characters but also to humanity as a whole. As Reyes observes, “Like all horror, body horror must present at least one source of threat to its intradiegetic characters. This source of threat need not be human or [. . .] necessarily a monster, but it will need to have a sense of agency” (Reyes

2020, p. 397). Although it is pointed out more than once in the novel that the alien microbes are not intelligent, there is a strong sense of agency as they take control of the people who have been infected. When Eli escapes from the crashed spaceship, he is driven by the extraterrestrial microbes: “the one thing he *must* do: seeking out new hosts for the alien microorganisms that had made themselves such fundamental parts of his body. Their purpose was now his purpose, and their only purpose was to survive and multiply” (Butler 1985, p. 30). In body horror, according to Reyes, parasitism “underscores questions of moral integrity and helplessness” (Reyes 2022, p. 111), and this is evident also in *Clay’s Ark* where the microbes are symbionts rather than parasites. To begin with, Eli feels helpless and regards himself as “a prisoner within his own skull, cut off from conscious control of his body” (Butler 1985, p. 29). As he tries to control the spread of the microorganisms, prevent an epidemic by containing it on the ranch of Meda’s family, and at the same time hold on to some of his humanity and a sense of ethics, he is involved in an ongoing negotiation with the symbiotic microbes that have combined with and fundamentally changed his own body.

Eli and other surviving hosts of the infection are markedly physically changed. They lose weight although they eat more than uninfected people; moreover, survivors and newly infected people prefer raw and unseasoned to cooked or processed food, which also at times serves as a source of alienation and disgust for uninfected characters. Reyes points out that “in body horror there will always be an element of revulsion associated with the exceptional body” (Reyes 2020, p. 394). This type of revulsion is apparent in the reactions of Blake and Rane to Eli and his people. Arriving at their ranch, Rane is struck by their physical appearance and appalled by the way they look at her, which she experiences as something close to physical assault: “They were all scrawny and their eyes seemed larger than normal in their gaunt faces. They looked at her with hunger or lust. They looked so intently she felt as though they had reached for her with their thin fingers” (Butler 1985, p. 76). The description of these people’s bodies and body parts as “scrawny”, “gaunt”, and “thin” is decidedly negative; the “hunger or lust” she detects in their way of looking at her taken to its most extreme implies fear of rape, and perhaps even cannibalism.

In his interaction with Meda, Blake experiences similar revulsion, and what he regards as inexplicable, ridiculous fear. He finds her thin face “predatory” and is afraid that “In a moment, she would take hold of him with her skinny claws. He stood up, stiff with fear of the woman and fear of showing it” (Butler 1985, p. 32). Blake asks himself, “What was it about these people? How were they able to terrify when they did nothing?” (Butler 1985, p. 33). He thinks that it is as if “there were something other than human about them” (Butler, *Clay’s Ark* 33). Even though he is more right than he knows in his feeling that Meda (as host to extraterrestrial microbial symbionts) is more- or other-than-human, what the description of her indicates is a lean predatory animal or bird of prey with claws, or possibly the Gothic image of a witch. When Blake tries to escape from her and the rest of the people on the ranch, he is looking for Rane to pick her up in the car: “But he saw only stick people—menacing, utterly terrifying in their difference and their intensity. In the moonlight, they seemed other than human” (Butler 1985, p. 62). Here, Blake’s fear of Eli and his people is highlighted: the “stick people” are “utterly terrifying” to him because they are different and therefore appear to be other than human, triggering the mechanism of Othering. The reference to the moonlight again points to Blake’s fear having supernatural Gothic overtones, despite his being a man of science and rationality, a twenty-first-century physician.

It is significant that it is actually the two focalizers who are coded as white, Blake and his whiter-skinned daughter Rane, that are suspicious of the food they are served at the ranch. Although he quickly rejects this assumption, Blake initially “wondered whether the food was clean and free of live parasites. Could some parasite, some worm, perhaps, be responsible for these people’s weight loss?” (Butler 1985, p. 31). Rane is worried because she is unfamiliar with vegetables that do not come out of some sort of container, but are actually picked and eaten where they grow. The fear of parasitism, as Diehl points out

in her article on American germ culture, is connected to twentieth-century discourses on race and ethnicity in the US: “the concept of a microbial parasite was extended to a race parasite [. . .]” (Diehl 2013, p. 85). Reyes categorizes “parasitic horror” as the kind of body horror that “primarily revels in infection phobias and tells stories about the gradual domination of one body (the human) by another (a foreign and sometimes supernatural one)” (Reyes 2022, p. 110). This type of phobic fear, which has been racialized in the USA, is referenced in the epilogue of *Clay’s Ark* when the alien microbe is spreading uncontrollably in different cities: “In Louisiana there’s a group that has decided that the disease was brought in by foreigners—so they are shooting anyone who seems a little odd to them. Mostly Asians, blacks, and browns” (Butler 1985, p. 200). The scapegoating of Asians, blacks, and browns—of “foreigners”—in a pandemic brings to the fore the very real and still very much present horrors of racism, and it also resonates, as Diehl has shown, with an American history in which “Alien contact implied illicit copulation or racial contamination as Western anti-immigration activists began to accuse nonwhite peoples of importing disease and infection across their borders” (Diehl 2013, p. 87).

Rabies and rabidity are also important in various ways to *Clay’s Ark*. Like parasites and worms, rabies figures in Blake’s attempts to make sense of the disease. When Meda tells him about the nature of the extraterrestrial disease he is reminded of another illness: “It was something people did not get any longer—something old and deadly that people had once gotten from animals. And the animals had gone out of their way to spread it. The name came to him suddenly: rabies” (Butler 1985, p. 39). In a 1988 interview, Butler explained that she based the disease in *Clay’s Ark* on rabies, as she “was fascinated by the fact that one of the side effects of rabies is a briefly heightened sensitivity” and “thought it would be great to contract a disease that was both contagious and a real physical boost” (McCaffery and McMenamin 1990, p. 21). Moreover, in *Skin Shows*, Halberstam argues that “rabidity, in a horror film about chains of infection, maps out a new narrative form, one characterized not by straightforward progression but by cycles of parasitism [. . .]” (Halberstam 1995, p. 158). Here I would suggest that the structure of Butler’s novel is similarly informed by cycles of infection eschewing straightforward chronology.

*Clay’s Ark* consists of temporal retakes from different points of view, following the four focalizers’ cycles of infection, their attitudes, and the outcomes of their infection. As already mentioned, the chapters alternate between “Past” and “Present”, which means that the chapters with uneven numbers, 1–27, follow Eli from five days after the spacecraft crashed to his coming to terms with the fact that all children born to infected parents are quadrupeds, and establishing that he and the then-three women on the ranch will go on trying to contain the disease as long as possible, even though he knows it is a losing battle. In this way, the reader has access to the already infected and physically transformed Eli’s point of view throughout the novel. In terms of Gothic fiction’s more- or other-than-human predecessors, it may perhaps be possible to see him as a parallel to Frankenstein’s monster in that readers are privy to his own thoughts and motivations. Besides the alternating structure between “Past” and “Present” chapters, the novel is divided into five parts: Part 1: Physician; Part 2: P.O.W.; Part 3: Manna; Part 4: Reunion; and Part 5: Jacob. In Part 1, the “Present” chapters follow and are focalized through Blake; in Part 2, Rane; and in Part 3, Keira. These parts cover the same period of time, but give insights into what happens to the three members of the Maslin family, as they are divided at the ranch after being abducted by Eli and his people, and constitute the beginning of each cycle of infection, either through a scratch breaking the skin or sex. “Physician” is obviously a reference to Blake. “P.O.W.” (prisoner of war) is perhaps a less obvious reference to Rane, but it resonates with how she regards her situation with Eli’s people: as a form of Gothic captivity. Her twin sister Keira’s view is diametrically different to Rane’s as the heading “Manna” indicates. Keira, who is weak and dying due to untreatable leukemia, is instantly attracted to Eli. They have sex after Keira has made clear that this is what she really wants, which means that she is effectively infected by the extraterrestrial microbe. As her cycle of infection goes on throughout the rest of the novel, it becomes clear that the infection is beneficial for her and

that she will survive. In Part 4, “Reunion”, the members of the Maslin family are reunited but captured by the car family. They are again divided in Part 5, which means that the three “Present” chapters in this part of the novel are each focalized through one of them. In this part, “Jacob”, the “Past” chapters are focused on the quadruped children, and Eli’s initial reactions to them, with Jacob being the first child born to infected parents.

### 5. Monstrous Kinship

Various family constellations—Eli’s family of infected people and quadruped children, the Maslin family, the car family—are central in *Clay’s Ark*, and they are related to horror and monstrosity in different ways. In a discussion of monstrous kin in novels by N. K. Jemison and Nnedi Okorafor, Marinette Grimbeek contends that “understandings of the monstrous are always already implicated in notions of kinship, irrespective of whether these are employed to exclude the other as nonkin or to expose the vulnerability of notions of the self or kin” (Grimbeek 2023, p. 178). Similarly, notions of family and kinship, of inclusion and exclusion, of what is normal and what is perverse or monstrous, are explored throughout *Clay’s Ark*.

Eli’s building and maintaining an isolated family of infected, transformed people and their nonhuman offspring is one thread that runs through the entire novel. He is initially taken in and cared for by Meda’s family, and when they contract the infection and go through the difficult and sometimes lethal stages of the disease, he tries to take care of them and help them to survive. Eli realizes that “he was making them his family—a family with ugly problems” (Butler 1985, p. 69). In regard to Meda, he strongly feels that “she must live or he was a monster, utterly evil, completely without control of the thing that made him monstrous” (Butler 1985, p. 86). In these early stages of Eli’s infection there are signs of the “sense of fear or disgust for the self, and negative emotions towards the non-normative body” that Reyes brings up in his discussion of body horror (Reyes 2020, p. 394). When Eli first arrives at the ranch, he stands outside the window of a room in which a fertile woman sleeps; he is furiously fighting his body’s close-to-overwhelming impulses to break in and go to the woman. “He was not an animal, not a rapist, not a murderer. Yet he knew that if he let himself be drawn to the woman, he would rape her. If he raped her, if he touched her at all, she might die” (Butler 1985, p. 17). As he fights his sexual urges, he feebly tries to remember that he has decided to be “human plus, not human minus” (Butler 1985, p. 17). Eli’s converting the ranch into “a colony, an enclave” for a “human gathering, not a herd” (Butler 1985, p. 87)—a family—is thus a complicated enterprise, particularly as the alien microbes, in their compulsion to spread and procreate, at times make their human hosts’ physical urges stronger than social taboos such as incest.

In *Clay’s Ark*, then, incest is one of the hazards for newly infected people who are in close proximity to their biological kin. The people living on the ranch when Eli arrives are a white family consisting of Meda, her parents, her two brothers, and their wives. After they have been infected, “Meda found both her brothers and her father after her, and she, like them, was alternately lustful and horrified” (Butler 1985, p. 69). Her father is the most horrified of them all by being sexually drawn to her: “He felt he had gone from patriarch and man of God to criminally depraved pervert unable to keep his hands off his own daughter” (Butler 1985, p. 69). Eli makes sure that the members of Meda’s family will not commit incest, since, as he sees it, “They would be losing enough of their humanity shortly” (Butler 1985, p. 58). When Eli and his people abduct Blake and his two daughters, they are separated and interact with different people on the ranch. However, when the Maslins are caught by the car family, they are locked into the same room. Blake is badly beaten and is not entirely conscious of what has happened, but later discovers that Rane has had to pull Keira away from him, and the car family has then put them elsewhere to protect them from him. As the car family watches turn-of-the-century religious movies from the ranch family’s library, Rane bitterly thinks, “Well, maybe God had arrived a few years late from Proxima Centauri Two. God in the form of a deadly little microbe that for its procreation made a father try to rape his dying daughter—and made the daughter not

mind" (Butler 1985, p. 168). The Gothic horror of white men committing incest, raping their black daughters, also reverberates with the nation's slavery past. This past has also generated the conflation of incest with miscegenation in American literature and other discourses (Sollors 1997; Holland 2012).

If incest constitutes the horror of raping or having sexual intercourse with one's close biological kin, the notion of miscegenation apparently represents fear of the opposite: the mixing of different races or species. As Holland puts it, "Miscegenation, as the space of commingling and (un)like a vacuum, drags more than just race into its orbit. It also takes categories like brother/sister, human/animal, and produces an end product that is now the 'us' that we used to call 'them'" (Holland 2012, p. 108). *Clay's Ark* brings up antiblack racism connected to ideas of miscegenation in the context of the extraterrestrial-human invasion, contagion, and hybridity. Looking back thirty-eight years from Butler's present when she wrote the novel, about two thirds of the states in the USA still had anti-miscegenation laws: they all prohibited marriages between blacks and whites—if not also marriages between whites and people belonging to other ethnic groups—at least until 1948 and many until 1967, when, as mentioned above, the US Supreme Court ruled anti-miscegenation laws unconstitutional. According to Luckhurst, commenting on Butler's oeuvre in the mid-1990s, "Butler's work, if anything, addresses the ethical horror, dubious complicities, responsibilities and desires of the always 'inappropriate' miscegenate" (Luckhurst 1996, p. 31). Although he only spends two sentences on *Clay's Ark* in his article, Luckhurst's overall comment makes excellent sense in terms of this novel, particularly in Eli's case, as I hope to have shown above. Moreover, as Vint observes, the "white farm 'infected' by Eli is transformed into a multiracial as well as an 'animalized' community by the end of the novel, including Hispanic, black, and Asian as well as white characters" (Vint 2005, p. 298). Ideas of miscegenation, then, operate on two levels in *Clay's Ark*. One is overtly referencing twentieth-century American racist ideas of miscegenation: as Diehl points out, early on in the century, "American managers of whiteness had cultivated a powerful web of signifiers connecting race—specifically, nonwhiteness—with invasion, parasitism, and contagion" (Diehl 2013, p. 85). The second is related to the actual mix of homo sapiens and an alien species resulting in nonhuman or hybrid offspring in the novel.

The first hints of anti-miscegenation notions related to race surface in *Clay's Ark* when Eli and another man from his community hijack Blake's car. Eli looks at Rane and Keira, and asks Blake, "What kind of cradles have you been robbing, Doc?" Blake explains that they are his daughters without further elaboration. However, the reader learns that "His wife Jorah had been black, and he and Rane and Keira had been through this routine before" (Butler 1985, p. 8). Eli is described as being surprised but accepting the fact that white Blake has mixed-race daughters more quickly than most people. This passage indicates that it is unusual for white and black people to marry and have children together. Another instance of a more explicitly racist statement that clearly expresses social norms, if not laws, against miscegenation occurs when Meda's family gives Eli a job as a handyman. He works hard on the house that is intended for one of her brothers and his wife. The brother confronts his sister after she has talked to and made a pass at Eli and ends up saying: "If that guy were white, I'd tell you to marry him" (Butler 1985, p. 57). In other words, there is some social if not legal prohibition against black and white people marrying in the future version of the US that this novel portrays.

Another instance indicating racist social norms against this type of marriage is when Rane is informed by a woman in Eli's community about the extraterrestrial microorganism causing the infection, and Eli being an astronaut from the crashed spacecraft *Clay's Ark*. Rane does not believe what she is told and least of all that Eli is an astronaut. She argues that her father would have been a far better choice, and wonders if the woman would believe her if she said that he had been an astronaut. The woman answers, "Not if you're his kid, honey. Nobody with young kids went. No white guy married to a black woman went either. Things never got that loose" (Butler 1985, p. 79). Again, it is made clear that

marriages between white and black people are not approved of in this society and that such a marriage has serious consequences for those involved.

The quadruped children of infected people in Butler's novel actualize issues of miscegenated offspring, hybridity, and various reactions to difference. When Blake and his daughters encounter Eli's community, there are eleven children, and Eli's son, Jacob, is the oldest of them. The similarity of attitudes towards children with one white and one black parent and the quadruped children of Eli's community is brought home in an interchange between Eli and Keira. He tells her that he likes the way she relates to Jacob and another of the community's children: "They're good kids, but the reactions they get sometimes from new people . . ." Keira muses: "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" (Butler 1985, p. 114). As a daughter of an interracial couple, she has had to learn how to deal with people's racist reactions to her parents' marriage, regarding her as the improper miscegenate result of it. Keira, on the other hand, is immediately able to appreciate Jacob and the other quadruped children and regard them as perfect in themselves. She tries to convey her feelings about Jacob to Blake:

"Jacob's beautiful, really", [. . .]. "The way he moves—catlike, smooth, graceful, very fast. And he's as bright as or brighter than any other kid his age. He's—" "Not human", Blake said flatly. "Jesus, what are they breeding back there?" (Butler 1985, p. 65)

Like Blake, Keira's sister Rane reacts very negatively to the children, whom she regards as and refers to as "animals". As Vint aptly observes, the human/animal boundary in *Clay's Ark*, as well as in Western metaphysics in general, "is constructed to mark the recognition or denial of kinship" (Vint 2005, p. 287). Rane, as well as Blake, polices this boundary and fears transgressions or the breakdown of it. She admits to Jacob, who asks why she does not like him, that it is "Because you look different. Because I'm afraid of you" (Butler 1985, p. 96). However, she is not afraid of him "personally, but what he represented" (Butler 1985, p. 97): nonhuman and therefore, in both Rane's and Blake's view, monstrous kinship.

Late in the novel, in the last few sections on the past, Eli's own initial reactions to Jacob's differences are portrayed. Eli has a very difficult time accepting that his "beautiful, precocious child" is a quadruped, and alienates him by his repeated, futile attempts to make him walk upright and by his negative attitude:

There were times when Eli could not even look at the boy. What the hell was going to happen to a kid who ran around on all fours? A freak who could not hide his strangeness. What kind of life could he have? [. . .] he might be mistaken for an animal and shot. And what in heaven's name would be done with him if he were captured instead of killed? Would he be sent off to a hospital for "study" or caged and restricted like even the best of the various apes able to communicate through sign language? Or would he simply be stared at, harassed, tormented by normal people? (Butler 1985, p. 166)

Reyes explains that in body horror, "negative emotions felt towards the non-normative body, especially in the case of transformations or disabilities, may actually be overcome after a period of adaptation for the characters", which is the case regarding Eli's feelings towards his own transformation; over time he adapts to the corporeal symbiosis with the alien microbes and the way it changes his body and physical needs. With time he also overcomes his negative emotions towards the quadruped children's physical differences. However, at this point, it is his awareness and fear of "normal" people's likely reactions to his son that inform his attitude towards Jacob. As Reyes points out, in body horror, "If the main characters themselves do not experience their corporeality with panic, others likely will, and their rejection will mark either the beginning of self-loathing or else the quest to annihilate the threat the strange body poses to the status quo" (Reyes 2020, p. 394). Although Eli loves Jacob desperately, he considers killing him for his own good, which is something both the women and Jacob perceive. The thought of committing filicide to

protect one's child from other people and society—which, for example, is acted out in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*—both point to the lethal violence that may lurk within families and the physical, scientific, and psychological violence of society.

Mechanisms of familial inclusion and exclusion are also at work in connection with the car family in *Clay's Ark*. This kind of violent, criminal gang appears to be a function of social divisions and precarity in the novel. Although the designation “family” may seem ironic in regard to marauding gangs, it becomes clear in Blake's interchanges with members of the car family who has kidnapped them that they seriously regard themselves as a family. The leader, Badger, is surprised that the Maslins' relatives are willing to pay a ransom for them, and says to Blake, “Most of you walled-in types don't give a piss for each other, Doc. You don't know family like we do” (Butler 1985, p. 146). Smoke, a young woman in the car family, who is the result of a rape, explains, when Blake asks for her real name, “We don't keep the same names once we're adopted into a family” (Butler 1985, p. 159). For people being seen as social pariahs, “sewer slugs” or “sewer rats”, being adopted into a car family offers a sense of inclusion and belonging; however, if Eli's infected family is a family with ugly problems that fights to maintain a sense of ethics in the face of infection and transformation, the car family is a monstrous family, who torture, rape, and kill people who are not members of it.

## 6. “Grievous Bodily Harm”

It is through Rane's perspective in the final part of *Clay's Ark* that the monstrous actions of the car family are most distinctly presented as body horror. As Reyes points out, “body horror can foreground the depiction of grievous bodily harm, spectacularizing brutal attacks on characters and presenting the effects of violence aesthetically or in minute detail. This type of visceral horror is the one usually described by the term ‘body horror’ in popular culture [. . .]” (Reyes 2022, p. 114). Like Rane's, Blake's final moments and demise, focalized through Keira, are also informed by body horror in Butler's novel.

The expectation of being raped is built up through Rane's speculations and observations before she is subjected to the violations and brutal violence herself. Separated from her father and sister by the car family, she ponders, “What was worse? Being raped by three or four car rats before she was ransomed or submitting to Eli's people and the microbe?” (Butler 1985, p. 168). Although she is obviously aware of the acute danger she is in at this point, her adverse feelings towards what she has seen at Eli's ranch still have the upper hand. Moreover, she firmly believes that she will be ransomed and let go. Rane is placed where she can hear what goes on in the next room as members of the car family walk in and out of it: “At the moment, they were preoccupied with the ranch women—a mother and her thirteen-year-old daughter. There was also a twelve-year-old son. Rane had heard some of the car rats had raped him, too. [. . .] She could not help hearing moaning, pleading, praying, weeping, screaming [. . .]” (Butler 1985, p. 168). In Butler's novel, then, not only girls and women are victims of rape but also boys and men, which is also made clear elsewhere in *Clay's Ark*.

Rane, however, has no choice in regard to submitting to the microbe since she has already been infected, which leads to her actually seeing—and experiencing—as well as hearing what has happened to the ranch women and the boy in horrifying detail. When her hunger drives her to look for something to eat, and she chooses the raw meat in the fridge, she is also sexually drawn to a man that she finds repulsive to the point that she sees him as a nonhuman animal: “A gorilla, Rane thought” (Butler 1985, p. 170). After she has sated her hunger on the raw meat, she still thinks, “He was an ape. Heavy brow ridges, broken nose, body hair nobody could believe. But [. . .] he smelled interesting” (Butler 1985, p. 171). Trying to resist her sexual urges caused by the microbe and escape, she nevertheless ends up rubbing herself against his body, “smiling outside and screaming inside [. . .] as though she were two people” (Butler 1985, p. 173). The apelike man carries her into a room with beds, throws her down on one, undoes the restraints around her feet, and “causally tore her clothing off. Finally, he climbed onto her and hurt her so badly she screamed aloud” (Butler

1985, p. 174). At this point, Rane knows that she, due to the microbial infection, is strong enough to hurt and even kill the man, but as she is compulsively driven by the mission of the microbes, she refrains from doing that. Although she is tied spreadeagled to the bed and repeatedly raped by different men, her body heals between the sexual assaults. She grows even stronger and becomes more aware of what is happening around her after one of the men brings her raw meat and vegetables: “He unshackled her and watched in amazement and disgust as she ate” (Butler 1985, p. 174). Here Rane’s microbially induced eating habits serve to make her perverse or mad in other people’s eyes. Looking around, she observes that in a corner, “a young boy, naked, covered with blood, lay like discarded trash. [...] He had clearly been tortured, mutilated. His hands were still shackled. [...] His ears and penis had been cut off” (Butler 1985, p. 174). The state of this dead boy’s body brings to mind that of lynched African Americans in nineteenth-century and twentieth-century US history: a very particular kind of real-life American body horror. The ranch woman and her girl are still alive, filthy and tied spreadeagle across separate beds. The woman has been “crying hoarsely” but is now unconscious: “Rane could see and hear her breathing shallowly” (Butler 1985, p. 174), as she is obviously badly hurt. The girl is awake and has watched what is happening to Rane: “The girl’s wrists and ankles were bleeding in spite of the relative gentleness of the security cuffs. Her body was bruised and bloody and there was something wrong about her eyes” (Butler 1985, p. 175). Apparently driven mad by the ways she has been abused, and what she has seen the car family do to the other victims in the room, she starts screaming although nobody is touching her, before she is slapped and goes completely silent. In these few pages then, *Clay’s Ark* runs through a spectrum of body horror, focalized through Rane, which includes disgust, severe self-loathing, and detailed sexual abuse, as well as the horrific results of rapes, torture, and mutilation.

The rest of this chapter is a crescendo of violence and death ending with Rane’s head being cut off. Using her more-than-human strength, Rane manages to break free and get hold of a gun with a fully loaded two-hundred-round magazine. She uses the gun, killing people, to get out of the room and then out of the house. Shooting people again triggers the screaming inside her head, her sense of ethics being at cross-purposes with the survival instinct of the microbes: “She was going to be a doctor someday. Doctors did not kill people; they helped people heal” (Butler 1985, p. 177). In this attempt to escape, Rane gets caught in the crossfire between the reinforcements the car family has called in and Eli’s people. She is shot multiple times: “The disease organism was merciless. It kept her alive even when she knew she must be almost cut in half. It kept her conscious and aware of everything up to the moment someone stood over her, shouting, then seized her by the hair and held her head up as he began to saw slowly at her throat with something dull” (Butler 1985, p. 178). Later, Eli tells Keira that Rane is dead, killed by the car people. When Keira questions how he knows that Rane is dead, he tells her that they “cut her head off and threw it out the front door” (Butler 1985, p. 196). The depiction of Rane’s awareness of her head being slowly sawed off by something dull is pure body horror, as is her severed head being thrown out the door like discarded trash.

The decapitation of Rane can thus be seen as one example of body horror generating “disgust towards the open, vulnerable body” (Reyes 2020, p. 395); and in this case, the reader is privy to the decapitation from the point of view of the person being decapitated. The disgust towards a mangled body may be even more apparent in the final chapter, which is focalized through Keira. She traces her father after he, like her, has escaped from the captivity of the car family; he has been injured and she follows the trail of blood. Keira hides as she hears a truck, which drives past her, but she can hear it slow down and stop further ahead. When she finds him, her father has been “half-crushed by the wheels of the truck” and “[h]is legs, the whole lower part of him looked stuck to the broken pavement with blood and ruined flesh” (Butler 1985, p. 193). This is a graphic depiction of a mangled human body. Despite these “massive injuries” he is alive, and “Keira dropped down beside him, sickened, revolted. She could barely look at him [...]” (Butler 1985, p. 193). Her

reaction to her father's body reinforces the horror of the graphic depiction, as does the fact that Blake is alive despite his terrible injuries.

The reason for the driver of the truck to run over Blake in this gruesome way is simply to steal his wallet, which again shows the brutality of this fearful world. In the process of being robbed, Blake takes hold of the driver and uncontrollably "tore at him like an animal" (Butler 1985, p. 194). It is thus ultimately Blake's actions that set off the pandemic that is described in the epilogue.

## 7. Concluding Remarks

As indicated above, in *Clay's Ark*, Butler thus activates the American Gothic discursive pattern, or Gotheme, of the Africanist Savage Villain and white Civil Hero (Lenhardt 2020), but she does it in ways that complicate and critique it. The white physician and man of science, Blake Maslin, does not save the world from contagion, but instead sets off a full-scale pandemic. It is also Blake's thoughts that veer towards supernatural Gothic horror when he tries to make sense of his reactions to and perceptions of Eli and his people. In contrast, African American Eli, who brought the extraterrestrial disease to Earth, is the character in the novel who, besides Blake's murdered wife, has a well-developed ethical compass, which informs his thoughts and actions throughout the transformations and adaptations that the symbiosis with the alien microbe brings. Thus, Butler manages to place an already infected and therefore dangerous African American male character at the center of the novel without making him a villain or monster. In the pairing of Blake and Eli, then, Butler signifies against the racist history and discourses that Goddu traces in *Gothic America*, in addition to the racialized and racializing Gotheme that Lenhardt outlines.

Body horror, as I have shown, informs the structure of the novel as well as the setting and events. The alternation between chapters set in the past and the present, and the temporal retakes through focalization in the different sections follow the four main characters' cycles of contagion, similar to the new narrative form based on rabidity that Halberstam (1995, p. 58) has observed in horror films about chains of infection. This narrative form—together with Blake's failures and shortcomings as a white, privileged man of science and the dystopic, Gothic state of the world of *Clay's Ark*—questions Western ideas of straightforward chronology and linear progress.

Through the fear and disgust created by body horror, Butler also explores monstrous aspects of kinship and human violence towards other humans in the novel. These processes, transgressions, and actions are paralleled with those of American antiblack violence and racism. In *Clay's Ark*, then, Butler highlights the residue of notions grounded in anti-miscegenation laws in people's racist responses to interracial marriages and children; hints at rape and incest during slavery times and at twentieth-century racialized phobias, developed in what Diehl calls American germ culture; and graphically describes a mutilated body in terms that resonate with the state of bodies of lynched African Americans. From an African American perspective, American history is a Gothic history filled with body horror. However, Butler's novel also attests to Storey and Shapiro's claim that through its materiality and corporeality, horror points to historically immediate experiences, and is in this sense "modern-facing" (Storey and Shapiro 2022, p. 3). This novel is, moreover, future-facing as it is set in a speculative future version of the USA, in a year that today is part of our near past.

Working as a HistoFuturist in *Clay's Ark*, taking American history into account as well as extrapolating a future based on her present in the early 1980s, Butler combines sophisticated literary strategies and Gothically inflected biological science fiction with Gothic horror elements used in horror films at the time of her writing the novel, balancing various traits of the genres against each other. Like in other of her novels and short stories, she revisits the colonial aspects of the science fiction genre—colonialism being one of "the horrors propagated by traditional SF" (Huang 2022, p. 173)—and reverses them: *Clay's Ark* portrays the aftermath of a colonial space adventure gone awry where the potential human colonizers and Earth itself end up being colonized by the alien microbes. Through

this microbial bodily invasion and its effects, humankind is threatened and ultimately decentered, which exposes the patterns—and the futility—of American antiblack racism as well as human exceptionalism.

So, although the 1980s are already receding into American history and a few aspects of the imagined twenty-first century in this novel may feel dated today (while many are uncomfortably close to home), *Clay's Ark* is a prime example of how aspects of popular culture genres and media—such as science fiction, the Gothic, and horror films—can be employed in an American novel to worry, question, and destabilize ingrained historical and cultural patterns.

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