

# From Dystopia to Utopia: The Construction of Post-Human Life Community in Kurt Vonnegut's *Galápagos*

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**Abstract.** Kurt Vonnegut constructed a post-apocalyptic fantasy in *Galápagos*: after the extinction effects of technology abuse, war and ecological unbalance in the Capitalocene, the old human race cannot reproduce due to the plague, while the new human race comes to an island by “Noah's Ark” and evolves into seal-like animals, returning to nature and living in harmony with other species; it contains a profound criticism of the Anthropocene and a post-human ecological imagination of life forms. Based on the framework of subversion-reconstruction-prospect of life community, this paper explores the construction path of post-human life community. Finally, it is pointed out that the essence of this construction is the nomadic strategy of escape and the fantasy of absolute de-territorialization, but it reveals the vision and value of reconstructing the life community.

**Keywords:** Vonnegut, post-human, Galápagos, life community

## 1. Introduction

The conservative ecological view holds that human culture is the creation-formation of nature, which is ontologically antagonistic to ecology; humans cannot return to the primordial existence of oneness with nature, otherwise, it would be a negation of human existence. However, post-humanists such as Braidotti, and Haraway transcend this logic with notions of universal vitality and becoming-with, forming the conceptual dimension of the life community. However, existing studies on post-human communities in literature mostly confine themselves to the examination of human species, social structures, etc., lacking ecological interpretations of a community of life for man and nature and ethical reflections on practice. This paper takes Kurt Vonnegut Jr. (1922-2007), the American humanitarian writer, and his novel *Galápagos* (1985) as an example, intending to view the subversion of the old life community from the perspective of dystopian narrative, analyze the construction of the new life community after humans return to the primordial existence in the novel, and finally, using the ecological perspectives of Bookchin and Haraway as a lens, anticipate the ecological society and symbiosis mechanism presented by the post-human life community in the novel.

## 2. Nightmarish “Dystopia”: Subversion of the Old Life Community

“The future of humanity is no longer a paradise or a refuge, but more like a terrifying hell. This ironic interpretation of the trend of modern human development is referred to by scholars as ‘dystopia’ or ‘anti-utopia’... It represents a society opposite to utopia, a place where imaginary politics and economics are in chaos. In summary, dystopia is a ‘dark’ imagination of the future.” [1] Like works such as *Slaughterhouse-Five* and *Cat's Cradle*, the black-humorist, Vonnegut, also employs a warning and satirical language to unfold a nightmarish “dark” imagination of human society in *Galápagos*. This pessimistic critique is often understood by scholars as misanthropic humanism. Thematically, dystopia takes various forms, and *Galápagos* writes the subversion of the old life community with a triple landscape of capitalist dystopia, technological dystopia, and apocalyptic dystopia [1].

The post-humanist Braidotti proposed that the life community is composed of “the common materiality of human and non-human, ecological basis, and technological intermediaries” [2], where no life subject exists independently without others, possessing the dynamic generation of “universal vitality” flowing through all things which become-with each other. However, humanity's infinite desire for proliferation has led to resource plundering, war, and destruction of ecological habitats, resulting in the imbalance and subversion of this life community, as depicted in *Galápagos*. The main plot of the novel is as follows: In the 1980s, a company in the capital of Ecuador plans a “natural journey of the century”, and the world-class “Darwin Bay” is about

to carry celebrities to the Galápagos Islands. However, when the global financial crisis breaks out, Peru goes to war with Ecuador, while a virus that causes female infertility spreads around the world, putting humans on the brink of extinction. The captain of the “Darwin Bay”, who lacks navigation proficiency, carries the last 10 survivors of the old human race and accidentally strands on the island of Santa Rosaria at the northern end of the Galápagos Islands. They become the ancestors of the new human race and evolves into a seal-like creature with extremely small brains and fins without arms. With an essentialist perspective, Vonnegut attributes the fault of the old human race to the “big brains”, which breed human alienation and its disregard for the life community.

The novel’s depiction of consequences due to this alienation and disregard lies in:

### 2.1. The Instrumental Rationality in the Capitalist Dystopia

“The Frankfurt School identifies that instrumental rationality has permeated the overall structure of society and various aspects of social life, creating a one-dimensional society and mode of thinking, and becoming the foundation for the comprehensive rule and enslavement of humanity in capitalist society” [3]. Instrumental rationality advocates efficiency and profit, treating nature and others as objects to obtain benefits, thus ignoring their intrinsic value. Financier MacIntosh has the influence to mitigate the impact of environmental pollution and resource waste but only seeks to exploit the lower classes through technology, extracting profits and controlling the world. Under global capitalism, material and money have shifted from means to direct ends, and people’s attitudes towards non-humans and ecological foundations become irrelevant. “They (referring to the old human race, editor’s note) are like deaf and blind bellies judging how urgent a problem is (such as the destruction of North American and European forests by acid rain)” [4] (p.132). Through the narrator’s voice, Vonnegut repeatedly portrays the greed and selfishness of the big brains under capitalist enslavement and the absurdity of the fetishization of money in the work, aiming to remind people to regain value rationality and ethical principles of life, abandon the cancerous logic of capital proliferation, just like the most poignant sentence in the book: “I need to tell you, from the air, this once beautiful and bountiful planet now looks like poor Roy Hepburn’s diseased organs exposed in an autopsy, those obvious cancers, growing for the sake of growth, consuming everything and poisoning everything, are these cities of humanity that you love so much?” [4] (p.282).

### 2.2. Ethical Misconduct and Toxic Discourse in the Technological Dystopia

“Toxic discourse” is a distinctive feature of post-natural literature (i.e., literature that holds the primitive nature no longer exists because of environmental pollution), “depicting horrifying scenes such as rampant epidemics, frequent nuclear leaks, and haze, warning of the deep crisis behind the prosperous urban landscape—the desolation of the collective human habitat and the loss of survival significance, calling for the abandonment of anthropocentrism, the construction of a life community, to achieve the common well-being of all life on Earth” [5]. *Galápagos* presents such “horrifying scenes” as: “All forests were cut down, all lakes were polluted by acid rain, and all underground water was undrinkable due to industrial waste” [4] (p.84). Written in 1985, due to its temporal characteristics, Vonnegut was particularly concerned with the theme of nuclear pollution in the toxic discourse. Roy’s brain cancer, Mary’s infertility, Akiko’s body hair, Selena’s blindness, and Captain Kleist’s “Huntington’s chorea” are more or less related to gene mutations caused by nuclear radiation. The narrative not only reveals the relationship between environmental deterioration and health, emphasizing the interconnectedness of the life community, but also reflects the ethical misconduct of technological abuse. During the war between Peru and Ecuador in the novel, two rockets are launched. One of them “caused the deaths of thousands of people, birds, dogs, cats, mice, and other creatures” [4] (p.239), while Colonel Reyes, who presses the launch button, derives “a transcendent pleasure more enjoyable than sex” [4] (p.208) from this act. Although he knows nothing about mechanics, once the computer is activated, it sends detailed instructions to the release system and accurately launched the rocket. This pleasure reflects Freudian “polymorphous perversity”, meaning anything can become the object of libido impulse, its incomprehensibility reminiscent of the extreme evil in Hannah Arendt’s context, but the annihilation of individual morality and the calculation of scientific rationality point to the modernity in Zygmunt Bauman’s context, which has become the main cause of the collapse of the life community.

### 2.3. Parody of Genesis in the Apocalyptic Dystopia

According to Vonnegut himself, the story of *Galápagos* can also be called the “Second Noah’s Ark.” The novel is replete with direct or indirect references to characters and plots from the Bible, constituting a common postmodern narrative technique in Vonnegut’s works, namely parody. Despite the downfall and sins of the old human race—nuclear radiation, war, famine, global financial crisis, and ecological pollution—they are still not enough to completely overturn the old life community. At this point, the author ingeniously arranges a “deluge”: a virus ravages the globe and devours all the eggs in human ovaries. Afterward, women, like Mary, can no longer bear children, and there is no way to stop the spread of this disease. The “Noah’s Ark,” the Darwin Bay vessel, runs aground on Santa Rosalia Island, an “Eden,” with 10 survivors aboard, where Captain Kleist becomes the Adam of the new human race, and six Kanka-Bono girls from the tropical rainforests of Ecuador become the Eves. “None of them had outstanding ‘big brains’, no wealth-creating capabilities, and no unique survival skills on a desert island. These innocent survivors formed the primitive community of the new human race” [6]. In this sense, it can be said that the big brains of the old human race have become sacrifices to Jehovah in the story of Genesis. Thus, the world of dystopia ends, and the life community enters a new

chapter.

### 3. The Reconfigured “Human”: Origin of the New Life Community

The old life community, in its geological sense, is consistent with the concept of “the Anthropocene”. The latter was proposed by Nobel laureate chemist Crutzen to highlight the enormous impact of human activities on the geology and ecosystems. “This is a reflexive concept—it inspires reflection on the planetary effects of human activities. The concept of the Anthropocene embeds explorations of the ‘post-human era’, inspiring various efforts to step out of the Anthropocene and put an end to it” [7]. Thus, it can be inferred that the Anthropocene is anti-apocalyptic. With the curtain falling on the anthropocentric society of rationalism in *Galápagos*, the Darwin Bay sets sail for people to step out of the Anthropocene, marking the advent of a post-apocalyptic and post-human era. On Santa Rosalía Island, in the space of Heidegger’s so-called “being-thrown” (*Geworfenheit*), there are no crises brought by “civilized societies” such as erosion by capital and technology, resource plundering, war, financial crises, and political manipulation. In short, this is a state of primordial nature, a free, “uncovered” “clearing in the woods” (*Lichtung*). However, upon closer examination, it is evident that there are many controversies behind this setting. For example, in a society under the enslavement of global capitalism (referred to by post-humanist Haraway as the “Capitalocene”), does such a state of primordial nature really exist? The anthropologist Bruno Latour proposed: “In the Anthropocene, the ‘artificialization’ of the entire earth has abandoned the concept of ‘nature’ just as ‘wilderness’ has, for better or for worse, we have entered a post-natural era” [7]. The collusion between the Capitalocene and the Anthropocene has led to the removal of the boundaries between nature/culture, nature/artifice, and no longer exists an “external” nature, only “internal” resources [8].

Moreover, even if such a nature exists, can we really return to it and achieve harmonious coexistence between man and nature? Jacques Lacan’s viewpoint is that human culture is the creation-formation of nature, which is ontologically antagonistic to ecology. Humans cannot return to the primordial existence of the sameness with nature because “through this fierce antagonism, humans have severed the umbilical cord between themselves and the primordial balance of nature and animals. Humans cannot heal the wound on the body of the mother nature because they are that wound” [9]. However, fundamentally, this is still a conservative or even rigid ecological concept that views nature, animals, and human culture as opposites. The return to the primordial nature in *Galápagos* can be seen negatively as an attempt to “re-mystify” the “external” nature, or positively as a reasonable idea for constructing a life community—once the capitalized “Human” subjectivity is reconfigured, then everything is not irreversible, and the primordial balance between humans, nature, and non-human species can be restored.

Katherine Hayles points out that the subjectivity of post-humans needs to be continuously constructed and the boundaries need to be rebuilt. “Consciousness/ideas are just an accidental phenomenon, like a new nobleman rising, trying to exaggerate a minor program into the whole show. Before Descartes thought of the self as the thinking mind, the long Western tradition regarded consciousness/ideas as the center of personality (human identity)” [10] (P.3). According to statistics, there are over 20 satires on the big brains in *Galápagos*, and over 10 criticisms of the “opinions” generated by them. It is these opinions that determine the virtual paper wealth, which, when the financial crisis strikes, even if there is sufficient food for all humanity, thousands of people in many countries die of hunger because they cannot afford food due to currency devaluation; it is these opinions that change the ownership of private property, leading to reckless behavior and cruel acts. Due to the selfishness and greed of the big brains, people disregard the well-being of other species, destroy natural habitats, and cause the extinction of species such as albatrosses and ivory-billed woodpeckers. When the 10 survivors (referred to as “colonists” in the book) land on Santa Rosalía Island at first, they “almost immediately” killed all the land tortoises to satisfy their hunger. The narrative attributes the big brains to an evolutionary mistake and, through a process of adaptation to the island’s environment over a million years, lets humans evolve for the second time into marine creatures resembling seals. “They are just a link in the food chain of Santa Rosalía Island, no longer have human forms, no longer rely on brains and desires, and no longer exhibit the binary opposition of good and evil” [6]. The hands of the new humans have regressed into fins, and their brains have shrunk to the size of a bullet, with no language or tools. Hands and brains symbolize human technology and desires, and losing them means that humans cannot develop science or plunder resources, thereby deconstructing human subjectivity in the natural world. From the perspective of Mikhail Bakhtin’s carnivalization, the distinction between superiority and inferiority between humans, animals and plants is completely eliminated, and this “primate of all creatures” welcomes a thorough “de-crowning”. What the new human race loses is only the ability to dominate nature, but what the Earth gains, is the balance and prosperity of the entire new life community. In the end of the novel, Vonnegut humorously concludes, “If some kind of supernatural creature, or UFO people, brought humans into a state of harmonious coexistence with themselves and other parts of the natural world, I didn’t catch them doing it. I am prepared to swear that the law of natural selection did the repair job without any external assistance” [4] (P.329).

### 4. A “Utopia” of Plural Coexistence: Towards a Post-Human Life Community

American social ecologist Murray Bookchin pointed out that human domination over nature ultimately expanded into an ideology of human domination over nature. Therefore, relying solely on natural evolution to return humans to their ecological origins is not enough. According to the famous proposition by British political philosopher Thomas Hobbes about the “state of nature”, although prehistoric human communities had early harmony, conflicts and confrontations caused by power struggles (control of wealth, people, natural resources, etc.) would lead to a situation of “war of every man against every man” in a stateless society [11] (P.83).

However, just as Lacan's discourse on the antagonism between humans and nature, this long-standing dichotomous claim inevitably falls into the struggle between subject and object. The impact of post-structuralism and deconstructionism provides the possibility of an ethical dialogue between "intersubjectivity" and criticism of postmodern ethics, namely, recognizing differences, respecting others, and rebuilding Levi-Strauss's "ethics of the Other", providing the idea of community originating from Ferdinand Tönnies with profound significance. Tönnies defines the community as "a living organism" [12] (P.67-68), and he refers to its essence from a psychological perspective as "positive relationships with each other" [12] (P.87-88). In *Galápagos*, the new human race on Santa Rosalía Island forms a true community in the sense that they become "a big family that includes everyone. They have a common language and religion, as well as some common jokes, songs, and dances, almost everything from the Kanka-Bono tribe. And the Divine Wind becomes a venerated patriarch that the captain has never been. And Akiko became a venerated matriarch" [4] (P.304). In terms of Tönnies's types of communities, the new human race has formed a kinship community based on families, a geographically-based community based on marine-island ecosystems, and a spiritual community based on cultural identities such as language, religion, and art. A communal, egalitarian, and free (although still patriarchal, the existence of patriarch and matriarch only provides the "dignity of elders" of the community as defined by Tönnies, and from a gender perspective, *Galápagos* truly achieves gender equality), positive relationship of mutual affirmation is constructed. Post-humanists shift this relationship to a perspective of ecological holism and ontological conversion, transforming it into a positive ethical dimension of universal vitality, while also calling for the pluralistic coexistence of the post-human life community, such as the life unity with post-human ethics of happiness advocated by Braidotti. She declares, "Both human and non-human ethical subjects have a natural impulse—towards the power of freedom, towards the positive forces that promote life" [2].

Similarly, Bookchin refers to the highly cohesive, creatively liberated, and culturally intimate relationships among humans as a commune, further extending this concept to an "ecological commune". In *The Ecology of Freedom: The Emergence and Dissolution of Hierarchy*, Bookchin constructs an ecological society, which involves re-entering natural evolution, forming larger or composite communes, and then "through the ecosystem, forming a network of biological communities, 'artfully' adapting to their surrounding natural environment. Large communes will coexist and nourish life forms that are originally part of the ecosystem" [13] (P.407). This aligns perfectly with the ecological concept in *Galápagos*, namely, the multi-species ethnography narrative of the post-Anthropocene: the dissolution of anthropocentrism and speciesism, the integration of humans into the web of life and the realization of harmonious coexistence among diverse species and between man and nature, which ultimately lead to a post-human life community. The evolution of the new human race from the "colonists" who indiscriminately killed island organisms to later species of seal-like animals filling the ecological niche of "fisherfolk" in the Santa Rosalía Island ecosystem is the result of adapting to the natural environment and joining a multi-species co-evolution network. The so-called "artful adaptation" and "nourishment" of other life forms can be examined within the theoretical framework of post-humanist Donna Haraway. She employs Deleuze's theory of becoming to illustrate the "becoming-with" relationship between different species—mutual flowing, co-evolving relationships, thus also nourishing each other. Just as in the novel, the new humans consume fish as food, evolving into species adept at swimming and fishing; yet these seal-like creatures will in turn be eaten by sharks and killer whales. Meanwhile, Haraway describes the aforementioned symbiotic mechanism as "sympoiesis", where "poiesis" is a Greek suffix meaning "creation" or "making", aiming to express that the nature we inhabit is a symbiotic system of multiple species coexisting and creating together, similar to Bookchin's "creatively liberated" ecological commune. Unlike the Anthropocene or the Capitalocene, in the Chthulucene, the collective subject "we" are facing the danger together, where humans are no longer the dominant actors, and all other beings react in this epoch. The beings of this world, both living and non-living, constitute the main story of the Earth [14] (P.55). The narrative contrasts the state of the Earth around one million years before and after the era of multi-species coexistence and cooperation: at the beginning of the story, "the clock of the universe is in terrible danger, and humans are destroying everything around them" [4] (P.327), but one million years later, under the shared ecology of the life community and harmonious symbiosis, the ugly volcanic hills on the island, full of cracks and pits, have turned into white sand beaches and blue lagoons.

Katherine Hayles predicts in *How We Became Posthuman* that the days of humanity are numbered, and the era of post-human is imminent: either humanity will become extinct like dinosaurs, or they will merge with technology to become cyborgs. Vonnegut, through *Galápagos*, provides a third route: escaping the Anthropocene and the Capitalocene, deconstructing the rationalism of human technology, integrating into the "great chain of being" through evolution and re-communalization, and entering the ecological commune composed of post-human life communities. Undoubtedly, because technology and capital are deeply embedded in our present, forming a "techno-science" and capital alienation, this approach is impossible. Just as Vonnegut ironically named it "Eden", Santa Rosalía Island is a "utopia", an idealized place, where the romanticism of kinship communities between humans and non-humans, as imagined in the novel, is self-evident; and completely escaping existing institutions and orders is nothing but a nomadic, absolutely de-territorialized neoliberal fantasy within the context of Deleuze and Guattari. But as Bookchin said, "In the face of the dual crisis of society and ecology, we must fully unleash our imagination and engage in utopian thinking" [13] (P.30). *Galápagos* involves bold imagination based on the dilemma of human community, creatively envisioning post-human forms of life, ecological landscapes, and profoundly revealing the far-reaching values of ecological well-being and the construction of a non-anthropocentric life community.

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