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Nalo Hopkinson

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(20 December 1960 –)

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BOOKS:

Brown Girl in the Ring (New York: Warner-Aspect, 1998)

Midnight Robber (New York: Warner-Aspect, 2000)

Skin Folk (New York: Warner-Aspect, 2001)

OTHER:

"Money Tree," *Tesseracts 6: The Annual Anthology of New Canadian Speculative Fiction*, edited by Robert J. Sawyer and Carolyn Clink (Edmonton: Books Collective-Tesseract Books, 1997).

"Riding the Red," *Black Swan, White Raven*, edited by Ellen Datlow & Terri Windling (New York: Avon-Nova, 1997).

"A Habit of Waste," *Northern Suns: The New Anthology of Canadian Science Fiction*, edited by David G. Hartwell and Glenn Grant (New York: Tor, 1999); reprinted in *Women of Other Worlds: Excursions through Science Fiction and Feminisms*, edited by Helen Merrick and Tess Williams (Perth, Australia: University of Western Australia Press, 1999); reprinted in *Fireweed*, 53 (Spring 1996): 28–43.

*While a Ph.D. candidate at the University of Wisconsin—Madison, I wrote this entry for the *Dictionary of Literary Biography* volume, edited by James Miller. Ultimately, this volume was shelved. I have made a few cosmetic changes to tighten the grammar and standardize some of the *DLB* stylistics; otherwise, the original manuscript (completed 30 May 2002) is largely intact.

"Precious," *Silver Birch, Blood Moon*, edited by Ellen Datlow & Terri Windling (New York: Avon Books, 1999).

"Slow Cold Chick," Northern Frights 5, edited by Don Hutchison (Oakville, ON and Niagara Falls, NY: Mosaic, 1999).

"Greedy Choke Puppy" and "Ganger: Ball Lightning," *Dark Matter: A Century of Speculative Fiction from the African Diaspora*, edited by Sheree Thomas (New York: Warner, 2000); "Greedy Choke Puppy" reprinted in *Years Best Fantasy and Horror*, edited by Datlow and Windling (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2001); and in *Year's Best Fantasy*, edited by Hartwell (New York: Harper Collins, 2001).

Whispers from the Cotton Tree Root: Caribbean Fabulist Fiction, selected, with an introductory essay, by Hopkinson (Montpelier, Vermont: Invisible Cities Press, 2000).

"The Glass Bottle Trick," *Whispers from the Cotton Tree Root: Caribbean Fabulist Fiction*, edited by Hopkinson (Montpelier, Vermont: Invisible Cities Press, 2000).

SELECTED PERIODICAL PUBLICATIONS — UNCOLLECTED

Fiction:

"Midnight Robber," *Exile*, 18.4 (1995): 36–44.

"Griffone," excerpt, *Obsidian III: Literature in the African Diaspora* 2, no. 2 (Fall/Winter 2000–2001).

Drama:

"Red Rider," *Tellin' It Like It Is: A Compendium of African Canadian Monologues for Actors*, edited by Djanet Sears (Toronto: PUC Play Service, 2000): 11–14.

Nonfiction:

"Delany's Mad Man: the Dark Side of Human Desire," *WORD: Toronto's Black Culture Magazine* (27 October – 9 November 1994): 10.

"Dropping Science: Black Science Fiction in the 90's," *Possibilities*, 1.4 (Summer 1995): 16–19.

For fans of science fiction and fantasy who have sought and craved non-White voices, characters, and perspectives, the small number of Black writers in these literary genres have provided them few options from which to choose. Though forty years have expired since the first Black science fiction novelist appeared, a dearth of Black science fiction and fantasy writers still prevails, and no hard science fiction writers are Black. Nevertheless, recent developments have excited Black speculative fiction and fantasy enthusiasts about the prospects for the fiction of the new millennium to reach into the future and, just as importantly, grapple with issues centuries old and older. At the center of this fervor is the Black speculative fiction and fantasy novelist Nalo Hopkinson, who forever changed the field in the three short years following the 1998 publication of her much-acclaimed novel, *Brown Girl in the Ring*. Following in the thematic footsteps prefigured by Octavia E. Butler, the first Black female writing speculative fiction and fantasy, and yet writing in an inimitable style no one could have anticipated, Hopkinson makes her fiction as rich as her own background.

Noelle Nalo Hopkinson was born 20 December 1960 in Jamaica and reared in Jamaica, Guyana, and Trinidad before she moved to Toronto, Canada, at age 16 in 1977, having stopped briefly in New Haven, Connecticut, where her father attended a graduate theater program at Yale University. Hopkinson's parents were especially instrumental in shaping her interests and talents. Her mother Freda (née Campbell) Hopkinson, a Jamaican library technician, helped Hopkinson engage literature by lending the twelve-year-old her library card. Hopkinson soon discovered science fiction and fantasy en route to becoming an avid reader, prolific writer, creative writing instructor, and a dynamic figure in the sci-fi field years later. Many of Hopkinson's works foreground mother-daughter relationships and the recovery of a genuine female voice free of limitations imposed by a male-oriented society. Along with the feminist bent of her fiction, Hopkinson frequently draws upon a lyrical tradition represented by her father, the late Slade Hopkinson. A noted Guyanese poet, actor, and playwright whose work inspired Hopkinson's first novel, both themes and characters from some of his poetry appear as epigraphs, characters, and themes in Hopkinson's fiction. Among Slade Hopkinson's works, "The Madwoman of Papine: Two cartoons with captions" (1976), published in a collection of the same name, figures most significantly in his daughter's fiction. Slade Hopkinson acted for a time in the Trinidad Theatre Workshop founded by Derek Walcott, the Nobel Laureate. In 1969, Slade Hopkinson performed in a version of Walcott's play, "Ti-Jean and His Brothers" (1958), which CBC Radio broadcasted. Nalo Hopkinson began writing science fiction in 1993, the year her father died, and takes pride in seeing his lyrics next to her own written word. Hopkinson's only sibling is her brother Keïta, who also enriches her fiction with his critical insights as a painter.

Hopkinson's progression from reader to creator has been long in the making, although the creativity of science fiction and fantasy would nurture and sustain Hopkinson's interests until it ripened into her own published fiction years later. From her early formative years until she became a writer, Hopkinson's life followed a rich course in which her father's artistry, her mother's contributions, and their broad interest in the arts constantly exposed her to stories and the lushness of language. As a child she began reading fantasy literature such as Homer's *Iliad*, Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* (1726), and Philip Sherlock's *West Indian Folk Tales* (1966) before moving to science fiction in the form of Michael Crichton's *The Andromeda Strain* (1969), following the release of the movie. Frank Herbert's *Dune* (1965), Samuel R. Delany's *Dhalgren* (1975), and Ursula K. Le Guin's *Always Coming Home* (1985) were influential in shaping and solidifying Hopkinson's appetite for speculative fiction. She continued to read avidly as her family migrated from the Caribbean to Canada, where she attended York University, studied Russian Language and Literature and French, and graduated with honors in 1982.

The combination of the literary legacy bestowed upon her by her parents and her own status as a westernized urbanite has influenced the motifs of some of her earliest works of speculative

fiction and fantasy. This "hybridity," recognized by reviewers such as William Doyle-Marshal, significantly influenced Hopkinson's national and socio-cultural background as a Black West Indian and specifically enabled her to redefine the field of speculative fiction arts and letters. Indeed, Hopkinson's own ideological orientation has motivated her to delve into the cultural infrastructure undergirding science fiction and fantasy, from its epistemological and ontological premises to its rhetorical and linguistic apparatuses. Taking the cue initiated by her predecessors such as Butler and Samuel R. Delany, Jr., the first Black science fiction and fantasy author, Hopkinson foregrounds a diasporic African culture and privileges protagonists and a supporting cast of characters who are of African descent. Such a maneuver in and of itself is radical for a simple reason: Since the inception of the field as a modern phenomenon in the late nineteenth century with the literary genius and phenomenal popularity of H. G. Wells' *Time Machine* (1895), after its canonization as science fiction in the mid-1930s with John W. Campbell's *Astounding Stories,* and even into the new millennium, science fiction and fantasy have been fields dominated by White men and their ideals, concerns, and discriminations. The stereotypes, if not outright racism, have informed everything from plot construction to publication and marketing decisions. Delany discovered such when one of his novels, *Nova* (1968), was initially rejected because it featured a Black protagonist. Charles Saunders, the first Black novelist to work solely in the sword and sorcery subgenre of fantasy, wrote his *Imaro* trilogy in the 1980s specifically to create a protagonist who paralleled and responded to internationally known fantasy figures such as Edgar Rice Burroughs' Tarzan and Robert E. Howard's Conan. Moreover, Stephen Barnes, an African-American speculative fiction author, only recently began to address issues of racism in his speculative fiction because readers were not interested in non-White protagonists and their concerns.

Hopkinson continues the struggle these and other Black speculative fiction writers have joined, but has increased the aesthetic ante considerably because of the West Indian literary form that

makes her novels adventures in ways that enrich, extend, and challenge the normative. This very potential drew Hopkinson to speculative fiction because, as she stated in an interview published in *Foundation*, "I think speculative fiction has the potential, often realised nowadays, to be perverse and subversive and oppositional and revolutionary. Which could make it a wonderful literature for radical and marginalised communities." Her debut novel, *Brown Girl in the Ring*, initiated the widespread critical appreciation of Hopkinson's fiction and a radical new way of thinking of language, culture, and speculative fiction and fantasy for marginalized and non-marginalized communities.

With the 1998 publication of *Brown Girl*, whose story extrapolates from Slade Hopkinson's "The Woman of Papine" and directly draws upon Derek Walcott's play "Ti-Jean and His Brothers," Hopkinson showed that Creole, the Afro-Caribbean vernacular common among West Indians, could be used to tell a compelling story. Moreover, through *Brown Girl,* Hopkinson argues that Creole effectively situates the stories in the Afro-Caribbean perspective, for it validates the culture, expands the pluralistic possibilities for all readers, and undermines the privileged position the English language enjoys. The result is revolutionary, going far beyond the patois Lome uses in Delany's *Babel-17* (1966), and reaching the heights achieved by Michelle Cliff in *Abeng* (1985), a highly acclaimed novel exploring the heritage of a "White Creole" girl maturing in 1950s Jamaica. Hopkinson's shift of linguistic register to Creole from her "normative" British English created an abundance of fantastic opportunities for a story, at its core, centered on tried and true plots and subplots: The tradition of near-future post-Holocaust novels set in decayed and decadent urban ruins where the intense fight for survival preempts virtually everything else; the protagonist is an immigrant to a western metropolis who is striving to reconcile her West-Indian identity with the new American culture; and, related to this, an immigrant family, seeking a land of Canaan but finding the opposite, struggles to remain intact amidst the modern forces of social entropy that foist chaos and pathology upon them. In fact,

Hopkinson confided that one of the inspirations for *Brown Girl* was an article about the high level of "schizophrenia in [male] Caribbean populations." Hopkinson centers these themes and plots on the brown girl Ti-Jeanne.

Ti-Jeanne, whose name means "every woman," is a young mother from Jamaica who is struggling for survival, under the auspices of her grandmother, the healer Mami Gros-Jeanne, in the inner city of Toronto. This inner city and this post-Holocaust story differ, however, from the standard post-apocalyptic visions in that the ruination is not total. Instead, the "Burn" of *Brown Girl* represents the place specifically sustained by those in the suburban areas to hold the undesirable denizens like Ti-Jeanne. Hopkinson's retreat from a "Mad Max" version of the story allows her to highlight present racial and class distinctions that limit and delimit the geographical and social space that affects her disadvantaged characters tremendously. The psycho-social impact on the residents creates an underclass that is entrenched in its poverty in direct proportion to the turpitude of the privileged class in its security and comfort. Not surprisingly, Ti-Jeanne's family is fragmented, as are her self-identity and affiliations: She wishes to have no affiliation with the old ways of her grandmother, her own mother has been lost for years, and the father of her child, Tony, struggles with his own selfishness, drug addiction, and criminal past to be a father. Just as important as the issue of race and ethnicity is the quest for gender liberation. Ti-Jeanne's quest, like those of many of Hopkinson's female protagonists, is to find her voice in a patriarchal society. Hence, Hopkinson unites the cultural alienation of diasporic Africans, especially the West Indian immigrants, to the alienation of females from selves unconfined by the patriarchy. The highly politicized plot in which Hopkinson conflates issues of race, gender, class, and nationality into the speculative fiction aesthetic is not unique even though such a presentation is rare, for Octavia Butler pioneered this mode for Black females. Moreover, the narrative flow is sometimes coarse and incomplete, weaknesses indicative of Hopkinson's limitations as a new novelist and the time constraints under which she finished her manuscript. What does make *Brown Girl* a sublime lyrical moment in the Black literary continuum stems from and flows through the Creole register and its West Indian foundation.

The Creole of *Brown Girl* is not merely an aesthetic novelty. The narrative structure, the cultural orientation, the interpersonal dynamic, the intertextuality, and the very foundational structures of science and modernity generated and validated by normative fictive discourse awaken to new possibilities preeminent critics of science fiction rightly consider a significant development. Award-winning science fiction writer and critic Charles De Lint first found the Creole and the West Indian cultural references baffling. But once he acclimated, proving true Hopkinson's premise that non-Caribbean readers could, De Lint "became enthralled with the tidbits of Caribbean culture, the Voudoun ceremonies, the mix of old world and new world sensibilities. The plot took on an intensity that literally propelled me through the pages. I struggled over the first fifty or so, but read the next two hundred in one sitting. When I closed the book, the patois of its voices went on speaking in my head for days." Charles Saunders, a long-time Canadian citizen following his expatriation from the United States, lauded the narrative shift to a storytelling tradition rooted in African narrative forms retained by diasporic Africans even centuries after their enslavement. In truth, far more than Saunders' efforts in his sword and fantasy series, Hopkinson shifts the substance and the form, which involves what scholars call a "speakerly text" because of its orality. The orality, meant as a communal form of expression, opens possibilities in the text and the genre that validate the novel's many imaginative moments of speculative fiction, dark fantasy/horror, magic realism, social criticism, and theology. Hence, Ti-Jeanne, a new and reluctant mother, is visited by her West Indian personal deity, or loas; she and Tony, the equally reluctant father, walk invisibly through Toronto because Mami Gros-Jean has conjured them into the spirit realm; fierce duppies (spirits) give chase and hurl fireballs; and, her own grandfather is revealed as an obeahman, a warlock whose posse rules the Burn because he abused

the power the gods gave him and stole duppies, including that of Ti-Jeanne's mother. Hopkinson's re-visioning of textual possibilities manifest itself early in the novel at the onset of Ti-Jeanne's visions:

> The back of Ti-Jeanne's neck prickled at what she saw:
>
> *A fireball whirl in through the window glass like if the glass ain't even there. It settle down on the floor and turn into a old, old woman, body twist-up and dry like a chew-up piece of sugar cane. She flesh red and wet and oozing all over, like she ain't have no skin. Blue flames running over she body, up she arms, down the two cleft hooves she have for legs, but it look like she ain't even self feeling the fire. She ol'-lady dugs dripping blood instead of milk. She looking at me and laughing kya-kya like Mami does do when something sweet she, but I ain't want to know what could sweet a Soucouyant so. The thing movin' towards me now, klonk-klonk with it goat feet. It saying something, and I could see the pointy teeth in she mouth, and the drool running down them:*
>
> *"Move aside, sweetheart, move aside." She voice licking like flame inside my head. "Is the baby I want. You don't want he, ain't it? So give him to me, nuh, doux-doux? I hungry. I want to suck he eyeballs from he head like chennette fruit. I want to drink the blood from out he veins, sweet like red sorrel drink. Stand aside, Ti-Jeanne."*

Much of the novel narrates Ti-Jeanne's difficulty in reconciling the advent of these insistent, ghoulish visions with reality and, toward the end of the novel, the realization that the greatest threat to her is her grandfather's quest for her duppy. The denouement occurs, ironically, in the confluence of old and new worlds, when African gods walk Toronto's CN Tower and Ti-Jeanne's grandfather comes to a horrific end. Notwithstanding the disruptions in narrative flow and the need for stronger character development, the reader can now appreciate the cultural consciousness underlying Hopkinson's novel and find the horror even more compelling because of the synergy between West Indian and Canadian culture. In short, Ti-Jeanne's story is not only one for every woman, but for everyone.

Hopkinson's fusion of diasporic African and European forms as speculative fiction demonstrates the very height of hybridity many preeminent literary scholars and intellectuals consider the foundation of much Western civilization. The hybridity fosters an interdependent cultural relationship among Blacks and, more importantly, between Europeans, their descendants, and African descendants. Moreover, such hybridity challenges and disrupts inflexible and hierarchial notions of race and ethnicity, making possible cultural blends between traditional science fiction plots of post-apocalyptic struggles and Afro-Caribbean theology and motifs. This aspect of *Brown Girl*, a text Hopkinson had to rush to complete to meet her contest deadline, not only won it the inaugural Warner-Aspect first novel contest of 1998 against a field of nearly one thousand manuscripts, but also the Locus Award for best first novel; *Brown* Girl also and figured in Hopkinson's receipt of the John W. Campbell Award for best new writer later in the year. It was also shortlisted for the prestigious Philip K. Dick and James R. Tiptree, Jr. awards, and has been translated into French and Polish.

But awards alone do not pay bills, as Hopkinson discovered like many writers before her, especially those writers of science fiction and fantasy. Although Hopkinson's income allowed her to discontinue her previous employment, which sometimes demanded long hours, she had to sideline her writing temporarily to seek freelance work. With increased recognition, she began a frenetic schedule of producing and publishing fiction, both short and long, to finance her promotional efforts as a new writer-artist and, more broadly, her travels as an ambassador for speculative fiction. Beginning in 1999, Hopkinson kept a hectic pace of attending a variety of science fiction and fantasy conferences, where she refused to merely participate as a panelist. Instead, she assumed an outspoken and active programmatic role in reshaping the atmosphere to be friendlier to non-Whites. At the annual WisCon conference held in Madison, Wisconsin, in 2001,

Hopkinson asked for issues relevant to people of color to be included on the programming, and facilitated a focus group culminating in the birth of the Carl Brandon Society, whose mission is to advance the visibility of people of color in the field. At WisCon 2001, this society organized the first-ever Carl Brandon Society dance to foster a more relaxed atmosphere conducive to promoting diversity. Meanwhile, Hopkinson continued to write and publish. Her busy schedule notwithstanding, she had soon completed her second novel, *Midnight Robber* (2000).

Midnight Robber engages in the same revisionist project, not unlike Saunders' efforts with the *Imaro* trilogy and Delany's creation of Gorgik, the gay version of Conan featured in *Tales of Nèverÿona* (1977) and *Neveryóna* (1982). The innovation here is not only the Creole register in which the novel is narrated and the characters' dialogue, but the heroic tradition it joins and rewrites to fit an Afro-Caribbean folktale framework. Epic heroes of ancient and modern society, from Ulysses and Achilles to Beowulf and King Arthur to Superman and Luke Skywalker, have all played and continue to play vital roles in reinforcing culture and mores for younger generations. Hopkinson knows very well the importance of heroic models. In *Midnight Robber*, she raises the *ante* in a high-stakes cultural game where her voice and those like hers seek to expand the notion of the heroic and epic.

Hopkinson uses *Midnight Robber* to fuse the freedom struggle and impulse still prevalent among diasporic and continental Africans with Western heroic paradigms to address the socio-cultural deficits and injustices in society, both inter-racially and intra-racially. Undertaking the same aesthetic course established in *Brown Girl*, Hopkinson again shifted readers away from the paradigms and values typical of Western society, especially that of North America, by situating them within a world where semiotics, history, technology, and many aspects of culture reflect the West Indian imprimatur. Unlike *Brown Girl*, which fits into more or less known socio-political units, *Midnight Robber* reaches into the dark matter and infinite complexity of space. Enter Toussaint and Tan-Tan.

Toussaint, named after the great Haitian liberator of the Eighteenth century, is a future world far from Earth where the inhabitants are descendants of the exodus of Blacks and an assortment of White and non-White individuals. The protagonist is Tan-Tan, the daughter of one of Toussaint's mayoral couples, Antonio Habib and Ione Brasil of Cockpit County. Like *Brown Girl*, *Midnight Robber* is oriented toward those things Afro-Caribbean, such as a respect for the significance of the Middle Passage, enjoyment of the Anansi oral storytelling tradition of West Africa, and even a delight in sorrel, a West Indian fruit beverage. The Anansi, the trickster figure of West African origin whom Hopkinson designates as "the cunning spider-man," provides the infrastructure of the novel. The story itself unfolds like a web, the story told by Granny Nanny, the artificial intelligence, serving both as the frame and the threads to connect and clarify the parts of the novel as it progresses. Of equal significance is the cultural sophistication of Toussaint, for it is not the contemporary equivalent of a Third World socioeconomic polity. Instead, the rich fabric of this culture is embellished with futuristic technological achievements and a near-utopian society governed by a computer matrix, the aforementioned Granny Nanny. Thanks to technological sophistication, common labor has been eliminated by the pervasiveness of artificial intelligence ("a.i."). If it seems too good to be true, Hopkinson soon turns it into a cautionary tale by revealing the corruption associated with any society, especially those members of it who are too comfortable in their exercise of power. Tan-Tan pays a steep price as the victim entangled in a web of mischief in which the high-maintenance wife cheats on her husband, the high-powered husband cheats on his wife, and the jealous husband uses deception in his combat under the code duello against his wife's lover. As an indirect consequence of the actions of the jealous intrigues of Tan-Tan's parents, Ione and Antonio, and an immediate consequence of Antonio's attempt to fix the result of the duel, Ione's lover is killed accidentally. Caught in the maelstrom surrounding her guilt-ridden and frightened father, Tan-Tan's effort to help him

avoid sentencing only results in her exile with him to another dimension, fated never to see her native land again. Enter New Half-Way Tree.

New Half-Way Tree is the rough equivalent of a Third World where criminals have been forever exiled from Toussaint to survive in an environment not only lacking a.i., but also populated with an assortment of terrific and deadly creatures, such as mako jumbies, which resemble enormous ostriches. Stripped of the comforts and security of a.i., Antonio soon reveals himself as ignorant, cowardly, selfish, and, like many adults, quick to judge the unknown and label it as dangerous. Chicibud, a native of New Half-Way Tree who is both keen and kind, quickly becomes Tan-Tan's closest friend despite his unusual appearance. Not so the relationship between Chicibud and Antonio, whose hostility toward and refusal to listen to Chicibud forces him to save their lives at grave risk to his own. More significantly, Tan-Tan becomes the fabled Robber Queen, a version of Robin Hood and Zorro not only West Indian, but also female.

Consequently, the heroic tradition and gender constructions receive considerable attention in *Midnight Robber*. Tan-Tan and her father are saved by the *douen*, a species of New Half-Way Tree in which the males are arguably less privileged than the birdlike females, whose preferred communication is song, who are larger and potentially more dangerous than the males, and who can fly. Furthermore, the Robber Queen is not only called upon to bring civility to a lawless land, but also to protect the douen from the hostile humans whose xenophobia leads them to distrust and despise the douen, whom they treat like children. Hence, *Midnight Robber* redefines the picaresque tradition through the lens of speculative fiction. The literary sophistication evident in *Midnight Robber* shows Hopkinson's maturation as a writer, although the brashness of and story behind *Brown Girl* perhaps renders it the more significant and interesting of the two novels. Based on the wide acclaim of *Brown Girl* and the continued improvement that revealed Hopkinson as a major talent, literary critics took note, for *Midnight Robber* became a New York Time's Notable Book of the Year (2001) and was short-listed for the Philip K. Dick, James R. Triptree, Jr., Nebula, and Hugo awards. In addition, it was shortlisted for the Sunburst Award for Canadian literature of the fantastic for the year 2000.

Although *Brown Girl* and *Midnight Robber* are the major components of her magnum opus, these novels are not the only representatives of Hopkinson's rapid rise to influence. She shows, through her short fiction, that she belongs to the vanguard of a millennial movement among Black speculative fiction and fantasy writers. Here, the innovations of Creolization and re-writing the picaresque meet the innerspace frontier of the Internet as publication medium. Just a few years into her literary career, Hopkinson had already demonstrated the journeyman flexibility first shown by Delany, a former rock musician and now professor of comparative literature who still writes speculative fiction and erotica, and Steven Barnes, who has written teleplays and screenplays for programs such as "Baywatch." Hopkinson's short career shows a similar trajectory, for she already utilizes the possibilities of the Internet as a mass medium to acclimate readers to her artistic ideology, disseminate her own artistic ventures into drama and radio, and foster newsgroup discussions about speculative fiction and fantasy. Hence, Hopkinson has a personal website, promotes discussions of Afro-futurism, has her short stories commissioned for radio and digital broadcasts, and writes dramatic monologues set to music, all of which she has published via the Internet. The years 1999 and 2000 were especially productive for Hopkinson's movement into Internet, broadcast, and other forms of publishing: A digital broadcast of Hopkinson reading from *Brown Girl* appeared on the Internet in 1999; in 2000, Hopkinson wrote a dramatic monologue commissioned for production and performed by an actress at the Toronto World Stage Festival; and, two of her short stories, "Riding the Red" and "Indicator Species," were broadcast as plays on CBC Radio. A survey of Hopkinson's output reveals that though her technological ingenuity and prolific creativity profited greatly by the pervasiveness of the Internet, a steady contin-

uum of themes (gender and race, self and selfishness) and techniques (narrative Creolization and Afrocentric plots) abide in her short fiction.

Her first published fiction, the short stories "Midnight Robber" (1995) and "A Habit of Waste" (1996), signaled the arrival of Hopkinson's speculative patois. "Midnight Robber," the result of a science fiction course for writers planned by Judith Merril but aborted in 1993, would eventually develop into a novel. It first appeared in *Exile*, a literary magazine based on Toronto, Hopkinson's adopted home. "A Habit of Waste," Hopkinson's second published short story, also shows the influence of its pedigree through its staying power. First published in the feminist literary journal *Fireweed*, it has been anthologized twice since then: In *Women of Other Worlds: Excursions through Science Fiction and Feminism* (1999), edited by Helen Merrick and Tess Williams, and *Northern Suns: The New Anthology of Canadian Science Fiction* (1999), edited by David G. Hartwell and Glenn Grant. "A Habit of Waste," whose plot involved themes similar to Slade Hopkinson's "The Madwoman of Papine," ventures into the psychological depths of Whiteness as an objectified desire, such as the Shirley Temple blue eyes Pecola Breedlove desires in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* (1970). Instead of blue eyes, Hopkinson uses the liberation of speculative fiction to explore the personal and familial impact of self-hatred taken to an extreme and to a place where the desire to escape from one's non-White self can be gratified, quite literally, by an out-of-body experience.

The plot follows the psychological growth of a woman, Cynthia, who swaps her large-hipped, close-cropped, and compact black body for the "Diana"-model white one she purchased. Hopkinson peels back the layers, revealing slowly the complications that Cynthia now faces, such as dissatisfaction with work, anxiety over her propensity to wrinkle and add fat, and the fractured relationship with her West Indian parents. The depth of the psychological study and the irony involved in its complications start at the beginning of the story when Cynthia encounters another woman "wearing" her body and she feels a quick succession of emotions ranging from pity to envy. The ensuing conflict between her Grecian whiteness, issues related to gendered objectification, and the loss of cultural pride and affiliation prefigures much of the thematic intensity of *Brown Girl*. Hopkinson's artistic voice in this piece is very similar to what Octavia Butler achieves in *Kindred* (1979), a neo-slave narrative studying the relationship between the past and present, Blacks and Whites, and males and females using the mechanism of time travel. Unlike *Brown Girl*, which was far more ambitious and experimental, "A Habit of Waste" presents a calm and steady narrative lens that shows Hopkinson's ability to use speculative fiction and fantasy to highlight issues of gender and race.

Hopkinson strongly reiterates the feminist themes of finding a female voice and re-connecting to subordinated sexual desire in the stories "The Money Tree" (1997), "Precious" (1999), and "Slow Cold Chick" (1999). A brother's selfish greed, a princely husband's brutal greed, and a male neighbor's sexual greed are all occasions for the female protagonists of these stories, respectively, to find and sometimes voice their subordinated desires to resolve a crisis or conflict. The stories are also occasions illustrating the groundswell of interest in Hopkinson's fiction following her first two short-story publications. Like their predecessor, "A Habit of Waste," these short stories have entered the speculative fiction and fantasy genres through the staying power of anthologies. This canonization is not unexpected, for Hopkinson's short fiction reveals an economy and lyricism of expression she has yet to replicate in her long fiction. Hence the series of Hopkinson's short stories anthologized from 1997 to 1999: "Money Tree" appeared in *Tesseracts*[6]*: The Annual Anthology of New Canadian Speculative Fiction* (1997), edited by Robert J. Sawyer and Carolyn Clink; "Riding the Red" (not discussed in this entry) appeared *in Black Swan, White Raven* (1997), edited by Ellen Datlow and Terri Windling; "Precious" graced the collection arranged by Datlow and Windling in *Silver Birch, Blood Moon* (1997); and, editor Don Hutchison took a fancy to "Slow Cold Chick," which he included in *Northern Frights 5* (1999).

In "The Money Tree," Silky finds herself forlorn at the disappearance of her brother, Morgan, whose incessant struggles for income led him to seek out the fabled Golden Table their grandfather had told them about when they were young. Morgan has been absent and presumed dead for months when the story opens. Straddled with nightmares and sinking further into despair, Silky tries to commit suicide by drowning herself in her bathtub. Ironically, this act reconnects her to the maternal in the form of her deceased mother, a mermaid who could never acquaint her children with the love of water, and River Mumma, the ancient water deity who identifies Silky's mother as a daughter. Free of nightmares, her social life returning, and her body plump like her mother's, Silky takes a swim at the YMCA. Hopkinson wrenches the story into the fantastic when River Mumma appears and the pool turns into an old Jamaican river where the treasure Morgan sought was supposedly located. As frightened swimmers rush out of the pool, Silky discovers her latent abilities as a mermaid and dives down toward her brother who is still holding on to the table.

"Precious" is a revision of the "Diamonds and Toads" fairytale in which the "good" sister is graced both with a mouth that lets fly jewels when she speaks and marriage to the prince, while the "bad" sister is cursed with a variety of living horrors leaping from her mouth. In Hopkinson's postmodern rendition, the protagonist's speech causes precious gems to fall from her mouth to the delight of her greedy, abusive prince-husband (Jude) and stepsisters. Not until she finds her voice of authority and throws off the dictate that women must always speak nice, delicate things does Precious speak her mind to Jude: "I shall be nice if and when it pleases me, and stop calling me Precious; my name is Isobel!" The intense, stuffy atmosphere of the story and the unnerving plot provides a powerful contemporary retelling of Charlotte Perkins Gilman's 1892 feminist classic, "The Yellow Wall-Paper."

"Slow Cold Chick," a surreal, dark fantasy whose title is an erotic irony, is about a woman who is a cold chick because she

cannot voice her desires. Blaise has bottled-up desires and needs, such as the desire to tell off men who repeatedly make unwanted advances, and a bisexual desire for a couple of her neighbors, a male and female. But then an egg mysteriously appears that hatches to reveal a cockatrice, an objective manifestation of her desires that grows and grows, has a fantastic appetite, and a searing gaze that can disintegrate antagonists. Blaise runs away at first, but is later united with the cockatrice as this huge, rapacious creature forces its way down her throat, leaving her with "new-found warmth in her voice" and the ability to feel "the blood heat of her palms."

"Greedy Choke Puppy" (2000), the most critically acclaimed of Hopkinson's short fiction, tackles these same themes of unfulfilled female desire. Consonant with many of the protagonists in Hopkinson's other works of fiction, Jacky is a young woman living in Trinidad with her granny. As a Ph.D. candidate, she is an intelligent and aspiring woman in her early thirties who is still attractive and seems to have everything going for her: A good education, a loving grandmother, and a compelling appearance men find attractive. Nevertheless, she also has her problems and weaknesses, which include the absence of her mother and an impatient craving to find a mate and have a child. The strong, traditional granny, the attractive and impatient daughter, and the West Indian culture that binds them, especially the poetic Creole, are signature elements of Hopkinson's modus operandi. But showing the continuing evolution of her craft and artistic objectivity to delve into the interstices of her own themes, Hopkinson prepares the reader for a surprising ending that results, in part, from the double story she unfolds: Jacky's plot is paired with a flashback in the form of a story granny told Jacky and her close friend and confidante when they were children. As the main plot develops, granny's story of the parasitic soucouyant intersperses the action, and Hopkinson deftly leads the reader to think that granny was the soucouyant who leaves her skin at night to go suck the life-spirit from children. However, the conclusion reveals that though Granny is a soucouyant, she has channeled her destructive de-

sires into productive, loving ones. The culprit is revealed to be the protagonist-antagonist, Jacky, who, like her mother, could not control these desires and is ultimately destroyed by her granny. This and other subtle ironies, masterfully revealed in the denouement, show a rapid maturation and complication of theme critics have noted. "Greedy Choke Puppy" was shortlisted for the James R. Tiptree, Jr. Award and was published in two anthologies representing the best fantasy and horror published that year.

Although cupidity is a recurring theme throughout Hopkinson's fiction, her own engagement with budding writers demonstrates her desire to pass on to others some of the benefits that she received when she attended the Clarion Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers' Workshop in 1995. Beginning in 1996, she has taught and continues to teach creative writing at a variety of places, from the fiction circle workshop at the Womenfolk Festival held in Sauble Beach, Ontario, in 1996, to the one-day "Magic Realism, Fantasy, Horror & Surrealism" workshop at the Toronto Writing Workshop (1999), and a four-week course she taught at the Toronto Women's Bookstore called "Rocket Grrls, Chicks in Chain Mail, and Smart-Mouthed Crones: Women Writing Women in Science Fiction and Fantasy" (2000). Her ongoing quest to fund her writing and traveling underlies much of this teaching, but the integrity and sincerity Hopkinson returns to the craft and bestows upon her students is undeniable. When her teaching culminated with her status as a writer-in-residence at Clarion West in Seattle, Washington, in 2001, Hopkinson completed the circle. Speaking of her 1995 Clarion experience in an interview she gave in 2000, Hopkinson said that her instructors were not only patient and accessible, but "were the kind of people that I know that if I'd wanted advice I could contact them, and that was extremely valuable. And, they get to know you too." Hopkinson passes this benefit on to her students, one of whom had this to say of Hopkinson's dedication: "Nalo herself made a personal commitment to having diversity be present in the student body by e-mailing everyone she could think of and encouraging them to get people of color to apply to Clarion West. Of the six people of color, Nalo

was previously in touch with five of us." Moreover, Hopkinson has served the artistic community by participating as an arts officer with the Toronto Arts Council, a return of time to the artistic community that, through the Ontario Arts Council and the Canada Council, seeded her grant money that enabled her to complete *Brown Girl* before the Warner-Aspect deadline.

In light of the foregoing discussion, especially concerning Hopkinson's sincerity and ability to promote cross-cultural bonds, one could easily overlook an important non-literary historical fact imbedded in Hopkinson's fiction that makes it even more complex and subversive. Hopkinson's importance extends beyond the foregoing contact zones framed in terms of West vs. East, Africa vs. Europe, Black vs. White, or Male vs. Female, but also the hotly contested intra-racial struggle between Afro-Caribbeans and African Americans. Hopkinson's fiction provides an historical link in the trans-Atlantic movement that brought Africans to the West while also foregrounding the significance of the West Indies as the mediation point of the movement of culture from Africa to the Americas.

Extrapolating from current literary scholarship presenting the thesis that Black literary forms may have migrated from Africa through the Caribbean and South America first and then to North America, one could argue that Hopkinson's fiction engages in its own double meaning or counter-rhetoric. First, Hopkinson argues against the ubiquitous power of the dominant narrative structure, which she criticizes for disempowering people of African descent even as her fiction relies upon its particular rhetorical meaning and literary tropes. Second, and perhaps no less important, Hopkinson's fiction challenges the diasporic privilege enjoyed by African Americans, who have denigrated the "monkey chasers" for decades. Rudolph Fisher's "The City of Refuge" (1925), Jamaica-born Claude McKay's *Home to Harlem* (1928), Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937), and Cliff's *Abeng* all provide literary history documenting the tensions between Afro-Caribbean immigrants and African Americans. Hopkinson's Creolization of speculative fiction, which she has ex-

panded into the fabulist fiction of *Whispers from the Cotton Tree Root: Caribbean Fabulist Fiction* (2000), is a harbinger of a new perspective on science fiction and fantasy.

Whispers from the Cotton Tree Root, the first such anthology of its kind, contains a potpourri of fabulist fiction, including speculative fiction, fantasy, surrealism, magic realism, and horror, or some blend thereof, written by people of Caribbean descent, most of them from Jamaica, Trinidad, and Guyana. In collecting the stories, Hopkinson worked against or sought to expand the normative science and thinking behind most science fiction and fantasy. Using the leitmotif of the cotton tree, or the *ceiba*, "a tall tree with thick roots around which pits and caves form" and in which spirits supposedly live, Hopkinson works with an epistemology at odds with that underlying most science fiction. In her introduction, she states her position unequivocally:

> Northern science fiction and fantasy come out of a rational and skeptical approach to the world: That which cannot be explained must be proven to exist, either through scientific method or independent corroboration. But the Caribbean, much like the rest of the world, tends to have a different worldview: The irrational, the inexplicable, and the mysterious exist side by side each with the daily events of life. Questioning the irrational overmuch is unlikely to yield a rational answer, and may prove dangerous. Best instead to find ways to incorporate both the logical and the illogical into one's approach to the world, because you never know when life will just drop you down in that hole, into a ceiba space where none of the rules you know operate.

Hopkinson has indeed found her own ceiba space, a place where readers, upon entering, find a new millennium and a new cosmos racing toward its final frontiers. In this fecund space, Hopkinson continues to recover ground lost by her relatively late creative flowering. She is busy at work on her third novel, *Griffonne*,[1]

[1] *Hopkinson* published this novel under the title *The Salt Roads* in the fall of 2005.

published *Skin Folk* (2001), her first short story collection, released an unabridged audiocassette recording of *Brown Girl* (2001), was honored with short stories appearing in several best fantasy, horror, and erotica anthologies for 2001, and, as if this was not enough, is improving her craft by pursuing a M.A. in writing popular fiction that she expects to receive in 2002. While Hopkinson might be writing dark matter out of a ceiba space, she is clearly one of the significant new writers of the new millennium.

Gregory E. Rutledge
30 May 2002; 4 September 2006

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