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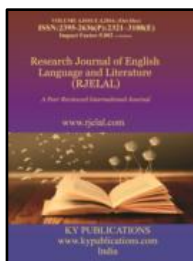
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ON THE HISTORICAL AND FUTURISTIC INTERFACE: CULTURAL IDENTITY IN NALO HOPKINSON'S *MIDNIGHT ROBBER*

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ABSTRACT

Popular culture consists of the cultural patterns and expressions which are recognized and reflected by the society. Speculative fiction, which includes genres of speculation like science fiction, fantasy, horror, futuristic utopia/dystopia, alternative history and cyberpunk, is a staple of popular interest and consumption. In the wake of advanced breakthroughs in scientific innovations, the speculative explores the immense possibilities that technology has brought into our lives. As an integral part of popular culture, the speculative reflects on the values of society and draws from its common beliefs, shared values, fears and superstitions. Moreover, it is informed by the postmodern outlook which subverts the distinction between high and low forms of culture. The speculative seeks out modern cultural references and uses them to relate and explore specific aspects of both personal and communal life. This paper analyses the speculative fiction, *Midnight Robber* (2000) by the Jamaican-born Canadian writer, Nalo Hopkinson and surveys how it provides a reflection on reality by exploring a futuristic world informed by the writer's racial and cultural legacy. It also examines how the narrative addresses the interrelatedness of current and developing technologies and cultural systems by addressing social concerns like marginalization, technological interventions, linguistic/racial identities and resistance.

Keywords: speculative, science fiction, popular culture, Afrofuturism, race, cultural identity, resistance.

Popular culture incorporates the widespread cultural elements in a society that are propagated through a commonly used language. It integrates the daily interactions, needs, aspirations and cultural moments that make up the everyday lives of the society. The expression of popular culture materializes in day to day practices such as cooking, fashion, newspapers, magazines, television, mass media and the many facets of entertainment such as sports, music, dance and literature. Thus, popular culture can be identified as "culture actually made by people for themselves" (Williams 111). It consists of all the cultural activities of the people, or

their "distinctive way of life" which is considered as popular within the social context, and is popularly accepted within the society in any particular period (Hall 449). Popular culture in turn accommodates cultural texts and practices which fall outside the definition of high or elite culture. This residual nature makes it a site of struggle between the marginalized and the dominant groups in society, where forces of assimilation and resistance come into action.

Speculative fiction which includes genres of speculation like science fiction, fantasy, horror, futuristic utopia, dystopia, alternative history and

cyberpunk is a staple of popular interest and consumption. Speculative narrative, in its broadest sense, creates narrative worlds informed by unbridled imagination and incorporates supernatural, fantastical and futuristic elements. It draws inspiration from the scientific and technological advancements and discoveries. By experimenting on the idea of life in its myriad transformations, speculative fiction creates a world of ideas, hypotheses and philosophy. This world provides the tools, tropes, and cognitive framework within which social concerns can be explored and debated. It comfortably accommodates various conventions and sub-genres to defamiliarize the familiar and to provide a reflection on reality. Black speculative writers, transform their narrative into a platform for effectively addressing racial and cultural issues. Thus, the speculative genre transforms, as Jewelle Gomez observes, the narrative into a medium of resistance.

[T]he idea of speculative fiction, which I use as a phrase to put everything together, is that speculative implies possibilities. . . . Meaning we can imagine the world to be a very very different place. As African-Americans [and writers of colour], this seems to be at the core of our getting from day to day. Speculating that there are other possibilities other than doom. (358)

Noelle Nalo Hopkinson, an internationally acclaimed writer of speculative fiction, was born in Jamaica in 1960. She grew up in Jamaica, Guyana, and Trinidad before moving to and settling in Toronto, Canada, in 1977. The evocative, often troubling, novels of Hopkinson explore far-reaching issues of race, gender relations, power hierarchies and the recovery of a genuine female voice free of the limitations imposed by the patriarchal society. Her narratives blend the elements of science fiction and fantasy with motifs of tricksterism and storytelling from Afro-Caribbean folklore. This hybrid nature of her works largely transforms them into vehicles of addressing cultural issues with depth, passionate intensity and complexity. She taps into the potential of speculative fiction to be “perverse and subversive and oppositional and revolutionary” which makes it “a wonderful

literature for radical and marginalised communities” (Burwell 41). Hopkinson, as a part of the Afrofuturist mode of discourse, portrays digital futures hybridized with the cultural landscape of African diaspora. The peculiar situations based on technological advancement depicted in her narratives, craft unorthodox versions of societies where there is an intermingling of histories, languages, and cultures.

In Hopkinson’s second novel *Midnight Robber*, published in 2000, the action takes place on two fictional planets, Toussaint and its prison planet colony, New Half-Way Tree. The protagonist Tan-Tan and the other inhabitants of the planet Toussaint are descendents of those people who had left Earth to forge a new society free from the racist premises of the terrestrial communities. An internet-like information system, known as “Granny Nanny”, invented by the Marryshow Corporation is in command of Toussaint. She injects each person on the planet at their birth with nanomites, which allow her to have a mental access to them. This access takes the form of an eshu, the local artificial intelligence, which exists as a voice within the head, performs multiple tasks and provides information upon request. Tan-Tan spends her childhood in Cockpit County, until her father, Antonio, poisons his wife’s lover during Toussaint’s annual Jonkanoo Carnival. Knowing that the all-seeing Granny Nanny will punish him, he escapes with Tan-Tan to the penal dimension, New Half-Way Tree, where Granny Nanny cannot reach him. At New Half-Way Tree, a douen (the lizard-like sentient species that is native to the planet) named Chichibud, leads them into the nearest human settlement, Junjuh. At Junjuh, Tan-Tan’s life takes a disturbing turn when her father begins to sexually exploit her. This traumatic experience causes a split in her personality. Tan-Tan becomes both ‘good Tan-Tan,’ who is obedient and docile, and ‘bad Tan-Tan’ or the ‘Robber Queen,’ the fearsome, super-human legend and a central figure in both the Trinidadian Carnival and Toussaint’s Jonkanoo festivities. On her sixteenth birthday, she kills her father and escapes from Junjuh, pregnant with his child. Chichibud takes Tan-Tan to the douen home called daddy Tree. Chichibud’s daughter, Abitefa,

helps Tan-Tan she to creolize human and douen methods of living. In order to confront her personal demons, she disguises herself as the Robber Queen, and begins visiting the human settlements to defend the poor and the downtrodden and to punish the wicked. Eventually people in both dimensions begin to tell tales about her exploits, both real and imagined.

The narrative of *Midnight Robber* chronicles the adventures and mythologizing actions of the protagonist, incorporating tales and myths from traditional African, Caribbean, North American and South American cultures. The opening lines feature the voice of a narrator, much like in folktale tradition, inviting the reader into the story: "Oho. Like it starting, oui? Don't be frightened, sweetness; is for the best. I go be with you the whole time. Trust me and let me distract you little bit with one anansi story" (Hopkinson 1). Conflicting accounts by multiple voices convey the plot which is replete with narrative breaks and non-linear digressions. "The often overlooked or ignored oral transmissions produced by non-western populations are defining features of both Hopkinson's rendering of Toussaint and its inhabitants' conventions of expression" (Enteen 266). In detailing the numerous accounts of the Robber Queen's origins and the myths surrounding her, Hopkinson weaves together memories, beliefs, and customs deriving from Caribbean folk culture, voodoo spirits, African-American slave stories, and separatist movements. It mimics, through language and form, the anansi stories, the traditional West African and Caribbean folk tales, which change with every delivery, lack narrative closure, and have unreliable narrative voice.

Anansi, the trickster-hero of West African and Caribbean folktales, who often takes on the form of a spider, persuades humans to defy divine prohibitions and then reveals the cost of their disobedience. The folk tradition of the web-like cyclical and interconnected narrative strands finds its parallel in the interlaced cyberspace network of Granny Nanny. This vast intelligence network, known also as the 'Grande Nanotech Sentient Interface' or the 'Nansi Web,' has been moderating the behaviour on Toussaint and its neighbouring

nation worlds comprising of a multicultural society, for over two centuries:

The Nation Worlds were one enormous data-gathering system that exchanged information constantly through the Grande Nanotech Sentient Interface: Granny Nansi's Web. They kept the Nation Worlds protected, guided and guarded its people ... The tools, the machines, the buildings; even the earth itself on Toussaint and all the Nation Worlds had been seeded with nanomites – Granny Nanny's hands and her body. Nanomites had run the nation ships. (Hopkinson 10)

Granny Nanny intricately entwines her network with the planet and its inhabitants, functioning most prominently as a guide and information source. In portraying Granny Nanny, Hopkinson draws inspiration from the life story of seventeenth-century Jamaican Maroons who fought slavery and won independent rule in Jamaica. The position of Granny Nanny is a combination of technological fighter, protector, and surveillance. She transmits most information through the eshus, the digital entities that run each Toussaint home. In Caribbean and West African cultures, Eshu is the Yoruba trickster deity, the deliverer of messages to and from the spirit world who can be in all places at once.

As a subversive narrative strategy, Hopkinson combines the tropes of science fiction and cyberpunk with Afro-Caribbean folk tradition to create a hybrid narrative. "By re-imagining Afro-Caribbean vernacular literary practices within the context of science fiction, *Midnight Robber* is able to dissolve the tensions between textual and oral culture and between creator and creature, 'master' and 'slave'" (Boyle 181). Hopkinson mixes standard British and American English with Trinidadian and Jamaican creoles and thus, hybridizes the language as well. Placing these languages in dialogue, she constructs a unique language, which historically locates her characters: "To speak in the hacked language is not just to speak in an accent or a creole; to say the words aloud is an act of referencing history and claiming space. The people ... in my novel have done that, have left Earth to a

place where they can make their own society. Their speech, written and spoken, reflects the reasons they've made that journey" ("Code Sliding"). Consequently, this revised version of Caribbean oral practices has the potential to simultaneously decode the past and reformulate the future.

Hopkinson further champions the oral performances of the Caribbean and African diaspora by locating Granny Nanny's communicative capabilities in the realm of the aural (Enteen 272). The Nansi Web programme was written by a community of Afro-Caribbean programmers immediately before their escape from Earth. During her time on Earth, Granny Nanny became too complicated to understand until Marryshow, a calypsonian programmer, ran the programming language through the interface of Afro-Caribbean calypso:

You know [the programmer] was a calypsonian, yes? Just trying a thing, he run the Nanny messages through a sound filter; tonal instead of text-based, understand? The day them was set to wipe she memory, Nanny start to sing [calypso]...She brain didn't spoil, it just get too complex for [them] to translate the concepts she was understanding... Nanny was seeing things in all dimensions-how a simple four dimensional programming code would continue to do she? So she develop she own language. (Hopkinson 51 – 52)

Once she reached this advanced state, Nanny became unable to communicate in written code and began communicating in 'nannycode,' a tonal rather than written language, which is far more complicated for human comprehension. Therefore, she created a version of a hundred and twenty-seven tones called 'nannysong,' which contains only basic phrases, numbers and simple stock sentences which humans could access with their senses (Hopkinson 52). Unlike other speculative works that use the idea of 'Big Brother' control element, Granny Nanny is a benevolent guardian, who interferes only when she judges that someone's well-being is in danger.

The conventions of science fiction merge with Afro-Caribbean symbols and history in the

narrative of *Midnight Robber*. The inhabitants of Toussaint have not completely forgotten the history out of which they arose on Earth. Jonkanoo has become a holiday during which they celebrate the landing of the Marryshow Corporation nation ships that had brought their ancestors to Toussaint two centuries before: "Time to remember the way their forefathers had toiled and sweated together: Taino Carib and Arawak; African; Asian; Indian; even the Euro, though some wasn't too happy to acknowledge that-there bloodline. All the bloods flowing into one river, making a new home on a new planet" (Hopkinson 18). This explanation of Jonkanoo and the life on Earth alludes to the history of colonialism and slave trade which brought diverse populations together in the Caribbean. The moment of diasporic travel to the "nation worlds" also encompasses the Middle Passage across the Atlantic. Ben, the programmer in charge of Garden, refers to this history when he presents Tan-Tan, during the Jonkanoo, with a hat fashioned out of rattan in the intricate shape of a ship: "Long time, that hat woulda be make in the shape of a sea ship, not a rocket ship, and them black people inside woulda been lying pack-up head to toe in they own shit, with chains round them ankles. Let the child remember how black people make this crossing as free people this time" (Hopkinson 21). The memory of the intergalactic crossing cannot shake off an older memory of a more harrowing crossing, in which the shadowy presence of a slave ship haunts the travellers of the rocket ship. Similarly, the penal colony of New Half-Way Tree is a shadowy replica of both Jamaica and Toussaint, a space in which the processes of colonisation, discrimination and exclusion replay themselves through a number of metaphors like the barren land, labour culture and the marginalised natives.

The hybrid context of myth and modern technology in *Midnight Robber* creates possibilities of agency in physical, psychological and linguistic divergence and duality. The central trope of this agency is Tan-Tan and her 'Robber Queen' persona. It is a corollary of the tale of the 'Robber King' which is a classical masquerade from the Trinidad carnival. The King would wear embellished bandit

costumes and stop people in the streets to tell them a fantastic tale in exchange for coins. The wordy tale would be about him being the son of an African prince who had been subsequently stolen into slavery and brought to a land full of strange-looking people. He had later escaped and became a robber in order to survive. This particularly Trinidadian metaphor for the exiled hero becomes a model of identification for Tan-Tan, who also suffers exile and alienation. The Robber King is legendary for being good with words, thereby manipulating them to spin out outrageous and fascinating stories instantaneously. Consequently, these traits of confidence in speaking, flair to command attention and self-assurance in ones worth, fascinates the quiet and almost invisible Tan-Tan.

The persona of the Robber Queen becomes both an agency of empowerment and an act of resistance for Tan-Tan. She carries her unborn child while meting out vigilante justice in the guise of the Robber Queen, thus bringing about a subtle transformation in the social fabric of New Half-Way Tree. "Resorting to maroon-like living in the inhospitable interior spaces and manipulating the carnival figure of the Robber King, Tan-Tan's body is physically reproductive and discursively productive" (Fehskens 146). As a result, her pregnant body cease being a site of violation and transforms into an embodiment of agency and meaning-making. Through Tan-Tan's vigilantism, coupled with her acts of protection, mercy and benevolence, Hopkinson rewrites both the epic and popular culture heroic tradition thereby assimilating it into an alternative Afro-Caribbean folktale framework.

The resistance through language comes into play for Tan-Tan when spoken word becomes central to her own power during the Jonkanoo carnival. At the human settlement of Sweet Pone, Tan-Tan addresses the crowd in the guise of Robber Queen: "Power coursed through Tan-Tan, the Robber Queen's power—the power of words: 'I you will never catch, for I is more than a match; I will duck your base canards; I will flee and fly to flee again.' Nanny, sweet Nanny, yes. Tan-Tan bad inna Robber Queen stylee" (Hopkinson 319). Towards

the end of her speech, both the personalities of Tan-Tan and Robber Queen manifest in Tan-Tan's pregnant body and making her voice polyvocal: "... her cracked voice came out in two registers simultaneously" (Hopkinson 325). This doubling effect is an indicator of Tan-Tan accepting her hybridized cultural history and identity. Tan-Tan asserts her given name by invoking the spirits of indigenous Caribbean women warriors and exclaims to the crowd: "I is the AN-acaona, Taino redeemer; the AN-nie Christmas, keel boat steamer; the Yaa As-AN-tewa; Ashanti warrior queen; the N-AN-ny, Maroon Granny; meaning Nana, mother, caretaker to a nation" (Hopkinson 320). Tan-Tan's name overcomes its plain identity of a repeated sound and suddenly reverberates with the legacies of resistance and leadership in the history of Black resistance.

Hopkinson addresses the Black history of sexualized violence and colonization as well as "seeks to retrieve native women of the Caribbean from the margins of individualistic discourse, to complicate conventional assumptions about femininity, and to eschew hierarchies of knowledge production that privilege written over oral transmissions and singular truth over dynamic interpretations" (Enteen 270-71). The narrative invokes the history of Afro-Caribbean movements of resistance through its characters and spatial realms. The planet Toussaint acquires its name from the Haitian revolutionary hero Toussaint L'Ouverture. While futuristic narratives usually construe technological interfaces as either masculine or genderless, Hopkinson envisions a feminine force controlling the web, Granny Nanny. She takes her name from the Jamaican revolutionary leader who led runaway slaves to safety during the First Maroon War from 1720-1739. Like the legendary fighter, Nanny uses her knowledge to ensure harmony, security, health, and freedom from outside oppression for the planet's occupants. She inspires an almost universal devotion and "[keeps] the Nation Worlds protected, guided and [guards] its people" (Hopkinson 10). At the end of the narrative Tan-Tan names her child Tubman, after Harriet Tubman, the American Civil War revolutionary.

In *Midnight Robber* Hopkinson explores the Black diasporic dislocations through the medium of emergent technologies. The narrative “deftly combines the competing and complimentary exigencies of Afro-futurist, cyberpunk, and utopian impulses. The trickster qualities inherent in cyberpunk’s celebration of bricolage and hacking are retooled into skills of subterfuge and making do when inflected with Afro-futurism’s attendance to African-American and diasporic African themes” (Dery 9). The use of hybridized language and carnivalized narrative form accommodates a diverse and inclusive space to examine the multiplicities, fissures and complexities of Afro-Caribbean culture. The narrative combines the popular with the discourses of power, knowledge and the legacies of slavery and colonialism, to create a critical paradigm which eloquently celebrates Caribbean genealogies.

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