

# GEOGRAPHIES OF PLACES AND BODIES

## revisiõning Caribbean literature written by women

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### RESUMO

O presente ensaio discute uma possível revisãõ da literatura caribenha contemporãnea por meio da “ficçãõ especulativa” produzida por mulheres. Ao analisar como essas escritoras procuram unir aspectos tradicionais da literatura caribenha com um discurso distópico e questionador, este ensaio aborda essa ficçãõ especulativa produzida na diáspora, a partir de uma perspectiva de gênero, focalizando o romance *Midnight Robber*, da escritora caribenha-canadense Nalo Hopkinson.

### PALAVRAS-CHAVE

Literatura caribenha, ficçãõ especulativa, gênero

I am just trying to identify science fiction/fantasy/horror/magical realism as fiction that starts from the principle of making the impossible possible.

Nalo Hopkinson<sup>2</sup>

In her renowned essay, “When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision,” published originally in 1971, Adrienne Rich, referring to Ibsen’s play of the same title, discusses the dynamic atmosphere women writers were experiencing at that time as a “awakening of the dead or sleeping consciousness.”<sup>3</sup> Rich then proceeds to elaborate on the meaning of such an awakening and re-vision: “Re-vision—the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction—is for women more than a chapter in cultural history: it is an act of survival.”<sup>4</sup> With such words, Rich urges women writers to “know the writing of the past,” but to address it in a different light, not only to “pass on a tradition but to break its hold over us.”<sup>5</sup> For Rich, this process of

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<sup>1</sup> Pesquisadora do CNPq e da FAPEMIG.

<sup>2</sup> Hopkinson’s interview with Alondra Nelson. NELSON. Making the Impossible Possible: An Interview with Nalo Hopkinson, p. 98.

<sup>3</sup> RICH. When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision. p. 167.

<sup>4</sup> RICH. When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision. p. 167.

<sup>5</sup> RICH. When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision. p. 168.

rewriting, and above all of “re-visioning,” of seeing with fresh eyes, is an act of survival as a political act, for “politics was not something ‘out there’ but something ‘in here,’” a part of the task of the woman writer. Here Rich finds a strong argument to support the long-standing feminist claim that the personal is also political. For her, “writing is re-naming” and women writers have to work hard to take this opportunity of creating new visions of the world through renaming, for “the awakening of consciousness is not like the crossing of a frontier—one step and you are in another country.”<sup>6</sup> Rather than being a one-time action that produces immediate results, re-vision is an ever-lasting process, a continual act of struggle that requires from the woman writer a critical view of tradition and a desire for renewal.

Since Rich wrote her seminal revisionist text, several women writers have undergone the task she lays out for them in this essay. Many works have been produced by women writers employing revisionist strategies—one merely has to name a few of these writers: Jean Rhys, Angela Carter, Margaret Atwood, for example. More recently, African-American and Afro-Caribbean writers have also attempted to produce works with such a revisionist stance. “Through this dual focus on recuperating and re-visioning, recognizing the influence of the spiritual and the supernatural in the everyday,” Gina Wisker claims, these writers have “chosen to explore issues of race and sexuality, using a rich mixture of history—the factual, realism—and magic, specifically the formulae of horror and of speculative fiction.”<sup>7</sup> What has been called “speculative fiction” – a term that has often been used to describe a genre that comprises several other literary blends, such as science fiction, magic realism, fable, horror, and fantasy genres—has proven to be a fertile ground for women writers to practice their revisionist work. For Wisker, women writers such as Jewelle Gomez, Tananarive Due, Nalo Hopkinson and Toni Morrison “have made significant contributions to the development of this new hybrid form, African-American and Afro-Caribbean women’s speculative fiction.”<sup>8</sup> Much of this writing—and this is especially the case of the Caribbean-Canadian writer Nalo Hopkinson—addresses relevant issues concerning women and gender relations in contemporary and diasporic societies, establishing new parameters for what has been traditionally referred to as science fiction written by women.

Born in Jamaica and raised in Guyana and Trinidad, Nalo Hopkinson has lived in Canada since she was sixteen years old. She has published several novels and received many literary awards. Her first novel, *Brown Girl in the Ring* (1998), was followed by *Midnight Robber* (2000), and then by the collection of short stories, *Skin Folk* (2001). In 2003, she published her third novel, originally entitled *Griffone*, and later published as *The Salt Roads*, and in 2007 her last novel to date, *New Moon’s Arms*, was released.<sup>9</sup> Hopkinson’s speculative fiction combines elements of her Caribbean and African cultural tradition

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<sup>6</sup> RICH. *When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision*. p. 176.

<sup>7</sup> WISKER. *Your Buried Ghosts Have a Way of Tripping You up: Revisioning and Mothering in African-American and Afro-Caribbean Women’s Speculative*, p. 72-73.

<sup>8</sup> WISKER. *Your Buried Ghosts Have a Way of Tripping You up: Revisioning and Mothering in African-American and Afro-Caribbean Women’s Speculative*, p. 72.

<sup>9</sup> For further information on Nalo Hopkinson, see her website: <<http://nalohopkinson.com>>.

while devising a specific literary style for construing her narratives that simultaneously endorses and challenges those same traditions she has inherited and pursues. The author herself gives an unusual definition for the term “speculative fiction.” For her, it can best be described as

a set of literatures that examine the effect on humans and human society of the fact that we are toolmakers. We are always trying to control or improve our environments. Those tools may be tangible (such as machines) or intangible (such as laws, mores, belief systems). Spec-fic tells us stories about our lives with our creations.<sup>10</sup>

Hopkinson further states that she is interested in this genre because it contains the possibility of what she calls “a subversive literature.”<sup>11</sup> Actually, it can be argued that her fiction proliferates with a fusion of genres that makes it difficult to classify her work. What is interesting to observe is her inescapable affiliation to her Caribbean roots, which also informs the blending of distinctive cultural and literary sources. As she puts it: “when my work is coming from a Caribbean context, fusion fits very well, that’s how we survived (...) It’s a sensibility that I’m quite familiar with and enamored of.”<sup>12</sup> Wisker observes how Hopkinson is also concerned with “reclaiming, reinscribing, and reconfiguring the geographies of place,” and “the geographies of the mind linked with place and history,”<sup>13</sup> not only regarding her Caribbean homeland, but also in relation to Canada, her adopted country.

This blending of traditions and also the hybrid nature of her work can also be detected in the choice of language for her fiction, especially in the case of *Midnight Robber*. The Caribbean background evoked in this novel is reflected in the portrayal of characters—all Afro-Caribbean—and, above all, in the language employed: a hybrid Creole, based on Hopkinson’s knowledge of Jamaican, Trinidadian and Guyanese, which is meant to reclaim the oral tradition of the region. This dialectal form of language, which is often referred to in the novel as “Anglopatwa,” is observed not only in the speech of the characters, but it is also the means through which parts of the novel is narrated, including the metadiscourse of the narrative voice that frames the story, as is shown in the following opening passage:

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 (...) Maybe I is a master weaver. I spin the threads. I twist warp’ cross weft. I move my shuttle in and out, and smooth smooth, I weaving you my story, oui? And when I done, I shake it out and turn it over *swips!* and maybe you see it have a next side to the tale. Maybe is same way so I weave my way through the dimensions to land up here. No, don’t ask me how.

New Half-Way Tree is where Tan-Tan end up, and *crick-crack*, this is she story.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> NELSON. Making the Impossible Possible: An Interview with Nalo Hopkinson, p. 98.

<sup>11</sup> RUTLEDGE. Speaking in Tongues: An Interview with Science Fiction Writer Nalo Hopkinson, p. 591.

<sup>12</sup> NELSON. Making the Impossible Possible: An Interview with Nalo Hopkinson, p. 99.

<sup>13</sup> WISHER. Your Buried Ghosts Have a Way of Tripping You up: Revisioning and Mothering in African-American and Afro-Caribbean Women’s Speculative, p. 80.

<sup>14</sup> HOPKINSON. *Midnight Robber*, p. 1-3.

Like Anansi, the trickster figure from West African and Caribbean Folklore who often appears as a spider, the narrator weaves a tale and a storytelling web for and around the unknown listener—the one who should, according to Caribbean custom, respond “crack” to the storyteller’s utterance of “crick” to mark the beginning of the story to be told. The anansi story<sup>15</sup> this narrative voice weaves is precisely the plot described in *Midnight Robber* about the travels, perils, and incidents in the life of the child/protagonist, Tan-Tan, and her coming of age. Only in the end, when the narrative voice closes the story, is the reader able to comprehend the full meaning of these initial words, whose voice behind these utterances is, and to whom the story is being told.

The anansi story that the narrative voice refers to is that of the famous Robber Queen, the central focus of *Midnight Robber*, who throughout the narrative will turn out to be the protagonist Tan-Tan. At the beginning of the story, Tan-Tan is a child who lives in a futurist utopian planet called Toussaint,<sup>16</sup> to which peoples of African descent went to in a diasporic movement reminiscent of the historical Middle Passage. Tan-Tan is eventually forced to follow her father into exile to the primitive planet New Half-Way Tree, which exists in another dimension veil. This “other” planet, which is described as a prison colony and a planet of lost, restless people, drifters, convicts, and exiles, is the site of another story to be told—this time a dystopian one.

The narrative as a whole is composed of references to several Caribbean myths and African diasporic folk traditions. Even the futurist devices found in Toussaint, such as the all controlling web, a supposedly benevolent and protective technological center, and the operating system that runs a dwelling and speaks with the people through an auricular piece are references to historical and cultural myths from the region: the Granny Nanny, the grandmother figure who evokes the Queen of the rebellious Maroons (Nanny of the Maroons), from Jamaican legend; and the “eshu,” the African all-powerful deity and often trickster that can be in many places at once, a figure that appears frequently in the folklore of countries of the Black diaspora. Moreover, it has been argued that Hopkinson makes reference to at least three major Caribbean folk stories in the construction of *Midnight Robber*: “the African trickster tale of Anancy the Spider and Dry Bone, the Taino ecological myth of the squalid planet, and the Jamaican legend of Three-Fingered Jack, a historical figure who killed his plantation owner for a crime committed against his mother and then became the subject of fear rather than celebration amongst the people of the island.”<sup>17</sup> Likewise, the title of the novel, *Midnight Robber*, refers to a twentieth century male Trinidadian classical masquerade for carnival, which is “considered a ‘survival’ of a more authentic carnival that existed in the past.”<sup>18</sup> The Midnight Robber, also a kind of trickster figure, traditionally wears an enormous hat and a flowing cape, carries a weapon, and makes ingenious use of a distinctive speech called

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<sup>15</sup> The term anansi story is used to refer to folk tales from the Caribbean, which come from a tradition of Africans brought to the region.

<sup>16</sup> According to Rutledge, Toussaint is in this novel “named after the great Haitian liberator of the Eighteenth century.” RUTLEDGE. Nalo Hopkinson, p. 12.

<sup>17</sup> ANATOL. Maternal Discourses in Nalo Hopkinson’s *Midnight Robber*, p. 117.

<sup>18</sup> FREITAS. Disrupting the Nation: Gender Transformation in Trinidad Carnival, p. 12.

“robber-talk.” In the novel, Hopkinson substitutes a Robber Queen for the traditionally masculine figure, who becomes the means through which the female protagonist deals with the several situations of exile, danger, and neglect with which she is faced. Her translation of the Midnight Robber figure goes beyond the transgression of gender roles, as it becomes not only a trickster, but also “a version of Robin Hood and Zorro not only West Indian, but also female.”<sup>19</sup>

What interests me most in *Midnight Robber* is precisely the gender construction that underlies the story in tandem with the many forced exiles the protagonist of the novel undergoes and the predicaments that she suffers under these conditions. In fact, the novel describes and translates both in gender and racial terms the experience of diaspora and exile, which is one Hopkinson herself has undergone, as she mentions on several occasions. Corroborating this view, the author affirms that exile is “a big theme when you come from a diasporic culture. Where is home? Can you go back there? Or do you have to go forward and make yourself a home elsewhere? Does home reside within you or outside of you?”<sup>20</sup> As Giselle Anatol has pointed out, Nalo Hopkinson herself embodies an African diasporic experience that is often transposed to her fictional work.<sup>21</sup>

*Midnight Robber* also has as its central focus the experiences of a child as she becomes a woman and has to undergo different diasporic situations. It examines the experiences of exile of the female character, the questioning and the renegotiation of gender relations in this context, the racial predicaments, and the abject experiences that she ultimately has to endure. Furthermore, the novel explores the alternative spaces of belonging and the new social configurations that have become central to the understanding of our contemporary world—in this case, metaphorized in Hopkinson’s bleak view of the future. Rather than privileging the notion of exile, I believe Hopkinson’s works can best be read in relation to diasporic movements that denote a more political and engaged movement. The term diaspora, for Paul Gilroy, is useful in this context because it “lacks the modernist and cosmopolitan associations of the word exile.” “Transcoded from its Jewish source,” Gilroy adds, “the term provided a model which the modern black thinkers of the Western hemisphere were eager to adapt to their particular post-slave circumstances.”<sup>22</sup> Both terms may be applied to *Midnight Robber*, but often with different connotations. That the old African diaspora occupies central stage in this narrative can be observed in the many references to the significance of the Middle Passage and to the fact that the Caribbean colonized planet of Toussaint, the place the characters in the novel now live, is described as a diasporic place to which people of African descent moved to in search of a better place to live. This time, however, it is highlighted that “black people make this crossing as free people.”<sup>23</sup> Unlike her comfortable home in diaspora in Toussaint, Tan-Tan’s experiences in New Half-Way Tree, the country she escapes to with her corrupt father, can better be described in terms of a forced exile. She is doomed then to live

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<sup>19</sup> RUTLEDGE. Nalo Hopkinson, p. 13.

<sup>20</sup> SOYKA, *Literature Without a Country: Nalo Hopkinson’s New Novel, Midnight Robber*, p. 1.

<sup>21</sup> ANATOL. *Maternal Discourses in Nalo Hopkinson’s Midnight Robber*, p. 112.

<sup>22</sup> GILROY. *Diaspora*, p. 208.

<sup>23</sup> HOPKINSON. *Midnight Robber*, p. 21.

perpetually running away from situations she does not choose to undergo or is not responsible for.

The role of women in the African diaspora and “the intersection of geography and gender ideology” are also central issues addressed in *Midnight Robber*,<sup>24</sup> especially in terms of a theorization of gendered diaspora as proposed by Clifford, Spivak, Chow Friedman, and Kamboureli, and other contemporary critics. For Clifford, diasporic “experiences are always gendered,” for women bring to the discussion on diasporic spaces a particular set of revealing characteristics.<sup>25</sup> While diaspora is often “inscribed as a masculinist trope,” as Gilroy claims,<sup>26</sup> because of its association with nomadism and dislocation as a tradition masculine domain, discussing contemporary diasporas as a particularly gendered phenomenon contributes to bring to the fore relevant issues concerning women’s experiences in this context. Alison Donnell observes how Caribbean women have historically migrated more than men, especially in the post-1970 period. However, the migration patterns of these women, Donnell contends, are quite “different from those of men.”<sup>27</sup> Hopkinson’s tale about a futurist diaspora also foregrounds the experiences of Caribbean women in diaspora, not necessarily from a redemptive perspective, but rather as a critique on how certain sexist practices and prejudices prevail even in an ideally conceived futurist space in which Caribbean peoples are finally able to rescue and relive their traditions and customs. Tan-Tan’s experiences in New Half-Way Tree also highlight the continuous sexism and the pervading stereotypical roles women have been struggling against for ages. Tan-Tan, however, eventually moves away from these confining spaces, acquiring both the capacity for mobility and the power of agency.

Wisker observes how Nalo Hopkinson is interested in “exploring the horror scenarios associated with women, motherhood, and nurturance” in several of her works.<sup>28</sup> This gendered perspective also predominates in *Midnight Robber* and can be noticed right from the beginning of the novel when the unknown narrative voice describes, in the following terms, the two planets that are the setting for the story: “New Half-Way Tree is how Toussaint planet did look before the Marryshow Corporation sink them Earth Engine number 127 down into it like God entering he woman: plunging into the womb of soil to impregnate the planet with the seed of Granny Nanny.”<sup>29</sup> The age-old colonial imagery of the land as the body of a woman that is impregnated by a male force is evoked in this scene and becomes an important reference for the events that will develop in the narrative. In this case, however, it is supposedly a woman’s seed—Granny Nanny—that is believed to have impregnated the country. Here, the symbol of Granny Nanny, the female entity described as the artificial intelligence (a.i) of the planet, embodies the notion of nurturance and care in specific gender and racial terms.

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<sup>24</sup> ANATOL. Maternal Discourses in Nalo Hopkinson’s, p. 112-113.

<sup>25</sup> CLIFFORD. Diaspora, p. 311.

<sup>26</sup> GILROY. Diaspora, p. 209.

<sup>27</sup> DONNELL. *Twentieth-Century Caribbean Literature: Critical Moments in Anglophone Literary History*, p. 89.

<sup>28</sup> WISHER. Your Buried Ghosts Have a Way of Tripping You up: Revisioning and Mothering in African-American and Afro-Caribbean Women’s Speculative Horror, p. 80.

<sup>29</sup> HOPKINSON. *Midnight Robber*, p. 2.

Donna Haraway, in her influential work *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*, observes that it is not surprising that science fiction has become “a rich writing practice in recent feminist theory” as it allows for a critique of pre-established modes of thinking.<sup>30</sup> She argues for the possibility of a cyborg writing and a cyborg feminism that moves beyond naturalism and essentialism and focuses on situated knowledges and affinities among women. For her, the cyborg metaphor, which in Hopkinson’s novel is evoked by Granny Nanny as the central intelligence in the planet, is a powerful image, “a hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction,” a concept that “changes what counts as women’s experience.”<sup>31</sup> Haraway also evokes the figure of the trickster or coyote as another useful myth for feminists, as she claims that it is “a figure for the always problematic, always potent tie of meaning and bodies.”<sup>32</sup> Haraway envisages both metaphors—that of the cyborg and that of the trickster—as productive means of thinking about feminist forms of critique and allegiance, not as a dream of a common language, in Adrienne Rich’s words, but as a “powerful infidel heteroglossia.”<sup>33</sup> In Hopkinson’s novel, these two transgressive metaphors emerge as representations of agency for women. Granny Nanny embodies the metaphor of the cyborg, who, “rather than being a ‘Big Brother’ paradigm, is an affectionate reference to her sense of love, care and duty,”<sup>34</sup> while the protagonist Tan-Tan becomes associated with the trickster figure. As suggested by Haraway, these powerful figures convey strong images for women and feminism by interrogating traditional hierarchical practices; in this case, both in gender and racial terms.

In addition, the novel is peopled with strong female characters that play a crucial role in Tan-Tan’s development and shows the necessary affinity among women propagated by Haraway: the nurse that takes care of her as a child, and Benta and Abitefa, the birdlike creatures (“hinds”) that shelter and protect Tan-Tan in her second exile in New Half-Way Tree. The treatment Tan-Tan receives from these female characters contrasts sharply with the harmful and destructive manner in which her father, the man to whom she is closest, relates to her and tries to “plant” her, to use her as a soil to be “harvested.”<sup>35</sup> Yet, neither Granny Nanny, the all-powerful mother figure, nor her own mother, Ione Brasil, or her stepmother, Janisette, can protect Tan-Tan from the horror that follows her life in exile: the rape by her father. Both incidents—her exiles and rape—are often described in abject terms, as actions that the protagonist tries to understand and digest, but cannot fully do so.

In this novel, the depiction of the female body in transformation, the destruction of all the possible homes the protagonist attempts to build for herself, and the unnamable interdiction of incest can be read through the notion of the abject, as theorized by Julia

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<sup>30</sup> HARAWAY. *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*, p. 149.

<sup>31</sup> HARAWAY. *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*, p. 199.

<sup>32</sup> HARAWAY. *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*, p. 201.

<sup>33</sup> HARAWAY. *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*, p. 181.

<sup>34</sup> HOPKINSON. “A Conversation.”

<sup>35</sup> HOPKINSON. *Midnight Robber*, p. 260.

Kristeva. The abject in this case—the object of both repulsion and attraction—shares with the condition of exile and foreignness a renewed significance. According to Kristeva, aversion to food and excrement are some of the most elementary forms of abjection: “Loathing an item of food, a piece of filth, waste, or dung. The spasms and vomiting that protect me. The repugnance, the retching that thrusts me to the side and turns me away from defilement, sewage, and muck. The shame of compromise, of being in the middle of treachery. The fascinated start that leads me toward and separates me from them.”<sup>36</sup>

The abject, for Kristeva, is defined by its relation to the feminine, especially with the maternal element, by means of a body that is perceived as being on the frontier of things, but that simultaneously does not recognize these frontiers, that repels at the same time that it attracts. The abject is what is expelled and also rejected, that which challenges the subject and the constitution of subjectivity: “It is thus not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite.”<sup>37</sup> The ambiguity of the abject is also seen in the way that our culture traditionally relates to the foreigner, the stranger, who is the symbol of the other that is not accepted in society.<sup>38</sup> Along these lines, Rey Chow claims that the abject is often personified in the stranger/foreigner in the sense that ethnic hybridity can be identified as a form of abjection.<sup>39</sup>

The feeling of abjection can be perceived in Hopkinson’s narrative on several occasions in Tan-Tan’s new life as a frequent situation of exile, “as she had had home torn from her again.”<sup>40</sup> Tan-Tan, “wanting desperately to make some sense of the new world in which she found herself,” believes “she ain’t think she could take much more strangeness, oui?”<sup>41</sup> In her introduction to the world of the douen people to which she comes in her second exile in New Half-Way Tree, she is forced to eat a raw frog as a kind of initiation ceremony to be accepted in the community. Tan-Tan describes the episode in the following terms:

The tree frog squirmed in the cage of their two hands. Tan-Tan tried to pull away. She hated slimy things, they reminded of all the ways her daddy had taught her for bodies to make slime (...) Tan-Tan took a little sip from the hot thread of blood pumping down her chin. It tasted salty, and sweet. It spread over her tongue like thick mud. Like the first time Antonio had ever ejaculated in her mouth (...) Her belly rose right up into her throat, but she swallowed the frog’s blood.<sup>42</sup>

This moment of abjection reminds her, of course, of the most terrifying abject experience she has had: that of being raped repeatedly by her father. Her disgust at her new situation also appears in her aversion of excrement: “Tan-Tan had to pee, but she wasn’t going to

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<sup>36</sup> KRISTEVA. *Powers of Horror*, p. 2.

<sup>37</sup> KRISTEVA. *Powers of Horror*, p. 4.

<sup>38</sup> KRISTEVA. *Strangers to Ourselves*, p. 1-2.

<sup>39</sup> CHOW. *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, p. 148.

<sup>40</sup> HOPKINSON. *Midnight Robber*, p. 193.

<sup>41</sup> HOPKINSON. *Midnight Robber*, p. 183-184.

<sup>42</sup> HOPKINSON. *Midnight Robber*, p. 184-186.



squat with her bottom exposed to the outside to do her business, like some kind of wild animal, a leggo-beast in the bush (...) She felt her mouth screwing up in disgust (...) There was a kind of bowl hanging below it. Her stomach roiled at the sight of the pale, fat grubs churning in the mess inside.”<sup>43</sup>

Likewise, the condition of being in exile, of being a foreigner, is for Tan-Tan translated as an experience of abjection from which she cannot escape. Her utmost feelings of abjection become intertwined with her experience of exile and the perception of her pregnant body and of the life she is carrying within her after being raped by her father and killing him in self-defense. She describes the life she carries within herself as “the monster child” that is eating her insides,<sup>44</sup> “the parasite baby,”<sup>45</sup> “the damned baby,”<sup>46</sup> “the devil baby,”<sup>47</sup> an abject being that devours her own self and destroys her subjectivity.

Unlike her first aborted pregnancy, this time, living in a third exiled situation, as she and Abitefa are expelled from the douen community, she decides to keep the child: “Is the baby, the monster baby that was round and hard now like a potato in her belly (...) Resentfully Tan-Tan dug her fingers into her stomach. The defiant thing inhabiting her didn’t yield. Her dead pounded with anger. She could only drink what it let her, eat what it permitted.”<sup>48</sup> She explains to her sister-hinde: “He rape me, Abitefa. He put this baby in me, like the one before. He was forever trying to *plant* me, like I was his soil to harvest”.<sup>49</sup> In this sense, the pregnant body becomes the site of the utmost abject feelings. For Tan-Tan, her pregnancy emblemizes the abject in its most appalling manifestation in that it causes her to feel repulsion and aversion to her own body and to the child she carries inside—the strange being that becomes a personification of all the abject experiences of exile and rape that she undergoes.

The experience of the maternal body as a site of abjection challenges Tan-Tan’s sense of subjectivity and her view of her own self, which begins to be perceived as a split-self after the night of the rape. From that point on, she becomes split between the bad and the good Tan-Tan. Both the abject alien body within her and this splitting of the self can only be resolved when Tan-Tan fully embodies her dream fantasy of the Robber Queen, the “outcast woman,”<sup>50</sup> the “woman-of-words,”<sup>51</sup> the protector of innocents and “the terror of the bad-minded.”<sup>52</sup> By transforming a masculine myth from her cultural heritage into a powerful image of a female heroine who decides to fight for justice on an outlaw planet, Tan-Tan manages to rewrite the script of her life and to

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<sup>43</sup> HOPKINSON. *Midnight Robber*, p. 190-191.

<sup>44</sup> HOPKINSON. *Midnight Robber*, p. 236.

<sup>45</sup> HOPKINSON. *Midnight Robber*, p. 247.

<sup>46</sup> HOPKINSON. *Midnight Robber*, p. 297.

<sup>47</sup> HOPKINSON. *Midnight Robber*, p. 298.

<sup>48</sup> HOPKINSON. *Midnight Robber*, p. 255.

<sup>49</sup> HOPKINSON. *Midnight Robber*, p. 260.

<sup>50</sup> HOPKINSON. *Midnight Robber*, p. 168.

<sup>51</sup> HOPKINSON. *Midnight Robber*, p. 246.

<sup>52</sup> HOPKINSON. *Midnight Robber*, p. 254.

engender a new meaning for her abject body, now transformed by the act of carnivalesque performance. As in the logic of the Bakhtinian carnival, in which “the hierarchical structure of society and the forms of terror, reverence, piety, and etiquette connected with it” are suspended,<sup>53</sup> Tan-Tan reverses momentarily the hierarchies in a typical act of carnival. Only slowly is she then able to transgress the fixed boundaries and to reinscribe her self to a new context created by her act of performance. As a trickster, Tan-Tan interrogates the politics of the body in tune with Haraway’s theorizations, arguing eventually for a questioning of “the actual production and reproduction of bodies.”<sup>54</sup>

In a quasi-utopian resolution of the narrative, Tan-Tan is finally able to reconcile herself with the abject conditions that have haunted her: the forced exile, the traumatic rape, the child she carries inside herself. All these situations are forced upon her, without her being able to decide about her destiny. Yet, rather than being a victim, she succeeds in playing the role of a heroine and finally turns into a legend – the legend of Tan-Tan, the Robber Queen from New Half-Way Tree, which is recounted by the narrative voice that opens the novel and in three separate episodes in the story: “How Tan-Tan Learn to Thief,” “Tan-Tan and Dry Bone,” “Tan-Tan and the Rolling Calf.”

It is also through the powerful use of language that Tan-Tan, personified as the Robber Queen, manages to accept the unacceptable and to make the impossible possible. It is by “stealing the torturer’s tongue”—a reference to the poem by David Findlay that opens the novel—that Tan-Tan unveils the possibility for a rewriting of (her)story in her own terms. One can hear Tan-Tan’s voice through Findlay’s poem, which continues in the following manner: “hear this long tongue!/ fear this long tongue!/ know this tall tale to be mine too, and I’ll live or die by it/ I stole the torturer’s tongue.” In the end, Tan-Tan steals the torturer’s tongue and makes the tale her own. She participates in a carnival festivity masquerading as the Robber Queen and is then able to show “the Robber Queen’s power – the power-of-words”<sup>55</sup> by finally telling in verses typical of battles of wit—and in a reference to calypsonians’ competitions<sup>56</sup>—the “real” story of her life to the whole carnival crowd and to Janisette, her stepmother, who was unable to save her from her own father and is now chasing her for having murdered him. Tan-Tan tells the story of how she was taken into exile without having committed any transgression of the law and without having been allowed to carry anything into her new life, how she was raped repeatedly by her father and became twice pregnant by him, and how ultimately “the Robber Queen get born that day, out of excruciation.”<sup>57</sup> At this moment, “Tan-Tan the Robber Queen, the good and bad”<sup>58</sup> becomes reunited with her self, completes the reconciliation with her past, and, for the first time, manages to acquire agency for her life:

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<sup>53</sup> BAKHTIN. *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics*, p. 123.

<sup>54</sup> HARAWAY. *Simions, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*, p. 200.

<sup>55</sup> HOPKINSON. *Midnight Robber*, p. 319.

<sup>56</sup> Calypso is a musical rendering originally from West Africa that was sung and performed by slaves. Calypso became typical of Trinidad, which is known as the land of Calypso. It is often performed as a type of competition in which calypsonians have to undergo a battle of wits sung in verses.

<sup>57</sup> HOPKINSON. *Midnight Robber*, p. 325.

<sup>58</sup> HOPKINSON. *Midnight Robber*, p. 325.

The Tan-Tan knew her body to be hers again, felt her own mouth stretching, stretching open in amazement at the words that had come out of it. Is she, speaking truth; is truth! “*Sans humanité!*” she spat at Janisette – “no mercy!” – the traditional final phrase of the calypsonian who’d won the battle of wits and words. Tan-Tan gasped, put a hand to her magical mouth.<sup>59</sup>

This scene confirms the redemptive resolution to the story, as it allows Tan-Tan to break her silence and to reconcile herself both with her abject body, her child, and her experience of othering through exile. She is finally able to fulfill the prophecy set out for her: “If you take one, you must give back too.”<sup>60</sup> What happens next takes us back to the beginning of the story and allows us to identify the unknown, until then, narrative voice: the house eshu who was sent, by Granny Nanny, to New Half-Way Tree through the dimension veil to rescue Tan-Tan. He only manages to arrive in time for the birth of Tan-Tan’s child and it is to him that the story is told. Tan-Tan’s child is, symbolically, named “Tubman: the human bridge from slavery to freedom.”<sup>61</sup>

Simultaneously rescuing the past and pointing to the future, Hopkinson’s revisionist and futurist narrative of diaspora, exile, and displacement is also a story about the present, about our contemporary world. By addressing issues that are central to our understanding of our present time and place in terms of transnational movements of mobility and the conflation of gender and racial paradigms within this context, Hopkinson argues that these are not new phenomena, nor will they disappear in the foreseeable future. Even so, the past has to be kept alive through the reinstatement of tradition so that we can prepare ourselves for the future. The optimistic tone of the ending of the novel, which contrasts sharply with its dystopian vision and the critique regarding the role of women, can only be envisaged through a reconciliation, a bridge, between past and present: the past that recovers the myth of the Caribbean Robber Queen and the future that allows the future generations in diaspora—represented by Tan-Tan’s child—to make peace with their tradition, their place of origin, and their new and provisional homes. Tubman, Tan-Tan’s child and the symbol of a new generation of diasporic Caribbean peoples, becomes what his name symbolizes: a human bridge, a connection among peoples, and one more movement towards liberation for people and women, in special, of the African diaspora.



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<sup>59</sup> HOPKINSON. *Midnight Robber*, p. 326.

<sup>60</sup> HOPKINSON. *Midnight Robber*, p. 175.

<sup>61</sup> HOPKINSON. *Midnight Robber*, p. 329.

## ABSTRACT

This essay discusses how speculative fiction produced by women writers has revisited contemporary Caribbean Literature. By analyzing how these writers combine traditional aspects of Caribbean literature with a dystopian and transgressive discourse, this text addresses the questionings proposed by women writers from a gender perspective, focusing on the novel *Midnight Robber* by the Caribbean-Canadian writer Nalo Hopkinson.

## KEYWORDS

Caribbean literature, speculative fiction, gender

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