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GRADO EN ESTUDIOS INGLESES

Trabajo de Fin de Grado

Marginal Bodies in Science Fiction:  
Examining Nalo Hopkinson's *Brown Girl  
in the Ring* and "A Habit of Waste"

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Salamanca, 2018



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This thesis is submitted for the degree of English Studies

3/7/2018

Tutor: Ana María Fraile Marcos

Vº Bº

## ABSTRACT

In *Brown Girl in the Ring* Nalo Hopkinson introduces a post-apocalyptic Toronto in which the wealthy and powerful have fled the inner city, leaving a lawless and dangerous slum controlled by the mafia and abandoned by all institutions, including healthcare. In the different but also futuristic society of “A Habit of Waste,” medical technologies have evolved enough to allow those with the money to pay for it to switch bodies. In both stories, Hopkinson makes use of science fiction devices to explore the marginalized embodiment of the protagonists and the conflict that arises from it, in order to expose the structures of oppression and exploitation that prevent the integration of hybridized identities in a white dominated society.

## KEYWORDS

Science fiction, Afrofuturism, body, Nalo Hopkinson, healthcare, Afro-Caribbean

## RESUMEN

En *Brown Girl in the Ring* Nalo Hopkinson presenta un Toronto pos apocalíptico en el que los ricos y poderosos han huido del centro de la ciudad, dejando un suburbio peligroso y anárquico controlado por la mafia y abandonado por todas las instituciones (incluyendo la sanitaria). En la también futurista sociedad de “A Habit of Waste” las tecnologías médicas han avanzado hasta el punto de permitir cambiar de cuerpo a aquellos con dinero para pagarlo. En ambas historias Hopkinson emplea recursos típicos de la ciencia ficción para explorar la corporalidad marginal de las protagonistas, así como los conflictos que emergen de esta, con el objetivo de exponer las estructuras de opresión y explotación que impiden la integración de identidades híbridas en una sociedad predominantemente blanca.

## PALABRAS CLAVE

Ciencia ficción, afrofuturismo, cuerpo, Nalo Hopkinson, atención sanitaria, afrocaribeño

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## INTRODUCTION

For readers seeking non-White voices in science fiction and fantasy genres that build upon the work of authors like Samuel Delany and Octavia E. Butler, Jamaican Canadian writer Nalo Hopkinson has emerged as a prominent figure in the last two decades. In her first novel, *Brown Girl in the Ring* (1998), she creates a dystopian Toronto in which an economic collapse provoked by the reclamation of land by the Temagami Indians has led to violent riots that have profoundly altered the socioeconomic tissue of the city, creating a “doughnut hole” (10) called the Burn: an inner city slum controlled by a violent mafia from which the wealthy and powerful have fled together with any shadow of government or police force. In this setting rife with danger and insecurity, we are introduced to Ti-Jeanne, a single mother barely out of her teens, and her grandmother Gros-Jeanne, who has taken the role of healer and spiritual leader of the community and tries to educate her reluctant granddaughter in the Caribbean traditions that inform her practice. In the course of her adventures, Ti-Jeanne is faced with the dangers presented by the “posse,” the mafia that controls the Burn, and struggles to find her identity after learning of her gift to communicate with the Orisha spirits of the Afro-Caribbean pantheon. Hopkinson cleverly introduces elements of Jamaican culture to make the Canadian-born protagonist face a heritage she is reluctant to accept, as is Cynthia, the main character of “A Habit of Waste” (1999), who goes so far as to make use of the advanced medical resources introduced in the short story to exchange her black, curvaceous body for a white, boyish one much to the displeasure of her Trinidad-born parents, who hold on to as many traces of Caribbean culture as they can find in Canada. Although not set in a dystopian reality, Hopkinson makes use of futuristic technology commonly found in science fiction works to explore the conflict faced by a second-generation Jamaican immigrant socialized in Canada when trying to accept the non-normative aspects of her identity. In both of these stories, Hopkinson introduces young

female protagonists struggling to reconcile their immigrant heritage, embraced and passed on by parents and grandparents. Furthermore, Hopkinson uses common science fiction devices to recreate the conflict and highlight the points of contention between female ethnic embodiment and the heteropatriarchal Western context. By examining how Nalo Hopkinson's chosen works connect both with the Caribbean literary tradition and the more typical science fiction tropes, this paper seeks to demonstrate that the latter can provide an exceptionally fertile ground for the exploration and negotiation of marginal identities, as has been shown by authors ascribing to currents within or connected to sci-fi but more socially minded like afrofuturism or speculative fiction. In the process, I suggest, Hopkinson exposes the conflictive relationship of the non-normative body and the marginalized populations with the medical establishment and explores the possible consequences of such a conflict.

#### GENRE CONSIDERATIONS: SCIENCE FICTION AND THE EXPLORATION OF MARGINAL IDENTITIES

Within the short story anthology *Skin Folk* (2001), "A Habit of Waste" is prefaced by a fragment of Guayanese poet Slade Hopkinson's "The Madwoman of Papine: Two Cartoons with Captions," of which I have considered relevant to quote the following verses: "Scholars, more brilliant than I could hope to be, / advised that if I valued poetry, / I should eschew all sociology" (Hopkinson 183). It would not be unreasonable to infer that the poet refers here to the familiar conflict between art for art's sake and the use of the artistic medium to examine or further social issues. Slade Hopkinson seems to resolve the problem by choosing to disregard the opinions of those more brilliant than him and maybe sacrifice the quality of his poetry in order to examine "the latitudes of ex-colonised," their "unmollified" degradation and "imported . . . styles in art" (183). Indeed, Nalo Hopkinson chose an extremely poignant fragment of her father's poetry to introduce a story that very explicitly deals with the protagonist's impossibility to reconcile a racialized body with her Western socialization,

firmly picking the side of the creators that employ the artistic medium to point out social conflict. In *Brown Girl in the Ring*, the author introduces each chapter with a brief quotation from traditional Caribbean folklore, which serves to shape the ethnic environment in which the characters attempt to survive, but which also connects Hopkinson's story to the Caribbean literary tradition. The novel itself is inspired by St. Lucian born and Nobel Prize winner playwright Derek Walcott's play *Ti-Jean and His Brothers* (1970), a parable filled with characters of Afro-Caribbean folklore and St. Lucian customs, from which Hopkinson draws the names of her characters and the themes of the rite of passage for the young protagonist and the subaltern challenging authority: in Walcott's play, it is the black man who confronts the white devil; in Hopkinson's novel, it is a woman who confronts male authority and the marginalized subject that challenges the context that subjugates it.

Hopkinson also connects with Caribbean literature through her chosen genre. In the section dedicated to Caribbean Theories in *The Empire Writes Back*, Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin collect Jacques Stephen Alexis' theories that link the amalgamation of different cultures in the region due to its complicated history of colonization with the most adequate forms in fiction, which must be carefully picked in order to move apart from the "imported . . . styles in art" of the ex-colonised that Slade Hopkinson mentions in his poem. Dealing with a culture that is primarily "Afro-Amerindian-European syncretism" (147) and has emerged from "clash and miscegenation" (144), Alexis establishes that realism must be rejected "as a suitable mode for Black-Haitian expression," arguing that a realistic depiction must be accompanied by "the strange and the fantastic, of dreams and half-light, of the mysterious and the marvelous" (148). However, he was careful to point out the fact that Haitian art was never disconnected from the reality of man and "the fight for hope" (148), creating a marvelous realism focused on the plight of the long-suffering communities of the West Indies and distant from European privileged experimentations. These assertions about what

Caribbean literature must be to define itself away from the colonial trace resonate clearly in Nalo Hopkinson's work. A novel like *Brown Girl in the Ring*, in which the incorporation of motifs of African mythology, spiritual quests, divergent visions, and traditional monsters of the Caribbean like the soucouyant, the zombie or the loogaroo mix together with social commentary can be easily identified with the literature that Alexis discusses in "Du réalisme merveilleux des Haïtiens." However, Hopkinson's work also connects with the future through advanced technologies and artifacts typically associated with the science fiction genre, like the dystopian future and advanced transplant technology in *Brown Girl in the Ring* or the possibility of individuals changing bodies in "A Habit of Waste". These features move her writing a step apart from Caribbean marvelous realism into something more universal to the black experience in the postcolonial setting.

As Gregory Jerome Hampton discusses in *Changing Bodies in the Fiction of Octavia Butler*, both African American literature and traditional Science Fiction "have historically included elements of social commentary and allegories that involve spaces/scenarios that are uncommon in mainstream (white) American literature" (69), mainly due to the fact that they focus on bodies and images that have been traditionally overlooked. In the same way Alexis drew a link between form and matter by claiming a necessity for Caribbean authors to embrace a writing style as syncretic as Caribbean culture itself, putting a "universally marginalized body" at the center of the narrative—as is the case in Butler's works (and Delany's and Hopkinson's)—requires "an engagement of aesthetics that allow duality and multiplicity with regards to race, gender, and sex; an aesthetic that presents a space of ambiguity that is both acceptable and logical" (Hampton 69). This commitment to diversity has allowed sci-fi to develop beyond the "space western" pulp publications to explorations of "the way in which women are treated in society" as well as "issues of race and sexuality" (Murphy 120). However, some backlash has been experienced from right wing sectors within



the community, such as the “sad puppies” controversy in the Hugo awards, when a conservative group campaigned against “a perceived bias towards liberal and leftwing science-fiction and fantasy authors” (Barnett). Examples such as this may have contributed to elicit a need to self-define amongst authors choosing innovation and social concern within the genre, whose works may incorporate some of the trappings of sci-fi but which “contain no intergalactic space travel, no teleportation, no Martians” (Atwood, *Writing with Intent* 285). Margaret Atwood’s differentiation between speculative fiction, which “invents nothing we haven’t already invented or started to invent” (285) and science fiction “in which things happen that are not possible today” (*In Other Worlds* 12) famously clashed with Ursula Le Guin’s own taxonomy, which employed more or less the same criteria to differentiate between fantasy and science fiction. Despite the problems of delimiting the sometimes blurred lines between categories, the existence of a tendency that has split from pulp sci-fi to explore futuristic possibility in works firmly anchored in present reality is undeniable. Another recent attempt to demarcate from outlandish extraterrestrial fantasies has been Afrofuturism, which emerges as a subgenre within science fiction which “combines elements of science fiction, historical fiction, speculative fiction, fantasy, Afrocentricity, and magic realism with non-Western beliefs. In some cases, it’s a total reenvisioning of the past and speculation about the future rife with cultural critiques” (Womack 9). Nalo Hopkinson’s works, with their heavy charge of Jamaican mythology, futuristic technologies and challenge to Western socialization certainly ascribe to this recently named but not untried subgenre, which employs science fiction scenarios that allow for the exploration of marginalized bodies in a central position, but align more closely with speculative fiction’s concern with the future consequences of events already set in motion in the present.

Amongst other examples of African American authors using proto-science fiction settings to imagine realities in which racialized individuals subvert the *statu quo* (383),

Samuel Delany mentions George Schuyler's *Black No More: Being an Account of the Strange and Wonderful Workings of Science in the Land of the Free* (1931). Schuyler's book is a speculative satire in which the racial problem in the United States has disappeared thanks to a medical treatment by which black people can turn themselves white. Imagining a reality in which it was impossible to establish a racial stratification of society, Schuyler exposed the exploitation basis of the American economy by highlighting the madness ensued by the disappearance of racial difference. In *Black Skin, White Masks* Frantz Fanon examines the story of Jean Venuse, the protagonist of the Guayanese writer René Maran's *Un homme pareil aux autres* (1947) who "has lived in Bordeaux for years; so he is a European," but "he is black, so he is a Negro" (Fanon 64). Because Maran's book does not employ futuristic technology nor magic, Venuse's endeavors to reject his blackness are attempted through love of white women. In Fanon's words "By loving me she proves that I am worthy of white love. I am loved like a white man. I am a white man" (63). Nalo Hopkinson translates this anxiety into a futuristic setting by creating a reality in which transplanting someone's consciousness into a different body is entirely possible, provided you have enough money to pay for it.

In "A Habit of Waste," Hopkinson employs the same trope as Schuyler's and the same concern as Maran to explore the impact of the white beauty canon upon black embodiment: Cynthia, a young woman who has discarded her black body and exchanged it for a white, slimmer model, has never been able to stand her natural hair, "full, tarty-looking lips," "fath thighs" and "outsize ass" (183), which she always tried to conceal and slim down. The author highlights the damaging internalization of white beauty myths as Cynthia reviews the MediPerfiction catalogue: the bodies portrayed as desirable alternatives are either Caucasian or racialized but acceptable options of "commodified beauty within an Orientalist market" (Martín-Lucas 197) because of their sexualized exoticism: "*Indiras* came with creamy brown skin, falls of straight, dark hair, and curvaceous bodies ("*exotic grace*")"

(183). In a very short story in which most characters are of Afro-Caribbean origin, the white gaze is characterized in Cynthia's study of her old body: her Western socialization as a Canadian clashes with her Jamaican heritage, resulting in both the rejection of her immigrant parents' "banana boat" accents (she wishes they would assimilate once and for all after thirty-three years away from Trinidad) and the erasure of her blackness. As DuBois showed through his concept of double-consciousness, the experience of racialized embodiment under racism thrusts upon the black body an identity coded from the outside, forcing blacks to measure "one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity." However, after Old Man Morris' healing meal-and-a-story, Cynthia seems more reconciled with her roots, and in her Thanksgiving visit to her parents she connects with her heritage through the fatty food they prepared and that she usually rejects: she is Fanon's ultimate white masked, black woman. Through a similar race-switching trope, Schuyler exposed the exploitative base of the American system and Hopkinson highlights the damaging effects that the internalized beauty canon emerging from the dominant heterosexual white male gaze has upon non-conforming bodies. Indeed, in Schuyler's and Hopkinson's works we can appreciate how the change of perception needed to read science-fiction tropes allows for the exploration of conflicts connected to black embodiment in a Western white patriarchal society, providing a poignant example of how elements typically attached to sci-fi can serve in speculative fictions to examine social forces at work in our present reality.

#### THE MEDICAL ESTABLISHMENT AND THE MARGINAL BODY

In works as early as Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* or Stevenson's *Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, considered by many as the antecedents to modern science fiction, there is already a clear interest in the use of advanced and experimental medical sciences as a tool for the exploration of the biological and the psychological aspects of what it means to be

human. This has even more relevance in our modern societies, which are not only heavily medicalized, but are already achieving feats that only science fiction authors had dared to think about years before, such as the incorporation of artificial components of technology for sensory integration (the thousands of people with cochlear implants are technically cyborgs), tightening the gap between the sometimes outrageous scenarios presented in sci-fi literature and our direct reality. When considering issues of enhanced human performativity through medicalization, one cannot escape the consideration of *who* is the subject of said medicalization and is able to access man-made bodily improvements: the issue of stratified access to healthcare based on socioeconomic conditions is a sadly relevant one in a world in which the privatization of medical resources is increasingly pervasive. In both *Brown Girl in the Ring* and “A Habit of Waste,” Nalo Hopkinson tackles these issues head on, introducing aspects concerning healthcare with close links to those familiar to the reader in order to draw attention to the terrible consequences that can result from restricted access to healthcare due to economic circumstances.

In both of Hopkinson’s stories, modern medical resources are portrayed as something only accessible through great amounts of money. Cynthia had to save money for five years before she could afford to switch bodies (183) and in the dystopian Toronto in *Brown Girl in the Ring*, the inhabitants of the Burn do not have access to medical facilities or assistance. Moreover, nurses and doctors are called the Vultures, since they only venture into the inner city to collect dead bodies or face near-death emergencies: “The price for established medical care was so high that only the desperately ill would call for help. If you saw a Vulture making a house call, it meant that someone was near death” (8). This disparity in the possibilities of access to medical assistance that leads Gros-Jeanne to set up as healer of her community is precisely what brings the dystopian future Hopkinson introduces closer to the reader: it is impossible not to connect the unattainable medical services that are almost foreign for the

dwellers of the Burn with the current situation faced by many in countries like the United States, where the advances made during the Obama administration currently seem in dire peril. The consequences of this polarized society in regards to health care are twofold: firstly, if the advancement of medical science allows for the improvement of the human body beyond what nature intended, the result of a restricted access to said enhancements on the basis of economic power hints at a future where the upper social classes will not only have money and power but also physical enhancements that will allow for the perpetuation of an extremely unequal system. Secondly, the direct consequence of that inequality is that the marginalized populations left beyond the scope of health care are turned into the objects of medical science, instead of subjects of healthcare, as it has happened time and time again in our recent history.

One of the freshest examples of this objectification of the marginalized body by the medical practice is the treatment the medical community has given black people in the past century, pathologizing bodily difference and making use of bodies perceived as biologically more imperfect in order to further medical investigation. An illustration of this is the ill-treatment suffered by African American Henrietta Lacks, a cancer patient in 1951 whose biopsied ever-multiplying cells were taken without consent and used after her death in the “colored ward at Johns Hopkins Hospital” (Grady) to create a cell line that is still commercialized and used in research facilities all over the world with no monetary compensation for the family. As Rachel C. Lee points out, there is such a thing as the “biosociality” of race, under which “the creation of a population whose demise and limited lives are required to promote the enhanced, limitless lives of others” (qtd. in García Larranz 22). Hopkinson exemplifies this population with Premier Uttley’s conception of the Burn as a uniform amalgam of spare bodies, as good a place to find a disposable body to harvest a heart for transplant as the pig farm normally employed to such ends. This misuse of marginalized

bodies is aggravated by the fact that it is done from the top of the power structure, and thus difficult to stop and easy to serve as precedent: “political arrangements . . . enable the misuse of healthy black bodies for organ donation” (Jones 9). The sociopolitical context Hopkinson creates for *Brown Girl in the Ring* points out to the use of marginalized, non-white bodies as biological fodder that will serve for the perpetuation of more powerful ones, as happens to Gros-Jeanne, whose life is deemed insignificant if her heart can be used to prolong Premier Uttley’s. Even Cynthia herself, in “A Habit of Waste” refers to her original black body as an “old castoff” and “donated discard” that only someone with no other choice will accept, proving how much she has interiorized this perception through her socialization and assimilation in the white hegemonic context. Hopkinson uses a dystopic imagining of Toronto to defamiliarize the reader enough to amplify the historically inescapable problem of the mistreatment of non-normative bodies by Western medicine, and give a clear warning about the dangers of an increasingly privatized access to health care.

## CONCLUSION

As we have seen, the chosen works of Nalo Hopkinson exemplify how science fiction imaginings joined with speculations anchored in present social reality can serve as the perfect vehicle for the exploration of marginal bodies and hybridized identities, allowing the manipulation of reality in order to highlight the points of conflict with hegemonic culture, as we can see in Cynthia’s literal rejection of her black body in “A Habit of Waste” and in Ti-Jeanne’s reluctance to take up her Mami’s teachings on how to communicate with the Orisha spirits in *Brown Girl in the Ring*. The conflicts of identity arising from black embodiment in individuals socialized in white dominant cultures and the protagonists’ difficulties to connect with an ethnic heritage that does not correspond with Western beliefs are examples of the issues tackled by emergent speculative trends such as Afrofuturism, that appropriate elements

of science fiction and fantasy to examine and expose conflictive issues not so effectively tackled by more realistic literary genres, but still connected to our social reality. The estrangement of familiar situations through their development to the ultimate consequences, as is the case of dystopian fictions, challenge preconceived notions in order to question their prevalence. Hopkinson employs this device to question the current path of the Western medical field, using the figure of the medically enhanced body that has turned into a common cornerstone in science-fiction narratives to raise the issue of who composes the populations that access such advanced technologies, and how this will shape our future societies and their power distribution. Although set in the future, the concern with Public health reflects a very current anxiety that connects the reader to the futuristic scenario, and the explicit exposure of how non-normative bodies excluded from healthcare are used as biological fodder for the maintenance of normative ones amplify current points of conflict and envision future consequences of our current system. As Michel Foucault argues, “The possibility exists . . . for a fictional discourse to induce effects of truth, and for bringing it about that a true discourse engenders or ‘manufactures’ something that does not as yet exist” (qtd. in Jones 6). What the speculative aspect of science fiction contributes is the potential to send its readers into movement to prevent or provoke the reality imagined, which in the case of Afrofuturistic narratives is a shift in the racial distribution of power to allow for a freer negotiation of hybridized and non-hegemonic identities.

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