

Posthuman Worldbuilding in Nalo Hopkinson's *Midnight Robber*: An Exploration of the Techno/ Natural Divide



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Abstract: This article draws heavily on Francesca Ferrando's *Philosophical Posthumanism* (2019) to analyse the ways in which the contrast between 'techno-driven' and 'nature-driven' civilisations in Nalo Hopkinson's *Midnight Robber* (2000), while initially seemingly portrayed in accordance with roughly canonical science fiction tropes, can be made to show the tension at the perceived fracture between technology and nature (and, in a parallel fashion, discourses of progress and backwardness) that has been a staple of classic science-fiction writing. A posthuman critical perspective on Hopkinson's worldbuilding, with its blend of mythology, fantasy and science fiction, serves to provide a new outlook on sf as a literary genre. Hopkinson's novel also serves to illustrate how a posthuman discourse on these themes (nature, culture, mythology and science), through the application of Haraway's 'naturecultures' (2003) and the turn towards non-Western epistemologies, provides much-needed nuances to explore these topics in relation to postcolonial speculative fictions.

Keywords: posthumanism, science fiction, fantasy, Nalo Hopkinson, *Midnight Robber*

1. Introduction

Jamaican-Canadian author Nalo Hopkinson is one of the most acclaimed contemporary English-speaking black science fiction writers. She has been recently named the 37th Damon Knight Grand Master (SFWA, 2020: n.p.)—a lifetime achievement award conferred by the Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers of America Association—and her short stories have consistently featured in science fiction and fantasy anthologies as

well as garnered commercial success. Her fictions have not only been popular with readers but have also received much critical acclaim and scholarly attention for the way she weaves her Caribbean heritage into her work, creating countercultural decolonizing science fictions that foreground subject positions typically marginalized in Western sf by non-white, non-heterosexual, female authors. The explicit engagement of Hopkinson's writing with queerness and race has often resulted in its being



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analysed as a site of resistance against a genre that has historically been dominated by white, male authors and has predominantly featured white, male-centred narratives (Rutledge, 2001). At the same time, this has complicated the definition of her work as classic science fiction, because her novels borrow from and weave together such diverse sources as cyberpunk, mythology, folklore, magical realism and fantasy in the configuration of hybrid, politically engaged narratives. This has led a number of critics to approach her work from the lens of Afrofuturism. Indeed, many have considered her a quintessential or foundational figure of the genre, among which Marleen S. Barr (2008), whose anthology *Afro-Future Females*, tracing the development of Afrofuturism through female science fiction, already includes and studies Hopkinson's narratives.

As defined by Mark Dery (1994: 180), under the label of Afrofuturism falls any "[s]peculative fiction that treats African-American themes and addresses African-American concerns in the context of twentieth-century technoculture." Afrofuturism "profoundly challenges ideas about science, technology, and knowledge," which is why "many Afrofuturist texts do not fit neatly into the conventions of science fiction and actually borrow from other speculative genres" (Faucheux, 2017: 563). As a genre, Afrofuturism displaces predominantly white forms of knowledge that have historically shunned black intervention, such as the "hard" science on which traditional science fiction is principally based (Shawl, 2018: n.p.). Afrofuturist texts seek to move towards and represent eminently black forms of knowledge creation that also vindicate

the presence and agency of black bodies in science-fictional imaginaries beyond stereotype, tokenism or de-humanization. The Afrofuturist vindication of black epistemologies is one of the reasons that in my view help pose critical posthumanism as a framework from which to explore the intricacies and multiplicities inherent to black science fiction. Insofar as critical posthumanism defines itself as post-dualistic and is cognizant of its debt to non-Western epistemologies in its self-configuration as such (Ferrando, 2019: 60-61), it is possible to use it as a tool to explore the crossing and blurring of boundaries in Afrofuturist fiction, using interstitial cyborg methodologies (Haraway, 1991) to bring to light the same interstitiality of black women's Afrofuturist tales (Thomas, 2020: n. p.). This fundamental characteristic of Afrofuturism, and Afrofuturist fiction written by women in particular, is already present from its earliest iterations, for instance in the works of Octavia Butler, where she creates "worlds that uncannily reflect reality and deflect and undermine it and the same time by generating subjects who improve on the available human models" (Spillers 2008: 4), and question, in so doing, a uniform and exclusionary conception of the human as an embodied subject.

A philosophical or critical posthumanist approach should not be taken *uncritically*, however. As Ferrando notes, "[i]n order to postulate a post- to the human, the differences which are constitutive to the human [...] have to be acknowledged" (2019: 25). Post-dualism cannot, in this case, equate to colour-blindness. Hopkinson's *Midnight Robber* and, I would argue, black speculative fictions in general can be used to make



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the case for a black critical posthumanism that takes the post-dualistic and affective ethos of philosophical posthumanism and applies it to the construction of fictional worlds that are not only cognizant of the whitewashed history of science fiction but remediate the racial and epistemological gap left in their wake. This project would highlight the insufficiencies of the humanist rational project with regards to its multiple subalterns—again, in our case, queer, female, and black—and develop a hybrid subjectivity that centres around them. This is not an unprecedented project (cf. Lillvis, 2017) and neither is it, I believe, necessarily at odds with other posthumanist approaches to black speculative fiction that may focus on other aspects of interest to posthuman theory. Among these approaches, I am particularly interested in that which borrows a page from the transhumanist book to examine the ways in which our relationship with technology is both racialized and gendered, and speaks to the continuation of systems of oppression that disproportionately affect black subjects. In this case, it bears noting that I myself, following Ferrando (2019) and others, define transhumanism as a separate project from that of critical posthumanism, insofar as transhumanism is heir to the project of humanism; so, unlike critical posthumanism, it is still embedded in its hierarchies, which it does not seek to contest. If anything, transhumanism creates new techno-centred hierarchies that, because of the current unequal global distribution of technology as well as the biases in its operation and development, arguably not only perpetuate but widen existing inequalities.

The aim of this article, then, is to use

insights from both Afrofuturist and posthumanist philosophies to explore some of the ways in which such processes may be said to be taking place in Nalo Hopkinson's *Midnight Robber* (2000). This novel narrates the story of Tan-Tan, whom we meet as a young girl on planet Toussaint, colonised by Caribbean people at an unspecified time in the past in an attempt to forge a better life for themselves.

Toussaint's citizens depend heavily on the use of technology: every house has a virtual assistant or house eshu, and citizens themselves have their own eshus implanted at birth. With these, they are connected to a vast network that includes all inhabitants in Toussaint and which is controlled by Granny Nanny, an artificial intelligence set up by the Marryshow Corporation, which, in turn, holds supranational governmental control. After Tan-Tan's father, Antonio, accidentally kills his wife's lover in a duel, he is given a chance at escaping life imprisonment by Maka, a pedicab driver who had provided Antonio with the poison that ultimately killed his enemy. Maka entrusts Tan-Tan with a device capable of overriding the prison's security protocols, which she manages to get to her father, by sneaking into the police car as he is arrested. With Maka's help, then, Antonio takes Tan-Tan and both flee across different dimensions to New Half-Way Tree, which, unlike Toussaint, has an astounding ecological diversity, and where exiles from Toussaint are sent in lieu of serving time for their crimes. Although Antonio ostensibly seeks a new life in his flight to New Half-Way Tree, soon the patterns of abuse which had been at play in his family life at Toussaint re-emerge. Antonio sees Tan-Tan as an extension of his wife in



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Toussaint and repeatedly rapes her until, one day, Tan-Tan kills him in self-defence. She is then forced to leave the human settlement at New Half-Way Tree and explore new ways of living in the wild outskirts of the planet, creating a persona for herself, that of the Robber Queen, who embarks on a quest to fight for the underdog and right the wrongs of the unjust governmental systems of New Half-Way Tree.

In the pages that follow, I look at the contrast between the 'natural' and 'technological' worlds in Hopkinson's novel, a divide that is precisely represented by the different planets in which the story develops. I draw on contemporary radical philosophies, namely critical and philosophical posthumanism, and new materialism, to explore some of the ways in which the contrast between the 'natural' and 'technological' worlds of Nalo Hopkinson's *Midnight Robber* may be interpreted, and how these different although connected strata create fictional worlds within the novel that are representative of the complexities of black science fiction. More than twenty years past the original date of publication of *Midnight Robber*, these interconnected layers of meaning and criticism still offer critical ways of engaging with the challenges of technology for the bodies that neoliberal, white-centred and patriarchal governmentality places under the category of the subaltern—and, more generally, of addressing the technocratic reality of contemporary Western societies.

2. Toussaint: Technology and the surveillance state

Broadly speaking, we can establish a

division between the 'natural' and 'technological' worlds as represented in *Midnight Robber* by analysing the two planets at each side of the dimension veil, New Half-Way Tree and Toussaint. My analysis through the next pages identifies New Half-Way Tree as the nature-oriented world and Toussaint as technologically driven. This analysis, however, must always be prefaced by the acknowledgement that a critical posthuman methodology such as that on which much of my study is supported is wary of the existence of a blanket binary between the natural and the technological, if it acknowledges that there is such a thing as 'the natural' and 'the technological'; these caveats will be addressed further on. In this section, I understand the technological, particularly, in terms of the digital, which in this case generally accounts for information technologies, and, more to the point, the software and programming technologies on which they rely.

Within a consideration of how informatics pertains to the worlds of *Midnight Robber*, immediately salient in the planet Toussaint is the fact that this is a world where the singularity has happened. The singularity, as defined by Vernor Vinge in his influential 1993 homonymous paper, is "the imminent creation by technology of entities with greater than human intelligence" (12). Although, according to Vinge, the singularity may be achieved in a number of ways, its most prevalent representation in science-fiction narratives, which has by now reached the status of one of the genre's tropes, is "[t]he development of computers that are 'awake' and superhumanly intelligent" (1993: 12). In *Midnight Robber*, the singularity is presented in the form of the AI known as



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Granny Nanny, which oversees any and all activities in the planet by way of its implantation at birth in the citizens of Toussaint through an “earbug” that connects them to Nanny’s network. We are told that, after Granny Nanny was developed, one day

[S]omething start to go wrong. It get to where the programmers would ask Nanny a question, and she would spew mako bloks of pure gibberish. [...] She brain didn’t spoil, it just get too complex for Eleggua [the code in which she was written] to translate the concepts she was understanding no more; after Nanny was seeing things in all dimensions. (Hopkinson 2000b: 51)

The awakening of Granny Nanny to a greater understanding of the world beyond what was provided in her code initiates a series of attempts to make her “gibberish” understandable. This project, led by Marryshow of the Marryshow Corporation that shall govern over Toussaint, is ultimately successful and saves the AI’s memory from being deleted. Through the translation of her new language into “nannysong,” Granny Nanny is able to persist as the overruling Toussaint intelligence, although the version of her language accessible to the population is “basic” compared to her real communication capabilities (52). Only a small community of pedicab runners, descendants of a programmer clan, are able to access a greater number of commands through their better knowledge of nannysong. This affords them some privacy, that “most precious commodity of any Marryshevite” (10), as it means that they can use Granny Nanny’s programming language to momentarily carve some space away from the AI’s oversight.

In the figure of the pedicab runners, the ability to bypass surveillance is simultaneously linked to a rejection of technology and proficiency in it. The technological expertise that allows them to override Granny Nanny’s earbug programming is contrasted with the traditional forms of living that they choose to engage in. These include doing the “back-break” labour (8) that has been eradicated in Toussaint— as it is now intelligent machines that perform any physically strenuous work—and living in “headblind” (9) houses, that is, analogue or low-tech compounds lacking in digital domestic technologies such as robots or virtual assistants of different sorts. Most notably, pedicab runners rely on traditional forms of knowledge that include and are made possible by the use of paper and writing, or “[c]ode that Nanny couldn’t automatically read” (51).

The prospect of a life within Toussaint but outside of the system is then tied to elaborate forms of code production at each side of the digital spectrum that circumvent the expectations of Granny Nanny, which, although super-intelligent by singularity standards, is nevertheless bound to her programming. In the fascination of some of the characters at the chance of a life outside the AI’s oversight, we see how the matter-of-factness of the AI’s control over the life of their citizens has standardized modes of living that make possible the continued oversight of Granny Nanny, and immerse their subjects in a technological feedback loop which goes, for the most part, unquestioned. Therefore, in spite of the utopian drive at the heart of Toussaint, life on the planet still grapples with the old privacy-security debate, which questions what may be an optimal amount of control of the technocratic state



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that ensures the safety of their citizens by their more or less wilful surrender of data and so of unimpeded action. As Hopkinson acknowledged in an interview

It isn't perfect; the person who invented the system saw the high level of benign surveillance as an acceptable trade-off for the kind of safety and high quality of life that the people would have. There are no poor people on Toussaint, and no wage slaves. And though Granny Nanny perceives all, she doesn't tell all, unless she thinks it's an issue of someone's safety. It really does feel like being mothered, and sometimes that's a good thing, sometimes it's a smothering thing. (Hopkinson, 2000a: n.p.)

There are many things to unpack in the author's commentary. The fact that there are no poor people in Toussaint, for instance, does not mean that there is no disenfranchisement, nor a social hierarchy. Although ultimately supervised by Granny Nanny and the Marryshow Corporation, some form of local political organisation far from the utopian egalitarian dream still persists, and the ostracizing of pedicab runners is representative of how the emancipatory power of the digital has not been fully realised but has instead configured technology as the new frontier: if advanced technologies have enabled the possibility of life in Toussaint, in imposing themselves they have also created a number of naturalised others that cannot or do not wish to conform to the new techno-standards. Naturalised, sexualised and racialised others are the by-product of the perpetuation of humanistic value hierarchies that turn into biopolitical differentiation markers, so, in this context, it is also worthwhile to

look at the implications of Granny Nanny as a female-coded, black AI. Race and gender cannot be wholly separated in this analysis as Granny Nanny is named after Nanny of the Maroons, an 18th-century Jamaican leader who successfully led the Windward Maroons against the British and would go on to found one of the most important black settlements in Jamaica. While many critics have read Hopkinson's Granny Nanny "as a role model of Black female empowerment that subverts patriarchal images of the enslaved Black woman" (Martín-Lucas 2017: 112, original capitalised initials) I agree with Martín-Lucas that there is a strong case for a more nuanced interpretation of the AI, as it still works "within the structure of the corporation and the violent genocide of indigenous populations this produces" (112). Although the subversive potential of Granny Nanny is not to be understated, Hopkinson's Nanny also brings to light the intrinsic violence within any coloniser system.

Granny Nanny both denounces and perpetuates a legacy of violence that is stored in traditional science fiction tropes (Sorensen, 2014: 277) and that, arguably, is perpetuated by the transhumanist projects of the Marryshow Corporation's techno-state. For the implementation of Granny Nanny and of the technological infrastructure that allows for the relative ease of life in Toussaint, the planet had to be stripped of its original environmental landscape and so of its ecological diversity, which creates the first point of division between Toussaint and New Half-Way Tree and establishes the first otherised subject within transhuman standards, nature: "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



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entering the woman; plunging into the womb of soil to impregnate the planet with the seed of Granny Nanny” (Hopkinson, 2000b: 2). The seeds of Granny Nanny, in this case, are digital: the nodes of a surveillance web that spans the entire planet and cover not only the physical but the mental bodies of its citizens. The metaphor of impregnation and the use of biological processes to describe the implantation of the network clashes with the artificial nature of the latter. This dissonance parallels that of the fact of colonisation, which ostensibly creates a better world—for the colonisers—at the expense of defacing the planet, and these parallels ask what other dissonances or compromises are made in the actualisation of the colonisers’ utopian dreams. For as much as Granny Nanny “creates a discursively egalitarian community [...] unmarked by racial difference and freed from a life of labor” (Fehskens, 2010: 138), the inception of Toussaint is founded in the putting into action of unequal power dynamics that subjugate both citizens and the earth to the discourses of techno-thanatological machinery.

The sexual vocabulary used to describe the simultaneous processes of colonisation and the establishment of Granny Nanny is also evocative of non-consensual intercourse. With her choice of words, Hopkinson is able to connect colonialism as an important science-fiction trope to the real histories of colonisations, which pass through the exploitation of women and land to bring to fruition the colonial dream. These, incidentally, foreshadow the repeated rape of the novel’s protagonist, Tan-Tan, by her father Antonio, which becomes a climactic point in the novel as it leads to Tan-Tan’s killing of her father and her adopting the

persona of the Robber Queen that gives the novel its title. Because adherence to the Granny Nanny network is not voluntary, the perpetuation of state control via technological surveillance necessitates of the violation of the bodies of its citizens; as has been noted, bodies both physical and mental, for the artificial intelligences implanted at birth (the eshus) appear in the ‘mind’s eye’ of individuals. Impregnation and the ‘smothering’ motherly conceptualisation of Granny Nanny also perpetuate damaging gender and familial dynamics, which are also a fixture of the novel both in Tan-Tan’s abusive relationship with her father and in his dysfunctional marriage to Tan-Tan’s unconcerned mother Ione. Granny Nanny, as the embedded and embodied panopticon¹ in the lives of their citizens and the ultimate measure of state control since it is inseparable from the materiality of its subjects, becomes fully realised in the playing out of these familial dynamics. The totalising state and technological project culminates in Tubman, Tan-Tan’s

¹ “Panopticon” refers to Jeremy Bentham’s (1995) conception of a circular building designed to allow for close monitoring of all residents (whether inmates, patients, pupils, etc.) from a structure at its center, so that all could be kept in view at any given time. Most famously, it has been reelaborated by philosophers Michel Foucault (1995) and Gilles Deleuze (1990), who have used Bentham’s panopticon as an image to describe the ways in which societies are able to exert discipline and control through means of surveillance. Scholar Shoshana Zuboff (1995, 2019) in recent writings has more explicitly linked these means of surveillance to the rise of capitalism and advanced digital technologies, which more accurately describes Nalo Hopkinson’s Granny Nanny.



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son by her father, as Tubman is the first individual to be connected to Granny Nanny without the need for prosthetics. Tubman, who has not received the ear implant connecting him to Granny Nanny, can nevertheless communicate with her, and so his body becomes “one living connection with the Grande Anansi Nanotech Interface” (Hopkinson 2000b: 328). Potentially, Tubman inaugurates a lineage of individuals who, unlike Tantan in *New Half-Way Tree*, cannot escape control of the artificial intelligences to which they are subject, and so initiates the move from a cyborg existence to a one of complete digital embodiment.

3. New Half-Way Tree: Necropolitics and naturecultures

New Half-Way Tree is said to be the “mirror planet” of Toussaint, where “we send the thieves-them, and the murderers” as well as “the drifters, the ragamuffins-them, the ones the think the world must have something better for them, if they could only find what part it is” (2). For, although Granny Nanny had ostensibly been designed with some flexibility in mind, “to tolerate a variety of human expression, even dissension” (10), there still seem to be behaviours that warrant expulsion from Toussaint’s Garden of Eden. For what is supposedly a realised utopia, it is striking to see how expectations of a better future, which echo the novel’s diasporic roots as well as traditional science fiction narratives and the trauma of colonization, seem to also be perceived as a threat. Furthermore, those who are shunned to *New Half-Way Tree* are euphemistically spoken of as the “departed” (19), equating death to a life lived outside of the confines of the techno-

state. This vocabulary brings to mind Giorgio Agamben’s work on the figure of the *homo sacer* (1998). Agamben describes the *homo sacer* in contemporary societies as an individual condemned to a bare life outside state protection and acknowledgement, and yet considered within the state’s political organisation insofar as their ban from the state articulates the state of liminality to which the biopolitical modern state submits its subjects and so makes generally applicable the exception that allows the *homo sacer* to exist. As the planet of the disenfranchised and the dominion of naturalised others since it retains the ecological diversity lost in the colonisation of Toussaint, I propose a analysis of *New Half-Way Tree* in terms of its relationship with Toussaint by means the exclusion of its citizens from it, and in terms of the perseverance of nature against the ecological effacement of Toussaint.²

Like Toussaint, *New Half-Way Tree* also opens up questions of surveillance and state power. *New Half-Way Tree*,

² I am grateful to my reviewers for pointing out that there is indeed a connection to be made between the different distribution of political systems in Nalo Hopkinson and the similar power politics in Ursula K. Le Guin’s *The Dispossessed* (1974). Colonialism is of course a pervasive theme in the history of science fiction to which often underlies a strong utopian current (i.e., searching new worlds that may serve as political laboratories for social improvement strategies). As has been noted, however, in Hopkinson this is approached from an explicitly Afrofuturist perspective; as other scholars have pointed out and have extensively analysed, the planet Toussaint and the AI Granny Nanny, as other elements in the novel, are named after important figures of the African diaspora, and the colonized become the colonisers.



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however, stands as the necropolitical³ counterpart of Toussaint's techno-biopolitical logic. These necropolitical logics function in great part from the standpoint of the government of Toussaint, but they are also natively operative in New Half-Way Tree. Junjuh Village, the human settlement where Tan-Tan and her father eventually establish themselves, is ruled by a bloodthirsty sheriff whose "rules don't have no mercy" (Hopkinson 2000b: 169) and who condemns trespassers to physical punishment and death by hanging. Although, as a planet of *homini sacer*, New Half-Way Tree should fall outside of the scope of the biopolitical powers of Toussaint, its inclusion—by its exclusion—in Toussaint's state power allows for a measure of Granny Nanny's oversight to continue in New Half-Way Tree. In the novel, Tan-Tan is transported to New Half-Way Tree not by virtue of her having effectively committed a crime, but by her attempt to rescue her father from life imprisonment, affording him a chance of living "he life in he own terms" (66). As Tan-Tan is not one of the antagonistic

figures that are exiled from Toussaint, but rather is unwillingly transported to New Half-Way Tree by following her father, still Granny Nanny takes it upon herself to recover her subject. The fact that Tan-Tan is an unsuspecting *homo sacer* makes her inhabit a doubly marginal position, within and without the system both in her former and current homes. This becomes further complicated as she violates the hospitality of her hosts in New Half-Way Tree after Tan-Tan murders her father. Her act of violence makes her carry "a double shame [...]: she is a banned figure in the human and douen worlds [the world of New Half-Way Tree]" (Fehskens 2010: 147). The murder of Antonio and Tan-Tan's later accidental revealing of the settlement where she was living under the protection of the douen, a bird-like alien species native to New Half-Way Tree, force her to live an uprooted existence.

This instability is mirrored in the duplicity of Tan-Tan's character, who is both Tan-Tan the human and the mythical Robber Queen, a persona which she takes on after the killing of her father through which she dissociates herself from her traumatic past experiences and seeks to impart justice. In this double existence, her body is both a site of empowerment—as she takes on a heroic persona of the Trinidadian carnival that connects her both to the thriving Jamaican cultural heritage and the Black pride that could be freely experienced in the streets of Toussaint—while simultaneously allowing her to stand for the dispossessed, and oppression, being as she is made to bear her father's child and perpetuate with him also the techno-thanatological legacy of her native planet both through the violence inherent to the rape and in birthing a child that is

³ Necropolitics is a term coined by Cameroonian philosopher Achille Mbembe (2003). Mbembe builds from Foucault's notion of biopolitical power to assert that sovereignty resides not only in controlling the bodies of citizens, but in controlling the possibility of their very existence, i.e. determining who can live and who must die. Mbembe also links these concepts to the state of exception and the state of siege, which are likewise crucial to Agamben's definition of the *homo sacer*. I see both Foucault's biopolitics, Mbembe's necropolitics and Agamben's *homo sacer* as related phenomena that allow us to form a complete picture of the ways in which governmental practices police completely, but from different angles, the bodies of subjects.



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inescapably connected to the surveillance technologies that policy life and colonise bodies and planets.

It is important to think about how all systems of oppression in Toussaint find resonance in New Half-Way Tree. As Fehskens (2010: 141) argues, Antonio's "repeated attempts to turn Tan-Tan into another Ione [his wife in Toussaint], via sexual violation and molestation, on New Half-Way Tree domesticates that criminal space into a new version of his home in Toussaint." If, in Toussaint, Granny Nanny was able to represent forms of colonial and techno-engendered violence, it is also worth noticing that these domesticating violences include environmental violence, from which the worlds of *Midnight Robber* seem to find a respite in New Half-Way Tree. Because advanced technologies have not arrived at New Half-Way Tree, nor could the grasp of Granny Nanny reach it prior to the birth of Tubman, New Half-Way Tree has safeguarded the ecological diversity that seemed to have also characterised other planets in the novel's system. This is a planet where "the mongoose still run wild, the diable bush still got poison thorns, and the mako jumbie bird does still stalk through the bush" (Hopkinson, 2000b: 2). Thus, the conservation of ecology is also tied to the preservation of magical, folkloric elements such as talking non-human, natural species (as opposed to the artificial intelligences of Toussaint) that vindicate black tradition and experience. Among the most relevant figures in these black folkloric ecologies, we might mention the douen, a bird-like alien species living in the planet Toussaint of whom Tan-Tan had only heard of in her nursery stories, that painted them as "children who'd died before they had their naming ceremonies

[and] came back from the dead as jumbies with their heads on backwards" (93). Among the douen stands out Chichibud, Tan-Tan's friend and protector, offering her a place of shelter after the murder of her father forces her flight from Junjuh, where "murder must always get repaid with murder" (151).

A posthuman critical framework can aid us in addressing how Hopkinson creates New Half-Way Tree as a counterpart to the heavily technologized and environmentally barren Toussaint. For this, I draw on Donna Haraway's work, particularly her conception of "naturecultures" (1991), which inextricably links the social and the natural in the formation of ecologies and so puts into question, among others, the natural/artificial, cultural/environmental, technological/ecological binaries. The blurring of dichotomic separations is also a central feature of philosophical posthumanism. Martín-Lucas, in her critical posthumanist analysis of *Midnight Robber*, has argued that Chichibud "gives voice to a posthuman critique of the anthropocentric humanist obsession with hierarchical taxonomy" (2017: 111). Characters like Chichibud, then, exemplify the blurring of ontological boundaries that is at the heart of an ethical posthumanist reading of Hopkinson's novel. At the same time, a worldbuilding that rests on black folklore and magical imaginings and which exists within a context of 'hard' science fiction (i.e. departing from and exploring the consequences of technoscientific developments) questions a purely rational conception of science: among other factors, "[t]he fine line between analogy [...] and genuine animal-person cross-overs in [Hopkinson's] ceremonial worlds also separates rigorous 'scientific'



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taxonomies" (Dillon, 2007: 33). With regard to the construction of new taxonomies, and although there are many examples of naturalcultural integration that could be analysed in the novel, I would argue that one of the most significant symbols for naturalcultural processes in *Midnight Robber* scholarship are trees, which are a recurring image in the novel. Trees, as a mode of organising information that imbricates digital logics with the vocabulary of biology and ecology, are representative of the ubiquitous character of technology the inseparability of natural from social ecologies. Trees are also homes and sheltering places, be it for the douens in New Half-Way Tree than the pedicab runners in Toussaint, and stand for ways of living that are connected to traditional practices and an ecological ethics cognisant of the particularities of the Black folkloric experience.

In the novel, trees serve as community spaces that house and enable subversion in many forms. It is telling, for instance, that pedicab drivers seek to live in tree houses which directly oppose the high-tech compounds in the rest of Toussaint. Similarly, the imbrication of the douen and their home trees, which the community is bound to protect and hide from the rest of the settlements in New Half-Way Tree, signals a reverence for the natural environment that goes against the exploitative logic that humans still employ in their strongholds in the planet. In keeping with a nonbinary posthuman logic, however, Hopkinson also makes trees a threatening figure in *Midnight Robber*, since they also stand for the necro/biopolitical power of governments, as trees are the site of hangings that function as a warning for trespassers and take up the colonial

imaginary that attacks black bodies and configures them as the subaltern of existing power structures.

4. Conclusions

In my analysis of the uses of technology in *Midnight Robber*, I have looked at how mechanisms of technocratic governance, in particular the operation of an all-witnessing AI, complicate an emancipatory reading of what is to be initially interpreted as the fulfilment of a utopian dream of black enfranchisement. Because the technocratic Toussaint state is still heavily involved in the policing of its subjects and is born of the same violent colonising impulses, a biopolitical reading of Granny Nanny in terms of its surveillance operation acknowledges the perpetuation of hierarchies of control within systems that, though initially conceived to empower, ultimately are designed to oppress.

In doing so, it brings to the fore questions of the possibility of utopian actualisation, when the boundary between utopia and dystopia is often ambiguous. A similar case of diffuse boundaries occurs in the case of the social and natural organisation of New Half-Way Tree, where violence inside and outside state structures threatens the establishment of ethical relationships that allow for the institution of the congenial, reciprocal, transspecies bonds on which the planet's ecosystem is set to thrive.

Midnight Robber plays with echoes and parallels both in Toussaint and New Half-Way Tree. The reverberations of multiple marginalities—black, woman, natural—against each other are not only a measure of the rhythm of the novel,



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which has so fruitfully been analysed by Leif Sorensen (2014) in musical terms, but also themselves a representation of the necessarily non-dichotomous character of Nalo Hopkinson's fiction, whose science fictions betray a critical posthuman sensibility. This is attuned to multiple individual and collective becomings as they are understood by posthumanist philosopher Rosi Braidotti (2002), who, also in tune with the new materialist thinking for which she is a foundational figure and point of reference, highlights the importance of states of change and flow in the configuration of subjectivity against essentialist, monolithic conceptions of the subject and against negative totalising ideas of 'difference' such as have configured so-called marginal bodies. Process-oriented embodiment, multiplicity and metamorphoses are well-represented by the myriad positions occupied by its protagonist in the roles across which she transitions back and forth; as Robber Queen, Tan-Tan, mother of native cyborgs, and subject in the oppressive technological and ecological environments on whose liminality she dances. Indeed, Braidotti (2002: 178-9) makes a pointed analysis of how our age of new technologies, advanced capitalism and ecological breakdown has swayed the postmodern appreciation for the monstrous in literature (particularly the monstrous feminine) towards liminal figures, the queer, and the "cyber-monstrous", which *Midnight Robber* emphatically illustrates.

The worlds among which Tan-Tan moves are representative of a particular understanding of science fiction not solely as a site for exploration and speculation but for historical criticism that engages with problems old—like the exploitation

of black and female bodies and the extraction of natural resources—and new—like the establishment of practices of state control and surveillance aided and abetted by technological developments. This conception of science fiction recuperates histories hitherto sidelined by its mainstream and vindicates marginalised epistemologies within and without its narratives that highlight the vital importance of thresholds as well as their osmotic qualities, like those of *Midnight Robber's* very own dimension veil.

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