

“Caught by a ... genre”: An Interview with Nalo Hopkinson

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The work of Caribbean-born Canadian writer Nalo Hopkinson has burst onto the North American speculative fiction scene within the last decade of the twentieth century. Since the publication of her first story in 1994, Hopkinson's work has earned the praise of such established writers as Octavia Butler, Samuel Delany, and Charles R. Saunders, in addition to garnering an astonishing number of awards and nominations. Her first novel, *Brown Girl in the Ring*, won the Warner Aspect First Novel and the Locus First Novel Awards. In 1999 Hopkinson won the John W. Campbell Award for Best New Writer, and the Ontario Arts Council Foundation Award for Emerging Writers. In 2000 her second novel, *Midnight Robber*, was chosen as a New York Times Notable Book of the Year. Her work has been embraced enthusiastically by the North American speculative fiction community, having been shortlisted for the Philip K. Dick, the James R. Tiptree Jr., the Nebula, and the Hugo Awards.

Most recently, Hopkinson has edited an anthology of short stories published under the title *Whispers from the Cotton Tree Root: Caribbean Fabulist Fiction*, and she published *Skin Folk*, a collection of her own short stories, in December 2001. Hopkinson's creative work, like that collected in the anthology she edited, is difficult to categorize, as it flirts with various speculative fiction genres, such as science fiction, fantasy, horror, dystopia. If anything characterizes her body of work, however, it is her imaginative power, her linguistic agility, and her consistently forthright treatment of racial and sexual relations. Hopkinson's innovative use of Creole dialect in some of her work not only challenges the dearth of ethnic voices and identities in speculative fiction, it enlarges the possibilities for genre fiction in the future. Influenced as much by *Star Trek* and *The Brady Bunch* as by Cervantes and Louise Bennett,

Hopkinson defies any labelling process that would assign her work to a single genre or herself to a single community. As Hopkinson told me in the interview, “There are many communities of which I feel a part.”

A graduate of the Clarion Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers’ Workshop at Michigan State University, where she worked with Samuel R. Delany, Hopkinson is currently enrolled in a low residence M.A. program in Writing Popular Fiction. Part of a new generation of cyber-savvy young writers, Nalo has a web presence through her personal site: <http://www.sff.net/people/nalo/>. Fittingly, I met with Nalo Hopkinson in a chatroom in cyber-space, where we conversed over a period of several days between mouthfuls of muffins, blackberries, and tea. Copy-editor Maria Haubrich (MH below) joined us for these sessions. To capture something of the essence of this online conversation, I have retained some of the *emoticons* and other keyboard symbols used by Nalo during the interview.

NB: First, I want to thank you for taking time out to do the interview. Since winning the Warner First Aspect Award in 1998 for your debut novel, *Brown Girl in the Ring*, you have been very busy: you’ve completed another novel, *Midnight Robber*, you’ve written and published a number of short stories, and you’ve edited an anthology of short works entitled *Whispers from the Cotton Tree Root: Caribbean Fabulist Fiction*. I would imagine that time for you right now is a precious commodity—particularly finding the time for your writing.

NH: Yes, life has become very busy. With a day job, my time was somewhat regulated, but now I work all the time. Or at least always feel like I *could* be working when I’m not.

NB: Describe for me what your life was like before winning the Warner Award, and what it has been like since.

NH: Before winning the Warner Award, I worked part-time (full-time really) in arts admin. I’d managed to find a job—Arts Grants Officer with the Toronto Arts Council—that did not make me weep when the alarm clock went off in the morning, but it did eat

up most of my creative energy. Was a wonderful job, though. They were the ones who allowed me six weeks off to attend Clarion. So I worked, and I'd write in between times. Not sleeping much helps. After winning the Warner Aspect First Novel Contest, not much of that changed at first. I still needed an income. Still do. So I kept working, kept writing in between times. When Warner wanted a second novel from me, they gave me an advance. That, along with a writing grant, gave me one year. I quit my job and leapt into the world of being a freelancer. It was quite a rash thing for me to do. My agent estimates that it takes five successful novels before one can realistically consider living off the writing. I scramble, but I haven't returned to the world of regular employment. The one I live in now is quite different.

NB: What kind of freelance work, Nalo?

NH: I write reviews, give talks, teach writing and literature. When none of those is forthcoming, I temp. Not secretarial; I'm too disorganized for that. Usually short-term data entry gigs where I mostly spend my days using the cut/paste function.

NB: You grew up in Jamaica, Trinidad, and Guyana, and moved to Canada when you were sixteen years old. What impact did these dislocations have on your formation as a writer?

NH: I always find that a difficult question to answer, because I don't know any other way to live. My family had been moving since I was eight months old. I have no basis for comparison. I think that one thing it brings to my writing is a sense of hybridity, of collage. It's difficult for me to assume that the way my world is for me is the way it is for everyone, or is the way it will always be. It may also mean that I use language differently. A number of socio/idiolects are somewhat native to me, and my instinct is to combine them.

NB: Your mother was a library technician and your father was an actor, poet, and playwright. Is it any wonder that you turned to writing yourself? Was the writing on the wall always there for you, so to speak?

NH: Word was very much always part of my life, yes. I was surrounded by books and by actors, poets, and storytellers. My brother Keita,

surrounded by the same artistic influences I was, has become a painter and musician.

NB: Can you talk about a few of your early influences?

NH: The theatre, certainly. My father was an actor, poet and playwright who taught English and Latin at the senior high school level. My mother worked in libraries. As a child, I was reading Homer's *Iliad* and *Gulliver's Travels* and Carlos Castaneda ... those were on the bookshelves at home. I was too little to know they were too tough for me. When I went after school to the library where Mummy worked, I was reading *The Borrowers*, the "Green Knowe" books, stuff like that; and from Daddy's peers and colleagues I was seeing Shakespeare performed, and reading compilations of local folk tales. Daddy began to make his mark in West Indian theatre by playing the part of King Lear at UWI, I think (University of the West Indies; probably the Jamaica campus). So I got to see a lot of Shakespeare. In fact, he did grad work at Yale in Connecticut in theatre. I saw him play Othello there. He went there on a scholarship, but he ultimately dropped out. Seeing him perform and having him around meant that when I came to study Shakespeare in high school, it was a breeze. Then Daddy was an actor for a while with the Trinidad Theatre Workshop, founded by Nobel Laureate Derek Walcott, so I got to see plays such as *Dream On Monkey Mountain*. I don't think I ever actually saw Ti-Jean and his Brothers, which I draw on for my novel *Brown Girl in the Ring*. Daddy and Walcott fell out later and stopped speaking to each other, although I think a certain mutual respect remained. Certainly Walcott made a very complimentary speech years later at UWI when Daddy died. The first time I got money to buy books, I bought collections of Alfred Hitchcock horror stories. Scared myself shitless. I stopped reading horror. It just terrifies me too much. But contrarily enough, I'll happily read any amount of "the world as we know it has come to an end" stories.

NB: I chalk that up to growing up with the doomsday clock. Four minutes to midnight when I was about twelve years old, I think.

NH: I remember being home in North York with my younger brother Keïta once and suddenly there was a huge bang from the sky and the world went white, then black. And we just sat and stared at each other in horror. I know we were both thinking, “this is it.” Turned out to be a freak thunderclap, but we’re the generation that lives with this sense that we’re going to blow ourselves up any minute.

NB: Is there, underlying our dread of the end of the world, a hope for a better one? Not in a Christian sense, but in the sense of more justice, equity, etc. I think of Octavia Butler, *The Parable of the Talents*. That desire to establish hope of something better.

NH: I think it’s a sense of justification. Kind of “hmpf, I told you what this would lead to.” Then, “well, so long as we’re here, how do we start again?”

NB: Do you recall any other early influences?

NH: A Trinidadian kiddie television programme called *Rikki Tikki* (name of a mongoose in a Kipling story); Gulliver’s Travels; poet Miss Lou (Dame Louise Bennett Coverly), Homer’s Iliad. Carlos Castaneda. Philip Sherlock’s collected Caribbean folk tales. *Sesame Street*, *The Lone Ranger*. *The Brady Bunch*. *Bewitched*. *I Dream of Jeannie*. Marvel Comics ... oh, and *Star Trek*, old school style.

NB: Live long and prosper!

NH: Finally now when I look at old *Star Trek* episodes I can see that it’s an imperium. As a kid I had no such political sensibility.

NB: Does it feel like a kind of betrayal when you realize that? That the stuff you loved has some really nasty politics?

NH: A betrayal? Hmm. No. I do feel sheepish sometimes for being a little thick, but one tends to get politicized one issue at a time, if at all. It’s a lifetime process.

NB: I guess I ask the question because, like you, I read a lot of sf when I was young, and I just totally missed the gender issues. I liked Heinlein!

NH: :) I used to devour Heinlein, would read each new book as soon as it came out in paperback (that being what I could afford). I credit Heinlein with performing the final ritual that made me a feminist.

I was, I think, in my late teens or early twenties. Had been reading—I forget the name of it now. The Heinlein novel where the protagonist becomes all kinds of people and eventually becomes his own wife ...

NB: Wasn't that *Time Enough for Love*?

NH: Something was beginning to bug me about the female love interests. They were smart, sexy, mouthy, and I loved that. But I slowly began to think that that was always happening in service of the male protagonist. I thought I must be imagining it. Was too young and inexperienced to trust my own budding perceptions ... then I got *Friday*. Read the first few pages. It was the first book I ever heaved across a room up against the opposite wall. And I stopped reading Heinlein. There's a scene in one of his novels where a woman is going into labour inside a spaceship. She has one labour pain and the protagonist "cranks the gravity up to max" (not exactly a quotation). And the baby pops out like a watermelon seed. And Heinlein never seems to think about the damage his protagonist has just done to that woman's insides. I know that a lot of folks still find his work affirming to women. I think it goes a certain way along that route, but that at a point, his imagination fails him and his own insecurities and fantasies take over. But hell, I guess that happens to us all.

NB: Still sidetrackin' here, Nalo, but Heinlein's portrayal of women, it seems to me, is similar to the portrayal of African-Americans through much of the 20th century. Very positive, in one sense, but always at the service of the white psyche. The redemptive "other."

NH: Yes, woman as the faithful Tonto.

NB: Exactly. It's difficult for some people to understand how demeaning these portrayals are.

NH: Because there's a level at which they are friendly and well-meaning. Lots of women think of Heinlein as feminist. For me, he doesn't go far enough.

NB: I want to talk about the anthology you've just published. I'm learning, through personal experience, how difficult a job editing can be. In your introduction to *Whispers*, you cite from your

call for manuscripts: “Bring out your duppie and jumbie tales; skin-folk flights of fancy; rapsfuturist fables; your most dread of dread talks. *Whispers from the Cotton Tree Root: Caribbean Fabulist Fiction* is to be an anthology of fantastical fiction in Caribbean traditions. Seeking fiction written from within a Caribbean or Caribbean diasporic context. Fabulist, unreal, or speculative elements such as magic realism, fantasy, folklore, fable, horror, or science fiction must be an integral part of the story.” But then you describe a process of “mutual education” when the stories began to arrive. What were you expecting when you sent out the call, and in what way were you educated by the response? Can you comment on specific stories and the way that they educated you?

NH: I’m a science fiction/fantasy writer. Those are the genre protocols to which I’m accustomed. Impossible things happen in sf/f/h [science fiction, fantasy, horror], but they must be seen to be “real.” They must be verifiable by more than one person. Dreams, for instance, don’t count, because they are phenomena that have no impact in the “real” world of the story. But Caribbean literature does not have a history of hiving fiction off into genres. There is a lot of writing that might be styled magical realist, but no tradition of science fiction and fantasy as it’s defined in the North. There is also a lot of writing that deals in belief and spirituality. In this part of the world, that’s either relegated to the “imaginary” world of fantasy fiction or split off into “inspirational” fiction. There are no such divides in Caribbean literature. So a lot of the contributors were asking me what I meant by fabulist, or saying that they didn’t write speculative fiction. The very first story I received was something that could be a poem or a story and that was unabashedly a dream (Kamau Brathwaite’s “My Funny Valentine”). And I definitely wanted to publish it, so I had to think hard about why it seemed to me to fit what I was looking for. I received a story (“Pot o’ Rice Horowitz’s House of Solace” by Ian Macdonald) which had no impossible elements whatsoever, but which had such a strong sense of fable that it felt magical. So I had to find a way to express why that piece was going into the anthology too. Had a long

chat with the publishers over that one. Generally, I got work that pushed, stretched, stomped on or ignored the Northern boundaries of sf/f/h, and that was delightful.

NB: You comment on your choice of the title in the introduction, but can you elaborate here?

NH: *Whispers from the Cotton Tree Root: Caribbean Fabulist Fiction*. Well, the subtitle was what the publisher, Invisible Cities, asked me to collect. So it seemed a nice, clear thing to put into the title. The main header took some thinking about. For a few weeks I called it *The Dub Side*, but that seemed to suggest only science fiction. Finally I hit upon the metaphor of the roots of the silk cotton or ceiba tree, where ghosts are supposed to live. Or, put in a more positive way, the spirits of our ancestors. So falling down into those roots can either be a terrifying, haunting experience or an affirming one, or a little bit of both. It seemed an apt metaphor for the kind of excavation work that many of the stories seemed to be doing. Digging into the past, into the psyche, into language and meaning. Using the word “ceiba” [in the introduction to the collection] also allowed me to make a perfectly horrid pun about “falling into a ceiba space.”

NB: I think the ceiba or cotton tree root is a wonderful metaphor for the kind of work that you’ve collected. And the choice of the word fabulist to describe the stories in *Whispers* seems to me to be perfect. In *The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction*, John Clute distinguishes fabulist fiction from what he calls genre science fiction by defining a fabulation as “any story which challenges the two main assumptions of genre sf: that the world can be seen; and that it can be told.” In other words, he goes on to say, “By foregrounding the means of telling a tale, fabulations articulate what might be called the fabledness of things: the fabledness of the world itself in some Magic Realism; the fabledness of the political and social world in some Absurdist sf; the fabledness of the aesthetic object in Postmodernism as a whole; and finally—the fabledness of fables in Fabulation itself” (400). Such self-consciousness about the construction of the worlds we live in seems to me to permeate the sto-

ries in *Whispers*. Do you think this is a good description as well? Are you happy with this label?

NH: “Fabulist” is the term that the publisher used, and they were correct. I’m happy with the label, yes. I like Clute’s description; fabulist challenges that the world can either be seen or be told. I think that’s one of the messages of the anthology. Rational worldviews say that you can observe, weigh, and measure truth. Speculative fiction comes out of that rational worldview. It dumps the odd or impossible things into fiction so that we can talk about them for awhile outside our rational lives. I know people who won’t let their kids read fiction because they think “fiction” is synonymous with “lies,” whereas fabulist fiction acknowledges that there are some things we just don’t know, some experiences we can’t quantify. Maybe not yet, maybe not ever.

NB: The anthology includes work from new Caribbean and Caribbean-diasporic writers, as well as the work of such long-familiar names as Kamau Brathwaite, Wilson Harris, Olive Senior, and Jamaica Kincaid. Acknowledging that there is also a large body of realist fiction coming out of the Caribbean, do you think nonetheless that there is something inherently distinctive about the Caribbean experience that lends itself to the production of fabulist, rather than realist fiction?

NH: No, I don’t think it’s inherently Caribbean. I believe that we all tell those kinds of stories, all over the world. We just find different paradigms in which to express them. One thing I have to fight in how non-Caribbean people see the work of Caribbean writers is the Northern impulse to exoticize and simplify the Caribbean, to think that Caribbean people are inherently more exotic, more mysterious, more sensuous, less complicated, whatever.

NB: Not only is the range of authors in the anthology impressive, but the stories, poems, and plays in *Whispers*—twenty in all, I believe—cover a diverse range of topics, styles, and sub-genres. Underlying many of them, though, is a sense of historical and geographical dislocation. In “Spurn Babylon” by Tobias Buckell, a surveyor just arrived in St. Thomas discovers that the black popu-

lation there is reconstructing a slave ship to take them “back to Zion.” One of the characters in that story, when asked why a slave ship, says, “We ah bring we history with we. We face it, not run from it” (47). Does this pretty well describe the Caribbean experience?

NH: I don’t think that any one thing can describe the Caribbean experience. Except that yes, it is a history of dislocations, how people have dealt with that varies from individual to individual. What I liked about Toby’s story is that it talked about the sense of dislocation that a white (or “off white, or post-white,” to quote writer Honor Ford-Smith) Caribbean person might feel. We are multiracial and multicultural nations. Up here, we get configured as black people only. What about the Asians, South Asians, white people, mixed race people, native people of the Caribbean? So I was happy to be able to bring a tiny sense of that complexity into the anthology.

NB: You mentioned the tendency to exoticize the Caribbean, and the pigeonholing that that involves. There is also that danger in writing genre fiction as well, right?

NH: Yes, though the stakes seem not quite so high. High enough, when one is trying to build a career. But no taxi driver is going to refuse to stop for me because I write science fiction, whereas by my skin and my hair there are people who decide that I’m Jamaican, and therefore clearly trouble. I’m often asked if I feel pigeon-holed as a genre fiction writer, and I do and I don’t. The world of s[cience] f[iction] and f[antasy] seems plenty big enough for me to do what I want to do with my writing.

NB: It is a big world, and it includes a variety of sub-genres, as your anthology demonstrates. Writers not from North America or Europe who write fantastic fiction tend to be exoticized and held apart from the more mainstream *sf/f* on the shelves.

NH: Yes, we do. Then at cons [conferences] there are panels on why there are no writers of colour in the field, whereas I recently made a list of all the fantastical fiction I could find by writers of colour that was published in 2000 in English, and, though incomplete,

it was seven pages long. We're there, but rarely configured as writers important to the genres of science fiction and fantasy. Mostly we don't ourselves think of our fantastical writing in relation to sf and f either, so, in one way, there are few writers of colour in those genres. I think it's changing. Largely, perhaps, because of a determined readership. As a reader I like fantastical fiction and I want to see representations of people like myself, and people of many races, cultures, genders, body types and sexualities, and I'd like to see that writing coming out of its own communities. So I seek that work out. I'm willing to look beyond the shelf labels. I think that many readers are like that, particularly science fiction/fantasy/horror readers. On the one hand, they romanticize "otherness," but on the other, they are genuinely interested in being educated about worldviews beyond their own. It's a complicated blessing.

NB: In a review of the anthology *Dark Matter*, Joe Monti argues that writers of colour who write speculative fiction are doubly ghettoized, and that most readers of sf recognize only two names: Samuel Delany and Octavia Butler. Obviously, anthologies such as your own and *Dark Matter* will go some distance toward correcting this marginalization, but is there something underlying this blindness that makes it more difficult for speculative writers of colour to command attention? Is it perhaps that visual sf, in particular, is so white?

NH: White sf/f/h writers have included characters of colour in their stories for some time. But those characters have often been written as white Westerners painted different colours. So as a reader, if I don't have an illustration in front of me, it's easy to miss the cues that this is meant to be a person of colour. The story we tell ourselves in sf community is that in a good world, race shouldn't matter. Unfortunately, in our fiction we tend to portray this as though race doesn't exist. Or rather, as though only one race/culture exists; white and Western. It still tends to be assumed to be "normal," the state that everyone would revert to if all things were equal. Less and less can writers make that assumption, however. For one thing, more of us are coming from other communities and writing

from those experiences. But it does get tiresome to be told (for instance) that “black people won’t talk like that in the future” when you have your characters signify a little, as happened to my colleague Andrea Hairston when she was workshopping one of her science fiction stories. I do fear that anthologies such as *Whispers* and *Dark Matter* may only perpetuate the ghettoization. They feel like important anthologies to have, but I think that people can use anything as a tool for marginalization. I can see it happening that the existence of one or two writers of colour in the field becomes perceived as an incursion or invasion, so that people will seek to limit the numbers of writers of colour: “oh, we already have a Nisi Shawl story, we can’t publish an Ama Patterson one too,” when in fact the anthology or journal or magazine may include dozens of stories by white writers. Now that anthologies that are race/culture specific are being published, I fear that the feeling in the industry might be, “oh, they already have their own vehicles and that’s where they belong, we don’t need to publish them in the ‘regular’ outlets.” I mean, how often do you hear Octavia Butler described as a feminist author? Or hear Delany’s work spoken of in relation to cyberpunk? I took part in an online chat recently where one issue raised was whether *Dark Matter* had created a “flood” of black writers in the field (<http://www.scifi.com/transcripts/2000/darkmatter.html>). Fewer than twenty stories doth not a flood make. Not when there are thousands of white writers. Then someone from the audience said that “if there were to be too many of you, you would become too common.” A well-meaning statement, but it reveals that to some at least, our value seems to be in our rarity. Makes us seem “exotic.”

NB: Good points. Moreover, why aren’t these individual works (in *Dark Matter* and your anthology) ever collected in sf anthologies? For example, I’ve read many sf anthologies, but I’d never encountered Du Bois’s story (collected in *Dark Matter*) in any of them.

NH: Partly it seems to be the self-protective instinct we have in sf community to ghettoize ourselves (faced with a literati that thinks sf is a joke), and partly it is a colour bar. I perceive both operating

around the beat writers: Ginsberg and the rest. The black beats and the women beats tend to get written of (if at all), separately from the male beats. In sf, we acknowledge William Burroughs from amongst the beats, but tend not to talk much about the other beat writers (and I find that right across the literary community we tend not to talk about the fact that many of those beat writers were queer; another barrier operating). By only discussing Burroughs, we in sf and f are doing that self-protective thing that's about only talking about the fantastical writing that is so precious to us and so villified in much of the literary community. But that denies that that work was created in a milieu of and in response to other work. So when a writer such as Ishmael Reed comes out with his astounding fantastical and satirical novel *Mumbo Jumbo*, that to my ears seems to have a very clear lineage that includes the beat generation, he simply doesn't register on the sf radar.

NB: Regarding your earlier point about the way people are allowed to talk in science fiction: Have you ever noticed: aliens and (nice) people in the future don't use contractions?

NH: [grin] Jeannie in *I Dream of Jeannie* never does seem to master them. Ashok Mathur is working on a paper that mentions that. Not to mention the fact that Jeannie would seem to come right out of the country of "The Arabian Nights," yet is blonde and blue-eyed.

NB: It's precisely that challenge to a monolithic white, Western culture that makes *Midnight Robber* so interesting and subversive.

NH: I also liked the [subversive] sense of mischief of much of the work in the anthology. Mischief in dead earnest, but irreverence nevertheless.

NB: I laughed out loud reading some of the works. At the other end of the emotional scale, I thought "Widows' Walk" (by Opal Palmer Adisa) was extremely beautiful and moving.

NH: "Widows' Walk" was so difficult. That woman's daily agony as she waited for a husband that might never return was excruciating.

NB: And the story was beautifully written. How has the anthology been received so far?

NB: It has received good reviews from *Publisher's Weekly* and the *Library Journal*, and an excellent review in *Locus Mag*, which compared it to *Dark Matter*. It is one of 12 "Best Books of 2000," as judged by the Vermont Book Professionals Association, and three of the stories in it were short-listed for the James R. Tiptree Jr. Award, which is for speculative fiction which explores gender and gender roles. I'm very happy with how my first editorial effort is going.

NB: We're reviewing your anthology along with *Dark Matter* as well in the ARIEL issue. Samuel Delany says some very nice things about you in *Dark Matter*, I think.

NH: Thank you. Yes, Chip's been very supportive.

NB: You couldn't have a more respected writer behind your work.

NH: Truly. Kamau Brathwaite was wonderful too, when I visited NYC recently.

NB: You've got Brathwaite in your anthology.

NH: Yes, an original Brathwaite story. Made me very happy.

NB: Turning from the anthology, I would like to talk about your own work. Charles R. Saunders has described you as "[Octavia] Butler's true literary child" (400). How do you feel about such statements, especially when, in the same anthology, Samuel Delany complains about the (perhaps unconsciously) enforced segregation of speculative authors of colour? Is this comparison to Butler, while obviously meant as a true compliment, another form of ghettoization?

NH: As I've said, a ghetto works two ways. In can be imposed from the outside as a trap or prison. But it can also be a place where people gather voluntarily to make community with each other. I think it behooves the people on the inside of a ghetto—voluntarily or otherwise formed—to keep tabs on what's going on outside, but I don't think that allying yourself with folks who share elements of your experience is de facto a bad thing. I first looked to Delany as a mentor, but when Saunders compares me to Butler, there's a way in which it feels as though one of my own is claiming me. It's a good feeling. Butler blurbed my first novel and Delany, while I was new to the community, was making a point of introducing me at every [science fiction] con[vention] that he and I ended up at together. I

felt like a debutante. There are many communities of which I feel a part, so it touches me to get that welcome from any of them. From sf community in general, for instance, from black and Caribbean community; or from feminist sf; or from a much less easily defined community of freaky folks of colour.

NB: I want to talk a bit more about Delany in a minute, but first, to get back to your point about being claimed. Alice Walker makes much the same point in "In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens." It's about having a community, isn't it?

NH: Yes. But for me, and for many children of immigrants, there's always a sense that there's more than one community. When they can overlap, it's blessed.

NB: You talk about being part of different communities. Do you consider yourself a Canadian SF writer and how has this influenced your writing?

NH: I have a Canadian hat too, yes. I guess the main way in which it affects my writing is that I don't write from the place of being a citizen of a superpower. Canada's very aware of its status as living in the shadow of the juggernaut, and I think that's a good thing. It can mean that Canadian writers may more easily perceive particular types of power imbalances. All that's a generalization of course, and breaks down immediately upon looking at individual works on individual topics by individual writers. I am a Canadian writer the way that Thomas King or Shani Mootoo or Hiromi Goto are Canadian writers.

NB: You've also mentioned Octavia Butler: how much has her work influenced your own?

NH: At some point in my early twenties I began to wonder which of the sf writers were black. It was right after I discovered to my surprise that Chip (Delany) was black (told you I could be thick). That's when I found out about Charles Saunders and Steve Barnes and Octavia Butler. Interloaned Butler's books from the public library and read them all at a gulp and was enormously impressed. But frankly, I'd already imprinted on Chip's writing years before I encountered the other writers. *Dhalgren* broke my brain apart and

re-mixed it. So when people compare me to Butler, I sometimes think that it's as much because we're both black and female and sf writers. My writing does not have the layers of complexity that I so admire in Chip's, but there's something in his general level of freakiness—in the tabooeness of the topics he tackles—that has always appealed to me.

NB: That's what I was thinking when I asked the earlier question about influence. Your writing, with its emphasis on linguistic virtuosity and transgression, seems to have more in common with Delany than with Butler.

NH: Yes. I'm still more timid than Chip, and I don't have anywhere near his mental ability, but he's definitely my benchmark. Linguistically though, I have perhaps even more in common with Caribbean writers than with Delany. When your language has been colonized, you find ways to subvert and reconfigure it. Writers from India know this. African writers all over the world. Scottish and Irish writers, too; anyone from a place where a ruling, foreign power has tried to abolish the language of a whole people. As to transgression? Yeah, it was a pure relief to find people like Chip writing science fiction that felt very personal and that dealt with the taboo. I'm talking about sexuality more in my writing, and it tends not to be normative sexuality. I don't know where my own writing will go, but with a writer like Delany out there, it feels as though the sky's the limit. I have an uncle who's gone before me.

NB: You mentioned Louise Bennett earlier. Her use of language is powerful.

NH: When she first performed in public, someone in the audience yelled, "Is dat yuh madda sen' yuh a-school fuh?" I've always loved the idea of using creole to criticize someone's use of creole. Bennett and Kamau Brathwaite (the latter coined the term "nation language" to describe African-saturated creoles) are also influences in the way they claim the right to honour the use of the vernacular. In sf I seem to many people to be doing something unusual by writing so much of *Midnight Robber* in creole, but in Caribbean literature, I'm just following in a long tradition. What's different is that

I blended creoles, but that's because I grew up in three Caribbean countries with three different English creoles.

NB: I saw bell hooks at a conference once. She came out in full signifying glory, but then stopped, explained that she had a cold and couldn't "perform" any more. The essentializing and denigration of dialect misses the way that it is performative, difficult, and transgressive.

NH: "Denigration" is probably exactly the word to use here. Can be read as "de-blackening." Phew. So you do understand what I mean when I use "to signify" that way. It's performative in that kind of space, yes. When you're speaking it in your own community it's also performative, but it's your *language.* It's a way of connecting. In front of an audience that doesn't speak it, it can feel as though you're feeding the tourists. Of course, likely hooks' audience had speakers and non-speakers. Life is always so complicated.

NB: This is so! I want to come back to *Midnight Robber* in a minute, but first I want to ask you one more question about Delany. You studied with Delany when you attended the Clarion Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers Workshop. What kind of immediate impact, as an instructor, did Delany have on your work?

NH: I first met Delany in Toronto when he came in, I think, the 80s as part of a tribute to Judy Merrill. I asked him to sign my tattered copy of *Dhalgren*. I met him again in Toronto when I had the presumption to try to review *The Madman*, and he granted me an interview given in a restaurant over a plate of calamari. I was in heaven. I attended that particular Clarion in part because I knew he was one of the instructors. The rest of the lineup didn't hurt, either (Joe and Gay Haldeman, Nancy Kress, Pat Murphy, Tim Powers, Karen Joy Fowler). Delany was the one who said, "If a story begins, 'First Name Last Name did something not very interesting,' I won't read any further." Words to live by. My story beginnings changed immediately. He's also the one who told us that until we figured out what our characters did for a living, our worlds wouldn't feel real. The fact of his existence at Clarion was

easily as important as what he said. It didn't hurt either that I liked him as a person. It would have been a very different experience otherwise.

NB: Interesting comment about beginnings—I just looked at your first lines—you put the reader right there, in the world, immediately. I know [from a previous conversation] that you haven't read much Toni Morrison, but she uses a similar strategy: *Beloved* begins “124 was spiteful.”

NH☉: Once you've begun doing it, it becomes this fun game: how can you dump the reader into the middle of the world, make zir* curious to read on long enough to find out what the hell you're talking about? *[“zie” and “zir” are gender inclusive personal pronouns. The “z” is pronounced “tz.” -nh]

NB: I don't know whether you're familiar with the work of James Blish. He uses such tactics too, and students are really put off. Students in my sf class have difficulty with Blish because he doesn't provide them with much exposition, much sense of familiarity. I have been telling them that the best sf should be unsettling, should be estranging. Do you think that people's expectations about what sf is and should be are increasingly informed by the generic sf of film and TV? If so, does that make it more difficult for serious sf authors to find an audience?

NH: I know James Blish. Been a long time since I read him. Are students entering your class knowing it's a sf course? You'd think that they'd already be familiar with being unsettled then—if they're already reading in the genre. I think you're right. It is an unsettling genre. I have friends who insist to me that they don't read sf, and when I go to their bookshelves and start pulling off the Gloria Naylor and the Sherman Alexie titles, insist that that's *different.* When I ask further, some of them will admit that the genre sf they have read scares them. I think that sf readers by contrast, like to be jolted out of their ways of thinking. Bless 'em. Film and tv sf rarely has anything to do with what's happening in the genre. The media stuff tends to get obsessed with the special effects and forget

to tell a story. The discourse in media sf is some 30 years behind what's happening in the literature; it's still hung up on glorifying paramilitary regimes, whereas the range of political analysis in the written genre is much more varied, and has been from the beginning, wherever you define that beginning as being. And film and tv are very visible. So yes, it does make it difficult for sf text writers to get any respect.

NB: You can add Salman Rushdie, Alice Walker to that list too.

NH: [g[rin] And Thomas King, Shani Mootoo, Larissa Lai, Eden Robinson, Hiromi Goto, Ashok Mathur, Kwadwo Agymah Kamau, Glenville Lovell, Marcia Douglas, Bharati Mukherjee, marina ama omowale maxwell, Amos Tutuola, Dambudzo Marechera, Virginia Hamilton, and Ben Okri (to get a little more global).

NB: But I think the students in an sf class are used to being unsettled to a certain degree—aliens, wormholes, and all that. But they don't expect their ideologies—their worldviews—to be challenged at some pretty basic levels: gender, race, culture, etc.

NH: Sigh. They don't? Then what in hell are they reading? Thomas More was challenging ideologies when, in the 1500s? And Margaret Cavendish in the 1600s? And Karel Capek, who first coined the term "robot"? And Mary Shelley with *Frankenstein*? Even *Star Trek* tries to challenge some of the more broad stroke societal conventions. How come they're surprised, then? Oh, I think I might have the answer ... I think it comes back to the notion that really the best way to treat people is as though they're just like you. And in response to that, much science fiction does do this sort of "colour-blind casting" which as I've said isn't colour-blind at all, but which makes everyone read as basically straight, white, middle class, young, able-bodied North Americans in alien drag or girl drag, or whatever. So I guess it would be easy to read sf and consider yourself liberal, and not get your ideologies challenged much at all. You'd have to read selectively, because sf is so full of subversive writing, but you could do it. I think the notion that people aren't very different from each other is an excellent place to start, because

it's a vital part of the truth. But somehow we have to appreciate that we also aren't like each other at all.

NB: All I know is that they'll be reading *Midnight Robber* next time I teach the course.

NH: That may make a difference, or it may not make them perceive anything new at all. One reviewer said that *Midnight Robber* was light beachside summer reading. People see what they see.

NB: Your use of creole in most of your fictional work, it seems to me, adds a level of estrangement that forces—or perhaps compels—the reader unfamiliar with the language to begin thinking differently. I find when I read one of your novels or stories now, I quickly pick up the syntax, and it takes some time after I've put the book down to stop thinking in those rhythms. Ursula Le Guin argues that sf “short-circuit[s] habits of mind that insulate us from the world.” After I've come away from your work, I feel as though my habits of mind have been short-circuited. Can you comment on your use of language in your fiction?

NH: Oh, is that the effect that my language use has on you? It's difficult for me to know, because for me, the effect is of slipping my tongue into a very familiar and welcome groove. It's like putting on your favourite sweats. I don't know how to assess how someone unfamiliar with it will react, but it's not the first time that someone has said that the language patterns stay in their head long afterwards. You know—I'm not really sure what I'm doing. I've been thankful that people previously unfamiliar with the rhythms of English Caribbean vernaculars can fairly quickly slip into the language I use. And I've been grateful that Caribbean readers seem to take the hybrid language I created in *Midnight Robber* pretty much in stride. It was after I was most of the way through *Midnight Robber* (and driving my writing group crazy with what they read as inconsistent language use) that I realized I had unconsciously created three layers of language: surface, deep creole, and deeper creole. Surface was for fairly formal communication: letters and such. Narrative. Deep signalled a level of comfort that the speaker had. Deeper signalled opposition or taking a stance in some way.

NB: I want to talk about the douen in *Midnight Robber*, but first a longer question about aliens in general. You have said in an interview that “At some metaphorical level, the message I get [from sf] is that white people are humans and people of color are aliens. It’s a genre that on the face of it is very much about ‘us’ and ‘other,’ but is still largely written from a perspective of being on the outside trying to fathom the ‘other’” (“Nalo Hopkinson Subverts Science Fiction”). How has this understanding informed your own portrayal of the “other”?

NH: I find I can’t see “the other” as all that strange, the way we conceive of them. I suspect that if we ever do encounter alien life though, it may well be so, well, alien that we won’t really be able to fathom it. So the aliens that I wrote in *Midnight Robber* feel more to me like people from somewhere else. I didn’t try to describe true alienness. It may defy description. As in Suzette Haden Elgin’s *Alien Tongue*, where the alien is so unsettling that the little human baby literally turns itself inside out trying to understand what it’s perceiving and dies horribly.

NB: I think you’re right. True alien-ness is beyond human understanding, almost by definition, right?

NH: A reviewer once complained that I didn’t describe the colour of the douens [characters in *Midnight Robber*]. I read that and thought, “but they’re people-coloured!” I think of them as people. And people range from a flushed pinkiness to a flushed dark brownness; to an alien, it wouldn’t look like that huge a colour range—to a lion, we maybe all look kind of hairless and fragile and skin colour is of little import. By contrast, no two guppies have the same skin colouration; they probably find us very dull. It’s only that we’re obsessed with minor gradations in skin colour. That reviewer was correct that I didn’t describe the douens’ skin colour (though I did describe the colour of ruffs and feathers). But it was interesting to me to sit and figure out why I’d been sketchy about it.

NB: So about the douens: here is my question. In *Midnight Robber*, your portrayal of the douen women, the hinte, strikes me as particularly subversive. The hinte appear to Tan-Tan, the protagonist

in the novel, to be a different species: unlike the douen men, they look like birds, they can fly, their speech is different. But they are very powerful, very magical. What were you attempting to do with the douen?

NH: Argh. Spoiler! I worked so hard to write that surprise into the novel that I'm loath to have you reveal it to someone who hasn't read it. I'm trying to remember what I was attempting to do with the hinte. It's two books ago. Okay, I think I have bits of it: Tan-Tan takes a sort of patronizing attitude towards the douens as the native race on New Half Way Tree. It's an attitude that she shares with many of the humans. She doesn't question it until she has to live amongst the douens. I wanted something that would so shake up her perceptions of who was and wasn't "people" that she'd never be able to be patronizing towards them again. The douen men are already one remove of "other." She has perceived Chichibud as people because she met him as a child and has always had a close relationship with him. But other human beings for the most part don't see douens the way that Tan-Tan sees Chichibud. We humans have a long track record of being able to decide that people aren't people and that they therefore merit our exploitation of them. The hinte don't even look like people, so Tan-Tan perceives them at first as dumb animals. Indeed, the douens use this penchant that humans have of "otherizing" anything different as a way of hiding the hinte in plain sight. Yet Tan-Tan discovers that the hinte are patently just as much people as she is. I probably had something more pedestrian in mind, too. I tend to collapse characters. In early drafts I had Chichibud (whose name is a pun on a Jamaican folk song about birds) using this pack animal. Then I realized I'd shown no douen females and began to think about why that might be. It tickled me to think that they might have been right under the noses of the humans all along. Of course, there's another twist to the whole thing. Tan-Tan is beginning to perceive both male and female douens as people, but then she encounters the way they live their lives in the Daddy tree, and much of it revolts or alienates her. We are alike, but yet we are alien to each other.

NB: There is some really interesting work being done with computer anime right now. When I saw some of this work, I thought immediately about the way that the worlds you create—so strange, populated with amazing creatures—would best be recreated visually in this genre. Have you sold any of your rights to film so far?

NH: I guess it would be a good thing to sell film rights. But I always think of Whoopi Goldberg trying to do a Jamaican accent in *Clara's Heart*, and I cringe. Corporate film almost always seems to convey so much *less* of the idea than was on the page, and it has such a poor track record of representing Caribbean people. But I guess I might think of the cash potential. It'd be nice not to be broke. Someone has expressed an interest in *Midnight Robber*, but they're trying to find producers and it's been a while, so I'm not holding my breath. I've had the same idea that you did; that animation would be the best way to represent *Midnight Robber*. Expensive, though. I don't know that any Hollywood studio would take such a costly chance on something that departs so far from the expected and that uses primarily dark-skinned folks, to boot; and in a science fiction story, where we (people of colour) still tend to show up in small numbers. My agent was able to get someone from the Spielberg studios to read *Midnight Robber*. Apparently his assessment was that it was "too dark." Which can be read two ways, and makes me giggle. Some people have expressed interest in making *Brown Girl in the Ring* into a film. I think that'd be much easier. The setting (Toronto) already exists, for one thing. No need of too many expensive special effects. I think it's a story that would work well for an independent director, so it wouldn't have to be the scary Hollywood route. We'll see.

NB: I want to shift gears again to talk about your short stories. You've published quite a few, enough for a collection?

NH: *Skin Folk* is coming out in December of this year, a collection of my short stories. There are 15, and five of them are new.

NB: Your short stories tackle a variety of subjects. And many of them seem to belong to the horror genre. You're quite skilled at crafting them.

NH: Is that the whole question?

NB: Hmm, I'm trying to think how to put this into a question In "Ganger (Ball Lightning)" you are really subversive. Here, your work is most like sf, but it breaks that taboo (as you were mentioning earlier) against the portrayal of sex in sf. That's still not a question—how about a comment?

NH: Okay, I'll take you off the hook ...

NB: You could sense my writhing?

NH: Yeah, I could sense you twisting in the wind. First of all, it tends to amaze people when I say that I can't read horror. Can't watch it on screen. I read the description of the *Blair Witch Project* and had to ask a sweetie to spend the night with me, because just the idea of film was so scary ... and I've never even seen the movie. So I was surprised (and pleased) to find horror readers claiming me, but I don't know if what I write is really horror. Much of it is certainly horrific, but so is life. In "Ganger," I was playing. They're on the face of it a straight, middle class black couple, but they've wandered into gender play. That may be understated enough in the story that no one has commented on it. What freaks poor Cleve out is having the sensation that his outie is an innie. But I also hint that they've been experimenting with bondage. I don't say who's getting tied up, though. Maybe they take turns. And I "masculinize" Issy by having her say things like "don't eat freezer snow" (which echoes "don't eat yellow snow," and references men and dogs pissing in the snow) and that using the suits was like "taking a shower with your clothes on," which is how some men complain that condoms feel, but I also make Issy's body large and round and very feminine. I also gender fuck a little with Cleve, who's big and muscular and clearly very much male, but who also has roundnesses to his body, and who has a gentleness that Issy lacks. I was playing not only with the notion of what a proper het[erosexual] black middle class West Indian couple is like, but yes, also with that notion that science fiction doesn't deal with sex (thankfully, I'm not the only or the first person to tackle that one). I call "Ganger" my "wet science fiction" story. There's hard sf and soft sf (technological and socio-

logical). “Ganger (Ball Lightning)” is wet sf. Sheree Thomas, who published it, calls it a love story, and she’s correct. Some reviewers have called it a horror story, which kind of surprised me. It gets two kinds of responses. People either say it’s really sexy, or that it’s “spine-chilling horror.”

NB: It’s a great story, Nalo. *Twilight Zone* for grown-ups. I can’t get the image of the suits writhing together in the closet out of my mind. Kind of a metaphor for modern romance?

NH: Perhaps. Romance as a notion is one I distrust deeply. It seems to be enamoured of ways to keep people apart and then idolizing the pain of the separation, rather than giving them skills to get and remain together. Thank heaven a lot of contemporary romance writers are happily doing some subversion of their own on that front. With my story, I liked the idea that the suits could get it on, but that Cleve and Issy had sort of forgotten how and ended up being reminded by a literal lightning bolt.

NB: Right. That’s exactly what I was thinking. Nalo, what is your next project and how is it coming along?

NH: I’m about one quarter of the way through writing *Griffonne*. It involves a lot of research, which is daunting.

NB: What is it about?

NH: I’m reluctant to talk too much about that while it’s developing, but essentially it’s historical magical realism, and what I’m mainly looking at is how the sexuality of women in the African diaspora gets configured in white eyes.

NB: Can you talk about where your research is taking you?

NH: Oh, I can whine about that for days ... 18th century Saint Domingue (Haiti); 19th century Paris; 4th Century Alexandria. One of my characters is a woman named Jeanne Duval, who was a black mistress of Baudelaire’s. *Griffonne* means, essentially, “mulatto.”

NB: It sounds as though this work is taking you in a different direction from *Midnight Robber*.

NH: Totally. I think I’ve gone in a new direction with each novel.

NB: Do you worry that if you do change your approach in each novel, you'll have more trouble marketing your work? Does your publisher worry about that?

NB: The genre and marketing thing is vexing. I think that the pulp era and the movies kind of juggernauted over the whole idea of futuristic fiction and now those who don't know the literature think that *Star Wars* is as deep as it gets. They've forgotten Zamyatin, if they ever knew him. I think that's why I'm so struck by the term "dislocation." Particularly for immigrants, we live very much with a sense of dislocation. Add in being from any number of marginalized communities (female, of colour, you name it), and I think the audience for the type of sf that I write should be out there and easy to find; so many people are multiply located, which is a more functional way to look at it than dislocated. But I don't think about the marketing; I can't, or I'll be second-guessing myself constantly and I fear that my writing would suffer. I leave the marketing to my editor to worry about. She's good at it.

NB: There are so many more things I would like to talk about, but this will have to do for now. I know you love food ... would have liked to talk about food

NH: Yes, it's in almost every story. It's nostalgia.

NB: I like the way you use the fudge in "Ganger."

NH: Making it is a lot like that, except without the broken glass.

NB: Here is my final question, Nalo: what can you accomplish with a science fiction story, or horror, or magic realism that you cannot with realism?

NH: I can shake people up. Perhaps starting with myself. And perhaps I can make us see a new way, start to think a new way, perhaps come up with other ways of tackling some of the many things that vex us. I think that realism can do that too to a great extent. But it doesn't seem to be the aim of realism in the same way that it's the aim of sf/f/h. Elisabeth Vonarburg has said something about how a writer gets "caught" by a particular genre. I think that's happened with me and sf/f/h. I didn't decide I was going to be a science fiction writer. It's what I've always read, always been most interested

in. Something about the way that speculative fiction and other fantastical genres can use fantasy and story just appeals to me, gives me a sense of transcendence that I rarely get from mimetic fiction.

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