

Speaking in Tongues: An Interview with Science Fiction Writer Nalo Hopkinson

In 1998, Nalo Hopkinson joined the ranks of Black science fiction writers like Samuel R. Delany, Octavia Butler, and Steven Barnes, among others. The Jamaican-born Hopkinson is the daughter of the late Slade Hopkinson, the Guyanese actor, poet, and playwright who was part of Derek Walcott's Trinidad Theatre Workshop. Hopkinson spent her first sixteen years living in Jamaica, Trinidad, and Guyana. For the past twenty-three years she has resided in Toronto, Canada. She infuses the tropes of science fiction and fantasy with Caribbean folklore and culture. In 1997 she won the Warner Aspect First Novel Contest for *Brown Girl in the Ring* (Warner Books, 1998) and is a recipient of an Ontario Arts Council Foundation award for emerging writers; the Locus Award, First Novel Category; and the John W. Campbell Award for best new writer. Hopkinson's first novel also made the preliminary ballot for the Nebula Award. *Brown Girl* is a post-Holocaust novel set in the twenty-first century inner city of Toronto, which has suffered an economic collapse. The novel chronicles the struggles of one woman, Ti-Jeanne, to reconcile her individuality as a young North American woman and unwed mother with the group orientation of her Afro-Caribbean ancestry, which includes a nascent ability as a mystic.

Hopkinson's second novel, *Midnight Robber*, will appear from Warner Books in March, 2000. Set on a Caribbean-colonized planet and told in a hybrid creole, it is a science fictional allegory for displacement and exile. She counts African American science fiction writers Samuel Delany and Octavia Butler among the writers whose work has inspired her. (Delany was one of the writers-in-residence when Hopkinson attended the Clarion Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers Workshop at Michigan State University in 1995.) Hopkinson is currently editing *The Dub Side*, an anthology of Caribbean fabulist fiction.

This interview is based on Hopkinson's answers to a series of interrogatories which I presented to her in February, 1999, about *Brown Girl* and about her perspective as the newest (then) Black science fiction writer and the newest (still) Black female science fiction writer.

Rutledge: Why are you a writer of Black fantasy?

Hopkinson: Because it's better than being a writer of purple prose? I'm a writer. I'm predominantly black. I write fantasy (actually, I say "speculative fiction," because my work can include elements of science fiction, fantasy, dark fantasy, horror, and magic realism). I'm not a writer of black fantasy. (I go into that more below.)

Gregory E. Rutledge, a first-year English Ph.D. candidate at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, studies Black science fiction and fantasy. In August, he completed his M.A. thesis on the cosmology of freedom in the works of Samuel R. Delany, Octavia Butler, Charles R. Saunders, and Nalo Hopkinson.

Rutledge: How long have you been interested in Black fantasy? What do you know of your predecessors like Butler, Delany, Saunders, Barnes, and others?

Hopkinson: I think perhaps we're using the word *fantasy* in different ways, so I need some clarification. Are you using it as an umbrella term for all the genres of fantastical writing? I'm accustomed to hearing it used to name one specific genre. According to the classifications with which I'm familiar, Butler writes science fiction, not fantasy. Delany has written both. Saunders' *Imaro* trilogy was sword and sorcery (i.e., a sub-genre of fantasy). Barnes writes futuristic action adventure as well as having co-written hard sf with people such as Larry Niven and Jerry Pournelle. Tananarive Due has been dubbed a horror author. I don't know Virginia Hamilton's work very well, but she has published young adult science fiction as well as collections of African American folktales.

I've read some form of fantastical literature since I was a tot, be it folktales or Homer's *Iliad*, so I gravitated naturally toward the sf shelves. Some time in my 20s I saw a photograph of Chip Delany, with whose work I'd fallen in love on first encountering it, and realized that he was black. I'd never heard of such a thing before. I wept. It felt as though my universe had just doubled in size. Though my life was surrounded with Caribbean writers of color (my father and his friends), none of them wrote sf. I'd only met one other black person who read the literature.

I began to wonder if there were any other black writers of speculative fiction. I was working at a public library at the time, and used that resource to research the question. I found and devoured all the Octavia Butler novels I could get, and got books by Saunders and Barnes on interlibrary loan. A colleague pointed me to the shelves where Virginia Hamilton's novels were. For the past few years I've been haphazardly collecting works of fantastical fiction by black and Caribbean writers, and some

by other people of color. This comes in handy when I'm on yet another sf convention panel on why people of color don't write sf. Black people don't write a lot of science fiction, but we are well represented in magic realism. And though we don't *write* a lot of science fiction, it's in our other artistic forms: our music (remember P-Funk's *Mother-ship Connection*?), our visual arts, our comics. African U.K. filmmaker John Akomfrah made a documentary on black expressions of science fiction in music. It's called *Last Angel of History*.

The long tradition of science fiction out of which came works such as Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* and Karel Capek's *R.U.R.* has on this continent been overshadowed by the pulp era, which produced a lot of, well, pulp, as well as some fine literature. But it's left Western sf with a stigma about being adventure stories in which white people use technology to overpower alien cultures. Small wonder that black writers haven't been drawn to it in large numbers—we've been on the receiving end of colonization, and for us it's not an entertaining adventure story. I believe it's Chip Delany who pointed out in an interview with Mark Dery that science fiction is a literature about how our technological creations affect our lives.

African cultures have been made into consumers of technology, not its creators, and Western technology at that. How then are black people to feel a buy-in to science fiction? Come to think of it, this seems largely to be a problem for writers. I worked for a while at an sf bookstore, and the patrons came in all shades and colors. I think there's an invisible readership of people of color. You rarely see them at cons, so it becomes easy to think that they aren't there.

I think the dearth of black writers of science fiction is changing, and I hope that Walter Mosley's recent call to arms in the November 1998 *New York Times* will speed it up. I know that my publisher, Warner Aspect (the sf imprint of Warner Books), was pleased to discover after they accepted *Brown Girl in the Ring* for publication that I am black.

They are very much aware of that particular gap in the field and were happy to be publishing a new black author.

The thing is, that notion of colonizing alien races has only ever been one theme of science fiction; it's as varied a literature as any other. And even within that topic, many writers have been hugely critical of the assumption that human culture (which for much earlier sf meant white, Western, privileged humans) would be "superior" to other intelligences. It's just that the discourse is only slowly coming from other experiences: the working class, women, writers of color, queer writers, disabled writers. But science fiction has always been a subversive literature. It's been used to critique social systems well before the marketing label of *sf* got stuck on it. And that's when I find *sf* compelling. When Chip Delany writes about fetishized desire and power games through the eyes of an ex-slave who doesn't talk a whole lot about why he finds sub-dom play arousing, I'm forced to think twice and thrice about a whole bunch of things in relation to each other: sexuality, race, class, color, history. I think that a speculative literature from a culture that has been on the receiving end of the colonization glorified in some *sf* could be a compelling body of writing. Look at the work of the Jewish speculative fiction writers, like Jane Yolen's novel *Briar Rose*, which uses the elements of the folktale as a lens into the horrors of the Holocaust, and never once allows readers to romanticize the experience. It's brilliant. Or the wickedly incisive and funny work of First Nations writer Sherman Alexie.

Rutledge: How would you characterize what you write, if Black fantasy isn't acceptable?

Hopkinson: English is a very flexible language, but sometimes that flexibility makes meanings muddy. When I say "black sf writer," the adjective *black* is modifying the word *writer*, not the word *sf*. I'm a black writer of *sf*. It's easy for someone to take the phrase *black sf writer* to mean that a black sf writer is someone who writes something called

"black sf." I write speculative fiction. I am black. I wouldn't say that Jeff Noon writes "white Manchester men's sf," or that Ursula Le Guin writes "women's sf" (though I'm sure some would say the latter). It's very important to me to be a voice coming from one flavor of black experience, and Caribbean, and Canadian, and female, and fat, and from feminist and sex-positive politics. But what I *write* doesn't have those identities; *I* do. My writing won't appeal to everyone, but I don't want to wave a flag over it that says, "This is written only for black people" (or Caribbean, or Canadian, or female . . . you get my drift). It isn't. I'd like readers to discover for themselves if my work resonates with them or not. Funnily enough, it is important to me to be identified as a writer of speculative fiction, perhaps because it feels like claiming my share of space in a literature that has largely not represented me. I recently heard from a black woman my age who said that she stopped writing *sf* when she was younger because people told her that black people don't write the stuff. Now she's sticking to her guns and getting back into it.

Rutledge: How do you see your work as reflective of that by "standard" fiction writers who are Black, and how different?

Hopkinson: I don't think my work is reflective of the work of black writers of mimetic fiction. The body of work being created by black writers in all genres is precious and valuable. Yet I don't see what I'm trying to do as being in relation to realist writing styles. I'm going to try to paraphrase part of the Mosley article and hope that I capture it accurately. He says that access of black writers to the mainstream has only really happened in this century, and there is still a barrier there: "Excellence" in the work of black writers is judged by how well we write about "being black in a white world," which is obviously only one part of our lived experience. "A limitation imposed upon a limitation," he calls it. His words really struck me. They concretized for me some of what I'm trying to do in my writing.

I was born in a part of the world where people of African origin are in the majority. Racism most emphatically exists, but my early experience of being made aware that my dark skin, round ass, and tight-curled hair made me devalued coin did not come from being part of a minority community. And in fact, being middle-class, I had more access to privilege than many. Nor was it a simple issue of black and white, not when there are African, European, Asian, and South Asian people there, all with centuries-long histories of being in the Caribbean—not to mention the aboriginal cultures whose people were there even before Columbus got himself lost and they found him. And all of those races and cultures have undergone and are undergoing a certain amount of mixing. My experience of being “raced” (that’s not a word, is it?) is a complex one that has to take into account the cultures and histories of many races, not to mention class and economics. It cannot be a simple binary, and it is nowhere close to being the only issue that frames my writing.

I have an early short story about a young Afro-Caribbean woman living in Canada who exchanges her body for one which is white and slim with straight hair. She diets rigorously, and she hates it when her parents talk in creole and when other black women dress in ways that celebrate their bodies and their cultures. I took the story to a writing retreat to be critiqued. Some people said I had to decide what my protagonist’s problem was. Was it internalized racism, or female body image problems, or the problems that the child of immigrants faces when she tries to adapt to a new culture? They felt I had to choose one, that my story would lack focus if I didn’t. But the themes were all interrelated; it wouldn’t have made sense to me artificially to disentangle them. It may be a weaker story as a result of my stubbornness,

**Writing
without
creoles can
feel like
cooking a
meal without
the spices.**

because I’m still developing the skills to portray all those complexities, but I’d rather keep trying to do that than simplify my writing.

When I read the work of African American realist writers, there’s always the awareness of the white world in which the characters live;

there *has* to be, if the fiction is to be representative of the real world. The realist work of Caribbean writers must reference the effects of hundreds of years of colonialism. It’s there in the work of African writers, too, although my sense is that it’s a little less all-pervasive, perhaps because it wasn’t possible to reave

people on the continent from their pre-slavery histories and cultures to the extent that you could when you removed them from their homelands. The experience of slavery is a huge cancer in the collective consciousness of African people all over the diaspora. The ripple effects of it (if you’ll bear with a mixed metaphor for a moment) still continue, and they touch the past, the present, and the future. People recognize that about the effects of the Holocaust on Jewish people, but we don’t get the same recognition. We’re supposed to have “gotten over it” by now, even though its domino effect still very much straitlaces our lives. Speculative fiction allows me to experiment with the effects of that cancerous blot, to shrink it by setting my worlds far in the future (science fiction) or to metonymize it so that I can explore the paradigms it’s created (fantasy). I could even choose to sidestep it altogether into alternate history. Mosley says that sf makes it possible to create visions which will “shout down the realism imprisoning us behind a wall of alienating culture.”

I don’t want to write mimetic fiction. I like the way that fantastical fiction allows me to use myth, archetype, speculation, and storytelling. I like the way that it allows me to imagine the

impossible. Mosley also said something to the effect that human beings first imagine a reality, then figure out a way to make it manifest. When women sf writers first began imagining women in positions of authority, the idea seemed risible to many. Not any more. I don't see science fiction and fantasy as being just wishful thinking. I like to believe that they can also be more like, I dunno, guided imagery. Societal biofeedback? If black people can imagine our futures, imagine—among other things—cultures in which we aren't alienated, then we can begin to see our way clear to creating them.

Rutledge: What do you see your writing doing, if anything? That is, do you construct your stories with an agenda in mind other than the craft of telling a good story?

Hopkinson: After all I've said in the previous answer about what I see sf by black writers doing, I'm now going to say something that's apparently contradictory. No, I don't have an agenda when I write, unless you count it as an agenda that I want the story to be a compelling read. Story themes come to me in later drafts, when I've figured out what the story's about. I start with a word, a phrase, or a snapshot image. I try to marry it with another image and see what comes out of the tension between the two. I wordsmith as I go—constructing my language in ways that are pleasing to me, figuring out the “voice” of the story. I write until I have the semblance of a story, then I take it to my writing group, where people ask all the questions that hadn't occurred to me: “Why does she find oranges nauseating on page 17 when she loved them on page 2?” “He's obviously trying to overcome his terror of dogs: How come you didn't write more about that?” I think, *He's afraid of dogs? She hates oranges?* then I realize that they're right, those two facts are the crux of the story, but I didn't see that when I wrote it. So I figure out what happened to make him afraid of dogs and her revolted by oranges, and I finish the story. Or maybe I disagree

with my writing group completely, but something that someone says sparks my own thinking, and I figure out the key to the story and write that.

Every time I've set out to write a story with a message in it, it's died on the vine. I have to write about images that fascinate me. It doesn't work if my fiction is really veiled lectures on what I think people would be doing if they knew what was good for them. That's another reason I say I don't write “black” fiction. Sometimes I write about black experience, sometimes not. I have a short story that, if I imagined it in any cultural context at all, was set among the English peasantry of a previous century. It's about how difficult coming of age can be for young girls.

Rutledge: Who are your literary role models, past and present?

Hopkinson: How many years do you have? Chip Delany, as is probably obvious by now. I like that his work is transgressive, that it talks frankly about things like sex and queerness and fetish behavior, which are all still so taboo to name in so many black communities. I also like that he's such an amazing stylist that you can *smell* his worlds; he can construct layered, intricate sentences that please me so to have read. Pretty much the whole canon of feminist sf writers—Tiptree, Le Guin, Tepper . . . there are many, and many newer ones springing up. Octavia Butler, who is not realist, but firmly realistic. She refuses to take the pleasant way out in her writing. And she writes every day, which is still difficult for me. Candas Jane Dorsey and Ronald Wright, for first novels that rocked. Kelly Link, whose work is quirky and gorgeous and funny and often vaguely disturbing. Gene Wolfe and James Morrow, who can make me read about organized religion and love it. Elizabeth Lynn, whose characters represent a range of sexual identities and who was one of the first writers I read who explored alternative relationship models and intentional communities. Shani Mootoo, another rocking first novel. I like its masked, magical

Trinidad and the way it explores gender roles. Ray Bradbury, who writes with such breathless enthusiasm and from an obvious appreciation of beauty. Kim Stanley Robinson's *Pacific Edge*, for an appealing utopia with warts, and for writing that is exquisite in style. Every so often I pick it up and re-read a passage or two, for its word craft, world building, and characterization. Keri Hulme for *The Bone People*. Shakespeare. Charles Johnson, for his magic realist novel *Middle Passage*. This is a game I could play all day.

Rutledge: Ti-Jeanne embodies many of the concerns of contemporary society faced by Black women in the Americas (e.g., unwed motherhood, poverty, conflicts between self and tradition). Is this character, as Edana Franklin from *Kindred* seems to be Butler, very much like yourself?

Hopkinson: Have you asked Butler? I wonder if she feels as I do. This is becoming one of my least favorite questions, to be asked if my characters are thinly veiled autobiographies. No, I make them up. My life has been very different from Ti-Jeanne's. My family was often short of money, sometimes acutely so, but I never had the experience of living in extreme poverty. We were middle-class; it was a given that I'd finish school and go on to university somehow. Between my parents and me, we worked and paid the cost of my education. I have never lived in what is in effect a ghettoized war zone. I have never had children, never been pregnant, was never a medical professional. I hope that my portrayal of Ti-Jeanne rings true, but only some of her experience is anything like mine. I know what it's like to be a green girl, to feel somewhat aimless in life. I know what it's like to be overrun by events. I've also had boyfriends who were really bad for me. I know what it's like to be scared and unsure of myself.

As I do more talks and interviews, I'm getting very curious about why people always ask me if the characters are people I know. The one person who put the question differently wanted to

know if a particular short story was a recounting of a dream I'd had, which is another way of saying, "Did you experience this?" (And no, I didn't; I made it up.) Someday I'd like to turn the question back on the audience. It's as though people believe that fiction doesn't exist, that it's all real people's experiences with the serial numbers filed off, a kind of mask. But it's more like a quilt; there are bits and scraps of real people in there, but they are recombined to suit the story, and there's at least as much whole cloth there, in the backing and the stuffing and the binding. Maybe people have gotten distrustful of fiction. So many people still parrot that fiction is at best worthless, at worst evil, because it's *lies*. So perhaps if a fiction resonates with some people, they decide that it can't be deception—as if it ever were—that it must be truth? And truth means it must have really happened to someone the author knows?

Rutledge: What nonliterary influences are most prominent in your creative efforts?

Hopkinson: By *nonliterary*, you mean everything that isn't writing? Food. I love writing about it, describing it, particularly the foods with which I grew up. Caribbean history. I'm doing more and more research into folkways that operated in the previous century and the beginning of this one. Language, which I talk about more later. Folktales. I love the way they portray archetypes as stories that can resonate on many levels.

Rutledge: How long have you known you wanted to be a writer? Do you have expertise in any other field? Did you publish anything before your novel?

Hopkinson: I wanted to be a writer at a very early age. My father was a writer and so were many of his friends, and I loved reading. But I didn't believe I had any talent for creating fiction, and it was the only form of writing that drew me strongly to want to attempt it. I won an essay-writing competition at age ten or so (there's a pic-

ture on my web page of a young me in my school uniform, accepting the plaque). I wrote a few non-fiction articles for local papers. But it wasn't until 1992 that I took the plunge and started taking fiction-writing courses and sending my short stories out to magazines. As to expertise in other fields, I facilitate a mean arts grant jury, and I probably still have the skills, though not the wind, to teach a funk aerobics class. I learned to sew because very little ready-made clothing fits me well, and I type between 70 and 80 words a minute.

I've published short stories in journals and anthologies, and I've had short stories produced for radio broadcast. In the science fiction field, it's rare to publish a novel before you've published a number of individual short stories in magazines or anthologies. Once you've built up a portfolio of short-story publications and have a novel manuscript to shop around, it's easier (but by no means easy!) to get the attention of an agent or publisher.

Rutledge: Do you write any book reviews or do any kind of literary criticism?

Hopkinson: I have published a few non-fiction articles, mostly brief book reviews and one opinion piece, but nothing from an academic point of view. I write reviews mostly of speculative fiction, mostly for popular magazines. They are short and usually don't go much beyond a summary and a sentence or two of critique. I hope to be able to do more critical writing about the field at a later date, though the more I discover how difficult it is to write fiction, the less I'm willing to lambaste anyone's efforts. I do enjoy reading literary criticism when I can wade through the unfamiliar vocabulary. Sometimes it gives me a glimpse of some of the greater issues to do with writing, and that's inspirational and helpful.

Rutledge: What's your educational background, both formal and informal?

Hopkinson: Elementary school in the Caribbean. Took my "O" Level exams,

but not my "A" Level (Ordinary and Advanced Levels—British system). Four high schools in four different countries: Trinidad, Jamaica, Guyana, and Canada. Was good at biology, literature, and languages; indifferent at geography, history, civics, and art; horrible at math, physics, and chemistry. Now I have to study it all in order to write what I do, and it's much more fun this way. Studied Russian and French in university, graduated with a combined honors. I went to college for a diploma in Recreation Management. (In Canada, colleges are very specifically for vocational training; they are not degree-granting institutions. Those are all called universities.) Tried the sciences again at the university level. Was good at biology but horrible at math, without which I couldn't take physics or chemistry. Whew. I dropped out and abandoned plans to become a chiropractor. Took a few silversmithing courses, plan to take more. In 1995, I attended the Clarion Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers' Workshop, a graduate course through Michigan State University (Octavia Butler is a Clarion graduate, and Samuel Delany was one of the writers-in-residence the year I attended). I guess you don't want to know about the aerobics instructor training courses.

Informally, my father was a poet, actor, and playwright who taught English and Latin at the 6th Form level (senior year of high school). My mother is a library cataloguer. Books were everywhere, and I had pretty much free rein of them. My parents took me to see theater, dance, readings, visual arts exhibitions. And I worked for nine years in a large public library system, with access to everything it had to offer. I am a voracious reader. I also worked for six years as a grants officer for a local arts council. That was a great education. I got to see what projects other artists were undertaking and what issues were important to them, and to hear how they described their artistic vision and creative processes, and hear how other people assessed

their proposals. Then I got to see the finished work. It's made it much easier for me to conceptualize and communicate what I'm trying to accomplish—and to read rejection letters. I have a sense of what goes into the decision-making process, and I don't take "no" so personally.

Rutledge: Why did you move from the Caribbean to Canada?

Hopkinson: Daddy had chronic kidney failure, and there was no treatment available in Guyana, where we were living at the time. Canada had excellent treatment, and with that and his own determination, he was able to extend his three-year life expectancy to nineteen years. But we had always moved around. I was born in Jamaica. My family left there when I was eight months old for Trinidad; left there when I was, I think, five years old for the U.S. (Daddy had been accepted into the graduate theater program at Yale University and subsequently dropped out); went back to Jamaica, then to Guyana, then Trinidad, Jamaica, Guyana again, to Canada when I was sixteen. I've been here twenty-two years now.

Rutledge: How has the publication of *Brown Girl in the Ring* and its success as the winner of the Warner Aspect First Novel Contest changed your life?

Hopkinson: It's meant that, for now at least, I'm working full-time at my writing, not at a nine-to-five job. It's a precious thing (I was going to say "luxury," but I live month to month). I've had some long-time dreams fulfilled. I've seen my name in print, for one. I've learned that, yes, I can write something as huge as a novel. I met Chip (which first happened before I started writing fiction, when he came to Toronto to give a reading from *The Madman* and I got to interview him for a local paper). My mother now has some notion that at least some of my weirdness is in service of a pursuit of which she approves. My father never saw my fiction in print. He died in 1993.

Rutledge: Where do you see problems with your first novel in terms of structure, artistry, characterization, and things that go into making a novel successful?

Hopkinson: If I were to do it again, I'd do more in-depth characterization of some of the secondary characters, particularly Rudy, but also the Premier and her assistant. I think the structure works well. I'd probably be less melodramatic. People have correctly pointed out that the dystopian near-future setting is nothing new. That was deliberate on my part. It was my first novel and I was wrestling with a host of skills that were new to me and elements that would be plenty new to readers. I had my hands full. It was pretty astonishing just to get to the point of typing the final sentence. The rest has been a bonus.

Rutledge: What goals do you have as a novelist?

Hopkinson: To finish novel #2 by the publisher's March 1 deadline! Creatively, I'd like my work to get more layered, more subtle. I want to work on characterization. I want to learn how to handle more complex ideas.

My second novel is now at the final draft stage. I have ideas for two more and a very dim notion for another after that. As I accomplish those, I'll get ideas for others. I'll continue writing short stories. It's a form I really like, because every word has to count, and you can explore one idea nicely in a short story.

I want to bring a new voice to the field, and perhaps some new readers. The speculative-fiction community is alarmed by the fact that the readership is aging. We hear that younger readers aren't coming to the field in the same numbers. If that's so, part of it might be because the corporate film that bowdlerizes sf tropes has become so popular. *Star Wars* and the like don't have much to do with why many of us read the genre, but they're fun to watch and a lot of people would rather do that than try to figure out words on a page;

we're taught in school to hate reading. Part of the reduced readership may be because of the way speculative fiction is marketed. There is genre writing (sf, mystery, romance, etc.) and then there is "literature." Under the genre labels, there are thousands of books churned out every year that are fairly formulaic brain candy. I don't see too much wrong with that—sometimes comfort reading is just what you want, and I think it can serve to disseminate and diffuse issues that were previously radical. And to be realistic, publishers have to sell books to survive. But I think that genre labelling has led to people who are unfamiliar with the genre assuming that *sf* on a book spine automatically means a lightweight read. I'm flabbergasted when people tell me that *Animal Farm* and *A Handmaid's Tale* aren't speculative fiction, that they're "real literature." And really, much non-genre fiction that is published each year is also entertaining brain candy; that's not the sole province of genre fiction. But work with genre labels on it gives the snobs something to point at when they say, "I don't read *that* stuff; I only read 'literature.'" I think people forget that realism is as much a convention as any of the genre tropes. I recently read an article by a local author in which he chided a local science fiction writer for calling his characters "guys." He said they weren't guys, they were talking lizards. Well, a guy in a realist fiction isn't a "guy" either. It's a fabrication into which the author has crafted the illusion that you're perceiving a human. One doesn't deem a Picasso worthless because it doesn't look like a landscape. Why then the conceit that only realist fiction can be good fiction?

I think some of the way to solve the shrinking market may be to entice in whole new communities of readers. I'm hoping to be a writer who can do some of that. When my novel was launched, people who wanted to support me bought it and read it even if they normally didn't read anything they thought of as science fiction. Some

of them have told me they were pleasantly surprised, that they didn't realize science fiction could be like that. I hope that at the very least it got a new bunch of people into our local sf, black, and women's bookstores. If so, I'll be happy if any of those people return to those bookstores in search of other writers. When I give readings at African History Month events and literary events, I'm being introduced as a science fiction writer. I don't look like many people's conception of an sf writer, and since my work is coming from an experience that many have never thought of in terms of science fiction and fantasy, it's making people curious. People are taking copies of the book to friends in the Caribbean, because it has no distribution there yet. I'm getting favorable reactions back. Educators are beginning to include it in their courses, graduate students in their theses. Because the protagonist is a very young woman, the book is also reaching a youth audience. I gave a reading a year ago to an auditorium of high school kids, and their questions were illuminating: "You live in Toronto? *This* Toronto right here?" They were only familiar with contemporary urban expression from the U.S. Afterwards a few of the Caribbean kids came up to me to tell me how much they'd enjoyed seeing me on the stage and hearing their urban Canadian environment described in a Caribbean creole. And they liked hearing the folk-tale elements. It gave them a sense of ownership and pride. I think that's how the readership in a genre starts to expand.

Rutledge: What kinds of hobbies do you have? Are you, for example, a Trekker?

Hopkinson: Can watching tv be a hobby? I think of hobbies as more doing/making things than passive spectatorship. I watched *Star Trek* all through childhood, up until a few years ago. I started to lose interest somewhere in the middle of *DS9*, and *Voyager* never really grabbed me, which is fine, because my television

broke in 1996 and I've not replaced it. The one I had was a donation of someone's old clunker. I haven't been able to bring myself to fork out hundreds of dollars that could be feeding me on an object that sucks my energy and free time but gives very little satisfaction in return. I saw the last Trek movie—sort of a nostalgia thing—but will probably not see the one that's just been released, though I kind of liked Jonathan Frakes's work as a director in the last one. I'm a bit addicted to e-mail, but that's not a hobby either. I like to sew, but haven't had much time for it with the writing. I still love reading, and I buy a few new books every week when I can afford it. But reading's also more of a pastime than a hobby. I recently resurrected an ambition to be a dancer when a friend who's a choreographer created a solo dance-work for me. We just finished a four-day run, and he's talking of staging it in 1999. I like dancing for fun too, though I have to be in the right mood for the club atmosphere. I loved the silversmithing courses I took; I will eventually learn more silver- and iron-smithing. I've taken up city bicycle riding; it's good for generating high levels of adrenalin as you duck cars that are trying to mow you down. I have dreams of getting back to pumping iron, but I'm not good at sticking to the regime.

Rutledge: Do you have any other creative projects in the works?

Hopkinson: CBC Radio recently made a recording of me performing one of my short stories to an original musical composition by William Sperandei, a local jazz trumpeter. It was so much fun! I'd like to do more of that, perhaps release a spoken-word recording with music. I'll think about it more once I have this second novel to the publisher. And I'm working on a collection's worth of short stories. I have a notion of working with my partner, who's also an artist, to create a children's picture book.

Rutledge: Derek Walcott obviously means much to you as an author. Have you met him personally? What is it about his stories that led you to adopt one of his characters for your own?

Hopkinson: I didn't adopt any of his characters. I did refer to three of them by giving three of my characters feminized versions of their names. Daddy worked with Derek at the Trinidad Theater Workshop that Derek founded. Daddy was one of the actors, and eventually was part of a pretty spectacular disagreement with Derek and a subsequent splintering off of people from the TTW. I was a child at the time. Before the break between the two men, my mother would drop me at Derek's house in the mornings, and his then-wife Margaret would drive me and her daughter Anna to our schools (I think my parents had to be at work earlier than school opened). I saw Derek's plays rehearsed and performed. I don't remember if I ever saw *Ti-Jean and His Brothers*, but I've certainly read it. I did see *Dream on Monkey Mountain*. My father had a role in one production of it. I saw a production of *Joker of Seville*, with Albert Laveau in the lead.

The name *Ti-Jean* is the French equivalent of "Everyman." Early on in the writing of *Brown Girl in the Ring*, I realized it was a novel about three generations of women battling an evil in their lives, and I thought of the parallels with *Ti-Jean and His Brothers*, an early play of Derek's in which three brothers battle the devil. I wanted to acknowledge that connection to Derek's work, so I named the three women Ti-Jeanne, Mi-Jeanne, and Gros-Jeanne—the feminine equivalents of the brothers Ti-Jean, Mi-Jean, and Gros-Jean. I liked the idea of Ti-Jeanne as everywoman. I had to call Derek to ask his permission to quote from the play, and my heart was in my mouth, because I had childhood memories of him and my father shouting in fury at each other. But he was very gracious. I know too that, when Daddy died, Derek gave a eulogy at the University of the West Indies which was a very

respectful tribute to Daddy's contribution to Caribbean literature. I like the magic that operates in many of Derek's plays, the lushness and the exquisite wordcraft of them, and the fact that he uses creole and music.

Rutledge: You include two passages in your novel that are not in English, French, Spanish, Creole, English Pidgin, or Krio. What language is this, and what are the meanings of these passages?

Hopkinson: What's Krio? A type of creole? The woman who speaks the passages to which you refer is Romni Jenny. She's Rom (some would say gypsy, but I gather that can be a term of contempt). The phrases mean something like, "Oh God, what an awful thing to happen," and a curse: "May a cancer eat his throat!" I got them from the autobiography of a Rom man from Quebec. Last I heard, Toronto was one of the most culturally diverse cities in the world. I tried to reflect some of what that's like to experience. Did you think that I used the Rom words because I speak Rom? It was all part of the research I had to do to write the novel, like the research on heart transplant operations, and details of the Toronto landmarks which I describe.

Rutledge: The ability to speak a native tongue and English reflects Du Bois's double-consciousness. Are there other elements of your novel in which a character is split between European and non-European culture?

Hopkinson: Other elements than Romni Jenny, you mean? I guess the Russian couple that you meet in the beginning, Paula and Pavel, and the priest in the church in that scene. He's got at least a three-way split going, being a Euro francophone Catholic Québécois living in anglophone Toronto, where I'm told that long ago it wasn't unusual for businesses to post "Help Wanted" signs which read "Catholics Need Not Apply." But you don't see enough of the priest to know all that, it's in my head. A Canadian

would probably pick up on some of it from the brief description of him.

All the Caribbean characters inhabit hybridized worlds. In the Caribbean, class divisions are clearly marked in language; an attuned ear can hear the points of demarcation. Caribbean people who emigrate (or who operate within more than one class level) learn to code-switch, to jump back and forth between various language usages as needed. Mami Gros-Jeanne does it when she deals with the street kids. She switches to a more Canadian English. Children of immigrants do a peculiar-sounding (to my ears, though I do it myself nowadays) thing where their accent and word choices sound neither completely of the old country nor completely of the new. That's how Tony speaks, and it was a bitch to write. For people from diasporic cultures there's more than a doubled consciousness. It's occupying multiple overlapping identities simultaneously. Throw in identities formed around politics, gender, class, sexual preference, etc. and you have quite the stew. There is no solid ground beneath us; we shift constantly to stay in one place.

Because Toronto is so culturally diverse, I see that multiple consciousness reflected in the work of many local artists who are my peers, whatever their media. We are the people who have more than one place or identity or culture that's home, and we're struggling to find modes of expression that convey how we've had to become polyglot, not only in multiple lexicons but also in multiple identities. The classical forms of artistic expression give us a base from which to work, but from there we have to break the codified forms and create new voices for ourselves. When I can make a pun that resonates multilingually across any number of four languages and three creoles, who's going to understand it? When a character in one of my stories is bubbling (a Jamaican dance style) to a reggae song one minute and babbling about cockatrices the next, what is the reader to make of her? When I say I'm

"predominantly" black, does it convey any of the callaloo that is the Caribbean, that gives me a clan tartan, one Jewish great grandmother, and one Maroon, as well as Aboriginal, West African, and South Asian ancestry? Or do you think you hear someone who's trying to distance herself from her African origins?

For me, language is a particularly thorny matter. I've talked about code-switching between and among dialects and sociolects, and the increased complexity that happens when you throw in two or more languages. If I'm talking to another Jamaican, I'll probably use a fairly standard though accented English; that's base norm for a middle-class Jamaican. If I've been trying to tell my friend something that she's not been grasping and she finally gets it, I might switch into the vernacular to counter with, "Chuh man, after is that me a-tell you!" Using a creole that we share is an ironic way of saying, without having to speak the actual words, "So we've finally found a base of understanding." It's a pretty complex set of codes. A lot of Caribbean identity is bound up in language. We have used it as a tool of resistance and politicization (Rastafarian "dread talk" being a clear example). We have hybridized the different languages that were in operation in the Caribbean into creoles. Each Caribbean country has its own; a creole speaker from (for instance) Jamaica will not necessarily understand one from Barbados. And each creole has its sociolects that signal a speaker's class, level of education, sometimes even caste and race. On top of all that, we've gone through years of our educators trying to shame this textured, complex, rich "bad language" out of us and make us speak only "the Queen's English," whatever that means to anyone who isn't actually the Queen of England. The vernaculars were seen as debased; and in many places are still so seen. But when as a wordsmith I have the choice between saying "just before dawn" and "'fore-day morn-

ing," which do you think will seem more evocative to me?

Some artists in the Caribbean have deliberately reclaimed their vernaculars by creating work in them. The first time that Miss Lou (Jamaican poet Louise Bennett) performed a poem written in Jamaican creole, someone in the audience shouted out, "Is that you mother send you a-school for?" criticizing her vernacular in the vernacular. It's important to me to try to reflect the place that language has in Caribbean identity. In *Brown Girl in the Ring* I made the Caribbean characters mostly Trinidadian and some Jamaican, and I wrote their dialogue in the way they would speak it. Narrative I wrote in standard English. I've gotten a mixed reaction from readers. Some take to it pretty easily; some find it tough going for a few pages until they get the hang of the sentence construction; and some seem almost offended that I didn't write the dialogue in standard English. They see it as a naïve artistic choice. It may be, but to me it would be disjunctive and weird to make a working-class Jamaican man speak like a middle-class North American one. But I do understand why those readers are so disconcerted; it's something I'm struggling with too.

I think that quite a few things are going on here. One is that creoles are oral forms. There is no standard spelling and it's difficult to capture them on the page. I wouldn't expect even a Caribbean reader to find the reading smooth going at first. (Though if they are from the country whose speech I'm representing, they have a bit of an advantage, particularly if they read the dialogue out loud.) I do use conventional spellings where possible—you instead of *yuh*, for instance. I'm trying to represent the vocabulary and sentence structure, not the accent. Another is that there's still an uneasiness around vernacular speech, especially black vernacular speech. In this part of the world it can be seen as disrespectful to represent it. Memories of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and the Step'n

Fetchit films make people uncomfortable. Some readers feel that I'm creating caricatures of black people, that I'm representing us as uneducated and ignorant. People who read my use of creole this way are dismayed at what they read as internalized racism on my part, when in fact I'm representing a different but no less complex version of English. I'm getting better at conveying the creoles I use as the linguistic constructs they are, with their own rules for sentence structure and grammar. They aren't just accents or ignorance.

A third thing that's going on is that some people make the judgment that I've violated one of the conventions of "excellence," which is that "good" writing is with a few exceptions written in "clear" English. But it's not an inviolable literary convention in any artistic tradition; it's perfectly usual, for instance, for an excellent Caribbean artist to use creoles to whatever effect he/she sees fit. *Excellence* means different things in different contexts. I'm asking readers to do something difficult, to take on something unfamiliar, mastery of which lies at the heart of their ability to comprehend the dialogue. I have to expect that some may bristle. I'm going to keep working at it, trying to devise other methods for making it easier to read. Chip told me that a little dialect goes a long way; using a word or two suggests the vernacular without having to represent huge chunks of it. I think he's correct. The first draft of my second novel *Midnight Robber* was written completely in a hybrid Trinidadian/Jamaican creole of my own invention, but I've since changed the language construction so that it's more like the first novel (standard English narrative but creole in the dialogue). But how

then do I represent the mind set of a people that is so tied up with the words they use *and how they use them*, if I don't represent those words themselves? I don't yet have a satisfying strategy. Amos Tutuola's magic realist stories in Yoruba English were well-received, so maybe there's a way. When I read the Trinidadian creole of the opening passages of Dionne Brand's novel *In Another Place, Not Here*, I know I'm in the presence of a master poet. I have found that, if people who are unfamiliar with the dialect can hear me read a section of my work, reading it for themselves comes easier to them. Warner tells me that they plan to post a sound bite of me reading from *Midnight Robber* on their web site. I think that will help.

Another writer once said to me that since the ability to code-switch is practically a given in post-colonial diasporic cultures, it makes sense that writers from those cultures will use it in their writing. I agree with her. Creoles carry their own nuances and textures of meaning. They are a tool for communication that we have. Writing without them can feel like cooking a meal without the spices. It's still edible, even nutritious, but the cook knows how much more interesting it could be with a little piece of thyme and some garlic. This may sound as though I'm putting down unadorned English, but I don't believe there is any such thing, except perhaps in memos, and rarely even there. Every nook of every region of the English-speaking world tailors English to suit itself. That's one of the strengths of the language—its flexibility. How do I communicate to a diverse bunch of readers if I'm using creoles? I'm still ironing that out, still asking for feedback.

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