

Configuring the Caribbean through sf

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Caribbean literary engagement with questions of being emphasize a counter hegemonic practice of denying and henceforth reimagining of historical conceptions of the Caribbean place and its people. One of the main ways Caribbean writers assert this counter hegemony is through an attention to language practices, both indigenous and Creole. I propose Caribbean sf (Csf) as an extension of Jane Bryce's argument of 'outsider' fiction.¹ Bryce's claim that 'outsider' fiction is best encapsulated by Speculative Fiction excludes other kinds of 'outsider' fiction which also consider "what might happen if submerged, sublimated or suppressed stories, voices of philosophies became so dominant as to create a radically different world" (17). As a form of outsider fiction, Csf reimagines the colonial experience by bringing together all kinds of fiction that apply sf tropes such as advanced technology, time travel, inter-planetary settings, genetically modified being, alien(ated) subjects to envision certain futured states of the Caribbean space and its people. Csf resists the exceptionalism ascribed to the genre of speculative fiction, which Bryce upholds as "the genre, par excellence, by which popular fiction reimagines the present and pushes the boundaries of a possible future through the means of Caribbean myth and magic" (17). Focusing on Csf allows for a deeper reimagining of Caribbean being that is manifested across a spectrum of representations—not limited to myth and magic. Nalo Hopkinson, a Jamaican-Canadian speculative fiction writer acknowledges the dearth of 'other(ed)' experiences which have recently surfaced in Csf. Hopkinson states, "the discourse [of science fiction] is slowly coming from other experiences: the working class, women, writers of color, queer writers, disabled writers" (591).

Csf is the focus for how Caribbean writers use sf tropes—that is, tropes related to fantasy, folklore, speculative fiction, and science fiction—to develop nuanced postcolonial versions of Caribbean identity as well as challenge the traditionalist and mainstream version of science fiction that originated in pulp magazines from as early as the 1920s.² The designation of Csf in this follows the imperialist underpinnings of mainstream SF discussed by Eric D. Smith.³ Smith's argument that postcolonial sf challenges imperial hegemony (6) also offers a way to address the dearth of attention paid to science fiction literature and theory by women and queer writers of the Caribbean.⁴ However, unlike New Wave SF which still grappled with issues of exclusivity owing largely to American and British literary influences, postcolonial sf developed into a spectrum of Global South SF literatures.⁵ One such form of Global South SF is Csf. In what follows I first map the foundations and development of Csf before analyzing works of Csf that take up matters related to affirming Caribbean linguistic diversity.

Hopkinson's *Midnight Robber* combines the experience of crossing from a high-tech planet, Toussaint, to a primitive one, New Half-Way Tree, with an intricate web of Trinidadian and

Jamaican Creole English. The protagonist, Tan-Tan, is forced by her father, Antonio, into a space-pod bound for New Half-Way Tree, the mirror planet of their home, Toussaint. Tan-Tan's journey resembles a spatial remapping of her identity. The agency she finds on New Half-Way Tree rehumanizes her by giving the space to be free of her father's ownership over her movement and her body. Hopkinson portrays a process of reconfiguring Caribbean identity through the space-pod which takes Tan-Tan to the technologically inferior, but no less culturally and linguistically significant, planet of New Half-Way Tree. Immediately, readers are immersed in the storytelling tradition as the narrator takes on the guise of a "master weaver" who proudly says, "I spin the threads. I twist warp 'cross weft. I move my shuttle in and out, and smooth smooth" (21). Through the narrator, Hopkinson directs attention to the technological machine of Creole English. This new language, nannyson, mixes new sounds with creole words to create a hybrid blend of communication. Nannyson, we are told, was developed by a calypsonian. Nanny's programming reflects its creator—an agent of socio-political commentary (153). The distinctly Caribbean voices of the novel extend the depth of science fiction past its superficial treatment of linguistic diversity as criticized in the late twentieth century by Walter E. Meyers. According to Meyers, the attention to historical linguistics in science fiction is as superficial as its pulp fixation on intergalactic difference (36-37). Hopkinson's science fiction presents a marked departure from this generalization. *Midnight Robber* places the accuracy of Creole English at the center of its introspection of the differences between the technologically superior Toussaint and its inferior counterpart, New Half-Way Tree. Where language has always been critical to creating a unique Caribbean identity—epitomized by Kamau Brathwaite's quest for nation language⁶—Hopkinson creates two worlds with disparities in technological access yet sharing the same Creole identity.

Similar to the emphasis placed on amplifying Caribbean identity through the technology of language, *Midnight Robber* draws attention to an inter-planetary Caribbean state of being. In doing so, the novel moves away from globality and toward planetarity. As discussed by Gayatri Spivak, thinking in terms of the planet suggests that "both the dominant and the subordinate must jointly rethink themselves as intended or interpellated by planetary alterity" (347). Hopkinson portrays the tenuous relationship between the two planets, Toussaint, a technologically superior world, and New Half-Way Tree, Toussaint's primitive, yet culturally vibrant counterpart. In the novel, the protagonist Tan-Tan is forced by her father to travel with him via a space shuttle from Toussaint to New Half-Way Tree. The narrator describes the process as occurring in different waves and crossing many veils: "The first wave hit them. For Tan-Tan it was as though her belly was turning inside out . . . A next veil swept through them, slow like molasses" (73). The novel is grounded in a uniquely Caribbean sensibility through the comparison between space travel and molasses, the latter being a by-product of the sugar-making process which was integral to the sustenance of Caribbean economies up to the twentieth century. Hopkinson overlays the dimensional shift to another planet with an historical account of the ways in which enslavement warped the African body. The transportation from the planet of Toussaint, named after the Haitian general François-Dominique Toussaint Louverture who led slave revolts as part of the Haitian Revolution, reflects a reversion from notions of independence and anti-Black racism. The transportation pod itself is

likened to slave ships that crammed as many West Africans as possible to offset the certain death during the treacherous journey across the Atlantic. As a science-fictional reimagining of forced exile, *Midnight Robber* doesn't only rethink history on a planetary scale, but it also reinvents the connections between technology, language, and embodiment. Hopkinson's utilization of Creole English is rooted in an understanding of language as a technological machine. Nannysong, a sophisticated language enabled through advancements in technology, is born out of calypso and overlaid with artificial intelligence. In the novel, Antonio learns from his cousin, Maka, that nannysong was created by Granny Nanny.⁷ Before she dies, Maka explains that Granny Nanny uploaded her consciousness to an open-access AI platform which later came to be called nannysong. The submerged memory of Granny Nanny is reignited and established as a foundation of Toussaint's cultural identity. The historical significance of Granny Nanny also humanizes the people of Toussaint, as it is through Granny Nanny that the people were able to create the future they wanted for themselves using technology rooted in their historical icon. Hopkinson claims language, specifically Caribbean languages such as Trinidadian Creole, Jamaican Patois, and Papiamentu, as a survival tool.

Granny Nanny's history, which stands in for the society's collective memory, converted into nannysong, survived because her consciousness was converted into four-dimensional memory space. The transhuman overtones of technologizing consciousness establishes an intergenerational relay anti-colonial history which sees knowledge of Granny Nanny passed down to Tan-Tan through the utilization of digital space. This digital space incorporates cloud technology wherein nannysong becomes easily accessible and of unlimited capacity. Maka's description of the birth and growth of nannysong through a sound filter engineered by a calypsonian mirrors the forms of techno-driven change discussed by Curwen Best. According to Best, innovations in art forms such as soca and calypso "demonstrate how Caribbean music was being reconfigured by technology, indeed, how Caribbean culture is presently being co-constructed by technology" (32). *Midnight Robber* overlaps cultural memory and Caribbean music with techno-driven change. Where calypso was created out of a challenge to systems of power and some technologies evolved out of a need to communicate, nannysong represents a mode of resistance to Standard English, a survival of cultural memory, and an assertion of Creole identities.

Hopkinson suggests that Creole survives and is sustained through the memoryspace of nannysong. Nannysong is Hopkinson's version of a futured language that has undergone technoscientific syncretism of Creole identities. The "four-dimensional programming code" (*Midnight Robber* 153) of nannysong propels Creole into a higher, more complex space-time dimension. In this fourth dimension of memoryspace, Caribbean existence combines multiple and alternate perspectives of historical, cultural, and linguistic change.⁸ The technology of nannysong, which naturally evolved from calypso and grows through artificially intelligent machine-learning, resembles an elaboration of Kamau Brathwaite's Sycorax style. Sycorax, Caliban's mother in *The Tempest*, who is unseen yet imbued with malevolent power, is native to the island on which Prospero becomes stranded. By naming his computer Sycorax (*ConVERSations* 176),

Brathwaite claims the marginal figure as a muse for his own reinvention of colonial language. The videolectic style, enabled by Sycorax, takes on added proportions, and dimensions, in *Midnight Robber*. Brathwaite's videolectic style of decolonizing language and identity sees him defy typographic conventions in the search for new forms of expression. In *ConVERSations*, Brathwaite's description of Sycorax's ability to reconceptualize language foretells the ability of nannysong in *Midnight Robber* to be an evolutionary form of Creole. Beginning with orality in the same way that Hopkinson would later do through calypso, Brathwaite explains that "the/thing about 'oral po-/etry'—the Oral Trad/ition [OT] today—in a world of electronic/(s)—is that it's allowing us at last to mix the two 'traditions' into sound/visual; to convert/script into sound via/the spirit" (217). Nannysong in addition to being language transposed in a different style—that is, tonal—substantiates the oral tradition through its extrasensory transmission among the people of Toussaint.

Nannysong contains the essential elements of nation language in that it is adapted to Toussaint's environment and the cultural imperative of historical preservation. What Brathwaite refers to as the "software" of nation language, that is the rhythm and syllables of Caribbean poetry (9), takes the form of an actual software program in *Midnight Robber*. The foundation of nannysong is its "one hundred and twenty-seven tones" sung in "basic phrases" for human intelligibility (*Midnight Robber* 154). The "impossibly intricate nannysong" speech pattern (44) resembles Glissant's claim of Caribbean speech which is "first and foremost sound" (*Caribbean Discourse* 123). The sonic structure of Caribbean speech enables its own process of reclamation. Glissant goes on to say that "This is how the dispossessed man organized his speech by weaving it into the apparently meaningless texture of extreme noise" (124). Where nannysong represents a re-possession of Caribbean identity, Hopkinson portrays a reversion of dispossession when Antonio and Tan-Tan leave the technologically sophisticated planet of Toussaint for New Half-Way Tree. Although New-Half-Way Tree is not technologically sophisticated, it is no less dynamic than Toussaint. It is also no less human than Toussaint. In fact, Tan-Tan finds that the douens might be more human than the actual humans of her technology-driven home planet.

The "dimension veil" separating Toussaint from New Half-Way Tree reveals non-human beings with human sensibilities. Existing alongside the strange flora and fauna of New Half-Way Tree are the douens—creatures with heads resembling a bird, arms with fingers, leathery chests, no genitalia, legs with knees bent backward, and feet like a goat. One of the douens, Chichibud, functions as the repository of New Half-Way Tree's history. As he guides the aliens, Tan-Tan and Antonio, from their space-pod to his home on New Half-Way Tree he interweaves the history of New Half-Way Tree with veiled criticism of the people of Toussaint. When Antonio tells Tan-Tan, "We don't know nothing about this beast" (*Midnight Robber* 270), Chichibud replies: "Beast that could talk and know it own mind. Oonuh tallpeople quick to name what is people and what is beast" (270). The exchange between Antonio and Chichibud reflects the projection of animality by Western humanist thought.⁹ To some extent, the bestialization of Chichibud points to a process of queering the Caribbean human. Hopkinson shatters conceptions of who and what is

considered non/human by reconfiguring the bases of humanity. Chichibud's compassion for his daughter humanizes him and counters Antonio's reckless reproduction of colonial stereotypes which, to recall Césaire, applies thingification to beings that do not look 'typically human.' As with nannysong, a high-tech consolidation of nation-language, the douen's ability to speak Anglomatwa, Francomatwa, Hispanomatwa, and Papiamentu call to mind Brathwaite's discussion of nation language as representing the vast, diverse Caribbean space.

Hopkinson uses douen folklore in the novel to challenge notions of Caribbean culture and its people as backward, insignificant, or non-human. The folkloric aspects which are submerged, to use Brathwaite's term, on the other(ed) planet of New Half-Way tree, are portrayed as essential to Tan-Tan's cultural consciousness. Despite not looking typically human, the douens are nonetheless human in their linguistic identity, sentience, and affect. Through the focus on the douens, alternate-beings, who are more human than their non-human physical features would suggest, Hopkinson replicates Glissant's call for a "defiance of a universalizing and reductive humanism" (Glissant 133). The ethnopoetics of *Midnight Robber* which to Glissant's point "belongs to the future" (Glissant 134) takes place on the parallel planet of New Half-Way Tree. Hopkinson's vision of Caribbean futurity provides a response to Glissant's argument that "The tool is the other's property; technology remains alien" (132). *Midnight Robber* uses the tools of sf to exalt nation language and folk culture. In an interview with Alondra Nelson, Hopkinson explains that the term spec-fic—which this paper incorporates into the overarching term Csf—is "a set of literatures that examine the effects on humans and human societies of the fact that we are toolmakers . . . Those tools may be tangible (such as machines) or intangible (such as laws, mores, belief systems)" (98). Both tangible and intangible tools are used in *Midnight Robber* to conceptualize Caribbean resistance and reclamation of place and personhood in futuristic, and technologically regressed planets. Like both types of tools Hopkinson uses, both planets are necessary to reimagining the complexity of Caribbean ontology.

The relatively new field of Csf reckons with the future of Caribbean identity and being that is very much rooted in its history. The emphasis on native language as a counterhegemonic tool takes the form of different Caribbean languages coalescing in *Midnight Robber*. As a writer of Csf, Hopkinson develops our understanding of native and folk ontologies through a focus on the survival of native Caribbean languages. This survival is enabled through a technological interface called nannysong as much as a cultural appreciation of indigenous folklore.

Notes

1. I use the lowercase 'sf' as opposed to the mainstream, capitalized form 'SF' which has historically been used to refer to science fiction. Because science fiction is only one component of Csf, others being fantasy, folklore, and speculative fiction, the lowercase 'sf' is more appropriate.

2. The pulp era of science fiction began under the label 'scientifiction' with Hugo Gernsback's *Amazing Stories* magazine series. These stories of science fiction more often than not tended to feature white, male, and heterosexual protagonists who fought physically and ontologically 'alien' species. Although magazines were dominated by male writers, Lisa Yaszek argues that women authors were very much present though disguised behind male pen names (10). However, when paperbacks began to rival magazines during the 1960s, Eric Leif Davin revealed that fewer women "made the transition to the new medium of novels" (306). The gradual waning of women's voices in science fiction owed to the lack of transition to the novel form is one point of restitution that is brought to the fore by Csf.
3. See the introduction to *Globalization, Utopia, and Postcolonial Science Fiction* for Smith's characterization of postcolonial science fiction as born out of a challenge to imperial hegemony.
4. Melzer argues that SF "has a tradition of conceptualizing themes of colonialism and social orders in conservative, and at times reactionary, ways. Beginning with the New Wave in the 1960s, Western science fiction texts and criticism have developed from a mainly White, male, heterosexual genre into a more diverse body of texts with the potential to radically reconceptualize power relations" (5).
5. The classification of Csf as part of a broader Global SF field is informed by O'Connell's argument that Global SF's "decentering of the West as the singular site and progenitor of futurity . . . takes places alongside a postcolonial critique that interrogates SF's relationship to technoscience" (682), amongst other things.
7. See Brathwaite for his theory of nation language which is "the kind of English spoken by the people who were brought to the Caribbean, not the official English now, but the language of slaves and labourers" (*History of the Voice* 5).
7. Granny Nanny, also called Queen of the Maroons, is credited as one of the pivotal leaders of the Maroons—a group of self-liberated West Africans who used guerilla tactics to resist Spanish and British control in early eighteenth-century Jamaica.
8. See Linda Dalrymple Henderson's "Science Fiction, Art, and the Fourth Dimension," pp. 69-84, for a discussion of the ways in which science fiction writers use references to a fourth dimension to give a deeper "space sense" of reality.
9. See Zakiyyah Iman Jackson for a discussion of African diasporic writers who "not only critique animalization but also exceed critique by overturning received ontology and epistemic regimes of species that seek to define blackness through the prism of abject animality" (34).

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