

## ABSTRACT

Title of Document: "NOTHING ABOUT THE RAPE:"  
GENERATIVE SILENCING IN NALO  
HOPKINSON'S *MIDNIGHT ROBBER*

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This project, which focuses on Nalo Hopkinson's *Midnight Robber*, explores the relationship between storytelling, witnessing, and lived experience. By interrogating the intersection of black feminism, speculative fiction, and slave narratives in the backdrop of the Haitian Revolution, Hopkinson's work shows that some silencing can be constructive, even essential, for survival.

“NOTHING ABOUT THE RAPE:” GENERATIVE SILENCING IN NALO  
HOPKINSON’S *MIDNIGHT ROBBER*

By

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## Introduction

At the 2009 Conference of the Fantastic in the Arts, Nalo Hopkinson took the podium. She began her talk, supposedly related to that year's theme, "Race in the Literature of the Fantastic," only to be interrupted by an internal possession; she was mounted by a creature from Planet Midnight (Hopkinson, *Report From Planet Midnight* 27). The creature spoke from Hopkinson's experience but not with her voice. The creature proceeded to lay into the dominantly white heterosexual cisgendered male audience, who represent the bulk of science fiction authors, publishers, and critics. The creature spoke rhythmically, cataloging common phrases Hopkinson has had to endure incessantly in her career as one of the foremost black women in science fiction. Many of the phrases read as classic, almost archetypal, color-blind racist phrases (Bonilla-Silva 211).

The creature, reporting from Planet Midnight, then translated the phrases back to the audience. Here's an example:

You say: "I'm not racist."

Primary Translation: "I can wade through feces without getting any of it on me."

Secondary Translation: "My shit don't stink." (Hopkinson, *Report From Planet Midnight* 36)

The statements, variations on the passage above, are not particularly controversial. The criticism that science fiction is dominated by white men is the starting place for most discussions of black science fiction writers or works of science fiction. This

angst is so ubiquitous that the essay “Race and Ethnicity in Science Fiction” in the *Cambridge Companion to Science Fiction*, easily one of the most accessible essays on the subject, opens with the sentence “Science fiction and criticism of the genre have so far paid very little attention to issues relating to race and ethnicity” (Leonard 253). The author, Elisabeth Anne Leonard, goes on to say “by far the majority of sf deals with racial tension by ignoring it” (Leonard 254). What separates Hopkinson’s/the creature’s statements and translations is the style of delivery. They are spoken *to* those who choose to ignore. There is no academic remove in those statements; they are accusations. Hopkinson/the creature does not hide behind a third-person veneer of impartiality. She talks in the second person about what “you say,” and in the first person as “translation” or “what I hear.”

This moment at the conference is emblematic of her career as a whole. Hopkinson works to uncover, create, and disseminate stories that have been willfully ignored, sometimes into nonexistence. In *Midnight Robber* she shows the process of creating, editing, and disseminating an ignored story, as seen in Tan-Tan’s appropriation, editing, and dissemination of the Robber Queen personality. In exploring Tan-Tan’s process of deleting certain events of her past from her Robber Queen personality, one can begin to posit alternative explanations for silencing in other texts. By exploring silences in the context of imaginary reading communities, one can break out of the typical notion that silences, especially in mediated historical texts (e.g., many slave narratives), are only as a result of the strong silencing the weak. Tan-Tan’s journey shows acts of silencing that come from within. These acts of silencing create alternative stories that are built to aid those who encounter them.

Being a black woman within a science fiction text is hard enough, let alone being the author of one. As Hopkinson says, science fiction is a “genre which speaks so much about the experience of being alienated, but contains so little written by alienated people themselves” (Leonard 253). This reality is all the more true in filmic science fiction, a genre in which there are no mainstream directors, or producers, who are black women. The reactions to two recent blockbusters, last November’s adaptation of Suzanne Collins’s *The Hunger Games* and May 2013’s loose adaption of Max Brooks’s *World War Z* show resistance to black women in leadership or savior role, albeit in different ways. In the case of *The Hunger Games*, the resistance to black heroines is most dramatic in social media reactions to the character of Rue. Even though the novel describes her as having “dark brown skin and eyes,” many reactions showcase a specific resistance to the casting of a black actor in that role (Collins 45). There was little to no outrage concerning the character’s darkness in the novel, perhaps because “other than that she’s very like Prim [Katness’s sister] in demeanor” (Collins 45). She does not “act black” in the novel because there is no way a character who “acts black” could be similar to the heroine’s white little sister in demeanor. She is not even that dark in the film. If the actress chosen to play Rue had been visibly and/or stereotypically Sicilian, Hispanic, Middle Eastern, or even a quite tan Anglo person, would the reactions to that character’s skin tone and ethnicity been laced with such venom? If the producers had not taken Rue’s darkness “all the way to black,” would sentiments such as “why does rue have to be black not gonna lie kinda ruined the movie,” “I was pumped about the Hunger Games. Until I learned that a black girl was playing Rue,” and “HOW IN THE WORLD ARE THEY GONNA

MAKE RUE A FREAKIN BLACK BITCH IN THE MOVIE?!?!?!?! Lolol not to be racist<sup>1</sup> buuuuut.... I'm angry now ;o" (Jordan Wright, John Knox IV, Maggie McDonnell, and EJ Santiago, qtd. in Stewart) been tweeted about with such reckless abandon? There is no way of knowing for sure because there is only that filmic text and the conversation surrounding it.

Speculation can be fruitful in its capacity to allow a reader, critic, listener, and/or speaker, lettered or otherwise, to extrapolate from current texts and conversations, introducing new variables to the cultural equation in order to see what happens. This is all to say that, while there surely would have been hate speech launched against the actress or producers if she had been Middle Eastern or Hispanic, it no doubt would have been in a different register. There are certain preconceived notions, echoing Patricia Hill Collins's notion of controlling images, which pigeonhole and restrict the movement of styles of black womanhood and provide "justification for race, gender, and class oppression" (Collins 77). These restrictions are especially common in mainstream commercial science fiction. Take the black woman (really a girl) out of *The Hunger Games* and replace her with a different kind of brown person and the conversation changes. Hate flies in a different direction. If she had been cast as Hispanic, perhaps the conversation would have veered towards misguided let's-build-a-big-wall approaches to immigration. If she had been cast as Middle Eastern, most likely the conversation might have consisted, in part, of anti-Islamic "what is a terrorist doing in a children's movie?" sentiments. At the end of the

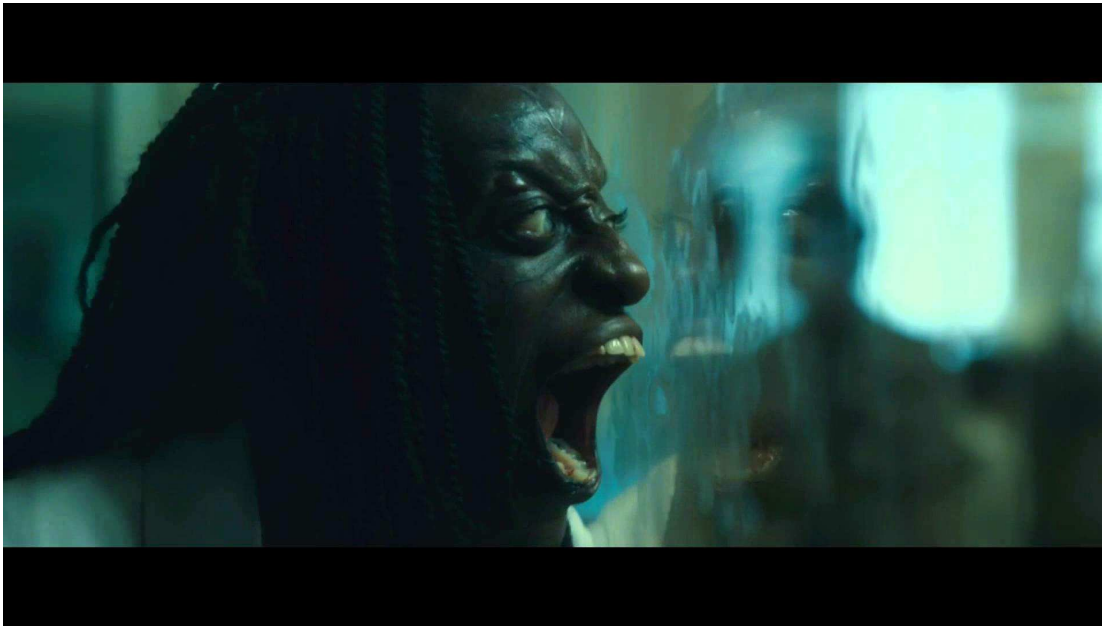
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<sup>1</sup> "Color-blind" words that would make Eduardo Bonilla-Silva's eyes roll back in his head.



day, however, it doesn't really matter. Katness and Peta are the white champions of District 11. Rue dies, regardless, if she is black, Middle Eastern, and/or Hispanic.

Whereas the resistance to blackness in *The Hunger Games* is more in the dialogue surrounding the film, the creators of *World War Z* do not even give the chance for the audience to react negatively to a black heroine because she simply is not present. Rue plays a critical role in Katness' survival and triumph, even if she does not have the privilege of being the savior herself. *World War Z* offers practically nothing in the way of black protagonists. The black woman who gets anything resembling a pivotal role (i.e., who is not an extra) plays the role of one of the biggest, baddest zombies, who looks like this:



**WHO** Zombie from *World War Z*

The third act of *World War Z* signals a genre shift<sup>2</sup> from a wide-scope shoot-'em-up to an attempt at claustrophobic horror à la Ridley Scott's *Alien*. For the majority of the film's run-time, the zombies are visually ambiguous and androgynous. They flow like water, as is especially apparent in the scene in Israel, containing possibly the most iconic image of the film in which endless zombies mindlessly collaborate to scale a protective wall. It was definitely the one advertisers emphasized the most in promotional materials (Newitz):



**Popular promotional image of zombies as they usually appear in *World War Z***

However, this zombie in particular is the one that gives Pitt's character pause.

Thousands of deracinated bodies flow into one, Madwoman-vooodoo-priestess

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<sup>2</sup> The third act felt tacked on and out of place, mainly because it actually was tacked on at the last minute. The production drama behind the film is now almost as big of a story as the film itself (Holson). It is telling how, when pressed for time, the film's creators made the film conclude with the dreadlocked zombie. When in a rush (or even lazy), resort to controlling images the audience can easily digest. There was simply no time to challenge these images. How many other perpetuations of stereotypes and controlling images occur due to unpublicized haste and laziness?

zombie. The image does not fit neatly into Collins's mammy/matriarch/welfare mother/black lady/jezebel paradigm for controlling images, perhaps because the image is meant to play on xenophobic fears (Collins 79-93). She is a synecdoche for every iteration of the zombies' lost humanity. Her dreadlocks hang like Medusa's snakes, echoing the racial tension in the *Predator* character, as explored by Zelma Catalan. Catalan claims the characters' dreadlocks signal that they are "humanoids from a technologically advanced but culturally primitive civilization" (Catalan 50). *World War Z* exploits blackness and cultural markers to communicate a character's primitivism and savagery in a similar way. Her blackness carries, contains, and communicates the violence of millions. Embodied rituals or even personal style preferences are rendered dangerous, foreign, and abstractly weaponized. She is not a black woman who has put relaxer in her hair to "tame" it. It is a signal of her wildness, unpredictability, and danger towards Brad Pitt's character, Gerry Lane, capable of slaughtering so many zombies while standing face-to-face with them. She is the zombie who gives him chills—even though she's behind bulletproof glass.

Regal  
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**Sarah Amankwah**

I watched this movie at the  
14 Theatre in Hyattsville, MD during  
film's opening weekend. The theatre  
ninety percent packed; the crowd was  
predominantly black. For most of the  
showing, the audience was a non-factor  
movie onscreen. People jumped at the  
scares and that was about it. When this

woman came on screen, however,  
nearly the entire audience doubled over with laughter. The image, which was meant  
to be the most unsettling of the film, rang simply absurd and unreal, vulgar, and  
minstrel-esque. How much does Sarah Amankwah's makeup differ from shoe polish?  
The audience was reacting to this creature as a *woman*, not as a zombie, something  
they did not do for any other member of the undead. The attempt to dehumanize this  
character backfired, at least in this theatre at this showing.

Filmic science fiction is one of the more mainstream varieties of speculative  
fiction, especially with surging corporate interest in cultivating transmedial  
franchises.<sup>3</sup> To create a transmedial franchise is to build a universe. What is  
speculative fiction, with its alternate realities, distinctive technologies, and other  
worlds but universe building? Speculative fiction and franchise development appear  
to go hand-in-hand. Unfortunately, there does not seem to be much, if any, space for

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<sup>3</sup> Disney's recent accumulation of both the Marvel and Star Wars universes are two of the finest examples of corporate universe building. The long cycles of these franchises and seemingly infinite potential for rebranding/booting look to be a safe investment. Indeed, multiple high-budget projects are planned through at least the end of the decade.

black women. Nalo Hopkinson is at the forefront of amplifying black women's voices in science fiction, from authors to publishers to characters. She is in the business of carrying on Alice Walker's legacy of telling stories she should have been able to hear. There are more roles for black woman in new universes than the beast at the end, the consolidation of the terrors that preceded her.

Regardless of the medium, there is little room in science fiction in which black women can make a name for themselves. It is wonderful that *Star Trek* featured the first interracial kiss, but 50 years later and it's still Uhura fighting a green woman over Captain Kirk (*Star Trek*). Where is Uhura's standalone adventure? This is the problem space from which Hopkinson writes, one in which black women, both as characters in and creators of texts, face extreme difficulty in disseminating new stories and representations. This is why, in *Midnight Robber*, Tan-Tan resorts to story as her ultimate coping mechanism and weapon in the face of extreme abuse and terror. It is why Hopkinson's novum in the novel is pure alternative.

### **Alternative Haitis**

Hopkinson's project in *Midnight Robber*, exploring what stories can happen (and what those stories can *do*) in the wake of exposed alternatives, dovetails in task and spirit with recent scholarship on the Haitian Revolution. Inspired by C.L.R. James, scholars look to alternative methods of inquiry and research in order to uncover, reconstruct, and refine alternative stories from that time. A few years after the publication of the Second Edition, James makes explicit the call to reject

conventional techniques and questions official accounts. Invoking Hegel, James says, “Unless, in the words of Hegel, you are doing speculative thought, thinking about what is going to happen as a result of what you see around you, then you are not doing anything” (James, “Lectures” 72). Here James talks about speculation as an act of prediction based on present observations. He also talks about it as an active process—one must *do* speculation. Tan-Tan does this speculation in her editing the Robber Queen story based on the needs of her imagined audiences.

There are a number of scholars who have taken up James’s call for speculation. They demand alternative stories about the Haitian Revolution. James showcases a rich and productive skepticism of official accounts, using them as tools to uncover and create truth rather than accepting them *carte blanche* as recordings of truth.<sup>4</sup> This skeptical approach to archival work anticipates Lisa Lowe’s idea of the archive as a source of knowledge production (Lowe 196). James considers what other stories could come to the fore if we one had access to alternative or missing narratives. For example, when discussing the resignation of Mulatto leader Rigaud’s resignation, James speculates the following about the documents:

Roume refused to accept Rigaud’s resignation and thenceforth civil war was inevitable. With the packet that contained Roume’s appointment were two other

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<sup>4</sup> James speaks about a moment from *The Black Jacobins* when he used an official description of slave gangs by Swiss traveler Girod-Chatrand: “It’s a very famous description, and I used it. *Today I would not do that*. I would write descriptions in which the black slaves themselves, or people very close to them, describe what they were doing and how they felt about the work that they were forced to carry on. I don’t blame myself for this in 1938; it is a famous inscription. It is accurate enough, but I wouldn’t do that today. I don’t want today to be writing and say that’s what *they* said about how *we* were being treated. Not any longer, no. I would want to say what we had to say about how we were being treated, and I know that that information exists in all the material. But it was easy enough in those days to go ahead” (James, “Lectures” 99). He regrets, over thirty years after the original publication, his lapse in speculation.

packets. What did they contain? We do not know. But it may well have been instructions to keep the two parties apart at all costs. Roume did not war, but he acted as if his business was to prevent a close understanding. (James, *The Black Jacobins* 225).

James insists on an alternative historical account that does not simply say, “I don’t know what was in those documents so I will not speak about them.” Instead, he speculates about their contents. He insists on alternative stories in history in the same manner as Hopkinson does in science fiction. Lack of access does not mandate an end to inquiry. Even in the absence of official documents, there is still work to be done. Many scholars, such as Laurent Dubois, Susan Buck-Morss, and Kate Ramsey currently carry on James’s mission, deploying innovative techniques to speculate alternative stories of the Haitian Revolution into existence.

A major work of Haitian Revolution historiography is David Scott’s *Conscripts of Modernity*. In this monograph, Scott interrogates James’s seminal text, looking for the problem space in which James created it. The problem space is a history of the circumstances surrounding the writing and publishing of a work of historiography. One can identify problem spaces through “an adequate interrogation of the present (postcolonial or otherwise) [that] depends upon identifying the difference between the questions that animated former presents and those that animate our own” (D. Scott 3). Scott contends that James was engaging something akin to myth-making, especially in the second, 1963 edition in which James is a bit more didactic in linking the histories of Toussaint L’Ouverture to the time of

publication.<sup>5</sup> Not myth-making in the sense of fabrication or distortion of past events, but in “the self-consciousness with which James connects the story of Toussaint L’Ouverture to the vital stories of his—that is, James’s—time” (D. Scott 10). James’s project, while also acting as a piece of interventionist historiography, also asks (and responds to) a growing need for more recuperation and reframing efforts in history, repositioning the Haitian Revolution not as a satellite event of the Age of Revolution, but as a central dynamic that enabled the French Revolution. His position of and response to this need is what Scott means by a problem space: “an ensemble of questions and answers around which a horizon of identifiable stakes (conceptual as well as ideological-political stakes) hangs” (D. Scott 4). Note, Scott says an “ensemble of questions and answers.” Just as an ensemble cast is at its best when the actors are on equal footing, none getting an inordinate number of lines or inordinate amount of spotlight, the questions and in a problem-space exist rhizomatically and without stratification. They tangle and are tangled, imbricate and imbricated.

Nalo Hopkinson is one of the foremost and forefront advocates for marginal voices within science fiction. In a genre replete with alien creatures that are made to feel familiar, Hopkinson still feels as if she and other writers on the margins (i.e., non-white, non-heterosexual, non-male) are from Planet Midnight. This is Hopkinson’s problem-space. She is writing within a genre she loves, but does not receive the same respect (let alone love) in return. Her fraught, but strict, adherence to conventions of the genre open up space for Tan-Tan’s alternative storytelling.

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<sup>5</sup> This heightened didacticism most likely stems from James’s extensive “travels and [lectures]” since the publication of the original version. These experiences helped to foster his role as that “perceptive and intrigued outsider, in touch with everyday life, with concrete social problems and conditions which he describes with vivid and convincing detail” (Hoetnick 74).



## Science Fiction Narration: The Universe +1

Generic allotment is not solely an exercise in classification. Placing a work like *Midnight Robber* and an author like Hopkinson, which I have found listed under multiple genres depending on the store or site I am visiting at the time, is tricky. This does not mean genres are meaningless—far from it. Generity is simply another form of classification and community. The question becomes, to conjure Deleuze and Guattari, not “In what generic box should we place this work?” but “How can we use this work when it is in a certain generic box?” (Deleuze and Guattari 4) Working with *Midnight Robber* in Darko Suvin’s science fiction framework is useful because of the framework’s imperative that the work must be grounded in reality. If one reads *Midnight Robber* as simultaneous alternate histories pivoting around the Haitian Revolution, then it is crucial one sees the text as one in which the Haitian Revolution actually happened, even (especially) if it happened in different ways. Suvin’s definition of science fiction requires our known rules of physics and logic as a starting point—I believe this should include history as well.<sup>6</sup>

*Midnight Robber* aligns perfectly with Suvin’s specifications of what science fiction (SF) is and is not. Suvin, in his 1978 generic manifesto “What is and is not an SF Narration,” says a work of science fiction begins in our reality, operating according to general laws of physics and logic, then introduces a novum or “fictional

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<sup>6</sup> This is not to say history abides by the same rigidity as logic or physics, but there are points of inquiry where some facts are taken for granted. Physicists generally agree that gravitational pull is real. They may disagree on how that force works. Historians generally agree that Toussaint L’Ouverture was a person who existed and who led many people in a violent uprising. They may disagree on the significance, target, scope and/or impact of said uprising—on how that uprising works.

novelty” (Suvin 1). He then proceeds to show how many fantastical genres, and works which may contain fantastic elements, are not science fiction. In the following pages, I will show how *Midnight Robber* is a science fiction narration and is not any of the other five genres Suvin says are not SF. Suvin finds the contours of SF through both induction (saying what qualities it contains) and deduction (eliminating violators), and I will apply these principles to *Midnight Robber*.

Suvin claims that “SF is distinguished by the narrative dominance of a fictional novelty (novum, innovation) validated by both by being a continuous with a body of already existing cognitions and by being a ‘mental experiment’ based on cognitive logic” (Suvin 1). Let’s take a moment to unpack this distinction. First, science fiction requires an element that does not currently exist or is currently proven. This new element (a novum) cannot come from nowhere—it has to “fit” within currently accepted science. In other words a novum cannot create the possibility of dividing by zero and getting a real number. A novum is an additional rule, technology, and/or discovery, not a refutation of the current laws of logic and physics; it is the universe plus one. This novum, which *could* exist, must also create a “mental experiment,” meaning that once introduced, the author, text, and reader must keep the rules consistent.

Suvin illustrates this last point very effectively by studying a limit case, *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*. Stevenson’s potion is not a novum because the rules for when Dr. Jekyll turns into Hyde change over the course of the novel. As Suvin says, “the transmogrification Jekyll-Hyde becomes not only unrepeatable because the concoction contained unknown impurities, but Hyde also begins

‘returning’ without any chemical stimulus, by force of desire and habit” (Suvin 25). Repeatability is logical if a novum plays by Suvin’s rules. If one understands how the novum works (knowing all the ingredients in the potion) and if that novum has predictable results (Jekyll turns into Hyde only when he drinks the potion), then it would be entirely repeatable. In *The Strange Case*’s universe, one can imagine another scientist attempting to replicate Jekyll’s potion. She would be able to if all the ingredients were made public; she cannot if she does not have all information.

It is in the demand for repeatability that the “science” in “science fiction” shines through. The scientific method demands the experimenter make the steps of the experiment transparent, controlling for intervening variables. These demands exist so other scientists and experimenters can repeat the experiment. Suvin explicitly states SF works are “mental experiments.” These experiments must abide by the same restrictions and processes (the scientific method) as their physical analogs if one can take them seriously. Hopkinson understands this generic imperative and exploits it in order to reach a broader, more Western readership. In reaching this more Western readership, Hopkinson is able to disseminate stories to these audiences who have not had the chance to read them before. It is easier for bookstores to carry a book in the Science Fiction section if it at least looks like a traditional science fiction text. Exposure to texts such as *Midnight Robber*, with characters like non-humanoid Chichibud, whose gender is undefined with little fanfare (i.e., the text does not other Chichibud based on the character’s fluid relationship with gender and performance), help to naturalize alternative gender performances, identities, and relationships in the reader’s mind. When the reader, now having seen these alternatives, encounters

someone who challenges her preconceived notion of gender, race, and/or class, she can be better equipped to interact with that person as a person, and not a vessel of difference. Experience with on-page representations can yield off-page progress.

Speculative Fiction, while subsuming more works and possibly allowing for more varied branches of thought, does not require the reliable reproduction of result Science Fiction demands. If *Midnight Robber* were an overt work of alternate history, if Hopkinson were to write explicitly about a reality in which Toussaint did not die at a betrayer's hand, then it would not be a work of Science Fiction. When culling together the submissions for *Whispers From the Cotton Tree Root*, Hopkinson as an editor was struck by the generic diversity of the pieces she received. She "was getting stories that were dreams (a no-no in the science fiction world) and stories that seemed to be poems and surreal stories that seemed to have nothing fantastical about them, though they were highly improbable" (Hopkinson, "Introduction," xii). This diversity caused her to reflect on her own orientation with the fantastic and speculative, one which she describes as fitting within a decidedly "northern tradition" in which story and plot elements "must exist outside of the imaginations of the characters" and that "any scientific extrapolation should seem convincingly based in the possible" (Hopkinson, "Introduction," xii). The former criterion plays directly into *Midnight Robber*. Tan-Tan imagines stories about the Robber Queen, then makes them manifest. She forces these stories and characters, in response to various styles of abuse and trauma, outside of her imagination and into the "outside." The latter touches on Suvin's second criterion, that the novum must be at least possible based on current (Western) empirical research. Hopkinson's work adheres to these four

criteria, summed up below, which creates a tense reading experience in which there is a decidedly Western/northern approach to generality while still telling ephemeral, mythical, and ineffable stories.

To sum, Suvin's four criteria a work must meet if it is a work of science fiction:

1. The work must contain a fictional novelty, a novum that controls the narrative.
2. The novum must be scientifically possible. The text must represent a world that could exist.
3. The rules set forth by the novum must be clear and consistent.
4. Satisfying the previous three criteria means the results must be reproducible and consistent.

The novum in *Midnight Robber* satisfies these four criteria. The question is, what is the novum?

### **Encrusted Alternatives**

Colin Dayan has a decidedly different take on what the visual can do in terms of creating and evaluating truth and temporality. In the opening to *Haiti, History, and the Gods*, she explains her motives behind her choice for the cover art.<sup>7</sup> She chose the

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<sup>7</sup> Dayan's explanation of her own cover art belies her professional success. It is highly unlikely a rising academic would have a say in his or her cover art, as he or she would not have clout with the publisher. Dayan's success in publication, meaning her works generate a profit for her publishers, opens doors for her to be more self-reflexive, commenting on her text while being in her text. I am not saying Dayan is doing anything wrong—*Haiti, History, and the Gods* is a breathtaking text. I merely mean to bring to the fore one facet of the financial barrier to innovative, abstract, and atypical scholarship.

“wall painting[s] on the kay-mistè (sanctuary of the spirits) in the temple of Vincent Dauphin, oungeun” (Dayan xiv) “because of their particular way of putting things together: condensing epic stories into particular claims on the imagination” (Dayan xii). Dayan sees the visual as a plane on which all knowledge is equal, not even receiving temporal privilege. There is no beginning and there is no end, which avoids teleological tension. Dayan talks about the components of these sanctuary paintings “as visual encrustation, where things thought disparate or incongruous [appear] simultaneously, and on equal footing” (Dayan xiii). In this sense, *Midnight Robber* is an intensely visual novel.

The visual nature of *Midnight Robber* creates a similarly surreal reading experience. There is little stable footing in the novel: familiar names are invoked in unfamiliar ways, it is nigh-impossible to discern who is telling the story and when the speaker or point of view shifts, and there is never a clear-cut moral guide. Hopkinson’s writing, through its assemblage of disparate (yet linked, for they must be) names, places, histories, and species, creates fiction that reads like a fever dream. It is on the boundaries of what a reader would consider reality. The connection between people and Hopkinson’s insistence that these fantastical speculative stories have real-world cachet keep things grounded in the human. People (and other species) share knowledge in order to survive (see the entirety of Chichibud’s interactions with Tan-Tan). The surreal element creates a space in which knowledge can be communal, and the results are radical, echoing Robin D.G. Kelly’s<sup>8</sup> assertion that “surrealism

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<sup>8</sup> Kelley understands the need for new ways to disseminate information. His final chapter of *Yo Mama’s disFUNKtional!*, a monograph that reads for the first 80% as a formally traditional (if radical in content) piece of scholarship, is a piece of speculative fiction in which Kelley falls asleep for 100 years, only to wake up to find a Black Studies in atomized disarray.

[serves] as a bridge between Marxism and the Black Radical Tradition” (Kelley, forward to *Black Marxism*, xxi).

Hopkinson’s “particular way of putting things together” makes pinpointing the novum particularly difficult. In much of science fiction, the novum is a discreet piece of technology: *Blade Runner* and “Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?” would not be possible without replicant technology. The same holds true with *Star Trek* and warp travel, the spark for the Federation, and with the eponymous matrix in *The Matrix*, to name just a couple of many. (*Star Trek: First Contact*, *The Matrix*) Hopkinson, however, does not make things so clear. She does not dabble in creating new technology for the sake of new technology, nor does her work display a technological origin commensurate with the previous examples. Gordon Collier notes this atypical use of technology, stating “science fiction offers Hopkinson a set of counters to work with, but she does not explore them as such, in the sense of technological ‘originality’” (Collier 453). That is, if Hopkinson were to create a double-slit experiment, she would not concern herself with the hows and whys of the counter’s effect on the perceived nature of light. She would be far more concerned that there is a difference in perception at all. The technology is merely a conduit. Collier touches here on Hopkinson’s pragmatism—why write a story just to create a new piece of technology?

At first glance, it appears the ‘Nansi Web is the novum in *Midnight Robber*. The ‘Nansi Web is the logical conclusion of Google Glass, an intercerebral network that connects people to other people, information, and other people’s information with no discernible external peripheral. It is full-time connectivity with no manual

controls. The information is then shown visually. It is still based on, or creates the illusion of, sensual perception, even if the stimuli are entirely within the brain. It appears to drive a large portion of the story and insinuates itself into a number of interactions.

The novel introduces Antonio while he is getting in to a pedicab. During his ride, the pedicab runner informs him that there is an upcoming meeting of “all the pedicab runners in Cockpit County; Board of Directors, everybody.” Antonio, incredulous, asks himself, “Why hadn’t he known they were organized?” (Hopkinson, *Midnight Robber* 9). The reader finds out the pedicab runners have opted out of the ‘Nansi Web. They are not plugged into Granny Nanny, so they are able to communicate undetected:

Private messages! privacy! The most precious commodity of any Marryshevite. The tools, the machines, the buildings, even the earth itself on Toussaint and all the Nation Worlds had been seeded with nanomites—Granny Nanny’s hands and her body. Nanomites had run the nation ships. The Nation Worlds were one enormous data-gathering system that exchanged information constantly through the Grande Nanotech Sentient Interface: Granny Nansi’s Web. They kept the Nation Worlds protected, guided and guarded its people. But a Marryshevite couldn’t even take a piss without the toilet analyzing the chemical composition of the urine and logging the data in the health records. Except in the pedicab runner communities. They were a new sect, about fifty years old. They lived in group households and claimed that it was their religious right to use other headblind tools. People laughed at them, called



them a ridiculous pappyshow. Why do hard labor when Marryshow had made that forever unnecessary? But the Grande 'Nansi Web had said let them be. It had been designed to be flexible, to tolerate a variety of human expression, even dissension, so long as it didn't upset the balance of the whole. (Hopkinson, *Midnight Robber* 10).

Hopkinson characterizes surveillance as an infection. Nanomites are the disease carriers of the surveillance epidemic in the Nation Worlds, "seeding" into nearly every aspect of life. From the nation ships to the toilets, starships to shit, Granny Nanny's nanomites have insinuated themselves nearly everywhere. Granted, this degree of surveillance is not without its benefits. People have access to much of this information. Tan-Tan would not know about the Robber Queen were it not for the stories told to her by Granny Nanny (Hopkinson, *Midnight Robber* 17). The surveillance state also keeps people nominally safe. However, privacy is at a premium. With access to information and personal protection no longer a commodity, privacy takes over as the most coveted good.

Many people in the Nation Worlds accept the exchange of access, safety, and comfort for privacy. The pedicab runners, however, do not. This dissension has already been accounted for however. The pedicab community is the remainder of Granny Nanny's surveillance state. As Zita Nunes says, "The law of assimilation is that there must always be a remainder, a residue—something (someone) that has resisted or escaped incorporation, even when the nation produces narratives of racial democracy to mask this tradition of resistance" (Nunes 125). The pedicab drivers resist incorporation even in the presence of dominant narratives of equality. The best

example of this narrative is when Tan-Tan first gets to New Half-Way Tree and tries to mediate an exchange between Chichibud and One-Eye: “Tan-Tan scolded, ‘He not your boss Chichibud.’ She repeated her lesson exactly as Nanny had sung it to them in crèche: ‘Ship mates all have same status. Nobody’s higher than a next *somebody*’” (Hopkinson, *Midnight Robber* 121, author’s italics). With Granny Nanny and the ‘Nansi Web driving so much of the early conversations, it is reasonable to see this surveillance system as the novum in *Midnight Robber*.

Upon closer inspection, however, it is clear the ‘Nansi web is *not* the novum. First, it is not consistently repeatable because its creators no longer understand how it works. Granny Nanny had to “develop she own language” because a “simple four-dimensional programming code” was not complex enough for an entity that sees “things in all directions” (Hopkinson, *Midnight Robber* 51-2). The new language resists full understanding because it is simply so large. Maka explains this resistance to Antonio as he mulls escape plans:

“If you was to transpose nannycode to the tonal, humans couldn’t perceive more than one-tenth of the notes, seen? Them does happen at frequencies we can’t even map. Nanny create a version we could access with we own senses. Nannysong is only a hundred and twenty-seven tones, and she does only sing basic phrases to we; numbers and simple stock sentences and so” (52).

Nannysong is so inaccessible to humans that Maka’s description vacillates between visual and aural sensory description. Maka starts by describing the translations as

“tonal,” but then says there are frequencies humans “can’t even map.” Nannysong is foreign to the degree that it exists between senses. If one does not know how something works, especially if that person is the human expert on the subject, then how can anyone expect to recreate it with any degree of fidelity?

A large number of characters speak of the differences between life in The Nation Worlds (which includes Toussaint), where the ‘Nansi web is ubiquitous and universal<sup>9</sup>, and New Half-Way Tree, the prison planet where there is no access to the ‘Nansi web. The absence of the ‘Nansi web and the consequent separation from Granny Nanny, while causing some discomfort initially<sup>10</sup>, does not drive Tan-Tan’s transformation into the Robber Queen who creates her own stories, which is the ultimate focus of the novel. This discomfort does not consume and destroy her as it does her father, Antonio. As Suvin says, a novum’s narrative dominance is key. Even though *Midnight Robber* is a visual text that “renders the complexities of multiple cultures in contact, the cross-fertilizations of histories, languages, and cultures, and diasporic dislocations,” it is still bound by narrative, meaning one cannot wholesale throw out the story for its details. In this case, the ‘Nansi web is a piece of fictional technology within a greater novum. Tan-Tan is able to see life in one universe with the ‘Nansi Web and life in one without, in part catalyzing her transformation. It is this ability to travel between universes that drives the narrative. The dimensional veil makes it possible to see a world (a universe) without the ‘Nansi web, and is thus the novum.

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<sup>9</sup> “Universal” takes a (different) shape when speaking within a multiversal paradigm.

<sup>10</sup> “Adult exiles to New Half-Way Tree often never came into the full satisfaction of feeling their muscles move the world around them” (Hopkinson, *Midnight Robber* 298). Before satisfaction there must be an acclimation period.

Priscilla Wald and Gerry Canavan find promise, strength, and efficacy in science fiction's "transformative alternative realities generated by both cognitive and noncognitive estrangement" (Canavan and Wald 244). For *Midnight Robber*, the ability to engage and live in alternatives is the novum! Hopkinson cuts to the heart of science fiction's allure, melding the genre's distinguishing characteristic (alternatives) and its characteristic device (the novum) into one. Tan-Tan is able to see alternative manifestations of her universe because of the dimensional veil<sup>11</sup>, which *is* scientifically possible<sup>12</sup>, *is* consistent, and *is* repeatable.

The reader knows there are multiple universes because Antonio explains it to Tan-Tan as they are passing through the veil: "He explained about the dimensional shift, how there were more Toussaints than they could count, existing simultaneously, but each one a little bit different" (Hopkinson, *Midnight Robber* 72). This exchange lets the reader know about the existence of various universes. Tan-Tan and Antonio's travel to New Half-Way Tree is a marker that travel is possible. But, there is no mention of its repeatability. The reader knows it is possible, but is it controllable?

Hopkinson gives the reader a small clue into the repeatability of the dimensional veil through her mention of the Nation Worlds (Hopkinson, *Midnight Robber* 247). It is the only mention, however indirect it may be, of other planets and/or universes (it remains unclear) besides Toussaint and New Half-Way Tree. The

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<sup>11</sup> While not among Toussaint, Garvey, Douglass, or any one of the men who have property named after them in the novel, W.E.B Dubois's presence is always there, slipping between universes.

<sup>12</sup> The idea of a multiverse has not been disproven. The debate is multifaceted and interdisciplinary, touching information studies, evolutionary theory, quantum physics, probability and prediction, cosmology, and philosophy, just to name a few arenas (Deutsch, Bousso and Freivogel, Garriga and Vilenkin, Freivogel, Greaves). I hesitate to embark on even a simple gloss of the literature, as I am bound to get something wrong due to my lack of technical background. Suffice it to say, there is a large, ongoing debate about the possibility of a multiverse and movement (for lack of better word—multiverse theory throws off any semblance of familiarity with traditional Cartesian geography) between universes by people who are experts in their fields.

Nation Worlds sounds decidedly similar to the United Nations. While the name “United Nations” does not explicitly state that there are multiple nations on the planet earth, one can assume that if there is a need for an organizational body, there is more than one entity. Analogously, the Nation Worlds lets the reader know there is an organizational, extraglobal, body that contains multiple planets. If the only veil were between Toussaint and New Half-Way Tree, then it is a singular portal and not necessarily repeatable. Hopkinson only gives the reader aftereffects, the results of the experiment. The Nation Worlds exist and they send people, their unwanted, their remainders, to New Half-Way Tree. Therefore, there is more than one portal, meaning it had to have been replicated at some point.

Ultimately, finding alternatives is the crux of Hopkinson’s oeuvre, both on and off the page. She insists on finding and crafting alternatives in a decidedly interventionist manner. To gesture towards Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, Hopkinson exchanges the “best of all possible worlds” to a scheme in which all worlds are possible (Leibniz section 168). It is common to view and use science fiction as a genre of escape and whimsy, such as John Joseph Adams’s take on the allure of post-apocalyptic environments: “To me, the appeal is obvious: it fulfills our taste for adventure, the thrill of discovery, the desire for a new frontier” (Adams 2). To Adams, an environment in which most everyone has died becomes a playground for the survivors. The parents went on vacation, leaving a full refrigerator, the keys to the car, and no supervision. For Hopkinson, the stakes are high and very real.

Hopkinson adheres to the conventions of science fiction, however obscurely. This adherence makes manifest Thaler’s claim that, “With their skillful maneuvering

between white popular genres and black cultural traditions, speculative fictions from the Black Atlantic participate in two literary traditions that are conventionally considered separate” (Thaler 2). In short, Hopkinson forces conversations between two groups that do not often converse. By placing the conventions of science fiction in conversation with the literary traditions of the Black Atlantic, Hopkinson uncovers new and alternative stories.

Each publication of a new alternative, either by Hopkinson herself or one of the artists with whom she works, is another story someone should have been able to read. If “Toussaint was attempting the impossible,” then publishing a novel that takes place in a universe where he was successful makes the impossible possible (D. Scott 132). If the Haitian Revolution “entered history with the peculiar characteristic of being unthinkable even as it happened,” then publishing a novel in which Toussaint was successful in realizing his goals requires understanding the event as it happened off the page (Trouillot 73). We are required to make it thinkable. If “the impossible was for [Toussaint] the only reality that mattered,” then what other impossibilities are out there? (D. Scott 132). What other realities are the only one that matters to other people? Stories make the impossible possible, expanding our capacity for truth, our ability to render possible future impossibilities.

Jillana Enteen argues very well that Hopkinson’s devotion to science fiction derives from her sense that the genre is not a playground but a social laboratory: “Hopkinson does not project fantasies that extend current systems or employ technology to drive the narrative. Instead, she envisions alternative social configurations that are embedded in different relationships to power, knowledge, and

the legacies of slavery and colonialism” (Enteen 265). Yes, the dimensional veil is a piece of technology that facilitates travel to alternative worlds. The travel itself is not what drives the narrative. It is Tan-Tan’s exposure to “alternative social configurations” that allows her to embody and control the Robber Queen story. The veil facilitates that exposure. Even though Hopkinson plays within the conventions of the genre, as shown in her adherence to Suvin’s depiction of the novum, her work is not slave to them. She adheres to generic conventions insofar as they facilitate her ability to disseminate new stories. Again, this attention to legacies showcases a fear of that technology’s replication, a fear that it may happen again. Enteen’s assertion, while targeted at Hopkinson’s work, also applies to Hopkinson’s role as an editor and disseminator of others’ stories.

Hopkinson often plays the role of an exasperated outsider within an outsider genre. I say “plays” instead of “embodies” or “takes on” because she has actually been known to perform this role, as seen in her role as the alien from Planet Midnight. As Collier says, “Hopkinson sees herself as an ethnic alien looking at a genre from which her race has been rendered practically invisible” (Collier 454). Their “race” has marginal representation and respect in a genre that is known for providing alternatives. In order to make space for new alternatives, she cannot use the tools of science fiction in the way they are traditionally utilized, a generic take on Audre Lorde’s ubiquitous “The master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house” (Lorde 110). Her simulacric showcase of her novum, showing only the aftereffects with no explicit cause, is a new tool. She is entirely unconcerned about what happened, but focuses her story on how to move forward. Put the focus on the present

and future, leave the past as simultaneous and in the past. All that matters is that the ravages of colonization and slavery do not happen again, no matter what shape they take.<sup>13</sup> Her alternative implementation of the novum reflects this imperative.

Technology takes a backseat to power and interaction in *Midnight Robber*. In fact, the more sharply Hopkinson focuses, the more she zooms in on a supposed technological novum like the ‘Nansi Web, the less narratological impact it has, especially considering the last two-thirds of the novel take place in an environment where that technology is unavailable. Instead, it is the technology on the periphery, in the novel’s penumbra, that has the most impact. It is the technologies of transportation, incarceration, and displacement that drive the narrative. As Hopkinson herself says in an interview with Soyka:

What does a fiction about mastery of self and other through technology become in the hands of writers who have cause to be weary of their mastery? What does a fiction which talks about colonizing other races and spaces become when written by people who’ve recently—as the history of the world goes—experienced that colonization? (Soyka, “Literature,” 2-3, qtd. In Anatol 113)

In response to these questions, Hopkinson crafts a world, extrapolating from our Earth, the planet Toussaint.

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<sup>13</sup> As Gizelle Anatol says, “Hopkinson complicates the picture to reveal structures of power that are not exclusively race-bound: Nursie’s ‘master’ is the exploitative Antonio, not a white man, and it is Antonio who is complicit in Nursie’s being left alone and unable to support herself when her daughter is exiled to New Half-Way Tree” (Anatol 118). It doesn’t matter who embodies the subjugating force. If it exists, there need to be alternatives available. Hopkinson’s work guards against future shapes of these forces, providing strategies for survival.



Let's take a step back for a moment and discuss this issue of alternate dimensions. The big shake-up in *Midnight Robber* is Tan-Tan and Antonio's forced migration to New Half-Way Tree. This sets up a 1-for-1 contrast between Toussaint and its prison analogue, New Half-Way Tree, allowing for a 1-to-1 reading of this contrast. As the novel progresses, it becomes apparent that Tan-Tan finds liberation on the prison planet, leading a life with far more impact (though not necessarily more pleasure) than if she stayed on Toussaint, remaining the daughter in the mayor's shadow and most likely submitting to a life like Ione's in which she is shackled to motherhood by forces not of her own choosing (Anatol 111). Stories are told about the Robber Queen, but they remain in the realm of story. She could not become the Robber Queen without this traumatic middle passage.

It's crucial to keep in mind Toussaint and New Half-Way Tree are different versions of the same planet! The dimensional veil, while mentioned and travelled through, does not receive the same degree of detail as technology such as the 'Nansi Web or Granny Nanny. The veil, however, is the only technology that enables travel to the alternative. The veil makes possible the technologies of subjugation and incarceration. Just because people know the veil exists and are able to travel through it does not mean people *must* do so. People are forced to travel through the veil when they violate the parameters of a subjugating surveillance state. They are forced onto the prison planet when they become a remainder that Toussaint is unable to cannibalize. Antonio, as mayor, has great control over the technology, both physical and social, on Toussaint, but becomes relatively powerless when that technology disappears on New Half-Way Tree. He enters an environment on New Half-Way Tree

that does not have a top-down, but rather a communal, power structure. Chichibud articulates this structure best, saying “Is so trade go. If people ain’t share their talents and gifts with each other, the world go fall apart (Hopkinson, *Midnight Robber* 121). Although trade is the mechanism he supports, he does not consider trade as one would in a capitalist and individualist scheme. He speaks of trade as a mechanism improving overall good, not to maximize one’s material profits.

Hopkinson also contrasts these two environments by showing the history of each planet’s iteration in different ways. Toussaint’s history through an official archive of names and ownership, and on New Half-Way Tree nothing is named after a person. There is no nominative ownership of space.

Collier states, “We are aware in *Midnight Robber* of the colonial process: like the Scotland superimposed onomastically on Ontario, Canada or Otago, New Zealand, past history and forsaken geography are employed as memorial orientation, generally in the form of Afro-Caribbean namings” (Collier 450). This colonial process only shows itself on Toussaint. The novel opens with a laundry list of who’s-who in male Afro-Caribbean history: “From Garvey-prime to Douglass sector, from Toussaint through the dimension veils to New Half-Way Tree, she leaves a trail of sad, lonely men—and women oui—who would weep for days if only you make the mistake and say the words ‘brown eyes’” (*Midnight Robber* 2). The names continue to come forth on Toussaint, all the names of men. There is no mention of notable women, no district named after people like Harriet Tubman or Mary Prince.

Toussaint is a world of male-dominated-geography, which is belied by the names of places. Names not only signify the history of a place, the actors involved,

but also who are considered at the time of the naming to have been the most important historical figures. It is an archive twice-obscured. The name itself ties the person to place. The act of naming shows the belief of those who had the power to name it. These names are historical texts—they reflect not only the actors of the past, but also give a glimpse into the problem-space at the time of naming. Obviously at the time of the planet Toussaint’s naming (and thus claiming ownership), those with the power to name privileged black male historical figures. It is safe to assume, in the absence of any name of someone who is not a black man, that the naming body was composed almost entirely of black men. The name reflects the patriarchy in power at the planet’s founding moment.

Dayan reflects on what it means to name a place after a person when she visits a place named after Jean-Jacques Dessalines, Toussaint L’Ouverture’s right-hand and ultimate successor. She ruminates on this place and the significance, power, and legacy of its name, saying, “Dessalines de manbre, the dismembered but potent Dessalines of the song, intimates this promise of indivisibility and proof of devotion. Having lost his personal identity, he becomes the place. The dismembered hero is resurrected as sacred locale” (Dayan, *Haiti, History, and the Gods* 33). Naming a “sacred locale” gives Dessalines posthumous power. Naming a place after him shows “proof of devotion” to him, to borrow Dayan’s phrase. It declares him a moral superior. (Almost) no one wants to eat lunch on Adolph Hitler plaza. Naming a place after a person not only connotes victory, but that the victory was morally acceptable.

Hopkinson names Tan-Tan’s original home planet Toussaint. She makes no mention of Dessalines anywhere. There is no proof there is a planet Dessalines in the

Garvey-Prime sector, or as an affiliate of the Marryshow Corporation. This absence leads me to believe that Toussaint experienced a “dub-side” of the Haitian Revolution in which Dessalines never succeeded L’Ouverature. Toussaint’s Western-style aspirations were seen through, creating a world in his legacy. Anatol says “the intersection of geography and gender ideology becomes apparent in the language that Hopkinson uses to describe the colonization of Toussaint” (Anatol 112). The only places named after people are named after men. This is language of colonization. Naming codifies what is and is not worthy of remembrance.

Early in their time on New Half-Way Tree, Tan-Tan and Antonio meet a creature (who they will know later as Chichibud) who can talk, and the following exchange occurs:

The jokey-looking beast bobbed its head at them, like any lizard. “I think you two must be want plenty, yes? Water, and food, and your own people? What you go give me if I take you where it have people like you?”

At the word “water,” Tan-Tan realized she’d had nothing to drink since the cocoa-tea Nursie had given her that afternoon, and she’d only sipped that; a whole lifetime away, it seemed now.

“Daddy, I thirsty.”

“Hush your mouth Tan-Tan. We don’t know nothing about this beast.”

The creature said, “Beast that could talk and know its own mind. Oonuh tallpeople quick to name what is people and what is beast.” (Hopkinson, *Midnight Robber* 93)

The last sentence says it all. Chichibud sets up a binary, people and beast, and generalizes about all tallpeople's relationship to it. Truth and fiction, legitimate and illegitimate, citizen or prisoner: these are all variations on Chichibud's theme. Chichibud does not argue against the distinction between people and beast, simply Antonio's assumed power to differentiate between the two.

Antonio comes from a Toussaint built on a capitalist-corporate power structure similar to much of the Global North. Capitalism is based<sup>14</sup> on the notion of mutual self-interest. People exchange goods, money and services. Individual choices are made out of self-interest. The idea of exchange allows a glimpse into what people find equal. There is not room for pure charity in a capitalist system.<sup>15</sup> Antonio, who is financially, politically, and socially successful when in a capitalist system, refuses to converse with Chichibud, signaling that the price of conversation with a "beast" is not worth the benefit of the safe passage that "beast" would provide. An economic exchange can belie the beliefs and desires of those in the interaction. The refusal "to do business" is not a rejection of an exchange before it starts. The exchange still takes place. A service is provided (safe passage) in exchange for an unnamed good ("What you go give me?"). This exchange of service for good is replaced by non-good for

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<sup>14</sup> This is an admittedly broad gloss.

<sup>15</sup> Shepherd Lee, the title character of Robert Montgomery Bird's novel, a slavery-era speculative text, weighs in nicely on this issue. Lee, forced to travel between bodies, see the lifestyles of a cross-section of society. In the body of Uncle Zachariah, a philanthropist, he speaks to his nephew about his nephew's upcoming wedding: "Thee shall marry the maiden, and I will straightaway see what I can do for thee. Verily, what is wealth but the dross of the earth, unless used to purchase happiness for those that are worthy" (Bird 267). The "worthy" in the last sentence could apply either to Lee/Zachariah or his nephew. In the former application Lee/Zachariah deems himself worthy, purchasing his happiness by facilitating his nephew's wedding. In the latter application Lee/Zachariah deems his nephew worthy and buys happiness for him in the form of a wedding. In either case Lee/Zachariah still gains from the act of philanthropy. In the first case he purchases his own happiness. In the second case he decides who is worthy of happiness, "what is people and what is beast" as Chichibud would say (Hopkinson, *Midnight Robber* 93).

prejudice. Antonio still believes he wins the transaction because he does not have to work with Chichibud.

Chichibud states he is a “beast that could talk and know its own mind,” signaling that the ability to speak and be metacognizant are traits that do not fit into Antonio’s scheme for what a beast is. It also signals that Tan-Tan and Antonio actually do know something “about this beast:” he can speak and “know its own mind.” Tan-Tan never actually engages Chichibud in the above passage, but her plea, “Daddy, I thirsty,” indicates her desire to exchange the unnamed good for water. It is to her benefit to engage with Chichibud because he can get her water. Antonio’s command to “hush your mouth” places her into the category of beast. She cannot speak, or is not allowed to. Antonio, by controlling who can speak and who cannot, controls who he considers beast and person, creating a self-reinforcing feedback loop: you may not speak because you are beast; you are beast, so you cannot speak. Tan-Tan is not a person in Antonio’s eyes because she is a woman, she is a child, and because she is willing to engage with beasts. Even after she leaves the gilded cage of Antonio’s shadow, Tan-Tan is still subject to his control over her access to personhood (not human, or, as Chichibud would say “tallperson”).<sup>16</sup>

Collier talks about the “Caribbean spatial identity” in *Midnight Robber* as “‘familiar’ and otherwise decentered, which fits in with the potentially globalized

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<sup>16</sup> The urge to classify in order to exploit is long-practiced and well-documented, and also gives a glimpse into the dark side of science fiction. Dayan speaks of Mederic Moreau de Saint-Mary, who “distinguished 128 parts of ‘blood’ that, variously combined, result in the possible nuances of skin-coloring among free *coloreds*” (25, Dayan’s italics). She categorizes de Saint-Mary’s efforts generically, calling the collection of documents “legalistic fantasies” and then later “stranger than any supernatural fiction” (25, 232). de Saint-Mary attempted to create alternatives that would remind “the mulatto...that no matter how white the skin, the tainted blood haunts the body” (12). When given classificatory power and an “imagination...driven by prejudice,” science fiction (as seen in the “irrationality of Moreau’s method”) can be portrayed and received as science fact (232). The alternative, when given power, can become (and unbecome) truth.

nature of the Caribbean as a zone without any potent (or successful) nationalist strivings” (Collier 33). Toussaint’s “dub” history, in which “nationalist strivings” are potent and are successful makes the “potentially globalized nature of the Caribbean” kinetic. A planet on which Toussaint’s more Western-style of nation building is seen to fruition (and then celebrated by naming the planet after the man) will carry the painful legacy of those Western styles, even if the actors are black. Those in power are wealthy men with access to technology. They hold on to this power through officiating what is and is not proper knowledge, creating a scheme in which women are geographically confined because their knowledge is not considered legitimate, which we glimpsed in the exchange between Antonio, Tan-Tan, and Chichibud previously. Antonio confines Tan-Tan in different styles based on his circumstances. On Toussaint, he confines her through luxury. Early in the time on New Half-Way Tree, he confines her sexually. Even after his death, he confines her maternally (Anatol). Even though these confines may take different shapes, they are all based on fear.

### **Luxurious Isolation**

As previously established, Tan-Tan is a child born into material privilege. Ione, Tan-Tan’s mother, who is unable to fully love her daughter, perhaps out of jealousy over the energy, attention, and affection Antonio lavishes on Tan-Tan, tries to be nice to her daughter “in a kind of way [by] forever buying her new toys” (Hopkinson, *Midnight Robber* 33). Ione will not play with her daughter, but will

provide endless baubles and playthings in exchange for the warmth she is unable to provide. This material privilege serves only to isolate her daughter. The reader's first introduction to Tan-Tan happens because Antonio is surveying his property and stumbles upon his daughter "playing all by herself up in the Julie-mango tree in the front yard" (Hopkinson, *Midnight Robber* 13). She is truly alone, interacting with no humans during her playtime. She is supervised by a minder, who "only [scurries] around the tree, chicle body vibrating for anxious; its topmost green crystal eyes tracking, tracking as it tried to make sure Tan-Tan was alright" (Hopkinson, *Midnight Robber* 13). Tan-Tan is a well-fed, well-protected, and well-isolated girl. She only interacts with her robotic Nursie, and even that connection is fraying. Not only does she not experience any direct human communication, but she does not even bear witness to any, as "people in her house would stop talking when [she] went into a room, even old Nursie" (Hopkinson, *Midnight Robber* 16). Only six at the time, Tan-Tan does not consciously reflect on the isolation: "truth to tell, Tan-Tan wasn't so lonely, oui" (Hopkinson, *Midnight Robber* 17).

Tan-Tan may not consciously feel lonely (or sorrow over her isolation) on a day-to-day basis, but Antonio and Ione's absence in her life takes a toll. Often, when people have no basis of comparison, their emotional states go unchecked. Tan-Tan unknowingly downplays her loneliness and isolation because she is isolated from alternatives. She does not know it is unhealthy that her only interactions are with machines, so she does not act out. People comment on her forced asocial childhood: "everywhere she went, she could hear people whispering behind her hands: 'mayor little girl...sweet in that pretty frock...really have Ione eyes, don't? Mayor heart



must be hard... girl child alone with no father!” (Hopkinson, *Midnight Robber* 22). People recognize something is wrong. Tan-Tan is a victim of neglect, but no one can intervene because of Antonio’s position, both politically and financially. It is not worth it to exchange one’s life(style) for Tan-Tan’s childhood. Their comments on her beauty and adornments could have taken place on a plantation in Haiti just as easily as they could on Toussaint, as “The Haitian elite incarcerated their women within conventions and rules at once idealizing and demeaning [making them] vessels for luxury, respectability, and beauty” (Dayan 81). Tan-Tan, like the women of the Haitian elite, is “forced into a life not of [her] own making” (Dayan 81). She is not writing a story of her own telling.

Tan-Tan does not consider this life wrong. When she hears the comments about Antonio’s absence, she pays them no mind because she is “enjoying herself” (Hopkinson, *Midnight Robber* 22). The phrase “enjoying herself” is a far cry from “having fun” or “is happy.” “Enjoying herself” places the only point of reference on Tan-Tan. It is wonderful she can enjoy herself, but she needs to enjoy the world as well. Already one can see a small split in her personality. There is the Tan-Tan who overhears those comments and experiences that loneliness, and then there is the Tan-Tan who interacts with that Tan-Tan. She would not have to enjoy herself if she were not forced into herself.

When Tan-Tan encounters an alternative, witnesses an interaction between father and daughter that is loving and healthy, the first Tan-Tan, the one who experiences isolation, takes over, literally taking center stage. Tan-Tan is set to

perform a solo during a concert by the Cockpit County Jubilante Singers.<sup>17</sup> Once on stage she performs admirably, the audience enthralled by the mayor's daughter delivering "the ancient words" with such elegance. That is until she peers out at the crowd:

She spied a man standing near the edge of the crowd, cradling a sleeping little girl in his arms. He was the baby's daddy. Tan-Tan's soul came crashing back to earth. Tears began creeping down her face. She fought her way to the end of the song. When she put her hand up to wipe away the tears away, an old lady near the front said, "Look how the sweet song make the child cry. What thing!" Tan-Tan pulled the mike bead off and ran to Ione. The nation ship hat fell to the ground. Tan-Tan hears someone exclaim behind her, and the scuffing sound as he stamped out the flames of the candles. She didn't pay it no mind. She buried her head in her mother's skirt and cried for Antonio. Ione sighed and patted her head. (Hopkinson, *Midnight Robber* 24)

When her "soul came crashing back to earth," Tan-Tan was surely not enjoying herself. Tan-Tan's sorrow, no longer refracted through her lens of isolation, comes forth viscerally. She no longer enjoys herself because "herself" does not exist in this ecstatic moment. The audience is there to celebrate the passage from earth to Toussaint, reflecting what Scott would call an "anxiety of exhaustion." Scott writes about the "anxiety of exhaustion" as showing its symptoms in the forms of "the acute paralysis of will and sheer vacancy of imagination, the rampant corruption and vicious authoritarianism, the instrumental self-interest and showy self-congratulation"

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<sup>17</sup> No doubt Toussaint's analog for the Fisk Jubilee Singers.

(D. Scott 2). The Jonkanoo<sup>18</sup> festival is a time of great celebration in the form of many spectacles—a “showy form of self-congratulation.” There is never any mention of anyone interrogating the reason for, or style of, the celebration. It is likely the pedicab drivers would not be present, but their voices are silent (possibly complicit) on this event. No one questions an event that would cause a six-year-old to cry on stage in front of an audience as the whole event is self-interested. There is only one explanation offered for Tan-Tan’s tears (the old woman’s claim of lyrical beauty) because there is a “sheer vacancy of imagination.” Antonio’s “vicious authoritarianism” over Tan-Tan makes her complicit in the entire event, willing to silence her explanation and instead running off the stage.

The incident during the concert is a synecdoche for young Tan-Tan’s lack of a meaningful relationship with either of her parents. In exchange for isolation, and for her compliance in being isolated, Tan-Tan receives nice things. The hat she drops is lavish and elaborate, “woven in the torus shape of a nation ship [the] Marrayshow Corporation: Black Star Line II” and containing “little people...sleeping in their bunk beds...a little crèche with a teacher and some pickney...a bridge with a captain and all the crew” (Hopkinson, *Midnight Robber* 20). Adorned in this significant and technologically complex work of haberdashery, Tan-Tan embodies a second, supposedly voluntary, middle passage. She is forced to celebrate, or at least sing a song that celebrates, a voyage she never made. The spectacle of the hat outweighs the spectacle of Tan-Tan’s anguish. The hat translates Tan-Tan’s inner anguish into outward passion, as the audience observes. No one asks her if she is okay. The hat

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<sup>18</sup> No doubt an analog for the John Canoe Festival, a Jamaican event in which performers parody and indict the planting class, as well as the ostentatious nature of military ritual (Wilson 77).

makes them assume she could only be crying for the current occasion and not her persistent circumstance.

Tan-Tan was excited to perform in spite of her parents' absence in her life. Part of that excitement stemmed from being able to display her hat for the world. This is an exchange: the hat for her neglect. When she sees an example of an alternative parent-child relationship, one in which a parent cares for the child by actually interacting with her, she storms off the stage. (Granted, she does finish her performance, as any trained child of a politician would do. No need to sully the family name just because the family itself is sullied.) As she storms off the stage, the hat falls off. Just four pages ago she was so excited about the hat. Once she sees that father holding a child in his arms, however, she "pay[s] it no mind" (Hopkinson, *Midnight Robber* 24). This is another exchange: Tan-Tan's refusal to accept her neglect for her hat. She takes her hat to the customer-service counter, getting her previously-suppressed anguish back in return.

Showing the audience's reaction while simultaneously documenting Tan-Tan's eye movements (Hopkinson never says Tan-Tan is crying because her father is not present, but she does cry right after she sees an image of a present father) shows alternative explanations for Tan-Tan's public tears. Tan-Tan, to the audience, is an object on display for their consumption, not unlike an auction block, a site of "questionable history" and one which has "tended to be used for antislavery agendas" (McKittrick 67). Tan-Tan cries at a festival celebrating black freedom, so her tears must be for the triumph of black freedom over enslaving forces. The public superimposes a romantic emplotment over her tears, much in the same way many

scholars and writers, (e.g., James) have on the Haitian Revolution (D. Scott 13). There are, of course, alternatives to these stories. Whereas McKittrick explores these stories through stripping away the human element, instead focusing on the emptiness of the Green Hill slave auction block for which there is apparent “transparency and objectivity of the ‘survey’ and architectural data,” Hopkinson looks for extreme subjectivity, down to the level of eye movement (McKittrick 67). Although the styles of their inquiry are divergent, McKittrick and Hopkinson’s platforms, the Green Hill slave auction block and the stage at the Cockpit County stage, do similar damage to black female bodies.

“The auction block,” according to McKittrick, “rather than the auction or private sales—anchors and gives coherency to differing black geographic spheres in the diaspora” (McKittrick 72). Divorcing ourselves from the event itself (the auction or sale) and instead focusing on the physicality and special effects of the auction block itself allows for a reading of black experiences that are not confined by circumstance or time. This focus is in touch with Brent Edwards, who suggests that “the use of the term diaspora... is not that it offers comfort of abstraction, an easy recourse to origins, but that it forces us to consider discourse of cultural and political linkage only through and across difference (Edwards 20). McKittrick’s block and Edwards’s diaspora find links in difference. The auction block and the stage are wildly different in their look and in their circumstance, but the effect on the women at the front is communal. The term diaspora links these three not because they all start from the same place (*Midnight Robber* explicitly starts from a different reality), but in their shared experience across time, space, and genre. The planet Toussaint is a part

of the African diaspora; the names that mark its history (and its geography) show as much. Without the technology and system of chattel slavery, auction blocks are not a necessary platform. The effects of slavery, loss of subjectivity to further affirm the master's dehumanization and essentialization, still affect Tan-Tan. The reader sees these effects at the Jonkanoo Festival scene. In this sense, the stage on which Tan-Tan sings and cries can be considered an auction block, linking her experience with other "black geographic experiences in the diaspora" (McKittrick 72).

Invoking both Saiyda Hartman and Frederick Douglass, McKittrick portrays the "moment of sale" on a slave auction block as an "economic exchange" that "renders the black body abstract [reifying] the buyer's/master's embodied universality and subjectivity" (McKittrick 71). Tan-Tan cries on stage. These tears are not considered by the audience to be for anything unique to Tan-Tan, but instead over the beauty of the sound she is singing. She is a commodity for entertainment, even if that entertainment is in celebration of a triumphant black state. The fireworks are in support of the celebration of the fourth of July, but someone who despised the celebration of the day could take pleasure in the spectacle devoid of its context. When someone does support the event, like the woman in the audience at the Jonkanoo festival, there can be only one reason for the spectacle. Tan-Tan's tears can only be for country. She and the audience exchange her tears for her audience's celebration of patriotism. Her body is rendered abstract in this regard because she represents to the audience the ideal of a proud citizen. She is rendered abstract because her owner/master (Antonio) is the mayor of Cockpit County. He is the leader of the land, the first citizen and, by default, the lead patriot. Her tears are an expression of

Antonio's "embodied universality and subjectivity." It is Tan-Tan's body expressing Antonio's universal patriotism.

The flip side of the auction block's reifying of the buyer/master/owner's "universality and subjectivity" is the reification of the enslaved person's status as an object of exchange: "the human-commodity is put on display and the auction block serves to spatially position black men to be seen and assessed" (McKittrick 72). Tan-Tan is seen by all, but it is the woman "near the front" who makes the comment about her tears. This woman, who is described as older, has more life experience and is physically closer to Tan-Tan than most people in that audience. Still, the distance the stage creates between Tan-Tan and the audience vast enough to encourage only one reading of her tears. The stage, like the block, "conceals black pain and resistances through racist public expectations: a hopping, jumping, trotting body is a nonsuffering body" (McKittrick 73). The only difference in the case at the Jonkanoo Festival is that the public is all black. Perhaps the racism is not there, but the tyranny of public expectation, refracted through the space between stage and audience, is. Tan-Tan can sing beautifully, so her tears must be caused by something beautiful.

Just moments before the concert, when Tan-Tan was not on stage, people were articulating how bad they felt for her about Antonio's absence. Once she gets on the stage/block, however, all sympathy is lost. The "point of sale [stage/block] marks the scale of the body as 'sellable,'" thus abstracting human complexities and particularities and discursively naturalizing multiscalar ideologies that justify local, regional, and national violence and enslavement" (McKittrick 79). Tan-Tan is not playing a role in her performance, but the stage/block (and the distance it creates)

forces one upon her. It renders her particularities and complexities, observed by members of the public just moments prior to the “point of sale,” abstract, unrelated to Tan-Tan. She cries over the beauty of the words because those words reinforce the system of power that both allowed for the cultivation of a black empire while simultaneously suppressing many people in its wake.

Sites like the Green Hill slave auction block and the stage at the Jonkanoo Festival are not just the domain of geographic history and science fiction. Simply because the auction block is no longer used as such, or that the stage is fictional does not mean these platforms do not exist. I cannot help but think of bell hooks sitting in her first-class seat, penning “Killing Rage: Militant Resistance”:

I am writing this essay sitting beside an anonymous white man that I long to murder. We have just been involved in an incident on an airplane where K, my friend and traveling companion, has been called to the front of the plane and publicly attacked by white female stewardesses who accuse her of trying to occupy a seat in first class that is not assigned to her. Although she had been assigned the seat, she was not given the appropriate boarding pass. When she tries to explain they ignore her. They keep explaining to her in loud voices as though she is a child, as though she is a foreigner who does not speak airline English, that she must take another seat. They do not want to know that the airline has made a mistake. They only want to ensure that the white male who has the appropriate boarding card will have a seat in first class. (hooks, *Killing Rage*, 8).



In this instance the front of the airplane is something of an auction block. The conversation does not happen in private, or in a place where K could move freely. An airplane, especially when the hatch is shut (it is unclear from the essay if the flight attendants had sealed the passage prior to their assault on K), is a very difficult place from which to escape. K is placed in front of the audience and assessed. McKittrick talks about James Martin's account of a slave auction<sup>19</sup>, how it portrays as an event and a space that reasserts "how black people are named, contained [and] valued" and forces "black performativity" (McKittrick 73). This reassertion takes place on the plane, forcing K to perform for the flight attendants.

While this is not explicitly stated, one can fill in the gaps and presume K performed some code switching, speaking to the flight attendants, who were speaking to her "as though she were a child," in a fashion that would prove she is not, in fact, a child. The flight attendants, then, operate as the auctioneers, forcing her to perform for the audience, which is composed of the other passengers on the plane. Just as the physical gap between Tan-Tan and the audience forces a reading of her tears as in response to beauty and love of country, as the auction block forces a reading of black captivity as natural, the chasm between the front of the airplane, the stage or auction block, and the other passengers, the audience or buyers, forces a reading of K's

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<sup>19</sup> The sheer spectacle of the slave auction is breathtaking. Following is a reproduction of the narrative, which shows just how elaborately choreographed and ritualistic these events were: "And we seen others sold on the auction block. They're put in stalls like pens for cattle and there's a curtain, sometimes just a sheet in front of them, so the bidders can't see the stock too soon. The overseer's standin' just outside with a big black whip and a pepper box pistle in his hand. Then they pull the curtain up and the bidders crowd around. The overseer tells them the age of the slaves and what they can do. One bidder takes a pair of white gloves and rubs his fingers over a man's teeth and he says, you say this buck's 20 years old, but his teeth are worn. He's 40 years if he's a day. So they knock that buck down for 1000 dollars...They call men bucks and they call women wenchies. Then the overseer makes him walk across the platform, he makes him hop, he makes him trot, he makes him jump" (Martin, qtd in McKittrick 72-73).

dissent as incorrect. The effects of display, forced performativity, and audience non-intervention have similar effects that cross geographic, temporal, and racial boundaries. Tan-Tan's presence on stage, like K's presence at the front of the airplane, like the millions of men and women once on the auction block, reinforces and exposes the chasm between subjectivity and story, a chasm Tan-Tan will eventually learn to exploit for her own revolutionary purposes.

Still, at this moment, at age six, Tan-Tan is in the category of beast, as Antonio defines it. Still, no one will speak to her. An entire square "full up of people" and no one will attempt to console a sobbing six-year-old (Hopkinson, *Midnight Robber* 23). Even when she reaches her mother, Ione says nothing. Instead, all she does is sigh and pat Tan-Tan's head (Hopkinson, *Midnight Robber* 24). There is no interaction with Tan-Tan, just attempts at consolation. When Ione finally speaks to Tan-Tan, the only topic is Antonio. This would make sense, as Tan-Tan asks Ione "ain't Daddy going to come with we?" (Hopkinson, *Midnight Robber* 25). Ione apparently does not hear the "we" in her daughter's question, only replying in answers relating to herself: "you daddy vex with me" (Hopkinson, *Midnight Robber* 25). Ione conditions Tan-Tan into silence, imploring her to "be strong [because Tan-Tan] is the only family [Ione has] now" (Hopkinson, *Midnight Robber* 25). Ione's definition of strength is silence and stoicism: "Swallow those tears and hold your head high" (Hopkinson, *Midnight Robber* 25). Again, Tan-Tan is urged into silence by her parents. She once again is forced to retreat into herself.

It is striking Ione speaks of Tan-Tan's tears as something to be swallowed. Tan-Tan, often alone, finds solace in fine foods. She has access to these foods

because she is forced into her prison of luxury, her life that is not her own. Prior to her performance and subsequent breakdown, people feed “Tan-Tan tamarind balls and black cake and thing...till the ribbon sash round her waist was binding<sup>20</sup> her stuffed belly” (Hopkinson, *Midnight Robber* 22). The next sentence is a catalog of the comments she hears about her father’s neglect, the comments she dismisses by saying she enjoys herself. Again, no one speaks *to* Tan-Tan, only *about* her. She is kept quiet by keeping her mouth full. Perhaps these are the same people who lament her neglect, feeding Tan-Tan treats in exchange for their peace of mind. After Ione silences her daughter’s cries at the concert the same mouth-filling occurs; Nursie makes her an elaborate hot cocoa, “still greasy with cocoa fat, then steeped in hot water with vanilla beans and Demerara<sup>21</sup> sugar added to it.” Only this time the luxury is not a suitable replacement, “this time it was more bitter than she liked” (Hopkinson, *Midnight Robber* 26). She begins to reject the food as compensation for abuse and neglect.

Tan-Tan’s relationship with food changes dramatically on New Half-Way Tree. She stops seeing it as a means of emotional replacement and more as a tool. Tan-Tan’s first meal on the prison “dub” side of Toussaint occurs shortly after Antonio gives in and accepts Chichibud’s assistance. The meal consists of “dry tree frog meat” and roasted halwa fruit. Tan-Tan and Antonio’s dining experiences could not differ more. Antonio spits out the dried meat; Tan-Tan finds it salty, chewy, and good. Chichibud instructs the two newcomers to “go slow until [the halwa fruit]

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<sup>20</sup> One has to wonder if the ribbon’s binding is a side-effect or a purpose of the decoration. Would Tan-Tan eat more if she were not told to wear a non-functional garment that provides sensual feedback about her size? Hopkinson brings up the ribbon before mentioning Tan-Tan’s sensation of fullness. Would she feel “stuffed” on the inside if she did not feel pressure from the outside?

<sup>21</sup> The specificity of the sugar is striking. On a planet named Toussaint, after a man who led (successfully in this alternative) in overthrowing sugar plantation owners, it is not enough to just have sugar, or just have brown sugar. It has to be Demerara sugar. Tan-Tan has access to the finest spices in Toussaint.

cool.” Tan-Tan does as instructed, finding the roasted fruit to be “good too, moist and tender, and the spice Chichibud had rubbed on it tasted like big-leaf thyme;”<sup>22</sup>

Antonio struggles with the fruit, burning his hands and struggling to swallow any of his hastily-excavated halwa meat (Hopkinson, *Midnight Robber* 106-7). Tan-Tan is obviously more open to these new foods and circumstances than Antonio, but that does not mean she does not still pine for her previous comforts.

After the meal, as she attempts to drift off to sleep, she reflects she misses her Nursie just as much as she misses her mother. She runs through what she would be doing on Toussaint at this time of night: “She would pick the yellow nightie. Then Nursie would have hot eggnog for both of them, with nutmeg in it to cool their blood. The smell would spice the air, not like in this strange land where the air smelled like sulphur matches all the time” (Hopkinson, *Midnight Robber* 108). She thinks about the eggnog even “pretending she could taste the hot drink.” The motion of swallowing even “clears her ears a little” (Hopkinson, *Midnight Robber* 108). These memories, even if they do not provide the intended comfort, provide some physiological release. Her body is still tied to these memories. This relationship, between remembering past foods and experiencing present comforts, begins to wear as she becomes more acclimated to New Half-Way Tree, as Toussaint (and her attachment to it) fades deeper into the past.

Later in her time on New Half-Way Tree, after her rape and subsequent development of the Robber Queen personality/defense mechanism, Tan-Tan finds herself lost, hungry, and alone. In this instance, she is not Tan-Tan because “The

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<sup>22</sup> She is still the child of privilege. What six-year-old can discern between different types of thyme? One who has had fine food thrust upon her for her entire life.

Robber Queen had triumphed” (Hopkinson, *Midnight Robber* 216). For a brief second Tan-Tan attempts to come to the surface through wishful, yearning memory: “She just wanted to be somewhere safe, somewhere familiar, where people looked and spoke like her and she could stand to eat the food. She crouched on the ground like that for a while, breathing, remembering when she was a girl-pickney and she’d had a home” (Hopkinson, *Midnight Robber* 217-8). She snaps out of this elegiac state by her growling belly because “memories weren’t going to fill it” (Hopkinson, *Midnight Robber* 218). Just as when Silk-E sings “Preacher man wanna save my soul/Don’t nobody wanna save my life,” pragmatics and sustaining one’s body in the present override any desire for the past or future, be it corporeal or divine (The Coup). Think of “Maria Louiza, Rosette Morel, and John Lewis [who] had all been born as slaves in Saint Domingue and brought to Baltimore by owners fleeing the momentous revolution of the early 1790s; all three were old enough to have distinct memories of the violent overthrow of slavery in their Caribbean homeland” (Rockman, *Scraping By*, 28). Their memories of liberation will not further their situation of the present. They are effective as a model to follow, or even as respite from pain, but there is nothing inherent in them that can aid one’s immediate situation. Tan-Tan’s belly needs to be full because she is hungry for calories, not for a memory of home. Metaphysics, memories, and plans are for people who have their basic needs met.

### **Escape and Dissemination**

Tan-Tan shows flashes of attachment to, and identification with, the Robber Queen from an early age, but it takes a traumatic event for her personality to split completely. Antonio sexualizes Tan-Tan from the very beginning. The first time the reader sees Tan-Tan is through Antonio's eyes, when he sneaks up on her while she is "playing<sup>23</sup> all by herself up in the Julie-mango tree in the front yard" (Hopkinson, *Midnight Robber* 13). It is an uncomfortable moment, made all the more uncomfortable by the fact that Tan-Tan does not know she is being watched:

Antonio felt liquid with love all over again for his doux-doux darling girl, his one pureness. Just so Ione had been as a young thing, climbing trees her parents had banned her from. Antonio loved her more than songs could sing. When she was first born, he was forever going to watch her sleeping at her bassinet. With the back of his hand he used to stroke the little face with cocoa-butter skin soft like fowl breast feathers, and plant gentle butterfly kisses on the two closed-up eyes. Even in her sleep, little Tan-Tan would smile to feel her daddy near. And Antonio's heart would swell with joy for the beautiful thing he had made, the one daughter, this chocolate girl. "My Tan-Tan. Sweet Tan-Tan. Pretty just like your mother." When she woke she would yawn big, opening her tiny fists to flash little palms at him, pink like shrimp in Shak-Shak bay. Then she would see him, and smile at him with her mother's smile.

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<sup>23</sup> The line between play and storytelling is quite porous. Tan-Tan, in her play, gets to try out different configurations and styles of the Robber Queen. She is drafting her story in play. Junot Diaz talks about this connection in a recent interview on his time growing up, playing Dungeons and Dragons. According to Diaz, "I'm not sure I would have been able to transition from reader to writer so easily had it not been for gaming" (qtd. in Gilsdorf). Tan-Tan initially interacts with the Robber Queen story and character as a reader, absorbing information from her minder and from the 'Nansi Web. Her play, like Diaz's, facilitates her transition from reader to storyteller.

He could never hold her long enough, never touch her too much, (Hopkinson, *Midnight Robber* 13).

Let's start with the obvious: "liquid with love." This is a phrase that could go in many different directions. One could paint it as having love without form or boundaries, as a love so profound that it brings tears to the beholder, or even as love that reduces one to a puddle. These are all fairly benign forms of love, but taken in context of the whole description (let alone, the whole novel), the phrase is seminal.

Antonio falls in love "all over again," indicating this is a cycle. He appears, falls in love with Tan-Tan, disappears (as noted in numerous points in the opening pages, Antonio is not the most present father), and repeats the process. His love has a refractory period. That his love expands beyond the scope of recorded music indicates it is not codified, beyond ineffable. There is something about that love that resists (or is scared of) recording. It is "liquid," unable to be written on. This notion of expansion or uncontainability extends to the final line: "He could never hold her long enough, never touch her too much." "Too much" as defined by whom? After her period of sexual enslavement, she surely would say she was touched too much, held long enough. Antonio's protests that she is simply too beautiful, too much like her mother, do not alter what is "too much" for Tan-Tan. After the first time Antonio rapes Tan-Tan, he says "*Is just because I missing your mother, and you look so much like she. You see how I love you girl? See what you make me do? Just like Ione. Just like your mother*"<sup>24</sup> (Hopkinson, *Midnight Robber* 141, author's italics). There is no

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<sup>24</sup> These descriptions are not in quotation marks, but in italics, a departure from how every other piece of dialogue looks on the page. The italics do a few things. First, it marks the speech as omnipresent,

explicit mention of Antonio raping Ione, but there is a long-present rift between them when the novel begins. It is very possible this was not the first time he had forcefully gone “liquid with love.”

Antonio regards Tan-Tan as “his one pureness,” an identification that is extremely problematic. First off, “pureness” is something that simply does not exist outside of one’s fantasy when humans are involved. Look at the previously-discussed “research” by Mederic Moreau de Saint-Mary. There is always an element of fabrication that comes along with discussions of purity. The expectation of pureness is isolating. Tan-Tan is seen as pure (in patriotism, in devotion, in emotion) on stage when she sings. She is the mayor’s daughter, a pure representative of Toussaint (much like Tea Party assertions of “Real Americans,” it is more an abstract type than something one can embody—the pedicab drivers surely could not be pure), so her tears must be for the content of the song and not something personal (Enck-Wanzer 23; Hopkinson, *Midnight Robber* 10). The fact that she is “his one” both labels her as owned and makes her the sold possessor of purity, cutting her off from the impure. Her purity is something to be consumed. Antonio’s “chocolate girl” is unadulterated. This expectation of purity leads, again, to Tan-Tan feeling as if she is not living her own life. So, in response, she makes one up. This story will drive her interactions with new environments and her responses to violent acts.

The scene in which Tan-Tan is first raped, in which her personality actively and explicitly splits, is difficult to read:

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flowing into the other paragraphs. It is not constrained by quotation marks. It also denotes something that is recurring. It is more the general idea of Antonio’s words, not the specific content. He says every time will be the last, but there is no last time (Hopkinson, *Midnight Robber*, 141). There is no last time he will say words conveying the meaning in italics.



Antonio laid her down on the bed. The “special” thing was something more horrible than she’d ever dreamt possible. Why was Daddy doing this to her? Tan-Tan couldn’t get away, couldn’t understand. She must be very bad for Daddy to do her so. Shame filled her, clogged her mouth when she opened to call out to Janisette [Antonio’s lover on Toussaint] for help. Daddy’s hands were hurting, even though his mouth smiled at her like old Daddy, the one from before the shift tower took them. Daddy was two daddies. She felt her own self split in two to try to understand, to accommodate them both, Antonio, good Antonio smiled at her with his face. Good Tan-Tan smiled back. She closed her mind to what bad Antonio was doing to her bad body. She watched at her new dolly on the pillow beside her. Its dress was up around its waist and she could see its thigh holster with the knife in it. She wasn’t Tan-Tan, the bad Tan-Tan. She was Tan-Tan the Robber Queen, the terror of all Junjuh, the one who born on a far-away planet, who travel to this place to rob the rich in their idleness and help the poor in their humility. She name Tan-Tan the Robber Queen, and strong men does tremble in their boots when they pass by. Nothing bad does ever happen to Tan-Tan the Robber Queen. Nothing can hurt she. Not Blackheart man, not nothing. (Hopkinson, *Midnight Robber* 140)

It would be easy to pinpoint the rape as the moment of Tan-Tan’s schism, her personality splitting as Antonio forces himself, but the split began far before then. This event is written as if there is a definitive split that happens only because of this

incident. Daddy splits into two daddies, Tan-Tan splits into bad Tan-Tan, and the Robber Queen is invoked to carry them all.

The Daddy split is written as if Antonio never wronged Tan-Tan before. In fact, it is that word, “before”, that creates the semblance of a before-Daddy and the after-Daddy. As can be seen in the discussion of Tan-Tan’s introduction, Antonio’s body has housed both Daddies for some time. He was simply not present enough for Tan-Tan to see both sides. Tan-Tan also only sees Daddy; his actions before the rape were not extreme enough to conjure a split. This passage is also tricky to parse because the narrator shifts perspective with no explicit signal to the reader. “Tan-Tan couldn’t get away, couldn’t understand” is written from the perspective of someone who *can* understand. It also inventories her mental state, not her perceptions. The phrase “Daddy was two daddys” is written more from her eyes, as experienced in the moment—“She felt her own self split.” It is a moment of realization, not a split in personality. Daddy was always two daddies. Tan-Tan just sees them separately now.

Tan-Tan’s circumstance is truly tragic, in the mode Scott describes in *Conscripts of Modernity*:

Tragedy questions, for example, the view of human history as moving teleologically and transparently toward a determinate end, or as governed by a sovereign and omnisciently rational agent. These views of human history suppose that the past can be cleanly separated from the present, and that reason can be unambiguously distangled from myth. (D. Scott 12)

Tan-Tan's relation to the Robber Queen is porous and ever-shifting. At times she plays at being the Robber Queen; other times she enjoys the story; other times she *is* the Robber Queen. Her reality and her mythology are inextricably, though varyingly imbricated.

The Robber Queen is always invoked around instances of Tan-Tan's abuse and neglect. Shortly after her first introduction, as seen through Antonio's eyes, Antonio asks her what she is up to, to which Tan-Tan responds "Me is Robber Queen, yes?" (Hopkinson, *Midnight Robber* 14). Antonio gives no response to this question, neither affirming nor denying Tan-Tan's relationship to the Robber Queen. She is left to her own devices to find her boundaries between play and reality, performance and embodiment, myth and history. Moving past the first question, Tan-Tan asks her father why he is home so early. Antonio says he is going to surprise her mother, whom he (correctly) suspects is with another man. He does not communicate the second part of his reason for coming home early, only that Tan-Tan is not to follow Antonio inside (Hopkinson, *Midnight Robber* 14-15). Tan-Tan is left alone, isolated in play as the Robber Queen, a role her father does not validate. From the very beginning of *Midnight Robber*, Tan-Tan is the sole possessor of the Robber Queen. It makes sense she takes on the role completely when circumstances force her to. Her present story is so painful that she is forced to embody (and ultimately alter and proliferate) the Robber Queen's story.

The Robber Queen, in Tan-Tan's mind, is uncomfortably intimate with Antonio, even prior to the explicit sexual abuse. Home life is even less comfortable for Tan-Tan after Antonio finds Ione in bed with another man: "Everybody [is] sad all

the time.” She spends her days “playing Robber Queen...with just her fretful [and synthetic] minder for company” (Hopkinson, *Midnight Robber* 17). She fantasizes about another reality in which her time with the Robber Queen is not a time of isolation: “She was going to go and live with Daddy in the mayor office, and them would play Robber King and Queen, and Daddy would tickle her and rub her tummy and tell her how she come in pretty, just like she mother” (Hopkinson, *Midnight Robber* 17). This fantasy becomes unfortunate reality. Antonio justifies his actions by telling her she looks so much like her mother (Hopkinson, *Midnight Robber* 141). Tan-Tan does not conjure the words and actions in a vacuum. No six-year-old would imagine an interaction his or her father in which he tells him or her “is coming in pretty” without having heard it before. Tan-Tan becomes the Robber Queen near the end of the rape scene, playing an awful version of the Robber King and Queen she had dreamt of in the past. The elements have always been there, in Tan-Tan’s mind. This was a story she had read before because she had made it up “to pass the time” (Hopkinson, *Midnight Robber* 17).

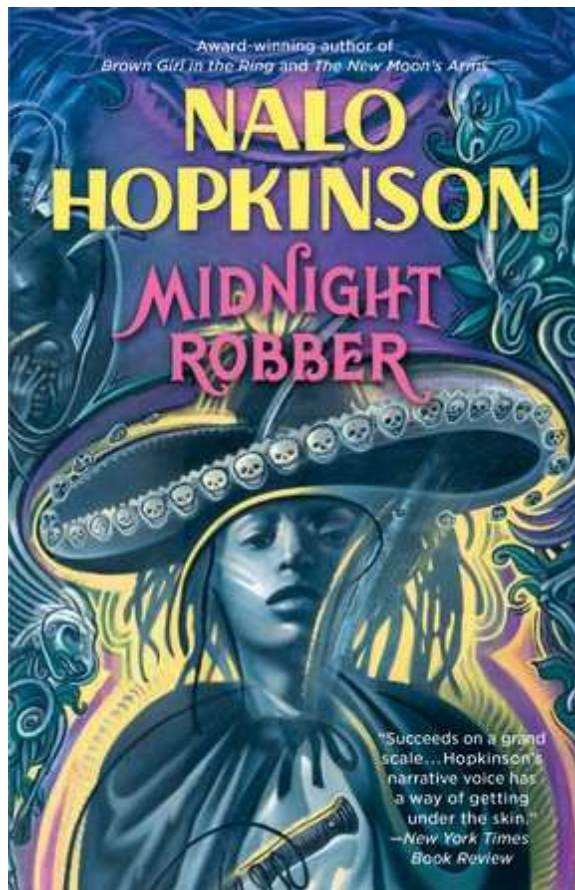
The only validation either parent gives to Tan-Tan’s obsession and identification with the Robber Queen is in exchange for absence. Following the incident at the Jonkanoo Festival, in which Tan-Tan cries on stage because of her father’s absence, Antonio sends his daughter an elaborate Robber Queen costume.

Ione laid out a costume on the bed, a little Robber Queen costume, just the right size for Tan-Tan. It had a white silk shirt with a high, pointy collar, a little black jumbie leather vest with a fringe all round the bottom, and a pair of wide red leather pants

with more fringe down the sides. It even had a double holster to go round her waist, with two shiny cap guns sticking out. But the hat was the best part. A wide black sombrero, nearly as big as Tan-Tan herself, with pom-poms in different colours all round the brim to hide her face in the best Robber Queen style. Inside the brim, it had little monkeys marching all round the crown of the hat, chasing tiny birds. The monkeys leapt, snatching at the swooping birds, but they always returned to the brim of the hat. (Hopkinson, *Midnight Robber* 27).

This is yet another instance when luxury and isolation intertwine for Tan-Tan. The outfit is indeed lavish: The Robber Queen costume Antonio gifts her is intricate, with a large number of details and delicate touches. It does not seem to be particularly practical for actual robbing, or even playacting as the Robber Queen. Fringe on all items makes her more likely to get caught on something. A hat as big as Tan-Tan is effective for hiding her face, but not for mobility. It is “just the right size for Tan-Tan,” but to do what? She can look like the Robber Queen, but she cannot make the

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*Midnight Robber Novel Cover (Gutierrez)*

movements a Robber Queen  
make. Mobile monkeys on the  
add decoration, but also seem to  
unwieldy. This gift is meant to  
decorate Tan-Tan as the Robber  
Queen, not for her to play the  
This is not the image of the  
Robber Queen on the cover of  
novel, with a more streamlined  
more menacing decorations, and  
better look at Tan-Tan’s face  
also looks much older than a  
year-old’s face. The morning of  
Ouvert, the duel between

Antonio and Quashee over

Ione, Tan-Tan is nervous and worried. She goes to get dressed, setting aside her

typical white and blue dress for the Robber Queen costume. As she puts on the leathers, the intricate hat, she finds they “covered up some of her scared feelings” (Hopkinson, *Midnight Robber* 53). This is a decoration for cover-up, for suppression and rejection of the human experience, not a tool for embodiment, for becoming, for growth and change. There is a debate between Nursie and Ione over the outfit, but, of course, no one will call it the Robber Queen costume, only “this.” Again, this costume resists vocalization.

Antonio does not even present the apology-gift in person, but leaves it for Ione to lay out on the bed, creating a two-fold absence-exchange. Antonio gives a gift for his absence at the festival; the gift shows Antonio’s acknowledgement of Tan-Tan’s draw to the Robber Queen in exchange for his absence from the apology. Ione does not mention anything about the Robber Queen while commenting on how nice the costume is, only focusing on details like the Brer Monkey and Brer Woodpecker (Hopkinson, *Midnight Robber* 27). The Robber Queen remains Tan-Tan’s sole possession because she is the only one who makes her attachment explicit. Antonio gives a gift with no verbal acknowledgement. Ione acknowledges the gift is nice and of high quality, but does not verbally acknowledge it is, indeed, a Robber Queen costume.

As a young mother of a small baby, a job at which “she knew she was no good at being” Ione uses the Midnight Robber as a scare tactic, telling her, “Don’t make too much noise, or the Midnight Robber will come and take you away” (Hopkinson, *Midnight Robber* 48). The Midnight Robber, at least the way Ione invokes him, is a

boogeyman, a means of silencing a noisy child. It is because of this scare tactic that Tan-Tan becomes obsessed with becoming the Robber Queen:

In the years to come, the little girl Tan-Tan would ask the eshu to show her images of the Midnight Robber. Fascinated and frightened at the same time, she would view image after image of the Midnight Robber, with his black cape, death-cross X of bandoliers slashed across his chest, his hat with its hatband of skulls. The Midnight Robber, the downpressor, the stealer-away of small children who make too much mischief. The man with the golden wooing tongue. She would show him. She would be scarier than him. She would be Robber Queen. (Hopkinson, *Midnight Robber* 48)

Scared into silence with this figure, Tan-Tan crafts the Robber Queen, a process which also takes place in silence. If the Midnight Robber is the “stealer-away of small children,” then by being scarier than he, Tan-Tan can steal (and it would be stealing, as she is not her own property but Antonio’s) herself away and write her own story. The images flooding her, if they look anything like the variety of images in the reader’s universe, show a multitude of representations. There is no *one* Midnight Robber, so it follows that she would not be *the* Robber Queen but “She would be Robber Queen.” Dropping the article does three things. First, it is capacious enough to accommodate any number of iterations of the Midnight Robber, who *is* saddled with the article. Second, there is no Lacanian desire in “Robber Queen” like there would be in “the Robber Queen.” Tan-Tan does not desire to become anything; she is confident that “she would be Robber Queen.” Third, it acts as a name, not a role.



Robber Queen can replace Tan-Tan in a way “the Robber Queen” could not. If this were a play, a script reading “Tan-Tan as The Robber Queen” would mean something far different from “Tan-Tan as Robber Queen.” The former sounds more like a plot device or bestial interloper, like *The Wicked Witch of the West* (Baum). The latter sounds like an actual character, a real person.

These past associations, seemingly inconsequential, add up. The pouring on of silences: Antonio’s and Ione’s parental silence, their refusal to verbally acknowledge the Robber Queen, the public’s silence in the wake of Tan-Tan’s grief, all add up. Tan-Tan’s definitive split may occur on New Half-Way Tree, but the perforations begin on Toussaint. “Tragedy has a more respectful attitude to the past, to the often-cruel permanence of its impress: it honors, however reluctantly, the obligations the past imposes” (D. Scott 135). If this tie to the past is the case, then Tan-Tan’s split is all the more tragic. Each past silence is an obligation on the present. Tan-Tan accepts and embraces those obligations, using them to create new stories for those after her.

Antonio spends the vast majority of page 71 insisting he and Tan-Tan will find freedom. He does not specify what that freedom will look like, nor does he give any indication of his plans for obtaining it. Tan-Tan does not have a say in this mission or offer any input as to what kind of freedom she will obtain. She is captive in Antonio’s quest for freedom, a slave to Antonio’s desire to control. This desire can be seen in his refusal to accept Chichibud’s exchange for survival, his insistence on determining “what is beast and not beast,” and his control over Tan-Tan’s body (Hopkinson, *Midnight Robber* 93). Antonio’s quest for a freedom that does not exist on New Half-Way Tree, a freedom that requires the subjugation of someone else—a

zero-sum freedom in which he is free to make others not free—is doomed from the start.

As is often the case in this novel, “it is impossible, especially for errant males, to escape the consequences of one’s own actions, hence a strong ethical presence that ultimately reinforces the desirability of women’s liberation into self-defined freedom” (Collier 452). Antonio is unable to escape his past neglect of Tan-Tan or his current sexual transgressions. Tan-Tan crafts the Robber Queen in his absence; the Robber Queen breaks off his unwanted presence. She crafts the Robber Queen over years. She is a self-defined character that facilitates Tan-Tan’s ability to obtain her freedom and disseminating her story in the manner she chooses. Antonio finds out Tan-Tan has been spending her time with a local boy, Melonhead. This incites his rage:

As he whipped her Antonio was dragging her by the arm through the house, into her bedroom. He threw her on the bed.

“Is man you want? I is man? I go show you what a man could do for you!”

No. No. She couldn’t face this again, after years free from it. He kicked her legs apart, yanked up her skirt, tore her underwear off. He pushed into her. She bawled out for the tearing pain between her legs. He grunted, “I is man too, you know! Is this what you want! Is this?”

Something was scraping at her waist. Her hand found it. The scabbard. With the knife inside. A roaring started up in her ears. It couldn’t have been she. It must have been the Robber Queen who pulled out the knife. Antonio raised up to shove into the person on the bed again. It must have been the Robber Queen, the outlaw woman,

who quick like a snake got the knife braced at her breastbone just as Antonio slammed his heavy body right onto the blade.

“Uhh!” Antonio jerked like a fish on a hook. He collapsed onto her. His weight drove the knife handle backwards against her breastbone, gouging upwards until it was under her chin. Antonio’s head fell on Tan-Tan’s own. She screamed. His body convulsed, then relaxed. Thick blood gushed out of his mouth. She heard his bowels loose in death. Then she smelt it.

Her body went cold. She started to tremble uncontrollable. She lay there under Antonio’s corpse, waiting for Melonhead to come and end the nightmare. (Hopkinson, *Midnight Robber* 168).

From a formatting standpoint, this passage simply *looks* different from the initial rape scene. First, these are relatively short paragraphs, as opposed to the unbroken, barely-formatted wall of text. The paragraph breaks open up space for interruption and redirection. They provide the space in which Tan-Tan can respond, even if only to herself “No. No.” to Antonio’s questions. (In fact, the only person who needs to hear “No. No.” would be Tan-Tan’s inner self, as surely saying “no” to a rapist would have no effect.) A single block of text represents a top-down, one-sided power relationship in which Antonio acts upon Tan-Tan and Tan-Tan puts up no physical resistance. The broken-up text enables action, reaction, exchange, and resistance.

What also sets this scene stylistically apart from the initial rape scene is the lack of italicized text preceding and following the main action. These italics, as discussed earlier, represent repeated speech, an environmental condition. Antonio

says those things to open up and close the scene. His omnipresent voice maintains narratological control over the abuse. They may be Antonio's words, but they are not dialogue. First, obviously, because dialogue requires more than one participant, Antonio's solitary voice is not in conversation with anything. They are words painted over Tan-Tan's story. Second, the italics indicate repeated words because the action was repeated. Rape, remorse, repeat. Antonio's words, this time around, are in quotation marks. It is specific speech for a singular event. He says these words only once because the event happens only once. He will not move any part of his (or anyone else's) body after his death. He will not utter those words again. This event will not become routine for Tan-Tan.

The venue for this scene is different from the initial scene. This assault takes place in Tan-Tan's room. No such detail is given for the initial rape. Previously Antonio "laid her down on the bed" (Hopkinson, *Midnight Robber* 140). This time he drags her "into her bedroom" (Hopkinson, *Midnight Robber* 168). Yes, Antonio initiates the abuse by asking, "I go tuck you into bed, all right?", but neither the bed nor the room is described as belonging to Tan-Tan. There is no possessive pronoun because she was, at that point, still Antonio's property. This time, the final time, Tan-Tan owns the setting. She controls her geography. She has home-field advantage, perhaps because she adapted to New Half-Way Tree more quickly than Antonio, as evinced in their divergent reactions to the first food on the planet.

Antonio's claim that "I go show you what man could do for you" is not particularly new to Tan-Tan. He has been showing her what "man could do" her entire life. "Man could" ignore her yearning for an engaged parent. "Man could"

condition her into silence and stasis by flooding her with luxury over love. “Man could” strip that luxury away by kidnapping her and taking her and taking her from her home reality. “Man could” control her speech and movements in new environments. “Man could” force himself on and in her. She knows all too well what “man could do.”

“Man could” also, through the accretion of these violations, acts of violence, and subjugating forces, cause a split in Tan-Tan that enables her to end “man.” “Man” showed her how to rob someone of her story. As he invades her he grunts, “I is man too, you know!” Yes, she knows. She has experienced it before. She retreated into the Robber Queen to avoid “man.” Luckily, the Robber Queen paid attention while Tan-Tan retreated. Robber Queen knows how to be “man.” She can be violent just like him.

Tan-Tan gives the Robber Queen the tools to kill Antonio. She locates the knife and puts it in the Robber Queen’s hand. She knew to have the scabbard attached to her thigh from the previous rape, when she would focus on the Robber Queen doll, with “its dress...up around its waist...its thigh holster with the knife in it” (Hopkinson, *Midnight Robber* 140). This time around, with Antonio having “yanked up her skirt” up around her waist, she finds the scabbard “scraping against her waist...with the knife inside” (Hopkinson, *Midnight Robber* 168). The Robber Queen, equipped, can violate Antonio in the same way he violated Tan-Tan.

The Robber Queen costume Antonio gives Tan-Tan (via Ione) in exchange for his absence at the Jonkanoo Festival, is elaborate, both in its physicality and in Hopkinson’s description. The costume came with cap guns, both ineffective and

impersonal. Tan-Tan does not make the facsimile real when the Robber Queen takes over. She does not exchange the cap guns for real guns. She opts for the knife. She has been planning this moment from the first time Antonio forced himself upon her. While retreating into the doll, observing the holster, she decides “it would be real nice if the wooden knife inside it were really sharp steel” (Hopkinson, *Midnight Robber*, 141).

The knife enables Tan-Tan (and the Robber Queen) to reflect back Antonio’s actions on to his body. As he begins to “shove into the person on the bed again,” the Robber Queen interrupts. She penetrates Antonio before he has another chance to penetrate her. She is “man,” showing Antonio just “what man could do” to him (Hopkinson, *Midnight Robber* 168). In the previous description of Antonio’s sexual violence there is no mention of fluid, be it ejaculate, saliva, blood, or sweat. There is no mention of an ending because “the bad thing happened plenty of times after that.” There is no need to describe Antonio’s release because it happens all over again. Antonio forces himself upon Tan-Tan, reaches orgasm, then promises it will be the last time. “But he couldn’t help heself” (Hopkinson, *Midnight Robber* 141). Antonio’s orgasm may signal the end of the violent act for him, but not for Tan-Tan. She is forced to live with the memory and painful anticipation of the next time he is unable to “help heself.” There is no need to mention, let alone describe, Antonio’s orgasm because it signifies nothing to Tan-Tan.

When the Robber Queen takes over, however, the reader gets all the physical descriptors of Antonio’s orgasm. Antonio, in a moment of ecstasy, utters “Uhh!,” jerks and seizes “like a fish on a hook,” and collapses onto the bed (Hopkinson,

*Midnight Robber*, 168). Note he jerks like a “fish on a hook” and not a fish flopping about on land—the previous two are constrained in movement by the metal forced inside them. The Robber Queen penetrates Antonio with the knife and Antonio gives all the markers of an orgasm: writhing, guttural noises, collapse, and surrender. Antonio’s ecstasy is made explicit this time around because it is the only moment of ecstasy that is relevant to Tan-Tan. There is even the expulsion of bodily fluid: blood out of his mouth and shit out of his anus in exchange for semen out of his penis. It is a release that cannot be described monosensually: Tan-Tan sees the blood, hears the evacuation (and Antonio’s groans), and smells his feces. This is the corporeal description Hopkinson defers, from which Tan-Tan retreats, becoming more than explicit when it actually signifies an end. He experiences (and the reader is witness to) not a *petit mort* but a full death.

Tan-Tan makes the myth of the Robber Queen spill over to the real world, an inversion of the notion of real stories turning into myth. Having played as the Robber Queen and received her costume, Tan-Tan wants to see herself in the mirror. Her eshu, the interface between her and the ‘Nansi Web, says the name Belle Starr, which piques Tan-Tan’s interest (Hopkinson, *Midnight Robber* 28). Tan-Tan follows up, leading to one of the “regular incursions of documentary cyber-information showing real cultural history” (Collier 450). Eshu informs Tan-Tan that in the past, on earth, tasks and opportunities were in a large part determined by gender. Tan-Tan, incredulous, demands to know more, and finds out about Belle Starr, who, according to Eshu, was “a cowgirl performer from America,” An assertion that may be accurate in this alternate universe, but not in the reader’s (Hopkinson, *Midnight Robber* 29).

Tan-Tan asks for a picture of Belle Starr, to which Eshu responds that there are no pictures of her, that it was too long ago (Hopkinson, *Midnight Robber* 29). In the reader's universe, pictures of Belle Starr *do* exist, as seen below:



#### **Belle Starr**

Here one can glimpse a schism in archive between the reader's universe and the universe of Toussaint. Hopkinson's invocation of real names in alternative configurations challenges the importance of historical accuracy in terms of what new alternatives people can create. In the reader's universe, Myra Maybelle Shirley "Belle" Starr, the "Bandit Queen," was not a performer but an outlaw and a descendant of the Hatfields (Schroeder).

For Tan-Tan, it does not matter if the story is real. It is one she has read before, and is one she can emulate, revise, and adapt to her own needs. In this reality,



her Belle Starr was a performer, so she can expand that role and take it off the stage. She practices in play, then transmits in public. At the Jour Overt, there is a long performance in which the multiple Robber Kings are the primary characters. Tan-Tan watches, rapt, sitting in the Robber Queen costume for which only she knows the name:

And so it went: the classic tale, much embroidered over the centuries, mirrored the autobiography of Olaudah Equiano, an African noble's son stolen into slavery on seventeenth-century Earth. The Robber Kings' stream-of-consciousness speeches always told of escaping the horrors of slavery and making their way into brigandry as a way of surviving in the new and terrible white devils' land which they'd found themselves. (Hopkinson, *Midnight Robber* 57).

This phrase "much embroidered" calls to mind Dayan's idea of visual encrustation. Embroidered stories do not just show the story itself, but the multiple layers of its telling, stitched over and decorated, much like Tan-Tan's hat.

If The Robber King is Olaudah Equiano, with his intentional myth-making and the porous boundary between his lived experience and his narrative, then the Robber Queen (as embodied and disseminated by Tan-Tan) is Mary Prince. Prince's story, like the Robber Queen's is highly mediated. Silences appear in both stories, and the source of and reasoning behind those silences are ambiguous at best. Marlene Allen finds the characters in *Midnight Robber* to be "akin to slave narrators like Frederick Douglass, Harriet Jacobs, and Mary Prince" in that they "must figure out

strategies to survive the confining circumstances in which they live and gain a measure of empowerment and self-ownership in the process” (Allen 76). In the novel, Tan-Tan not only finds these strategies through her embodiment of the Robber Queen, but also disseminates them to a future generation. In order to make the Robber Queen story as clear and usable as possible, Tan-Tan intentionally omits difficult and traumatic events. Mary Prince does the same in her narrative.

It is clear Prince’s narrative leaves a large number of events and actions on the cutting room floor, so to speak. Much in the same way Tan-Tan realizes, after a series of abuses at the hands of her father, that through her body she “could rule man easy, with just one thing,” Prince used her body to open up opportunities that would otherwise be unavailable to her (e.g., passage between different plantations, being able to both raise the funds for and purchase her freedom) (Hopkinson, *Midnight Robber* 151). Prince used her body, and the sex acts she could perform with it, as a tool, which is a concept that would have been diametrically opposed to English conceptions of propriety and chastity. Only her actions that “exhibit the moral agency of a free individual” are recorded in her narrative. Her exchanges of sex acts for money, safety, comfort, or any other kind of advantage are not events that happen in the narrative. As Sharpe says, “that Prince’s sexual abuse would cast doubt on her character shows that she was expected to adhere to standards of morality impossible under the conditions of slavery” (Sharpe 32). This tension between Prince’s lived experience and acceptable narration create an impossible circumstance. There is a point where Tan-Tan has a disturbing dream, causing her to wake up “sweating, to the sound of the tree frogs singing out sunrise. She felt unreal. Is which world she living

in; this daddy tree, or the nightmare daddy world?” (Hopkinson, *Midnight Robber* 213). This feeling of unreality can apply to Prince’s narrative. She cannot say she was abused or used sex in order to escape (or defer) abuse, because in doing so she would sacrifice her chance to tell her story, a story that is incomplete because of (at least in part) narrative restraints placed on her from outside.

Sharpe casts the silencing of Prince’s sexual agency by her sponsors, publishers, interviewers, and amanuenses, in a negative light. The expectations for her conduct were impossible to achieve. It is impossible for someone to be sexually chaste<sup>25</sup> if she is a victim of forced sexual acts, which her narrative alludes to in episodes such as her assisting Mr D-- with his bath. Tan-Tan’s unreality is a bit different, as she self-silences her sexual abuse. She understands her witnesses, especially young girls, will be the people who ultimately write and reproduce (both in text and in action) the story of the Robber Queen, so she insists there is no mention of the rape. Her silence on this matter communicates to those looking on that they do not have to go through abuse in order to be Robber Queens. They can be Robber Queens without experiencing the pain the along the way. Tan-Tan has absorbed that pain for them. In this manner, in controlling what aspects of her story are made public, Tan-Tan (whose personality is split) acts as her own amanuensis.

Of the silences in Prince’s narrative, and other slave narratives generally, Toni Morrison writes, “In shaping the experience to make it palatable to those who were in a position to alleviate it, the [enslaved people] were silent about many things, and they ‘forgot’ many other things” (Morrison 110, qtd in Sharpe 32). In showing Tan-

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<sup>25</sup> This is, of course, if one measures chastity by the physical act devoid of the context and circumstances surrounding it.

Tan's refusal to disseminate stories of her abuse, Hopkinson gives the reader a glimpse into the processes behind "forgetting," as Morrison would put it. By exploring the process, Hopkinson offers an alternative reason for silencing that does not portray the act as solely responding to the demands of an "antislavery movement that did not condone practices that went against the Protestant ideals of obedience, self-discipline, hard work, and moderation" (Sharpe 33). Hopkinson shows that there are alternative, internal reasons for silencing. Sharpe's reasoning for the silences in the narrative does not account for silences created by Prince. Prince and company only imagine one kind of audience (white, European, wealthy). It is possible Prince imagined a different audience of currently enslaved women. Prince did not want other enslaved women to believe their only way out of bondage would be through resorting to sexual transactions. To channel Alice Walker, Prince's story had not been written before. Putting this narrative out in the marketplace (of both ideas and text-objects) would no doubt affect future stories and actions. Tan-Tan's explicitly states "nothing about the rape," giving the reader a glimpse into alternative reasons for silencing. This glimpse into the alternative can aid in developing new ways of understanding the silences in Prince's narrative. These silences may not solely be in response to nineteenth-century Protestant morality.

Sharpe writes that employing Freud's notion of mnemonic trace "can be useful" when analyzing the silences in Prince's narrative:

Freud describes the mnemonic as the product of two opposing forces, whereby the effort to record an experience comes up against a resistance. This two-handed operation

moves us away from considering a singularity of agency in any record of the past. The product of the double force of remembering and forgetting, repetition and erasure, legibility and illegibility, a screen memory is not a record of what happened but of the way it was remembered to have happened. (Sharpe 33)

The notion of mnemonic trace is critical when it concerns slave narratives, especially Prince's, because it calls for the reader/researcher to question the authenticity of a historical document. Authenticity, here, means the representation of events as they happened, not as they are remembered. In Sharpe's deployment of Freud's theory, no text can be an authentic historical document, but solely a record of memory. Prince's narrative, then, is not a record of her experience, but a memory "against a resistance" (the resistance being the demands of Protestant morality). The two hands of this "two-handed operation" are Prince's memory on the left and Protestant morality on the right. Prince's narrative is a document that includes markers or signs of Prince's memory, echoes of resistance against that memory, and the interplay between the two. One can find instances of the interplay through silences, "repetition and erasure," and "legibility and illegibility." Mnemonic trace, with its focus on the play between memory, resistance, and record is highly effective in working towards uncovering the gaps between the story that is told in the narrative and Prince's lived experience. It also prevents alternative readings of these silences, readings that position these silences as future-looking and didactic. Tan-Tan's decision to self-silence opens up space for such readings.

If one considers the didactic elements in Prince's narrative, one can imagine an alternative audience from Protestant English abolitionists. If one sees the abolitionists as the sole intended audience or reading community, as Sharpe does, then of course anything that "is forgotten, erased or illegible" is so because it did not service the needs of that audience (Sharpe 33). Paquet describe Prince as "a political activist, a woman who spoke not simply on behalf of herself but also on behalf of a community of slaves" (Sharpe 41). Prince's narrative says the same, giving something of a statement of purpose:

Oh the horrors of slavery!—how the thought of it pains my heart! But the truth ought to be told of it; and what my eyes have seen I think is my duty to relate; for few people in England know what slavery is. I have been a slave—I have felt what a slave feels, and I know what a slave knows; and I would have all the good people in England to know it too, that they may break our chains, and set us free. (Prince 21)

Prince "know[s] what a slave knows." She also knows what a woman who bought her way out of slavery knows. Her narrative explicitly states she is a representative, communicating the position of enslaved people to those who are not enslaved—this is the reading Sharpe's analysis supports. There is also a way to view this text as flowing in the opposite direction: Prince communicating the position of a now free woman to those who are still in bondage. Placing Prince's text within Patricia Hill Collins's theory of black feminism, in which the primary action is black women communicating strategies of survival, allows for such an opposite reading (Collins

57). This reading shows that these silences could be intentional, self-generated, and not solely in response to the pressures of Protestant morality.

As Prince's narrative moves from chronicling her life on various plantations and under various masters and mistresses (much like *Midnight Robber* chronicles Tan-Tan's movements under Antonio's control) to chronicling her steps toward obtaining self-ownership (much as *Midnight Robber* chronicles Tan-Tan's deliberate steps toward controlling the Robber Queen story), the text shifts to a decidedly more didactic register. This shift to the didactic is best seen in her account of how she raised the funds to buy herself:

The way in which I made my money was this.—When my master and mistress went from home, as they sometimes did, and left me to take care of the house and premises, I had a good deal of time to myself, and made the most of it. I took in washing, and sold coffee and yams and other provisions to the captains of ships. I did not sit still idling during the absence of my owners; for I wanted, by all honest means, to earn money to buy my freedom. Sometimes I bought a hog cheap on board ship, and sold it for double the money on shore; and I also earned a great deal by selling coffee. By this means I by degrees acquired a little cash. A gentleman also lent me some to help buy my freedom—but when I could not get free he got it back again. His name was Captain Abbott. (Prince 27)

From the first line of this paragraph Prince's purpose is clear. She is going to outline how she raised her money. It is striking how she refers to the funds as “my money.”

Typically people would say ‘I made money’ without the possessive pronoun. Prince has been making money for someone else her entire life; of course she is going to emphasize her ownership. It is a statement that could resonate with other people who have not been making their own money, that is, other people who are in bondage. The narrative presents a list of ways in which one could make his or her own money.

The opening sentence signals a break from the preceding paragraphs, which serve to tell longer episodes. There preceding paragraphs, which narrativize incidents in which Prince’s mistress, Mrs. Wood, “got vexed” with Prince, such as when she spoke back to Mrs. Wood or got in trouble about “a quarrel [Prince] had about a pig with another slave woman” (Prince 26-7). Each incident receives its own paragraph, whereas the instances of Prince making her money read more as a bullet list in prose form.

There is an imbalance in how much ink is spent to chronicle Prince’s punishments and how little is spent on how she raised funds to buy her freedom. This imbalance obviously belies the explicit motive for creating, publishing, and disseminating the narrative—so that “all the good people in England know” the horrors of slavery as well (Prince 21). One can see the focus on the horrors though the pathetic diction employed in the paragraphs surrounding the “list” on page 27: “I was so vexed and hurt by her words,” “I bore in silence a great deal of ill words,” “I had no comfort” (Prince 26-7). In these paragraphs, as seen in the brief excerpts, people speak to and act upon Prince’s psyche and body. There is much made of Prince’s mental state in response to these transgressions, explicitly stating her “vexed” reactions. There is much made because these paragraphs are targeted toward people



who Prince and Pringle believe to be ignorant of the psychological toll slavery takes on a person who is enslaved. The explicit effort of the narrative (and thus the paragraphs surrounding the “list”) is to garner sympathy and support from white English aristocrats (the people who had the funds and cultural capital to incite policy changes) in order to make these people demand repeal of the laws legalizing slavery. These people needed to be convinced, in no uncertain terms, that the institution of slavery hurts many people. The text emphasizes the horrors of the institution to achieve this goal. It’s explicit purpose, as Salih would say, is to function as “a piece of propaganda, a protest designed to convince the English reader that the iniquities of slavery in the colonies continued even though an Act of Parliament ending the slave trade had been passed in 1807” (Salih xxx). I contend the “list” on page 27 is not targeted toward this explicit audience and is not propaganda, as evinced by the content and register shift. The “list” is a how-to manual for then-current enslaved people who are dealing, on the ground level with the “iniquities of slavery” *and* a plea to aristocrats.

Thomas Pringle states in the first sentence of his preface that “The idea of writing Mary Prince’s history was first suggested by herself” (Pringle 3). If one takes Pringle at his word, then one can speculate that Prince was not coerced by abolitionists to relay her experience in the name of political progress. If Prince was the first to suggest that they craft and publish the narrative, then there must have been reasons for her wanting to do so. Yes, the narrative explicitly states the document was written for and to the English so they could more fully grasp the ongoing horrors of the institution. Sharpe shows how some acts were left out of the published narrative.

Guided by Freud's theory of mnemonic trace, Sharpe makes the assumption that these silences are because of the demand by abolitionists, based on the Protestant morality, that a figure of sympathy must remain chaste if there is to be any effort to alleviate the condition of people who share the experiences of that representative figure. If Prince crafted the "list" to communicate strategies for survival, it could be possible that some things were left out because they would get in the way of her mission. She wanted to return to the Caribbean, so she did what she could in her absence to help alleviate the conditions of those she left behind. Perhaps tracts about her exchanging sex for money would be unproductive to those who need to get out of their own bondage.

Sharpe's methodology for identifying the silences in Prince's narrative consists of tracking "signs of her subjectivity across several documents, including the proslavery propaganda and courtroom cross-examination that were intended to discredit her" (Sharpe 36). This evidence is excellent for exposing the silences in the narrative. But it is not productive in uncovering the motivations behind those silences. Sharpe gives the "what," an extremely crucial piece of the puzzle, through hard evidence. How she comes about the "why" is a bit more inductive and speculative. This is not to fault Sharpe—there is no hard evidence that shows Prince's thought process at the time of her relaying the narrative. Nor is there any transcript of the conversations between her and Susanna Strickland, her amanuensis (Salih, "Notes," 71). That is the frustration and privilege of internal monologue: even under extreme emotional, physical, spiritual, and/or political pressures, one can still be the sole owner and consumer of one's own truth. Prince's narrative was crafted in the

problem-space (to call back to David Scott) of nascent abolition and Protestant sexual morality—it is by no means unreasonable for Sharpe to read this socio-political problem-space onto the narrative and into its silences. This reading neglects the potential personal, the unnamed inner thoughts and motivations behind these silences. These silences leave room for speculation.

Hopkinson foregrounds alterity as a means of knowledge and identity constructions in *Midnight Robber*—Tan-Tan most likely would not have developed, embodied, and disseminated the Robber Queen character without her forced immersion into an alternate dimension. This emphasis on alternatives, combined with the parallels between Tan-Tan and Prince’s lives (constant movement, multiple people performing subjugating acts, a mercenary relationship with sexuality fostered by repeated sexual abuse, and a desire to disseminate a version of their stories) allows a reading of Tan-Tan’s internal monologues and non-vocal decisions as possibly giving a glimpse into alternative reasons for Prince’s narrative’s silences on her own sexuality.

As Sharpe says, “The slave narrative was a means by which an unlettered black woman such as Prince could express herself in writing. But it also exhibits the triangular relationship between slaves, readers, and evangelical sponsors” (Sharpe 31). Tan-Tan understands this triangular relationship as she begins to take control over the Robber Queen’s personality. The Robber Queen was born in response to silence and neglect. Her sponsors (or parents) molded their child into the ideal of Cockpit County, dressing her in such a manner that her public tears could only be interpreted as an outpouring of patriotism and not as a physical manifestation of her

inner pain and loneliness. The Robber Queen takes over and allows her to put this past behind her.

Now, the Robber Queen needs to exist for a new generation of readers. The Robber Queen, as Tan-Tan learned about her, was only a performance, not a real person. Tan-Tan knows, with the right inspiration, these stories can breed extratextual results. She also knows that stories can be borne out of the retelling of what was previously witnessed. When Antonio challenges Quashee (Ione's lover) to a duel, Tan-Tan hears a woman scream, "Oh, God! Look story now" (Hopkinson, *Midnight Robber* 42). Since the age of six, Tan-Tan has known the power of witnessing over the number of stories available. She knows what happens in public, what is "story now" can become the stories girls emulate later. Prince, in a similar manner, crafts her list as the "story now," a quick tale that outlines strategies for obtaining freedom that do not require suffering en route.

In *Midnight Robber*, "Storytelling serves as the primary means for the transmission of knowledge for Hopkinson's characters' precursors, and factual 'accuracy' is only one criterion for a good story; others are delivery, style, audience response, and relevance to current conditions" (Enteen 266). Tan-Tan is well-aware of the power of storytelling. She spent most of her life interacting only with stories. Ignored by her parents, Tan-Tan consumed stories of the Midnight Robber to fill the void. She knows the power of stories because they gave her the tools to escape Antonio's slavery. She knows stories can be made from observed action, that style is critical. When the conditions are relevant and the audience is appropriate, Tan-Tan has to do a bit of myth-making in the moment. She is beaten down, ready to give up

her fight, but she cannot let the girls in her audience see that story: “Her arms wouldn’t work to push her upright. They trembled and ached. Tan-Tan rocked to her knees, then her feet, wept with the effort of tossing the remaining blanket over her shoulders. She smiled her brightest smile at the little girls” (Hopkinson, *Midnight Robber* 288). Here, Tan-Tan knows she is “story now” in the eyes of these girls. They need to see her rise, despite all odds. Just like Scott’s Toussaint, the impossible is the only reality she cares about. They need “this narrative of resistance,” so they can emulate it later (Trouillot 71). They need to see her rise with pleasure and joy so their emulation can be driven by hope and beauty, not escape and pain. Tan-Tan cannot get up with her arms,<sup>26</sup> so she finds an alternative way by rocking on to her knees. She is in agony, but the girls in the audience must never know. The audience response is what she intended. Later, “she began to notice little girls playing at Robber Queen” (Hopkinson, *Midnight Robber* 288).

Dayan talks about myth’s silencing effect on women’s roles and stories in the Haiti:

What happened to actual black women during Haiti’s repeated revolutions, as they were mythologized by men, metaphorized out of life into legend? It is unsettling to recognize that the hyperbolization necessary for myths to be mutually reinforcing not only erases these women but forestalls our turning to these real lives. (Dayan, *Haiti, History, and the Gods* 48).

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<sup>26</sup> The manner in which Tan-Tan lifts herself up is striking. She uses her hips, not her arms. If this were a traditional action movie, the audience would see the muscle-bound male, flexing and glistening with effort, triceps and biceps rippling, push himself up. Tan-Tan’s style makes use of her hips to rock her up, a more subtle action. Women’s hips are built to convey life. She uses her hips to save her own.

Tan-Tan understands the separation between life and myth, knows what myth can cover up. She sees she has been “metaphorized out of life into legend” when she sees these girls “playing at Robber Queen.” She is already myth. Those girls get to play at Robber Queen, who is strong, giving, and female, without having to endure the same torture as Tan-Tan. Because of this, Tan-Tan insists people say “nothing about the rape. Certainly nothing about Chichibud and Benta, or about daddy tree. She had drunk tree frog blood, drunk down people’s secrets with it. She owed them her silence” (Hopkinson, *Midnight Robber* 302). Tan-Tan does not want her real life to get out there. That is a story that these girls do not need. They need the Robber Queen, not another tale of pain and suffering. Tan-Tan here is refusing to participate in a society and “culture [that] offers the mantle of victimization as a substitute for transformation of society” (hooks, *Killing Rage* 18). Prince, too, refuses to take up that mantle.

Tan-Tan, after seeing the girls on New Half-Way Tree playing Robber Queen, insists no word of her rape get out. She says nothing more on the matter, but it is reasonable to assume (based on the close proximity of this demand to her witnessing the girls playing) that she does not want the girls to think being a victim of sexual abuse is a requirement or prerequisite to becoming a Robber Queen. This is a moment of intentional silencing—Tan-Tan wants the Robber Queen story and persona to disseminate, but she does not want the story to be imbricated with trauma. It is not shame or acquiescence to a moral authority that causes her to demand silence about her abuse, but her desire to look out for future generations. Prince’s narrative contains

similar silences, which I contend are in part intentional and not in response to the Protestant moral problem-space in which it was written.

Prince's narrative opens with a chronicle of how she entered bondage. The narrative states, "there was no help; I was forced to go...to a strange house, and I found myself among strange people" (Prince 8). In the same vein as Tan-Tan, who finds herself in the strange new world of New Half-Way Tree, "forced to go" by Antonio. Both women attempt to, as Prince would say, "submit [themselves] to change" (Prince 8). Prince attempts to find joy in nursing Master Daniel; Tan-Tan works to enjoy the new foods, cooking and consuming them in the manner Chichibud instructs (Hopkinson, *Midnight Robber* 105-7). They both have a moment of reckoning, an "enough" moment: Tan-Tan, when she finally unifies with the Robber Queen and kills Antonio, Prince when she awaits her turn on the auction block.

Prince laments being forced to leave her "dear little brothers in the house<sup>27</sup> in which [she] had been brought up" (Prince 11). While awaiting her turn to enter the geographies of the auction block, along with her mother and siblings, "the other slaves could say nothing to comfort" them (Prince 11). At first glance, the reason behind the slaves' inability to vocalize comfort is ambiguous. It is unclear if those enslaved people were forbidden to provide comfort or that they simply have no comfort to provide. The preceding sentences help to understand the lack of comfort: "Miss Betsy kissed us all, and, when she left us, my mother called the rest of the slaves to bid us good bye. One of them, a woman named Moll, came with her infant in her arms. 'Ah!' said my mother, seeing her turn away and look at her child with the

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<sup>27</sup> Notice the difference between her description of her childhood residence as a "house in which I had been brought up" and her declaration that the money she made is "my money."

tears in her eyes, ‘your turn will come up next’” (Prince 10-11). Here the reader witnesses an exchange between black women with an all-black audience, as Miss Betsy has taken her leave. This would be a perfect opportunity for Prince’s mother to attempt to formulate a plan to escape this fate, or at least give some comforting words. This is a space in which a hidden transcript could be made explicit (J. Scott 14). However, no one, not even Prince’s mother, who accepts the inevitability of sale, can provide any help. Prince, like Tan-Tan, learns through witnessing interactions between parents and children that no one will help alleviate her condition without her direct intervention.

Tan-Tan cries when she sees a father having a healthy interaction with his child because it reinforces that her relationship with Antonio is not healthy. Prince despairs when she sees her mother unable to console another mother with child because it reinforces the extreme momentum propelling the slave auctioning process. It moves forever ahead. Both girls gain profound insight into their condition through witnessing parent-child relationships. A common trope in slave narratives is the realization of the inhumanity of the institution of slavery through witnessing the torture of another enslaved person (Feldman 188). These two moments refract that trope a bit. Instead of Tan-Tan understanding her solitary condition through witnessing another girl being ignored and silenced, she gains insight through witnessing the opposite of her condition, inverting the trope. Prince, in witnessing her mother’s inability to provide comfort to another, realizes no one will be able to help her. This moment alters the trope through witnessing another slave’s resignation to pain, not through witnessing the master inflicting it. Both acts of witnessing not only



give Prince and Tan-Tan insight into their relationships with abusive institutions (chattel slavery and Antonio's fatherhood, respectively), but also how important the act of witnessing itself can be. As previously discussed, Tan-Tan uses this knowledge to influence the story girls witness when in the presence of the Robber Queen. Whether it is by making a show out of her smiles or by demanding no one speak of her rape, Tan-Tan intentionally silences some of her past. She sacrifices the replication of her past for the hope that others' futures may be better. It is possible Mary Prince uses her knowledge of witnessing in a similar manner. She silences her abuses and sexual exchanges so the enslaved people who may access her story, either through reading it directly, hearing it read, or hearing a retelling (or any combination of those three), do not think being abused or coercive sexual exchange is a requirement for purchasing one's freedom. She silences these moments so other enslaved people do not witness it. She compresses her strategies for raising money, perhaps so a literate enslaved person could rip out the page and 'witness' to others, on an easy-to-conceal cheat sheet, some of Prince's strategies for obtaining freedom and surviving.

In the aftermath of simultaneous disasters<sup>28</sup>, one an earthquake and the other Prince's breaking "a large earthen jar," Prince's body is left "all blood and bruises" (Prince 16, 17). She is left black and blue not from the violent upheaval of tectonic plates sliding and shifting, but from a series of beatings she received at the hand of her current master, Captain I--. Prince's fellow enslaved people, upon seeing her condition, in which she could not help but "moan piteously," could do nothing for her

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<sup>28</sup> Disaster is relative. Most people would call an earthquake a disaster, although no one got hurt in this particular one. Prince's breaking the jar is far more disastrous in its effects on Prince.

besides shake “their heads and [say], ‘Poor child! Poor child!’” (Prince 17). Just as her mother was unable to help Prince, her elders—those with more plantation experience and knowledge—could do nothing besides sympathize and empathize.

Prince finds herself echoing the words of her fellow enslaved people on Captain I—’s plantation when she reunites with her mother: “She had a sweet child with her—a little sister I had never seen, about four years of age, called Rebecca. I took her on shore with me, for I felt I should love her directly; and I kept her with me a week. *Poor little thing!* her’s has been a sad life, and continues so to this day” (Prince 23, my italics). First, note how Prince does not repeat the exclamation as the fellow enslaved people on Captain and Mrs. I--’s plantation did. There is no time or energy to expend on unproductive sympathy. Prince notes Rebecca is still in bondage at the time of the narrative’s writing, a fact Pringle confirms in a footnote: “Rebecca is still alive and in slavery in Bermuda” (Prince 23)<sup>29</sup>. Prince does not know the whereabouts of most of her relatives, but she knows at least one of them is still enslaved. It is not unreasonable to speculate that Prince had Rebecca on her mind when telling her story. It is also not unreasonable to think Prince would want to include information on how to escape that bondage—communicate strategies for survival—to her sister(s) in captivity. It is thirdly not unreasonable to assume Prince would not want Rebecca to think sexual exchange is a necessary condition for obtaining the funds with which to buy her freedom.

At the end of the list, Prince states that a man named Captain Abbot gave her money, but that she wound up being unable to spend it on her freedom and thus

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<sup>29</sup> This moment would be an example of “Prince’s representations of the grounds of connection between Blacks throughout the region” (Nwankwo 157).

returned it to him. According to the testimony, “she gave at the libel trial against Pringle in March 1833, Prince claimed that she lived with Captain Abbot for about seven years, although apparently ‘[s]he did not live in the house with him, but sleep with him sometimes in another hut’” (*The Times*, 1 March 1833, std in Salih, “Notes” 77). Every other item on Prince’s list is an example of money she earned through non-sexual labor exchange. The mention of Captain Abbot’s money does not happen until the end of the list, where it is dismissed as a non-event. Reading this dismissal through the lens of Tan-Tan’s generative silencing, it is entirely possible that Prince does not detail her relationship (sexually, residentially, romantically) with Abbot because it is not of any use to those who may read this list as a guide for obtaining their own freedom. Captain Abbot is too circumstantially-bound to be a reliable source of money.

Every item on the list, with the exception of Captain Abbot, involves Prince exchanging her non-sexual labor for money—money with which she could buy her freedom. That money is tangible, transportable, and decidedly Prince’s. She earned that money in ways that could be replicated by other people in bondage on other plantations. Be it reselling produce or livestock or taking in extra washing, these are tasks that could conceivably happen on other plantations. The narrative describes these tasks generally, with no mention of specific people, boats, or markets. Every task on that list is general and not specific to circumstance. The tasks are written of generally so they can be repeated. Whether in Saint Domingue or Kingston, any person in bondage could potentially bring in extra washing to raise funds. Captain

Abbot is bound to circumstance and geography, however and is dismissed, at least in part, because of this specificity.

Using Sharpe's methodology, which involves reading testimony against narrative in order to find silences then finding the resistance that forced the silence, it would be very easy to the narrative's silence on Captain Abbot is due to English Protestant morality. Said morality would not allow for an unmarried woman to sleep with a man, especially a man who gives that women money (although it is not clear if Abbot's money was explicitly in exchange for sex acts or cohabitation). Prince could not been the pure poster-child victim needed for the abolitionists' cause if her relationship with Captain Abbot were made explicit. This is most definitely part of the story behind the silence—one cannot ignore the problem-space in which the narrative was published. I contend the narrative also dismissed Captain Abbot because he is of no use to anyone currently in bondage. There is no way one can predict the appearance of a benefactor, romantic interest, sexual exchange, or otherwise. Captain Abbot is not a useful component in Prince's list. It is this-future-looking utility in storytelling that is the ultimate focus here.

*Midnight Robber* provides insight into the utility of alternative stories. Tan-Tan endures loneliness, abuse, inter-dimensional transport, and an endless procession of new environments and geographies. She clings to the Robber Queen story to get through those difficulties; when bad things happen they happen to the Robber Queen, not Tan-Tan. She sees the real-world impact of story, how it can serve as a guide or protector through difficult and impossible circumstances. The fiction of the Robber Queen enabled her to endure the real-world abuse that should be impossible. With

this knowledge, she silences those parts of her story that could potentially bring about more pain. If one embodies a story in order to escape pain, then a story that requires more pain only compounds the problem.

The novel gives the reader a glimpse into the processes behind developing, embodying, and disseminating a story. Like the Robber Queen story, one can use *Midnight Robber*'s stories in a way that has impact outside of the text. The novel shows the generative power silencing can carry. Sometimes events are silenced and/or obscured not out of shame or regret, but because they are simply not useful.

Hopkinson is adamant about the extratextual utility of science, speculative, and fabulist fiction. This utility stems from the genres' ability to create "an arena wherein [black writers] can interrogate racism, sexism, and other oppressions in new formats while hearkening back to the African diasporic past" (Allen 76). Hopkinson, in her new format, is able to interrogate approaches to silence that place those with the most power at the center of inquiry and discourse. Her interrogation shows silencing as a protective, future-looking act, which can inform readings of "the African diasporic past," like Mary Prince's narrative. This understanding of silencing can open up new reading of historical silence. Instead of reading silences in a way that mandates facts were deleted for insidious or "cover-up" reasons, one can look for how silences can be future-looking, not past-obscuring. Sometimes events of the past must be deleted in order to prevent repetition. Deleting parts of the past can generate alternative futures.

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