



Blood, Soil, and Zombies: Afrofuturist Collaboration and (Re-)Appropriation in Nalo Hopkinson's *Brown Girl in the Ring*

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Abstract: In her Afrofuturist novel, *Brown Girl in the Ring*, Nalo Hopkinson unravels the psychological, cultural and historical trauma of the zombie figure. More than simply a supernatural element of the text, the zombie, and more particularly the latent psycho-social trauma it fantastically embodies, forms the very bedrock of the Afrocentric setting in a way that exposes and critiques the continued suffering of African diasporic peoples under racialized economic structures. While the origins of the zombie document Haitian anxieties surrounding slave labor, the zombie's contemporary form, in reflecting middle class preoccupations with global capitalist consumption, highlights the ways in which cultural appropriation of Afrocentric culture helps perpetuate a larger systemic cycle of violence that erases black pasts while collapsing black futures into an uncertain present. This paper will explore the ways that Hopkinson uses her vision of a dystopian Toronto that entraps and vilifies its poor racialized citizens (for the protection of its larger population) to challenge neoliberal global dominance. Through her re-privileging of Afro-Caribbean spiritual systems and knowledge frameworks, Hopkinson suggests that only by challenging and seeking alternatives to the epistemologies inherited by European modernity can we hope to counteract the violence they continuously enact upon global populations and revive hope for the prosperity of black life in the future. However, while her novel implicates cultural appropriation as part of a larger, white supremacist institutional regime, her novel's framing of Afrocentricity on diasporic Indigenous soil highlights further challenges of Afrocentric representation in Afrofuturist literature.

Keywords: *Brown Girl in the Ring*, Nalo Hopkinson, Afrofuturism, African diaspora, African studies, Afro-Caribbean studies, Canadian multiculturalism, critical race studies, Indigenous studies, zombie, zombi, global capitalism, Canadian literature

Introduction

On August 12th, 2017, white supremacists descended upon Charlottesville, Virginia to lay claim to the United States, a land they asserted has always belonged to white Americans. "Blood and soil," they cried, metaphorically

embedding their white bloodline into the cultivation of the nation while waving their pitchforks, assault rifles and, ironically, Tiki torches high into the air as a show of white male rage (Wagner, 2017). Many critics mocked the mob's use of the Tiki torch, a symbol of Polynesian and southeast Asian



culture, to express their murderous white hatred for nonwhite people (Murphy, 2017). However, the appropriation of nonwhite cultures cannot be read as an ironic departure from violent white supremacist hatred. As this essay will explore through its reading of Nalo Hopkinson's *Brown Girl in the Ring* (1998), the borrowing and misuse of nonwhite culture has always existed as part of the violent drive to erase the future of nonwhite bodies by writing over their past.

For the purposes of this essay, I focus primarily (though not exclusively) on what this violent impulse towards erasure means for black bodies. Indeed, only a few months after President Trump all but pardoned the white supremacists in Charlottesville (Merica, 2017), the FBI's counterterrorism division declared that black activists whom they identified as "black identity extremists" were potential enemies to the state and therefore must be treated as radicals (Darby, 2017). These thinly veiled attempts by the state to consolidate white supremacist power by disrupting movements that value black life can be read as part of the necropolitical rubrics of the black everyday. Achilles Mbembe (2003) has theorized 'necropolitics' as a feature of sovereign power, derived from the perception of the sovereign state's own mythical right, not only to exist, but also to terrorize and murder those bodies viewed as the "absolute enemy" (p. 25). Such a system places the right to kill into the hands of the state, its military and its police departments, and further, the urban and citizen militias, child soldiers and one-man shooters, government bodies and

private sector contractors, all of which form an anti-democratic apparatus that creates "zones of death" designed to transform certain populations into "the status of *living dead*" (p. 40).

Mbembe's theory of necropolitics is a useful lens through which we can consider how the systemic violence against black bodies involves the collapse of the future into the present (p. 37). The future of the necropolitical present has no room for black bodies that live with social, economic and political significance. Indeed, it is a future that would rather not imagine living black bodies at all. This concept has long been engrained into the European historical imagination, with Hegel's Enlightenment philosophy imagining Africans and their descendants as primitive precursors to the evolution of European reason and civilization (Mudumbe, 1988, p. 17). The maintenance of these "death worlds" requires not only a collapsing of black future, but also an erasure of black past—more specifically, a forgetting and re-writing of the pain and suffering caused by racist regimes of power. Writing over black historical trauma does not only re-write African and African diasporic history; it also involves attacking African and African diasporic *cultural* history. W.E.B Du Bois's seminal text, *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), seems to have pre-emptively foregrounded the African answer to the white supremacist cries of "blood and soil" in Charlottesville. He writes:

Your country? How came it yours? Before the Pilgrims landed we were here. Here we

have brought our three gifts and mingled them with yours: a gift of story and song—soft, stirring melody in an ill-harmonized and unmelodious land; the gift of sweat and brawn to beat back the wilderness, conquer the soil, and lay the foundations of this vast economic empire two hundred years earlier than your weak hands could have done it; the third, a gift of the Spirit. Around us the history of the land has centred for thrice a hundred years; out of the nation's heart we have called all that was best to throttle and subdue all that was worst; fire and blood, prayer and sacrifice, have billowed over this people, and they have found peace only in the altars of the God of Right. Nor has our gift of the Spirit been merely passive. Actively we have woven ourselves with the very warp and woof of this nation,—we fought their battles, shared their sorrow, mingled our blood with theirs, and generation after generation have pleaded with a headstrong, careless people to despise not Justice, Mercy, and Truth, lest the nation be smitten with a curse. Our song, our toil, our cheer, and warning have been given to this nation in blood-brotherhood. Are not these gifts worth the giving? Is not this work and striving? Would America have been America without her Negro people? (p. 162-163)

Du Bois's cry is one that can be heard throughout the African diaspora. Certainly, African-Canadian authors like Nalo Hopkinson and Lawrence Hill have "aim[ed] at an insertion of [black] trauma into the Canadian collective

memory" (Krampe, 2009, p. 63). The white supremacist denial of black trauma and cultural history certainly exists side by side with the appropriation of the "gifts" mentioned by Du Bois—story, song, culture. As Krin Gabbard (2004) writes in *Black Magic*, as evidenced by actors like Marlon Brando and singers like Christina Aguilera, "African American culture [is] essential...in mainstream American culture even when actual black people...are not present" (p. 19). In this sense, the white appropriation, misuse and transformation of black culture, as completed through various erasures, consolidates a necropolitical regime that denies black people a future.

Nalo Hopkinson's *Brown Girl in the Ring*, as an Afrofuturist text, seems to offer a corrective to this violent apparatus of black erasure. Afrofuturism, as James Edward Ford III (2014) has noted, is important for its assertion that "black people will exist in the future" (p. 161). More radically, he writes, "Afro-futurists treat blackness as a way of *envisioning futures*" (emphasis original, p. 161). *Brown Girl in the Ring* certainly uses blackness as the very blueprint through which to imagine a dystopian Toronto, framing the future with the traumatic pasts and presents of black life. West African and Caribbean culture animates heroine Ti-Jeanne's journey through an imagined future Toronto (at the time of the book's publication) in which the gods, monsters and magic of Afro-Caribbean mythology affect the lives and futures of *all* inhabitants of the city, province, and country. Specifically, it is Hopkinson's use of the zombie that truly disrupts the future-destroying



necropolitical teamwork of appropriation and erasure, particularly because the story of the zombie exists in a cross-culture white and black imaginary that blends colonial past, global capitalist present and apocalyptic future.

The zombie is most widely considered as an American cinematic horror monster, the kind to be found in movies like George A. Romero's *Night of the Living Dead* (1968) and television programs like *The Walking Dead* (2010). Steven Shaviro (2002) articulates the zombie as a collectively produced nightmare that imagine present reality as much as it imagines a possible future. As he writes, "[t]here is nothing extraordinary or supernatural about the *indeadted*...the reanimated dead...are immanent to social reality, rather than invading it from the outside" (282). That is to say that the zombie, as a figure of nightmare, exposes the social fears and anxieties present within a particular social moment even as it gestures towards, on the surface, a potential apocalyptic future. As such, the zombie apocalypse narrative "makes visible the internal ruptures, traumas and anguishes" of those imagining it, giving them a fantastical and more easily consumable representation (Orpana, 2011, p. 165).

If the zombie is a collectively produced nightmare, then who are the dreamers allowed to belong to this collective? What is it that has 'already happened' that causes the kind of anxiety that needs refiguring within the body of a nightmarish creature? What exactly is the nightmare being imagined?

In this paper, I take my cues from the assertion (Orpana 2011; Shaviro 2002; Canavan 2010) that the zombie apocalypse exists as a collective fantasy born from the fragmentation and individualism caused by late capitalism, and I consider the commercial incarnation of the zombie, always implicitly a culturally hybrid conception, in North American culture. The American zombie narrative addresses, within limits, the material consequences of neoliberalism. While it is important to expose the pathologies inherent in today's globalized economic structure, as Paul Gilroy (1993) would assert, the rise of these economic structures themselves, as well as their very constitution, is a result of racialized power (p. 15). Therefore, it cannot be extricated from the historical relation between race, labor and colonial violence. This is what the American zombie narrative, through its very construction, fails to address. The implications of this failure to the black originators of the myth are immediately felt in *Brown Girl in the Ring*. Other theorists (Lara 2012; Anatol 2004; Romdhani 2015) have discussed Hopkinson's use of the supernatural in *Brown Girl in the Ring* along the lines of postcolonial feminism, gendered agency, sexuality, and shame. I offer here a reading of the complex, hybrid imaginary of Hopkinson's zombies that exposes Afrofuturism's potential for cultural re-appropriation of the stories, lands, histories and futures stolen from Africa and its people across the globe. Whether intentionally or unintentionally, the very design of Hopkinson's dystopia dissolves the commercial imaginary of the zombie apocalypse into the dimensions of the traumatic contemporary reality as



imagined within a specifically white bourgeois framework. Thus, *Brown Girl in the Ring* acts as a site from which we can challenge the contradictions within this white bourgeois nightmare that, on one hand, demystifies the connections that must be made between capitalism and its human costs, and on the other, fails to acknowledge the differential precarity of certain kinds of black bodies within the neoliberal economic system. As Hopkinson exposes the appropriation and misuse of the zombie, she revives the Haitian *zombi*, casting black life, agency and history into the future.

Lauro and Embry (2008), in their *Zombie Manifesto*, read the zombie as what they call an ontic/hauntic object. This configuration, as they assert, destabilizes the cinematic zombie as an ontological figure by suggesting that it always already carries with it an association with Haiti, more specifically the historical context of the Haiti rebellion against the backdrop of the trans-Atlantic slave trade. “[T]here is the Haitian *zombi*,” they write, “a body raised from the dead to labor in the fields, but with a deep association of having played a role in the Haitian Revolution (thus, simultaneously resonant with the categories of slave and slave rebellion)” (p. 87). This version of the figure represented in explicit terms the exploitation and naked oppression sustained by a colonial project that imagined the enslaved as voiceless and subjectless cogs in its economic system. At the same time, the myth itself represents the voices of those silenced within this system. The *zombi* can be thought of as the slave’s nightmare. As Daniel

Cohen asserts, “[f]or the slave the only hope of release was death and the possible promise of a blissful afterlife. But if a dead slave’s body was reanimated for labor as a zombie, then the slave existence would continue even after death, a particularly horrible thought” (Cohen qtd. in Embry and Lauro, 2008, p. 98).

This nightmare imagines the never-ending suffering of black subjects. Black bodies are projected into the future, but only insofar as the necropolitical deathscape they inhabit continues indefinitely. If the *zombi* represents the fears and anxieties of Haitian slaves in the context of this particular historical moment, then what can be said of its translation into the American zombie, which Lauro and Embry describe as “a convenient boogeyman representing various social concerns” (p. 89)? Even as they make overtures to the Haitian cultural context and mention the element of appropriation inherent within the hybrid zombie figure, Lauro and Embry only seem to refer to its origins as a way to fill in the context of their posthumanist creation, the *zombii*, in order to reveal the wider contemporary reality of “we” subjects of the globalized world (p. 92). This theoretical act follows the logic that enabled the creation of the American zombie; both the *zombii* and the zombie, as either theoretical or commercial figures, subsume the elements of Haitian culture in order to extend its epistemological framework to a more ‘universal’ capitalist experience. Even as Lauro and Embry imagine the zombie (in all its incarnations) as a challenge to the subject/object dialectic, both post-*zombi* figures repeat the colonialist and imperialist strategies that obscure the subjectivity of the subaltern.



As Gayatri Spivak (1988) explains, “[i]t is impossible for contemporary French intellectuals to imagine the kind of Power and Desire that would inhabit the unnamed subject of the Other of Europe” (p. 75). In other words, it would be impossible for them to understand racialized bodies as subjects. “It is not only,” as she continues,

that everything they read, critical or uncritical, is caught within the debate of the production of that Other, supporting or critiquing the constitution of the Subject as Europe. It is also that, in the constitution of that Other of Europe, great care was taken to obliterate the textual ingredients with which such a subject could cathect, could occupy (invest?) its itinerary. (p. 75)

Storytelling, in its multitude of forms, and particularly storytelling through documentation, has long since been a device of the colonial and imperial project to cast the Other in Europe’s shadow, to make the Other understood only within the constraints of Eurocentric ideological discourses, thus reinforcing the European as Subject. In many cases, European-authored texts that ‘told the story of the Other’ were privileged over the cultural texts, written and visual, originating from other parts of the world. The story of the Other, as told by Europe, was “the asymmetrical obliteration of the trace of that Other in its precarious Subjectivity” (Spivak, 1988, p. 76). We must consider, then, the story that began to be told once, “[i]n its passage from *zombi* to *zombie*, this figuration that was at first just a somnambulistic slave singly raised

from the dead became evil, contagious, and plural” (Embry and Laura, 2008, p. 88). *Brown Girl in the Ring’s* dystopian Toronto can point towards an answer, particularly when put in dialogue with an analysis of the zombie apocalypse imaginary.

Save the White Family First: Whose Nightmare is The Burn?

In Hopkinson’s world, after a series of disturbances known as The Riots in Toronto, the Canadian government abandons the city, followed by the wealthiest of its citizens. As a result, the city descends into extreme poverty. The poor and racialized residents become concentrated in the inner city, The Burn. Alienated from the social, legal and economic protections of the state apparatus, they struggle to survive in a space in which they are newly vulnerable to the oppressive machinations of drug dealers, organ traffickers, and most particularly Rudy Sheldon, a gang (“posse”) leader who has made the CN Tower his central stronghold.

This ‘white flight’ of the Torontonians bourgeoisie to the safety of the suburbs, as well as the abandonment by the government, can tell us something about the way that the racialized poor figure into the imagined imminent threat of the zombie apocalypse narrative. As corporate power grows to increasingly uncontrollable levels, the unequal power relations that characterize the neoliberal landscape create a society in which even the middle class are no longer guaranteed economic stability and prosperity.



Indeed, as Ulrich Beck (1992) suggests, the globalization of the neoliberal economic structure has precipitated a “universalization of hazards [that] accompanies industrial production, independent of the place where they are produced” (p. 36). The figure of the zombie embodies this socioeconomic predicament of the modern era by presenting in supernatural form the psychic trauma permeating the reality of global capitalism. As Canavan writes, within the zombie narrative, individuals within a population are separated into two categories: the living remnants of humanity and the infected undead, “[r]emorselessly consuming everything in their path...leav[ing] nothing in their wake besides endless copies of themselves” (432). The zombie narrative derives its tension from the interaction of those belonging to the two categories whereby the goal of the living is to avoid falling into the abject category of the undead. It thus reflects a sense of the shared precariousness among all those affected by this globalized economy, all oppressed in different ways by a dissipated system of power. Yet this shared precariousness cannot erase the ways in which privilege and power differentially position bodies under the predatory regime of global capitalism. Indeed, the formative culture of neoliberal capital, in promoting personal responsibility in the face of institutional violence, denies individuals a language through which to understand the growing systemic hazards of globalization. The shrinking middle class is thus encouraged to direct its frustrations onto abject bodies who then become the physical representation of their trauma. Simon Orpana (2014) describes

this phenomenon in his articulation of the *zombie imaginary*:

“[s]ocial ills such as unemployment, poverty, lack of housing, health care, etc. that are directly produced by the capitalist system running according to its own internal logic are attributed to issues of population, usually with racial overtones. Rather than unemployment being correctly identified as the result of capital’s need to keep wages low, for instance, popular discourse blames foreigners and immigration, substituting effect for the cause. This logic is central to what I call the *zombie imaginary*, where problems that are properly structural, political, and economic are personalized and projected onto the devalued, often racialized, and gendered bodies of people (298).

The commercial zombie narrative thus blames rather than acknowledges the existence of society’s most abject, those to whom Zygmunt Bauman (2004) refers as the ‘wastes of modernity.’ As Bauman writes, “[t]he origins of [...] ‘human waste’ are currently global” (p. 58). It is “is the dark, shameful secret of all production. Preferably, it would remain a secret. Captains of industry would rather not mention it at all – they need to be pressed hard to admit it” (p. 27). David Eng also notes that the refugees, “unacknowledged lovers, illegal immigrants, [and] indentured laborers” that are “consigned to outcast status and confined to the edges of globalization” haunt those able to reap the benefits of process, able to be secure in the civil rights and economic profit to be



gained (p. 101). Despite this, even as the *zombie imaginary* acknowledges shared precariousness, it naturalizes an individualistic response of avoidance aimed particularly at prosperous white middle class families. The U.S Centre for Disease Control's tongue-in-cheek blog post on zombie preparedness stresses a mode of preparation that revolves around the nuclear family, providing a helpful picture of a white father and son in a suburban neighborhood as an example of the families to be saved (Khan, 2012). Likewise, *World War Z* (2013) stars Brad Pitt as a former UN employee who must take his wife and two daughters to safety in the midst of a zombie epidemic. This film, adapted from Max Brooks's novel of the same name, provides a powerful visual representation of the social politics operating in late-capitalist Western society. Popular culture seems to already imagine the white middle class family as the subjects who must be saved in the event of a crisis and the racialized poor as the abject they must escape from—a narrative that echoes neoliberal discourses of blame that target the racialized abject.

Canada is not immune to the neoliberal politics of blame. The country's discourse of multiculturalism does not erase the ways in which Canada's socioeconomically marginalized are often themselves articulated as a threat against the prosperity and stability of the white middle class. Toronto's *Safe Streets Act* of 1999 illuminates this logic, and though it was implemented a year after *Brown Girl in the Ring* was published, the discursive strategies at work in the legislation, particularly

in how it conceives of a 'safe Toronto,' stems out of the same social context and reveals the same tensions that must have given rise to Hopkinson's construction of a dystopian Toronto. The Act posits that Toronto's inner city could be transformed into a 'safe' place by removing the homeless, squeegee youth and solicitors from the area. As such it is "modeled on zero-tolerance policing strategies that emphasize the targeting [sic] of the poor and low-level forms of disorder as the biggest problems facing community today" (Gordon, 2005, p. 66). As the state, under an ever-increasing neoliberal logic, re-articulates social problems as private and financial, those left disadvantaged by the socioeconomic structure, and are unable to assimilate into the consumerist model of 'proper' productiveness and progress, are "[m]ore often than not... declared 'redundant'" and labelled as a "'financial burden'...[imposed] on the taxpayers" (Bauman, 2004, p. 12). Considering that a disproportionate number of such 'vagrants' are also the racialized poor, the logic driving the *Safe Streets Act* suggests that removing the 'redundant' would create a gentrified space for the proper consumerist activity of desired bodies.

Decades after *Brown Girl in the Ring* was published, black bodies remain targeted for removal at municipal and federal levels. Zero tolerance policing policies on the streets and in schools in Toronto select black bodies for incarceration at increasingly high rates; a recent UN report suggested that between 2005 and 2015, the number of black prisoners has increased by over 71% (Dyck, 2017). The



removal of black subjectivity and history from the politics of the present, as symbolized by the creation of the zombie narrative, thus mimics the removal of black bodies from geographical space, all to construct an imaginary white space and future that refuses to accommodate them. The American zombie cultural narrative does not explicitly name certain kinds of bodies as threats. But by privileging and individualizing of the bourgeois white subject, and characterizing zombies as unproductive, pathological consumers, it implicitly names the 'wastes' of global society as the threat: a category that brown and black bodies have increasingly fallen into.

The element of 'white flight' in Hopkinson's world building can be used to identify and critique this potentially problematic aspect of the American zombie narrative; white flight represents an attempt made by society's privileged white subjects to avoid falling into the category of the abject outside of neoliberal society. But their attempt rests upon the assumption that those already abjected are part of what threatens them. The white bourgeoisie's escape from Toronto in *Brown Girl* reveals an imperative to separate themselves from the 'dangerous' Others who have not only 'ruined' the city (in their imaginary) but could have dragged them into ruin as well. This perception of this 'dark threat' is shored up in the trope of zombie infection: "In its frenzied state of pure consumption," write Lauro and Embry (2008), "the zombie seeks to infect those who do not yet share in the oppression of their state: the zombie does

not attack other zombies. It seeks to transfer its burden, but the result is only a multiplication of its condition: no zombie body is relieved of its condition by passing it on" (p. 100). As this passage suggests, irreversibility is part of the fear: the loss of privilege, the exclusion from economic prosperity upon being 'ruined' by the supposedly unproductive and dangerous activities of those bodies who constitute the threat. And yet, the irony of the 'white flight' from Hopkinson's dystopian Toronto is that these members can simply leave to avoid the threat. Unlike the racialized poor, they have the means (such as a family-saving SUV) to simply move to a more prosperous location, leaving the outcasts trapped in a chaotic space without any of the social protections officially promised by the state. In this way, the American zombie narrative exposes the power relations that disproportionately favor certain segments of the population. As Hopkinson's setting suggests, these power relations invariably perpetuate the violence enacted upon precarious local and global populations.

Evidently, then, the American zombie has become another example of how in post-colonial societies dominated by a Eurocentric episteme, subaltern populations – their subjectivities, bodies, stories, and histories – have largely been devalued, dismissed, mis-used and endangered. But it is this very exploitation that, once exposed in the text, highlights the vitality of Afro-Caribbean culture and its potential to persist and thrive even when faced by racist impulses that demand their erasure.



Monsters in the Burn: Materializing Folkloric Agency

Hopkinson's setting, while enabling a critical reading that can expose the continued marginalization of the colonized, also naturalizes the Haitian *zombi* as part of the everyday life of dystopian Toronto. Referred to as duppies in the novel, bodies can be separated from their souls, which are made to obey a necromancer. Such is the fate of Mi-Jeanne, the protagonist's mother, whose father enslaves her and forces her to kill for his own gain: "I is the duppy that Daddy does keep in he calabash," she tells Ti-Jeanne once she inhabits her own body again. "Is my soul he bind to get he power. Is my sight he twist into obeah, into shadow-catching for he" (Hopkinson, 1998, p. 15). The focus on her soul and sight is important here. Once again it calls to mind the importance of the Haitian *zombi* in reflecting the historical and present fears of its people. *Their* point of view is privileged, *their* knowledge frameworks are naturalized by the casual inclusion of these folkloric elements within the setting. Ti-Jeanne initially decries her grandmother Gros-Jeanne's traditional Caribbean healing knowledge as "old-time nonsense" (p. 37) even as she continually faces the supernatural through her nightmarish visions. Although the point of contention between Gros-Jeanne and Ti-Jeanne is latter's lack of dedication in learning and respecting her cultural traditions, the existence of the traditions themselves—the magic, the knowledge and their ability to affect the world—is never questioned. As a Caribbean Canadian, Ti-Jeanne is caught between two

worlds, negotiating through a diasporic identity that divides her "power and selfhood...between traditions that still encompass her life and her desire for a perceived 'normal' Canadian life" (Newman-Stille, 2015, p. 148). Yet her cultural memory achieves *material* expression in her life in unavoidable ways. In the Burn, Afro-Caribbean knowledge frameworks breathe into the city as real spirits and real magic, healing or murdering Burn inhabitants, while protecting the black bodies whose culture they represent. Hopkinson re-configures the meaning of monstrosity in the text by juxtaposing Afro-Caribbean culture with the Canadian capitalist apparatus working against the prosperous future of the Afro-Caribbean community. Tony, caught between Canadian and Caribbean identities, dismisses Gros-Jeanne as irrational: "What's that crazy old woman doing over there in Riverdale Farm," he asks, adding that "[n]obody believes in that duppy business any more" (Hopkinson, 1998, p. 36). With this framing of Gros-Jeanne's work, Tony reinforces the notion that African cultures belong to the past and cannot be logically brought into the present or future as politically viable and legible knowledge systems. While witnessing Gros-Jeanne's summoning of the West African gods, Eshu-Legbara and Osain, Tony responds with "disgust and fear" (p. 92), landing him right back into the hands of Rudy, who he had been trying to escape. But the text makes clear that though a 'Canadian' imagination may classify Caribbean folklore as incomprehensible and monstrous, the true monsters of the text are those who symbolize the violent workings of Canada's economic



and political structure. The Vultures, agents of the healthcare industry aptly named for their predation on the racialized poor, stand in contrast to Gros-Jeanne's traditional healing: "[t]he price for established medical care was so high," the narration explains, "that only the desperately ill would call for help. If you saw a Vulture making a house call, it meant that someone was near death" (p. 8). Death and murder also haunt the Premier of Ontario, another of the text's monsters who dresses up her scheme to scavenge the hearts of the racialized poor for donation to the rich as a "safe, moral" policy ironically called "People Helping People" (p. 40). Hopkinson treats Afro-Caribbean knowledge frameworks as a potential corrective to the Eurocentric philosophy that gave rise to global capitalist violence against black bodies. Afro-Caribbean gods lend their power to the protagonists, power that they encourage to be used for the betterment rather than the destruction of others.

The white flight from Toronto implies that the dangerous brown inhabitants are to be found on the inside and feared, as evidenced by the Premier's assistant, Douglas Baine, who initially meets Rudy "in a cheap, off-the-rack bulletproof" (p. 1). Yet despite Ti-Jeanne's discomfort with her grandmother's religious traditions, she admits to her that she fears, contrary to conventional knowledge, "the 'burbs,' [the] Mercy Hospital ambulances and Rudy's elegant grey Bentley" (p. 111). In a subtle, but powerful narrative moment, she admits her fear of these Eurocentric symbols of capitalist modernity while under the

protection of the fog of Guinea Land, the ancestral land of the dead for all African descendants (p. 111). In the text, her safety exists literally within a living, breathing Afro-Caribbean framework, placed into jeopardy only by those married to the Eurocentric frameworks that have long exploited black bodies.

Rudy stands among those exploitative forces. The text articulates his predation of his own family to expand his business empire--not only as an affront to his family, but also to his heritage. Hopkinson makes clear that his absolute control of his wife, daughter and granddaughter through the workings of the obeah and the transformation of the living into zombies can only be brought about by his misuse of his culture. As Eshu, while in the form of the carnivalesque Jab-Jab, explains, "Rudy, he does try and make the spirits serve *he*" (p. 219). Once again, we see the Haitian slave's nightmare in Rudy's transformation of his daughters into zombies, first giving them drugs to destroy their physical and emotional agency. "For you see that paralysis," he tells Ti-Jeanne, "[i]s the first stage in making a zombie" (p. 211). The strongest zombies, he explains, are created by "split[ting] off the duppy from its body while the body still alive" (p. 213). This principle echoes Mbembe's necropolitical bodies transformed into "the status of *living dead*" (p. 40). The text brings of the Haitian *zombi* as a living reality of black trauma, history and culture into conversation with a narrative of white flight (from 'dangerous' racialized others), exposing how the absolute biopolitical control over black



bodies can only occur through a 'splitting': of black flesh from subjectivity and humanity, from dreams and imagination, from past and future. It is fitting, then, that Ti-Jeanne reclaims her agency and frees her mother from slavery through reconnecting her duppy spirit first to her corporeal flesh and then to her Afro-Caribbean spiritual ancestry as she holds African gods and spirits of the dead inside her head, releasing them to destroy Rudy once and for all. Hopkinson makes these connections clear in the text, writing: "Ti-Jeanne's head felt stuffed full. She could hear the rhythm of the blood vessels in her brain, pounding like drums" (p. 222). Her blood, her corporeal flesh, as Hopkinson argues, cannot be separated from the "gift of story and song" (Du Bois, 2007, p. 162-3). And indeed, the text buries these gifts, the spirit of the ancestors and her very own blood, right into the soil through the conduit of the CN Tower, likened in the text to a "spirit tree" that "dug roots deep into the ground where the dead lived and pushed high into the heavens where the oldest ancestors lived" (p. 221). Ti-Jeanne becomes a diasporic body who, through embracing of her culture, can reclaim a Caribbean and Canadian past, present and future. For Michelle Reid (2005), this moment of the text symbolizes the positive potential of diasporic hybridity and Canadian multiculturalism, one that includes, but destabilizes Eurocentric imagery:

It is both ironic and also very fitting that this landmark provides a means of accessing Caribbean spirit worlds if viewed in the right way. Ti-Jeanne uses the tower to

ground her sense of spirituality. It conveys her sense of being connected to her heritage, whilst also being at home in Canada. Her use of the tower does not seem like an outrageous appropriation of an urban building, so much as an appropriate use of the structure's potential. It is the culmination of apt reuses of space throughout the text. (p. 310)

As Reid notes, not only the CN Tower, but also Toronto's Allan Gardens park, Riverdale Farm, and the Toronto Crematorium Chapel are re-appropriated in the text, corralled to serve the interests of the multicultural community struggling but living after white flight. Whether used for hunting, healing or religious purposes, "[t]heir reuse is in keeping with the original function of the buildings, but...is changed in accordance with the needs of the Burn community" (p. 306). Like Hopkinson's use of the zombie figure, these instances of reuse constitute a reversal of the cultural hybridity of the American cinematic zombie that privileges bourgeois whiteness, a configuration of multiculturalism that places racialized bodies at the center. *Brown Girl* not only reframes multiculturalism; as an Afrofuturist text, it offers a re-privileging specifically of black people *within* a multicultural body. While hybrid identities are negotiated, it is Afro-Caribbean identity that lives, breathes, loves and destroys in the narrative.

Conclusion: Whose Bodies in the Past? Whose Bodies in the Future?



One wonders if this revitalizing of Afro-Caribbean culture could only be made possible after the lockdown of Toronto. The socioeconomic structures and cultural narratives that mark many of today's racialized bodies as disposable, even while dismissing their subjectivities and histories as unimportant, are products of European modernity. They cannot be extricated from the violence of colonialism nor the knowledge frameworks it produced. *Brown Girl in the Ring* makes clear that the spiritual elements of Ti-Jeanne's cultural heritage existed long before the events of the text. However, their agency and ability to effect real sociopolitical change is realized thanks to a reclaiming of land, resources and ownership affected but not dominated by white modernity. If we can read the agency of the Haitian *zombi* and the other spiritual elements within *Brown Girl* as appearing after the state abandoned its racialized poor, then perhaps we can read the exodus of the state apparatus and its wealthy elite as an act of accidental liberation for Toronto's nonwhite community, particularly for members of the Afro-Caribbean community. Despite the ongoing effect of predatory epistemologies on their lives, as Gros-Jeanne takes over the Premier's body and begins to put forward policies that would help the citizens of the Burn, the text gestures towards hope for the future—specifically a future that allows for the existence and prosperity of black bodies. Hopkinson, thus, points towards the inherent brokenness of the ideological systems inherited through colonialism—and through her dystopic vision, she suggests the necessity of alternative frameworks that re-

privilege the subjectivities of the disempowered in order to challenge and perhaps change such systems.

However, even as *Brown Girl in the Ring* reclaims the zombie as a symbol of black time, its use in the text further emphasizes the precarious politics of claiming 'blood and soil.' As James Edward Ford III (2014) writes, Afrofuturism, "is not simply a 'black thing' that excludes or condescends against other racial groups...[it] necessarily entails cross-cultural appropriation or collaboration that takes blackness seriously as a creative and critical entry point and alternative way of being" (p. 161). This is echoed by Michelle Reid's (2005) earlier assertion of the text's skillful appropriation of the land and its structures (p. 310). However, Hopkinson's embedding of Afro-Caribbean spirituality into the soil of Canada seems to displace Canada's Indigenous peoples from the central action of the narrative. They have been dispossessed of their soil and murdered to make room for white settlers and non-white immigrants alike. They are shuttled back into the realm of history. The story of Hopkinson's multicultural dystopian Toronto suggests that the privileging of blackness in an Afrofuturist diasporic setting runs the risk of engaging in the same violent erasure Du Bois decries, but against different bodies.

Though written by a non-white, diasporic Canadian author, *Brown Girl in the Ring* cannot be extricated from Canadian literature's longstanding practices of managing the country's history with Indigenous peoples.



Daniel Coleman's *White Civility* (2006) examines the narrative devices used to produce what he calls the "official symbolic history of Canada," which obscures, to use Zizek's words, its "'spectral' fantasmatic history" (Zizek qtd in Coleman, 2006, p. 28). The official narrative of Canada's settler history is the noble European struggle against and inevitable conquering of the vast Canadian wilderness, imagined as "uncultivated" and "largely empty" (p. 28). As he writes, "the presentation of Canada's symbolic history by means of the peaceable-seeming term 'settlement' suppresses, even as it depends upon, the violence that was deployed to expunge any claims which First Nations people had to the northern half of this continent" (p. 29).

Brown Girl in the Ring does not craft the story of a dystopian Toronto without the presence of the First Nations people; in fact, it is the Ontario government's disagreement with the Temagami people over land and resources that leads to the inevitable white flight, riots and collapse of Toronto. However, as Coleman goes on to assert, historically, Canadian literature has not necessarily dealt with the presence of First Nations people through perfect erasure. On the contrary, Canada's traumatic history of colonial violence has necessitated

a different cherishing of evil memories, an elegiac discourse by which Canadians demonstrate their civil sensibilities through mourning the traumatic, but supposedly necessary, losses that were inevitable

along the path of progress. The most common version of this melancholic civil remembrance recurs in the ubiquitous myth that Natives were or are a 'vanishing race.' [...] Thus Natives make fleeting appearances in verse epics of settlement such as Oliver Goldsmith Jr's *The Rising Village* (1825) or Alexander McLachlan's *The Emigrant* (1861) before they slink off into oblivion without any settler lifting a hand to harm them. (p. 29)

While *Brown Girl in the Ring* brings The First Nations people into its vision of a multicultural future, this is largely to frame its past. The Temagami people, culture, ancestry and spirituality do not appear in or affect the main plot of the text; rather, their political struggle is mentioned in a series of headlines Ti-Jeanne reads in the public library. Headlines such as "TEMAGAMI INDIANS TAKE ONTARIO TO COURT" and "JOBLESS RATES JUMP 10%: TEMAGAMI LAWSUIT IS FUELLING ONTARIO RECESSION" are used for narrative purposes (Hopkinson 1998, p. 11). Through the Temagami, Hopkinson can expediently explain the complicated origins of her setting. But instead of living and affecting the narrative, the people are kept in a kind of chronological stasis; the (neo)colonial violence that oppresses them is ever present in the text, but only insofar as it provides a jumping-off point for the re-emergence of Afrocentric multicultural agency. Without this violence against Indigenous bodies, the future civilization, at once dystopian and potentially utopian, cannot take place.



Even in the central story, the Temagami have not entirely vanished. Hopkinson's likening of the CN Tower to a "spirit tree" might be taken as a gesture to First Nations symbolism, which demonstrates the text's concern with collaboration and hybridity (p. 221). Yet, since the tree primarily serves to place Ti-Jeanne's cultural memory, ancestry and spirituality into the land she immigrated to, we can also interpret the CN Tower as yet another symbol of multiculturalism that makes gestures to the existence of an indigenous cultural history while marginalizing the people's agency and political representation for the sake of others. First Nations history ghosts the text while remaining in the background, its people "slink[ing] off into oblivion" when the narrative no longer needs them to foreground the setting and actions of the immigrant characters (Coleman, 2006, p. 29). This remains as a predicament for a text written to present the experiences of black people, a text included in a body of literature that has African and African diasporic futurity at its core. How do Afrofuturist texts project black bodies into the future without divesting other racially marginalized bodies of their place in that future? After Gros-Jeanne's heart takes over Ontario Premier Uttley's body, her utmost concern is re-modeling the heart donation platform that took Gros-Jeanne's life and threatens the impoverished inhabitants of the Burn. Gesturing towards a settling of the Temagami conflict during this moment in the text might have allowed the Temagami themselves to be projected into the future along with those racialized in the Burn. As it stands, they remain in the "supporting roles"

they have historically played in the narrativizing of Canada as a multicultural nation. As Eva Mackey explains in *House of Difference* (2005), First Nations people have certainly been used to "represent Canada's heritage and past" though "their presence is limited...symbolising Canada's natural beginnings" (p. 51-52). Though their trauma lives on to craft the world of the Burn, they themselves remain in Hopkinson's text as static as the figures of natives preserved in museums.

These representational politics do not negate the progressive work of *Brown Girl in the Ring*. However, the conflict does illustrate the challenges for Afrofuturist texts in asserting Afrocentricity in diasporic settings. Such literature takes on the important work of centering African and African diasporic bodies, which have been brutalized, exploited and divested of their agency, culture, prosperity and future. *Brown Girl in the Ring* stages a political and cultural reclaiming in the name of black life. However, the irony of Hopkinson's text is that the very setting of the book at once reverses and consolidates this violent logic of appropriation, which highlights the need for Afrofuturist storytellers to consider carefully the politics of collaboration, appropriation and re-appropriation in their texts. Acknowledging the black blood bled into diasporic soil will always ultimately necessitate an acknowledgement of the complex history of the soil itself. Afrofuturist writers, in their imagining of black bodies into the future, may have to grapple with a more robust vision of that future in order to truly be liberated from



the epistemologies of violence that continue to affect and devalue racialized life.

association denied colonized peoples.

Notes

1. "Blood and soil" is a term most familiarly associated with Germany's Nazi regime, though as Radhika Mohanram (1999) points out, the notion that specific bodies belonged to specific places—and reversely, the linking of specific nations with an imagining of the perfect, pure national body is a concept that found expression with the emergence of Western nationhood and imperialism in the nineteenth century (4).
2. In *The Black Atlantic*, Gilroy (1993) specifically refers to slavery as "capitalism with its clothes off" (p. 15) as a way to impress upon the fact that the biopolitical terror that brought about black suffering cannot be understood apart from capitalism, which is precisely why, as Mbembe has argued in *Necropolitics* that black suffering and capitalist economy continue to be inextricably linked even as advancements of neoliberalism and global capitalism bring about new forms of the sovereign *right to kill* black bodies (16).
3. In doing so, Tony seems to mimic the kind of colonial discourse that associated European modernity with reason and rationality, and



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