

Rhonda Frederick (Boston College)

‘Stories of What If’: *Brown Girl in the Ring* and Literary Fantasy as Theory [1]

Abstract:

“Stories of What If’: *Brown Girl in the Ring* and Literary Fantasy as Theory” interprets literary fantasy as a theoretical tool that can intervene in how readers make sense of extraliterary worlds. Applying this perspective to Nalo Hopkinson’s *Brown Girl in the Ring* (1998), the essay highlights “imaginable truths” that complicate ideas of national belonging.

Keywords: Literary fantasy, extraliterary worlds, national belonging

You got to make your own worlds; you got to write yourself in.
Octavia Butler [2]

I

In the above epigraph, science fiction/fantasy writer Octavia Butler asserts that the seemingly fantastical—that is, the creation of worlds and deliberate placing oneself in them—is as “real” as writing. Thus speculative fiction—an umbrella term for fictions that present “a changed, distorted, or alternated reality”—can be understood as a critical vehicle for imaginable truths to form and re-form perceptions of extra-literary realities. [3]

In describing her short story collection, *At the Bottom of the River (ABR)*, Jamaica Kincaid attributes the work’s fantastical elements to the people and place from which she comes; yet contrary to her perspective on these writerly contexts—Antiguan histories, people, cultural beliefs and practices—critics have described *ABR* as magical realist. The writer concedes that parts of her collection are “magic” and “real,” but asserts that it is not a work of magical realism. Challenging the terms’ usefulness in describing *ABR*, Kincaid counters that her Antigua is unreal and “goes off into fantasy all the time,” making her not an imaginative writer, but one who writes out of a “fantastic” background. [4] Rather than merely rendering magical elements realistically, Kincaid’s work conveys fantastical truths of her social and experiential milieus. In saying this, I do not claim that Kincaid replaces the “real” with the “unreal”; instead, I see her as dismantling boundaries between the two, advancing the notion that “reality” is plural and centering her Antigua as a creative rubric. The style of Kincaid’s short story collection may titillate, but the form her narrative takes has revolutionary potential.

Toni Morrison, in her interpretation of early United States literature, offers a compelling model for using genre critically. *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* is said to examine “the American literary imagination and [find] it obsessed with the white/black polarity.” [5] Intrigued by this perspective, I find it significant that Morrison uses the gothic romance as a tool that makes sense of the North American landscape and identity. [6] To begin, she observes that early North American literature was strikingly pessimistic in its tone:

it is difficult to read the literature of young America without being struck by how antithetical it is to our modern rendition of the American Dream. How pronounced in it is the absence of that term’s elusive mixture of hope, realism, materialism, and promise. For a people who made much of their “newness” their potential, freedom, and innocence it is striking how *dour, how troubled, how frightened and haunted* our early and founding literature truly is. (35)

She continues by stating that the gothic romance—its characteristic medieval settings, horrifyingly gloomy atmospheres, irrationality, and mysterious and violent occurrences—perfectly captures the terror, uncertainty, and perversity that characterized experiences of North America’s early settlers and context of its nascent writers (48). [7] In addition to making use of this literary form to negotiate the fearful tumult of this new land, “Americans” conjured and invoked what Morrison describes as a recurrent Africanist presence (see 33). This figure—characterized by a stereotyped blackness, often imposed on extra-literary black people—was a necessary though secreted aspect of early North American literature and identity. Morrison argues that this eerily present Africanist persona allowed these writers to conjure an “American identity” that was new, fearless, white, and male because it was not black, not enslaved, and not wretched (45). Significantly, this newly minted identity breeched boundaries between the literary and the extra-literary, since “knowledge ... plays about in linguistic images and forms cultural practice.” Additionally, “responding to culture—clarifying, explicating, valorizing, translating, transforming, criticizing—is what artists everywhere do, especially writers involved in the founding of a new nation” (49).

Through her attention to early North American literature’s tone, form, and recurring Africanist trope, Morrison recalls—and foregrounds—anxieties that haunted early discourses of American-ness. *Playing in the Dark* is persuasive, particularly in its invitation to read literary form complexly: rather than merely a style of writing, the gothic romance acts as a critical lens through which we see how a country and a citizen were made. Toni Morrison convincingly remarks on how America and Americanness evolved out of a vexed—novel, unknown, fearful—relationship to both land as well as black and brown peoples.

Morrison’s critique manifests the intimate connection between literary form, identity, time, and place, offering an example of how the gothic romance centers the experiences of “Americas” peoples and places while critically defamiliarizing oppressive Western perspectives. [8] Similarly Walter Mosley interprets “science fiction and its relatives (fantasy, horror, speculative fiction, etc.) [as main arteries] for recasting our imagination.” [9] Particularly for black peoples “cut off from their African ancestry by the scythe of slavery and from an American heritage by being excluded from history,” he argues that “science fiction offers an alternative where that which deviates from the norm is the norm” (Mosley 32). Poet/activist Walidah Imarisha’s definition is equally relevant: “Science fiction is the only genre that not only allows you to disregard everything that we’re taught is realistic and practical, but actually demands that you do. So it allows us to move ... into the realm of the imagination.” [10] Importantly, speculative fiction demands that something be done with its portentous imaginings because “we make up, then make real” (Mosley 32); therefore, this fiction’s imaginable truths—when productively rendered—encourage writers and readers to think and to behave differently.

Yet despite the form's imaginative potential, Octavia Butler observed that early science fiction defaulted to old conquest tropes:

in earlier science fiction there tended to be a lot of conquest: you land on another planet and you set up a colony and the natives have their quarters some place and they come in and work for you. There was a lot of that ... let's do Europe and Africa and South America all over again. [11]

Deviating from this trend by manifesting Mosley's and Imarisha's vision of science fiction, and evincing a critique of place and identity comparable to that in Morrison's *Playing in the Dark*, Nalo Hopkinson proffers *Brown Girl in the Ring* as an African diasporic, pan-Caribbean, and immigrants' experience of a future Toronto. [12] The novel presents a Canadianness that is open to a Yoruba-derived, diasporic African spirituality imbued with Trinidad and Jamaica, and one that challenges familiar "us versus them" narratives of national belonging. Theorizing through Hopkinson's fantastical form unveils imaginable truths that depict an autochthonous [13] Canadian identity that is unproblematically "grounded" in diasporic African/Caribbean milieus.

II

Brown Girl is set in a near-future Toronto decimated by "rich flight" and government neglect. Those who remain in "the Burn" (metropolitan Toronto in common parlance) are barricaded within and left to fend for themselves. Farming, bartering, and—for some—criminality have become new modes of survival. Ti-Jeanne is a new mother learning to cope with her unnamed baby boy; her drug-addicted ex-boyfriend, Tony; her severe and emotionally distant grandmother, Gros-Jeanne Hunter (aka Mami); and her absent-then-present mother, Mi-Jeanne (aka Crazy Betty). Connected to these characters are Catherine Uttley, Ontario's incumbent premier and a woman in need of a heart transplant, and posse don Rudy Sheldon who manipulates pan-African/pan-Caribbean spiritual practices to control the Burn. And Hopkinson complicates these relationships: Rudy is Mami's ex-husband; the don forces Tony to "secure" a heart for Premier Uttley; Tony asks Ti-Jeanne and Gros-Jeanne to entreat the gods to help him avoid this odious task and escape Rudy's wrath; the young addict "discovers" that Mami is an ideal match for Premier Uttley; Rudy attempts to use Ti-Jeanne's soul to continue his oppressive dominance; and the protagonist ultimately fulfills her spiritual inheritance by serving the gods her grandmother serves.

The novel's national exploration is necessarily complex: though exclusively set in a future and post-apocalyptic Toronto, *Brown Girl's* form considers and affirms the formation of Canadian identity as "both/and" rather than as "either/or." [14] For example, literary fantasy effortlessly renders protagonist Ti-Jeanne's self as grounded in the Torontonion landscape, enlivened by her Trinidadian and Jamaican inheritances, and enabled by her migrations across godly and

human realms. That the protagonist embodies this Canadianness way exemplifies the imaginable possibility of how one can belong to a nation.

Ti-Jeanne best represents this fantastical Canadianness, though other characters imagine belonging to the nation in instructive ways. After Toronto collapses, Trinidadian-born Gros-Jeanne moves into a structure that represents an idealized Canada, one that predates the large-scale immigration of people from non-European countries. [15] Riverdale Farm, the author writes:

had been a city-owned recreation space, a working farm constructed to resemble one that had been on those lands in the nineteenth century. Torontonians used to be able to come and watch the “farmers” milk the cows and collect eggs from the chickens. The Simpson House wasn’t a real house at all, just a façade that the Parks Department had built to resemble the original farmhouse. (*Brown Girl* 34)

The farm and its buildings pay homage to the way things were supposed to have been in the North American country (clearly erasing First Nations people), and indoctrinate pre-Riot citizen-visitors into this homogenized identity. Mami converts a space designed for a specific—and mythologized—national performance into living/dining; medical examination; and sleeping rooms, transforming it from a static veneer into a place of living and healing. Gros-Jeanne also introduces her black, female, Trinidadian, and spiritual selves into a national/physical space from which they were excluded. Yet because she “Caribbeanizes” this Canada—and “Canadianizes” her Caribbean—she does much more than insert formerly excluded selves into an imagined idyll. During and after Mami, Riverdale Farm is both/and—Canadian and Caribbean (among other influences)—and no longer either one or the other. Neither is it incidental that Hopkinson reimagines the estate as Gros-Jeanne’s “balm-yard,” a Jamaican phrase for “a place where healing rituals are practiced.” [16] Conceived of as a white Canadian space, Mami’s claim on Riverdale Farm/Simpson House imagines healing rifts between their conception and her lived reality, a healing that challenges the idea that immigrant’s must sever connection to pre-migration realities to belong to the North American space. [17]

Though spectacular, the novel does not represent the possibilities of Ti-Jeanne’s identity or Mami’s spatial occupation simplistically: not all fully appreciate either character nor consider either woman as wholly positive. Susie, a street kid who needs her broken leg set, must be convinced that Mami is not a witch who eats children (*Brown Girl* 63). Gros-Jeanne/Mami ultimately soothes Susie and her crew, sharing with them a self who is committed to healing. So while readers experience Mami’s Canadianness as one “hyphenated” by myriad influences, they cannot ignore characters (like Susie) and situations (like being segregated in the Burn) that challenge its viability.

Other scenes in the novel replicate Mami's reinvention of Riverdale Farm and result in cooperative interactions across borders. Early in the novel, Ti-Jeanne returns from doing errands for her grandmother. The young mother hires a pedicab runner to take her to a location on the edge of the Burn, "Sherbourne Street [on the] corner of Carlton" (9). Arriving at her destination: the runner moved off quickly, not even looking around for more customers. *Coward*, Ti-Jeanne thought to herself. It was safe enough in this part of the Burn. The three pastors of the Korean, United, and Catholic churches that flanked the corner had joined forces, taken over most of the buildings from here westward to Ontario Street. They ministered to street people with a firm hand, defending their flock and their turf with baseball bats when necessary. (10)

Guided by a shared desire to "[minister] to street people with a firm hand," the leaders of these three churches obviously come together because of their shared mission. Though theirs may be a situational cooperation, it is one that serves sacred (each church's flock) and secular (the safety of characters like Ti-Jeanne) ends. Political and social realities may have forced this particular union, but it nevertheless exists as a productive, cooperative relationship. The significance of this depiction cannot be underestimated: though imagined, it stands as an example of "what if": what if real world divisiveness could become the background to a shared vision?

In much the same way, *Brown Girl* questions rigid gender categories through the married couple, Paula and Pavel. After the apocalyptic riots, the former university instructors work as butchers/farmers who

defended their territory fiercely. Both brawny people, they each had a large, blood-smeared butcher knife tucked into one boot: warning and advertisement. Nobody gave them much trouble any more, though. It wasn't worth the personal damages to try to steal from the well-muscled pair. Rumour had it that those who crossed Paula and Pavel ended up in the cookpot. Besides, vegetables and fresh meat were scarce, so people tried to stay on [their] good side. (13)

The Burn's new reality dictates how clergy unify their section of the Burn, much the same way as it standardizes Pavel's and Paula's selves and rules. Nonetheless, Hopkinson's depiction of intricate gender identifications is remarkable in that it exists along side human/god transformations as well as spatial occupations like Mami's. Paula's muscularity and skill at her trades do not oppose her femaleness: "hugely pregnant, Paula was arguing the price of two scrawny squirrels with two gaunt young women who had their arms wrapped possessively around each other" (14). The truth of Paula's muscular, pregnant female self is not mitigated by the Burn's current mores.

Ti-Jeanne makes and remakes herself from myriad "tools" available in the Burn; in other words, who she is can be understood as autochthonous, formed out of the place in which she

finds herself. Being in the Burn is real for Ti-Jeanne in that she knows herself as of the place and its community (though she initially rejects the spiritual aspect of her being). When Gros-Jeanne learns that her granddaughter has visions of death, that Ti-Jeanne is the “daughter” of Eshu/Prince of Cemetery/Legbara who “does watch over death ... but ... control life, too,” the older woman wants to instruct the younger one on how honor this relationship and serve the spirits (95). At first, fear and ignorance cause Ti-Jeanne to reject her clairvoyance as well as her grandmother’s guidance; later, her desire to help Tony forces her to come to terms with her father-god and with Gros-Jeanne’s belief, both uniquely forged in the North American space.

Framed by the protagonist’s obsessive relationship with Baby’s father, Ti-Jeanne’s connection to her father-god demonstrates how the character viably crosses boundaries, of the human/godly sort as well as the national and identity kinds. The ceremony where Gros-Jeanne seeks spiritual intervention for Tony begins when “she looked at the cement head” and asks: “Eshu, we ask you to open the doors for we, let down the gates. Let the spirits come and talk to we.” She continues: “Eshu, we ask you to bring down the doors so the spirits could be here with we tonight. Spirits, please don’t do no harm while you here; is we, your sons and daughters” (*Brown Girl* 91). Eshu, Legbara, and Prince of Cemetery: each name represents a single loa and indicates its stops in migrations between West Africa and the Americas. This multiplicity also suggests the features of Eshu’s nature: trickster, guardian of crossroads between gods/humans, and guardian of movements between the worlds of the living and the dead. When describing itself, Prince of Cemetery says: “Woman, man, child? Is all one when them come to me in the end” (118). Finally, as the One in the Black Cape, “Him is the one you call when somebody work a obeah ‘pon you and you want revenge” (129). Ti-Jeanne, as *Brown Girl’s* protagonist and the character intimately tied to this god, embodies Eshu’s complexities, a truth made manifest whenever Prince of Cemetery “rides” her.

Early in the novel it is revealed that “Ti-Jeanne could see with more than sight” (9), but the fullness of her relationship to Prince of Cemetery appears in Gros-Jeanne’s ceremony for Tony:

Ti-Jeanne giggled, a manic, breathy sound that made Tony’s scalp prickle. She rose smoothly to her feet and began to dance with an eerie, stalking motion that made her legs seem longer than they were, thin and bony. Shadows clung to the hollows of her eyes and cheekbones, turning her face into a cruel mask. [...] Her voice was deep, too deep for her woman’s body. Her lips skinned back from her teeth in a death’s-head grin. (94)

Literary fantasy allows readers to “see” Ti-Jeanne’s physical transformation into Legbara, rather than regard it as performance, thereby rendering imaginable the full range of possibilities that the protagonist/god represents.

Like the migrations that bring pan-African and -Caribbean spiritual traditions to *Brown Girl's* Ontario, the novel's spectacular imaginings solidify Ti-Jeanne's embodied Canadianness in its depiction of the channeling a pantheon of Yoruba-based gods through Toronto's very real CN Tower. [18] Linking diasporic African and pan-Caribbean gods, as well as Jamaican and Trinidadian traces, to a structure designed to represent "the strength of Canadian industry [and] a tower [once] taller than any other in the world," [19] the novel marks the physical, spiritual, and psychic movements through the Americas, literally grounding them in the post-apocalyptic Torontonion landscape.

Rudy's maleficent use of the oldest ancestors' powers thwarts Mami and Ti-Jeanne's attempt to aid Tony, but the granddaughter's fight against her grandfather sets the stage for the repurposing of the CN Tower and the perspective it traditionally represents. Fear of violence keeps businesses, government, and the upper classes out of the Burn, creating a vacuum that Rudy fills with his own vengeful authority. The don's occupation of the tower instigates an *authoritative* change, but not a *revolutionary* one: Rudy merely replaces of the "strength of Canadian industry" and the Canadianness that the tower symbolically represents with his self and ambitions. Though he uses different means, Rudy avails himself of the methods of Toronto's formerly dominant culture, significantly represented by the CN Tower itself. When approached to locate a "voluntary" heart donor for Premier Uttley, the don claims no political affiliation: "and what that have to do with we? Posse ain't business with politics. Is we a-rule things her now." The narrator continues: "It was true. Government had abandoned the city core of Metropolitan Toronto, and that was fine with Rudy" (*Brown Girl* 3). His selfish, abusive relationships with both family and adopted country are the novel's main antagonisms, and they stand in stark contrast to that of characters and institutions I have thus far explored; still, considered as a whole, Hopkinson's characterizations exemplify an intricate Canadianness and the communities that drive the novel to its conclusion. The form of *Brown Girl* allows the novel to stand as an example of different ways of being in Canada, finally exemplified by Ti-Jeanne's use of the CN Tower.

Rudy attempts to coerce his granddaughter's spirit into serving him—rather than the gods—but before fulfilling that choice Ti-Jeanne recalls the previously mentioned ceremony:

She remembered her grandmother's words: The centre pole *is the bridge between the worlds*. Why had those words come to her right then?

Ti-Jeanne thought of the centre pole of the *palais*, reaching up into the air and down toward the ground. She thought of the building she was in. The CN Tower. And she understood what it was: 1,815 feet of the tallest centre pole in the world. Her duppy body almost laughed a silent *kya-kya*, a jokey Jab-Jab laugh. For like the spirit tree that the centre pole symbolized, the CN Tower dug roots deep into the ground where the dead lived and pushed high into the heavens where the oldest ancestors lived. The tower was their ladder into this world. A Jab-Jab type of joke, oui. (*Brown Girl* 221)

Legbara, incarnated here as the Trinidadian carnival figure of the Jab-Jab, cavorts through Ti-Jeanne's musings, highlighting the jest and revolutionary aspect in the above quotation. [20] Ti-Jeanne repurposes the tower as center pole, underscoring imaginable possibilities of diasporic black peoples claiming the iconic symbol of Canadianness. Here, the protagonist simultaneously young woman; black; mother; pan-Caribbean; diasporic African, and servant of the spirits is, fantastically, Canadian.

The novel characterizes Metropolitan Toronto as a space of ungovernable immigrants and poor, alienated people while its outer boroughs are affluent and governable. When Ti-Jeanne calls the gods from the heavens and the recently dead from below the earth, her summoning imagines a border crossing between states of being, and suggests a permeable boundary between them all. "Ogun," Ti-Jeanne calls, "'Osain!' [...] 'Shakpana, Emanjah! Oshun, Oya! And Papa Legbara, my Eshu! Come Down, come down and help your daughter!'" Instinctively understanding that "the call to the heavens should be mirrored by a call to the earth," the protagonist invites "every one Rudy kill to feed he duppy bowl [to] come and let we stop he from making another one!" (221). Her recognition that ostensibly different godly and human realms are nonetheless intimately connected bodes well for ways inhabitants in diverse parts of Toronto can belong.

Interpretive possibilities spectacularly performed in the CN Tower/center pole scene allow us to "think" Canadian national identity differently. When considering the divisive relationships between Toronto's suburbanites and those they consider "rats" (240), attention to *Brown Girl's* form and themes can unlock imaginable possibilities in extra-literary worlds. The extra-literary, interpretive prospects for Hopkinson's creative intervention are profound, particularly since fantasy literature uses accessible language and provocative storylines to engage a mass audience. [21] If, as Walter Mosley argues, "anything conceivable ... is possible. From the creation of life itself ... to freedom" (Mosley 32), then innovatively exposing a large readership to novel perspectives can stimulate behaviors ignited by the imaginable. Experiencing characters who live inclusive and—at the same time—racially, spiritually, and culturally complex identities can trigger re-considerations of alleged differences between recent and more established immigrants. *Brown Girl's* fantastically different Canadianness realizes truths that challenge seemingly insurmountable divisions between people and, armed with an imaginably real example of complex subjectivities, readers might act according to these novel perspectives and take steps to change how national identities circulate in the public imaginary. Specifically in *Brown Girl in the Ring*, Nalo Hopkinson "refunctions" [22] the Canadian nation-state by re-imagining who can belong and what this subject can look like. The novel's Toronto, Ontario, Canada—fantastically symbolized by the CN Tower/centre pole—is enabled by Ti-Jeanne's pan-Caribbean/diasporic African spiritual additions. This imaginable truth dialogues with extra-literary discourses of national belonging, offering an example of a "what if" that can help us rethink limiting us-versus-them binaries.

Endnotes

[1] I borrow “Stories of What if” from Philip Sander’s interview with Nalo Hopkinson, Tobias Buckell, Karen Lord, and RSA Garcia. See *Caribbean Beat*, Issue 138 (March/April 2016).

[2] Official Octavia Butler Facebook Page, maintained and updated by Open Road Media. 20 July 2016, 12:56PM. [Accessed 27 May 2016, <https://www.facebook.com/OctaviaButlerAuthor/>].

[3] Science fiction, fantasy, supernatural, mystery, and utopian/dystopian fictions fall under the umbrella of “speculative fiction.” See “speculative fiction,” *Handbook of African American Literature*, edited by Hazel Arnett Ervin (Gainesville: University Press of Florida) 2004 http://gateway.proquest.com.proxy.bc.edu/openurl?ctx_ver=Z39.88-2003&xri:pqil:res_ver=0.2&res_id=xri:lion&rft_id=xri:lion:ft:ref:R04432821:0&rft.accountid=9673, accessed 27 May 2017. See also Jinqi Ling, “Speculative Fiction (Part III: Genre, Form, and the Paraliterary,” *Routledge Companion of Asian American and Pacific Islander Literature*, edited by Rachel C. Lee (Abingdon: Routledge, 2014), http://gateway.proquest.com.proxy.bc.edu/openurl?ctx_ver=Z39.88-2003&xri:pqil:res_ver=0.2&res_id=xri:lion&rft_id=xri:lion:ft:ref:R05343240:0&rft.accountid=9673, accessed 27 May 2017.

[4] Allan Vorda, “An Interview with Jamaica Kincaid,” *Mississippi Review* Volume 20 Number 1/2 (1991), pp. 13.

[5] Editorial Review, <http://www.barnesandnoble.com/w/playing-in-the-dark-toni-morrison/1111177711>, accessed 28 May 2017.

[6] Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1992).

[7] Generally understood as European in origin and spanning the 18th and 19th centuries, the gothic romance has had numerous revivals. Some 20th century US writers, for example, embraced the genre as a vehicle suited to expressing a uniquely Southern reality. The works of Horace Walpole, Mary Shelley, Bram Stoker, Flannery O’Connor, William Faulkner, and Carson McCullers fall into the gothic tradition. See “Gothic Novel,” *Oder, Norman*. “Merriam-Webster, EB combine for lit encyclopedia.” *Publishers Weekly* 6 Feb. 1995: 28. *Literature Resource Center*. Web. 28 May 2017.

[8] Speculative fiction—or “science fiction,” used interchangeably by some—includes “science fiction, fantasy, utopian and dystopian fiction, supernatural, fabulation.” See Hazel Arnett Ervin (editor), “Speculative Fiction,” *Handbook of African American Literature* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2004); http://gateway.proquest.com/openurl?url_ver=Z39.88-2004&res_dat=xri:bsc:&rft_dat=xri:bsc:ft:reference:AAL0399, accessed 28 May 2017.

[9] Walter Mosley, “Black to the Future,” *New York Times Magazine* 11/1/98, Section 6.

[10] “Demanding the Impossible: Walidah Imarisha Talks About Science Fiction and Social Change,” *books post* by Kristian Williams on April 13, 2015, 2:23pm <http://bitchmagazine.org/post/demanding-the-impossible-walidah-imarisha-talks-about-science-fiction-and-social-change>, accessed 28 May 2017. Imarisha is a “poet, journalist, documentary filmmaker, anti-prison activist, and college instructor” and co-editor, with adrienne maree brown, of *Octavia’s Brood: Science Fiction Stories from Social Justice Movements* AK Press, 2015.

[11] Randall Kenan, “An Interview with Octavia E. Butler,” *Callaloo* 14.2 (1991): 498.

[12] Nalo Hopkinson, *Brown Girl in the Ring* (NY: Aspect/Warner Books, 1998).

[13] That is, one “formed ... in the place where found.” See “Autochthonous,” <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/autochthonous>, accessed 28 May 2017.

[14] Wonderful work has been done on Hopkinson’s 1998 novel (see Works Cited for full bibliographic reference), but three pieces usefully engage my argument: Derek Newman-Stille’s “Speculating Diversity: Nalo Hopkinson’s *Brown Girl in the Ring* and the Use of Speculative Fiction to Disrupt Singular Interpretations

of Place,” Michelle Reid’s “Crossing the Boundaries of the ‘Burn’: Canadian Multiculturalism and Caribbean Hybridity in Nalo Hopkinson’s *Brown Girl in the Ring*,” and Sarah Wood’s “‘Serving the Spirits’: Emergent Identities in Nalo Hopkinson’s *Brown Girl in the Ring*.” Newman-Stille’s argues that “[s]peculative fiction can propose an alternative reading to the landscape and allow a space for diversity” and Hopkinson uses her novel “as a space for the assertion of the idea of home for people in diaspora” (Newman-Stille 157). Persuasively, Newman-Stille’s writes: Hopkinson “uses the text of *Brown Girl in the Ring* to suggest an alternative reading of the Toronto environment, injecting it with ... Caribbean myth to illustrate the Canadian myths of single nationhood that are imprinted on the city” (149). Reid interprets the Burn (composed of recently arrived and multi-ethnic peoples) as “a positive model for a new interdependent form of Canadian multiculturalism based on local involvement and participation [and] the reintroduction of centralised government support” (Reid 312). Finally Wood reads *Brown Girl* as a syncretic science fiction “that ... attempts to offer a localized resistance to imperialist assumptions that can be found in sf” (Wood 316). Unlike these critics, interpret literary fantasy as a theoretical tool and argue that, as such, it intervenes in how readers make sense of so-called real world experiences. Applying this perspective to Hopkinson’s novel, I believe, highlights imaginable truths that complicate and challenge how we have come to understand and perhaps live ideas of belonging to a Canadian nation. Where the above-mentioned articles emphasize Caribbeanness-in-Canada or suggest a hyphenated Canadianness, or put the novel’s form in conversation with dominant/oppressive ideologies, I read *Brown Girl* as offering a fantastic opportunity to imagine Canadian belonging autochthonously.

[15] The century the structure evokes predates the large-scale immigration of non-European peoples as well as the time when the country failed to recognize indigenous populations. See “Immigration: The Postwar Era and the Removal of Racial and Ethnic Barriers,” <http://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.com/articles/immigration>, accessed 28 May 2017: “At war’s end in 1945, Canadian immigration regulations remained unchanged from the restrictive prewar years. But change was not long in coming. Driven by a postwar economic boom, growing job market and a resulting demand for labour, Canada gradually re-opened its doors to European immigration, first to immigrants Canada traditionally preferred—those from the United Kingdom and Western Europe—but eventually to the rest of Europe as well” and “The last vestiges of racial discrimination in immigration were gone from Canadian immigration legislation and regulations by the late 1960s. This opened Canada’s doors to many of those who would previously have been rejected as undesirable. In 1971, for the first time in Canadian history, the majority of those immigrating into Canada were of non-European ancestry. This has been the case every year since. As a result, today Canada is not just a multicultural society, it is also a multiracial society to a degree unimaginable to earlier generations of Canadians.”

[16] “Balm-yard,” *Dictionary of Jamaican English 2nd Edition*, edited by FG Cassidy and RB LePage, University of the West Indies Press, 2002, pp. 22.

[17] The Canadian Multiculturalism Act, designed “for the preservation and enhancement of multiculturalism in Canada,” “recognizes the diversity of Canadians as regards race, national or ethnic origin, colour and religion as a fundamental characteristic of Canadian society.” See Minister of Justice, “Canadian Multiculturalism Act,” (R.S.C., 1985, c. 24 (4th Supp.), current to May 27, 2014/last amended 1 April 2014 (<http://laws-lois.justice.gc.ca/eng/acts/c-18.7/>), accessed 28 May 2017. These intentions are acknowledged in the Act’s Preamble while its body specifies how “all Canadians, whether by birth or by choice, [can] enjoy equal status, [and avail themselves of] the same rights, powers and privileges [while being] subject to the same obligations, duties and liabilities” (1). Yet despite these stated intentions, actualizing the Act’s mandate—at least in the public imagination—appears to have been difficult.

[18] “The CN Tower was built in 1976 by Canadian National who wanted to demonstrate the strength of Canadian industry by building a tower taller than any other in the world” (“La Tour CN Tower,” <http://www.cntower.ca/en-CA/About-Us/History/Astounding.html>, accessed 28 May 2017). “The name CN stands for Canadian National, the construction company for the tower. The Canadian Railway Company, which constructed the tower, transferred its ownership rights to the Canada Lands Company in the year 1995. However, due to the wish of the local residents, the name was retained with a slight modification and the tower is known as Canada’s National Tower” (Markus MacIntyre, “Building of the CN Tower” (http://www.tccn.ca/articles/Detailed/Canadian_Construction_History/Building_of_the_CN_Tower_145.html), accessed 28 May 2017).

[19] “La Tour CN Tower,” accessed 28 May 2017.

[20] “The jab jab — [French] patois for ‘double devil’ [...] costume makes him look like a medieval European jester [an entertainer known for witticisms, jokes, pranks]—two-coloured shirt with points at the waist, decorated with bells, mirrors, and rhinestones; a cape; a hood, sometimes with horns; stockings on his legs — but this clownish getup disguises a fierce warrior who carries a thick whip, ready to use in battle against any other jab jabs he may encounter. In the old days, the jab jab would usually wear an iron pot under his hood to protect him in battle from his opponent’s whip. He showed off his battle-readiness with chants about his ferocity and his resistance to civil society.” See Dylan Kerrigan, “Creatures of the Mas: A Guide to Traditional Characters in Trinidad Carnival,” *Caribbean Beat Magazine*, Issue 71 (January/February 2005): <http://caribbean-beat.com/issue-71/creatures-mas#ixzz4Fpx2FrTo>, accessed 28 May 2017.

[21] See “popular literature,” <https://www.britannica.com/art/popular-literature>, accessed 28 May 2017.

[22] Alondra Nelson, Thuy Linh N. Tu, with Alicia Headlam Hines (editors), *Technicolor: Race, Technology, and Everyday Life*, NYU Press, 2001, pp. 8.

Works Cited

- Coleman, Monica A. "Serving the Spirits: The Pan-Caribbean African-Derived Religion in Nalo Hopkinson's *Brown Girl in the Ring*." *Journal of Caribbean Literatures* 6.1 (2009 Summer), pp. 1-13.
- Hopkinson, Nalo. *Brown Girl in the Ring*. Aspect/Warner Books, 1998. Print.
- Kenan, Randall. "An Interview with Octavia E. Butler." *Callaloo* 14.2 (1991), pp. 495-504. Print.
- Vorda, Allan. "An Interview with Jamaica Kincaid." *Mississippi Review* Volume 20 Number ½ (1991): 7-26. Print.
- Morrison, Toni. *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*. Harvard U P, 1992. Print.
- Mosely, Walter. "Black to the Future." *New York Times Magazine* 11/1/98, Section 6. Print.
- Newman-Stille, Derek. "Speculating Diversity: Nalo Hopkinson's *Brown Girl in the Ring* and the use of Speculative Fiction to Disrupt Singular Interpretations of Place." *The Canadian Fantastic in Focus: New Perspectives*, edited by Allan Weiss. McFarland, pp. 146-158. ProQuest. Web. 27 May 2017.
- "Demanding the Impossible: Walidah Imarisha Talks About Science Fiction and Social Change," books post by Kristian Williams on April 13, 2015, 2:23pm <http://bitchmagazine.org/post/demanding-the-impossible-walidah-imarisha-talks-about-science-fiction-and-social-change>, accessed 18 April 2015.
- Reid, Michelle. "Crossing the Boundaries of the 'Burn': Canadian Multiculturalism and Caribbean Hybridity in Nalo Hopkinson's *Brown Girl in the Ring*." *Extrapolation* 46.3 (2005), pp. 297-314. Print.
- Rutledge, Gregory E. "Futurist Fiction and Fantasy: The Racial Establishment." *Callaloo* 24.1 (2001), pp. 238. Print.
- Saunders, Charles R. "Why Blacks Should Read (and Write) Science Fiction," *Dark Matter: A Century of Speculative Fiction from the African Diaspora*, Edited by Sheree R. Thomas, Aspect—Warner Books, 2000, pp. 398. Print.
- Wood, Sarah. "'Serving the Spirits': Emergent Identities in Nalo Hopkinson's *Brown Girl in the Ring*." *Extrapolation* 46.3 (2005), pp. 315-326. Print.

Suggested Citation:

Frederick, Rhonda. "'Stories of What If': *Brown Girl in the Ring* and Literary Fantasy as Theory." *forum for interamerican research* 11.1 (April 2018): 6-18. Available at: www.interamerica.de