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Making the Impossible Possible: An Interview with Nalo Hopkinson

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

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"Making the Impossible Possible"

An Interview with Nalo Hopkinson

Alondra Nelson

Nalo Hopkinson is the critically acclaimed author of two novels, *Brown Girl in the Ring* (1998) and *Midnight Robber* (2000), and the editor of an anthology of "Caribbean fabulist fiction," *Whispers from the Cotton Tree Root* (2000). A collection of Hopkinson's short stories, entitled *Skin Folk*, was published in the winter of 2001. In 1998 Hopkinson was the first recipient of the Warner Aspect First Novel Contest for new science fiction writers for *Brown Girl in the Ring*. Now in its fifth printing, the novel won the Locus Award for Best First Science Fiction Novel. Hopkinson received the John W. Campbell Award for Best New Writer in 1999 and has also been nominated for several other prestigious awards for writers of speculative fiction, including the Hugo Award, the Nebula Awards, the James R. Tiptree Jr. Award, and the Philip K. Dick Award.

The Jamaican-born Hopkinson resides in Toronto, Canada, and has also lived in Guyana and Trinidad. Drawing on Caribbean culture, especially that of Trinidad and Jamaica, her writing has introduced unique themes and archetypes into the generic conventions of science fiction. *Brown Girl in the Ring* is the story of Ti-Jeanne, a young mother living in near-future Toronto. Faced with life-threatening challenges, she turns to her grandmother Gros-Jeanne for help. A skilled Orisha priestess, Gros-Jeanne teaches her granddaughter the relevance and power of traditional spirituality for the modern world. In this tale, Hopkinson mixes Caribbean dialects, references to Derek Walcott's play *Ti-Jeanne and His Brothers*, and quotations from a popular Caribbean children's ring game (from which she borrows the novel's title) with more familiar science fiction conventions such as biotechnology and a postindustrial dystopic urban setting. *Midnight Robber* is similarly syncretic, infusing allusions to Haitian culture and references to Yoruba spirituality, Jamaican revolutionaries, and Trinidadian carnival into science fiction mainstays such as alternative dimensions and artificial intelligence. In this interview, Hopkinson discusses her truly original form of literary speculation.

This interview was conducted via e-mail during the summer of 2001.

Alondra Nelson: I've heard you describe your writing as speculative fiction. Why do you prefer this description of your work to having it defined **[End Page 97]** as science fiction, for example? How do you define speculative fiction and how did you come to write it?

Nalo Hopkinson: I don't know that I prefer speculative fiction (spec-fic) as a description. If I've said that, it would depend on who asked me the question and why. To those who insist that my writing isn't science fiction, I say, yes, it is. To those who insist that it isn't literature, I say, yes, it is. When I'm simply asked what I write, I use whatever definition I think the audience will either understand or be curious about. As to my definition of spec-fic, I describe it as a set of literatures that examine the effects on humans and human societies of the fact that we are toolmakers. We are always trying to control or improve our environments. Those tools may be tangible (such as machines) or intangible (such as laws, mores, belief systems). Spec-fic tells us stories about our lives with our creations.

I write science fiction and fantasy (and some would say, horror) because that's what I read. Most of the fiction on my shelves is speculative or fantastical in some way, and always has been. As a young reader, mimetic fiction (fiction that mimics reality) left me feeling unsatisfied. The general message that I got from it was "life sucks, sometimes it's not too bad, but mostly people are mean to each other, then they die." But, rightly or wrongly, I felt as though I'd already figured that out. I felt that I didn't need to read fiction in order to experience it. But folktales and fables and the old epic tales (Homer's...

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