

# Posthumanist Feminism and Interspecies Affect in Nalo Hopkinson's *Midnight Robber*

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posthumaines dans la dystopie *Midnight Robber* (2000) de Nalo Hopkinson, selon une approche intersectionnelle. Il met l'accent sur l'affinité interspécifique qui se développe entre une cyborg noire et d'autres êtres posthumains dans l'espace, où des « artisans » subalternes, des machines et des communautés indigènes fournissent des affects enrichissants d'amour et de compassion qui engendrent le respect mutuel et la solidarité.

## Abstract

This paper examines the posthuman affective communities in Nalo Hopkinson's dystopia *Midnight Robber* (2000), from an intersectional approach. It focuses on the interspecies affinity developed between a cyborg Black girl and other posthuman beings in outer space, where subaltern 'artisans,' machines, and indigenous communities provide nurturing affects of love and compassion that engender mutual respect and solidarity.

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## Résumé

Cet article examine les communautés affectives

This essay examines the posthuman affective communities imagined by Nalo Hopkinson in her dystopian novel *Midnight Robber* (2000) from an intersectional approach that makes use of critical posthumanism, affect theory, postcolonial literary criticism, and feminist theories of the cyborg. This text has been selected as an outstanding example of the innovative speculative fiction produced by feminist TransCanadian (Kamboureli and Miki 2007) authors in the twenty-first century, following the path opened by distinguished theorists of the posthuman condition, such as Donna Haraway (1991b, 1999), N. Katherine Hayles (1999), Rosi Braidotti (2006, 2013), along with Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri (2004), who have often used examples from speculative fiction to illustrate their sophisticated analysis of current affairs and search for alternatives.<sup>1</sup>

Despite the new interest in this literary mode in Canada, especially due to Margaret Atwood's works,<sup>2</sup> "the huge body of utopian writing published in the so-called 'margins' of the western world has hardly been paid attention to by scholars and readers of speculative fiction" (Pordzik 2001, 28). In particular, Black speculative fiction—also referred to as Black Atlantic Speculative Fiction (Thaler 2010) and Afro-futurist Fiction (Barr 2008; Nelson 2002a, 2002b; Rutledge 2001)—has done much to deepen the interrogation of the human and the posthuman, and to describe forms of affective relation that are more enabling and empowering for the currently oppressed. It is my intention to foreground Nalo Hopkinson's contribution to the creative imagining of a posthumanist future from non anthropocentric, non androcentric, but also feminist, anti-racist, and queer perspectives that are rooted in hybrid epistemological grounds. Starting with a review of the potential of speculative fiction to intervene in the philosophical discussion of political alternatives to patriarchal neoliberal humanism, the article will then examine the neocolonial structures of domination reproduced in Hopkinson's dystopian novel, and the new understandings of kinship and affective solidarity across species borders that her resilient protagonists develop.

### SF Activism: The Politics of Genre

Hopkinson's essay "Report from the Planet Midnight" (2012) voices a political manifesto in defense of the transformative and empowering social function of

the literary imagination, claiming that "at a very deep level, one of the things that fantasy and science fiction do is to use mythmaking to examine and explore socio-economically configured ethnoracial power imbalances" (43). In this, she is in full allegiance with Braidotti's (2013) vision that

The posthuman predicament, in both the post-humanist and the post-anthropocentric sense of the term, drives home the idea that the activity of thinking needs to be experimental and even transgressive in combining critique with creativity. As Deleuze and Guattari teach us, thinking is about the invention of new concepts and new productive ethical relations. (104)

Hopkinson's definition of speculative fiction as "fiction that starts from the principle of making the impossible possible" (in Nelson 2002b, 98) serves as an adequate and inspiring description of the potential usefulness of this tool for a critical posthumanist analysis of neocolonial necropolitics, which Achille Mbembe (2003) has sharply defined as "*the generalized instrumentalization of human existence and the material destruction of human bodies and populations*" (14; emphasis in the original). The novel critiques especially how such necropolitics operates on the bodies of women, instilling fear and vulnerability, and more dramatically on the disposable bodies of racialized women.

*Midnight Robber* is a good example of such critical thinking via the literary imagination because it situates, in a fictional future time and fictional extraterrestrial settings, pressing issues in the current decolonial feminist agenda. Its action is set two hundred years from now, in two mirror planets. On the one hand, Toussaint, which enjoys the materialist comforts of advanced technology and whose citizens are, for the most part, humanoid cyborgs; on the other, its "dub version" (Hopkinson 2000, 2), the New Half-Way Tree, an "underdeveloped" and "wild" planet that serves as prison to Toussaint's discarded and/or dissenting cyborgs.<sup>3</sup> Importantly for our discussion here, New Half-Way Tree is still the home of the indigenous populations that had been exterminated in the colonization of Toussaint. The two planets serve in a figurative way as representative of the consumerist and rich First World, and the exploited and "savage" Third World: "where Toussaint civilized,

New Half-Way Tree does be rough” (2). However, a crucial aspect that distinguishes *Midnight Robber* from common narratives of the affluent North/ impoverished South dichotomy is that Toussaint has been founded by descendants of Caribbean peoples who were searching for a new life “free from downpression and both-eration...Taino Carib and Arawak; African; Asian; Indian; even the Euro, though some wasn’t too happy to acknowledge that-there bloodline. All the bloods flowing into one river, making a new home” (18). By placing the Caribbean descendants in the extraterrestrial space, Hopkinson conflates the two locales that Haraway (1999) critically identified as the (post)modern utopia in “The Promises of Monsters”: “Space and the tropics are both utopian topical figures in Western imaginations, and their opposed properties dialectically signify origins and ends for the creature whose mundane life is supposedly outside both: modern or postmodern man” (339).

In contrast to the exoticizing perspective of the Western (post)modern man who is a stranger to both locations, Hopkinson’s novel is focalized through a cross-dressing Black girl, Tan-Tan, in an extraterrestrial Caribbean nation.<sup>4</sup> Her narrative thus subversively rewrites also the postcolonial utopia that Ralph Pordzik (2001) identifies at the core of colonial white settlement in the New World:

In the era of colonialism this perception of utopia was reinforced by those who left their homes in order to find the promised land overseas, settling in faraway places which they intended to shape into a new world of their own making: the history of colonization and white settlement is inextricably linked to this secularized view of paradise cut to a heavenly pattern of social justice and material wealth. (55)

Toussaint thus represents “the postcolonial dream of a better world [where] Caribbean migrants have achieved their independence from Earth through the use of high technology and cyberspace” (Thaler 2010, 98). Though remembering the Middle Passage, the novel inverts the meanings of the diasporic journey by replacing the slave ship for the rocket ship, which “extends the maritime imaginary of the Black Atlantic to the emptiness of outer space” (99), in a trip towards the promised land “in which diaspora is free and

voluntary” (Langer 2011, 67). However, as was the case in the European colonizing enterprise, the freedom and material comfort of the pioneers comes at the cost of enslavement of the subaltern classes, genocide of the indigenous inhabitants, and destruction of the native environment. As Jessica Langer (2011) has pointed out, “In *Midnight Robber*, the slave narrative has not been erased but rather *displaced*—the genocide on to the bodies of Toussaint’s douen and other life forms, and the slavery on to the people sent to New Half-Way Tree” (67; emphasis in the original), that is, on to all infra-humans according to the standards of liberal Humanism.

### **Paradise Lost? Cyborgian Privilege**

The critique of discriminatory humanism is carried out in the novel by the negative portrayal of high tech monitoring of citizens in the new nation of Toussaint. This society has been carefully engineered by the Marryshow Corporation to guarantee peaceful and prosperous social stability, enhancing human bodies with biotechnologies from the moment of birth that make of these “New Garveyites” (Hopkinson 2000, 18) posthuman cyborgs: a nanomite solution is syringed in the baby’s ear to implant an artificial intelligence device called eshu (the name of an African god), a sort of personal assistant, educator, and house butler who communicates via this earbug and activates certain biotech devices that help minimize discomfort in their everyday life; for instance, the “nanomites swimming in the vitreous humour of her [Tan-Tan’s] eyes polarised, dimming the light for her” on sunny days (55). Biotech enhancement thus exemplifies “the prosthetic coevolution of the human animal with the technicity of tools and external archival mechanisms (such as language and culture)” that Cary Wolfe (2010) finds a defining character of posthumanism (xv).

It is important in this respect, nevertheless, to resist the too frequent conflation of both “technological advancement” and “cyborg consciousness” with Western Whitemodernity’s idea of “progress” significantly present in discourses on transhumanism. According to Wolfe (2010), transhumanism is a project of improvement of the human that “derives directly from ideals of human perfectibility, rationality, and agency inherited from Renaissance humanism and the Enlightenment” (xiii), while posthumanism critiques this inheritance, an idea that is also defended by Haraway (1999) and Braidotti

(2013). Even more importantly, it is of crucial relevance to take into consideration the conceptualization of the cyborg stemming from other epistemologies and cultural traditions, including African and Amerindian ones. In relation to the first, we need to consider that

African diasporic history contains a wealth of theoretical paradigms that turn the reified binary between blackness and technology on its head, readily lending themselves to the task of constructing adequate frames of reference for contemporary theories of technoculture. From the early model of fractured consciousness offered by W. E. B. Du Bois to the fractal patterns found in West African architecture, examples of black cultural prefigurations of our contemporary moment abound. (Nelson 2002a, 6)

Elizabeth Boyle (2009) remarks this genealogy in her analysis of *Midnight Robber* when she claims that “the novel emphasises the mixed heritage of the African diaspora by deterritorialising the Du Boisian metaphor of the ‘veil’, representative of African American ‘double-consciousness’” (179), an aspect to which I will return below when discussing Tan-Tan’s fractured identity on exile. With respect to indigenous knowledges, and on a similar line of thought, Chela Sandoval (1999) insists that

Colonised peoples of the Americas have already developed the cyborg skills required for survival under techno-human conditions as a requisite for survival under domination over the last three hundred years. Interestingly, however, the theorists of globalization engage with the introduction of an oppositional ‘cyborg’ politics as if these politics have emerged with the advent of electronic technology alone, and not as a requirement of consciousness in opposition developed under previous forms of domination. (248)

It is Sandoval’s perspective that I think comes out vindicated in Hopkinson’s novel, which engages with the development of Tan-Tan’s “cyborg consciousness” from the practice of feminist posthumanist politics grounded on affective alliances of solidarity respectful of difference. Such intersectional politics are at the core of cyborg politics according to Sandoval: “cyborg consciousness can be understood as the technological embodiment of a particular and specific form of opposi-

tional consciousness that I have elsewhere described as ‘U.S. third world feminism’” (248); that is, in summary, the practice of looking at life from the “standpoint of the subjugated,” in Haraway’s (1999, 191) terms that Tan-Tan achieves in the novel.

The engineered social system of Toussaint brilliantly represents what Haraway (1991b) described in “A Cyborg Manifesto” as the “informatics of domination” characteristic of our “network society,” as Manuel Castells (2000) has named it,<sup>5</sup> and it provides fertile grounds for the discussion of neoliberal Life manipulation and its concurrent necropolitics. The birth of the nation of Toussaint is a sort of in-vitro fertilization planned by the Marryshow Corporation that rephrases in techno-medical discourse its very colonial enterprise, an invasive mode that reiterates the colonial metaphor of the male explorers penetrating/raping the virgin lands: “New Half-Way Tree is how Toussaint planet did look before the Marryshow Corporation sink them Earth Engine Number 127 down into it like God entering he woman; plunging into the womb of soil to impregnate the planet with the seed of Granny Nanny” (Hopkinson 2000, 2), a metaphoric rape that will become real when Antonio, Tan-Tan’s father, repeatedly rapes and impregnates her. It is relevant in relation to this that the rape and impregnation of Tan-Tan will take place in New Half-Way Tree, which is in the process of being colonized, given that the insidious persistence of the trope of the territory envisioned as a female body in order to facilitate its conquering and exploitation, extended into the nationalist metaphor of the motherland, has been widely analyzed as the ideological root for the recurrent use of rape as a war crime.

The specific Black Caribbean historical references invoked in the names of Marryshow, Toussaint, and Granny Nanny (also called ‘Nansi, that is, Anansi) contest the post-race cyberspace myth that Alondra Nelson (2002a) has also criticized as utterly inadequate:

The racialized digital divide narrative that circulates in the public sphere and the bodiless, color-blind mythotopias of cybertheory and commercial advertising have become the unacknowledged frames of reference for understanding race in the digital age. In these frameworks, the technologically enabled future is by its very nature unmoored from the past and from people of color. (6)

This is obviously not the case of Hopkinson's narrative. The Marryshevites—that is, those who are granted full citizenship in the new planet and enjoy its advanced technology—have discarded hard work and scorn those who prefer the old ways, just like contemporary consumers who cannot understand anti-capitalist ways that require more time and effort to achieve a sustainable economy that respects the environment, for instance. In the novel,

pedicab runner communities...were a new sect, about fifty years old. They lived in group households and claimed that it was their religious right to use only headblind tools [that is, non-traceable by the web system]. People laughed at them, called them a ridiculous pappyshow. Why do hard labour when Marryshow had made that forever unnecessary? (Hopkinson 2000, 10)

Runners are dissidents of the utopia, because under the pretence of keeping the safety and good life of its citizens, they are in fact under permanent surveillance from Granny Nansi's Web's nanomites which "kept the Nation Worlds protected, guided and guarded its people. But a Marryshevite couldn't even self take a piss without the toilet analyzing the chemical composition of the urine and logging the data in the health records" (10), and for this reason, "Privacy [is] the most precious commodity of any Marryshevite" (10). This is a familiar context for most of us now, immersed as we are on debates on privacy and massive espionage via internet. Pedicab runners live in community, have organized into a co-operative and "even lived in headblind houses, no way for the 'Nansi Web to gather complete data on them" (9); they are a threat to the security of the system because they do not respect the authority of Antonio, the mayor, who is the most powerful man and defends the values of the Corporation. Antonio is abusive towards this dissenting group, whose criticism is voiced by a runner woman who manages to boycott his earbug connection to the web and complains: "I working ten more hours a week to pay your new tariff. Sometimes I don't see my pickney-them for days; sleeping when I leave home, sleeping when I come back. My baby father and my woman-them complaining how I don't spend time with them no more. Why you do this thing, Antonio?" (7). Antonio confesses the new tariff "Is a labour task. For the way allyou insist on using people when an

a.i. could run a cab like this. You know it does bother citizens to see allyou doing manual labor so. Back-break ain't for people.' Blasted luddites" (8). His words elicit, on the one hand, the disgust of the rich towards the sweat of the manual worker that has to be hidden out of sight, as the word "sweatshop" so clearly denounces, and the penalizing regime of control on those who refuse to be monitored by the Marryshow Corporation's web-system. On the other, the reference to the Luddites invokes a history of worker's dissent and protest at the worsening of work conditions under the excuse of using more efficient technologies. The woman's response to Antonio, "Honest work is for people. Work you could see, could measure" (8), voices a criticism of the virtual speculative economy where the (post)human labour force has lost all power of negotiation and deems workers disposable. Their contrasting views on labour reflect Castell's (2000) description of "the new technological paradigm" (9):

Labour is fundamentally divided in two categories: self-programmable labour, and generic labour. Self-programmable labour is equipped with the ability to retrain itself, and adapt to new tasks, new processes and new sources of information, as technology, demand, and management speed up their rate of change. Generic labour, by contrast, is exchangeable and disposable, and co-exists in the same circuits with machines and with unskilled labour from around the world. (12)

The euphemism employed in the novel for the subaltern workers at the service of the accommodated class—Nursie, Cookie, Gardener, etc—, is "artisans", although their "art" must always fulfill their masters' desires: "Cookie was an artisan too, had pledged his creations to whoever was living in the mayor home" (Hopkinson 2000, 26). Their subservience is not chosen but enforced, as suggested by the case of Aislin, Nursie's daughter, sent to the prison planet of New Half-Way Tree after Antonio gets her pregnant. The complicit silence about "the departed" (another euphemism, for the expelled) further proves how the necropolitics of this capitalist regime operate through the mobilization of fear in the population, who are unable to verbalize their terror of exclusion: "Is so it go; Toussaint people didn't talk too much about the criminals they had exiled to New Half-Way Tree" (19), an interested lack of curiosity

that can be made extensive to most “good citizens” of any Western democracy:

you never hear of New Half-Way Tree, the planet of the lost people? You never wonder where them all does go, the drifters, the ragamuffins-them, the ones who think the world must be have something better for them, if them could only find which part it is? You never wonder is where we send the thieves-them, and the murderers? [...] New Half-Way Tree is the place for the restless people. (2)

Considering the potential for catharsis in post-colonial utopian literature, Pordzik (2001) contends that

Dystopian novels set in a colonial context often create the impression of simply reproducing the horror scenarios of imperialist expansion on an imaginative level that provides neither redemption nor resolution, but figures instead as an outlet for the self-accusations and the sense of guilt of those daily confronted with the consequences of their own passive involvement in the politics of repression and disenfranchisement. (55)

While there is an obvious criticism of the complicity of “normal”/normative citizens on the ongoing colonial enterprise in Hopkinson’s novel, I will argue that the posthumanist feminist ethics guiding the protagonists’ actions do offer an alternative resolution to humanist colonization, one where human and non human beings establish relationships of cooperation based on respect, negotiation, and openness to difference. As will be detailed and analyzed in the following section, these are best enacted in the dub planet of New Half-Way Tree.

### **Paradise Regained? The Affective Regimes of Interspecies Communities**

A major critique to patriarchal affective regimes of female submission comes in the novel from the depiction of the heteronormative nuclear family represented by Antonio, his wife Ione, and Tan-Tan. Prior to their exile, adultery destroys the façade of familiar happiness and causes the expulsion of Antonio from the dubious paradise of Toussaint. The idyll of the perfect family had never in fact been real, as Tan-Tan has grown neglected in affective terms by both

her mother and father, who try to compensate with materialistic presents their emotional self-interest. As is often the case with affluent children, it is the machines and subaltern caretakers who provide the affective nurturing to the little girl: Nursie, Ben, even the a.i. eshu are warmer and more caring than her parents from the very moment of her birth:

From the first birth pangs hit Ione, it was as though she realised she didn’t have the taste for hard labour, oui. As soon as she pushed the baby out of her, Ione took one look at it and shouted at Antonio to activate the wet-nurse, purchased to help Ione with the breastfeeding. The midwife Babsie took the baby, held it out for Ione to give it one dry kiss on the tiny cheek, and that was that for mother-love. (Hopkinson 2000, 46)

In contrast to such posthumanist ethics of love and care, for her parents, Tan-Tan is just a property: “She [Ione] reached out her two arms to claim her property. Antonio put the baby into them” (47). This view leads Antonio to kidnap “his” girl when divorce is imminent and, after having killed his wife’s lover, he is expelled to New Half-Way Tree. Tan-Tan is thus forced into exile by her father, who will abuse her sexually as a replacement for his betraying wife: he gives Tan-Tan her mother’s wedding ring on her ninth birthday, symbolically making her his spouse and raping her for the first time that same night, and repeatedly in the following years.

As a strategy of survival in the line of Sandoval’s cyborgian third world feminism and Du Bois’ Black double consciousness invoked above, Tan-Tan splits her self into two performative characters: the submissive, silenced, and good Tan-Tan girl; and the empowering rebellious Midnight Robber, a transgender impersonation of the male hero of Caribbean Carnival: “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” (140). Using Braidotti’s (1994) concept of nomadic subjectivity, Wendy Knepper (2013) analyzes how

Masquerading as the Midnight Robber, Tan-Tan travels across communities and worlds, reconfiguring her identi-

ty through performance and performativity. [...] Tan-Tan, the nomadic, cross-dressing hero(ine) serves as a kind of avatar for the narrative discourse itself, which moves through space and time as well as across disciplines of knowledge in order to reincarnate identity in a more pluralistic, experimental fashion [...] to express alternative constructions of identity and community through a virtualized Caribbean queer imaginary. (140-41)

This pluralistic conceptualization of (post)identity fits well with current definitions of posthumanist subjectivity which, as is the case with Tan Tan's contingent performative enactments, is conceived of as always unfixed, situational, relational, embodied and embedded (Braidotti 2013, 51).

The outcasts, now downgraded to human status—the high-tech earbugs are out of range in New Half-Way Tree and the most advanced gadget is a car engine, which becomes an instrument of destruction later on—, are aggressively occupying the lands formerly inhabited by indigenous species such as the douen (another mythical Caribbean figure of in-betweeness). Despite this aggression, the posthuman douen's ethics of hospitality are more compassionate and protective of the dispossessed than those of the exiled humans colonizing their planet. Chichibud is the co-protagonist douen, described as a becoming-animal figure<sup>6</sup> with a bird-like head, four-finger hands, goat-like feet, and “something looking like a pocket of flesh at its crotch” for genitalia (Hopkinson 2000, 92). He gives voice to a posthuman critique of the anthropocentric humanist obsession with hierarchical taxonomy; during his very first encounter with Tan-Tan and Antonio, when the latter refers to him as “the beast,” Chichibud replies: “Beast that could talk and know its own mind. Oonuh tall people quick to name what is people and what is beast” (92). This first meeting of Chichibud with Antonio and Tan-Tan makes allusions to the encounter of European colonizers and indigenous peoples of the Americas through Chichibud's sarcastic criticism of the exchange of pens and beads for vital resources like water and food, or, his knowledge of the languages of ‘the tallpeople’—“Anglopatwa, Franco-patwa, Hispanopatwa, and Papiamento” (95)—, which the douens have learnt “for oonu don't learn we own” (95). Even the fact that the douens call themselves by that name because this is what the newcomers called

them replicates the Europeans' labelling of the indigenous as “Indians” in the Caribbean.

After Tan-Tan kills her father while he is raping her, thus putting an end to the exploitation of filial duty, love, and fear on which incestuous abuse is based, Chichibud offers her shelter in the secret home of the douens, where they have kept themselves apart from ‘the tallpeople’ “[e]ven though we sharing the same soil, same water, same air” (Hopkinson 2000, 173). The interspecies hostility between “humans” and “beasts” is bridged in the act of hospitality offered by Chichibud despite the high risk for the future survival of the douens that this entails: “Come in peace to my home, Tan-Tan. And when you go, go in friendship” (179). Although the elder leader of the douen community is reluctant to accept Tan-Tan into their tree home, Chichibud argues in her favour and she is given shelter and introduced into their secret knowledges, which she swears not to disclose, on a basic agreement of reciprocity that Chichibud makes explicit: “Understand that I doing it to save your life, but you have to guard ours in return ... When you take a life, you must give back two. You go keep douen secrets safe? You must swear” (174). Tan-Tan thus learns from the douen the skills to inhabit a new environment and contribute to the communal welfare. This is what Grace L. Dillon (2008) has described as “Indigenous and embedded knowledge of biological mutualism” (30); she becomes to all effects a new member of Chichibud's family. Thus, “Hopkinson extends the transformative potential of cross-dressing by introducing cross-species communities and relationships, which further challenge notions of gender, family and community” (Knepper 2013, 147). Tan-Tan may at this point be seen as another becoming-animal figure, in her close affinity to the douens and hints of her new family, which abounds in Hopkinson's critique of Eurocentric Humanism, as Madhu Dubey (2008) has signalled when contextualizing Hopkinson's works side by side Octavia E. Butler's:

Afro-diasporic as well as Euro-American women's science fiction exploits the trope of becoming animal not only to explore the implications of (black people and women) being identified with animal nature, but also to call into question dualistic and overlapping oppositions between nature and culture, magic and science, animal and human, body and mind, female and male, European and African,

and so forth. In common with other women writers of science fiction, Octavia E. Butler and Nalo Hopkinson use the trope of woman becoming animal in order to defamiliarize the modern Western discourse of the human. (35)

Commenting on the figure of the alien, Sara Ahmed (2000) contrasts the dominant use of the alien as a source of fear and danger with more positive uses, like the one in *Midnight Robber*:

making friends with aliens, eating with aliens, or even eating one (up), might enable us to transcend the very limits and frailties of an all-too-human form. Or, by allowing some aliens to co-exist 'with us', we might expand our community: we might prove our advancement into or beyond the human; we might demonstrate our willingness to accept difference and to make it our own. Being hospitable to aliens might, in this way, allow us to become human. It could even allow us to become alien, to gain access to alien worlds, previously uncharted by other humans. (2)

This is of course the case of Tan-Tan, the posthuman-alien in the douen's indigenous territory. The interspecies positive affects developed in *Midnight Robber* reflect both Braidotti's (2006) and Haraway's (1999) similar understanding of affectivity, where

the emphasis falls on a cognitive brand of empathy, or intense affinity: it is the capacity for compassion, which combines the power of understanding with the force to endure in sympathy with a people, all of humanity, the planet and civilization as a whole. It is an extra-personal and a trans-personal capacity, which should be driven away from any universalism and grounded instead in the radical immanence of a sense of belonging to and being accountable for a community, a people and a territory. (Braidotti 2006, 205)

This accountability explains why Tan-Tan is forced once more to exile, because she has transgressed the norms of trust by visiting human settlements, inadvertently disclosing her hiding place and bringing the destruction of the douen's home tree by humans, as Chichibud explains: "You cause harm to the whole community, cause the daddy tree to dead" (Hopkinson 2000, 281). On this new exile, Tan-Tan is accompanied by Chichibud's adolescent daughter Abitefa,

culprit of covering Tan-Tan's lies, and later also by a rolling calf (another Caribbean myth), thus creating a new trans-species community of mutual support across differences that further reinforces the novel's feminist posthumanist affective politics.

## Conclusions

*Midnight Robber* addresses two clashing aspects of the cyborg world as described by Donna Haraway (1991b): "A cyborg world is about the final imposition of a grid of control on the planet ... From another perspective a cyborg world might be about lived social and bodily realities in which people are not afraid of their joint kinship with animals and machines, not afraid of permanently partial identities and contradictory standpoints" (154). The first one is reflected in the novel through the totalitarian control by the Grande Anansi Web in Toussaint. This is a controversial aspect, since Granny Nanny has been read in a very positive view by several critics, among them notably Elizabeth Boyle (2009), Jillana Enteen (2007), and Ingrid Thaler (2010), who view her in connection to the historical figure of Granny Nanny, as a role model of Black female empowerment that subverts patriarchal images of the enslaved Black woman. Though acknowledging some of the violent aspects of Hopkinson's Granny Nanny, they foreground her role as protector and guardian of the community. While I indeed value the potential for subversion in the representation of Granny Nanny as the ultimate form of power in Toussaint and the disruption of cliché representations of Black women in most cultural forms that it implies, her working within the structure of the corporation and the violent genocide of the indigenous populations this produces complicate, from my point of view, such a flattering reading of her values. The second aspect, that of new forms of kinship with machines and animals, is presented through Tan-Tan, whose double consciousness becomes acknowledged publicly at the end of the novel when she discloses her secret history of abusive incest. In the last pages, she gives birth to a son, Tubman, who though engendered with violence, is the first 'born' posthuman, since the fetus grows the techno connection to Granny Nanny just like any other limb: "By the time she get pregnant with you, Nanny...instruct the nanomites in you mamee blood to migrate into your growing tissue, to alter you as you grow so all of you could *feel* nannysong



...your whole body is one living connection with the Grande Anansi Nanotech Interface” (Hopkinson 2000, 328). The figure of this baby Tubman is, like that of Granny Nanny, therefore ambivalent, since, on the one hand, he may be considered “the first colonial agent of Granny Nanny on New Half-Way Tree” (Langer 2011, 69), while, on the other, he could also “use the power of Granny Nanny to build a non-colonial society: like his namesake, ‘the human bridge from slavery to freedom,’ or, more adequately, the posthuman bridge” (69). This is the version favoured also by Thaler (2010) in her very positive reading of the novel’s ending. For Wendy Knepper (2013), his name is another act of “transgender dubbing that recalls, repeats, and opens up its historical source in unexpected but highly resonant ways” (151). Her reading of baby Tubman is also a very positive one, as she considers that

Tubman forges links between (post)colonial history and an alternative future through a hybrid embodiment of the transformative potential associated with processes of emancipation, cross-dressing, transgender naming, and cybernetic incorporation. [...] The new ‘Tubman’ brings together multiple discourses that trouble a conventional understanding of human identity in terms of race, technology, and gender: the post-slavery body, the cyborg, and the transgendered body. (152)

Tubman’s name claims the legacy of Harriet Tubman and the cultural memory of Black struggles for emancipation, though from a perspective critical of the complicity of freed Blacks in ongoing colonialism, which perfectly fits N. Katherine Hayles’s (1999) description of the cyborg: “Standing at the threshold separating the human from the posthuman, the cyborg looks to the past as well as the future. It is precisely this double nature that allows cyborg stories to be imbricated within cultural narratives while still wrenching them in a new direction” (158).

In this article, I have proposed a critical posthumanist reading of *Midnight Robber* taking into account that, as Cary Wolfe (2010) has clarified, “the point is not to reject humanism tout court—indeed, there are many values and aspirations to admire in humanism—but rather to show how those aspirations are undercut by the philosophical and ethical frameworks used to conceptualize them” (xvi). Hopkinson’s critique of the

reproduction of violent patriarchal colonial patterns in the extraterrestrial New-New Worlds that gave freedom to the oppressed Caribbeans warns us of the need to deeply challenge and transform the ideological tenets sustaining dominant epistemologies. I find particularly pertinent Chela Sandoval’s (1999) reminder that “If cyborg consciousness is to be considered as anything other than that which replicates the dominant global world order, then cyborg consciousness must be developed out of a set of technologies that together comprise the methodology of the oppressed, a methodology that can provide the guides for survival and resistance under first world transnational cultural conditions” (248). I am convinced that in the twenty-first century, we may continue to find in literature the kind of critical thinking demanded by our new life conditions. Speculative fiction by TransCanadian queer feminist activists like Nalo Hopkinson, but also Larissa Lai or Hiromi Goto has notably contributed in exciting and innovative ways to the discussion by imagining new posthumanist feminist ethics and forms of affect that are most relevant to contemporary social justice struggle.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> For a survey of the posthuman agenda in science fiction, see “Literature as Lab” in Mads Rosendahl Thomsen’s (2013) *The New Human in Literature*. Looking back to the origins of the genre, the monster in *Frankenstein* has been described as a paradigmatic figure of “an early cyborg” (Hayles 1999, 158), a posthuman figure so popular in contemporary culture that Hardt and Negri (2004) have come to affirm that “Frankenstein is now a member of the family” (196).

<sup>2</sup> In line with this, it is surprising that Atwood’s (2011) study of the genre *In Other Worlds: SF and the Human Imaginations* does not mention even in passing the production of such a widely anthologized and influential TransCanadian author as Nalo Hopkinson; in fact, no reference at all appears in Atwood’s book to contemporary Canadian SF apart from her own.

<sup>3</sup> Thaler (2010) explains this as a reference to Caribbean music: “A ‘dub version’ was originally the B-side of a Reggae record, which features the A-side song’s bass and drums without the vocals” (103). See her extensive chapter on this novel in *Black Atlantic Speculative Fictions* for a detailed explanation of the Caribbean historical and cultural elements in the novel. Knepper (2013) also offers an interesting explanation of the relevance of dubbing in the novel, in her chapter “Cross-Dressing and the Caribbean Imagination in *Midnight Robber*.”

<sup>4</sup> As Knepper (2013) explains, Tan-Tan is the name of a well known Carnival character in the Caribbean. Peter Minshall, the Carnival

artist who is mentioned as such in the novel (Hopkinson 2000, 29), created a mobile of Tan-Tan as Queen of the Carnival in 1990 (Knepper 2013, 142).

<sup>5</sup> Castells (1996) has extensively theorized on this concept in his famous trilogy *The Information Age: Economy, Society and Culture*, most especially in its first volume, *The Rise of the Network Society*. A concise summary and introduction to the concept may be found in his article "Materials for an Exploratory Theory of the Network Society" (2000).

<sup>6</sup> On the becoming-animal trope and its relation to diverse indigenous philosophies in Hopkinson's novels see Dubey (2008) and Dillon (2007, 2008).

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