

## “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

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 *Iliad*, for instance) felt as though they lived in a different dimension. It wasn't until later that I would learn words such as "archetype" and "metaphor" and begin to figure out what attracted me to Anansi stories and fantastical tales. As a child, I just vaguely knew that I wanted stories that transcended the quotidian "life sucks and then you die." Call it escapism, because at some level it is, but I think that goes back to human beings being tool-users. We imagine what we want from the world; then we try to find a way to make it happen. Escapism can be the first step to creating a new reality, whether it's a personal change in one's existence or a larger change in the world. For me, spec-fic is a contemporary literature that is performing that act of the imagination—as opposed to the old traditional folk, fairy, and epic allegorical tales, which I think of as historical literature of the imagination. And here I need to qualify, because all fiction is imaginative and much of it transcends the quotidian. I'm just trying to identify science fiction/fantasy/horror/magical realism as fiction that starts from the principle of making the impossible possible.

**AN:** Speculative fiction is an apt umbrella description of your work because it is a genre that, as you say, comprises other genres, including sci-fi, fantasy, fable, magic realism, and horror. Your writing seamlessly

interweaves the conventions of many of these subgenres. *Midnight Robber* contains elements of sci-fi (the omniscient neural network or internet that you call Granny Nanny), fantasy (Tan Tan takes up residence in a magical world of tree-dwellers), and horror (there is a sinister or melancholy tone to the story as well); while *Whispers from the Cotton Tree Root* is divided into themes that range from “Crick Crack” to “Science” and “Dreams.” Is this alchemy of conventions common among other writers of genre fiction? Do you think that the anxiety to classify your work stems from this blending of themes and styles?

**NH:** Well, first I want to say that when people have said that there are elements of fantasy to *Midnight Robber* I’ve had to wrack my brains to think what those might be. I finally decided that it was the three “folk” tales that form the triple spine of the book. I wouldn’t have said the beings in the tree; I tried to make them as scientifically plausible as I know how, which admittedly isn’t much!

For all that I’ve been reading science fiction and other fantastical fiction since I was a child, I didn’t grow up in a SF community. No such thing in the Caribbean. I began attending cons [science fiction conventions or community gatherings] regularly in 1996. I didn’t know that there was an ideological debate between science fiction and fantasy until I was preparing to attend the Clarion Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers’ Workshop at Michigan State University in 1995. That was when I figured out, from things my fellow students were saying, that there is and has been a bitter pitched battle between the two for decades.

I guess that fusion of the genres is characteristic of my writing if only because I’m not very good at remembering to tell the genres apart. But too, when my work is coming from a Caribbean context, fusion fits very well; that’s how we survived. We can’t worship Shango on pain of death? Well, whaddya know; he just became conflated with a Catholic saint. Got at least four languages operating on this one tiny island? Well, we’ll just combine the four and call it Papiamentu. Can’t grow apples in the tropics for that apple pie? There’s this vegetable called *chocho*, and it’s approximately the right color and texture and pretty tasteless; add enough cinnamon, brown sugar, and nutmeg, and no one will know the difference. It’s a sensibility that I’m quite familiar with and enamored of (and it’s great for writing postapocalyptic cities). Other writers do do it, though; take Ian McDonald’s *Terminal Café*, for instance. And people are still arguing over whether Karen Joy Fowler’s *Sarah Canary* is a historical piece or a first contact story.

I do get wary of getting typecast. The Caribbean still has this allure in this part of the world of being an “exotic” tropical paradise, so the setting and the language in some of my stories seem to overshadow everything

else in some reviewers' eyes, and that's mostly what they talk about. One reviewer stated that *Midnight Robber* was light beachside reading, and I really wished I could ask him about what it was that he saw when he read the book. Not that I minded the review, which was positive in its own way, but I'm still struck sometimes by the difference between what I think I've written and what readers get from the text, and sometimes I'd like to know more. Every writer has to struggle with that. At a con a few months ago, a woman had all kinds of questions for me about things she hadn't quite followed in the book, although she'd enjoyed it. It was as much a learning experience for me as it was for her; I got a glimpse for a moment into how she had interpreted elements of the novel that I had meant to be understood quite differently.

In December 2001 my publisher released a collection of my short stories. When they showed me the cover that they wanted to use, I was very pleased, because it's gorgeous work. It shows a young black woman dressed in a loose white dress and head wrap that hints that she's going to some kind of Orisha ceremony. She's standing at night among the tall canes of a tropical sugar cane field. She's carrying a lit candle, and beside her at head height is a snake twined around one of the canes. After a few days of exulting over the cover, though, it struck me; most of the stories in the collection are set in Toronto! I had hoped it would have a cover that was sort of Michael Ray Charles meets cyberpunk. I pointed the Toronto settings out to my editor, and she said she realized that, but that my readers were used to the kind of cover image she had chosen and to the occasional dissonance between it and my content. It's odd. That kind of cover worked very well for *Midnight Robber* (and it was a chance to have a cover painted by the dynamic duo of Leo and Diane Dillon). We'll see what it does for *Skin Folk*.

**AN:** What type of extrapolation do the conventions of speculative fiction allow that is not allowed the realist or social realist fiction writer?

**NH:** If I were to write mimetic fiction, I'd be to some extent limited by what is known of the world. If my realist character were a young, straight, fat, middle-class woman living in North America, we can all pretty much guess at the types of struggles she might have around body image and developing as a sexual person. We could also probably come up with a similar list of ways in which she could try to resolve those problems. What would make the story unique are the particular events and texture of the life that would I imagine for that character.

However, in fantastical fiction, I can directly manipulate the metaphorical structure of the story. I can create a science fictional world in which relative fatness or slimness has about the same significance as eye

color, but only persons under five feet, five inches are considered beautiful. I can show people desperately trying not to grow taller and taking pills intended to cure them of the “disease” of tallness, which is considered to be epidemic in their society. I can show people who develop emotional disorders related to being tall. Another thing I might do is to create a fantastical world in which my fat protagonist magically becomes thinner in order that she can convince people to ignore her, so at the moment when she finally would be considered beautiful, she disappears. (Hey, maybe I should write that. No, too late now.)

In other words, one of the things I can do is to intervene in the readers’ assumptions by creating a world in which standards are different. Or I can blatantly show what values the characters in the story are trying to live out by making them actual, by exaggerating them into the realm of the fantastical, so that the consequences conversely become so real that they are tangible.

**AN:** Writers of speculative fiction may create new metaphors, but the genre is nonetheless filled with characters who are thinly veiled metaphors for racial others—monsters and aliens, for example. How did you reconcile your affinity for the genre with its tacit racial politics?

**NH:** In part by writing from within the realities of racialized others. We will inhabit the future, but what will that future mean to us who have a history of being racialized? And we certainly inhabit a metaphorical landscape, but how do our histories and our experiences in the world lead us to paint that landscape? A friend recently took me to a landmark, a little stone pillar sunk into the ground at the waterfront of an American city. She said, “This marks the spot where this land was discovered.” A little taken aback, I said, “You mean, it marks when the white people first came here?” She blinked and replied, “I guess, but we call them pioneers.” Well, okay, but they aren’t the discoverers of that land. They aren’t its first pioneers by a long shot. It had already been discovered and inhabited centuries before. What would the story of that second discovery be if told from the eyes of the previous Native inhabitants? For that matter, never mind the white landing, what would the story of the first discovery be—the centuries when Native peoples were taking up residency on Turtle Island? That’s an epic in itself, with its own tales of loves and hatreds and battles and treaties. So another strategy I have is to sometimes refuse to write yet another plea to the dominant culture for justice, and instead to simply set the story of the “othered” people front and center and talk about their (our) lives and their concerns.

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about the horrible things that happen to black people living in a system that despises us for our skin color. And I think it's vitally important to write about that. We need to continue writing about it; in fact that's one of the things that the novel that I'm currently writing is about. But if that's all that's getting published, I think I'm justified in suspecting that the industry was and is eroticizing black people as victims, as though that is our value to the world. However, now I'm also starting to see more "black" novels that write about the full lives of black people, everyday racism included.

**AN:** *Midnight Robber* begins with the poem "Stolen" by David Findlay, which repeats the phrase "I stole the torturer's tongue." How was this poem intended to reflect on the novel?

**NH:** I kind of hate telling people that I planned for them to think anything in particular in response to something I've written. For one thing, it's not nearly so calculated a process for me, because by writing, I'm often trying to work out what I think. For another, there will be a number of different interpretations to any piece of fiction, and that's part of the fun. Anyway, David wrote that song after he and I had been discussing *Midnight Robber* while it was in progress: what I was trying to do with it, particularly with language. I hoped that the song would give the reader a notion of some of the sensibility behind many creoles. But I may have been too subtle. It's incredible to me, but I'm slowly realizing that a lot of people don't know that Africans sold into the European slave trade were forced with extreme prejudice to take European names and to stop speaking their own languages, so those readers won't know that the resulting creoles are part enforced compliance, part defiance, and a whole lot of creativity. But I think that people will get *something* out of David's song, so I don't worry too much about it.

**AN:** One of the distinctive elements of your fiction—particularly in the context of spec-fic—is your use of creolized language. Earlier you mentioned Papiamentu, the language derived from Spanish, Dutch, Portuguese, and African influences, that is primarily spoken in Aruba and Curaçao. Do you use this in your fiction? What other dialects do you use in your writing?

**NH:** No. I've only used creoles that an English speaker would understand. I mentioned Papiamentu once in *Midnight Robber*; I made it one of the languages that people from my twin planets speak, because I didn't want to give them *Star Trek* syndrome, where alien worlds have only one culture and language. I've only heard Papiamentu spoken once in my life, and it's a language I'd like to learn sometime. I also majored in Russian

and French and studied German for a year, so language is something with which I love to play.

The dialect I use most in my writing is Trinidadian, because that's what I speak the most handily. I can do a smattering of Jamaican, especially if I consult with my mother and grandmother, and I can throw in a word or two of Guyanese. *Midnight Robber* blends all three.

**AN:** How has your use of Caribbean-inflected language been received?

**NH:** Well, you know, to me it's not a new thing to write this way. Reclaiming oral speech patterns has been a growing practice among Caribbean writers for years, and also for writers from any country that is aware that it has a vernacular or two (and they all do, never mind the white Torontonians who once said to me, "I don't have an accent; *you* have an accent! I speak, like, normal, eh?"). So I was a little surprised to get so much surprise. But mostly it's been received quite well. Caribbean readers seem to like the blend of creoles that I did in *Midnight Robber*. Science fiction readers are generally up for a challenge, so most of them have waded into the language with a will and many have told me that they've had fun there. I recently received a fan letter from Japan, and that impressed the hell out of me because the gentleman had read *Midnight Robber* in the original. It hasn't been translated. My agent has warned me not to expect too many offers to translate it into other languages because of the hybrid creole in which it's written. I have a friend who thinks it would do well in Yiddish, and from what little I know of that language, I think he has an interesting notion there. The language I use in *Midnight Robber* is as much a sensibility thing as it is specific words, and Yiddish, near as I can tell, carries the historical sense of being the language of a people whose diasporic spread has at times been forced upon them, and it also, I think, has the sense of being a language "of the people."

**AN:** You distinguish your work from that of "traditional folk, fairy, and epic allegorical tales," which you describe as "historical literature of the imagination." And yet, though your novels and short stories are set in the time of the possible, your writing is filled with historical references, especially to Caribbean culture, and it is apparent that significant historical research goes into your fiction. How do you use history? How would you characterize the historical work of your novels? Are you using a different sense of history or the past than what is used in a fairy tale?

**NH:** How do I use history? I'm still figuring that out. Much of sci-fi draws on European history and folklore, to the extent that simply to mention a name—Oedipus, for instance—calls up a wealth of associations without



the author needing to say another word. It's like the black actor Paul Winfield playing an alien in "Darmok" (an episode from the fifth season of *Star Trek: The Next Generation*). He declaims, "Darmok and Jalad at Tanagra," and everyone from his culture knows the tale he's referring to and the parallels he wants to draw to his current situation. The humans, however, are just baffled. They don't know the lore of that culture. If I wrote, "Nanny with her cheeks clenched," only a few people would have any clue who or what I was talking about. So I find myself having to first describe the Caribbean history or the folktale, then create my metaphors once I've done my info-dumping.

It's difficult to do that in a short story. I'm still devising ways. I can only have so many history teachers, graduate students specializing in folklore, librarians or folktale-spouting granddads conveniently show up to tell the audience what they need to know. I have a story that's stalled right now, and I think that's partly why. In a novel it's a little easier, because you can put in a tiny bit of info-dump at a time over the course of the whole novel, and your readers will slowly piece together what you're trying to tell them.

**AN:** Critics have hailed you as the heir apparent to a black science fiction tradition most often associated with the work of Octavia Butler, Samuel Delany, and Jewelle Gomez. Recently, two important works have been published that extend the timeline of black speculative writing, expand its lineage and enlarge its geographic scope. Sheree Renee Thomas's edited collection *Dark Matter: A Century of Speculative Fiction from the African Diaspora*, in which your work is featured, includes the early-twentieth-century work of W. E. B. DuBois and George Schuyler, thinkers who have rarely been characterized as writers of speculative fiction and whose work is understood as far afield as that of, say, Delany or Butler. Your edited collection, *Whispers from the Cotton Tree Root: Caribbean Fabulist Fiction*, contains the writing of noted Caribbean novelists Kamau Brathwaite and Jamaica Kincaid, who are probably little known among avid readers of sci-fi or fantasy. How would you describe this moment in black speculative writing? Is it the advent of a new wave of black science fiction, simply the emergence of new categories for African diasporic fiction, or the extension of an extant tradition?

**NH:** Danged if I know. I'd like to think that it's all three. A wave comes from a source, and for it to exist, there's gotta be people to dub it a wave. I definitely want to see more spec-fic being published by black writers, so whatever it is that's happening, I hope that it continues and strengthens. One of the many things I like about Sheree's anthology is that by printing new fiction alongside reprints of over a century ago, she's proving that



we're here, and we've been here awhile. For myself, what I was trying to do with my anthology is to reveal that hybrid place where magical realism (an "othering" term in itself, since it's so often used to refer to and exoticize fantastical fiction by hot country peoples), genre science fiction, and fantasy coexist. The book hasn't made as big a splash as *Dark Matter*, but so far, readers of both literary and speculative fiction seem to be quite happy to be plunged into that zone of shifting paradigms.

Having an anthology of writing by Caribbean people also allowed me to complicate an idea I encounter in the north: that "Caribbean" equals "black." I hope to see more and more writing by people of color. An anthology or two written solely by people of color would be nice. I can think of all kinds of things that would be nice, but I'm very wary of ghettoizing us all over again, of putting us in a place where the mainstream can say, "we don't need to publish that work, because they have their own vehicles." Or, "well, we already have one story by a person of color, so they're already represented and therefore we couldn't possibly publish a second." Someone recently said to a panel of black sci-fi writers, "But if there get to be too many of you, you'll become too common." I don't want to be a talking dog act. I don't want our value to be in how uncommon we are. That's a good strategy for keeping us on the outside and our numbers limited. I'd like to see people of color represented in strength at all levels of the industry: more editors, more publishers, more design people, more marketing people, more graphic novelists, more comic book artists. I'd like it to become perfectly commonplace that the instructors at spec-fic writing workshops are 30 to 50 percent people of color (and representation just as strong of working-class writers, queer writers, disabled writers, older writers, non-American writers; luckily, all these things overlap). The possibilities for imaginative fiction as a world literature are endless, but I think that the spec-fic industry is at this point limited in how it thinks about it.

Recently, a group of us have started to come up with ways to foster the development and the visibility of spec-fic by writers of color ([www.carlbrandon.org](http://www.carlbrandon.org)). We are a tiny, scattered group of people at the moment, so we're only able to take baby steps as an organization, but perhaps it will grow. I hope so.

**AN:** Who is Carl Brandon? What type of activities does the Carl Brandon Society do? Are all of the members writers?

**NH:** Carl Brandon was the first black fan to make a name for himself in the science fiction community. Carl Brandon didn't exist. He was the fictional creation of white writer Terry Carr, who was in part responding to someone's racist comment that black people had no place in the science

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editors, more  
publishers, more  
design people,  
more marketing  
people, more  
graphic novelists,  
more comic book  
artists. The  
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fiction community. Terry created Carl Brandon as a nom de plume, and Carl proceeded to become very active in the fan community, producing a fair bit of writing about events in the community. A lot of people came to think of Carl as a friend, and it was a bit of a traumatic event in science fiction fandom when the hoax was revealed.

Three years ago, a bunch of people, most of us people of color, met at Wiscon (the annual gathering of the feminist science fiction community) to begin to discuss how to raise the profile of people of color in the sci-fi community. The Carl Brandon Society was born out of that. We have no official membership criteria; anyone can volunteer. But we do have a steering committee that is and will continue to be comprised largely of people of color. That steering committee includes fans, writers, editors, and scholars. We chose the name Carl Brandon partly in tribute to Terry for raising the issue of race in sci-fi fandom. Partly it was a sense of irony, too, a wry awareness that the first acknowledged black fan in the community was a true invisible man, more à la Ralph Ellison than H. G. Wells. Partly it's an homage to Wiscon and the feminist sci-fi community, which provided us a meeting place, making a point of continuing to program panels on issues of race, and which has funded the photocopying costs that allow us to distribute our annual bibliographies of writing by sci-fi authors of color every year to the hundreds of Wiscon attendees. It's an homage because of James R. Tiptree Jr., another famous sci-fi hoax; a woman writer (Alice Sheldon) who masqueraded as a man for years in order to get her work published.

As to what types of activities we do, not very much yet. We are a handful of people, we're spread out all over the globe, and when we do manage to meet, it's only once a year at Wiscon for an hour or two. So far, we've managed to get a Web site under construction, and we've begun, as I've said, creating and distributing an annual list of sci-fi and related non-fiction published by writers of color in the previous year. Individual members have facilitated panels on issues of race at various sci-fi conventions in the United States. We have a free listserv going (called carlbrandon) at [www.yahogroups.com](http://www.yahogroups.com). We hope at some point to sponsor an award, but we have no funding and little infrastructure yet. It will take time. We have to build a groundswell of support and enthusiasm first.

**AN:** How would you describe a con to someone who has never attended one? How did you learn of the first con that you attended?

**NH:** The first one was in 1982, in my first year of university. It was a small con organized by the science fiction club that I used to attend in the Canadian high school from which I'd just graduated. I knew nothing of

cons, and despite having attended the sci-fi club for a year (that's how long I attended high school in Canada), I knew and understood nothing of sci-fi community. But I was a new immigrant to Canada, so sci-fi community seemed no more strange than Canada and Canadians themselves did. Anyway, they organized this con in a Toronto hotel. I remember that the guests of honor were C. J. Cherryh (who, fifteen years later, would be the final judge for the first Warner Aspect First Novel Contest, which launched my career as a novelist when I won it. Of course, Cherryh didn't remember meeting me, and I myself didn't even make the connection until my novel had already been published. We had a brief and pleasant e-mail chat about it a few years ago) and John Norman, who writes the infamous "Gor" novels (Old World sword-and-sorcery set on an alternate, magical, preindustrial Earth where women are the sexual slaves of men). What an odd combination of guests; I can understand that now that I know a little bit more about both authors. I wonder what their conversations with each other were like.

Back then, all I remember was that C. J. Cherryh had stunning blue eyes, beautifully contrasted by curly black hair (blue eyes are one of those novelties for me; in the Caribbean, they're in the minority) and that John Norman wore a dark-colored suit the whole weekend and was quiet, unassuming, and extraordinarily polite. I remember that the other members of the SF club encouraged me to wear a costume. I loved the notion, because I'd never played mas' [masquerade] at Carnival time in Trinidad; I'd jumped up in the streets as tens of thousands do, but I'd never been part of a costumed band. And I'd only ever had one opportunity to celebrate Halloween, and that was at six years old when we were living in Connecticut while my father was at Yale University on a graduate theater scholarship. (I guess I should clarify that Halloween is not celebrated in the Caribbean.) So I tried to figure out what costume to wear. This was before Arnold Schwarzenegger had made the first *Conan* movie with Grace Jones playing a barbarian. This was way before Tina Turner as Auntie Entitie in *Mad Max beyond Thunderdome* and Grace Jones again in the campy vampire film *Vamp*. Not that it's changed at all nowadays, but I think my only models then for black women masquerading the future or the fantastical were the Trinidadian mas' bands, which I didn't think would translate to this solo northern medium, and the amazing costumes of the 1970s funk group "LaBelle" with Patti Labelle, and the divine Tina Turner as the Acid Queen in the film *Tommy*. Oh, and of course, Nichelle Nichols as Lt. Uhura in *Star Trek*, old school. And I sure as hell couldn't think of anyone black in the literature who would be so recognizable that I could dress like her and people would know who I was masked as.

The character of  
Lt. Uhura actually  
devolved  
politically from  
the full  
participating role  
that Gene  
Roddenberry  
had originally  
envisioned to that  
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receptionist.

So began one of my first lessons on blackness in sci-fi and fantasy. Who as a black woman could I be who would be recognizable to people at the con? Too dark (I thought) to have the proper pallor for a vampire, too thick-thewed (I thought) to be a fairy, so even the generic tropes of the genre wouldn't serve me. I suspected they wouldn't recognize anyone from LaBelle or the Acid Queen (and I was probably too conservative then to have had the nerve to play the Acid Queen), so I chose Lt. Uhura. Watched a lot of *Star Trek* (which I always did anyway) and made myself a *Star Trek* uniform out of red polyester and gold braid. I couldn't quite figure out the insignia they wore but while browsing at Bakka Books, Toronto's science fiction bookstore, I discovered to my amazement that there were whole manuals devoted to nothing but schematics of every aspect of *Star Trek*, from the layout of the Enterprise to the various officers' costumes. I didn't know whether I was appalled or relieved to discover that the too-brief-for-dignity dresses of the female officers came with matching red panties, so that even if you inadvertently flashed a glimpse of crotch while falling all over the ship as it lurched in the progress of a battle with the Romulans, at least what you were flashing would still be in uniform.

I couldn't afford a *Star Trek* manual (and didn't really want it; typically for me, I was more interested in the story aspect of *Star Trek*), so I memorized the insignia and used the embroidery function on my sewing machine to make myself a copy of it. I don't think I made the red panties. I think I made the skirt of my costume a little longer than regulation so that if I revealed my bottom, it would at least be by choice. Wore my costume to the con with my shiny black high-heeled boots and styled my (then) straightened hair into the famous Lt. Uhura bob. Years later when I gave my partner a picture taken of me in that costume to put up on my Web site ([www.sff.net/people/nalo/](http://www.sff.net/people/nalo/)), he misread the bob as a flattened Afro, and Photoshopped it back up to what he thought its spherical glory had been. When I told him that in fact I'd had straightened hair, he was incredulous. It so doesn't jibe with his image of me that he couldn't bring himself to correct what he'd done. So the image of me as Lt. Uhura on my Web site shows me (and by extension, her) in full, Afrocentric, Angela Davis black power mode. Which is fantasy of the first water, I guess. The character of Lt. Uhura actually devolved politically from the full participating role that Gene Roddenberry had originally envisioned to that of intergalactic receptionist. I gather that there had been hate letters to *Star Trek* for even having a black character in a permanent role, and the producers became nervous and made Roddenberry write smaller and smaller roles for her. Nichols herself only stayed with the show because none other than Martin Luther King asked her to; told her that she gave black people in America a vision of themselves having a future.

How would I describe a con? Well, I generally don't attend the costume cons or the media cons unless I've been specifically invited to them. As always, I'm more interested in the book side of things. I think I'd have to describe what's common to them all, which is science fiction community. And frankly, though I can sometimes find some of the ways of the community vexing and strange, I'm still blown away by a literature that has a following so strong that the readership voluntarily organizes conventions where writers, readers, gamers, costumers, actors, critics, and the occasional scholar can meet, hang out, and play. I could probably attend a con every weekend of the year on this continent. This wouldn't happen if I were writing purely mimetic literary fiction.

It's a very strange and very specialized environment, but out of that comes a strong sense of community, and I value that. I also value that the community is made up of the folks like me who were the weirdos in school, who couldn't figure out why lipstick could only be some shade of red, or why a relationship was supposed to happen between only two people, or why men weren't supposed to wear lace miniskirts. There's probably no "alternative" lifestyle that's unfamiliar to sci-fi community, and that makes it one community (I have many communities, some of which often don't intersect much at all) in which I can feel at home in certain aspects of my outlook on life. One thing for which I long is many, many more black and brown and yellow and red faces, and there are a few of us trying to make that happen.

Sci-fi community is very liberal (and there's a bit of an irony to a Canadian—and a Caribbean, for that matter—saying that about Americans, because we don't have the American fear of socialism, so to us with our three-and-more party systems, "liberal" is middle-of-the-road, leaning to the Right). Generally the feeling in sci-fi community is that everyone should be welcome, and that racial differences shouldn't matter. It's an excellent beginning, but in practice what it tends to mean is that someone who brings up the issue of the inequities of race can make people uncomfortable and as a result can be seen to *be* the problem. It's a weird twist that can turn the people who are being racialized into the racist ones for daring to mention that there is not an even playing field. That kind of prejudice is not ubiquitous in sci-fi community, but I'd say that it's pervasive enough that it can make sci-fi community a less welcoming place than it would like to be. I know that a lot of the people of color in the field notice it; we talk about it.

**AN:** One of your contributions to *Dark Matter* is a short story entitled "Ganger (Ball Lightning)" about a heterosexual couple experimenting with a hi-tech bodysuit that heightens sexual pleasure. Did Samuel Delany's fiction writing—*Dhalgren* and the Neveryon tales, for example—

influence your decision to write about sex and sexuality? Do you plan to continue creating fiction that blurs the line between the erotic and the fantastical?

**NH:** When I read Delany's novel *Dhalgren* at about twenty-two years old, it blew my brain apart and reassembled the bits. That man hacked my mind. When I later read his autobiographical work *The Motion of Light in Water*, and began to learn something about the experience that had gone into making the man, I sort of fell in love. It hadn't occurred to me that one could write science fiction and fantasy as metafiction about the process of creating story. At the time, I didn't even have the words to explain or even understand what he was doing; all I could do was to be swept away. I didn't realize that you could use science fiction and fantasy to talk frankly and personally about the sexual and other lives of marginalized people. I suspect, though my memory may be faulty, that his work and James Baldwin's were the first fiction that I read that incorporated sexual acts between queer men, and I think that when I was reading the Baldwin, I was too young to know what a big deal that was—probably didn't even understand the sex scenes. If my memory is correct, then I'm blessed that that reading experience came to me from two *black* men, because queer black men's lives still feel like a mostly silenced topic in the world. A local Toronto paper just published an "exposé" in which they seem to be claiming that what gay black men want is to be closeted, which of course ignores the input of all the outspoken brothers out there.

What was your question again? Oh, right; yes, I would say that Chip was one of the first people from whose work and life I drew courage when I began to write about sex and sexuality. Writing by people such as Carol Queen and Susie Bright and Elizabeth Lynn also helped, and the collection *Pomosexuals: Challenging Assumptions about Gender and Sexuality*, edited by Carol Queen and Lawrence Schimel, and *Transgender Warriors*, by Leslie Feinberg, and *Beneath the Skins: The New Spirit and Politics of the Kink Community*, by Ivo Dominguez Jr., and the seriously rude, black gay S&M comics of Belasco, and one of bell hooks's autobiographies, where she talks about trying to negotiate a polyamorous relationship with her partner, and postings by people such as Juba Kalamka and Ayizé Jama-Everett on your own AfroFuturism listserv, and the efforts of erotica publisher and sci-fi/fantasy writer Mary Anne Mohanraj, and of erotic sci-fi/fantasy publisher and writer Cecilia Tan, and writing by bisexual black theologian Eliahou Farajaje-Jones.

In other words, I've been systematically gathering about myself the thoughts on sex and sexuality of a bunch of freaky women, transfolks, and people of color: the people who like me might think that green is a perfectly good color for lipstick, and that five people in a relationship can be

a good idea, and that gender ambiguity can be hot. When I was a misfit girl living uncomfortably in a highly normalized world, science fiction and fantasy were the first literatures I read that wrestled head-on with normativity, a way of being in the world that works for me in some arenas and flat out makes me suicidal in others. Who knew that the fictions that sometimes gave me reason to remain alive were lived experience for many very real people?

Damn, I've strayed away from your question again. Yes, I probably will continue to write about sex, and I'll probably continue to try to write about it in a way that explores the edges. The man and woman in "Ganger (Ball Lightning)" are a heterosexual black couple having "het" (and, I like to think, hot) sex, but they've nevertheless wandered into some gender play: something that neither one of them addresses directly in the story, and that isn't even really central to their dealings with each other, but that indirectly helps to force out some issues in their relationship that they haven't been dealing with very well. That story is about to be republished in *The Year's Best Erotica*, by Susie Bright. I was unimaginably thrilled to be receiving communication from Susie Bright, asking if she might publish one of my stories. One of the utterly cool things about writing is that it has helped me meet some of the people who've been formative to me.

My short story collection, *Skin Folk*, contains a story that is the first one I've ever written deliberately as erotica. I do fret a lot about how those elements of my work will be received by the more conservative people in my communities, but the alternative would be to try to chop bits of myself off again in order to be acceptable. As I get older, I find it harder to keep doing that type of self-mutilation. I very much fear being attacked by people about whom I care who don't like what I'm doing, but the fear isn't silencing me very effectively any more. It helps when I'm in the grip of the fear to know that there are people who've been walking this road ahead of me. It helps that there are Chip Delany in this world.

**AN:** How did you learn about the Clarion Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers Workshop?

**NH:** I think I was sixteen years old when I first heard about it. I was living in Georgetown, Guyana, at the time. I'd read all the science fiction and fantasy in the local public library and was jonesing for more. I complained about it to a friend of my aunt's, a black man, and he lent me some of his precious collection of sci-fi novels on condition that I return them to him. One of them was a collection of Clarion stories that talked about the Clarion experience. I can't remember, but I fear that I may not have returned his books to him after all, because I still have that one, at least. In that self-absorbed way that young people can have, I knew his face and I knew that



he was a family friend, but I wasn't too clear on his name, and I didn't know how to contact him. And, of course, it didn't occur to me to ask my aunt. Anyway, when I read the description of Clarion and what goes on there, I longed to attend myself. But I wasn't a writer. Didn't think I could be a writer. But the longing never went away.

I was a student at Clarion in 1995. Clarion is a six-week graduate-level workshop for writing science fiction, fantasy, and horror. You're accepted on the basis of some samples of your writing. Every week there is a different writer in residence who leads the workshop sessions and lectures on some aspect of the field. It's an exhausting, all-consuming experience. I loved it.

**AN:** Having returned to Clarion as an instructor this summer, do you have a sense that the alternative perspectives and stylistic fusion that you and other writers have brought to speculative fiction have influenced younger writers? Did the schism between sci-fi and fantasy exist among students as it had when you were at Clarion in 1995?

**NH:** Yes, there's still an ideological battle between sci-fi and fantasy. That feels to me like one of those sibling battles that rages for years, perhaps lifetimes. It's a battle that gives us a perverse kind of pleasure, and it'll be around awhile. And writers have been effectively fusing science fiction and fantasy way before I tried it—and many of them way better. In fact, I'd say that they only split when they became marketing categories. Case in point: as with my novel *Brown Girl in the Ring*, Emma Bull's excellent novel *Bone Dance* fuses Orisha beliefs with a science fictional future in a broken-down city, and hers was published years before mine. At Clarions East and West in 2001, there was a multitude of approaches to storytelling in the group, and a few people were quite upfront about working to create some kind of fusion between their cultural traditions of storytelling and the narratives of science fiction and fantasy. I suspect some of that is the influence of more senior writers, and some of it comes directly out of the interests, experiences, and sensibilities of those emerging writers themselves.

**AN:** Students of Clarion workshops are expected to forge the future direction of sci-fi and fantastical fiction. Reflecting on your experience as an instructor at a recent workshop, what does the future of speculative fiction hold?

**NH:** What does the future of speculative fiction hold? I have no clue. Despite the reputation that science fiction writers have, speculative fiction is really not about predicting the future. That strikes me as an oddly boring enterprise; the real future is always so much more absorbing and com-

plex than anything we can imagine. What I would *hope* will begin to happen in SF/F/H is that, in the same way that women writers and readers are claiming a place in the fantastical genres, there will begin to be more diverse expressions of people's lived experiences of race, culture, class, sexuality, social structures, and gender, and that more of those expressions will begin to come from outside the United States.

