"The Human Bridge from Slavery to Freedom": Nalo Hopkinson's Critical Hope for Utopia in *Midnight Robber*

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In "The Only Way Out is Through," Eric Smith discusses the science fiction convention of utopias as places where racial relations between humans have naturally improved through history. However, within the narration of such "social transformation[s] in a local context," these utopic societies fail to "simultaneously [imagine and confront] the global systemic structures that inform those local realities" (50). In other words, by positioning themselves as able to simply 'evolve out' of social injustices, these utopias turn a blind eye to the conditions that create such injustices in the first place; they ignore history and refuse—inadvertently or not—to engage critically with the present (48). This uncritical imagining comes from what José Esteban Muñoz calls a "banal optimism" (3). Muñoz contrasts this abstract utopia with the methodology of "educated hope" (3-4): a relational collective's desire to transform current social dynamics by visualizing a future through a concrete utopia, or a utopia grounded in history (1, 3, 9). By positioning *Midnight Robber*'s Toussaint and New Half-Way Tree as "dub-version[s]" of each other (Hopkinson 2), Nalo Hopkinson critiques this banal utopia and articulates potentialities for a better future grounded in history.

At first glance, Toussaint appears to be an example of Muñoz's educated hope; however, through the population's detachment from physical labour, Hopkinson depicts their alienation from history. Toussaint is administered by

Granny Nanny, an ai responsible for ensuring everything runs smoothly, including

labour, education, and other aspects of society and economy. When Tan-Tan's eshu,

an ai house helper, says, "where Toussaint civilized, New Half-Way Tree does be

rough" (2), this binary leads the reader to see Toussaint as the desirable planet,

reflecting what Jameson identifies as the "'postindustrial society' from which

traditional production has disappeared and in which social classes of the classical

type no longer exist" (qtd. in Smith 59). Granny Nanny performs all physical labour,

freeing humans of such responsibilities; apart from physical labour, no job seems to

be more valued than others. The reader does not encounter poverty in Toussaint,

indicating an erasure of class as we currently know it. On the surface, the people also

possess a deep connection to their history and culture: historical freedom fighters

such as Granny Nanny and Marryshow are constantly evoked in name through the

narrative, and Toussaint upholds Caribbean traditions such as stick fights and

Carnivals. Yet, Smith argues that this utopia is only possible by creating a distance

from both history and New Half-Way Tree (48). The ai filters Toussaint's history,

generating a distance between lived cultural experience and knowledge. When the

eshu describes stickfighting, it implies that the dance is a tradition with the sole

purpose of "remind[ing humans] of their history, of times back on Earth"

(Hopkinson 35). However, Nursie imparts deeper meaning to stick fighting, telling

Tan-Tan they are "sweet for so!...Body and mind working together....Do not mind

people who tell you labour nasty. Some kinds is a blessing for true, a sacrament"

(35). Nursie's view of the stick fight as "sacrament" shows a connection between

physical labour and one's identity, culture, and history. In fact, Toussaint's cultural

history is often physically performed, as with the Carnival parade, when the Mummers walk for long enough that, when they reach the town square, Tan-Tan's feet are throbbing (22). Similarly, the runners, the only ones who still perform physical labour for a living in Toussaint (8), are direct descendants of Granny Nanny's programmers and the only ones who know parts of nannysong (52), the language that forms Granny Nanny, or the ai's programming language, in a way. Thus, with a culture where "break-back ain't for people" (8), people alienate themselves from their labour and physicality, but also from their history and cultural identity.

When Tan-Tan goes to New Half-Way Tree, she faces the consequences of Toussaint's "historical amnesia" (Smith 59), revealing how historical figures are only invoked to create a utopia based on banal optimism in Toussaint. The eshu initially describes New Half-Way Tree as how "Toussaint planet did look before the Marryshow Corporation" (Hopkinson 2), or, in other words, before colonization. Because of that, Smith argues the douen and other native life's presence in New Half-Way Tree "emphatically indicate their absence on Toussaint" (52), reminding the reader of the "genocide on a scale that equals the European extirpation of the Caribbean native cultures" (Clement qtd. in Smith 52). New Half-Way Tree "contains and preserves the occluded historical content of Toussaint" (Smith 52) and, thus, reveals how freedom fighters are used to instill the perception that Toussaint has already achieved freedom. The flip side is that this belief keeps people from realizing that their freedom depends on the exploitation and othering of New Half-Way Tree.

However, New Half-Way Tree is more than just a "mirror planet of Toussaint" (Hopkinson 2), but a planet with a complex and evolving society that influences and is influenced by Toussaint. The douen, the indigenous inhabitants of New Half-Way Tree, are not stuck in a time before colonization, but instead grow and adapt their craft (152), learn how to speak patwa languages (95), and teach themselves through observation how to work with iron (230). Moreover, the othering of New Half-Way Tree's indigenous species and the people exiled to the planet inform the identity Toussaint crafts for itself; if "break-back not for people," then those who need to perform physical labour in New Half-Way Tree are "people no more" (135). When Toussaint exiles people, it crafts a narrative of who is desired and who is not. As Kate Perillo argues, Toussaint's utopia is not "universally accessible" (6). Toussaint fails as a result of educated hope, not for an incapacity to "free [its people] from…downpression and botheration" (Césaire qtd. in Perillo 6), but for its relationship with New Half-Way Tree. Toussaint's utopia can only be understood as such by purposefully ignoring the "dispossess[ion of] its indigenous species" that allowed Granny Nanny's technology to exist, as well as the dimensional veil, the "barrier that codifies inequality and enables the (re)production of Earth-like, conquest-driven technologies on the latter planet" (Perillo 7). In ignoring Toussaint's colonial past and the consequences it still has in the present (Smith 52), people turn a blind eye to the consequences they impose in New Half-Way Tree, perpetuating an exploitative dynamic.

Even so, this situation is not immutable. Tubman's birth disrupts the dimensional veil between Toussaint and New Half-Way Tree, signaling the potential

for fundamental change to the relationship between these two planets through an acknowledgment of historical past and present. Tubman, "the human bridge from slavery to freedom" (Hopkinson 329), has a unique connection to Granny Nanny, becoming a bridge with the potential to strip away Toussaint's willful ignorance of New Half-Way Tree. On one hand, Granny Nanny's direct access to New Half-Way Tree can lead to a colonizing genocide like the one that happened in Toussaint. Technology's potential to be a colonizing tool is already developing in New Half-Way Tree, as Tan-Tan witnesses in Begorrat Town. The establishment of indentured servitude (285-6) shows that the threat of slavery and indentureship has not stayed in the past; not only is this threat a present possibility, but a present reality. On the other hand, Tubman also represents a possibility of a future where Granny Nanny can no longer keep New Half-Way Tree out of people's mind in Toussaint. The dimensional veil is lifted, and New Half-Way Tree becomes physically and materially there, accessible in a way that can force acknowledgment of Toussaint's colonial legacies. Tubman is the possibility of a "planetary society in which 'each and every identity is extended through a relationship' with those who have been systematically othered" (Perillo 13). The ambiguous end of the novel does not establish one concrete, certain path to the future, but rather remains as the educated hope for a better reality—a potential to address "the historical amnesia of the home-world of Toussaint" (Smith 66). Potentialities can remain unfulfilled, and hope can lead to disappointment; however, like Muñoz argues, "The eventual disappointment of hope is not a reason to forsake it as a critical thought process" (10). Regardless of whether the hope Tubman represents is fulfilled, he allows the reader to view the possibility

of the "restructured sociality" and "critical investment in utopia" that Muñoz

believes allows for a promise of a better future (6-7, 12).

Toussaint's "historical amnesia" keeps its utopia accessible only to its people,

creating a veil of banal optimism that blinds Toussaint's citizens from engaging

critically with the consequences of their influence on New Half-Way Tree. However,

by bringing the reader to New Half-Way Tree and having Tan-Tan experience the

consequences of colonization, Hopkinson crafts a critique of the banal utopia that

desires to stay blinded from its history. The two planets are presented as dub

versions of each other, in the sense that each is a complete and complex place, but it

is only by understanding both and their relationship can one truly get a full picture

of each. That understanding is necessary to move towards a critical hope of a utopia

that is global instead of localized. In that sense, Tubman's birth suggests the

potential to bridge that gap in understanding; he is the hopeful potentiality that can

create a pathway to this global utopia. Whether such potentiality can truly be

fulfilled, however, remains to be seen.

Work Cited

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