

Re-framing the Diasporic Subject

The Supernatural and the
Black Female Body in
Nalo Hopkinson's *The Salt Roads*

As a genre, speculative fiction¹ engages with many of the premises that underlie colonialism and imperial projects. Often, “spec-fic” scenarios replicate the same principles and dynamics of invasion and extermination/domination that have historically marked colonial expansions. John Rieder explores how much of early science fiction is constructed upon “fantasies of appropriation,” which include the location of the Indigenous or racialized *other* in marginalized contexts (often regarded as exotic and underdeveloped), the exploitation of resources, or the adoption of the *noble savage* figure (Rieder 34-60). Parallel to this pervasiveness of colonial discourses in spec-fic, there have been relatively few mainstream stories that engage significantly with non-European ethnicities. Elizabeth Leonard notes that “sf deals with racial tension by ignoring it. In many books the characters’ race is either not mentioned and probably assumed to be white or, if mentioned, is irrelevant to the events of the story and functions only as an additional descriptor” (254). This is, of course, not only a problem of the content of spec-fic works, but of the publishing industry itself, as it is still largely dominated by white, male authors. This literary situation is nevertheless gradually changing as more black and Indigenous writers turn to the genre of speculative fiction. Nalo Hopkinson belongs to a tradition of black spec-fic writers who, though still a minority, have produced a strong and celebrated body of work. This tradition includes writers such as Octavia Butler, Samuel Delany, and Charles Saunders, as well as more recently published writers of African descent, such as Nnedi Okorafor and Nisi

Shawl. Indeed, Hopkinson's and Uppender Mehan's collection of short stories by multi-ethnic writers, *So Long Been Dreaming* (2004), was the first to be self-defined as "postcolonial science fiction and fantasy," confirming, as Hopkinson has declared, that "a speculative literature from a culture that has been on the receiving end of the colonization glorified in some sf could be a compelling body of writing" (Rutledge 591).

Postcolonialism and speculative fiction thus overlap in significant ways and bringing them together constitutes a productive critical exercise. In this article, I focus on Hopkinson's *The Salt Roads* (2003) to argue that, through narrative approaches such as the focus on the black female body and the use of the Afro-Caribbean supernatural, two main historical and cultural re-examinations can be discerned. First, the use of Afro-Caribbean epistemologies and cosmologies subverts elements from both canonical speculative fiction and Western philosophy and creates new frameworks of narrative and thought. The first section of this essay looks specifically at how Vodou metaphysics conceives time-space and mind-body relationships in non-Eurocentric terms. In Vodou, the self is defined outside the constraints of historical linearity, an ontological approach that also ties in with the work of many other Caribbean writers and scholars, most notably Kamau Brathwaite's idea of tidalectics. As I will explore below, this vision of self and history allows for a reading of Caribbean cultures and identities under a distinctively Caribbean lens. Thus, the novel is not only concerned with the purpose of *writing back*. It also engages in processes of self-definition that in turn add to a corpus of spec-fic which lacks compelling representation of racialized subjects and worldviews. As well, the particular narrativization of the black female body in this novel implies a rethinking of imperial projects and their historical aftermaths, and more importantly a reframing of diasporic subjectivities. The multi-relational framework provided by Vodou spirituality, echoed in epistemologies such as that of tidalectics, foregrounds the role of the body as historical context. The second section of the article focuses on this role and how it is fictionalized in terms that necessarily trouble certain established notions of diasporic experiences. Specifically, the novel implicitly questions Paul Gilroy's framing of the Black Atlantic, according to which the black diasporic experience begins with the Middle Passage. The historical (and geographical) parameters of the novel widen to incorporate previous imperial contexts (particularly, the Roman Empire) in which the black female body was exploited and racialized prior to the transatlantic slave trade. Thus, my argument in the second half of this essay

is that the novel points to an alternative framework to position the black diasporic subject: that of gendered practices of oppression and resistance.

The Salt Roads is a complex novel in that it follows the stories of three female characters along three different timelines. Crucially, these women are all visited or possessed by Lasirèn, a sea-goddess of the Haitian Vodou pantheon, who is attributed to Ezili, the *loa* (goddess) of love. The lives of the protagonists are thus tied together through the agency of the female deity. The narration opens with Mer, a slave woman born in Africa and working in a plantation in Saint Domingue. The second main character to be introduced is Lemer, the mixed-race mistress of French poet Charles Baudelaire. Finally, near the middle of the novel, the third main character is presented: she is Meritet/Thais, a Greek-Nubian prostitute living in Alexandria in the fourth century AD. Apart from their connection through Lasirèn, many other elements link the stories of these women: their names are related to the sea, they are all dark-skinned, they engage in queer relationships at different points, and their bodies are used for the pleasure and benefit of men.

Further, all three narrative lines in *The Salt Roads* are connected with real historical events and contain fictionalized versions of historical figures. In the Saint Domingue plantation, Mer engages with a runaway slave called Makandal, whose magical powers help advance the slave revolution by poisoning the water supplies of slave owners across the island. This character is clearly based on François Mackandal, a marooned slave who played a crucial role in the Haitian revolution, and who was allegedly a *houngan*, or Vodou priest. For her part, Lemer's character corresponds (although not completely, as some biographical events are changed) with Jeanne Duval, also known as Jeanne Lemer, who was the real-life mistress of Baudelaire and was of mixed French and African descent. Lastly, Meritet/Thais is associated in the novel with Mary of Egypt. According to Christian hagiographies, Mary of Egypt was a libertine woman living in Alexandria who, after travelling to Jerusalem, repented her sins by fasting in the desert and converting to the Christian religion. It is the element of the Afro-Caribbean supernatural, conveyed through the figure of Lasirèn, that separates the novel from historical fiction and distinguishes it as spec-fic instead.

I argue that the particular epistemologies that emerge from Afro-Caribbean traditions in Hopkinson's narrative challenge and subvert Eurocentric forms of meaning-making that pervade canonical fantastic genres. Postcolonial theory is in part useful for such an analysis of *The Salt Roads*, because this theory is "a method of deconstructing existing traditions

of Western thought and culture and of reading literary texts differently” (Gikandi 113). The novel, in reading history speculatively, offers a significant revision and rewriting of Eurocentric and male historical accounts. At the same time, however, a deconstructionist approach may not be sufficient to evaluate the full impact of the novel, especially in discussions about genre. While an important historical revision can be discerned in this text, the use of supernatural elements anchored in Afro-Caribbean traditions also implies the construction of new paradigms of spec-fic. To approach the novel as merely a response to or deconstruction of European models would retain the centrality of those very models. Rather, I emphasize in my reading the new models that emerge from the non-European discourses the novel engages. Walter D. Mignolo explains that “de-colonial options are being enacted by [I]ndigenous as well as by social movements emerging in the process not just of being anti-imperial, but of undoing the logic of coloniality and imagining de-colonial societies” (“Introduction” 18). Through decolonial thought, texts like *The Salt Roads* gain authority not only as a response to or questioning of Eurocentric models, but independently of them, as the “imagining” of a decolonial alternative to Western-based interpretations of history and epistemology. In alignment with decolonial theories, I focus on elements of intervention and critique of traditional discourses in the novel. Most importantly, I highlight projection and speculation in non-Eurocentric terms, that is, the construction of paradigms that are meaningful regardless of their relationship with Eurocentric epistemologies. By implementing Vodou cosmology as a regulating ontological principle, *The Salt Roads* points to both a postcolonial (revisionist) project and decolonial (speculative) subtext.

The Disruption of Western Space-Time and Mind-Body Axes

In the Caribbean context, colonial history permeates processes of cultural production and self-definition (Tsaaior 124). Several academic and literary texts by relevant Caribbean writers such as Derek Walcott, Kamau Brathwaite, Edouard Glissant, and George Lamming can be said to be “concerned with *writing back to the centre*, actively engaged in a process of questioning and travesty colonial discourses in their work” (McLeod 25, emphasis original; see also Tsaaior 125). Yet, it has been imperative to question whether this should be the pivotal *raison d'être* of postcolonial literature and criticism. The Afro-Caribbean supernatural is used in the novel to construct a narrative of historical revisioning, which emerges as an undeniable response to and contestation of dominant versions of history. At

the same time, however, it permits the articulation of a particular cultural identity that departs from those *centralized* European precepts. In Mignolo's words, it is the "constitution of a new epistemological subject that thinks *from and about* the borders" (*Local Histories* 110, emphasis original).

Two important elements from Vodou metaphysics escape the purported rationality of European epistemology. The first of these is the non-linearity of time. There are several aspects in Vodou that defy teleological assumptions about the linear progression of time. As Leslie Desmangles explains,

Not only is the physical world inverted in the cosmic mirror of the sacred world, but so too is time. The oungan who is about to begin a ceremony often enters the peristil by emerging . . . backwards; this reverse motion symbolizes the retrogression through time to primordial times when the world was being created. The opening of the Vodou ceremony represents the sudden halt of profane time. (103)

Following this transcendental space-time scheme provided by the very basis of Vodou cosmology, Hopkinson often fictionalizes her supernatural characters within a similar, temporally-undefined framework. It is common to find in her works representations of a divine dimension that transcends the laws of time and space as conceived by Western thought. In *Sister Mine* (2013), for example, Afro-Caribbean gods are described as "simultaneously doing an infinity of things in an infinity of locations in the present, the past, and the future" (99). In *The Salt Roads*, the female *loa* Lasirèn, who is significantly associated with the seas and oceans, similarly breaks and fragments time in her encounters with the novel's protagonists: "Time does not flow for me. Not for me the progression in a straight line from earliest to latest. Time eddies. I am now then, now there, sometimes simultaneously" (42); "[i]n seconds I float through days and weeks, see the rains come and go, the crops flourish and be felled" (119-120). Following the parameters of Vodou cosmology, Lasirèn moves in a dimension that is not restricted by linear progressions of time.

The transcendence of a linear progression of time made possible by the supernatural in Vodou implies a significant self-defining narrative technique. For Lasirèn, the currents she ubiquitously navigates are associated with the lives of black people: "There are currents there. There is movement. Helpless, I tumble and splash from one to the next. Each eddy into which I fall immerses me into another story, another person's head. The streams are stories of people; I can/will/did see them, taste them, smell them, hear and touch them" (208). Thus, Hopkinson creates an imaginative space that links Afro-

Caribbean lived experience with a supernatural component, a connection that significantly takes on the form of stream flows. In the context of the cultural erasure and displacement of colonialism, the sea emerges as one of the defining locations of a dialogue between the histories of colonizers and colonized. Poet Kamau Brathwaite's concept of "tidalectics" approaches the sea as the location of a history that "can be characterized as fragmentary and dispersed" (Tsaaior 124). Based on an artistic interpretation of the currents that travel between islands in the Caribbean archipelago, tidalectics is a "methodological tool that foregrounds how a dynamic model of geography can elucidate island history and cultural production, providing the framework for exploring the complex and shifting entanglement between sea and land, diaspora and indigeneity, and routes and roots" (DeLoughrey 2).² In *The Salt Roads*, the connection between streams/currents (and the movement they imply) and Caribbean history is crucial in that it follows a tradition of Afro-Caribbean cultural and identity discourses. Tidalectics, as Anna Reckin explains, "is concerned with a sense of relation that is expressed in terms of connecting lines, back and forth . . . and there are clear parallels here with [Édouard] Glissant's 'poetics of relation' and the shipping routes that Paul Gilroy discusses in his *Black Atlantic*" (2). With tidalectics, focusing on a non-linear, non-progressive model of history, a Caribbean ontology emerges that instead "draws attention to fluid cultural processes, sites of abstract and material relations of movement and rest, dependent upon changing conditions of articulation or connection" (Pugh 11). In *The Salt Roads*, these "changing conditions of articulation or connection" are effected by the linking of the protagonists' parallel lives through the powers of Lasirèn. In this way, the recourse to an imaginary that troubles received notions of time and space allows for a narrative articulation that can be clearly connected with a Caribbean tradition of historical and socio-cultural revisioning.

The second rationalist theory to be challenged by the incorporation of the Afro-Caribbean supernatural is that of the Cartesian conception of the self. Vodou metaphysics do not adhere to the division between mind and body proposed by Descartes, nor to the prevalence of the former over the latter implied in such dualism (Strongman 14). To understand this discordance, it is necessary to look into the concepts of the *gros-bon-ange* and the *ti-bon-ange*, two parts of the self as conceived by Vodou. The first, Maya Deren explains, "is born of the body, and may be imagined as the shadow of a man cast upon the invisible plane of a fourth dimension. . . . [It] is the metaphysical double of the physical being . . . the immortal twin

that survives the mortal man” (26). The *ti-bon-ange*, on the other hand, is “the universal commitment towards good, the notion of truth as desirable, all that conscience which, in our culture, is understood as a function of the soul” (26). Whereas the body is made of physical substance and is, therefore, perishable, this does not entail the hierarchy of the mind over the body that Cartesian philosophy maintains. Desmangles illustrates the intimate connection between the *gros-bon-ange* and the body thus:

the gwo-bon-anj [sic] is conceived as motion: the sinuous motion in the succession of human generations, and the invisible driving force that generates action in a person’s body. It is thought of as the root of being, consciousness, the source of physical motion, the inherent principle within the body that ensures life; it is identified with the flow of the blood through the body, and the movements of inhalation and exhalation of the thoracic cavity. (66-67)

This notion of the *gros-bon-ange* as movement and the force behind the succession of generations recalls the life-flows described in the novel from Lasirèn’s perspective, as well as the emphasis on fluidity proposed by the aesthetics and epistemologies of tidalectics.

The centrality of the body is not only paramount in understanding the self. As a whole, Vodou is a highly performative religion where corporeality adopts multiple ritualistic and cosmological functions (Largey 69). The *loa* (or gods) often manifest different aspects of the same principle, and physical and anatomical elements are crucial in characterizing and distinguishing these aspects. Aspects and symbols in connection to physical appearance fluctuate in Vodou, an overlapping movement of meaning closely connected with tidal epistemologies. Deren describes how “[a]lmost every detail is specified for the aspects of the loa, and these serve both to identify him and to guide his ritual service. Postures, voice level, attitudes, epithets, expressions, etc., are formalized for each aspect” (95). For instance, Ezili, the Vodou *loa* of love, has three main manifestations: Ezili Freda is a beautiful, delicate, and feminine spirit; Ezili Danto (or Ezili-ge-rouge [red-eyed]), is in contrast dark skinned and usually represented as silent and enraged; and lastly, its manifestation in Lasirèn is connected to the sea. In the novel, this multiplicity and fractality is stressed in narrative terms by techniques of variation and repetition, especially in the symbolic recurrence of the number three. This plurality in the diverse aspects of Vodou spirits reinforces an ontology of multiplicity and fragmentation, rather than wholeness and completeness.

The complex relationship established between mind and body in Vodou metaphysics is particularly evident in the parts of the novel narrated in the

first person by Lasirèn. In her awakening to the physical world she tells how she starts having awareness of her self and her surroundings through the bodies she possesses. In her first intervention, when she is summoned to life by Mer and two other women singing in sorrow, Lasirèn wonders: “Do I have a voice? I open my mouth to try to sing the three-twist chant I can hear, and tears I didn’t know before this were called tears roll in a runnelled crisscross down the thing that is my face and past my . . . lips? to drip salt onto my tongue” (46). It is worth recalling here Carole Boyce Davies and Elaine Savory Fido’s words on Caribbean women’s “voicelessness” in literature and history. “The Caribbean woman,” they argue in their introduction to the collection *Out of Kumbla* (1990), “has been historically silenced in the various ‘master discourses’” (1). Later in the novel, when Lasirèn possesses Lemer, the French woman, she says: “[T]he ginger-coloured woman floods me with words, with meaning, and with something more powerful. Now I know them as emotions” (56). Here, the body and the fluid corporeal experiences that materialize in Vodou acts of possession prevail over the mind in the process of acquiring consciousness and knowledge. This signifies a turn from Eurocentric conceptions where the self is determined by the mind, as contained in the Cartesian premise “I think, therefore I am.” Lasirèn’s voice, her existence and consciousness, emerge from the pain experienced by three women in the context of the slave plantation. She then learns to identify the world around her from the experiences of Lemer’s body, as well as the bodies of other women. Lasirèn thus acts as connector between the three main characters within this non-Cartesian framework that allows for fluidity and the convergence of the different historical points that each woman inhabits. This narrative framework thus becomes the “locus for the reinscription of the woman’s story in history” (Boyce Davies and Savory Fido 6).

Conceiving the self as plural and fluid is critical to expressions and representations of sexuality, both in Afro-Caribbean societies and in the novel. Roberto Strongman argues that “[a]llowing for a wider range of subjectivities than the more rigid Western model, the modular African Diasporic discourse of personhood becomes a vehicle for the articulation of non-compliant identities that are usually constrained by normative heteropatriarchy” (27). Indeed, the characters in Hopkinson’s novel do not conform to normative notions of sexuality. In her reading of *The Salt Roads*, Kate Houlden points out that there is “a sensuous portrayal of the mutability of black female sexuality, as the novel brings to life a range of female

characters that have sex with both men and women” (465). An example of these characters’ fluctuating sexualities is the relationship between Mer and her friend Tipingee:

Sometimes Tipingee . . . could only remember Mer’s strong hands, her eyes deep, the muscles of her thighs as she scissored her legs around Tipingee’s waist. Mer always been there for her: shipmates; sisters before Tipingee’s blood came; wives to each other after, even when they had had husbands. (12)

This passage, with a significant descriptive emphasis on the body and bodily fluids, draws attention to a feeling of companionship and support; it recalls the experience of crossing the Middle Passage the characters endured together, and their mutual help and protection during their lives on the plantation. That queer relationships are another factor that connects the distant lives of the protagonists can be seen in a chapter entitled “Throwing.” Here, a section ends with Baudelaire and Lemer having sex, while she “lay back and thought on other, softer, more skillful mouths” (74), meaning her lover Lise. The following section opens with a scene in the plantation in Saint Domingue where Mer reminisces about Tipingee performing oral sex on her. These and other similar portrayals of sexuality and queer relationships³ throughout the novel emerge from a fluid conception of identity that can be traced back to the diversified articulation of the self in Vodou metaphysics. In terms of contemporary literary genres, this means an important addition to the representative scope of spec-fic, where female queer identities usually receive much less attention than the traditional male, heterosexual hero. Furthermore, these moments of support and solidarity are essential in providing positive anchoring points in the articulation of the black diasporic subject.

The Body as Historical Context: Redefining the Afro-Caribbean Diaspora

The supernatural in *The Salt Roads* acts as catalyst for an epistemological framework that places special emphasis on the black female body, which is constructed as fluid, rather than fixed, through its connection with Vodou spiritual and physical tenets. Moreover, as I have argued, the protagonists’ agency in terms of sexual identity provides them a space of solidarity and comfort. Maintaining the black female body as a fundamental referent, this section seeks to explore how the novel addresses and troubles certain notions of the Afro-Caribbean diaspora and the diasporic self. María Alonso Alonso has argued that diasporic writers use the supernatural in their work as “a tool to come to terms with the past of their community in order to reconcile themselves with a history that in many cases haunts them” (65). Some of

Hopkinson's novels, such as *Brown Girl in the Ring* (1998), *Midnight Robber* (2000), or indeed, *The Salt Roads*, are examples of this process of narrative revisioning.

In its approach to a transatlantic history of colonization, *The Salt Roads* revisits some of the conceptual axes of the African diaspora, especially those presented in Paul Gilroy's *Black Atlantic* (1993), which to date constitutes one of the most important attempts to contextualize it. By including the story of Meritet in Egypt, Hopkinson's text introduces a historical and geographical expansion of black diasporic experiences. Thus, it defies some of the basic premises in the concept of the Black Atlantic that situate the diasporic subject exclusively in a post-slavery context. Gilroy's Black Atlantic emerges as "one single, complex unit of analysis" which aims to "transcend both the structures of the nation state and the constraints of ethnicity and national particularity" (Gilroy 15, 19). Outside of a rationale that posits identity as invariably fixed, natural, and rooted to particular territories, the Black Atlantic relies on multidirectional crossings for the construction of identity. This paradigm, then, emphasizes routes, as opposed to roots, as the main epistemological device of diasporic identity formation. In its emphasis on hybridity, motion, and border crossings, this approach fits in with representations of the fluid identities of the characters in Hopkinson's novel. However, the novel diverges from Gilroy's theory of the Black Atlantic in some basic points. For Gilroy, the slave ship and the crossing of the Middle Passage act as political and symbolic starting points in the praxis of movement that accompanies the black diaspora thereafter. The Atlantic Ocean, the site of the slave trade and colonial exchanges of goods, thus becomes the geopolitical framework where the black diaspora is located.

In contrast, the historical and geographical scope of *The Salt Roads* is much broader, and this means an expansion of the diasporic context the characters inhabit. This expansion is achieved mainly through the story of Meritet, the Nubian prostitute living in Alexandria. Alexandria is presented as a truly cosmopolitan space, an urban enclave whose multiple cultural contacts are a product of the expansion of the Roman Empire. Colonization and imperial contact have historically acted as powerful agents of transculturation. Fernando Ortiz coined the term *transculturation* to "express the highly varied phenomena that have come about in Cuba as the result of the extremely complex transmutations of culture that have taken place" there (98); transculturation encompasses "the different phases of the process of transition from one culture to another" (102). This approach

disavows the essentialist Western “notion of culture as static, fixed, objective, consensual and uniformly shared by all members of a group” (Unni Wikan, qtd. in Grillo 158). Mignolo points out that

[t]ransculturation offers a different view of people interaction. It is, in other words, a principle to produce descriptions that changes the principle in which similar descriptions have been made up to the point of its introduction in cultures of scholarship’s vocabulary. (*Local Histories* 16)

The transcultural processes that originate with the Roman Empire and which succeed each other like waves throughout the historical contexts of the novel work to provide new descriptions of the black diasporic subject. The tavern where Meritet works exemplifies an early form of cosmopolitanism and transculturation in what could be called a proto-globalized space. It houses people of different ethnicities: Meritet herself is of mixed Greek and Nubian descent; there is an Egyptian girl and a girl from Syria; and Judah, a male prostitute and a friend of Meritet who accompanies her in her journey to Jerusalem, is Jewish. Antoniou is a Roman merchant sailor who uses the services of both Meritet and Judah; he tells her about his journeys to faraway places in the Middle East, and it is on his ship that Meritet and Judah manage to flee Alexandria. Jerusalem is referred to in the novel as Aelia Capitolina, the name given to the city by Roman Emperor Hadrian in the second century. At a point in the novel, Lasirèn identifies herself with her own aspect as Ezili Danto, and realizes how this name can be traced back to ancient Egyptian religion: “In her name I perceive echoes: Danto, D’hanto, D’hantor, D’hathor. Some few of the Haytian slaves were North African, and a small memory of Hathor’s love still clings to them” (304). Throughout the novel, other female deities and religious figures are evoked in connection to Lasirèn/Ezili, such as Isis, Venus, or the Virgin Mary. Images of the latter are in fact used in Haitian Vodou to represent Ezili in her different manifestations (Deren 138). This network and circulation of cultural symbols challenges ideas of cultures as fixed and hermetically sealed from each other, what Homi Bhabha has described as “the absurd notion of an uncontaminated culture” (53). Rather, it illustrates a dialogical and relational approach to the production of cultures that can be aligned with Édouard Glissant’s idea (drawn from Deleuze and Guattari) of “rhizomatic thought,” in which “each and every identity is extended through a relationship with the Other” (11).

In this way, the emphasis on Roman colonization and the journeys across the Mediterranean Sea implies a change of the ontological foundations of the African diaspora proposed by Gilroy. He situates its origins and development

in the slave trade after the New World discovery and the subsequent cultural interchanges that take place in the Africa-America-Britain triangle, with the Atlantic Ocean as the chief stage for these transnational networks. By linking Meritet's story to that of Mer in the Caribbean plantation and that of Lemer in nineteenth-century France, Hopkinson extends these historical and geographical boundaries. What, then, are the foundations she proposes for the connections between the three protagonists of the novel? I argue that the overlapping experiences of gender and racial oppression underlying these characters' stories become the far-reaching diasporic framework that differs from the Black Atlantic. However, to reiterate, Hopkinson not only emphasizes pain and hardship, but underscores as well the importance of healing practices, sorority, and resistance as elements that unify these and other black women's identities. Once again, the female body is the central context where these experiences of suffering and resilience are located.

It is crucial at this point to turn to the question of the body as historical context. Drawing on Foucauldian theories, Angela King describes the body as "an over-determined site of power for feminists as well as for Foucault; a surface inscribed with culturally and historically specific practices and subject to political and economic forces" (30). However, as Elizabeth Grosz has pointed out, this construction of the body as context was based for Foucault on a "corporeal 'universal'" which "functioned as a veiled representation and projection of a masculine which takes itself as the unquestioned norm" (188). In order to produce a nuanced reading of cultural and historical inscriptions on the body, then, it is necessary to pay attention to its particularities and material foundations in terms of gender, race, sexuality, and other identity markers. The novel revolves around the black female body; however, patriarchal systems of colonization impose the condition of a body abused and subject to violence, both physical and psychical. In this respect, Hortense Spillers has written that "the African female subject, under these historic conditions, is not only the target of rape . . . but also the topic of specifically *externalized* acts of torture and prostration" (207, emphasis original). *The Salt Roads* highlights the impact of Western cultural and political structures on the body by depicting detailed descriptions of its protagonists. Picking sugar cane, Mer talks about being whipped in the plantation: "My back was burning, burning. I stayed bent over the cane, didn't dare raise up. Seasoned twelve years ago to stay bent that way whole day if I must, crouched over cane" (60). Discussing sexual desire, she says that "most of we Ginen women don't have the spirit for

loving. Don't get pregnant plenty neither; don't have our courses regular. The food here doesn't nourish us enough for our bodies to grow babies" (97); and often, as happened to her, women give birth to stillborn babies for that very same reason. Meanwhile Lemer, in France, is the target of scorn and discrimination from Parisian society, due to her skin colour. Although now a dancer, she used to earn money by selling her body and sexuality, like her mother and grandmother before her. Moreover, she contracts syphilis from having intercourse with Baudelaire. The effects of the venereal disease are described with special attention to its impact on her body: "I looked old. I tried to draw myself up tall, to smile. The frozen side of my face wrenched the smile into a grimace. I could feel the tears start down, warm on my left cheek, cold on my insensible one. 'I am become a monster'" (226). The character Meritet, the Nubian prostitute, also partakes in these racialized, but more specifically, gendered projections. Li-Chun Hsiao has asserted that "[i]f there were to be a history of the body in the Caribbean, it would have to take the bodily labor of the slaves as its point of departure" (5). Once again, transposing the violence over the black female body to the pre-modern time of Meritet, Hopkinson offers a precedent to these acts of denigration; she delineates a genealogy of pain. Meritet's experience, like those of the other protagonists, is connected to her sexualized body, as she becomes accidentally pregnant and later suffers a miscarriage that threatens her life.

By focusing on the female body in pain as a node of connection between the three narratives, the novel outlines a history of racialized and gendered acts of dehumanization. Allusions to bodily fluids abound in the descriptions of the black female body in the novel. In her essays on abjection, Julia Kristeva talks about "*corporeal waste*, menstrual blood and excrement, or everything that is assimilated to them, from nail-parings to decay" as representing "the objective frailty of symbolic order" (70, emphasis original). This, as Elizabeth Grosz explains, is because "[b]ody fluids attest to the permeability of the body, its necessary dependence on an outside, its liability to collapse into this outside . . . , to the perilous divisions between the body's inside and its outside" (193). And also, according to Grosz, "in the West, in our time, the female body has been constructed not only as a lack or absence but with more complexity, as a leaking, uncontrollable, seeping liquid" (203). In connection with these processes of objectification, Hortense Spillers argues that, through the violence of slavery, the body bears "the marks of a cultural text whose inside has been turned outside" (207). The black female body in Hopkinson's novel thus becomes a site of codification where the inside is

made external. The socio-political and cultural subjugations of the black female body are, indeed, strategies of control and containment, symptomatic of the threat that this body poses to Western hierarchies of race and gender.

Thus, the emphasis on bodily fluids and sores in the novel illustrates the effects of patriarchal Western colonization on the female diasporic self. However, Hopkinson's narrative of solidarity and resistance provides a means to counteract these practices of oppression. Bodily fluids are also used in the novel to reflect an intimate connection and companionship with other women. Early in the novel, in a passage where Lemer and her lover Lise have just had sex, they decide to divine their future in a water bowl and, lacking one, they use the chamber pot, full of their urine and menstrual blood. Lemer describes this as a blissful moment: "Here in the warm dark with my Lise, no one to bother us, anything felt possible" (19). To cite Houlden again, in the novel, "Hopkinson shows the love and support black women offer each other being a source of sustenance, as well as conduit to sexual pleasure" (467). Thus, sexuality and mutual care, narratively embodied in the women's fluids, become the way to both physical and psychological healing. In terms of the supernatural, the role of Lasirèn/Ezili in binding black women's experiences together transcends the realm of pain and moves into the possibilities of resistance and triumph. Maya Deren argues that "the female principle" Ezili personifies "participates in all of the major cosmic forces . . . and Voudoun does not idealize woman, *per se*, as the principle of fecundity" (137). In a sense, Ezili is positioned outside Western, patriarchal readings of women. As Joan Dayan illustrates,

this goddess who oscillates between the extremes of grace and brutality is . . . no mere perpetuation of Christian notions of Virgin or Temptress, nor of masculine projections of Venus or Hag, but more exactly a dramatization of how black women saw, reacted to, and survived the experience of slavery and the realities of colonialism. (16)

The role of Lasirèn as repository for struggle and resistance is even more clear towards the ending of the novel. Aware now of her fragmented self as Ezili Freda, Lasirèn, and Ezili Danto—separate but one—she says: "They, we, are the ones healing the Ginen story, fighting to destroy that cancerous trade in shiploads of African bodies that ever demands to be fed more sugar, more rum, more Nubian gold" (304). Hopkinson then proceeds to fictionalize historical events by including the supernatural influence of Lasirèn on black women who defied racial and gender oppression. She mentions women such as Queen Nzingha of Matamba, who confronted Portuguese colonizers in the seventeenth century; Rosa Parks and her refusal to sit at the back

of a bus; and even trans women who fought in the 1969 Stonewall Riots in New York. Through the intervention of the spirit, these movements and the protagonists' lives become entangled, creating a border- and time-crossing whole that is nevertheless fluid and adaptable.

Conclusion

The Salt Roads presents a fascinating account of history infused with supernatural elements. This combination allows for the construction of an Afro-Caribbean narrative, an interventionist reading of history that defies Eurocentric epistemologies and ontologies imposed on colonized cultures. In this article, I have argued that non-teleological, non-Cartesian aspects of Vodou incorporated into the novel expand notions of the fixity of cultures and identities. The central role of the body in Vodou and its multiple selves rearticulates cultures as in permanent dialogue with each other, and identities as in constant motion. Sexuality, framed in the Vodou conception of the multiple, fluid self, emerges as a space of healing and resistance for the protagonists. This portrayal of queer relationships results, on one hand, in an expanded representational scope for the spec-fic canon. On the other hand, as the latter half of this article has examined, the novel constitutes a redefinition of the black female diasporic subject. Traditionally, diasporas are understood in their relation to geographical space. Even those “deterritorialized diasporas” such as the African diaspora (Cohen 123) negotiate their identities in relation to an *absent* space. In contrast, this novel broadens the horizon of the Afro-Caribbean diaspora. It connects episodes from modern violence and abuse to those perpetrated in pre-modern times in a different empire. The black female body as subject of colonization, racialized and objectified, becomes the context of a historical experience that links these disparate scenarios. The diasporic subject, however, is crucially represented as resilient as well, which implies potential for endurance and eventual triumph. Genealogies of pain are also genealogies of resistance. As Leif Sorensen notes, “the historical narratives that make up *The Salt Roads* point to alternative futures” (267). Thus, the novel is not only a narrative of revision, but one of intervention and projection. These two axioms are essential in determining that this work of spec-fic does not only respond to a (post)colonial drive to question and challenge dominant discourses of culture. While this is certainly a major dynamic in the novel, that of dialogue and contestation, it simultaneously creates a decolonial imaginative space articulated in cultural and historical terms that are particular to the Afro-Caribbean diaspora.

Arguing from a decolonial position, this novel could be said to both reflect and impact the emergence of globalized spaces which can be linked historically to the imperial constructions it represents and contests. The novel, in pointing to the far-reaching effects of colonialism and imperialism, invites reflection on current forms of imperial domination and oppressor/oppressed dynamics. In the context of spec-fic, the novel equally attests to how the genre is affected by dynamics of domination that stem from colonialism, and to how power structures that reside in Western thought can and should be transformed.

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NOTES

- 1 In a 1999 interview, Nalo Hopkinson noted that she favoured the term “speculative fiction” because her work “can include elements from science fiction, fantasy, dark fantasy, horror, and magic realism” (Rutledge 589). The term is similarly used throughout this article as an inclusive label, shortened as “spec-fic.”
- 2 This is reiterated in Paul Gilroy’s dialogues between roots and routes in the “webbed network” of his *Black Atlantic* (29).
- 3 For a detailed discussion on sexuality in the novel, see Houlden.

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