Phil Stephensen-Payne's *Marion Zimmer Bradley: Mistress of Magic* (1991; 60 pp) is useful as it identifies work written under pseudonyms, lists multiple editions and differences (if any) from edition to edition of her works; and credits cover artwork of each edition to the artist.

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Endnotes

1. Personal communication from Elisabeth Waters. April 10, 2008.

Re-Evaluating Suvin: Brown Girl in the Ring as Effective Magical Dystopia

Lee Skallerup

Introduction

Because of the centrality of technology in their nightmare visions of the future, Zamyatin's *We*, Orwell's *1984* and Huxley's *Brave New World* were often considered a part of the science fiction tradition while shaping our modern understanding of dystopias. And as dystopias have since been primarily understood as a sub-genre of SF, subsequent analysis became based on theories of science fiction, such as Suvin's theories of cognitive estrangement and the *novum*.

In 1990s, however, there was a perceptible shift in dystopian literature. Authors such as Fiona Farrell, John Cranna and Mike Nicol began questioning the normative conventions of the genre by introducing new elements such as magic to their visibly dystopic visions of society. One such book was *Brown Girl in the Ring* by Nalo Hopkinson. The narrative focuses on minority communities in futuristic inner-city Toronto, which have been cut off from the suburbs. Hopkinson, however, takes this dystopic vision and infuses it with elements of her own Afro-Caribbean heritage, a heritage that includes magic. Magic plays an essential role in the narrative, and provides the force necessary to overcome the dystopic situation. While, as mentioned above, dystopias traditionally fall under the heading of science-fiction, Hopkinson's novel challenges the perceived norms of both dystopia and science fiction.

Corresponding to this shift in dystopian technique was a shift in the theory which sought to both explain and understand it. Tom Moylan and Ralph Pordzik published two books that introduced the concepts of critical dystopia and postcolonial heterotopias. Although valuable in expanding our understanding of the dystopian genre, the foundation of these studies remains the various theories of science fiction, but especially Darko Suvin's theory of the *novum* and cognitive estrangement. Suvin, through these concepts, negotiates the possibility of using magic in an effective dystopian narrative, and thus Moylan and Pordzik produced studies that include magical dystopias based on a theory that negates the possibility of magical dystopias. Such projects are, at least on the surface, theoretically problematic, as they require Moylan and Pordzik to reconcile their...
projects with Suvin’s theory – reconciliations they never attempt; reconciliations that, if we wish all dystopias, including magical dystopias, to remain a part of science fiction, can be achieved by a proper re-interpretation of both the concepts of cognitive estrangement and the novum.

This paper will begin by looking at the historical theoretical relationship between science fiction and dystopia. It will then proceed to demonstrate how recent theorists have failed to adequately incorporate the practical changes authors have introduced to the genre, which includes the incorporation of aspects of magical realism. Brown Girl in the Ring will be shown to be an example of effective magical dystopia, while also being used to illustrate how the narrative challenges the former norms of the dystopian genre. Finally, this paper will argue that Suvin’s theory of cognitive estrangement must be re-evaluated – particularly in the dystopian genre – as a result of the normalization of the idea of the technological novum; that this normalization has necessarily led to the use of magic in the effective creation of dystopic universes; and that given this proper re-interpretation of Suvin’s theories, magical dystopias are revealed to provide opportunities for new theoretical applications of his concepts.

Science Fiction, Magical Realism and Magical Dystopias

The dystopian genre has historically been associated with, or considered as a sub-genre of science fiction, a genre that has technology at its core. Keith Booker states that “[s]cience has played a major role in the history of utopian thinking and in the modern turn from utopia to dystopia.” This sentiment is reiterated, repeated, and reinforced by a number of scholars, most importantly Krishna Kumar, Alexandra Aldridge, Darko Suvin, and Chris Ferns. Dystopias are typically studied as a sub-genre of science fiction. Science Fiction Studies has published a number of articles dealing with dystopias. Even Pordzik and Moylan, who point to developments in the dystopian genre, essentially rely on science fiction. Moylan’s book is titled Scraps of the Untainted Sky: Science Fiction, Utopia, Dystopia, and his thoughts on critical dystopias have appeared in the collection Learning From Other Worlds: Estrangement, Cognition, and the Politics of Science Fiction and Utopia and in Science Fiction Studies. In fact, Moylan offers a review of Pordzik’s book in said journal. Pordzik himself relies heavily on Darko Suvin’s theory of the novum for his comparative analysis, stating that “[the novum] can help to avoid the potential for confusion inherent in a cross-cultural approach to postcolonial utopian fiction [...] and therefore yields insights into the ways in which writers employ similar conventions to create new, original plot possibilities and to increase or maintain interpretive plurality.” It should be noted that novum was a term created by Suvin exclusively to explain, understand, and theorise science fiction.

Instead of falling within the genre of science fiction, Brown Girl in the Ring seems to fall more readily into the category magical realism. In the world of magical realism, there exists both the rational world and the world that runs by its own rules. It is the juxtaposition of these two worlds that makes a work a part of the magical real. This idea of the juxtaposition of two worlds is outlined in Wendy Fries’ definition of magical realism, in fact it is implied in its name. Both the magical and the real are present, and the two worlds often collide:

The text contains an ‘irreducible element’ of magic, something we cannot explain according to the laws of the universe as we know them... Descriptions detail a strong presence of the phenomenal world – this is the realism in magical realism... The reader may hesitate (at one point or another) between two contradictory understandings of events... We experience the closure or near-merging of two realities, two worlds.

Thus, it should not be surprising that the magical real is being used in the dystopian genre, particularly the critical dystopia/postcolonial heterotopian incarnation of the genre:

Magical realist texts are subversive; their in-betweeness, their all-at-onceness encourages resistance to monologic political and cultural structures, a feature that has made the mode particularly useful to writers in postcolonial cultures and, increasingly, women. Hallucinatory scenes and events, fantastic/phantasmagoric characters are used in several of the magical realist works... to Indict recent political and cultural perversions. History is inscribed, often in detail, but in such a way that actual events and existing institutions are not always privileged and are certainly not limiting: historical narrative is no longer chronicle but clairvoyance.

In the subversions of the genre that look to push the boundaries of dystopias, but still question social and political situations, why not use magic realism, particularly in a sub-genre that includes postcolonial in its name, postcolonial heterotopia?

Although narratives exist that merge elements of magical realism and critical dystopias, very little has been theorized about this phenomenon. This seems to be true because of the complications the marriage of genres implies, particularly if one bases their understanding of science fiction on Darko Suvin’s theories. According to Suvin, science fiction (SF) relies on what he calls the novum: “SF is distinguished by the narrative dominance or hegemony of a fictional “novum” (novelty, innovation) validated by cognitive logic.” The “cognitive logic” comes from “scientific cognition” and totally “differentiates SF from the ‘super natural’ literary genres (mythical tales, fairy tales, and so on, as well as horror and/or heroic fantasy in that narrow sense).” Cognition plays an even greater role in dystopian fiction than in SF. We as readers of dystopia must believe the probability...
of the *novum* socially and then scientifically. As outlined by Deer, in a dystopia the author needs both to condemn particular social injustices and to portray the mechanisms of oppression as credible enough, as sufficiently powerful and seductive, to represent a believable evil, not an irrelevant or farfetched one.17 The reader must achieve “cognition” in order to be pushed into social action.18 The dystopian *novum* does not rely exclusively on scientific cognition in order to be understood, although it plays an important role. However, what happens when scientific cognition is removed from the equation and replaced by magic, which is by definition unexplained/unexplainable?

Pordzik looks at what he calls “magic dystopias” in his chapter “Treasurehouses of the Unexpected: Magical Realism and the Transformation of Dystopian Space in Postcolonial Fiction.” The chapter includes the analyses of five books that use the magical in their dystopian narrative. Pordzik states that the use of magic undermines the cognitive constraints of the classical dystopian text—i.e. the specific rhetoric needed to convince the reader of the plausibility of the narrated world—by writing a novel that depends on the sustained opposition of two discrete systems of perception for its narrative potency and eschews interpretive closure by avoiding to let one collapse into the other.19

While I would agree that this is one of the effects of using magic in a dystopic text, and does lend to the narratives' ability to be critical and subversive, calling into question dominant forms of knowledge and power,20 Pordzik neglects to harmonize this view of the evolution of the dystopian genre with Suvin's theories about cognitive estrangement and the *novum*, two concepts that Pordzik celebrates as the basis for his comparison in the second chapter of his study.21 While he does not explicitly say so, it could be inferred by the use of the term “cognitive constraints” that the *novum* itself has become too constraining, dominant and homogenizing for the genre. Pordzik does not reconcile the concept of the *novum* and the idea of the magical dystopia.

Moylan suggests that one of the formal features that gives the critical dystopia its force is the practice of “genre blurring.” As he explains: “By self-reflexively borrowing 'specific conventions from other genres', critical dystopias more often 'blur' the received boundaries of the dystopian form and thereby expand rather than diminish its creative potential for critical expression.”22 Both Moylan and Pordzik deal with significant shifts in the dystopian genre and acknowledge the possibility of the magic joining with the dystopian genre, but at the same time make no effort to reconcile this belief with Suvin's theory of the *novum*.

Peter G. Stillman offers a simplified understanding of Suvin's theory of cognitive estrangement: “critical dystopias provide a new world in which the familiar is defamiliarized by being presented outside the dominant interpretive paradigms, from a new perspective, and in a novel context.”23 My hypothesis is that magical aspects of the neo-dystopias can serve as that part of the narrative that defamiliarizes the reader. The dystopian situation, the familiar features of the dystopia, have become that which leads the reader to cognition, but it is the magic that serves as the element which innovates and invigorates the genre. Perhaps this is because the technological future that we once fantasized about has arrived or is in the process of arriving. Perhaps it is because the idea of a negative future has become cliché. Regardless, as Pordzik has pointed out, magic has arrived in dystopia, and now we are left to try and understand its role and its effects on our understanding of the genre.

Brown Girl in the Ring as Critical Dystopia

*Brown Girl in the Ring* is Nalo Hopkinson’s first novel. It incorporates aspects of dystopia, utopia, magic realism, postcolonialism, Canadian history along with Caribbean history and spirituality. The novel provides a site within which to question a variety of aspects of dystopia. Using magical realism, the novel also examines questions of hybridization of culture and history. The majority of the novel takes place in Toronto's inner-city, sometime in the near future:

Imagine a cartwheel half-mired in muddy water, its hub just clearing the surface. The spokes are the satellite cities that form Metropolitan Toronto: Etobicoke and York to the west; North York to the north; Scarborough and East York to the east. The Toronto city core is the hub. The mud itself is vast Lake Ontario, which cunts Toronto off at its southern border. In fact, when water-rich Toronto was founded, it was nicknamed Muddy York, evoking the condition of its unpaved streets in springtime. Now imagine the hub of that wheel as being rusted through and through. When Toronto's economic base collapsed, investors, commerce, and government withdrew into the suburb cities, leaving the rotten core to decay. Those who stayed were the ones who couldn't or wouldn't leave. The street people. The poor people. The ones who didn't see the writing on the wall, or those who were too stubborn to give up their homes. Or who saw the decline of authority as an opportunity. As the police force left, it sparked large-scale chaos in the city core: the Riots. The satellite cities quickly raised roadblocks at their boarders to keep Toronto out. The only unguarded exit from the city core was now over water, by boat or prop plane from the Toronto Island mini-airport to the American side of Niagara Falls. In the twelve years since the Riots, repeated efforts to reclaim and rebuild the core were failing; fear of vandalism and violence was keeping 'burb people out. Rudy ruled his posse now, and he couldn't have cared less about Premier Uttley's reelection platform. (pp. 3-4)
This is the reader's introduction to Toronto of the future. This particular passage is useful to understanding not only what has happened to Toronto, but also leaves us clues as to the political situation contained within. It reiterates the attitude expressed by Rudy, the story's protagonist: "Posse ain't business with politics. Is we a-rule things here now?" (p.3). Rudy and his posse of drug dealers now run the core. The aforementioned Premier Utley needs a heart transplant, and in order to ensure that she receives a human heart (due to the outbreak of "Virus Epsilon" in pig hearts that were being used for transplants), Rudy is contacted. And he is given the orders to procure the heart by any means necessary.

The dystopic situation in the novel is quite interesting. Much like the dystopian classics, Brown Girl presents the reader with two possible worlds, one being the dystopic world of inner-city Toronto, cut off from the outside world. But while We, 1984 and Brave New World presented the alternative as the natural, pastoral past, Brown Girl's alternative is the suburbs, an alternative whose desirability the author actively questions through Ti-Jeanne. This questioning further differentiates the work from the traditional dystopian narrative. There are also similarities between the dystopian set up of Brown Girl and other dystopian narratives, such as The Handmaid's Tale, Player Piano and Fahrenheit 451. Erika Gottlieb calls these last three dystopias "emergency" dystopias, stating that "the new [...] ruling class does not start out with a consistent utopian ideology; it promises to deal with an emergency situation, to find an allegedly efficient solution to a crisis."

This would best describe how the situation degenerated in Hopkinson's dystopic Toronto. As for the plausibility of the extreme situation imagined for Toronto, Gregory Rutledge points out: "The economic problems of Miami and Detroit, both US metropoles with predominantly or significantly non-White populations in the city proper, suggest that Hopkinson's novel is not as fantastic as it would seem."

Although Rutledge mentions two American cities for comparison, the economic concerns that Hopkinson expresses are very real within a North American context.

Ti-Jeanne, who Nalo Hopkinson defines in an interview as representing "everywoman," is the reluctant protagonist of the novel. Through Ti-Jeanne, the reader is forced to question and re-evaluate the relationship between utopic and dystopic ideals. Ti-Jeanne lives with her Grandmother, Gros-Jeanne, and her newborn son in the Burn, which is considered one of the worst areas of Muddy York/Downtown Toronto. They have taken up residence in the "old" Riverdale Farm, growing food and herbs in the garden while having transformed the "farmhouse" into a makeshift hospital, where Gros-Jeanne administers physical (and spiritual) healing to those who come to her. Tony is the father of Ti-Jeanne's baby, and is a member of Rudy's posse. He is also a buff addict, the drug of choice of the particular time. Ti-Jeanne also "could see with more than sight. Sometimes she saw how people were going to die." (p.9). But she rejects these visions, and rejects her Caribbean heritage. She distrusts Gros-Jeanne's traditional remedies, is embarrassed by the discussion of these practices in public, tries to deny the visions that have been haunting her, flees the teaching and preaching of her grandmother, and dreams of moving out to the suburbs with Tony and their child. As the story progresses, Ti-Jeanne is forced to face her gift of being a seer, accept that Rudy is in fact her grandfather and Crazy Betty (the blind woman who wanders the streets) is her mother, and, when Gros-Jeanne is sacrificed for her heart, Ti-Jeanne is finally forced to incorporate all that she has learned in order to defeat Rudy and restore order to the Inner-City as well as to the spiritual world.

Brown Girl explores and questions the relationship between utopia and dystopia, and how we define and understand those spaces. Certainly, the initial description of the state of Downtown Toronto would lead readers to believe that we have reached a dystopian state: total isolation, abject poverty, a crime lord in charge, disinterest from those in "authentic" positions of power (the Premier, the middle and upper-class), a wall that physically confines those who live in the inner-city, cutting them off from entering the suburbs. And the attitude that the situation is less-than-ideal, to say the least, is reiterated throughout the first half of the novel by Ti-Jeanne. She is constantly dreaming of a life in the suburbs, her interpretation of a "better life":

Maybe a little apartment in one of the suburban cities outside the Metro core. Maybe North York or Scarborough, where she's heard there were jobs and people could afford to drive cars and wear store-bought clothes. They would both find work, and Mami [Gros-Jeanne] could come to live with them and leave Toronto people to their own hell. (p.33)

Tony reiterates this sentiment when talking to Ti-Jeanne, justifying his involvement with the Posse: "And what good would that [fixing bikes] do me? Eh? Penny here, penny there, never enough to really live on, never have anything nice? Is a good way to die poor, Ti-Jeanne!" (p.22). For Tony as well, the answer to all their problems lies outside in the suburbs. For these two, the only means of success is through purchasing power, "nice things." And all of this material wealth can be obtained in the suburbs. As put by Rutledge: "For Ti-Jeanne, the culture of romance, upward mobility, and middle-class existence, all of which stress individual as opposed to communal development, were to be preferred." Rutledge goes on to explain that "various aspects of self-aggrandisement and capital accumulation...almost become a form of capitalistic mysticism individuals like Tony desperately seek to master." For Ti-Jeanne and Tony especially, Muddy York has become a dystopia, because in contrast to the outside, the suburbs, where they think that they can achieve their utopian goals of "capital accumulation," Muddy York offers no such opportunities. But how "utopic" is the world outside of the Burn?
There are a few instances where life outside of the inner-city are described. One such instance is in the old library where the librarian has put up a time-line of headlines titled: "TORONTO: THE MAKING OF A DONUT HOLE" (p.10). We read on the next page the following:

TEMAGAMI INDIANS TAKE ONTARIO TO COURT: AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL FUNDS TEME-AUGAMICI ANISHNAABAI LAND CLAIM

FEDERAL GOVT. CUTS TRANSFER PAYMENTS TO PROVINCE BY 30%, CITES INTERNATIONAL TRADE EMBARGO OF TEMAGAMI PINE

JOBLESS RATE JUMPS 10%: TEMAGAMI LAWSUIT IS FUELLING ONTARIO RECESSION, SAYS LABOUR MINISTER

CRIME AT ALL-TIME HIGH BUT BUDGET CUTS FORCE ONTARIO PROVINCIAL POLICE TO DOWNSIZE (p.11)

The headlines go on to describe the mass-exodus of business from Toronto and the subsequent Riots. What is significant about the first headlines is the economic downturn of the entire province, not just of Toronto. This bleak economic outlook is reiterated by Premier Utley:

They’re going to vote for Brunner, damn his tanned, muscled hide. Or Lewis, God forbid, with her snarly make-work programs...I had to give the blasted Indians their blasted stewardship. I practically had orders from the feds, what with Amnesty International breathing down our necks. Their international sanctions had been starving the Canadian economy for years. We needed to be able to export Temagami pine and water again. (pp. 38-9)

What this reveals is that the economic condition of the province (in fact the entire country) is still in shambles. One would have to wonder if Ti-Jeanne and Tony were really heading for greener pastures if they left the inner-city for the suburbs with the economy in the condition portrayed, necessitating "make-work programs" and relying on the export of natural resources.

Uttley also represents another "evil" of the system outside of the Burn; she only cares about being socially responsible when it is beneficial to her personal goals and interests, in this case, her re-election. Her opposition to the porcine organ farms and her insistence on receiving a human heart are rooted in how the polls would swing in her favor:

Constantine [Uttley’s advisor] tapped in some more data. Twenty-three percent of those polled are voters. Look at what happens to your chances of reelection when we sway them to your side by having you bring back voluntary human organ donation.' He keyed in the new chart. Uttley felt her eyebrows rise at the result: 62 percent voter support in her favour. (pp. 39-40)

The Premier also only granted the Native group their "blasted" stewardship after the economy has suffered enough. Neither of the decisions made by the Premier that are presented to us through the narrative reflect any social consciousness nor any motivation outside of entirely selfish ones. Although a democratic process, Uttley’s reelection seems less about democratic process and more about manipulation, propaganda, which Gottlieb identifies as: “the seductive utopian promises of a dictatorship hiding behind the mask of the Messiah.” Not to mention that those inside Muddy York cannot vote. Is this world outside of the Burn truly better than the one inside the Burn?

Premier Uttley has her counterpart in Rudy inside the Burn. It is through Rudy that Uttley will procure her heart (illegally). And his reasons for assuming and holding power are equally as selfish as Uttley’s. A former buff-addict himself, Rudy used revenge and anger to fuel his rise to power:

“'Oh I know you can’t see no scar or nothing on me face now. Me does keep meself young and good-looking nowadays. No scar, no scratch, that me duppy don’t fix it for me. And it take away the craving for buff, too. "So yes, posse do for me that night. And them wasn’t the first one to do me bad, no, sir. From I born, people been taking advantage. Poor all me born days. Come up to Canada, no work. Me wife and all kick me out of me own house. Blasted cow. If it wasn’t for me, she would still be cleaning rich people toilets back home, and is so she treat me. Not because me give she little slap two-three time when she make mouth run away ‘pon me.” Anger at the injustice of it all burned again in Rudy. But it wasn’t like that now. Nobody took advantage of him now. (p.131)

Rudy, according to Rutledge, is “one whose rapacious habits for socioeconomic empowerment run unchecked...” One could say the same thing about Uttley. Uttley’s assistant is trained to produce the best election results by any means necessary, and only questions Uttley's decisions when they seem to indicate a “social conscience” (p.239) on her part. No one in Rudy’s Posse would think to question his choices and judgment; they were all too afraid of him, for good reason. But Rudy too wears the mask of the Messiah over the face of a dictator: he offers those who are loyal to him a steady job and steady pay (something that is rare in the Burn). Given the apparent socioeconomic condition of the world outside of Toronto and the parallels between those who hold positions of power inside and outside of the inner-city, Hopkinson leads the reader to question not only the validity of Tony’s and Ti-Jeanne’s views of the outside as a better place, but also their opinion that the Burn is dystopic.
Ti-Jeanne begins to question her utopic dream of the suburbs when she is truly forced to make a decision as to whether to leave what has been her home for most of her life or attempt to escape to the suburbs: “The thought of the ‘bubs scared Ti-Jeanne. She knew it was safer. She knew that there were hospitals and corner stores and movie theatres, but all she could imagine were broad streets with cars zipping by too fast to see who was in them, and people huddled in their houses except for jumping into their cars to drive to and from work” (p.111). When pushed and Ti-Jeanne has to decide if she is going to follow Tony: “Leave the Burn, leave her grandmother’s home and the people she knew, to live in the barren ‘bubs with a man who’s rather slash buff than work. Would she do it? When you get settled,” she said, ‘send word for me’” (p.113, emphasis added). Throughout her deliberations about life in the suburbs, she begins to realize that she belongs to a bigger family, a larger community that she would be abandoning for the “barren” suburbs. Despite Rudy’s best efforts, Utley’s ignorance, and Ti-Jeanne and Tony’s stubborn refusal to see it, Hopkinson shows the reader that there is nonetheless a thriving community and sense of community that has developed in downtown Toronto. As Donna Bally Nurse puts it in a review of the novel:

What one does come away with, however, is the suffering city’s tenacious spirit of community. Without money, people barter for goods. They take over public parks and build farms. Street children protect one another and ailing individuals turn to midwives and healers like Gros-Jeanne; Hopkinson insists that even in the midst of evil and destruction one discovers alcoves of kindness. 31

The dystopic world contains redeeming elements that allow the community to survive. Hopkinson explains why the dystopic setting was the ideal place for utopic aspirations to appear:

And it occurred to me that most post-holocaust novels happen outside the city. I wondered about the people who stayed — because people will stay; they always do. I wondered what would be keeping them there, what they would be doing there, what would they have the opportunity to do there? So I came up with communities of people who were opportunists. I came up with people who were just too damn ornery to leave — the grandmother is one of those. And people who can now form communities in ways that seem right to them. That was also sort of an opportunity to re-link things in a fashion less citified. 32

This type of questioning, of analysis of the traditional ideas of the dystopia are essential to the narrative’s ability to transcend into a new frame of reference.

As stated by Ferns: “The result is a vision which is critical, not only of utopia, or of the society to which utopia proposes an alternative, but also of the dystopian response itself. It is this critical — and indeed, self-critical impulse which may be seen to underlie a series of attempts to likewise transform the nature of the utopian vision.”33 The particular type of analysis and transcendence that Hopkinson narrates is reflected by Moylan in his theory of critical dystopia:

This, as the critical dystopias give voice and space to such dispossessed and denied subjects (and, I would add, to those diminished and deprived by the accompanying economic reconfigurations), they go on to explore ways to change the present system so that such culturally and economically marginalized peoples not only survive but also try to move towards creating a social reality that is shaped by an impulse to human self-determination and ecological health rather than one constricted by the narrow and destruction logic of a system intent only on enhancing competition in order to gain more profit for a select few.34

Ti-Jeanne is clearly in a deficient position economically and the system of community that is discovered and, one assumes, developed at the end of the narrative is reflective of an alternate system, dissolving the traditional boundaries between the ideal and vilified worlds.

Brown Girl as Critical Magical Dystopia

Oral histories are an important part of the narrative and an important aspect of the Brown Girl's critical force. And magic is a central part of Ti-Jeanne's history. But it is not the only history available to her. Cultural hybridity allows the inscription of a “space for a new form of political opposition, one fundamentally based in difference and multiplicity but now wisely and cannily organized in a fully democratic alliance politics that can talk back in larger though diverse collective voice.”35 Brown Girl closely associates cultural hybridity with magic; it is through magic that characters achieve cultural hybridity. By associating these two aspects, Hopkinson privileges magic as an essential element of her narrative and its critique. What differentiates Hopkinson's use of the magical from other forms of science fiction or fantasy is her postcolonial perspective, which, as put by Sarah Wood “attempts to offer localized resistance to imperialist assumptions that can be found in sf.”36

Charles de Lint writes that "Magic realism forces the reader to view the world differently —- past, present and future —- and to understand not only the connections, but the relevance of those connections."37 In Brown Girl, magic is used to represent the cultural heritage that Ti-Jeanne has to embrace in order to defeat Rudy and maintain the community. Wendy B. Faris points to two
of the common traits of magic realism: “We experience the closeness or near-merging of two realms, two worlds” and “These fictions question received ideas about time, space and identity.”38 This closeness and questioning are acted out primarily through Ti-Jeanne. She is our key to understanding the magical world that has been presented to us. In order for her to form her identity, Ti-Jeanne must merge the two worlds that she is able to see. Faris also points out that “[t]he reader may hesitate (at one point or another) between two contradictory understandings of events -- and hence experiences some unsettling doubts.”39 Rutledge addresses how Hopkinson overcomes this hesitation on the readers’ part. He describes Hopkinson’s novel as “culturally challenging,” pointing to the use of idiosyncrasies and Afro-Caribbean culture (shown through magic as well as language) as a possible stumbling block for non-Caribbean readers. But because the protagonist of the story is learning about her unique cultural heritage right along with the reader, it allows for “the freedom to appreciate the novel’s FFF [futuristic fiction and fantasy] allows non-Caribbean readers – including non-Caribbean Blacks – the freedom of appreciating the novel’s FFF.”39 As well, Ti-Jeanne moves back and forth from the Western culture to her native one, fusing the two together in order to achieve a solution to the obstacles she faces in the Burn.

Rutledge also describes what he calls Hopkinson’s “hybridized methodology,” in order to make the West African mythology more familiar to the those coming out of the Western tradition:

...Hopkinson roots herself in an ancient oral tradition in which the traditional West African gods and the Greco-Roman gods, among many others, walked the land, sometimes in mortal guise. Frequently, the gods foisted chaos and hardship on humankind, which was subject to their sometimes benevolent, sometimes selfish, japes and manipulations. Hence, Hopkinson uses theology-based fantasy and Caribbean mysticism to personify the Afro-Caribbean gods.41

Although Hopkinson offers us a glimpse of the fantastic, she roots it in traditions that would be familiar, and therefore more acceptable, to the Western reader. This mix of grim reality and magic that has parallels in traditional Western culture help make Brown Girl in the Ring “radically unique” and at the same time, a compelling example of magic realism.

Ti-Jeanne hybridises magic/culture in order to defeat Rudy. As Rudy is trying to steal her dummy (soul), Ti-Jeanne meets up with her spirit-father, the Jab-Jab/ Legbara. She is able to experience the memories of those closest to her: Rudy beating and berating her grandmother, Rudy manipulating and torturing her mother’s dummy into committing murder, and seeing the horrors of what Rudy is capable of through the eyes of Tony (p 220). She concludes that “I can’t keep giving my will into other people hands no more, ain’t? I have to decide what I want to do for myself” (p.220). And she is then able to come upon a hybridized solution in order to defeat Rudy:

She remembered her grandmother’s words: The centre pole is the bridge between the worlds...She thought of the building she was in. The CN Tower. And she understood what it was: 1,815 feet of the tallest centre pole in the world...For like the spirit tree that the center pole symbolised, the CN Tower dug roots deep into the ground where the dead lived and pushed high into the heavens where the oldest ancestors lived. The tower was their ladder into this world...she knew that the call to the heavens should be mirrored by a call to the earth... (p.221).

Ti-Jeanne calls to the spirits, calls to the dead and they together defeat Rudy, using a Canadian icon. Ti-Jeanne is able to incorporate aspects of her present culture with those of her ancient cultural heritage in order to form her identity. She moves from disbelief and the denial of her own culture at the beginning of the tale to acceptance, from acting on instinct alone as she first faces Rudy, through hybridization to self-awareness and the ability to decide what she wants to do for herself. Although the end of the novel shows that she is still unsure as to her role and her identity, she is clearly on the right path: “Well, Papa, look my answer here. I go do this for a little while, but I ain’t Mami. I ain’t who I want to do with myself yet, but I can’t be she” (p.244).

Symbolically at the end of the story, Ti-Jeanne does not join the mourners in a ceremony for Gros-Jeanne: “She still didn’t feel a part of these ways that had been so much a part of her grandmother’s life” (p.245). But she does settle down to try to name her as-yet unnamed baby. Firmly grounded in the present, having embraced the culture of her past and the future in her arms, Ti-Jeanne is ready to be her own person.

This also leads to her ability to find value in other cultures and the community that surrounds her. As expressed by Daniel Yon:

Identity is never mirror images of the bounded and “imagined” communities in which they are constituted. Instead, the foregoing ethnographic details speak to the sense in which they are negotiated and constituted through ambivalence. New identities are continually being forged dialogically from the interplay of being black, young, gendered, sexualized, Caribbean, Canadian and global all at the same time. The symphonic interception and collisions of these various “sites” of identification guard against tendencies to over-determine identities by privileging one “site” over the others.42

Gros-Jeanne again is the model for Ti-Jeanne as she leaves herself open to multiple influences, not just the Caribbean ones. And Ti-Jeanne eventually
embraces her own cultural hybridity, the Caribbean culture of her past, as well as the cultures and communities that now surround her. Before the confrontation with Rudy, Josée and the street kids save Tony, Ti-Jeanne and the baby. Ti-Jeanne repays them by tending to their wounded, despite Tony’s protests. And she discovers that communities can create their own “magic”:

A girl of about twelve returned the grin, flicking a hank of black hair out of her eyes. Her brown face was difficult to see in the dark of the tunnel. Her teeth gleamed. Mumtaz was carrying some kind of jury-rigged electronic box, about the size of a loaf of bread, held together with patchy layers of masking and electric tape. Ti-Jeanne could just make out toggle switches bristling from the top of it.

“Listen,” said Mumtaz. She flicked the switch, and Ti-Jeanne jumped as the tunnel filled with the din of hundreds of children screaming...

Mumtaz shut off the noise. “I layered all out voices. That way, it sounds like there are more of us than there are.”

“And the visuals?” Ti-Jeanne could have sworn there'd been a good forty kids.

“Deeplight projector hooked up on the subway tracks. I rigged it myself a long time ago. Keeps people out of our space. It's a tape I made of all of us, dubbed on six waves so it looks like a lot more.” (pp. 185-6)

Ti-Jeanne discovers that they also have a common enemy in Rudy, and with this newfound sense of community she feels with the street kids, she leaves her baby in their care while she goes to face Rudy, not only for herself and her family, but for the larger community. Once she defeats Rudy, she is able to understand how large the community is that she was fighting for: “By the time she was out of the market, she was juggling a half pound of rabbit pemmican...a bottle of cranberry jelly, a carved gourd rattle (“for the baby”), and Mary's honey. Grief still darkened her thoughts, but the attentions of the market people had soothed her a little” (p.232). With Ti-Jeanne's connection to her cultural heritage broken, she is nonetheless still able to find comfort in the larger community of which Gros-Jeanne was part and about which she tried to teach Ti-Jeanne.

The final and equally important occurrence of magic in the narrative is Tony's ultimate betrayal of Ti-Jeanne and his culture. He kills Gros-Jeanne in order to provide a heart for Premiere Utley. It is significant that Tony provides the means for this final act of magic and cultural hybridity. Despite his denial of magic and his cultural heritage, despite his blindness to the existence of the community and his having inadvertently threatened its viability, the heart he symbolically tries to steal is magically strong enough to live on and to ensure the survival and transformation of the community. As Neal Baker explains: “the heart of a black, Caribbean immigrant revives the health of a white, birthright Canadian. Utley is not just any Canadian, however, but the embodiment of the Canadian nation-state. Both literarily and figuratively, the body of the nation-state is fortified by the transplant of an ‘alien organ.’” Once Utley gets Gros-Jeanne's heart, she is transformed. She becomes a reflection of how Gros-Jeanne lived her life practicing cultural hybridity: “In every artery, every vein, every capillary, two distinct streams, intertwined. She had worried for nothing. She was healed, a new woman now” (p.237). Utley goes through almost the same process as Ti-Jeanne goes through, although notably not by choice. But one may question Ti-Jeanne's willingness to undergo the maturation and hybridization process that she experiences. It is only at the end of the story that Ti-Jeanne truly accepts her fate; even her battle with Rudy is initially for reasons that were not her own. While Utley is initially paralleled with Rudy, her process is then shifted to reflect that of Ti-Jeanne. And, like Ti-Jeanne, Utley is able to see beyond her own selfish reasons and begins to recognize the community contained within downtown Toronto:

“There's another thing, too. We're going to rejuvenate Toronto.”
“Premiere, you know that project has always been death to politicians. No one's been able to do it yet.”
“Yeah 'cause they've tried it by providing incentives for big business to move back in and take over. We're going to offer interest-free loans to small enterprises that are already there, give them perks if they fix up the real estate they're squatting on.”
“What small enterprises? The place is a rat hole, complete with rats.”
“Oh, I don't know. Something tells me we'll discover that there are quite a few resourceful people left in Muddy York.” (pp. 239-40)

Baker reads this part optimistically, stating that “Utley's urban plan parallels the 'intertwined' yet 'distinct' streams in her blood, promising a syncretic metropolis that will join divisions between the suburbs – primarily white – and the multicultural inner-city.” Much in the same way many people of different cultural heritages share in Gros-Jeanne's culture, her the “magic” not only represents Caribbean cultural heritage, but the multi-cultural composition of the inner-city. Utley's policy also mirrors the community, this community that is found in Toronto: intertwined yet distinct.

Conclusion

Hopkinson, in numerous interviews and essays, expresses how she understands the power of science fiction as a postcolonial tool:

Science fiction, in North America particularly, is traditionally a literature of
colonizing, and we've had a problem with that. Part of it doesn't really speak to us. But there is so much being done in the field that does. The literature is changing, it's evolving, and there are people who are tackling things like that head-on. But I think it's still very much a literature that does not really include us, except as window dressing. The over-all impression you get from the book covers is that the humans are the white people, and the aliens are people of color.

In an interview with Christian Wolff in Macomère, Hopkinson goes on to point out that “Science Fiction and fantasy appeal to me because of the subversive possibilities of them. I can... exaggerate and thereby call into question political conditions that currently exist in this world.” And in a conversation with the Quebec SF writer Élisabeth Vonarburg which appeared in Foundation, Hopkinson observes that

I think speculative fiction has the potential, often realised nowadays, to be perversive and subversive and oppositional and revolutionary. Which could make it a wonderful literature for radical and marginalised communities. But by and large people from those communities tend to see the genres (and probably somewhat accurately, at least historically) as literatures which just replicate and glorify existing power imbalances.

These comments strongly resemble Moylan's comments on the possibilities of the critical dystopia to “give voice and space to such dispossessed and denied subjects” and “go on to explore ways to change the present system.” What Hopkinson achieves with Brown Girl in the Ring is a complex analysis of dystopian and utopian expectations, using economic and social “denied subjects” as her main subjects. Through Ti-Jeanne, a young, unwed Black mother, Hopkinson suggests new ways to look at society and possible solutions to what she sees are the dystopic conditions. Ti-Jeanne has to accept her history and community as well as the histories and communities around her, and become a figure of cultural hybridization. Hopkinson expands the boundaries of the genre even further by privileging magic in her narrative. The central role that magic plays in the resolution of Ti-Jeanne's and the society's narrative seems to culturally hybridize the dystopic genre.

This dystopic narrative has effectively incorporated elements of both the magical and dystopic. And the magical elements represent an opportunity in the narratives for the characters to think differently about the society in which they are victims. This, in turn, invites the reader to participate in unconventional dialogues concerning the relationship between utopia, dystopia, eutopias and their present society. The magic does represent, as pointed out by many theorists, but best put by Todorov, “...s'agit ici comme là d'une transgression de la loi... l'intervention de l'élément surnaturel constitue toujours une rupture dans le système de règles préétablies”. But this questioning isn't limited, in the case of these magical dystopias, to the laws of society, but extends to the laws of the dystopian genre. The magical elements found in Brown Girl are impossible to ignore: they play a central role in the narrative, a central role usually reserved for science and technology. And magic also seems to be presented differently in this central role: while science and technology is often portrayed as being a malevolent force in dystopian narratives, magic in the case of this example is portrayed as a possible means of transcending the dystopian state and providing the insight to move towards a eutopia.

There are others who have recognized the challenge that Brown Girl poses to Suvin's theory of the novum. Sarah Wood observes that “by populating her text with characters and figures taken from Caribbean religious and folklore Hopkinson would seem to be in contravention of the strict generic rules that Suvin proposes.” Jennifer Gregory explains why this subversion is so effective:

Hopkinson privileges Afro-Caribbean spirituality in a way that further subverts even speculative fiction. SF is defined as embracing “cognitive estrangement.” Hopkinson's contradiction of the physical laws of nature introduces a cultural basis that produces a defamiliarization far beyond the epistemic meaning usually gathered by active SF readers. She exploits the degree to which SF renders the real unreal and creates an atmosphere of alienating defamiliarization for readers who stand as “outsiders” in relation to New World African religions.

The focus of these two critiques is the postcolonial implications of Hopkinson's novel, and while they recognize the subversion of Suvin, neither addresses the theoretical consequences of such subversion on the idea of the novum as the basis for science fiction.

There are many directions that dystopian theories can take in order to absorb this shift in technique. One would be to consider dystopias instead as a form of parody and satire. Peter Ruppert, among others, suggests that the impulse of dystopian fiction is in fact to “satirize existing social and technological tendencies by extrapolating and exaggerating the possible consequences of those tendencies, and [to] parody the utopian yearning for simple, timeless, permanent solutions.” Satire has no rules against the use of magic in order to create the satirical effect. As shown in Brown Girl in the Ring, magic serves as a valuable tool in order to highlight and question current social tendencies in particular. The playful nature of magical realism would also be well-suited to the often playful tendencies of satire and parody. Should magical dystopias be thus considered closer to the satirical tradition and distanced from the science fiction tradition?

Many, however, would argue that the critical history that has joined dystopias and science fiction is too difficult and important to ignore. Much of the critical reception of novels such as Brown Girl in the Ring shows the influence science fiction still has on our understanding of dystopias, magical or not. If we wish to retain dystopias as a sub-genre of science fiction, the most useful way would be to keep Suvin in the picture when trying to understand dystopias. We can attempt to reconcile Suvin with the use of magic, showing the possible application of the novum and cognitive estrangement in broader terms, which would include
and not exclude magic. The features that estrange and the features that permit cognition are shifted. Magic leads to estrangement, but the use of a dystopian setting leads to cognition, because the idea of a negative future as a result of current socio-political practices has become normalized. Magic has become that element that "renders the real unreal and creates an atmosphere of unfamiliarity in which the reader may be brought to consider issues in a fictive context that the same reader would not notice." The dystopian narrative, in its more traditional forms, had lost its effectiveness because it no longer rendered the "real unreal," and magic has moved in to revive the genre.

(ENDNOTES)

1 For a more complete discussion of these authors, see the chapter "Treasurehouses of the Unexpected: Magical Realism and the Transformation of Dystopian Space in Postcolonial Fiction" in Ralph Pordzik, The Quest for Postcolonial Utopia (New York: Peter Lang, 2001), pp. 107-132.


4 Krishna Kumar, Utopia and Anti-Utopia in Modern Times (Oxford: Blackwell, 1987).


7 Chris Ferns, Narrating Utopia, (Liverpool: Liverpool UP, 1999).


11 Pordzik, op. cit., pp. 12-15. See also Suvin, Metamorphoses of Science Fiction, pp. 63-84, for a fuller discussion of the concept of the novum.

12 Jerrilyn McGregory uses the term "mythical realism" to describe the novel, explaining that Hopkinson "[uses] duplicity by centering her text within the boundaries of fantasy." Perhaps a more fitting categorization, Mcgregory, however, does not offer a full theoretical examination of the term, saying that she is only "testing" it. For the purpose of this paper, magical realism will be used as a basis for the analysis, but I am fully aware that the novel does not fit perfectly within this realm. Jerrilyn Mcgregory, "Nalo Hopkinson's Approach to Speculative Fiction," Femspec 1 (2005), p. 3.


15 Suvin, op. cit., p. 63.

16 Suvin, op. cit., p. 65.


19 Pordzik, op. cit., p. 122.

20 Pordzik, op. cit., p. 130.


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29 Gotlieb, op. cit., p. 10.
33 Ferns, op. cit., p. 138.
35 Moylan, Scraps, p. 190.
44 Baker, op. cit., p. 221.
45 "Nalo Hopkinson: Many Perspectives," p. 76.