5   Transforming the body, transculturing the city

Nalo Hopkinson's fantastic Afropolitans

Miasol Eguíbar Holgado

ABSTRACT
This article explores the intersections between Afropolitanism and the speculative fiction of Afro-Caribbean Canadian writer Nalo Hopkinson. Interpreting her work under the theories of Afropolitanism brings to the foreground and problematises the disjunction between the modern African diaspora (Afro-American/Afro-Caribbean) and the contemporary African diaspora, the one Taiye Selasi addresses in her conceptualisation of Afropolitanism. In aligning the Afro-Caribbean fantastic context with the figure of the Afropolitan, the author addresses some of the incompatibilities that may arise between them, as well as the productive and creative possibilities of their conjunction for the definition of emerging, transnational African identities.

The concept of Afropolitanism, developed to designate a transnational ontology and artistic ethos shared by people connected to Africa, has recently attracted considerable attention both from the context of cyberspace and from academia. Born of the need to address and articulate fluid identities rooted in Africa, Afropolitanism speaks to experiences of migration and translocality in a globalised world. As a phenomenon which is only recently beginning to be theorised, several aspects of its applications and implications are yet to be debated in depth. Whereas current criticism has mostly focused on the class restrictions entailed in Taiye Selasi's original formulation of the concept in *LIP Magazine* in 2005, questions such as the scope of the term or the positionality of the body within its parameters remain under-discussed. This paper examines the work of Jamaican-Canadian writer Nalo Hopkinson and the ways in which a close analysis of representations of (non)racialised bodies in the global city may benefit from an Afropolitan approach. Equally, concentrating on Hopkinson's speculative fiction reveals how the discourse of Afropolitanism may be expanded and con-ferred with a more nuanced reading. Selecting texts from an Afro-Caribbean literary tradition instantly raises fundamental questions, such as the appropriateness of deploying the idea of Afropolitanism to describe shifts in Caribbean-Canadian identities. The term 'Afropolitanism' is most commonly used to refer to a contemporary experience, historically and conceptually detached from previous (forced) migration experiences of the African diaspora. Does this mean that Afropolitanism may exclusively imply a unidirectional movement, diasporic or otherwise, from the continent to other parts of the world? Would the presence of

Afro-Caribbean subjects and their experiences disrupt the social patterns and geographical movements around which Afropolitanism is constructed? I argue that the dynamics of cross-cultural contacts in modern metropolises, which can be conceptualised through Fernando Ortiz's ideas on 'transculturation', play a central role in defining Afropolitanism, to the point where a carefully appraised inclusion of Afro-American and Afro-Caribbean ontologies becomes a necessary step in the theoretical development of the concept.

In the article where she first introduces the term, Selasi defines the Afropolitan subject as follows:

> They (read: we) are Afropolitans – the newest generation of African emigrants, coming soon or collected already at a law firm/chem lab/jazz lounge near you. You'll know us by our funny blend of London fashion, New York jargon, African ethics, and academic successes. … There is at least one place on The African Continent to which we tie our sense of self: be it a nation-state (Ethiopia), a city (Ibadan), or an auntie's kitchen. … We are Afropolitans: not citizens, but Africans of the world.
>
> (Selasi, 2005)

Her attempt to encompass an emerging African cosmopolitan identity within this neologism can be framed within the recent wider movement towards self-definition in which diverse African groups (usually young, middle- or upper-class artists) give name to their own experiences of hybridism and culture and identity transformations. As Belinda Otas points out, 'terms like Afropolitan, Afro-Optimism, Afro-Klectic, Afro-Phile, Afro-Centric, and Afri-Capitalist' proliferate within a 'savvy generation living in a new-media village' (2012: 38). This miscellaneous terminology refers to the multiple strategies through which particular African subjects position themselves within the multicultural, globalised world of which they are part. Furthermore, the flexibility of the meaning-making process implies an equally flexible range of identities to which the terms can be ascribed. In this sense, Meruschka Govender, born in South Africa and of Indian descent, affirms that, in using the term Afropolitan to define herself and people like herself, 'I want to complicate Africa. I want people to realise how multi-dimensional the continent and the experiences of the people are' (quoted in Otas, 2012: 41). Nevertheless, the element that prevails in all these different modes of identity articulation is the reference to Africa as an ultimate site of identification. Selasi's proposal, as well as later critical texts reconsidering the concept (see Ede, 2016; Eze, 2014), all point towards Africa as a relatively immediate point of origin or departure. Achille Mbembe's important contribution to the heuristic applications of the term reconfigures part of the scope of Afropolitanism to speak about Africa as long since participating in global socio-cultural dynamics and therefore highlighting even more the central role of the continent (2007: 27). Even in those texts where the African diaspora is mentioned as one of the groups affected by processes of globalisation and cross-cultural contexts, the moment of migration is positioned in the time after the 1950s. It is people of African descent, but more specifically first-, second- or perhaps even third-generation African migrants who have developed the concept of Afropolitanism to define their transnational, cultural and identity-formation experience. There is thus a pervasive emphasis on the newness and contemporaneity of Afropolitanism.

In light of this tendency to associate Afropolitanism with recent migration movements, it is not surprising that discourses on Afro-Caribbean or Afro-American diasporas are left largely underrepresented. In an interview in 2015, Selasi herself even goes as far as to establish a distinction between the old African diaspora and the new one whose experiences she was seeking to describe: 'There is an African diaspora, not the original one; there is a new one, a smaller one' (quoted in Santana, 2016: 122). Her conceptualisation comes from the

impulse to address a kind of African transnationality that differs from that of the previous, centuries-old African diaspora (which I will call from now on, and for clarity's sake, the 'modern' African diaspora). However, the modern African diaspora has been widely theorised as transnational from at least the last decades of the nineteenth century. Salah M. Hassan aligns 'the Afropolitans to an earlier generation of African diasporic intellectuals, writers and artists – Frantz Fanon, Stuart Hall, Léopold Sédar Senghor and Aimé Césaire, among others – who in the process of inhabiting the Western metropolis have shaped our thinking of Western modernity and postmodernity' (2012: 24). Paul Gilroy's defining theoretical work *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (1993) is notable in its attempts to situate this African diaspora within a modern, global paradigm. He redesigns the diaspora as a space where it is possible to go beyond nationalistic claims of a pure, essentialist identity. Gilroy's approach emphasises diasporas as transnational frameworks, in which 'routes', rather than 'roots', are what join diaspora members. He both interrogates the 'significance of the modern nation state as a political, economic, and cultural unit' and posits that diasporas and their transnational nature can be used as tools to transcend the notions of ethnic absolutism associated with monolithic nationalisms (7). In a sense, it could be argued that Selasi's paradigms of identity politics are propelled by this principle. Her urgency to represent an African experience of cosmopolitanism is closely connected to Gilroy's deconstructions of fixed identities limited by nationalist exclusionary binaries. Teleologically, therefore, both Gilroy's and Selasi's ideas point to similar boundary-breaking processes in the formation of African-based identities.

However, it is in the origins of these two diasporic waves (the modern and the contemporary African diasporas) that the main distinction between them can be found. It is in its being a product of slavery, first and foremost, and of later subsequent intra- and inter-continental migrations, that the modern African diaspora differs from the contemporary diaspora, epitomised in the figure of the Afropolitan, who has relative freedom of mobility and an element of choice in their migration. Diasporic identities within these two broad groups are constructed upon completely different experiences of migration, displacement and cultural contact. Given the great distance between these starting points, the ontologies of the modern and contemporary diasporas will necessarily be disparate, and a careful evaluation of their divergences becomes equally important in the task of developing and exploring new dimensions of Afropolitanism. As dispersal from Africa and settlement elsewhere has taken such contrasting forms throughout history, it is with caution that any overarching terms should be approached. In the Canadian context, Wisdom Tettey and Korbla Puplampu indicate that 'the term *African-Canadian* is often used in everyday parlance and in the academic literature as an uncontested signifier of identity capturing all peoples of African origin in Canada' when, in fact, 'it is a very complex and contested concept that defies the presumed consensus of meaning implied in its usage, as well as the homogeneity of shared origin that members of the group have' (2005: 6). The entangled landscape of African-Canadianness includes socio-cultural manifestations from both the modern and contemporary African diasporas, as well as from times in between. There exists a settled community which has been present in Canada since the eighteenth century. It is a product of slavery and migrations from the US, and George Elliott Clarke designates this segment of the modern African diaspora in Canada as 'Africadia', which he defines as 'an ethnocultural archipelago consisting of several dozen Black Loyalist – and Black Refugee – settled communities (including some in and about the Halifax-Dartmouth metropolitan region), whose foundings

date back to 1783 and 1815 respectively' (2002: 107). Definitions of Africadia often depart from the cosmopolitan, transnational ethos, and are instead read as part of an indigenous or nationalistic movement. At the other end of the spectrum are those groups who arrived from continental Africa during recent migration movements, a part of the African-Canadian population that can perhaps be more easily aligned with the Afropolitan. The Afro-Caribbean diaspora in Canada, for its part, combines aspects from the modern and the contemporary diasporas.

The Caribbean diaspora in Canada originates as part of an immigration programme which encouraged people from the West Indies to migrate there during the 1960s, usually to act as cheap labour. As such, their contemporary diasporic experience can be framed within the scope of Afropolitanism, in that their displacement constitutes a contemporary reality and the push/pull factors involve a (to a certain extent) voluntary migration. It must be emphasised that class disparities can, and indeed do, play a fundamental role in ultimately self-defining as Afropolitan, since the concept has been conceived within a specifically upper-middle-class collectivity. However, it is also true that, as happens with current Afropolitan migration movements, processes of settlement in and contact with the hostland in the Caribbean-Canadian context take place, mostly, in post-Fordist urban spaces during a time of capitalist expansion and the consolidation of global socio-economic forces. The recentness of these movements from the Caribbean to Canada usually results in the migrants' and their descendants' detachment from the kind of personal or collective identification with Canada articulated by groups such as the Africadians. The national implications involved in this identity positioning contravene some of the agendas and ontologies conveyed in the works of Caribbean-Canadian writers such as Dionne Brand and M. NourbeSe Philip. These writers adopt a transnational point of view, clearly identifiable with the Afropolitan stance, whereby African diasporans cannot be fully accommodated within the limits of any nation-state structure. Philip argues that the New World African is in constant search of a lost homeland: 'where is home? And for those of us who belong to what I call the Afrospora, do we go back to the Caribbean …; do we go "back" to Africa; do we stay in North America?' (Thomas, 2006: 206). This is part of the reason why some Caribbean-Canadian authors are wary of using vocabulary like 'homeland' or 'belonging' within a black Canadian context, let alone acquiescing to a particular national identity. For them, the African diaspora is defined through a multiplicity of locations and experiences; and this self-placement strategy is not far removed from the basis of movements such as Afropolitanism whereby

> The African is no longer understood as being in opposition to the European, but as incorpo-rating Europeans, Asians, and the rest of the world. Being African is no longer anchored in the narratives of autochthony. … Identity, like culture, is delocalized. Place and origin are no longer exclusive markers of identity.
>
> (Eze, 2014: 238)

The emphasis on hybridity and transnationalism that can be observed in this Caribbean-Canadian segment of the African diaspora responds to very much the same predicaments of contemporary cultural and border crossings faced by Afropolitan subjects.

On the other hand, the Afro-Caribbean diaspora traces its early origins back to the slave trade, the essential point of rupture with contemporary diaspora movements. Migration in the modern African diaspora is different from any other migration in history: thousands of African men and women travelled between continents; however, it was not of their own volition, and they were moved, or rather transported, in deplorable conditions. The crossing

of the Middle Passage, the breach between worlds, is often invoked as a powerful experience whose enduring imprint has influenced African diasporans for generations, and into the present day. Dionne Brand transforms this trauma into the embodiment of in-betweenness, a space that destabilises notions of origin and leads to a state of unbelonging that later becomes voluntarily accepted. What she calls the 'Door of No Return' is an impossible reality, the Middle Passage is a lived history for slaves that becomes a metaphor for elusive origins:

> The door signifies the historical moment which colours all moments in the Diaspora. … The door exists as an absence. A thing in fact which we do not know about, a place we do not know. Yet it exists as the ground we walk. … The door casts a haunting spell on personal and collective consciousness in the Diaspora.
>
> (Brand, 2001: 24–25)

In this sense, rather than celebratory attitudes towards a multicultural background, as has become the central paradigm of Afropolitanism, the trauma and violence which triggered modern African dispersion permeate current African- and Caribbean-Canadian identity and cultural expressions.

Once it is acknowledged that there exist fundamental differences between the modern (Afro-Caribbean) and the contemporary (Afropolitan) diasporas, the question that needs to be asked is whether these differences are irreconcilable. For this, I turn to the debate on the politics of representation of Afropolitanism which has recently taken place in academic contexts. A consistent number of the critiques against Afropolitanism concentrate on its ostensible association to a capitalist, upper-middle-class experience. The Afropolitan is seen as a privileged subject who, in his/her celebration of a kind of elitist multiculturalism, fails to address the hardships endured by the majority of African peoples. In Amatoritsero Ede's words,

> The culture of Afropolitanism, as it is now mostly configured, can be regarded as short-sighted because of its individualistic political effects. This is exhibited through Afropolitan individual self-empowerment that ideologically mutates into an ironic and symbolic collective black self-negation, couched as a celebration of cultural hybridity and transnationalism.
>
> (Ede, 2016: 90)

Here the shift in individual and collective identity constructions promoted by Afropolitanism, towards consumerism and the West, is read as a rejection or denial of socio-cultural and economic realities in Africa. Therefore, it is not only regarded as an alternative vehicle for expressing articulations of identity and aesthetic values, some scholars rather consider it an ontological departure from or a rupture with Africa. For these reasons, critics such as Emma Dabiri refuse to use the label 'Afropolitan' and choose to self-identify instead through a contemporary form of Pan-Africanism 'that does not seek legitimacy via detours through our Anglo-American "superiors", but instead fosters a continental internationality' (2016: 107). Class restrictions, freedom of mobility and a highly commodified artistic style are regarded as the most crucial limitations of Afropolitanism, which can thus be seen to fail to represent a significant part of Africa's population. In contrast to these positions I argue that Afropolitanism has emerged as a reaction in itself, a reaction against certain nativist essentialising discourses, those which Mbembe identifies as 'institutionalised and ossified' (2007: 26), and which hinder further theorisations about Africa and the African subject as part of a global scheme. Despite the fact that Afropolitanism has been discussed within highly visibilised contexts of Western academia, which are arguably foci of discursive

authority, it should not be assumed that it attempts to represent experiences and identities beyond its scope. Rather, it would be more productive to align it with a series of tendencies that are necessary to deconstruct monolithic readings of Africa, to underscore its complexity in terms of class, gender, race and ethnicity. The epistemological potential of the concept lies precisely in the fact that it does not claim to present itself as 'the master narrative for African progress, or the single story of African success' (Dabiri, 2016: 107), but as one more facet of the multiple socio-cultural dimensions of Africa. Furthermore, as some critics have noted, Afropolitanism's resolution to move away from an ethos and narratives of victimhood (Mbembe, 2007: 29) does not imply blindness to 'the injustices and violence that have been inflicted on the continent and its people throughout its modern history' (Hassan, 2012: 20). Whereas emphasis on transnationalism and its acquiescence to multiple geographical locations and cultures as sources of identification may apparently point to a crippling of allegiances to Africa, in Afropolitan discourses (along with other recent attempts to redefine African identities) Africa features prominently and is, if not the centre of these narratives, at least an inescapable, *sine qua non* element. When interrogating the choice of the term 'Afropolitan', Eze asks: 'If it is an African way of being cosmopolitan, what do you call a European or Asian way of being cosmopolitan, Europolitanism or Asiapolitanism? Why can an African not just be cosmopolitan?' (2014: 239, 240). To my mind, the preservation of the signifier 'Africa' indicates a disposition on the part of the concept's producers and users to acknowledge the role of the continent as a distinctive, fundamental aspect of their cosmopolitan practices. This is clearly going against commentaries branding Afropolitanism as anti-African, and demonstrates how deeply ingrained the tensions are in Afropolitan conversations between constructive, positive attitudes towards a contemporary breakthrough in the continent and the contrastingly grim realities of poverty, the effects of (neo)colonialism and the pervasiveness of racial hegemonies.

Nalo Hopkinson's work parallels some of the quandaries put forward by Afropolitanism and the debates it has engendered. Speculative fiction, a term which includes subgenres such as science fiction, horror and fantasy, is perhaps the most appropriate way to describe Hopkinson's stories as they mingle elements from all these categories as well as from folklore and Afro-Caribbean story-telling. It is essential to emphasise that, in terms both of authorship and of narrative representation, people of African descent constitute a minority within these genres. Hopkinson belongs to a narrow (although much-celebrated) tradition of black speculative fiction writers such as Olivia Butler, Samuel Delany and Ben Okri, among others. Joshua Yu Burnett points out, drawing on Hopkinson's own conclusions, that speculative fiction has 'long and deeply problematic histories of depicting conquest and colonialism as glorious enterprises, and they also often engage in the othering of indigenous people to the point where the latter become non-human: that is to say, they appear only as aliens' (2015: 134). When ethnicities other than white are at all present in mainstream speculative fiction texts, it is often through narrative techniques that replicate othering processes whereby binary oppositions are established: human/non-human, white/non-white, us/them, self/alien or civilised/uncivilised. This displacement and the encapsulation of the black (read as racial other) body as part of an oppositional ontology parallel racist hegemonies currently in operation in Canadian society. Tettey and Puplampu assert that, despite the conspicuous enhancement of the politics of multiculturalism that has taken place in Canada over recent decades, still African-Canadians are read 'as perpetual outsiders and eternal immigrants, no matter how long they have been legal citizens' (2005: 41). The estrangement suffered by

those subjects who are targets of racism and alienation leads scholars to affirm that 'the black experience [is] fundamentally speculative'; a condition that

> can be applied not only to African Americans, but also to Afro-Caribbeans and other members of the African diaspora, who share similar historical experiences of dislocation, isolation, and alienation. Arguably, we might even apply it to the nations of sub-Saharan Africa, … through the experience of colonialism.
>
> (Burnett, 2015: 136)

Thus, even though speculative fiction may appear far removed from contemporary social struggles (be it because these narratives tend to be set in distant chronotopes or as a result of the imaginative, unreal content they often display and engage with), clearly this is one of the ways in which the genre mirrors elements from real life, even if it is through manifestations less straightforward than those of realist literature. Whereas the fantastic may utterly deflect from real and knowable scenarios, still writers 'are bound and constructed by numerous other forces, including their own culture and experiences and their publisher's expectations and target audience' (Leonard, 2003: 253), and these limiting paradigms are consciously or unconsciously conveyed to literary productions.

In addition to functioning as a somewhat distorted mirror on reality, speculative fiction also bears the potential to transform it. In this sense, the genre may be considered a subversive form of writing in which received social discourses and cultural impositions are interrogated and challenged. Talking about her own creative experience, Hopkinson reveals:

> one of the things I can do is to intervene in the readers' assumptions by creating a world in which standards are different. Or I can blatantly show what values the characters in the story are trying to live out by making them actual, by exaggerating them into the realm of the fantastical, so that the consequences conversely become so real that they are tangible.
>
> (Quoted in Nelson and Hopkinson, 2002: 101)

Freedom to create new worlds and to manipulate the parameters of known reality implies the possibility to undermine racial constructions such as the location of the black subject as other, both in real social contexts and in literary representations. In her first novel, *Brown Girl in the Ring* (1998), Hopkinson presents a near-future dystopic Toronto where the downtown area, known as the Burn, has become a shattered, extremely depopulated space with the majority of the city's inhabitants having retreated to the suburbs. This spatial and social disruption

> has been caused by events memorialized in a series of familiar headlines, referring to native land claims, international trade embargoes, federal government cuts in transfer payments, jumping jobless rates, budget cuts forcing downsizing, jobs leaving Toronto, rapid transit breakdowns and riots in the streets.
>
> (Brydon, 2001: 76)

Even though the city's eventual decay and the action of the novel are purely imaginative, the circumstances leading to this situation are close to contemporary realities. In this way Hopkinson emphasises the urgency and denounces the menace of these very current real-world struggles through the strategy of connecting them to a dystopic scenario. Furthermore, in making the Burn a place dominated by a Caribbean mafia, whom the protagonist, Ti-Jeanne, also of Caribbean descent, has to defeat, Hopkinson deconstructs racial dichotomies between self and other which are so pervasively consolidated in mainstream fantasy literature. Paralleling the suspension of disbelief effect, whereby the reader is willing to believe what is unbelievable, she applies what I call 'suspension of othering'. The particularity

of this narrative technique is that the imagined alternative reality does not explicitly address racism. Hopkinson chooses not 'to write yet another plea to the dominant culture for justice' and what she does instead is 'to simply set the story of the "othered" people front and center and talk about their (our) lives and their concerns' (Nelson and Hopkinson, 2002: 101), which is not the same as negating the existence of these conflicts. This heuristic function of speculative fiction resonates with some of the tensions faced by Afropolitanism which I mentioned above. In opening the possibilities for African identities to be anchored outside models of victimhood, and to locate them instead within a fluid network of cultural sites, Afropolitanism is interpreted as a blatant denial of the disturbing realities of Africa, and even as a rejection of African values themselves. These two opposing aspects in the politics of identification and the development of collective allegiances have to be negotiated both in discourses of Afropolitanism and in black speculative fiction, where the fact that racism may not be an explicit concern does not entail a negation of its effects.

It is at this point that I would like to establish what I believe to be the most productive connection between Hopkinson's fiction and the concept of Afropolitanism. They both constitute new spaces for self-definition and, most importantly, they design strategies to supersede racial hegemonies imposed on black people (and other, non-white ethnicities). As Ede asserts, 'Afropolitanism, as cultural politics, can be viewed as a coping mechanism against the nausea of history' (2016: 93). In the same way, speculative fiction written by authors of African descent may work to revise history, to counteract processes of erasure and under-representation, and to open new creative paths towards inclusion and self-assertion. The differences in diasporic materialisation that emerge between the Afro-Caribbean and the Afropolitan diasporas should not polarise both ontologies as mutually exclusive. While these distinctions must be acknowledged, it is precisely in the contemporary experience of hybridism and transnationalism, and the departure from traditional paradigms of identity constructions, that the Afropolitan and the Afro-Caribbean diasporans find a common ground that can be appropriately explored and exploited through speculative fiction. In Hopkinson's words:

> For people from diasporic cultures there's more than a double consciousness. It's occupying multiple, overlapping identities simultaneously. Throw in identities formed around politics, gender, class, sexual preference, etc. and you have quite the stew. There is no solid ground beneath us; we shift constantly to stay in one place. … We are the people who have more than one place or identity or culture that's home, and we're struggling to find modes of expression that convey how we've had to become polyglot, not only in multiple lexicons but also in multiple identities. The classical forms of artistic expression give us a base from which to work, but from there we have to break the codified forms and create new voices for ourselves.
>
> (Rutledge and Hopkinson, 1999: 599)

This statement largely coincides with Selasi's description of the Afropolitan when she says that:

> 'Home' for this lot is many things: where their parents are from; where they go for vacation; where they went to school; where they see old friends; where they live (or live this year). Like so many African young people working and living in cities around the globe, they belong to no single geography, but feel at home in many.
>
> (Selasi, 2005)

Both writers demand (and in demanding, also conceive) spaces where this form of deterritorialised consciousness and creole identity can flourish and be expressed. That is why the intersection between speculative fiction and Afropolitanism, as two vehicles that convey

emerging transnational patterns of identity, becomes a desirable, if not necessary, alliance. Placing black speculative fiction within an Afropolitan context allows for its inclusion in a theoretical, contemporary framework which is currently defining the directions for future African (and African-derived) cultures. Conversely, studying Afropolitan approaches through the analysis of speculative fiction texts contributes to expanding and enriching the concept in terms of the multiplicity of characters and experiences portrayed. To further explore this intersection in the work of Nalo Hopkinson, it is useful to turn to the idea of transculturation, first introduced by Fernando Ortiz in his *Contrapunteo Cubano del Tabaco y el Azúcar* (1995 [1940]). As opposed to 'acculturation', which refers merely to the acquisition of another culture, transculturation implies a merging and a transitional process such that 'the result of every union of cultures is similar to that of the reproductive process between individuals: the offspring has something of both parents but is always different from each of them' (Ortiz, 1995: 102, 103). Whereas this proposal implicitly attributes certain purity to the cultures that come into contact with each other, what I find useful from Ortiz's idea is the mutually transformative influences that cultures have between themselves. Thus, within the context of the Afro-Caribbean diaspora, Caribbean culture is not effaced when migrants establish in the hostland, nor does Canadian culture remain uninfluenced by these migrations; rather, the diaspora-hostland relationship produces a multidirectional metamorphosis which is always reciprocal. Ortiz considers this phenomenon a negative situation (102), although, aligned with celebratory assessments of transnationalism and border-crossing (as in Afropolitanism), it may be regarded as a fruitful circumstance, a product of the fluidity and flexibility of cultural production. It is true that the past four decades have witnessed what Virinder S. Kalra, Raminder Kaur and John Hutnyk call 'the advent of hybrid forms of culture' (2005: 1), together with the emergence of various theories which have attempted to define and describe these non-essentialist cultural manifestations – Gilroy (1993), Stuart Hall (1997) and Homi Bhabha (1994) are some of the most conspicuous examples. While they could also be used in the present context, like Ortiz's original theorisation of transculturation, these articulations of hybridity may equally be said to rely 'upon the proposition of non-hybridity or some kind of normative insurance' (Kalra, Kaur and Hutnyk, 2005: 72). I want to retrieve the concept of transculturation, furthermore, because I believe this term is particularly well suited to be applied to diasporic contexts. The term refers to a process, rather than a complete product or final state. As such, it may be used to describe processes of cultural, identity or spatial transformation (as is my intention here). These processes, it must be borne in mind, are not cumulative or progressive, but multidirectional and dialogic. This aspect of transculturation is essential to understand the Caribbean-Canadian diaspora, and more specifically Hopkinson's fiction, in Afropolitan terms, as it emphasises the transformative and transitional elements in the concept both of diaspora in general, and of Afropolitanism in particular.

Hopkinson's imaginative connection to Africa takes, primarily, the form of folklore and allusions to Afro-Caribbean religions and spiritual figures. Being products of transculturation themselves, these become further transcultured in the contemporary Canadian context. Afro-Caribbean religions are syncretic constructions, born out of colonial slave societies, and as such include elements from Africa, Europe and the Caribbean. Hopkinson's works, also in a syncretic fashion, incorporate aspects that can be associated to different spiritual practices, from Vodou and Obeah to the Orisha tradition. One of the most conspicuous and compelling ways in which Hopkinson brings Afro-Caribbean religions into her stories is through the act of the possession of some of her characters (especially in the novels I address here, *Brown*

Girl in the Ring and *Sister Mine*) by lwas, or spirits. In Vodou practices, Margarite Fernández Olmos and Elizabeth Paravisini-Gebert explain, possession is

> the most vital manifestation of the reciprocity that marks the relationship between Vodou devotees and the spirits that guide them. The *crise de loa*, the mystic trance of possession, when the lwa communicate with their children by incarnating themselves in one of them, is the most fundamental element.
>
> (Fernández Olmos and Paravisini-Gebert, 2003: 119)

In *Brown Girl in the Ring*, young Ti-Jeanne, who is only gradually and reluctantly awakening to her supernatural powers in order to defeat Rudy, the mafia leader, is both aided by spirits and possessed by them. At the first ritual she attends, she is unexpectedly ridden by the Prince of the Cemetery, a manifestation of Eleguá (in Santería)/Papa Legba (in Vodou), master of the crossroads and keeper of the borders between life and death (Fernández Olmos and Paravasini-Gebert, 2003: 213). The transformation her body undergoes is described as follows:

> She rose smoothly to her feet and began to dance with an eerie, stalking motion that made her legs seem longer than they were, thin and bony. Shadows clung to the hollows of her eyes and cheekbones, turning her face into a cruel mask. She laughed again. Her voice was deep, too deep for her woman's body. Her lips skinned back from her teeth in a death's-head grin.
>
> (Hopkinson, 1998: 93)

The science-fiction scenario conjured up in this novel provides, however, not only the grounds on which to condemn current socio-political practices of injustice and, to a certain extent, overcome them. If, as Bettina E. Schmidt argues, 'religions can be seen as location of memory (*lieux de mémoire*) in order to conserve information about Africa in new surroundings' (2006: 237), then Hopkinson's integration of religion in her texts produces a (post) modern narrative continuum, both creative and ontological, which connects Toronto to the Caribbean and Africa. Furthermore, the relevance of Hopkinson's extensive references to Legba should not be overlooked as, among the Caribbean deities (all born of processes of creolisation), this one is perhaps most closely connected to the Middle Passage. Elizabeth M. DeLoughrey argues that '[u]nlike most theories of Caribbean creolization which root the process in the plantation system', the reading of certain cultural elements such as the Limbo dance (linked to the figure of Legba) are examples of creolisation clearly taking place in the transitional context of the Middle Passage (2007: 94). Thus, the use of these African creolised figures as narrative devices and their incorporation into a dystopic urban future provide a transcultural addition to the landscape of Afropolitanism.

The fantastical is, moreover, a channel through which African spirits become literally corporeal, adopting the form of those they ride (Ti-Jeanne in this case), but also affecting the outer appearance, voice and even physical strength of that person. Hopkinson's characters thus morph into hybrid entities, combining dimensions from different worlds and blurring the lines between them, ambiguous in terms of corporeality as well as gender, age and other identity markers. This strongly signifies the transformative capacity of the African spirits which is further explored in *Sister Mine* (Hopkinson, 2013). The protagonist of this novel, Makeda, is an ambivalent character herself, in the sense that she is the daughter of a human (claypicken) woman and the deity of nature and living things, Boysie. Her uncle, Uncle John (referred to as Master Cross or even Death), can, once again, be linked to Eleguá or Legba, as he is the keeper of the crossroads and functions as the vessel moving between life and death. Although her twin sister, Abby, has supernatural powers, Makeda does not possess

any kind of magic (mojo), or so she is led to believe, which makes her constantly feel like an outsider in her mighty family. At one point in the story when their father is in trouble, Makeda and her sister visit their 'Family' (whose members can be equated to both Orishas and the Iwa pantheon of Vodou) to ask for their help. The spirits are described as constantly shifting shape: 'Uncle Hunter was carrying a briefcase in this instant. He wore a snappy suit, had a cell phone clipped to his waist in a tasteful leather hard-shell case'; and later '[h]e flipped the cuff of the suit off his wrist to check his watch, just as his form changed: leather outback hat, khakis' (Hopkinson, 2013: 97, 98). The identities of the spirits and the people they ride thus fuse and become one and, paralleling the effects of transculturation, a different being emerges from this contact: a fluctuating combination of the deity and the worshipper.

In this other world, it is not only physical appearance that changes and is confused. The protagonist describes the place as 'a space both enclosed and infinite' (92), and the spirits as 'simultaneously doing an infinity of things in an infinity of locations in the present, the past, and the future' (99). This imaginative conceptualisation of the Afro-Caribbean spirit world as a disrupted spatio-temporality constitutes an important creative and ontological mechanism with which to redress certain aspects of the African diaspora. Linear history and geographical distances are two central elements in Western articulations of diasporas in general and of the African diaspora in particular. When these dimensions of reference are narratively nullified as Hopkinson does in her interpretation of Afro-Caribbean religion, tra-ditional notions of the diaspora as bound by history and regional dispersion are equally displaced. Robin Cohen's work, in tune with the theory of the Black Atlantic, refers to the Afro-Caribbean diaspora as a deterritorialised diaspora, that is, as 'ethnic groups that can be thought of as having lost their conventional territorial reference points, to have become in effect mobile and multi-located cultures' (2008: 124); an approach that, although progressive with respect to previous theories, still moves within a framework restricted by borders and the cultures contained within them. Hopkinson's shift in perspective, on the contrary, rep-resents the ultimate frontier-crossing, where time-space boundaries are both transcended and disappear altogether, replaced by change, transformation and possibility. Significantly, the world of possibility that Hopkinson creates, the spirit world, is referred to as Guinea Land in *Brown Girl in the Ring*: '"Every time a African die," Mami intoned, "them spirit does fly away to Guinea Land. Is the other world, the spirit world"' (1998: 103). Thus, even though territories are traversed and time superseded in figurative terms, the element of Africa remains a con-stant within a multiplicity of cultural variables.

Preserving Africa as a cultural, spiritual or creative referent clearly connects this part of Afro-Caribbean speculative fiction to Afropolitanism. The next step is, then, to explore the other component of this dual term, the element of cosmopolitanism. Afropolitanism's critical description by Selasi and others (see Gehrmann, 2015) relies heavily on the Afropolitan subject's presence in and mobility through (usually Western) urban spaces, the consumption of a diversity of cultural as well as commodity products and, in terms of artistic creation, an eclectic sense of aesthetics composed of various elements from these plural worlds. While this is precisely the dimension of Afropolitanism which has received the most criticism, as mentioned before, cosmopolitanism serves as the space where restricted notions of fixed identities are debunked; or, as Abbas Ackbar puts it, it function as 'a modernist argument against the tyranny of 'tradition' as narrow parochialisms and ethnocentrism' (2000: 770). In heuristic terms, therefore, cosmopolitanism points to the experiences of transnationalism

and multiculturalism inherent to the Afropolitan ontology. In this context, Mbembe argues, Afropolitanism is attached to a powerful cosmopolitan ethos, represented in the

> [a]wareness of the interweaving of the here and there, the presence of the elsewhere in the here and vice versa, the relativisation of primary roots and memberships and the way of embracing, with full knowledge of the facts, strangeness, foreignness and remoteness, the ability to recognise one's face in that of a foreigner and make the most of the traces of remoteness in closeness, to domesticate the unfamiliar, to work with what seem to be opposites.
>
> (Mbembe, 2007: 28)

Understood in these terms, cosmopolitanism becomes a multidimensional negotiation of difference. Its complexity is enhanced within today's global urban centres as loci where difference is densely concentrated. Hopkinson, in populating Toronto and other metropolises with hybrid, fantastic characters connected to an Afro-Caribbean milieu, opens up possibilities for new and transgressing readings of the Afropolitan.

Her short story collection, *Falling in Love with Hominids* (2015), presents a vast array of speculative fiction characters, most of which embody cosmopolitanism in their own experiences and through the spaces they inhabit. Of these, modern, urban versions of Caliban told from Ariel's point of view, ghosts trapped in a mall for eternity or pre-adolescent werewolves-to-be surviving in a post-apocalyptic city, stand out as examples of fantastic characters that are re-incorporated into globalised contexts. 'Blushing' tells the story of a newly wed couple who have just moved to a luxurious house in Bellevue Park in Toronto. As the husband presents the bride with the keys to the rooms of the house, he warns her not to enter into his secret room. When later the bride wanders around Toronto (probably in the Kensington Market area, although the name is not explicitly mentioned) in search of a copy of the key to the secret room, the numerous multicultural spaces of the city and the market are referenced: a Jamaican patty shop, the Chinese market, an import store run by a Goth girl where the husband had bought antique locks and keys from India. The question of sexual harassment is introduced in the story through allusion to pictures of missing women stuck to telephone poles and in the warnings the bride receives from people: 'It's getting dark' and 'You be careful out there' (Hopkinson, 2015: 182, 183). When she finally returns home with the copy of the key, she finds a bloody scene in her husband's secret room: bodies of women, butchered and dismembered. The story, which until this point constitutes a version of the tale of Bluebeard set in a contemporary context, takes a turn when the husband finds the bride in the room. Rather than running away in terror, the bride, in an ironic reversal of the horror component of the tale, laughs and says to him 'It's alright. … I'll play your games with you' (184). This reinterpretation of gender roles and stereotypes from 'Bluebeard' to 'Blushing' is an example of transculturation in that Hopkinson utilises a traditional French story and re-adapts its moral to her own subversive purposes within a cosmopolitan context, thus creating a cross-cultural network of narrative influences and mutual transformations. Indeed, in the transnational condition endorsed by cosmopolitanism, and in the cultural contamination it implies (Appiah, 2006: 111), transculturation emerges as an unavoidable effect. Perhaps the best exponent of transculturation within the works of Hopkinson that I am exploring here is to be found in the ending to *Brown Girl in the Ring*, where Ti-Jeanne finally confronts Rudy. In the dystopian Toronto of the novel, the CN Tower has become Rudy's headquarters and it is there that their final battle takes place. On the verge of collapse after the fight, Ti-Jeanne notices the resemblance between the tower and the pole her grandmother used in possession rituals:

> Ti-Jeanne thought of the centre pole of the palais, reaching up into the air and down toward the ground. 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. Her duppy body almost laughed a silent *kya-kya*, a jokey Jab-Jab laugh. For like the spirit tree that the centre pole symbolized, the CN Tower dug roots deep into the ground where the dead lived and pushed up high into the heavens where the oldest ancestors lived. The tower was their ladder into this world.

> (Hopkinson, 1998: 221)

Upon this realisation, she proceeds to invoke the spirits: Shango, Ogun, Osain, Shakpana, Emanjah, Oshun, Oya and Eleguá, some of which coincide with the Seven African Powers as identified by Fernández Olmos and Paravisini-Gebert (2003: 195), who finally come to help her overthrow Rudy. The fact that the spirits travel from Guinea Land to the world of the living through the CN Tower, the most iconic building in Toronto, a Western symbol of modernity and a product of contemporary, global and industrial momentum, has very significant connotations. This conjunction illustrates the multidirectional influences of transculturation: traditional figures adapt and appropriate modern urban spaces, which are in turn transformed by their presence, acquiring new meanings and displaying imaginative and representational possibilities. As this analysis demonstrates, Hopkinson's speculative fiction combines a cosmopolitan context of transnationalism and transculturation with an African connection. These two elements come into play to broaden the cultural scope and creative meanings of Afro-Caribbean diasporic fiction in their intertwining in the genre of the fantastic. As such, the contemporary experience of these fundamentally hybrid and Africa-derived characters both fits into and refines ideas of Afropolitanism, which may be easily expanded to accommodate this ontology.

This article has explored some aspects of Afropolitanism which are often excluded from current academic discussions, i.e. the points of departure and overlaps between the modern and the contemporary African diasporas, so as to theoretically incorporate literary manifestations of the former into the idiosyncrasy of the latter. Whereas differences between the origins and expansion of these dispersals (slavery and subsequent migrations vs privileged mobility in recent times) are a contrasting point, the Afro-Caribbean diasporan and the Afropolitan are not placed in diametrically oppositional locations owing to those disparities. It could even be said that in their own particular ways, both Afropolitanism and, in this case, Afro-Caribbean speculative fiction share a conflict and aim to undermine traumas and identity displacements, all of which are related to issues of race and class. One way in which these paradigms therefore complement each other is in their departure from victim attributions, and in the negotiation of a willingness to move forward while still appreciating and acknowledging the obstacles that assail black peoples in Africa and elsewhere. As mobile subjects, even if this mobility has been triggered under different circumstances, both Afro-Caribbean diasporans and Afropolitans need to find routes for the articulation of their experiences that are alternative to traditional, nationalist approaches of cultural inclusion/exclusion within fixed territorial and identity borders. Hopkinson's speculative fiction offers a figurative space where these alternatives may be conceived and enacted, thus adding new dimensions to Afropolitanism. This connection is further reinforced by the presence of Africa as a central entity in processes of identification, even when Hopkinson deploys it in the form of syncretised Afro-Caribbean religions and folklore. While this may be read as too weak an attachment to an African past, the fantastical narrative strategies through which she represents African legacies, as itinerant, adaptable and border-crossing cultural artefacts, align her approach

to Afropolitan ontologies of transnationalism, identity flexibility and hybridity. In addition to the struggle for recognition, the erasure of 'othered' readings of the racialised body, and the recurrence of Africa as a creative and identity signifier, the cosmopolitan element also underlies both Hopkinson's work and Afropolitanism. In the contemporary dynamics of cultural contact and negotiation of difference which I have addressed through the concept of transculturation, a cosmopolitan sensibility emerges which permeates Selasi's proposal as well as Hopkinson's speculative fiction. All in all, in their subversion of limited conceptions and representations of African (and African-descended) subjects, and the deconstructions of monolithic notions of identity, both Afropolitan discourses and Afro-Caribbean speculative fiction constitute fertile grounds on which to address contemporary African identities in their attempts to be visibilised within global, cosmopolitan social and literary contexts. Combining these tendencies in theoretical terms, therefore, contributes to the development of alternative and nuanced discussions on the potential of the figure of the Afropolitan.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Funding

Bibliography

Ackbar, M. Abbas (2000). 'Cosmopolitan De-Scriptions: Shanghai and Hong Kong.' *Public Culture* 12.3: 769–786.

Appiah, Kwame Anthony (2006). *Comopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers*. London and New York: W.W. Norton.

Bhabha, Homi K. (1994). *The Location of Culture*. London and New York: Routledge.

Brand, Dionne (2001). *A Map to the Door of No Return: Notes to Belonging*. Toronto: Doubleday.

Brydon, Dianna (2001). 'Global Designs, Postcolonial Critiques: Rethinking Canada in Dialogue with Diaspora.' *Ilha Do Destierro* 40: 61–84.

Burnett, Joshua Yu (2015). 'The Great Change and the Great Book: Nnedi Okorafor's Postcolonial, Post-Apocalyptic Africa, and the Promise of Black Speculative Fiction.' *Research in African Literatures.* 46.4: 132–150.

Clarke, George Elliott (2002). *Odysseys Home. Mapping African-Canadian Literature*. Toronto: U of Toronto P.

Cohen, Robin (2008). *Global Diasporas: An Introduction*. [1997]. New York, NY: Routledge.

Dabiri, Emma (2016). 'Why I Am (Still) not an Afropolitan.' *Journal of African Cultural Studies* 28.1: 104–108.

DeLoughrey, Elizabeth M. (2007) *Routes and Roots: Navigating Caribbean and Pacific Island Movements*. Hawai'i: U of Hawai'i P.

Ede, Amatoritsero (2016). 'The Politics of Afropolitanism.' *Journal of African Cultural Studies* 28.1: 88–100.

Eze, Chielozona (2014). 'Rethinking African Culture and Identity: The Afropolitan Model.' *Journal of African Cultural Studies* 26.2: 234–247.

Fernández Olmos, Margarite and Paravisini-Gebert, Lizabeth (2003). *Creole Religions of the Caribbean*. New York and London: New York UP.

Gehrmann, Susanne (2015). 'Cosmopolitanism with African Roots. Afropolitanism's Ambivalent Mobilities.' *Journal of African Cultural Studies* 28.1: 61–72.

Gilroy, Paul (1993). *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*. London and New York: Verso.

Hall, Stuart (1997). 'Old and New Identities, Old and New Ethnicities.' *Culture, Globalization and the World-System: Contemporary Conditions for the Representation of Identity*. Ed Anthony D. King. Minneapolis, MN: U of Minnesota P. 41–68.

Hassan, Salah M. (2012). 'Rethinking Cosmopolitanism: Is "Afropolitan" the Answer?' *Reflections* 5: 3–30.

Hopkinson, Nalo (1998). *Brown Girl in the Ring*. New York, NY: Grand Central.

Hopkinson, Nalo (2013). *Sister Mine*. New York, NY: Grand Central.

Hopkinson, Nalo (2015). *Falling in Love with Hominids*. San Francisco: Tachyon.

Kalra, Virinder S., Raminder, Kaur, and Hutnyk, John (2005). *Diaspora and Hybridity*. London and California: SAGE.

Leonard, Elizabeth Anne (2003). 'Race and Ethnicity in Science Fiction.' *The Cambridge Companion to Science Fiction*. Eds Edward James and Farah Mendlesohn. Cambridge: Cambridge UP. 253–263

Mbembe, Achille (2007). 'Afropolitanism.' *Africa Remix: Contemporary Art of a Continent*. Eds Simon Njami and Lucy Durán. Johannesburg: Johannesburg Art Gallery. 26–29.

Nelson, Alondra and Hopkinson, Nalo (2002). '"Making the Impossible Possible." An Interview with Nalo Hopkinson.' *Social Text* 20.2: 98–113.

Ortiz, Fernando (1995). *Cuban Counterpoint. Tobacco and Sugar*. [1940] Trans. Harriet de Onís. Durham and London: Duke UP.

Otas, Belinda (2012). 'African Identities.' *Wings*. September-November: 38–41.

Rutledge, Gregory E. and Hopkinson, Nalo (1999). 'Speaking in Tongues: An Interview with Science Fiction Writer Nalo Hopkinson.' *African American Review* 33.4: 589–601.

Santana, Stephanie Bosch (2016). 'Exorcising the Future: Afropolitanism's Spectral Origins.' *Journal of African Cultural Studies* 28.1: 120–126.

Schmidt, Bettina E. (2006). 'The Creation of Afro-Caribbean Religions and Their Incorporation of Christian Elements: A Critique against Syncretism.' *Transformations* 23.4: 236–243.

Selasi, Taiye (2005). 'Bye-Bye, Babar (or: What Is an Afropolitan?)' *LIP Magazine* 3 Mar.: 5 Apr. 2016. <http://thelip.robertsharp.co.uk/?p=76>.

Tettey, Wisdom and Puplampu, Korbla (2005). 'Continental Africans in Canada: Exploring a Neglected Dimension of the *African Canadian* Experience.' *The African Diaspora in Canada*. Eds Wisdom Tettey and Korbla Pulampu. Alberta: U of Calgary P. 3–24.

Thomas, H. Nigel, ed (2006). *Why We Write: Conversations with African Canadian Poets and Novelists*. Toronto: TSAR.