

SLF Portolan Project

Interview with Nalo Hopkinson

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Mary Anne Mohanraj: Hi, I'm Mary Anne Mohanraj. I'm here at the World Fantasy Convention in Los Angeles 2019 with the Speculative Literature Foundation and we're here interviewing Nalo Hopkinson. She's the author of *Brown Girl in the Ring*; *Midnight Robber*; *The Salt Roads*; *The New Moon's Arms*; *The Chaos*; *Sister Mine* – those are all her novels – and then anthologies and collections, she has *Whispers from the Cotton Tree Root*; *Skin Folk*; *Mojo: Conjure Stories*; *So Long Been Dreaming* – which is the postcolonial science fiction anthology – *Falling in Love with Hominids*; etc, and so on. So it's a very long list. I've read almost all of it, I love them all. And what I really wanted to ask Nalo to talk about today is her use of language, which I think is exceptional. And it's something that, as a writer, I struggle with a lot in my own work these days. I think especially as someone who has done both sort of literary fiction with a focus on prose and language, and now recently have been writing, trying to write more commercial fiction and sometimes – and more genre fiction. And sometimes I find that when I am working with rocket ships or dragons, and fast paced plots and lots of dialogue, I feel like I'm losing my hold on finely crafted language and beautiful speech. And that's something you do so well. So I was going to ask you to read the opening of *Midnight Robber*. Which – (I've given her my phone – so – it's now locked. There you go! – And then) – so I'm going to ask her to read the opening of that, and then maybe we can just talk a little about how you approach that in your work.

Nalo Hopkinson: Okay. So this is a mostly Trinidadian English vernacular, with a little bit occasionally of Jamaican and some bits of Ghanese thrown in. And this is from the introduction.

(reading) “It had a woman, you see, a strong hard-back woman with skin like cocoa-tea. She two foot-them tough from hiking through the diable bush, the devil bush on the prison planet of New Half-Way Tree. When she walked, she foot strike the hard earth *bup!* like breadfruit dropping to the ground. She two arms hard with muscle from all the years of hacking paths through the diable bush on New Half-Way Tree. Even she hair itself rough and wiry; long black knotty locks springing from she scalp and corkscrewing all the way down

she back. She name Tan-Tan, and New Halfway Tree was she planet.”

Mary Anne Mohanraj: Thank you. I know when I first read that I was super struck by it. I love hearing you read it because I think initially I'm encountering, as a reader, a sort of a dialect I'm not familiar with, a way of speaking; it's going to be a little intimidating. When you read it, I think it comes very clear. But even on the page, it doesn't take me very long to fall into the rhythms and to be able to follow. So, if maybe – I know you teach a few hours from here, you're at –

Nalo Hopkinson: The University of California, Riverside –

Mary Anne Mohanraj: – at the University of California, Riverside. So I don't know whether this is something that you work on with your students, if you have approaches that you give them along this sort of – just how you think about it when you're working with language in these texts.

Nalo Hopkinson: First of all, I come out of a literary tradition in the Caribbean of privileging common speech. And that's a movement that started when my father, who was a poet, a playwright, an actor, was still alive, and there's people like Kamau Brathwaite, like Louise Bennett-Coverley who are saying “We speak like this.” It is not ‘bad English,’ it has its – and linguists who are discovering it has its own grammar rules, it has its own logic. And so there began a movement of writing the way people speak. So I already have permission, is what I'm saying. And also everybody's speech is beautiful. I mean, if you listen, just listen to people talking on the street where they're not, you know, trying to censor themselves for an English class. They flow. So one of the things I will do is put myself back in that space. I mean, my Caribbean English is middle class English, it still has its own stuff, but it's not as, it's not as deep, it's not as basilectal.

Mary Anne Mohanraj: Wait, I'm sorry, I don't know the word you just used.

Nalo Hopkinson: There's three words I've learned from linguistics and they are acrolectal, mesolectal, basilectal. And it's a way of not getting into the trap of saying “This is upper class speech, this is lower class speech.” So they actually go to the center. And they measure speech by how far it is from the center.

Mary Anne Mohanraj: Oh, that's super useful.

Nalo Hopkinson: Yeah, yeah, yeah. So basilectal is sort of what we think of as working class, farming class, common speech. Mesolectal is more like what you would get from – sort of white collar – and acrolectal is what we sometimes think of as BBC English. So I have permission, is what I'm saying, and I have the fortune of having grown up with an actor and a poet in the house. And also you can hear language being used, everywhere. You listen to hip hop, you listen to rap, you listen to any sort of music that comes out of an everyday tradition. And you can hear people using speech beautifully as working speech. So I try to tell my students to listen to themselves and to each other and when – They're in class. So they think I want proper English. And – have you read me?

Mary Anne Mohanraj: And this one thing I ended up saying to my students often when they're writing papers is, and they're – the writing on the pages is very stiff and very, very, you know, I mean, it's missing words, often they lose verbs and so on. And I remind them, I try to remind them: you speak beautifully in class. Right? When we're in conversation. Everyone can understand everything you say, you speak with passion and with, you know, emphasis. And that's all I want to see on the page. Just –

Nalo Hopkinson: Yeah, somehow they think you don't want that. I know. I say, “Well, you know, I don't actually want to be bored.” Sometimes I don't even understand what they're aiming for. They're trying so hard to make it, you know, so I say “What were you trying to say?” And they tell me! And I say “Write that down.” *[laughter]*

Mary Anne Mohanraj: Write that down! I think I just had that conversation last week as we were revising papers. *[laughter]*

Nalo Hopkinson: And then we have to get out of the trap of thinking that it's bad language. There is no language that is bad language. And all language is beautiful.

Mary Anne Mohanraj: I feel like – so I asked a question, you went in a direction that is actually now more interesting to me than my question. But I think I can connect them. So in the novel that I've recently finished working on, I have some working class characters. I come from a middle/upper middle class background, right?

So most of – a good half of my characters are working class and they're in that community. And it's not – and it's science fiction, it's set 100 years from now, so I can't, I can't exactly just like go and spend time in that community, right. I have to imagine it and invent it. And I wonder, like, what would you suggest as a way for someone like me to do a better job of representing that? Would spending more time listening to working class voices now give me access? Is that? Right?

Nalo Hopkinson: Yes. Yes, it would. Because then you know what you're extrapolating from. But also, I asked Samuel R. Delaney when he was one of my teachers at Clarion, and I was working on this novel and struggling with how to put a whole novel in an invented, well, cobble a hybrid vernacular. And he said a little of that goes a long way. And I promptly proceeded to ignore him. *[laughter]*

Mary Anne Mohanraj: Tobias Buckell said something similar on a panel we were on at one point, where he was talking about how he uses Caribbean speech patterns in his space opera series. And I think he said 10%, right, like he tries to put in about 10% of what you would actually hear in conversation. And that's enough to give people the sense of it without being a barrier to those who are completely unfamiliar.

Nalo Hopkinson: Yes, yes. And I think that works – it is what I will do, when I'm not trying to, you know, experiment with speech in a whole novel.

Mary Anne Mohanraj: Well, and in *Midnight Robber*, you don't do the entire book in that either. Right? You switch.

Nalo Hopkinson: I switch –

Mary Anne Mohanraj: Somewhat?

Nalo Hopkinson: I switch – valences, I do, switch – and sometimes it's a deeper register than others. But I don't think I ever go to straight up Standard English. But yeah, a little, a little bit of it, of particular phrasings. I remember reading, I believe it's Emma Bowles[?] – it's a novel that's set on a university campus, and there's a lot of Shakespearean English floating about. But she doesn't use a lot of it. She picks one or two phrases. And I remember “I cry you mercy” shows up every so often.

Mary Anne Mohanraj: I know what you thinking of, it's Pamela Dean.

Nalo Hopkinson: Oh, sorry. Sorry!

Mary Anne Mohanraj: That's okay, that's okay. Only because I happen to love that book. It's *Tam Lin*, and it's –

Nalo Hopkinson: Yes, yeah.

Mary Anne Mohanraj: Yeah, she does. And she does, she does a great job with those like little moments of Shakespearean English slipping in.

Nalo Hopkinson: Yeah, yeah. So you don't have to be an expert in that particular language form to write it. You have to know it well enough to pick some choice phrases and repeat those and that will give your readers the flavor. You talked about the – tackling my book for the first time and not knowing the vernacular, but somehow getting the pattern. I have heard that book read in New Orleans working class French-inflected English. I've heard it read in Ontario, Canada farm girl. I've heard it read in – had people fall into whatever vernacular they're familiar with and it sort of fits. So it's not as though the reader has to be an expert. They just have to understand that people speak in different ways.

Mary Anne Mohanraj: I use – one text that I find is helpful for getting my students and myself into, to pay attention to language a little bit is Ursula K. Le Guin's *Steering the Craft*. And the first sections she has, you know, just these various exercises on sentence-level work and she has these passages – example passages. And she has one by Twain – I think she may even use two examples by Twain – one is from *The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County*. And I think what's interesting is that I have the students and myself read these pieces out loud in class. And even though I have actually spent almost no time in the south, but when I read this work out loud, it puts me in these rhythms, right, and, you know, I almost have sort of a bad Southern accent by the end of the piece, right? And, like, then I want to keep talking like that. You know? And so I think, I think the text – you know, there's this, there's maybe an anxiety that if I, if I write like this, the reader will not be able to find their way in. But it's, you're kind of teaching the reader how to read this as they go, right?

Nalo Hopkinson: They're science fiction, fantasy readers, they're used to learning the text as they go. The thing that I do sometimes hear is people – they feel distanced from it because they say “Why would you want to write in bad English?” And in the UK and the US, there are traditions of writing the way people speak. But I have a former student who's teaching English in Korea and he tried teaching this novel – I mean, he managed. But they don't have a similar tradition so students couldn't understand why a writer wouldn't want to prove that she could manipulate language in the standard form. So you get that contempt, or people thinking I'm trying to express contempt for the characters.

Mary Anne Mohanraj: That's really interesting. There's a short story – do you know *The Goophered Grapevine*? – it's in *Dark Matter*, right, Charles Chestnutt, where he switches registers between very, very formal Standard English and, and the language spoken by the black slaves on the plantation. Right? And if I'm remembering right it was one of the first published short stories in America by a black man. And he encountered a lot of resistance from people who didn't want to believe he wrote it, that he could write it. And I thought it was, it was an interesting choice to have, like, here I will prove to you that I can do Standard English. And then put the best lines and the joke of the story, the point of the story in this other voice, and you're going to have to follow me there to get it, right? It's, it also reminds me of *Borderlands/La Frontera* by Gloria Anzaldua, which she writes in this, in TexMex. And again, it's this, almost a demand that, you know, if – I'm not going to make this – I'm not going to translate this for you. You come to me, right?

Nalo Hopkinson: Yes, yeah. And that is another question, is how do you represent it on the page? So *The Goophered Grapevine*, there's lots of, you know, apostrophes and leaving the ends off things, and that's fine. That's the way he did it. I don't. I write in, as much as I can in Standard English spelling.

Mary Anne Mohanraj: Right, no, that's interesting.

Nalo Hopkinson: But I keep the rhythms and the vocabulary. It gets, it's mostly not that hard to do except you get some words that just aren't translatable. There's the Jamaican word *mauger*, which means skinny, like skinny – too skinny. And of course, comes from *meager*, but you put down *meager*, it's just not going to work.

Mary Anne Mohanraj: It doesn't have the feel. Right?

Nalo Hopkinson: Yeah, you have to somehow come up with a spelling for *mauger*, which means some readers won't get it unless you're very careful about how you put it in context. And I find I don't worry too much about those readers! There's Google!

Mary Anne Mohanraj: There's Google, right? They'll get there. *The Bone People* is one of my favorite books. And she just puts all the Maori in there, and you cope, right? And she gives you enough in Standard English that you can follow even if you don't look up any of the Maori. If you do look it up, it adds so much, right? And, and I actually, I have to admit, I do appreciate that there's a glossary at the end of my edition. So –

Nalo Hopkinson: Me too. But I hate glossaries. And so I try – I read the whole book at first without using it at all.

Mary Ann Mohanraj: Yeah, I did too, actually, the second time through I looked at – I started looking things up.

Nalo Hopkinson: Yeah, [unknown name] and I had a conversation – he's a Canadian writer, had a conversation about – he was talking about readers who expect texts to be penetrable, who sort of assume that the text has to sort of lay itself bare for them. And the difference between that and sort of going with what you have on the page, and I had way more fun with *Bone People* just going with what was on the page. And then afterwards, if I wanted to explore more, I did.

Mary Anne Mohanraj: Right. What was that little bit there that I missed? There's another example of this in Dorothy Sayers, I don't know whether you're – so in the at the end of this trilogy, big climactic romance, she, the character writes a letter to her uncle in France. And he writes back to her. And so now there's this long letter in French that is central to what's happening and the decision she's about to make. And I think Sayers just assumes that anyone reading her novel at that, in that era in the 19th century, you know, early 20th century, would, of course, also speak fluent French. And I first encountered the book when I was 12, or 13, in a library in New Britain, Connecticut, and I was like, there was no Google, I had no way to access the English and it was deeply, deeply

frustrating. I was like, “What did he say to change her mind?”
You know?

Nalo Hopkinson: What little I know of Dorothy Sayers, I suspect that she actually didn't care whether you spoke French or not!
[laughter]

Mary Anne Mohanraj: Maybe not. And maybe that's the way to go, right? That is, that that letter needed to be in French, and so it was in French.

Nalo Hopkinson: Yes. Yeah.

Mary Anne Mohanraj: So, we are sadly running out of time. I could talk to you forever, but I'll ask you, maybe, one more thing. I do think it's laziness, maybe, for me, I mean, maybe that's not the right word, but like the – approaching language on the sentence level with this kind of care, I find challenging. I find it – and I wonder if, what would you say to a student who's like, you know, handing you something and you're like, ah, the language is – could be better, right? Like, are there any tips, any suggestions you give to get into the work in a better way?

Nalo Hopkinson: And do you mean someone who's trying to write in vernacular or just struggling with language in general?

Mary Anne Mohanraj: Maybe struggling with language in general? Yeah, I think to sort of get themselves to slow down and –

Nalo Hopkinson: I have them practice writing dialogue, and writing it without – I remind them that nobody's seeing what they're putting on the page. They can always decide, no, I'm never going to show this to anyone. So there's nothing stopping them from just playing. And writing is experimentation. I mean, in Academe, they call it research. And it's not that you have to go look things up, it's that the writing is the research. The only way to do research is to, is to put things together and see what goes boom!

Mary Anne Mohanraj: I think that ties into a whole 'nother conversation about perfectionism, and, and revision, which maybe – so we'll have to just come back and do this again. So I want to thank you so much, Nalo Hopkinson. And if you could just tell everyone, what are you working on now or what you'd like to point people to of yours that they should take a look at?

Nalo Hopkinson: My second short story collection, *Falling in Love with Hominids*, came out a few years ago. But right now I'm actually learning how to write comics, by writing for one of the most popular comics franchises in the world, *The Sandman*, which is rebooted with a new house in the Dreaming, and I am writing that story.

Mary Anne Mohanraj: That's amazing. So I have just bought my copy and am super excited to read a new graphic novel of the Sandman as interpreted by Nalo Hopkinson. So thanks so much. Thank you. Thanks, everyone.