

Specious Species Taxonomies: Porosity and Interspecies Constellations in Nalo Hopkinson's *Midnight Robber*

ABSTRACT Nalo Hopkinson's Afrofuturist novel *Midnight Robber* (2000) is a stellar example of postcolonial science narratives which imagine kinship connections between human and non-human characters and entities. Ties that develop between species in tandem with the novel's cyborg characters showcase the porosity of species boundaries, entangling interspecies connections within a frame of Afrofuturist porosity. Moreover, *Midnight Robber* uses non-human species as a foil to explore colonial legacies and ties the negotiation of species taxonomies to postcolonial criticism and Afrofuturism. As a postcolonial *Bildungsroman*, *Midnight Robber* triangulates narrative strategies, Afrofuturism, and interspecies relations by renegotiating modes of sociality in order to reconsider violent implications of science and how they can be undone. Bringing into dialog Afrofuturist, postcolonial, interspecies, and literary studies, this chapter aims to explore how Hopkinson's novel uses the genre of the *Bildungsroman* and sutures together Afrofuturism, porosity, and interspecies kinship in search of a more egalitarian future.

KEYWORDS Afrofuturism, interspecies kinship, porosity, postcolonial speculative fiction

[W]e are Homo Narrans,
both bios and mythos.
(Jackson 2020, 34)

Introduction: Dialog between Porosity and Interspecies Theory

Communities tend to organize themselves by means of boundaries—territorially, communities use boundaries to sketch their turf; conceptually, they define their sense of self through inclusion within and exclusion outside of boundaries.¹ Such boundaries can easily become normative and dogmatic. For a long time, both postcolonial literatures and theory have focused on the construction and effects of boundaries, which for the most part build on binary oppositions, and on how they can be deconstructed, exposed as spurious endeavors to maintain certain hierarchies. In this context, the concept of porosity has recently gained traction. Interpreting literary narratives, Mark Stein focuses on “porous texts” (2017) and presents a useful and systematic definition of porosity:

[T]he presumed border between the texts we read, the cultures we breathe, and the effects we wield, the difference we seek to make in the world—politically, socially, interpersonally, ecologically, historically,—is marked by *porosity*: By leakage, seepage, organic, vital exchange, breathing pores, connection, intersection, transference, and transgression. (140–41, emphasis in original).

In keeping with this definition, porosity has become a key term for many kinds of connectivity. It emphasizes that, whenever exchange across allegedly bounded systems is possible, this potential for porosity is actually *immanent* to such systems, and their boundaries are unstable and permeable.

Stein’s definition highlights such permeability, the messy, the material, and the fleshy. Interestingly, it thus adumbrates what is increasingly picked up in a major strand of the environmental humanities, i.e., interspecies scholarship, for instance in one of the major contributions to the field: Donna Haraway’s *Staying with the Trouble* (2016). Haraway’s study is

1 I would like to thank the editors for including me in this project. A special thank you goes to the anonymous reviewers and Eva Ulrike Pirker and Birgit Neumann in particular for their feedback on earlier versions of this article.

a rallying cry for “oddkin” (2). She exhorts her readers: “The task is to become capable, with each other in all of our bumptious kinds, of response. [...] The task is to make kin in lines of inventive connection as a practice of learning to live and die well with each other in a thick present” (1). The notion of a “thick present,” constituted by its entanglement with past and future times and characterized by a multiplicity of interspecies relations, is indubitably motivated by a twenty-first century that is witnessing climate change and environmental destruction of unprecedented extents. Haraway demands that humans abandon the privileges of anthropocentrism and make kin beyond what I call specious species taxonomies to ensure the wellbeing of the planet and its many inhabitants.

The ways human communities sketch themselves in contrast to other humans as well as other species are a form of narrative, as this chapter’s initial quote suggests. Science fiction testifies to strong ties between narrative and science and lends itself particularly well to creatively imagining paradigms and communities which expose the porosity of communal boundaries in general and, which is especially relevant for our purposes, “alterity, subjectivity and the limits of the human” (Vint 2010, 2). My contribution explores how interspecies connections, as they are imagined and narrated in Nalo Hopkinson’s novel *Midnight Robber* (2000), relate to and expand porosity, linking it to Afrofuturist endeavors, and how the novel renegotiates certain products and discourses of science by these means. The acclaimed novel is a stellar example of postcolonial science narratives which thematize interspecies constellations and display porosity in form and content, particularly because the genre of the *Bildungsroman* allows the narrative to reflect on social dynamics and political implications behind character formation (Who is a character? Who is a person?). Set in outer space, *Midnight Robber* imagines life in an extraterrestrial postcolony on the fictional planet Toussaint, which bears strong resemblances to the Caribbean, as well as on Toussaint’s prison planet New Half-Way Tree. Braiding together multiple storylines, the novel relates how the protagonist, a girl named Tan-Tan, grows up, is abducted, and repeatedly raped by her father, who takes her to New Half-Way Tree. There, Tan-Tan befriends another species, the douen. *Midnight Robber* imagines interspecies connections between “humans and other animals” (Wolfe 2013) and between humans and digital entities. The entanglements of the human and the non-human powerfully deconstruct the otherness of the non-human, incorporating interspecies constellations within the frame of porosity. The novel’s cyborg characters, in tandem with ties that develop between species, showcase the porosity of boundaries between forms of being. Thus, the novel revises anthropocentrism and the science backing it up from a

postcolonial perspective and traces confluences between Afrofuturism and interspecies porosity.

In the remainder of this article, I focus on three pillars of Afrofuturism in Hopkinson's novel, following Mark Dery (1994) and Ytasha Womack (2013) in their definitions of Afrofuturism: Firstly, I engage with cyborgs as Afrofuturist oddkin and narration in *Midnight Robber*, concentrating on technology as a pivotal element of Afrofuturism. Then, the analysis delves into interspecies contact, pointing to the extratextual dehumanization of Black people (Jackson 2020) and consequent glitches in definitions of personhood, which connect to the novel's reflections on 'other' species through characters' encounters with difference (Ahmed 2000). Lastly, I analyze interspecies transformation as Afrofuturism, engaging with narratives of formation as part of the porous poetics performing this (trans)formation (Slaughter 2007; Stein 2004), not least with an eye to kinship relations (Haraway 2016) in the novel. The concluding subchapter reflects on the implications of *Midnight Robber* for science fiction and discourses of science, taking into account the novel's use of African epistemology in this context (Osei 2023) and engaging critically with the relative transformative thrust of anthropomorphic species and regulative social structures in the novel.

Cyborgs as Afrofuturist Oddkin and Porous Narration

According to Dery, the concept of 'Afrofuturism' covers "[s]peculative fiction that treats African-American themes and addresses African-American concerns in the context of twentieth-century technoculture" (1994, 180). Despite its breadth, the definition is silent on contributions from other African and African-descended groups and diasporas. Also, as we have long since entered a new millennium, it only makes sense to widen the time frame. More recent definitions hold that Afrofuturist movements free African, African diasporic, and Black imaginations and creative works from the tethers of the past and enable them to envision and to inhabit a future, contributing to decolonization by daring to look ahead (Womack 2013, 9). To go with Womack, "Afrofuturism combines elements of science fiction, historical fiction, speculative fiction, fantasy, Afrocentricity, and magic realism with non-Western beliefs" (9). In this context, technology is an important factor and, by corollary, a recurrent trope in Afrofuturist works: Technology is an advanced and highly valued product of science. Since technology was and "is too often brought to bear on black bodies" (Dery 1994, 180), it is profoundly Afrofuturist to reclaim it for Black

subjects.² In the hands of Black, African, or African-diasporic artists and characters, technology is pliable and useful: On the one hand, their acts of reclaiming technology are attempts to strike back at forms of oppression of their communities and ancestors through technology. On the other hand, Afrofuturist uses and depictions of technology strongly counter anti-Black or anti-African stereotypes by imaginatively promoting Black cultures to the very forefront of progress.³

By way of putting technology center stage, *Midnight Robber* clearly meets a central criterion of Afrofuturist works. For instance, eshus are a potent example of Afrofuturist elements in the novel: “Also known in Caribbean and West African cultures as Esu, Elegba, Legba, or Eleggua, Eshu is the Yoruba trickster deity, the deliverer of messages to and from the spirit world in West African religions who can be in all places at once” (Enteen 2007, 273). Furthermore, Eshu is considered “the god of mischief” (Kanu 2018, 122), a “trickster figure [who] is the protector of travelers and frequently plays games that enable individuals to gain a new understanding of the world” (Knepper 2013, 143). In *Midnight Robber*, an ‘eshu’ is an artificial intelligence which helps people on Toussaint navigate their daily lives. Decapitalized, these eshus signify both traditional past and technologically advanced future and overcome the dialectic of the two.⁴

2 One might be inclined to think that oppression and discrimination through technology are a thing of the past. Regrettably, this is not the case. To name but one example, most ordinary cameras and face-recognition systems favor white skin and faces and, therefore, may not recognize a Black face as human or adequately photograph Black people (Cole 2015). Moreover, the last couple of years have brought forth surveillance technologies that enable racial profiling, further singling out non-white people and racializing criminality. Then again, said surveillance technologies technically could be used to monitor and prosecute discrimination and violence against Black people—video footage of George Floyd has played a big part in documenting his killing and in setting the narrative right. Lamentably, such pro-Black use of technology for the most part still has a rather Afrofuturist ring to it, not least with an eye on AI and its reproduction of racist bias.

3 It is imperative to take into account that notions of ‘progress’ are tied to a “prevaling Western/Eurocentric framework” (Pirker, Hericks, and Mbali 2020, 2). In this context, achievement implies “to move forward, to move on or to move up in life” (2). It might be fruitful to explore how different Afrofuturist works negotiate this tension.

4 Several scholars expand further on Afrofuturist elements in *Midnight Robber*. See, for instance, Martín-Lucas (2017). Erin Fehskens puts forth a slightly different, equally intriguing and related interpretation, saying that the novel “creolizes cyberpunk and Caribbean genealogies of resistance” (2010, 137).

Beyond directing the focus towards technology and a past–future continuum, these Afrofuturist eshus furthermore reinvigorate technology and contest the status of the human as bounded, individual, and self-reliant: The humans on Toussaint can have technology inserted into their very bodies and are thus linked to the supervisor web Granny Nanny. Many of them have an “earbug” (Hopkinson 2000, 5), to which they can issue commands, and they can have their own eshu, an artificial intelligence with which to communicate, from which to learn, and on which to rely (5). Eshus can be both inside and outside of the human body (5), which calls into question parameters of (im-)permeability, visibility, and materiality. On these grounds, several scholars have read the inhabitants of Toussaint as cyborgs (Thaler 2010, 109; Martín-Lucas 2017, 107; and others). To evoke Haraway’s famous definition, “[a] cyborg is a cybernetic organism, a hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction” (1985, 65).⁵ Yet, as alluring as it sounds, the cyborg concept does not sit well with Blackness, as Therí Pickens insists:

Since the cyborg opens up the conversation about futurity—which usually elides madness and Blackness—it also becomes a useful space to consider who we are becoming. Certainly, to think through our kinship with machines is apropos for discussions of disability given the medicalization of certain bodies [...] But the cyborg is an incomplete, politically fraught, and ethically suspicious answer to a series of questions about *raced and disabled* futurity. (2019, 19, emphasis added)

So, as an alternative reading more sensitive to uneasy tensions between Black experience and cyborg theory, I propose that it is worthwhile to consider the permeation of human bodies with technology in *Midnight Robber* as closely related to the cross-species and interspecies relations made possible by science that are configured in the novel. Earbugs and “nanomites” (Hopkinson 2000, 328), in this sense, would be like Haraway’s “critter[s]” (2016, 61): tiny organisms which populate the human body, sustain its metabolism, and thus contest the notion of an isolated human ontology and ecosystem. By reconfiguring the human in this way, *Midnight*

5 As a matter of fact, the cyborg may not even be as futuristic as it sounds, depending on how one reads it. In their excellent treatise *Animacies*, Mel Chen (2012) stresses: “Human bodies, those preeminent containers of life, are themselves pervaded by xenobiotic substances and nanotechnologies” (193), which proves the porosity of the non-fictional human body for more-than-human entities and substances.

Robber labors to undo the binary of organic and digital being and to make science visceral, embodied matter.

Future-oriented as the novel is, it has in mind an even further-reaching future, characterized by unprecedented entanglements between humans and technology. The body of Tan-Tan's as-yet-unborn son, who is addressed by the narrator at the end of the novel, "**is one living connection with the Grande Anansi Nanotech Interface. [...] Flesh people talk say how earbugs give them a sixth sense, but really is only a crutch, oui? [...] You now; you really have that extra limb**" (328).⁶ From this it follows that the next generation will not only be aided by technology but has an even deeper connection to it: technology and the human can no longer be disentangled. This successfully undoes the dyad of human and non-human. The human species is unveiled as not closed off against other lifeforms but very much dependent on and open to, porous for, them.

Narration in *Midnight Robber* performs both porosity and Afrofuturism, all the while being tied to negotiations of interspecies relations. The narratives of *Midnight Robber* are porous, as they straddle textual boundaries through many storylines, self-referential intertextuality, intermedial configurations, and circular narration. Hopkinson's novel is made up of several narrative strands, which form a complex web of storylines and multiple truths. Some parts, printed in bold, can be attributed to an organizing narrative authority, who interrupts the main plot of Tan-Tan to address her and communicate their own opinion. Also printed in bold are minor tales of Tan-Tan, which sometimes chime and sometimes clash with what the main storyline reveals. What all narratives in *Midnight Robber* share is an emphasis on the interventions of the narrator, who has qualities of a "**griot**" (79). The griot, an "*African storyteller*," is "*the main conveyor of the collective wisdom*" in African storytelling (Henrich 2001, 24; emphasis in original). Culturally specified, the griot-like narrative techniques employed in *Midnight Robber* infuse the generic conventions of the novel as a written medium with elements of oral storytelling, thus straddling boundaries between modes of narration and adding traditional African elements of storytelling to the porous, Afrofuturist narrative.⁷

6 I reproduce bold print used in *Midnight Robber* in order to stay as close as possible to the workings of the text and its materiality. Bold print in the novel variously visualizes artificial intelligences or non-human creatures speaking and thus highlights non-human speech and non-human presences in the narrative.

7 Another significant level on which *Midnight Robber* qualifies as a porous narrative is language (cf. Doloughan 2016, 143). English is creolized and comes into contact with a number of Creole languages on diverse diegetic levels:

Interspecies Contact and Afrofuturism

The significance of technological gadgets and intelligences which *Midnight Robber* underscores notwithstanding, Black futures can be imagined in ways that surpass emphasis on technology. Black subjects' humanity has been questioned over large periods of time (Jackson 2020, 1). Enslavement and colonization dehumanized Black people structurally, and police brutality against Black people, the Black Lives Matter protests gaining visibility and popularity since 2020, as well as the events that sparked them prove the dire truth that Black and non-Black people alike still need to fight for Black humanity to be recognized. Importantly, "the categories of 'race' and 'species' have coevolved and are actually *mutually reinforcing terms*" (12, emphasis in original). As the subjugation of Black people was rationalized through discourses which equated them with animals, to claim recognition for non-humans is a delicate issue when it comes to those humans whose own personhood remains cruelly contested. Critical scholar Zakiyyah Jackson strives to "identify [...] our shared being with the non-human without suggesting that some members of humanity bear the burden of 'the animal [...]'" (12). I argue that this can be a crucial frontier with an Afrofuturist purchase, as it leaves behind the struggle of Black people to be acknowledged as humans and moves so far beyond it that it can explore interspecies relations as a completely new nexus of Afrofuturist thinking.

Simultaneously, porosity in *Midnight Robber* reaches its full potential when harnessed to deconstruct species taxonomies. Such deconstruction is achieved by how the novel reimagines evolution and narrates bonds that exemplify kinship beyond species boundaries. Let us begin with the novel's rewriting of evolution: At the beginning of the novel, Tan-Tan's father kills his wife's lover and flees to the prison planet New Half-Way Tree, sequestering his daughter. Tan-Tan's transdimensional journey from Toussaint to New Half-Way Tree breaks up boundaries between several organic species (cf. Hopkinson 2000, 74). As Tan-Tan is being cast through dimensions on her journey from one planet to the other, chasms and boundaries between species—human and 'other'—dissolve. Tan-Tan undergoes a sort of micro-evolution, whose starting point deposes the human from their self-assigned throne. Once Tan-Tan and Antonio reach New Half-Way Tree, both of them are recognizably human again. What remains,

Code-switching by characters and the narrator as well as the role of nanny-song, the Creole language of the digital web Granny Nanny, which almost all inhabitants of Toussaint are connected to, testify to the postcolonial porosity of language in the novel.

though, is the knowledge that being human is a matter of perception and context. Crucially, the species with whom Tan-Tan briefly identifies stand in for various cultures and their respective histories: “Hopkinson evokes a cross-species Caribbean imaginary, which brings together manicou (a native of the Caribbean) and the mongoose (brought to the region through empire)” (Knepper 2013, 145). This fluid evolution, which is attentive to colonial history and its impact on ecologies, testifies to the links between Afrofuturist and interspecies conceptions and serves as a foil for more fleshed-out forms of kinship beyond species boundaries, taking up science on species development in its stride.

Midnight Robber further exposes species taxonomies as specious and boundaries between species as porous through its depiction of the relation between humans and douen. Douen are a bird-like species with roots in Caribbean folklore and are native inhabitants of New Half-Way Tree. The way they are depicted in the novel grapples with overlaps between the human as a species and personhood as a philosophical and ethical concept. As *Midnight Robber* shows, the ontological category ‘human’ is not coextensive with ‘person.’ When Tan-Tan and Antonio land on New Half-Way Tree, they are met by Chichibud, a douen. What follows is a “strange encounter,” an encounter with otherness (Ahmed 2000, 39). Tan-Tan’s first impression is relayed in detail: “The creature was only about as tall as she. It smelt like leaves. Its head was shaped funny; long and narrow like a bird’s. It was ugly for so! Its eyes were on either side of its head, not in front of its face like people eyes” (Hopkinson 2000, 92). Narrated from Tan-Tan’s viewpoint, the description casts Chichibud as an inferior other, reproducing well-worn tropes of non-human aliens.⁸ *Midnight Robber* goes on to contest those tropes. Comparing the creature to what she sees as the norm to measure everything else against, i.e., humans, Tan-Tan as a child is at least more curious than her father, who immediately calls Chichibud a “beast” (92). Chichibud’s answer is poignant: “Beast that could talk and know its own mind. Oonuh tallpeople quick to name what is people and what is beast” (92). He immediately expounds the Eurocentric and human-made dualism between humans and animals. Moreover, by calling humans ‘tallpeople,’ Chichibud adds a qualifier to ‘people,’ further undermining the status of the human as ontological given. By inference, he could be

8 Scholarship, too, posits the douen as irremediably Other. Langer, for instance, calls them “sentient aliens” (2011, 65)—which they are, as a matter of fact. Yet, I maintain that what *Midnight Robber* shows is that the ‘aliens’—a laden term—are persons and close to humans (whether the latter is worth aspiring to is a different question).

‘smallpeople,’ a form of people. Hence, Chichibud here “gives voice to a posthuman critique of the anthropocentric humanist obsession with hierarchical taxonomy” (Martín-Lucas 2017, 111; see also Sorensen 2014, 278).

Affirming that some animals do meet (Western) criteria of personhood, Derrida maintains that the key question for determining personhood is whether a given animal is capable of *responding* (2008, 8). Responses exceed reactions and imply sentience on the part of the responding one.⁹ Chichibud’s response to Antonio is a clever riposte; he meets anthropocentric expectations. Furthermore, Chichibud is polyglot: Apart from douen language(s), he also speaks several human languages: “Anglopatwa, Franco-patwa, Hispanopatwa, and Papiamento. [...] We learn all oonuh speech, for oonuh don’t learn we own” (Hopkinson 2000, 95). Matter-of-factly enumerating languages from the Creole continuum he speaks, Chichibud underscores that human arrogance is a reason why his species has had to learn several languages and that douen are more than capable of mastering human languages. When humans demarcate personhood, they elevate “the gatekeeper function of speech” (Wolfe 2013, 8). Chichibud’s command of a multiplicity of languages proves that he meets another, admittedly normative, criterion for personhood.

Midnight Robber further stages a confluence between postcolonial and interspecies discourses by portraying douen as similar to human colonial subjects. The relationship between human settlers and indigenous beings in the novel echoes how European colonizers violently displaced and subjugated non-European, Indigenous peoples. For example, this shows in the fact that the douen carry the burden of translation and need to learn a multiplicity of human languages. Descendants of slaves and the colonized themselves, those humans who now live on Toussaint follow the same patterns as European colonizers on Earth: They have subjected native inhabitants to their rule and now use them for their own purposes. Crucially, like historical colonizers on planet Earth, the settlers on Toussaint and New Half-Way Tree question the ‘personhood,’ i.e., the right to life and self-determination, of the creatures they encountered. Binary victim-perpetrator distinctions no longer hold—paradoxically, it comes down to a

9 To talk about ‘response’ entails questions of responsibility. Heiner Bielefeldt has made an interesting contribution on politics of responsibility in ecocritical and interspecies studies: Although many other pillars of anthropocentrism are toppled by scholarly and creative engagements with anthropocentrism, responsibility is more often than not still solely ascribed to the human (cf. 2021, 524). As it would exceed the scope of this paper to engage with Bielefeldt’s argument in depth here, I take it up later in my analysis of obstacles in the interspecies relationships woven in *Midnight Robber*.

non-human intelligence informing Tan-Tan about colonial history, which is ironic considering how most humans treat non-humans in the novel.

The fact that, despite their alleged superiority, humans here rely on the non-human for information and labor, among other things, lends a deeply ambiguous undertone to questions of morality and interspecies entanglements.¹⁰ Jessica Langer offers a convincing interpretation: *Midnight Robber* promotes “a non-essentialist view, and one that turns out to be explicitly anti-racist: descendants of colonized people are not valorized or idealized, but are rather portrayed as potentially colonial” (2011, 66). Langer sees Hopkinson’s novel as de-essentializing African-diasporic subjects, freeing them from their historically fixed position as victims. This Afrofuturist agenda is enriched by its outreach across species boundaries: Contemporary fields of research, “particularly animal studies, are slowly advancing the thesis that human–animal binarism is the original and foundational paradigm upon which discourses of human difference, including, or even especially, racialization was erected” (Jackson 2020, 12). Following this line of argumentation, Afrofuturism might not always stop at undoing narratives of Black victimhood on an intraspecies level but would sometimes reach out to other species. Daring to submit the coveted category of the human subject to intense scrutiny from interspecies-conscious angles, *Midnight Robber* contributes to redefining parameters of Afrofuturism, highlighting that both Afrofuturism and interspecies kinship are profoundly porous.

Afrofuturist Interspecies Transformation

Thus incorporated into the novel’s Afrofuturist set-up, interspecies entanglements develop significantly in the course of *Midnight Robber*. Specifically, one can trace character formation, a kind of *Bildung*, in the relation between Tan-Tan and the douen. Tan-Tan does not become an integral part of the douen community. Still, some ties do develop between the species. Subject formation in the genre of the *Bildungsroman* usually aims for integration of the subject into a community. Frequently, the task to change in order to be fit for integration was traditionally assigned only to the subject in formation (Slaughter 2007, 101). Plumbing a different field

10 As Langer puts it: “In *Midnight Robber*, the slave narrative has not been erased but rather displaced—the genocide on to the bodies of Toussaint’s douen and other life forms, and the slavery on to the people sent to New Half-Way Tree” (2011, 67, emphasis in original).

of African-diasporic and Black literatures—Black British literatures—Stein identifies a special kind of novel of formation: According to Stein, the “novel of transformation [...] is about the *formation* of its protagonists—but, importantly, it is also about the *transformation* of [a given] society and cultural institutions” (2004, xiii, emphasis in original). Following his definition, *Midnight Robber* can be interpreted as a novel of Afrofuturist interspecies transformation: It displays typical features of novels of formation but also transmogrifies the genre by adding elements of a postcolonial science narrative, performing porosity on the level of form and showing that both Tan-Tan and the douen have to adapt to build a relationship.

At the beginning, differences between Tan-Tan and douen appear insurmountable. When Tan-Tan and Chichibud meet for the first time, she is still heavily influenced by her father. When Antonio and Chichibud fight, Tan-Tan sides with her father and silently calls Chichibud a “nasty leggo-beast” (Hopkinson 2000, 99). Yet, after Chichibud has protected Tan-Tan and her father from a mako jumbie, a tall bird-like creature that attacks Chichibud and the humans on their way to a douen settlement, Tan-Tan places her trust in him: “Yesterday his snarly, snouty grin would have frightened her, but she was coming to like how his face looked” (117). Although Tan-Tan continues to notice Chichibud’s difference, she quickly becomes accepting of it and is willing to reconsider her parameters of identity and alterity.

Tan-Tan’s anthropocentric standards are further interrogated through “an ongoing dialogue about the categorization of species, sexual development, and gender that challenges prevailing communal discourses of identity” in *Midnight Robber* (Knepper 2013, 146). One powerful piece of evidence is how the sex of douen manifests and the confusion this causes for Tan-Tan, who, when she first sees young douen, observes: “Douen pickney could fly! The other kind of ratbat must have been packbird young. Their feathers were disorderly, rampfled up like slept-on hair” (179). Female and male douen look so different that she thinks they are distinct species altogether. Shortly afterwards, Tan-Tan learns that Benta, whom she has always taken to be Chichibud’s packbird, is actually his wife (cf. 181). Tan-Tan is confused because she generally bases species distinctions on sameness and difference, expecting sameness within one species. Chichibud retorts: “Allyou woman does look like man, or pickney” (182). Mocking the sameness of all humans, he turns the tables and posits his species’ appearances as the norm. Confronted with this knowledge, Tan-Tan begins to recognize “how the fronds of [Benta’s] feathers resembled the long hair on the douen pickney-them” (182). Once she has learned to look beyond patterns instilled into her by her upbringing, she can acknowledge

intraspecies dimorphism, which is all the more significant because male douen resemble humans much more than female douen do. In this regard, “[c]ross-dressing and the carnivalesque as well as encounters with non-human subjects” (Knepper 2013, 141) in *Midnight Robber* re-evaluate human-made and Eurocentrically oriented distinctions between sexes and genders *in tandem with* distinctions between species, adding nuance to biological discourses.

Tan Tan’s transformation can also be measured with regard to the level of respect she has for the douen. Growing up on New Half-Way Tree, Tan-Tan is partly influenced by other humans’ attitudes. (Male) human adults regard the douen as—at best—second-class citizens (cf. Hopkinson 2000, 120). Yet Tan-Tan becomes friends with Chichibud over the years. Chichibud reaches out across species boundaries in order to save her, offering her refuge among the douen when Tan-Tan is raped by Antonio and kills him in an act of self-defense on her sixteenth birthday (169). Since humans are going to prosecute Tan-Tan for Antonio’s death, Chichibud puts his own species’ community at risk to hide Tan-Tan (cf. 173). Here, “interspecies hostility [...] is bridged in the act of hospitality” (Martín-Lucas 2017, 111).

Despite the douen’s generosity, Tan-Tan is not integrated easily into the douen community. She is disgruntled with life in the bush, deprived of the relative amenities she is used to. Also, she is a young adult who just has had to live through a deeply traumatizing event. Altercations between her and douen are frequent. On the other side of the species boundary, not all douen are equally accepting of Tan-Tan having been given shelter in the douen community. One male douen in particular takes offense at Tan-Tan being there. Right when she arrives in the douen’s village, this douen uses a very obscene gesture to express his discontent, urinating with such force that his urine almost hits Tan-Tan (cf. Hopkinson 2000, 180). In order to avoid the pitfalls of what Bielefeldt denominates the “*anthropocentrism of responsibility*” and come to a balanced analysis of the relationship between species in *Midnight Robber*, the douen’s hostile behavior needs to be taken into account, too (2021, 524, emphasis in original). Problems in the relationships between Tan-Tan and the douen finally reach their climax because Tan-Tan does not obey the douen. She is advised to stay away from human villages to avoid capture. Keen on human contact, Tan-Tan ventures out into such villages anyway. One day, humans follow her back to the tree in which the douen live. When humans and douen meet, a violent confrontation takes place. One human shoots Taya, the sister of Chichibud’s wife Benta. In graphic detail, the narrator describes the spot “where Taya’s severed head was lying, the beak still opening and shutting; reflex action as her brain died” (Hopkinson 2000, 270). Thus depicted,

Taya's death affectively symbolizes consequences of human intervention and seems to refute the possibility of Tan-Tan's integration into the douen's community. Consequently, Tan-Tan and Abitefa, Chichibud's daughter who has helped her sneak into human settlements, are expelled from the douen community.

Prior to this infelicitous outcome, both Tan-Tan and her relationship with the douen had begun to change. In terms of sex, gender, and age, Tan-Tan and Abitefa, Chichibud's daughter, are peers. They become co-developing mates. Among the douen, there is a rite of initiation for those who are not yet adults, which resonates with ritual markers of processes of (trans)formation or *Bildung*. Benta instructs Tan-Tan to stay with Abitefa during her initiation period (cf. Hopkinson 2000, 221). Hence, they come to form a "trans-species community of mutual support" and grow up together for some time (Martín-Lucas 2017, 112). Abitefa teaches Tan-Tan how to survive in the bush, which allows the human to "learn [...] to creolize human and douen methods of living" (Fehskens 2010, 146). In the format of the *Bildungsroman* and in the wider context of stories of initiation, mentor figures are often essential to the protagonist's *Bildung* (Freese 1998, 150, 155, 174), referring both to their education and to their formation. Mentor figures are considered to be more experienced and knowledgeable than the subject in formation because they already have undergone formation. As Abitefa knows to navigate the bush, she assumes the position of Tan-Tan's mentor. That Tan-Tan's mentor is from a different species diminishes anthropocentrism and affirms the potential of interspecies "becoming-with" (Haraway 2016, 12).

Moreover, Tan-Tan comes to adopt some of the douen's communal values. For instance, douen form bonds of kinship beyond their own species, and Tan-Tan learns to branch out to other species as kin, too. When Tan-Tan first arrives on the tree where the douen live, Chichibud declares: "You in a Papa Bois, the daddy tree that does feed we and give we shelter. Every douen nation have it own daddy tree" (Hopkinson 2000, 179). The affiliative connection between douen and their tree modeled after filial proximity even shows in the name, "daddy tree" (Anatol 2006, 118). After the conflict between douen and humans, the douen have to leave their home and fell their tree to hide from the humans. When they do so, the scene is profoundly saddening: "[One douen's] wail got louder. So a child would lament a dead parent. Other douens joined in, some chanting low and passionately [...], some screaming, ululating, crying" (277). The douen's pain over the loss of their kin elicits Tan-Tan's empathy. Additionally, Tan-Tan's reaction shows that she has come to accept the douen's community frames for what is "grievable" (Butler 2010, 15).

Judith Butler explains parameters of grieving and concludes “that there is no life and no death without a relation to some frame” (7). Such frames are highly regulative and determine whether a given existence is deemed so valuable that its cessation would be appropriately met with grief. This kind of existence, then, counts as a life. Importantly, Tan-Tan here bids the tree farewell: “Thanks. I so, so sorry. Thanks” (Hopkinson 2000, 277). Her participation in the collective act of mourning attests that her frame of what is a life has expanded considerably. Moreover, she addresses the tree, which suggests that she accords sentience, the capacity to hear and understand her, to the tree. Matter, for her, has come to matter; the more-than-human is no longer removed indefinitely.

Aware of some kind of *Bildung*, Thaler has called *Midnight Robber* “another female coming-of-age story” (2010, 102). While her analysis dedicatedly traces how Hopkinson’s novel oscillates between Caribbean history and a projective future, I want to deliberately spell out the significance of a novel of (trans)formation in the context of interspecies porosity: Initially, “the philosophy of *Bildung* [...] articulated a transitive grammar for the elevation of the bourgeois male citizen to the universal class” (Slaughter 2007, 92, emphasis in original). This lays the foundation for a “historical social role: incorporating the problematic individual into the rights and responsibilities of citizenship” (94). German in origin, formation as a concept “conceives of harmonious human personality development (*Bildung*) simultaneously as an *unfolding* of an individual’s latent humanity in its encounter with the structures of the social world and as an *enfolding* of the individual within and by those structures” (101, emphasis in original). Usually, *Bildung* is thus contingent on the anthropocentrism of humanist (scientific) discourse.

The predominant narrative of the *Bildungsroman* as the integration of an initially unsuitable human individual into an extant, likewise human, community has seen varying inflections over the centuries. Whereas character formation of this kind used to be ideologically tied to “the progressive harmonization of the individual and the state” (91), contemporary versions of the *Bildungsroman* do not always elevate the nation-state as much as they foreground different kinds of social formations. Furthermore, protagonists of novels of formation were traditionally male. The genre has long since been diversified to encompass female and postcolonial subjectivities, to name but two inflections (cf. Fraiman 1993; Lima 1993; Hoagland 2006). Evidently, the *Bildungsroman* as a genre is subject to constant change, adapting to an ever-changing world and its visions. Bearing in mind the past of African and African-diasporic communities and the inclination toward the future propelled by Afrofuturism, it becomes clear that the *Bildungsroman*

in *Midnight Robber* carries out important political work. Straddling boundary lines between species while being rooted in the African diaspora's past but simultaneously branching out into a future, the development of the novel's female human protagonist (with cyborg critters) invites us to read *Midnight Robber* as an Afrofuturist interspecies *Bildungsroman*.

Sketching future directions for literature from the African diaspora, Jackson holds:

African diasporic cultural production intervenes productively in reconsidering the role of 'the animal' or the 'animalistic' in the construction of 'the human' by producing nonbinaristic models of human-animal relations, advancing theories of trans-species interdependency, observing trans-species precarity, and hypothesizing cross-species relationality in a manner that preserves alterity while undermining the nonhuman and animality's abjection, an abjection that constantly rebounds on marginalized humans. (2020, 18)

It would be wrong to say that Hopkinson's novel envisions a utopian interspecies form of "being-with" (Nancy 2000, 3). Instead, *Midnight Robber* charts and, to stick with Jackson's wording, 'advances', 'observes' and 'hypothesizes' incipient transformation of specious species taxonomies. Tan-Tan's actions have damaged the douen community, as Benta's sister has died and the douen have had to abandon their daddy tree and move to a different place. Conceptually, this has not dissolved boundaries between species but, for some douen, solidified them, so the community of douen as a whole has not changed on an infrastructural level. However, Chichibud, Abitefa and Benta have come into close contact with Tan-Tan, Benta and Abitefa having become something akin to Tan-Tan's adoptive mother and sister, respectively (Crosby 2013, 194; see also Anatol 2006, 118). The bonds between them can be read as familial relations, which both attests their proximity and includes Tan-Tan in a micro-community among the douen. Tan-Tan herself has come a long way ever since her first encounter with Chichibud. The relationship between Tan-Tan and the douen is what makes it possible for Tan-Tan to overcome the abuse she has suffered at her father's hands (Anatol 2006, 117). Also, the relationship is not only beneficial for Tan-Tan but has also slightly changed how Tan-Tan approaches the douen: At least Tan-Tan comes to appreciate the douens' knowledge of the bush and recognizes their superiority in this space. Although she has not been integrated into the wider douen community, after minor and major altercations, the two species have established ways of being-with each other on an individual level. Accordingly, the straddling of boundaries has

been ‘initiated’; for members of both species, trans-formation (‘formation’ retaining echoes of the German *Bildung*, i.e., education and development) has begun.

Crucially, the underlying logic of all *Bildung* is circular: For someone to mature and to be integrated into a given social formation, they have to possess or to have attained something of what their formation is supposed to produce from the outset (Slaughter 2007, 137). That ties between Tan-Tan and the douen could spring up shows that there was a predisposition for this in the first place. In other words, boundary lines between the two species have always been porous. The *Bildungsroman* is heavily pluralized through transcultural travel and inflections in *Midnight Robber*. Imagining budding interspecies bonds between extraterrestrial non-humans and a Black, female human pervaded by technological beings as a form of *Bildung*, *Midnight Robber* transforms the genre and exposes it as being malleable and immanently porous.

Conclusion: The Afrofuturist Past in (Trans)Formation

What, then, is the relation between science and narrative in *Midnight Robber*? First, technology as one of the prime products of science pervades the communities depicted in the novel. *Midnight Robber* manages to liberate technology from its anti-Black heritage and to use it for the empowerment of a Black diaspora equipped with the most refined technology, which even blurs boundaries between the human and the non-human. Second, scientific discourse is also renegotiated critically in *Midnight Robber* with an eye to species taxonomies. Literary imaginings of human-like but non-human species deconstruct anthropocentrism and depose the human from their pedestal, especially since *Midnight Robber* is vocal about human violence. *Midnight Robber* negotiates otherness with regard to non-human species as part and parcel of the novel’s Afrofuturism. Weaving together Afrofuturism, criticism of colonial practice and legacies, and interspecies kinship, Hopkinson’s novel hammers home the point that oppression and discrimination of Black subjects, exploitation of non-human species, and technological and biological science are deeply intertwined. Narrative here offers an opportunity to excavate blind spots of science, and it uses the power of fiction to invoke sympathy for those at the receiving end of scientific violence, the *Bildungsroman* serving as a tool to question underlying social parameters.

This also contributes to the (trans)formation of science fiction. Ping Su and Adam Grydehøj hail *Midnight Robber* “as a milestone in decolonizing

the mainstream Western science fiction”, “interweav[ing] narrative science fiction with Caribbean history and culture” (2022, 685). This is particularly relevant seeing as science fiction itself, they argue, “has often maintained a colonial pattern, with domination and oppression looming large in the narrative” (685). In addition, Elizabeth Abena Osei emphasizes African roots of Caribbean cultures and African cultural repositories as part of the fabric of *Midnight Robber*: Mentioning “Afro-Caribbean folklore traditions and magic in imagined futuristic spaces” (2023, 2) as a hallmark of Nalo Hopkinson’s writing, Osei’s Afrofuturistic reading of the novel’s “reclamation of traditional African storytelling techniques” (2) teases out “analogies consistent with the Sankofa principle” (2). As “the Sankofa bird [...] realizes the importance of traditional cultural practices” (6), striving for a better future, Osei’s argument makes it possible to focus on an African epistemology at work in the Afrofuturist dynamics of *Midnight Robber*. This makes the novel a case of *African science fiction* “performing the philosophy of the return” (14) while looking into the imagined future.

Last but not least, narration in *Midnight Robber* itself triangulates science, Afrofuturism, and interspecies relations: As one of the final passages of the novel reveals, Tan-Tan’s eshu, whom she had to leave behind on her way to New Half-Way Tree, is the novel’s griot-narrator who has always kept an eye out for Tan-Tan. Rooted in African cultural heritages but imbuing them with futuristic elements, the Afrofuturist griot-narrator exercises narrative agency to straddle boundaries between species, cultures, pasts, and futures and marks their porosity once and for all.

Invigorating impulses which propound interspecies porosity in conjunction with Afrofuturism notwithstanding, interspecies transformation cannot be said to be completed in *Midnight Robber*. One has to admit that the douen are particularly well suited to affiliation with humans because they have many qualities that can either be found in or are understandable to human subjects: They can talk; their males walk upright, wear clothing, and know how to handle arms; they form settlements and families; and they grieve. As a species, they are comprehensible in and through human terms and only become known to the reader through a human-made label (Martín-Lucas 2017, 111).¹¹ The alleged other’s “right to opacity” (Glissant 1997, 190) is relative here: The douens’ opacity and difference are rather domesticated, and they largely work along human-made parameters, which is of course due to “[t]he anthropomorphic bias of narratives” (Fludernik 1996, 13). It seems fair to say that the *Bildungsroman*, the genre *par excellence*

11 To label them ‘anthropomorphized’ would perpetuate anthropocentrism.

for negotiating human modes of sociality, here displays a tendency toward reinforcing such anthropocentrism.

Furthermore, the ending of the novel re-ingrains the image of the human heterosexual nuclear family. In the final scene, Tan-Tan gives birth to her son, supported by Abitefa and her human boyfriend Melonhead (cf. Hopkinson 2000, 329). Melonhead standing in for and as a father figure glosses over the fact that Tan-Tan's own father has raped and impregnated her. Moreover, Abitefa is demoted to the status of midwife, *companion* but not equal to the human protagonists—she does not even speak in this scene. Her presence might pluralize the nuclear family narrative, but agency has not been redistributed too radically between the two species. Certainly, the fact that there are other truths lurking right under the surface of the final scene—a history of rape, affiliative gestures from Melonhead, and a complex interspecies relationship between Abitefa and Tan-Tan—pluralizes the normative image of the nuclear family from within and below.¹² Still, the nuclear family is a powerful and lasting image. LaMonda Horton Stallings, well-acquainted with gender and queer theory as well as Afrofuturism, might have called this a “heteropatriarchal recolonization that happens with [...] the Western model of family” (2015, 28). Porosity mainly resurfaces on the level of form, *Midnight Robber* ending on a final comment from the griot-narrator. Insinuating that this ending may be but one version of a fabulous story in a network of multiple truths—“*me nah choose none!*” (Hopkinson 2000, 329, emphasis in original)—the ending points, slightly feebly, to other possibilities.

These points of contention notwithstanding, *Midnight Robber* mobilizes the double meaning of *Bildung*—both Tan-Tan and the douen undergo formation, and the novel contributes to knowledge production as a postcolonial science narrative. In all its porosity, Hopkinson's novel showcases that there is an Afrofuturist purchase to trans-formative interspecies porosity. Afrofuturism in *Midnight Robber* opens up to interspecies relations, despite discursive, material, social, and economic dehumanization of Black communities, which has been going on for centuries. The deconstruction of specious species taxonomies does not stop at using non-human creatures as a metaphor for interracial kinship. Instead, it takes non-human life-forms seriously and offers species-straddling solidarity from a community

12 Crosby offers a more optimistic reading of the final scene. According to her, Abitefa here occupies the role of Tan-Tan's sister, who will help her raise the child (2013, 196). Though the extended family may be pluralized across species boundaries, neither the structural implications of Abitefa's silencing nor the pre-eminence of human heterosexual romance instantiate far-reaching transformation of both species.

that may have had a lot to lose by negotiating the human as a category. By projecting an Afrofuturist paradigm which has left behind the dire struggle for recognition of Black people as humans with equal rights, *Midnight Robber* uses the potential of postcolonial science narratives and ideates a radical Afrofuture invested in renegotiating the regulative parameters of anthropocentrism.

ORCID®

Christina Slopek-Hauff  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6726-2396>

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