"There is no solid ground beneath us": The Shoals and Detours of Nalo Hopkinson's "The Glass Bottle Trick," "Precious," and "Greedy Choke Puppy"

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ABSTRACT

This article presents a reading of Nalo Hopkinson's short stories "The Glass Bottle Trick," "Precious," and "Greedy Choke Puppy" that considers Caribbean Canadian subjectivity through lenses of (inter)textuality and the material/metaphorical spaces and movements of interruption. It draws from Tiffany Lethabo King's thinking on shoals to theorize the gathering and accumulation of tales that occurs in Hopkinson's re/imaginings of "Bluebeard," "The Kind and the Unkind Girls," and soucouyant folklore. The article suggests that these shoals interrupt the paths of dominant narratives in ways that force detours to emerge, adapting Rinaldo Walcott's use of the term to explore the transformative possibilities that occur through the creation of new improvised paths, of otherwise ways of conceptualizing Caribbean Canadian being. Ultimately, it proposes that Hopkinson's stories acknowledge and yet interrupt colonial narratives of geography, identity, and femininity, providing a framework through which to consider the unstable grounds and the searching detours of Caribbean Canadian subjectivities.

Keywords

Caribbean Canadian; Nalo Hopkinson; intertextuality; fairy tales; folklore; soucouyant; self-creation; diaspora.

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In *A Map to the Door of No Return*, Dionne Brand writes that "[t]o live in the Black Diaspora is…to live as a fiction—a creation of empires, and also self-creation" (18). Her metaphor of Black[1] diasporic subjectivity as a fiction, as a creative text, provides a generative way of thinking through the multiple fictions of Black diasporic speculative fiction, particularly in relation to the intertextualities of Caribbean Canadian author Nalo Hopkinson's short stories. In what follows, I take up the idea of Black diasporic subjectivity as (inter)textual in combination with the spatial dimensions held by both the concept of diaspora as well as the Caribbean Canadian label in an exploration of three folklore re/imaginings from Hopkinson's *Skin Folk* collection—namely, "The Glass Bottle Trick," "Precious," and "Greedy Choke Puppy." More specifically, I use the language of space and movement to read the intertextuality of Hopkinson's narratives as a way through which to consider both the broader plurality of Caribbean Canadian subjectivity as well as the individual multifaceted fictions of the stories' female protagonists. I thus read Hopkinson's work together with an adaptation of Tiffany Lethabo King's theorizations of shoals and Rinaldo Walcott's thinking on detours to suggest that the stories' respective re/imaginings of "Bluebeard," "The Kind and the Unkind Girls," and soucouyant folktales reflect a self-creation that "work[s] alongside and across traditional geographies" (McKittrick xiv). In other words, I suggest that Caribbean Canadian subjectivity acknowledges and yet interrupts colonial narratives of geography and identity, interruptions that are formed by the accumulation of multiple stories and that force the creation of otherwise paths.

While the creation of empires cannot be ignored, it does not encompass the totality of Caribbean Canadian fiction. The white supremacist narratives of empire come through on the level of the term itself as a colonial (mis)naming of the spaces to which it refers. As Carole Boyce-Davies argues, "[t]he terms that we use to name ourselves…carry their strings of echoes and inscriptions. Each represents an original misnaming and the simultaneous constant striving of the dispossessed for full representation" (4). A term such as Caribbean Canadian, then, simultaneously carries both the colonial erasure of the names and relations to the land held by the Indigenous peoples in the Caribbean and Canada as well as the complex multiplicity of identities held by the dispossessed—such as Black diasporic peoples—with attachments to both places. This linguistic entanglement is further complicated by the ways in which the

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1. In my own writing, I follow P. Gabrielle Foreman's convention of capitalizing the word "Black" in recognition of Black being as a proper noun ("A Note on Language" xv; see also the community-sourced document "Writing About Slavery/Teaching About Slavery: This Might Help"). When citing others, I respect their terminology and capitalization decisions.

Canadian nation-state inscribes Blackness as "Caribbean or U.S.," thus "un-hing[ing] black people from Canada, while also reducing black specificities to an all-encompassing elsewhere (simply non-Canadian)" (McKittrick 99; see also Walcott 117, 135). Yet Hopkinson refuses to be reduced to an oversimpli-fied narrative of elsewhereness, instead mapping the specific diversity of her "geographic story" (McKittrick ix): "When I say I'm 'predominantly' black, does it convey any of the callaloo that is the Caribbean, that gives me a clan tartan, one Jewish great grandmother, and one Maroon, as well as Aboriginal, West African, and South Asian ancestry?" (qtd. in Rutledge 599–600). By imagining the Caribbean as a "callaloo" that entangles her Blackness with multiple other identities, Hopkinson undermines the Canadian flattening of difference that reads the Caribbean as only Black. At the same time, Hopkinson claims Canada as part of her geographic story (qtd. in Rutledge 591), rejecting the displace-ment imposed on her by the narratives of Canadian empire. Her self-creation thus pushes up against the creation of empires, a frictional intertextuality that tries to write a new fiction from the various parts in motion.

Hopkinson's navigation of Caribbean Canadian subjectivity illustrates the otherwise possibilities of self-creation. For Brand, self-creation involves imagery of searching, of "scouring maps of all kinds, the way that some fictions do, dis-cursively, elliptically, trying to locate their own transferred selves" (19). There is a sense here of what Nadia Ellis describes as the "unconsummated" desire of "diasporic consciousness" (2), "a persistent sense of the insufficiency of existing modes of belonging" that is "matched by an awareness that new forms remain inspiringly elusive" (3). The search is endless, a trying that is exhaustive but left unsatisfied. Yet this elusiveness of a definitive self–this unmappability–is what generates the radical possibilities of liberation. As Charlene A. Carruthers argues in relation to Black activism, there is an important "distinction between freedom and liberation": "We can gain or hold various freedoms–for example, the freedom to vote, the freedom to marry, the freedom to choose abortion. But liberation is a collective effort [that] must entail resistance to the dominant oppressive systems that permeate our societies" (25). In other words, liberation is not just about demanding "individual freedom[s]," but rather about insisting on a "collective access to…full humanity" (25). If applied to Brand's thinking on self-creation, this idea of liberation can emerge through the continuous search for new ways of being that resist the "compulsory sameness" inscribed through colonial maps and misnamings (Ellis 4). The genre of speculative fiction is par-ticularly generative here, as it allows for the imagining of possibilities that are uncontained by the boundaries of known reality. In this sense, Hopkinson's use of the speculative form emphasizes the potential of self-creation to transform existing linguistic and spatial structures by thinking with the realms of fiction, metaphor, and the fantastical. The work of liberation is in this transformation,

in the ways in which Caribbean Canadian subjectivities can be thought of as speculative texts entangled with other texts in a creative process rather than as singular narratives decided only by dominant white supremacist systems.

I combine these ideas of self-creation and subjectivity as fiction with the imagery of shoals and detours to emphasize "the imbrication of material and metaphorical space" (Smith and Katz 79), or more specifically the interconnectedness of physical geographies and metaphorical understandings within the diasporic self of Caribbean Canadian identity. Shoals in particular function here as a spatial representation of the accumulation[2] and entanglement of the multiple fictions within a Caribbean Canadian subjectivity. To that end, I am adapting Tiffany Lethabo King's imagery of shoals through Hopkinson's imagery of diasporic being as an experience of "no solid ground beneath us," of "shift[ing] constantly to stay in one place" (Rutledge 599). As King explains, "[t]he word 'shoal' has a number of meanings," but the primary focus of her thinking is on the shoal "[a]s a location and geological formation [that] is often described as a sandbar or a coral reef. It is an accumulation of granular materials (sand, rock, and other) that through sedimentation create a bar or barrier that is difficult to pass" (2), a space where "movement as usual cannot proceed" (3). She adds that "[b]ecause these sedimentations of sand, rock, or coral were often imperceptible until they sank a vessel, the mysterious and shoal-filled ocean floor posed a problem for navigating the sea," noting that shoals "can erode over time, drift, and eventually accumulate in another location," embodying an "unpredictability [that] exceeds full knowability/mappability" (3). For King, shoals provide "a space of liminality, indeterminacy, and location of suture" between the fields of Black diasporic studies and Indigenous studies, a space that is "simultaneously land and sea" and as such offers a way to "fracture" what she understands as the "overdetermin[ation]" of water in Black diaspora studies and of land in Indigenous studies (4).[3] There is something to be said here about the theoretical potential of

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2. My use of the term "accumulation" in this paper follows King's imagery of shoals and is thus meant to connote a gathering together of multiple parts. I do not intend to allude to Saidiya Hartman's conception of accumulation and fungibility as ontological definitions imposed on Blackness through slavery and its afterlives (Hartman, *Scenes*).
3. For the extensive presence of water and ocean metaphors in Black diaspora studies, King cites Paul Gilroy's "Black Atlantic," Kamau Brathwaite's "tidalectics," and Omise'eke Natasha Tinsley's "Black Atlantic, Queer Atlantic," and the *liquid blackness* research project, among others (4, 216n30); Michelle M. Wright's discussion of the centrality of the "Middle Passage epistemology" in Black studies also points to the ways in which the Atlantic Ocean has been pivotal to theorizations of Black life (7). For the perceived overrepresentation of land in Indigenous studies, King notes that dispossession in relation

shoals for the specific context of the entanglements between Black diasporic and Caribbean Canadian subjectivities when placed in relation to Indigenous peoples and the lands colonially called Canada—especially considering King's assertion that "the shoal gains its force from the traditions of Caribbean poetics and studies" (4)—but for the purposes of this paper my initial thinking is focused on the shoal as an interruptive yet unstable, unmappable space, as unsolid ground that constantly shifts. My application of shoals then conceptualizes them as an accumulation of narratives and fictions within Caribbean Canadian subjectivity that forms a point of interruption. The shape and location of this interruptive accumulation is subject to the endless searching of self-creation, meaning it can impede dominant white supremacist colonial narratives—or "movement as usual"—while also being elusive and unmappable. In other words, shoals operate here as a material/metaphorical expression of the intertextual fictions of Caribbean Canadian subjectivity.

If shoals are the point of interruption created by the accumulation of multiple texts, then detours are the new ways of thinking and being that are made to emerge as a result of the interruption. Rinaldo Walcott conceives of detours as "the (un)acknowledged routes and roots of black expressive cultures," as the "improvisatory and…in-between space[s] which black diasporic cultures occupy" (31). Although Walcott's description mentions roots as well as routes, his prioritization of movement through the imagery of the detour destabilizes the solidness implied by being rooted, moving roots away from "stillness" and towards "forms of stasis that are neither stagnant nor motionless" (Campt 158). In this way, detours, like self-creation, are not "an outright rejection" of "the nation and its narratives (whether Canadian or Caribbean)," but rather "an alternate passage" (Bucknor and Coleman vi–vii), a search in motion for new modes of subjectivity. Hopkinson's diverse roots and routes are part of the Black diasporic cultures that Walcott's ideas are centered in, yet they also fracture the flattening of the Caribbean into Blackness that occurs through Canadian narratives of nationality and belonging, asserting a Caribbean Canadian subjectivity that is entangled with and yet exceeds the Black diaspora. My theoretical framework reads this intertextual multiplicity as a shoal, as an accumulation of fictions that creates a material/metaphorical interruptive space and thus forces a change in course. In other words, detours function here as the transformative possibilities that emerge through encounters with shoals, through explorations of the unsolid ground of the Caribbean Canadian label.

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to land is significant to Indigenous scholarship and activism against white supremacist colonial powers (4).

The stories I have chosen to analyze here are not only intertwined through their Caribbean Canadian intertextualities, but they are also apt examples of the ways in which the formations of shoals and the liberatory potentials of detours operate through speculative fiction in a theorization of Caribbean Canadian subjectivities. All three are collected in Hopkinson's *Skin Folk* alongside other similarly intertextual re/imaginings of fairy tales and folklore. "The Glass Bottle Trick" follows the relationship of a woman named Beatrice and her husband Samuel Powell. Beatrice's anxiety over telling Samuel that she is pregnant threads through her memories of their courtship and marriage, memories that reveal Samuel to be controlling and often on the edge of becoming physically abusive. His murderous nature is then exposed towards the end of the story when Beatrice discovers the mutilated bodies of his previous two wives in a forbidden room in their house, their enraged spirits standing over their dead physical forms. Realizing Samuel killed the women because they were pregnant, Beatrice frees the spirits from the room, hoping that she and her unborn child will be spared from their vengeance. This theme of gendered violence is also central to "Precious," in which the female protagonist Isobel is both verbally and physically abused by her husband Jude. Like Beatrice, Isobel makes the decision to resist her husband's cruelty, but her ending is much less open-ended; while Beatrice's fate is left unwritten, Isobel knocks Jude out and calls the police, concluding her story—and the collection as a whole—with a joyful moment of freedom.[4] While "Greedy Choke Puppy" does not contain an abusive marriage, it does consider ideas of freedom and liberation that accentuate the collection's investment in thinking beyond surfaces: "*always, whatever the burden their skins bear…once they* get *under their own skins—they can fly*" (Hopkinson, "Riding" 10; emphasis in the original). In all three stories, the female protagonists bear the burden of being women in misogynistic realities, finding liberatory possibilities in going under this skin and embracing otherwise paths, embracing self-creation. The shoals and detours of the stories allow me to extend this concept to the Caribbean Canadian label, suggesting that the burden held by the misnamings of the term's surface, its skin, is not the totality of Caribbean Canadian subjectivities—that underneath lies the potential for flight.

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4. I use "freedom" rather than "liberation" for the specific context of her calling the police; although legal and carceral institutions seem to provide justice for Isobel and punishment to Jude for his misogynistic acts of violence, they are also white supremacist patriarchal systems that disproportionately target and police people of colour and that overwhelmingly dismiss women in cases of rape and sexual assault.

Hopkinson's "The Glass Bottle Trick" and "Precious" are both in conversation with fairy tales: the former with "Bluebeard" tales, and the latter with "The Kind and the Unkind Girls" tales. Although these story types have variants from all over the world (Yearsley; Roberts), Eurocentric focuses within folklore studies have often positioned the versions by Charles Perrault and the Grimm Brothers at the forefront.[5] A Brothers Grimm "Bluebeard" narrative titled "Fitcher's Bird" specifically involves a sorcerer kidnapping three sisters in a basket one after the other and testing each one by giving them keys and an egg to hold on to, forbidding them from entering one of the rooms in the house and warning them against losing the egg. The first two sisters both enter the forbidden room and, upon seeing the many mutilated corpses within it, drop the egg, marking it with a bloodstain that cannot be removed. When the sorcerer returns from his journey, he sees the stained egg and kills them. The third sister, however, does not drop the egg when she enters "the bloody chamber"; instead, she "gather[s]" the separated body parts of her two sisters and arranges them "in their proper places," resulting in them magically coming back to life (149). The third sister then tricks the sorcerer so that the three women can escape, locking the sorcerer in his house and burning it with him inside. "The Kind and the Unkind Girls," on the other hand, is much more amorphous, generally following the basic trope in which a kind girl is rewarded and her unkind sister is punished; in Perrault's version, titled "The Fairies," the kind girl is gifted with "flower[s]" and "precious stone[s]" falling from her mouth when she speaks (127), while her sister is penalized with "toad[s]" and "viper[s]" falling from her mouth when she speaks (128).[6] While I summarize only one version of each tale type here for the sake of practicality—and because these specific versions have relevance to Hopkinson's re/imaginings—it is necessary to "be careful with fairy tales," as "[t]here are always many stories behind the one story" (Hairston 156), and many variants that exist alongside and after the narratives that Perrault and the Grimm Brothers penned. This multiplicity of stories entangled within one story exemplifies the intertextuality of the Caribbean Canadian fiction.

The intertextual accumulations of "The Glass Bottle Trick" create a shoal around the imagery of eggs and wombs. In one of Beatrice's memories of her life together with Samuel, she describes the "two bottles…jammed onto

5. As Casie Hermansson notes, "the prevailing classification systems (Aarne's types classification, Thomson's motif index, and Propp's morphology)" for folklore and fairy tales are limited by their Eurocentrism (xv).
6. Interestingly, Warren E. Roberts points out that some versions of "The Kind and the Unkind Girls," which he categorizes together as "The Gold from the Forbidden Room Group," have some resemblances to "Bluebeard" stories (93–4).

branches of the guava tree" in their front yard, which Samuel—knowing that the bottles contain the trapped spirits of the women he murdered—explains away as a superstition: "You never heard the old people say that if someone dies, you must put a bottle in a tree to hold their spirit, otherwise it will come back as a duppy and haunt you? A blue bottle. To keep the duppy cool, so it won't come at you in hot anger for being dead" (Hopkinson, "Glass" 95). Beatrice finds this superstitiousness somewhat out of character for her otherwise "controlled and logical" husband (95), but is otherwise unconcerned, more focused on trying to reassure herself about telling Samuel that she is pregnant. In the present time of the story, she accidentally breaks the bottles, after which their cold air-conditioned house becomes uncharacteristically warm. In her search for the air-conditioning unit Beatrice opens a forbidden door and discovers the gutted bodies of Samuel's previous wives, their spirits standing above the bodies and holding bellies "slightly swollen with the pregnancies for which Samuel had killed them" (109). She realizes that by breaking the bottles she has freed the "duppy wives" (109), their hot anger now uncontained and filling the house, "thick and close as a womb" (107). This imagery of broken bottles and the thick heat of wombs then accumulates with the egg imagery of multiple "Bluebeard" tales. At the moment that Beatrice comes across the murdered wives, she is holding a raw egg which she drops in shock, and the "fast congealing yolk" reveals "a pin-feathered embryo" (108). Unlike the egg dropped by the sisters in "Fitcher's Bird," this one breaks open, another womb ruptured by Samuel's murderous violence. At the same time, however, the shattered bottles free life rather than destroy it, alluding to the cracking of hatching eggs: "*Eggs are seeds, perfectly white on the outside. Who knows what complexions their insides might reveal when they crack open to germinate and bear fruit?*" (92; emphasis in the original). The story's question calls in Canadian author Margaret Atwood's "Bluebeard's Egg," in which the protagonist asserts that "[t]his is something the story ["Fitcher's Bird"] left out…: the egg is alive, and one day it will hatch. But what will come out of it?" (178). These questions are never definitively answered, forming and dispersing in the intertextual gathering together of Caribbean, European, and Canadian fictions.

The interruption created by this accumulation centers on the issue of colourism. Samuel's hatred of his "molasses-dark skin"—a hatred that extends to all his possible offspring and the women who bear them—leads him to reference "Beauty and the Beast" tales when he compares himself to Beatrice and her lighter skin tone: "Beauty. Pale Beauty, to my Beast" (103). Beatrice's joking reply of "Black Beauty," another intertextual reference, upsets him, and he insists that he is "not a handsome man… Black and ugly as my mother made me" (104). Samuel's internalization of colourist evaluations of his dark skin rewrites the "traditional Bluebeard abhorrence of pregnancy and reproduction" in ways

that draw attention to the misogynistic and anti-Black narratives of empire (Bacchilega 189), narratives that accumulate with the geographic multiplicity of Caribbean Canadian being. Through the gathering of European, Caribbean, and Canadian texts alongside "texts" of gendered and racialized violence, "The Glass Bottle Trick" acknowledges the burdens of the Caribbean Canadian "skin" while also interrupting the movement as usual that would see Samuel kill Beatrice and her unborn child. Beatrice's discovery of and interaction with the duppy wives, and the connected gathering of eggs and wombs, then joins the shoal as the self-creation that does not deny the diverse influences within the Caribbean Canadian fiction; the violence of mutilated wombs and the dropped egg are not ignored, but rather accumulate with the freedom and life of hatched eggs and the broken bottles, insisting on the question of what else can germinate, what else will emerge.

The detours of "The Glass Bottle Trick" move through the unconsummated desire created by the unanswered question and the boundless searching of self-creation. The intertextual moments of the story are punctuated by Beatrice's memory of her father "chanting words from an old-time story": *Yung-Kyung-Pyung, what a pretty basket! / Margaret Powell Alone, what a pretty basket! / Eggie-law, what a pretty basket!*" (98; emphasis in the original). These words are from a Jamaican Anansi story,[7] in which Anansi uses a basket to uncover the secret of three princesses' names so that he may marry one of them ("Yung-Kyum-Pyung" 11). Anansi, as Natalie Robinson explains, is a "spider-man"[8] who is featured in "countless tales from throughout the African diaspora" (259)—an unmappable figure. The final line of the chant returns as the final line of the story, a (non)answer to the narrative's last question:

> When they had fed, would they come and save her, or would they take revenge on her, their usurper, as well as on Samuel?
> *Eggie-Law, what a pretty basket.* (110; emphasis in the original)

The materiality of Beatrice's fate is left uncertain, and yet this uncertainty highlights a self-creation that holds a liberatory potential for the conceptualization

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7. I follow Hopkinson's spelling from the epigraph to another short story in the *Skin Folk* collection, "Tan-Tan and the Dry Bone" (160). Other spellings include Anancy (e.g. Robinson 259) and Annancy (e.g. "Yung-Kyum-Pyung").
8. Although Hopkinson also refers to Anansi as a "spider man" ("Tan-Tan" 160), in another of her stories the protagonist encounters a feminine version of Anansi, and he illustrates the figure as a "[w]atcher at the boundaries, at the crossroads. Sometimes man, sometimes woman. Always trickster" ("Something" 52).

of Caribbean Canadian subjectivities. This final line not only recalls the shoal of egg imagery through the name "Eggie-Law," but also creates an otherwise path around the shoal's interruption through Caribbean folklore. The unmappability of Anansi moves with the unknowability of Beatrice's ending, creating an endless search that cannot prescribe a single answer. Beatrice and her unborn child thus exceed the boundaries of narrative in multiple senses, highlighting the in-between spaces of a detour that, in simultaneously holding the possibilities of life and the violences of death, imagines liberation from the "seemingly predetermined stabilities" that would reduce Caribbean Canadian being to the misnamings and inscriptions of colonial legacies (McKittrick xi).

Like "The Glass Bottle Trick," Hopkinson's "Precious" is intertwined with fairy tales and folklore. The story, as Cristina Bacchilega notes, functions as a continuation of "The Kind and the Unkind Girls" (189), imagining life from the perspective of the kind girl after receiving the gift of riches falling from her mouth. For the majority of the narrative, the only names she has are the pet names (Precious, Princess, Jewel) given to her by her (ex) husband Jude. She remembers him being "playful," "kind," and loving early in their relationship before his greed leads him to abuse her, extracting wealth from her sounds of pain to compensate for his poor financial decisions (Hopkinson, "Precious" 264–5). She manages to escape and hide from Jude for a time, but he tracks her down and threatens her. She lets her frustration and rage burst forth in a torrent of words, burying Jude in a pile of treasure finished with "a ruby as big as a human heart" formed from the declaration that ends her speech: "stop calling me Precious; my name is Isobel!" (269). With this assertion of her name, Isobel ends the story—and the *Skin Folk* collection as a whole—laughing with joy, as her mouth creates "[j]ust sounds, only sounds" (270). The significance of naming here gestures towards the entanglements of colonial misnamings and self-creation; Isobel rejects Jude's misnaming of her and affirms her true name, yet the story's title echoes the gendered linguistic violence of the imposed name "Precious." The reader must get under this "skin" to see the otherwise paths of flight the story holds.

The formation of this story's shoal begins with its epigraph, in which Hopkinson gathers pieces of the plurality of tales that weave through "Precious": "*The ending of the folktale goes that…the prince decides to marry the girl because she's so sweet and beautiful. Of course, the fact that she had just become a walking treasury can't have hurt her prospects either. I keep mixing that tale up with the one about the goose that laid the golden eggs and that ended up as dinner. That wasn't a happy ending either*" (262; emphasis in the original). The abusive marriage that plays out in "Precious" threads through Hopkinson's keen observation that the prince was most certainly drawn to the kind girl's ability to endlessly produce wealth as much as, if not more than, her personality and appearance; indeed, in Perrault's version, the prince asks to hear her story

as a result of "seeing five or six pearls and as many diamonds coming from her mouth" (129). The many tales within "The Kind and the Unkind Girls" story type then accumulate with another narrative form involving birds, gold, and greed, known as "Of the Goose and Its Master" in John E. Keller and L. Clark Keating's translation of *Aesop's Fables*. This story, attributed to Avianus, concerns a goose who lays golden eggs and a man who kills the goose in hopes of extracting the wealth from inside her body; her death provides no treasure, however, and the man loses his guaranteed daily riches because of his greed.[9] This tale type is also found in India, appearing in *The Mahābhārata* as a story of "wild birds" who "spit gold" and a man who "strangle[s] them out of greed" (132). This variant not only further intertwines the two story types in its depiction of gold coming from the birds' mouths—echoing the valuable stones that pour from Isobel's mouth—but it also adds to the multiplicity of geographies gathered in Hopkinson's story, an intertextual reminder of the diversity of Caribbean Canadian subjectivities.

The plurality of stories brought together by the epigraph accumulate together with the in-between spaces of Isobel's life. Before describing her relationship with Jude, Isobel outlines the limitations she has had to place on herself: "I stopped singing in the shower. I kept having to call the plumber to remove flakes of gold and rotted lilies from the clogged drain. … I used to have the habit of talking to myself when I was alone, until the day I slipped on an opal that had tumbled from my lips, and fractured my elbow in the fall" (262). Even when she is away from Jude's violence, the private joys of her voice are silenced, preventing her from singing and thinking out loud. At the same time, the wealth that her voice produces allows her to have financial freedom, as she has "no need to work," and thus "[her] time is [her] own" (266). This freedom, however, is not her liberation. To reiterate Charlene A. Carruthers's assertion of the distinction between freedom and liberation, Isobel's financial freedom is an "individual freedom" rather than part of a "collective access to…full humanity" (25); in other words, her ability to feel financially secure does not liberate her from the reality of extraction that she is forced to navigate, a reality in which, to adapt Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg author Leanne Betasamosake Simpson's words, "[her] body is a resource" (75). This narrative reduces Isobel's self to the "jeweled phrases" and "silver sentences" she can produce, alluding to the histories of forced labour and extraction in the creation of empires in both the Caribbean and Canada (Hopkinson, "Precious" 264). These in-between spaces of silence and speech are spaces of survival, of preventing injury and navigating racial capitalist and abusive relationships that impose "the extraction-assimilation system" on to her

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9. Some versions of the fable feature a hen rather than a goose (e.g. Aesop 119).

life and being (Simpson 75). Together with the multiplicity of tales that weave through Hopkinson's narrative, Isobel's strategies of survival—the texts of her life—question the greed that underlines her need for these strategies, gathering into a shoal that interrupts movement as usual through her refusal to accept "her gift, her curse" (Hopkinson, "Precious" 266).

The ending of "Precious" creates a detour of liberation through which Isobel can imagine new paths. Isobel recalls her father telling her that "a soft answer would turn away wrath," a focus on "agreeableness" that places her in the position of her abusive stepmother's obedient servant (263). Her labour, like her "gift" for producing gems, is exploited by those around her, and her father's advice guides her against resisting, instead teaching her to be quiet and pleasant, "smil[ing] until [her] teeth ached" (263). Isobel thus represses her feelings throughout the story, but by the time Jude finds her towards the end of the narrative, she can no longer hold back the "years of resentment," "eject[ing]" stones "with the force of thrown rocks" as she finally voices her anger at her father, her stepmother, and Jude, culminating in a series of powerful assertions punctuated by her name: "I am not your treasure trove, and I will not run anymore, and I shall be nice if and when it pleases me, and stop calling me Precious; my name is Isobel!" (269). With these words, Isobel rejects the exploitation she has been subjected to and the passive niceness she has been told to maintain, claiming the full complexity of herself in the declaration of her name. This moment creates a detour that forms an alternate path around the shoal of fictions of greed and survival, and that moves through the endless paths of self-creation, as Isobel insists her self into being and yet is undefined by national or racialized narratives. Like the multiplicity of her author's Caribbean Canadian experience, Isobel is simultaneously unmappable and rooted—not motionless but rather in an "effortful *equilibrium*" that affirms her self-creation while also refusing containment (Campt 158-9; emphasis in the original).

Unlike "The Glass Bottle Trick" and Precious," the intertextual accumulations of "Greedy Choke Puppy" are not formed around traditional fairy tales variants, but instead around specifically Caribbean folktales. The story follows Jacky, a humanities PhD student at the University of the West Indies who worries over growing older and not yet finding a husband with whom to have children, and her Granny, who lives with her. Jacky's dissertation on Caribbean folklore draws on her family's oral storytelling traditions, other Caribbean ways of knowing, and Western academic readings, generating tensions that are revealed in her conversations with Granny:

> "How you mean, 'Yes Granny'? You even know what a Lagahoo is?"
> "Don't you been frightening me with jumby story from since I small? I putting a section on it in my thesis paper. Is a donkey with gold teeth,

wearing a waistcoat with a pocket watch and two pair of tennis shoes on
the hooves."
"Washekong, you mean. I never teach you to say 'tennis shoes.'" (Hopkinson, "Greedy" 180)

While both Jacky and Granny speak in a creole cadence, Jacky's use of "tennis
shoes" over the creole word "washekong" destabilizes the ground of the conversation, creating a shoal of Caribbean and Western fictions. That the figure being
discussed is the Lagahoo, a shapeshifting creature from Caribbean folklore, further emphasizes the multiplicity of identity here. The story does not hierarchize
the two characters in this moment; its inclusion of both phrases allows readers
to draw upon the one they recognize to access a meaning for the one that is
unfamiliar. While the intertextuality of this shoal is less pronounced than in "The
Glass Bottle Trick" or Precious," it emerges in the interruption of a Western/Caribbean binary, in the shifting motions of a figure who inhabits the diverse creole
spaces of washekong and tennis shoes and who can embody multiple forms.

This shoal further accumulates with the Caribbean folklore of the soucouyant. A
soucouyant, as the story itself explains, is a "Caribbean equivalent of the vampire
myth," a woman who "removes her skin at night, hides it, and then changes into a
ball of fire" that can "fl[y] through the air" (187). During these nighttime flights, the
soucouyant seeks out babies and "sucks the life from [their] bod[ies]" (187), taking
youth for herself from "*somebody who still have plenty*" (184; emphasis in the original). Jacky is the main soucouyant of the narrative, but by the end of the story her
Granny reveals that "[t]he soucouyant blood" runs through "all the women in [their]
family," including herself and Jacky's mother (194). Jacky's fear of aging combines
with her soucouyant being to drive her to consume the life of her friend Carmen's
newborn baby, an act that leads Granny to decide to kill her at the end of the
story for the safety of their community. For Giselle Liza Anatol, this ending serves
to "demonize women's agency," inscribing a binary that "reveal[s]" Granny as "the
only 'good' woman" (140–1). Yet I would suggest that the accumulations of the
soucouyant and its vampiric allusions gather alongside the fictions of language
and the Lagahoo to interrupt the movement as usual that would position Jacky
and Granny in opposition. As Kinitra D. Brooks points out, Jacky's downfall is not
a triumphant vanquishing of good over evil (82), instead leaving Granny heartbroken and hoping that her next sighting of the Lagahoo will signal her own death
(Hopkinson, "Greedy" 196). In this moment, Jacky's death becomes the site of
questioning, of searching for an otherwise path that might bring liberation.

The detour that emerges from this interruption echoes the tensions between
creations of empire and self-creation through what Denolyn Carroll describes
as the tension between "being bound and being free," between "the ultimate
freedom that comes from shedding their skin and flying off into the night, and

their driving need for the life-breath of babies to sustain their own existence" (56). Jacky manifests this in-betweenness in her relationship with her skin. On the one hand, she feels "*confin[ed]*" by it, "*feel[ing] it getting old*" and "*binding [her] up inside it*" (Hopkinson, "Greedy" 191; emphasis in the original), and when Granny confronts her and threatens to harm her skin, Jacky, in her fireball form, "follow[s] close, drawn by the precious skin in the old woman's hands" (194). She is bound not only by her skin, but also by her need to inhabit that skin as an object of desire full of youth, beauty, and reproductive capacity. On the other hand, her fire form allows her a reprieve from the restrictive narratives that impact her identity: "*Sometimes I does just feel to take it off and never put it back on again, oui? … Oh, God, I does be so free like this!*" (191; emphasis in the original). Granny is also bound by her skin in some ways, as her refusal to feed on babies' blood prevents her from escaping the natural process of aging. Yet Granny, like Jacky, also experiences the freedom of flying; when she tells Jacky to "be careful when you go out so late at night," Jacky replies, "You self too, Granny. Always off to prayer meeting, sometimes 'fore day morning before you come home" (182). This subtle hint of Granny's soucouyant flights allows a detour to emerge, one that does not eschew the ways in which soucouyant being is shaped by violence, but rather searches for the liberatory potentials of being unbound by skin. There is no solid ground here, only the desire for otherwise paths, for new possibilities that, in the broader context of Hopkinson's speculative fiction, can untether Caribbean Canadian subjectivities from the oppressive narratives that read only skin and overlook the constantly shifting fire within.

The intertextualities of Hopkinson's short stories generate conversations about Caribbean Canadian subjectivities that I explore through the material/metaphorical framework of shoals and detours to highlight the otherwise potentials of thinking with fiction. The accumulations of fairy tales, folklore, and shifting imagery interrupt the singular narratives of oppressive systems, and the resulting detours search for new ways of being that can liberate the Caribbean Canadian label from the colonial violences inscribed on its surface. My thoughts here are not comprehensive; there is much more to be considered in relation to the entanglements of Black diasporic and Caribbean Canadian identities, the interconnectedness of imperial racial capitalist and gendered violence, and the political potentials of theorizing subjectivity through speculative fictions and spatial imagery. For now, however, I will end with the image of the "red ruby" that Isobel's name generates, a ruby "as big as a human heart" and "gleam[ing] as though a coal lit its core" (Hopkinson, "Precious" 269). Here, in the last story in *Skin Folk*, life blood and heat combine in the physical form of Isobel's liberating words, calling in Beatrice's unknowable future and soucouyant flights of fire to the possibilities of intertextual self-creation, of getting under the skin and searching for the elusive geographic story that captures the multiplicity of being.

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