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The Rhyming Irons of Abdur-Rahman Slade Hopkinson

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Cover Page Acknowledgments

For valuable research assistance, I am indebted to Kim Hamlett.

Scholars, more brilliant than I could be,
advised that if I valued poetry,
I should eschew all sociology.
Abdur-Rahman Slade Hopkinson, "The Madwoman of Papine"

Shortly after the death of Abdur-Rahman Slade Hopkinson, Peepal Tree Press published his *Snowscape with Signature* (1993), a representative selection of Hopkinson's poems drawn from four decades of work. Reviewers of the posthumous collection were quick to praise the Guyanese-born poet's blend of ingenuity and formalistic mastery. In one review, Mario Relich discerns a "tightly disciplined" form combined with an imagination that "ranges at will." According to Relich, this combination of formal expertise and creative innovation lends the poems their "capacity to surprise," which he sees as their ultimate source of value for readers. In another review, Laurence Breiner also notes the variety of the poems while stressing Hopkinson's reliance on traditional forms like the sonnet ("Four Poets"). Despite consensus on the sophistication of the poems and their frequent inclusion in anthologies of West Indian literature, Hopkinson's writing has received little scholarly attention (a 2013 newspaper article in *Guyana Times International* even dubs Hopkinson "the forgotten poet").¹ Such a gap is unfortunate considering not only the merit and relative exposure of Hopkinson's work but also the unique circumstances of the writer's life. In addition to having played what he calls in one poem "a game and career of hopscotch round the islands" (*Snowscape* 27), Hopkinson was a convert to Islam, a Canadian citizen, a Shakespearean actor, a university classmate of Derek Walcott's, a cousin of the poet Marcus Carter, and the father of the successful contemporary novelist, Nalo Hopkinson.² Thus Abdur-Rahman Slade Hopkinson's poems may prove to be valuable objects of study both on their own aesthetic merits and through the opportunities they provide to trace new connections across religious, generic, and generational borders of West Indian literature.³

In seeking to advance the critical discussion of Hopkinson's verse, this article theorizes the poet's characteristic "surprises" as consequences of his attempt to determine the appropriate space for socio-political issues in poems that invoke

¹ Hopkinson's work has appeared in both *The Penguin Book of Caribbean Verse in English* (1986) and *The Oxford Book of Caribbean Verse* (2005). Yet, he is mostly referred to as an actor and playwright. For a rare analysis of Hopkinson as a short story writer, see Idongesit Etim.

² The poem is entitled "'Retour Au Pays Natal', 1963." The collection *Snowscape with Signature* is hereafter cited parenthetically as SWS.

³ Describing Hopkinson as a poet of "enduring quality," Edward Baugh hints at the sort of connections one might make between Hopkinson's poetry and Walcott's (263). Gordon Collier emphasizes Hopkinson's "lasting influence" on Nalo Hopkinson's "ideas of craft and the Caribbean" and in her science fiction ("Spaceship Creole" 443). J. Edward Chamberlin also names Hopkinson as one of many examples of poets warranting further attention (252).

the (allegedly) timeless, apolitical forms and themes of the Western canon. I want to suggest that the central intellectual issue in much of Hopkinson's work, and the engine of his inventiveness at all stages of his career, is the clever positioning of poetic images and forms that negotiate the specific postcolonial culture of the Caribbean while engaging broader, often academic questions about the nature of art itself as occasioned by Hopkinson's knowledge of canonical English literature, the art of classical antiquity, and (later) the teachings of Islam. Indeed, such juxtapositions rarely lead to a sense of resolution. In fact, as I will show, issues of either Caribbean history or abstract aesthetics often appear suddenly in poems to defer questions about each other. At other times, Hopkinson uses Caribbean subjects to unveil the true political content behind the aesthetically abstract or so-called timeless questions of beauty and truth in canonical European literature (either to refute the possibility of a timeless, apolitical artistry or to challenge the European canon's sole ownership of that universality). In either case, the frequent eliding of these issues reveals the degree to which Hopkinson's poems are organized around a central tension in Anglophone Caribbean writing about the fraught relationship between the postcolonial artist and the cultural history attached to the English language. Yet Hopkinson's distinctive contribution to this familiar West Indian predicament lies in his ability to dramatize the ambivalent encounter of contemporary politics and traditional aesthetics on multiple levels in poems that interweave topical anecdotes, historical allusions, and formal innovativeness.

This tension between aesthetics and politics that I see as an organizing principle in Hopkinson's poems is clearly legible in his most famous work, "The Madwoman of Papine." The poem, as Nalo Hopkinson has described it, is a "solemn, classically-structured piece about a bag lady who used to live in Kingston, Jamaica" and an ironic comment "about how an old, mad homeless woman will not be considered appropriate subject matter for the lofty art of poetry." The speaker, a student at the University College of the West Indies, notes that "Scholars, more brilliant than I could hope to be, / advised that if I valued poetry, / I should eschew all sociology" (SWS 20). Yet the speaker is nevertheless drawn to the eponymous madwoman who haunts the outskirts of the university and who comes to represent to him "the latitudes of the ex-colonised, of degradation unmollified." Professors advise him that the woman is "Pedestrian" and hence "[t]oo limited / for lyric literature." Mimicking the professors, the speaker facetiously asks, "Who could make anything of a pauper lunatic / modelling one mildewed dress from year to year?" (SWS 19-20).

It seems likely that the poet would have experienced such a conflict in his own literary career. Hopkinson studied in the early 1950s at the University College of the West Indies, an institution that was undoubtedly influenced by the prevailing winds of Anglo-American New Criticism, a formalistic methodology that attempted to examine each text as an autonomous object with little interrogation of

the social or historical conditions of its production. This theoretical opposition to “sociology” in poetry coincided with imperialist ideologies that devalued local culture. As Breiner points out, “West Indian poets were conditioned by their colonial situation to doubt whether either their own skills or their subject-matter rose to the standards of the tradition to which they sought entry” (*West Indian Poetry* 123). Yet, as Derek Walcott has testified, the generation of Caribbean artists to which Hopkinson belonged was also excited at the prospect of drawing on cosmopolitan or sophisticated artistic modes to represent their own local cultures.⁴ Built on the interplay of these ideas, “Madwoman” suggests that while the academic education of West Indian artists would help forward literary achievement, it might also lead to a warped, elitist view of intellectual progress that could destroy the potential of the Caribbean as a source of art.

The homeless mystic who stalks the university in Hopkinson’s poem symbolizes a source of knowledge and culture in danger of complete marginalization should the West Indian students pursue the so-called higher, anti-local, purely formalistic aims of poetry. For instance, the poem initially locates the madwoman spatially along bustling routes of commerce:

Four years ago,
in this knot of a village north of the university,
she was in residence
where a triangle of grass gathered the mountain road,
looped it once, and tossed it to Kingston,
where grampus buses, cycling students,
duppies of dust and ululations in light
vortexed around her. (*SWS* 19)

It might be tempting to read this passage, and the poem itself, as an expression of pity for the madwoman as representative of an embattled, authentic West Indian artistry. Yet as Gordon Collier notes in the context of a broader discussion of Rastafarian elements in Caribbean writings, “Madwoman” can be seen as “oscillating” between notions of “aspiration and despair” (“At the gate” 243). Indeed, encoded in this ironic description of the woman’s collegial “residence” is both the potential for Caribbean themes to organize poetry and their tendency to become trampled in the educational (and commercial) system that produces poets. On the one hand, most clearly, the madwoman is swept away by the motion of students, tourists, and general university traffic.⁵ On the other hand, the madwoman

⁴ For a discussion of Walcott and Hopkinson’s overlapping time at the University of the West Indies, see Paul Breslin (22-25).

⁵ For a discussion of Papine as a busy commercial junction and a source of multiple literary reflections on madness, see David Howard (112-114).

remains an unavoidable object along the route from University to urban center. She even exercises a constant (albeit unacknowledged) influence on the students' progress; it is her small "triangle of grass" that once "gathered," "looped," and "tossed" the university road on its way.

Like many of Hopkins's poems, "Madwoman" leaves in suspension the issue of Caribbean culture's role in the imperial model of highbrow aesthetics. The poem's conclusion confirms the idea that while the "degradations" of the past hold promise as poetic subject matter, the window for such explorations closes quickly. "Madwoman" significantly spans a four-year period, by the end of which the madwoman has moved from the center of the "vortex" of university traffic to a spot "behind the shops / nearer the university" (SWS 20). She bears the traces of her own form of commencement, as she wears her "perennial dress, / now black as any graduate's gown, / but stands in placid anguish now" (SWS 20). As she moves closer to the university, her agency diminishes. In earlier years (as explained in the first stanza) her ideas "detonated into gestures" and she would "jab," "fling," "revise," and "butt blood from the teeth of God" (SWS 19). Yet following her quasi-graduation, the subdued Madwoman merely repeats a Rastafarian prayer that is "whispered" and "verbless" (SWS 21). If the Madwoman's four-year pilgrimage allegorizes the fate of local Caribbean culture in the poetic aspirations of the new generation, the key to interpreting the poem lies in the speaker's admission that he "went away for four years" and "[t]hen returned" (SWS 20). The very fact of the poem's existence suggests a victory for Caribbean materials, as the speaker has ultimately made the woman a subject of poetry. Yet the subdued quality of the now nearly "invisible old woman" who visits a purely "interior altar" also suggests that by going away for four years – presumably following the advice of his professors to ignore "sociology" – the university poet has missed an opportunity to capture the true aesthetic power of representing the local (SWS 20-1).

"Madwoman" provides a clear starting point for following the trail of such questions into subtler poetic territories. If "Madwoman" frankly addresses the role of "sociology" in crafting poetry, Hopkins's sonnet "Intro" raises the question through formal innovation. On this occasion, it is the poem's clever manipulation of the sonnet form that emphasizes this essential tension in Hopkins's poetry, the relationship (or porous boundary) between seemingly apolitical abstractions and the social and political realities of the West Indies. The first quatrain of this Shakespearean sonnet finds the speaker considering a difficult epistemological problem: the incapacity of human perception to "touch reality" (SWS 16). The second quatrain, true to form, elaborates on the problem, pointing out that one's inner thoughts are so consuming that they threaten the speaker's capacity to recognize "dense substance" like a building as anything more than a "film" or a "name" (SWS 16). In other words, the first quatrain suggests that perception cannot verify reality, and the second quatrain goes further by suggesting that words

themselves can cause us to doubt the reality of the physical world. A rather traditionally placed sonnet “turn” comes at the start of the third quatrain as the speaker decides to meet this intellectual problem through the writing of poems. By placing “fluid images” of the speaker’s “loves” into lines of poetry, the speaker seems to solve the problem outlined in the opening quatrains (SWS 16). However, this resolution does not come with the couplet, but in lines 11-12, when the poet recognizes that “each page proves / that the host to real griefs must himself be real” (SWS 16). In this way, the solidification of poetic images onto the “pages” of the poems unites the ethereal inner thoughts of the speaker with a tangible physical substance. But what, then, is left for the couplet to do?

After twelve lines of abstract musing on the principle of perception – an argument that bears no hallmarks of Caribbean geography or history – “Intro” abruptly concludes with a couplet that exposes the economic and cultural legacy of slavery: “And I, ex-slave from sugar’s golden times, / Choose my own irons; these free, linked English rhymes” (SWS 16). The paradox of one getting to “choose” his own enslaving “irons” – and the idea that rhymes can be both “free” and “linked” – unites traditional formalist debates over the value of poetic form (do poetic forms inhibit or expand meaning?) with the predicament of many postcolonial artists, who are compelled to express themselves and their political and cultural singularity in the oppressor’s language. But in what way does this couplet – this ironic point about the legacy of colonialism and its unmooring of the concept of “choice” in linguistic expression – portend to offer resolution to an already resolved argument about the capacity of human perception to “touch reality”?

The debate over the poetic role of what the professors in “Madwoman” call “sociology” plays out in the formalistic conflict of Hopkinson’s sonnet itself. With the sudden appearance of sugar plantations and chattel slavery in the closing lines, “Intro” does more than resist the closure that concluding couplets traditionally provide; in fact, the “rhyming irons” introduce entirely new and unforeseen problems about the legacy of colonialism into this most recognizable of European poetic forms. When the couplet is analyzed in the context of the total poem, it becomes a “rhyming iron” that grounds the poem’s abstractions. Appearing near the beginning of *Snowscape with Signature*, “Intro” epitomizes in its formal conventions the anxiety and surprising shifts that characterize Hopkinson’s work as a whole. The resolution to what we might call the poem’s initial “timeless” or “universal” questions is juxtaposed against (or unsteadied by) a sudden desire to explicate in verse the immediate cultural history of the Caribbean and, often, to reveal the impossibility of separating the two pursuits. This quick upwelling of local and historical content in the sonnet’s final lines acts almost as a formalistic admonition to the scholars in “Madwoman” in that the initial, abstract “resolution” (found in lines 11-12) proves literally premature and incomplete without the couplet’s ringing confrontation with the social and political world.

From the perspective of literary history, Hopkinson's formalist innovations enrich ongoing conversations about the politics of embracing the sonnet and other traditional poetic forms in the twentieth-century Caribbean. In "Intro," for instance, the sudden emergence of history and slavery in the closing couplet invites comparison with Una Marson's 1930 anthologized poems "In Vain" and "Renunciation." Both of these sonnets by Marson begin with twelve lines of elegant but rather generic pastoral images. The speaker in both poems also surveys an unidentifiable landscape, marking moonlit settings with traditional references to the Greek goddess Diana. Yet, just as the legacy of slavery surprisingly enters Hopkinson's sonnet in the couplet, more to complicate than resolve the abstract questions the speaker raises, Marson's couplets suddenly introduce into these otherwise standard pastoral love poems the language of slavery. After twelve lines of waiting for her lover to return, the speaker of "In Vain" dejectedly concludes: "In vain one boon from life's great store I crave, / No more the king comes to his waiting slave" (128). The speaker of "Renunciation," similarly craving an absent lover, concludes that while she might enjoy nature's beauty, something is missing: "But not for me what I most crave — / To call thee mine, — to be thy slave" (128).

The appearance of the vocabulary of slavery in Marson's concluding couplets is politically suggestive, yet the images still technically fit within the poem's ostensibly apolitical theme of romantic love. The couplets also function more or less traditionally by offering resolution. Thus, Hopkinson's more jarring introduction of slavery into his couplet, which breaks from the poem's formal and thematic structure, might be understood as a re-recording and amplification of the sociopolitical allusions in Marson's poems. In this sense, Hopkinson's "Intro" can be productively studied in relation to Eric Roach's 1948 poem "A Lover Speaks." In this three-stanza poem, the first two stanzas consist of eight evenly metrical lines that contain generic landscapes and classical references to pagan gods. Yet Roach's third stanza – which is metrically uneven and two lines longer than the other stanzas – abandons the structure, just as the speaker specifically identifies the race of his lover ("And you are your black hair, / Black eyes, deep lips and dark complexion") and her temporal and geographical locale ("...you are native to this time and island"). The poem concludes with three lines that, like Marson's and Hopkinson's couplets, introduce the vocabulary of slavery: "When you are you/ Then shall my fancy not be free / But slave and bound to what I love to see" (44). While Roach breaks with a more measured stanza form at the moment he adopts the specific and suggestive language of Caribbean history and politics, the conclusion still fits into the poem's discussion of romantic love. Thus again, by comparison, Hopkinson's use of slavery and diaspora imagery in "Intro," imagery unrelated to the poem's earlier discussion of "perception," may offer a more apparent and forceful disruption of the sonnet form than those employed by some fellow Caribbean writers of the middle and late twentieth century.

While the Shakespearean sonnet is impressed into this conflict between aesthetic abstraction and social critique, the actor in Hopkinson leads him to enlist Shakespearean monologues, too. The blank verse poem, “Death is not the Undiscovered Country” operates as a revision of Hamlet’s point that death remains “undiscovered.” Hopkinson’s speaker corrects Shakespeare’s Danish Prince by suggesting that “Death is here” in “these cities” full of misery and poverty (*SWS* 22). According to the speaker, the “true dead” exist in the real cities of the present and in the hopeless, degraded routines of its inhabitants, the “forgotten” (*SWS* 22). The move, of course, amounts to more than just a contradiction of Hamlet. With such a gesture, Hopkinson subtly recaptures and inverts the imperialist subtext of Shakespeare’s lines that privilege eternal questions of human mortality over the temporal political world of the Elizabethan era. Shakespeare’s Hamlet seems to say that death, not the New World that was only recently being colonized by the English at the time the play was written, is the “true” undiscovered country. Hopkinson’s poem thus overturns the Shakespearean motif by privileging the socio-political subject over the abstract philosophical subject. Moreover, he does so by direct reference to the area of the world that Shakespeare has in mind with his original comparison. In order to reinforce the rhetorical point, the poem both invokes and then breaks from the standard metrics of Shakespearean monologues. After being exclusively written in blank verse, “Death” sharply veers into two concluding quatrains of alternating, sing-song rhyme in iambic trimeter:

Remember tomorrow
 Death too keeps time,
 The clockwork heartbeats
 Recur like rhyme.
 These are the true dead,
 The truly forgotten,
 Their bodies a nausea, –
 With routine sweat rotten. (*SWS* 22)

The surprising and highly stylized conclusion, attached to the preceding prosaic blank verse, certainly disrupts the “routine” of the poem, but its verbatim repetition of the gruesome phrases used in the blank verse section – this time with rhyme, musicality, and playful indents – suggests a façade of happiness, a link between the sweet repetitiveness of rhyme and the rottenness of impoverished routine. Certainly this stark shift could be seen as an attempt to mirror the summative, rhyming couplets with which Shakespearean scenes often end, yet such a reading would still require us to observe how Hopkinson parcels out what could have been a regular pentameter couplet into eight shorter lines whose false air of a simple and light refrain lends all the more gravity to the despairing “routine,” one set in motion

centuries ago by the very discoveries that Hamlet trivializes in his contemplation of death itself. Here too, the political stakes of Hopkinson's formal innovation are less subtle than Marson's, whose parody of this same Hamlet monologue in the 1929 poem "To Wed or Not to Wed" keeps Shakespeare's blank verse largely intact.

The impulse to invoke and revise objects associated with the Western artistic tradition goes beyond drama and poetry in "The Aegean, the Caribbean" in which the speaker imagines recasting the ancient Greek sculptor Praxiteles's "Aphrodite" as an homage to a contemporary addressee, Catherine Kingdon. Initially the revision is a rather light, politically neutral update, as the speaker imagines "elongating the figure" and providing her with "binoculars" and "a frosty punch or julep, / A sliver of orange split across the rim" (SWS 66). Yet the deeper political dimensions of transferring the high art of antiquity to touristy images associated with the modern Caribbean enter once more through a discussion of form. Midway through the poem, the speaker abandons the conceit of re-sculpting Aphrodite and addresses the revision from a literary perspective: "Poetry has no marble limitations / Inviting you, I switch his sea to mine" (SWS 67). This announcement marshals an extended reflection on Caribbean culture and its ways of dealing with its postcolonial identity. The comic tone in which the speaker had earlier proposed a revision of Aphrodite does not so much vanish here but become representative of the ironic pose that the speaker understands as a coping mechanism for the West Indian artist:

As tall as the height of the morning star, you arise
From the Caribbean, where poets' and painters' eyes
Split into hot hues the vertical, white sunlight, –
The hues of laughter as it stabs at tribulation,
A people's paradox and mode, –
Mockery, our self-conferred emancipation (SWS 67)

The idea of "mockery" being "self-conferred" indexes Hopkinson's complex perspective on the project of comparing the Caribbean with classical culture. The speaker's ironic pose balances two nearly contradictory points: that the psychological emancipation of the Caribbean requires its artists to put local themes on par with those of the Western canon; and, paradoxically, that such artistic autonomy involves a self-deprecating mockery of the idea of the Caribbean espousing such self-importance.

At the risk of putting too much pressure on the point, "The Aegean, The Caribbean" advocates the elevation of the Caribbean to the level of classical motifs while insisting on the retention of the cultural characteristic of self-deprecation that (for Hopkinson) defines this postcolonial space and that is the result, in some

degree, of its traditional exclusion from the realm of sophisticated artistry. Hence the poem ends with an image of the “ghost” of Guyanese poet and visual artist Aubrey Williams “gathering emblems” for his “voracious mind” from a distinctively non-European source: the “western epics” that “inscribe” the South American landscapes of the Amerindians, whose “hieroglyphs” leave an impressive yet irrecoverable cultural legacy, a “continent in code” (SWS 67).

A more embittered irony organizes other Hopkinsonian comparisons between classical aesthetics and the legacy of New World colonialism in poems such as in “Ham in Exile.” A parenthetical subtitle informs readers of the poem’s occasion: “(On a white limestone bust of a negro, immediate ancestor and cousin of the black man)” (SWS 25). The speaker’s fixation on the “irony” of a white-colored black man leads to a discussion of the evolving means of colonialism and racism. He describes how the New World plantation systems that thrived on “[a]rguments of whip and Cross” gave way over time to a more insidious form of subjugation through a colonial educational system:

The Mother Country’s tutelage,
Her skills and science guarantee
Assuagement of her pupil’s rage,
Unverseered conformity. (SWS 26)

Consisting of such alternately rhyming four-line stanzas, the poem uses the rhyme scheme to emphasize its central exploration of a disconnect between form (white ivory) and content (black man), as the first and third lines of each stanza almost always produce, at most, half rhymes. These end-rhyming pairs include “choice/used,” “bewilderment/self-contempt,” “lands/Cross,” “sky/rise,” and “end/mind” (SWS 25-6). These imperfect rhymes – along with other formal departures like those in “Death is not the Undiscovered Country” – produce an effect similar to that of Walcott’s invocation of the Homeric epic in *Omeros* (1990). As critic Alexander Irvine notes, Walcott’s work “places itself, if not outside the classical epic tradition, then certainly in a particular relation to that tradition that demands aggressive interrogation of reading practices, ideas of influence, and ideas of poetic genre” (125).⁶ Indeed, many of Hopkinson’s most ironic, allusive poems are fundamentally about the intellectual and historical struggles inherent in the very act of a Caribbean invocation of the past. The invocation that clears a space for a new adventure in the epic tradition is both the starting and ending point for much of Hopkinson’s verse. He seems so frequently enthralled with this opening gesture, the idea of entering and reworking a particular tradition, that many of his most successful poems are devoted to its contemplation.

⁶ For a related reading of Walcott’s use of history in the epic, see Seanna Sumalee Oakley (59).

Of course not all of Hopkinson's poems contain such overt engagement with the "Western Tradition." In fact, Mervyn Morris has suggested that Hopkinson's "most distinctive contribution to West Indian poetry" is his religious verse, much of which documents his spiritual awakening as a Muslim convert (10-11). Yet many of these meditations on faith and divinity betray Hopkinson's persistent fascination with mapping the fault lines between harsh socioeconomic realities and the pursuit of a sublime aesthetic; albeit, in these poems it is the monotheistic God that fills the space that various abstractions on art and perception had occupied in earlier work. A prime example is "Himself at Last," a poem in which a wealthy, smug, "small-island" lawyer with a gardening habit is humbled by a "sclerotic stroke" that reduces him to simply "A grower of anthuriums" (SWS 80). When all of his riches are gone, the speaker coldly celebrates: "Speak praise to heaven for this man's handicaps / Which have stripped him at last down to himself" (SWS 80). Although this religious poem reverses the usual Hopkinsonian trajectory from a consideration of abstract aesthetics to the application of that discourse to present society, the unexpected stroke at the center of this poem replays the same general strategy in which the resolution or lack thereof is forged in the collision of these two realms. In this particular case, the "quibbling" lawyer's stroke and the sublime, simple life of gardening it precipitates is not only an act of God but a divine penalty for his social crimes, his "small-island" elitism and his implicit exploitation of those who would previously hang his "shingles" for him (SWS 80).

"December 1974: A Lament," perhaps Hopkinson's most sophisticated anthologized work and one that marks his increasing interest in religious themes, also enacts this reversal on a remarkable number of levels. In the poem, a presumably aging or ill speaker describes the seasonal changes of Caribbean flora to express anxiety about his legacy. Noting that his "time is dying," the speaker observes that the "euphorbia whitens" under the falling snow, the poinsettia's redness will "threaten" as its "blood stars the hedges," and the ripeness of the gungu will contrast with the scarcity of resources he will leave behind for his loved ones (*Caribbean Verse* 271). The progression seems to signify three related experiences of encroaching death. While the euphorbia presents a silent and sickly image of burial in pale snow, the poinsettia's red "blood" and "spears" indicate the violence of the struggle to stay alive, and the gungu's thick "pods" mock the speaker's wasting body, the blood of which "runs thin" (CV 271). The poem also cleverly underscores this dangerous passing of time – "my year is dying" – by repeatedly turning traditional astronomical markers of time like the sun and the stars into violent objects (the sun "melts" flesh, the "blood"-colored poinsettias "star the hedges" [CV 271]).

In a refrain rich with religious concerns about salvation as well aesthetic anxiety about poetic output, the speaker ends each of the first three stanzas mournfully wondering, "What have I planted, Lord?" (CV 271). Up until the final

stanza, the poem invites symbolic or allegorical readings of this “planting” by omitting the speaker’s profession, and phrasing these pleas in a decidedly prayerful context. However, the last stanza puts pressure on this metaphorical reading with a sudden barrage of financial and materialistic terms that either portray the speaker as a literal agricultural worker or, at least, introduce an irony that diminishes the prayerful tone of the poem. Relegating the idea of “planting” to the physical world, the speaker concludes with a series of materialistic and economic images: “Grand trees I cannot afford. / The quick crops, Lord! / Ambition I cannot afford. / The cash crops, Lord!” (CV 271). This formal shift in this closing stanza mirrors the speaker’s desperation and his decision to spurn “ambition.” Unlike the expertly crafted, seven-line stanzas that precede it, the concluding stanza has only four lines and contains no enjambment, reminding us of the quick, practical gains the speaker now requires.

The unexpected appearance of these repetitive, rhyming couplets – and the abrupt, possibly sarcastic prayer for “quick crops” and “cash crops” that they announce – contrasts with the far more complex and lingering treatment of rhyme in the preceding stanzas, in which, for instance, the identical rhyme created by the repetition of the word “dying” at the end of the fourth and fifth lines of the stanza suffers a slow auditory death in the same position of succeeding stanzas, from “dying-dying”, to “dying-dies”, to “dying-thin”, to “threaten-afford” (CV 271). Only the faintest echo of “dying” remains in “threaten,” and it completely vanishes in the sharply dissonant “afford,” introducing a financial theme that co-opts the rhyme scheme and poem in general in the final passage. This ebbing away of the rhyme seems to reflect the speaker’s claim that his “cry dies,” which appears in line 12 when the rhyme begins its slow death (CV 271). Given the reflective tone of the poem’s already “timeless,” mid-sentence opening (“And the euphoria, / Snow on its branches, Lord”), there is a strikingly palpable immediacy to this plea for “cash crops” (CV 271). This migration of the dying speaker’s resigned, wistful attitude to one of financial panic is thus remarkably enacted on a number of formal levels and typifies Hopkinson’s efforts to dramatize the artistic and theoretical struggle between the ethereal and the here-and-now.

While Hopkinson’s more spiritual poems tend to lack overt references to the postcolonial aspects of the Caribbean, they still pivot on these abrupt remembrances of the material world, remembrances that foster poetic conclusions that do not resolve earlier issues raised in the poem but rather introduce new complications. As I have suggested, the tension between abstraction and the physical world (or between the Ivory Tower and the village; or between the European canon and its ambivalent Caribbean inheritors) offers merely one avenue for exploring Hopkinson’s importance as a poet. For instance, the introductory piece “These Poems Are...” characterizes his verse as operating along another tension between private and public, a set of “confidences” that “sport a public face”

and thus function as “a hoard secreted in a public place” (SWS 15). Still other poems, like “A Song for You at History’s Turning,” chart the struggle between Hopkinson’s ethical convictions and the “Violent necessity” of racial strife in the 1970s, when “Cane juice foams bitter, and our brothers / Grasp their slick machetes in sleep” (SWS 57, 58).

In making the case for Hopkinson’s inclusion in ongoing critical conversations of West Indian literary history, I recognize that ultimately such arguments rest on the critic’s own debatable theoretical assumptions about what sorts of questions should animate scholarship and classroom study. Yet it seems clear that Hopkinson’s poems dramatize both formally and thematically a topic of almost unanimous interest for readers and writers of Anglophone Caribbean literature, namely the personal and political complexity involved in adopting English poetic forms and materials, what Hopkinson paradoxically calls the “choice” of one’s “rhyming irons.” Hopkinson’s most explicit encounters with this issue give us more opportunities to frame the legacy of Caribbean writers like Walcott, Roach, and Marson. Yet, as I hope to have shown, Hopkinson’s poetry is also driven by the same questions scholars face in theoretical discussions of the purpose of literary analysis. As Evelyn O’Callaghan has suggested in the pages of *Anthurium*, Caribbeanists in recent years have tended to move away from studies of theory itself toward studies that use theory as “a tool for reading literary texts,” perhaps because scholars are growing more aware “that the writing is itself frequently as much a theoretical as a fictional construct” (4). In an age when literary criticism aims to find a balance between historical contextualization and close reading — and when scholars are calling for both a return to the text and a more rigorous acknowledgment of the scholar’s own historical positioning as analyst — Hopkinson’s poetry offers a new and refreshing approach to these very questions from a decidedly creative and self-reflective position.

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