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TWO CANADIAN DYSTOPIAS:
Brown Girl in the Ring and Récits de Médilhault

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Résumé

La bibliographie de Lyman Tower-Sargent, "Utopian Literature in English Canada: An Annotated, Chronological Bibliography, 1852-1999," énumère plus de 70 dystopies canadiennes-anglaises et démontre qu’il existe un corpus canadien significatif de textes dystopiques significatif. Bien que les dix dernières années aient vu une véritable explosion de recherches dans le domaine du genre dystopique contemporain, il existe relativement peu de critiques concernant le vaste nombre de dystopies canadiennes. Cela ne veut pas dire pour autant que la critique contemporaine ne peut pas être utile dans le contexte canadien: Tom Moylan introduit l’idée du "critical dystopia" pour expliquer les mutations qu’a subi la dystopie contemporaine, et Ralph Pordzik, pour sa part, utilise le concept du "postcolonial heterotopia." Ces concepts sont tous les deux utiles pour nous aider à repenser la dystopie canadienne.

Abstract

Lyman Tower-Sargent, in his article “Utopian Literature in English Canada: An Annotated, Chronological Bibliography, 1852-1999,” lists over 70 English-Canadian dystopias and shows that there exists a significant corpus of Canadian dystopian works. While there has been an explosion of studies on contemporary dystopian literature over the past ten years, relatively little has been said about this substantial amount of Canadian dystopias. This is not to say that contemporary theories cannot be applied to the Canadian context: Tom Moylan introduces the idea of the critical dystopia to theorize the new developments in the dystopian genre, while Ralph Pordzik uses instead the idea of the postcolonial heterotopia, both of which can be used to help contextualize Canadian dystopias.

One aspect that these new studies fail to theorize is the introduction of magical elements to recent works of dystopia. This thesis provides a study of two Canadian dystopias, Brown Girl in the Ring by Nalo Hopkinson and Récits de Médiathèque by Anne Legault, in terms of Moylan’s and Pordzik’s theories, while at the same time showing how the appearance of magic within the genre is in fact serving to help these dystopian texts retain their critical power. This work first studies the evolution of the concept of dystopia as a genre, and then looks at how these two recent Canadian/Québécois dystopias further complicate and expand our understanding of the term dystopia through the incorporation of magic. Reconsidering Darko Suvin and his theories, much sited by contemporary dystopian theorists, shows the possible application of the novum and cognitive estrangement in broader terms, which would include and not exclude magic within the dystopian genre.
COMPOSITION DU JURY

TWO CANADIAN DYSTOPIAS:
Brown Girl in the Ring and Récits de Médilhault

Ce mémoire a été évalué par un jury composé des personnes suivantes:

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Chapter 1. Introduction

In the introduction to his book, *Dystopian Literature: A Theory and Research Guide*, M. Keith Booker describes dystopia as:

...includ[ing] those works that rely on a dialogue with utopian idealism as an important element of their social criticism. Further, I consider the principle literary strategy of dystopian literature to be defamiliarization: by focusing their critiques of society on imaginatively distant settings, dystopian fictions provide fresh perspectives on problematic social and political practices that might otherwise be taken for granted or considered natural and inevitable. (*Dystopian Literature*, 3-4)

The journey, however, to achieving or agreeing on this definition is a long one. Taking into consideration the more recent literary movements, such as postmodernism and postcolonialism, can we still think of dystopias as we once did, as Booker did even ten short years ago? Do Canadian dystopias conform to this definition considering that there exists little to no critical work on Canadian dystopias outside of Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale*? Lyman Tower-Sargent lists 76 English-Canadian dystopias in his article “Utopian Literature in English Canada: An Annotated, Chronological Bibliography, 1852-1999.” Sargent’s bibliography is incomplete in the sense that it excludes dystopias written in French. Given the lack of study concerning these dystopias, how can we consider our understanding of the genre to be complete? The goal of this work is to first study the evolution of the concept of dystopia as a genre, and then to look at how two recent Canadian/Québécois dystopias further complicate and expand our understanding of the term dystopia.
Negative Utopia/Anti-Utopia/Dystopia

Dystopias stand in direct opposition to utopias. The word ‘dystopia’ stems from the word ‘utopia’, coined by Sir Thomas More (meaning “no place,” from the Greek: ‘ou’ meaning not and ‘topic’ meaning place). Moore implied that although ‘no place’, a utopia was an ideal world. Add the prefix ‘dys’ (meaning, from the Greek, “hard, bad, ill”) and the word becomes literally ‘bad place’ (Klein, 49). The Oxford English Dictionary (OED) defines dystopia as simply “An imaginary place or condition in which everything is bad.” However, as David Ferns explains:

Dystopian fiction, in seeking to challenge and subvert the norms of the traditional utopia, exposes many of the contradictions and evasions inherent in the political and social aspects of the utopian dream. By the very fact of providing an opposition, dystopian fiction not only provides a dramatic focus which utopian literature so often conspicuously lacks, it also highlights the inherent authoritarianism which many utopian writers seek to conceal by showing authority only in its most benign aspects. (Ferns, 374)

According to the OED, the term was first used by J.S. Mill in 1868 who was criticising the utopians for desiring something that was, in his opinion, not good or utopic, but bad or dystopic:

It is perhaps, too complimentary to call them Utopians, they ought rather to be called dys-topians, or caco-topians. What is commonly called Utopian is something too good to be practicable; but what they appear to favour is too bad to be practicable.

Dragan Klaic offers a more complete definition of dystopia in his book The Plot of the Future: Utopia and Dystopia in Modern Drama, incorporating the intrinsic relationship between utopia and dystopia:

[A]n unexpected and aborted outcome of utopian strivings, a mismatched result of utopian efforts—not only a state of fallen utopia but the very process of its distortion and degeneration as
well...[dystopia] involves utopian ambitions while describing their total collapse. (Klaic, 3)

Most, if not all, theorists dealing with dystopia reinforce this connection between utopia and dystopia. As put by David W. Sisk in the introduction to his book *Transformations of Language in Modern Dystopias*: "Dystopian fiction, utopia's polarized offspring, turns human perfectability on its head by pessimistically extrapolating contemporary social trends into oppressive and terrifying societies" (Sisk, 2). Most scholars cannot agree on the definition of dystopia and its relationship to the term anti-utopia, but all agree that the dystopian genre is forever linked to utopia. Laurence Davies states that "there is an unruly playfulness in dystopia that has the potential to be more utopian than utopias can be themselves" (Davies, 205). Booker expands, explaining that

[...]utopian and dystopian visions are not necessarily diametrical opposites. Not only is one man's utopia another man's dystopia, but utopian visions of an ideal society often inherently suggest a criticism of the current order as nonideal, while dystopian warnings of the dangers of "bad" utopias still allow for the possibility of "good" utopias, especially since dystopian societies are generally more or less thinly veiled reconfigurations of a situation that already exists in reality. Moreover, dystopian critiques of existing systems would be pointless unless a better system appeared conceivable. One might, in fact, see dystopian and utopian vision not as fundamentally opposed but as very much part of the same project. *(Dystopian Impulse, 15)*

Northrop Frye, in his article "Varieties of Literary Utopias" calls anti-utopia "utopian satire or parody" (Frye, 28), while Gary Saul Morson claims in *The Boundaries of Genre* that anti-utopias represent an "anti-genre" (Morson, 115).

The dystopian movement, both as separate genre to write and write about, is a modern one, but the date of origin is also up for debate. As stated by Tom Moylan in *Scraps of the Untainted Sky: Science Fiction, Utopia, Dystopia*:
Although its roots lie in Meneppean satire, realism, and the anti-utopian novels of the nineteenth century, the dystopia emerged as a literary form in its own right in the early 1900s, as capital entered a new phase with the onset of monopolized production and as the modern imperialist state extended its internal and external reach. (Moylan 2000, xi)

Eugene Weber, in his article, “The Anti-Utopia of the Twentieth Century,” explains that “Utopia was nowhere, or it was very far away. Now this is no longer so; Utopia is just around the corner, and it generates reactions based on quite concrete hopes and fears” (Weber, 82). While utopias were still ‘no place’, there was no real fear of their realisation. But as the threat of utopias becoming a reality rose, dystopias began to appear to call into question the notions of any and all perfect societies. In keeping with the modernist movement, with its overriding themes of estrangement, alienation and revolt, dystopias called into question the prevailing dogmas of social and scientific progress and worked to provide “fresh ways of looking at man’s position and function in the universe” (Cuddon, 516). This is not to say, however, that dystopian sentiment has not existed much longer. Krishan Kumar in Utopia and Anti-Utopia in Modern Times states that

[...] the very announcement of utopia has almost immediately provoked the mocking, contrary, echo of anti-utopia. Hesiod’s Golden Age is succeeded by an Iron Age of unending pain and sorrow. Plato’s Republic elicits the satire and ribaldry of Aristophanes and the Attic comedy. Bacon’s scientific utopia is mercilessly ridiculed in Swift’s Gulliver’s Travels... There have always been those who, for reasons of individual psychology or social ideology, have been profoundly skeptical of the hopeful claims made on behalf of humanity by social prophets and reformers[...] (Kumar, 100)

This sentiment is echoed by Payton E. Richter in “Utopia/Dystopia?: Threats of Heel or Hopes of Paradise?” who also points out that “[t]he ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle
attacked his teacher Plato’s ideal city-state as described in *The Republic...*” (Richter, 5) and by Walter L. Fogg in “Technology and Dystopia.” But Alexandra Aldridge reiterates that the dystopian genre is unique. She writes: “This is not to say that dystopia is merely ‘utopia in reverse’ as it has often been called, but a singular category issuing out of a twentieth-century shift of attitudes towards utopia” (Aldridge 1984, 17). Chris Farns furthers the sentiment by saying that “it is only in the twentieth century that dystopian fiction, combining a parodic inversion of the traditional utopia with satire on contemporary society, begins to take on the kind of mythic resonance that underlies the appeal of the traditional utopia from More on” (Farns 1999, 105).

But how do we differentiate between anti-utopia and dystopia? Answering the question becomes difficult because at one time the two were considered synonymous, and, in fact, still are by some. Eugene Weber, in his article “The Anti-Utopia of the Twentieth Century,” uses the term ‘anti-utopia’ while the works he uses are clearly examples of dystopias. This was not uncommon, as Aldridge points out that dystopian fiction was “usually called anti-utopian in the 1950’s and 60’s” (Aldridge 1984, 11) and that “for the last two decades or more, ‘anti-utopia’ and ‘dystopia’ have been used by critics interchangeably” (Aldridge 1984, 8). In 1967, Hillegas states that “[a]lthough sometimes given such names as *dystopias* or *cacotopias*, they have most often been called *anti-utopias*” (Hillegas, 3). The term anti-utopia also suited critics, such as Kateb and Walsh who understood dystopias to be the “enemy” of utopias. Aldridge is one of the first to distinguish between the two terms in 1984: “The terms satiric utopia (or utopian satire), anti-utopia and dystopia are the most frequently used [terms]; they provide the most helpful generic distinctions, and taken in that order also suggest
something about the genesis and evolution of the contemporary negative form – the
dystopian novel” (Aldridge 1984, 5). According to her, the differentiation between the
two terms lies in that “[t]he pure anti-utopia is simple and primarily a direct attack on the
concept of utopia...The rise of dystopian fiction...is attributed to disillusionment with
actual ‘utopian’ schemes in the real modern world” (Aldridge, 8,11). This is not to say
that some did not use the term dystopia with a great deal of consistency, such as Richter’s
book *Utopia/Dystopia*?. But others still maintain no distinction between the two terms.

Krishnan Kumar, in his book *Utopia and Anti-Utopia in Modern Times* notes in a
footnote that “I use ‘anti-utopia’ as a generic term to include what is sometimes called
‘the dystopic’ or – more rarely – the ‘cacotopia’...” (Kumar, 447). Sisk clarifies the
distinction between the two terms, claiming that “anti-utopias merely criticize more
generalized utopian ideals, while dystopias aggressively target contemporary social
structures without direct reference to utopias” (Sisk, 5). He goes on later to state: “In a
nutshell, all dystopias are anti-utopias, but not all anti-utopias are dystopias” because
anti-utopias can “depict pleasant societies” but “dystopias always depict horrible
societies” (Sisk, 6). Moylan takes an opposing view, pitting anti-utopias against
dystopias:

*Dystopia is thus clearly unlike its generic sibling, the literary
eutopia, or its nemesis, the anti-utopia. The dystopian text does
not guarantee a creative and critical position that is implicitly
militant or resigned. As an open form, it always negotiates the
continuum between the Party of Utopia and the Party of Anti-
Utopia. Iconically immersed in an already oppressive society, the
discrete narrative trajectory of a dystopian text plays out on a
terrain contested by these historically opposed political tendencies.
Texts that adhere to the insistence of the (usually conservative)
argument that there is no alternative (and that seeking one is more
dangerous than it’s worth) run up to the limit of Anti-Utopia and
risk transforming what begins as a dystopia into a full-fledged anti-utopia [...] (Moylan 2000, xiii).

Regardless of how the relationship between the two concepts is understood, it is clear that dystopia represents an evolution away from anti-utopia, and the two genres or literary concepts are now separate, even if initially they were used interchangeably. And how we know they were used essentially interchangeably in early criticism is the general agreement on which texts were dystopic/anti-utopic.

The modern dystopian tradition in English literature is typically seen to be based on three “touchstone” works: *We* by Yevgeny Zamyatin, *Brave New World* by Aldous Huxley and *1984* by George Orwell. For example, Chris Ferns calls these works the “three most important dystopian fiction of the twentieth century” (Ferns 1989, 373). Booker focuses the first half of his study of the dystopian novel on these three works. Erika Gottlieb names these three works as “classics of dystopian fiction” (Gottlieb, 3), as does Amin Malak in his article “Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale* and the dystopian tradition.” Sisk, Aldridge, Hillegas and others point to the influence of H.G. Wells on all three authors. But understandings of what dystopia means varies greatly, depending on how these three works are interpreted. From the point of view of looking at these works as being influenced by H.G. Wells, some critics conclude that dystopias are strictly technological. In other words, the dystopian society must be as result of technology gone awry (see Aldridge 1984 and Hillegas). Fogg states that “Twentieth Century dystopias are predominantly extrapolations of what the writers feel are the destructive and dehumanizing effects of technology and technological change” (Fogg, 67). Aldridge states that “[dystopian] authors are, more accurately, anti-scientific; they have remained watchful over the intrusion of scientific values – objectivity, neutrality,
instrumentalism – into the social imagination. They have criticised the replacement of a humanist ethos with a scientific/technological ethos; in short their fiction assails the scientizing of society” (Aldridge 1984, 18). Colas de la Noue points to both Marc Angenot and Nadia Khouri for coming to the same conclusion:

...la dystopie est alors, non pas une mise en garde justifiée mais avant tout une ‘protestation réactionnaire’ contre le changement d’origine scientifique et technique et contre toute ‘rationalité collective’ accusée, à travers diverses représentations, d’entrainer la répression, la perte de liberté individuelle...la dystopie se présente comme une ‘subversion’ du projet utopique. (Colas de la Noue, 74)

De la Noue herself comes to a different, more common conclusion, that “La dystopie, dans l’ensemble, est une critique sociale qui doit elle-même être critiquée, remise en cause...” (75). Most recent dystopian theorists, favouring a more inclusive definition of what constitutes a dystopia, share Colas de la Noue’s vision.

Eugene Weber traces two major movements in the dystopian tradition, charting the development of the genre through the two World Wars. Following WWI, “when the high hopes of former times...were seen to be left unfulfilled” (Weber, 87), there came a development of what Weber calls “political” dystopias. These dystopian works dealt with social and political agendas gone awry. During and after WWII, a backlash against the purity and desirability of science and technology, cornerstones of the Wellsian celebration of science and technology and the Third Reich, created “technical” dystopias. The editor of The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction shares this idea of differentiation between “types” of dystopias, as they clearly identify both technological and political dystopias (Holstock, 32). For others, however, the distinction isn’t so clear between the two types. Robert S. Baker calls Brave New World: “...a projection of such fears into the
distant future of scientifically conceived utopia... but in its stress on economics, psychology, science and radical social change... it is a serious political novel” (Baker, 5-6). Booker approaches all three of the classic dystopias as social critiques, entitling the chapters “Anticipating Stalin,” “The Early Bourgeois Dystopia” and “The Totalitarian Dystopia after Stalin.” Erika Gottlieb looks at the political implications of each of the novels, saying that We has a “clear political message” (Gottlieb, 62), that Brave New World attacks “science and socialism” (76) and 1984 is a “[combination of] depth of psychology with political satire” (83). Although this admission that both the scientific and the political are targets of the dystopian tradition, there still exist eccentric exceptions to the definitions of the term dystopia.

Northrop Frye, in “Varieties of Literary Utopia,” Carter Kaplan in Critical Synoptics: Menippean Satire and the Analysis of Intellectual Mythology and Gary Saul Morson in The Boundaries of Genre all see the dystopian novel not as a separate genre, but simply as a utopian satire, tracing its roots to Menippean satire. Although Kaplan differentiates between traditional satire and dystopias by pointing out that “literary dystopia is not funny” (147). Frye calls We, Brave New World and 1984 examples of “utopian satire” (28-9). Although these are the key examples typically cited as dystopias, Frye removes them entirely from the tradition. George Kateb calls into question the validity of having 1984 on the list of dystopias:

Huxley’s book [Brave New World] is clearly an example of benevolent opposition to a benevolent utopia. But the society of 1984 is one in which complete malevolence reigns, a society existing consciously to prevent the consummation of a utopian order, and Orwell is not, of course, endorsing that society. If Brave New World is a hell of pleasure, 1984 is a hell of pain; if Brave New World is a false heaven, 1984 is a real hell. (Kateb, 235)
Aldridge comes at the issue from another direction: while she agrees with Kateb that Orwell has no interest in “happiness,” she is more restrictive in her definition of dystopia:

Dystopia aims to critique the scientific world view which stimulated its utopian predecessors and upon which utopia, “the dream of reason,” was built... The essential point about 1984 is that it makes no pretence of being a utopian conception and therefore cannot be precisely defined as a dystopia. We cannot talk for example about a scientific or scientific ethos forming the (corrupted) motive power of a society... There are ways in which science is misused – particularly the social sciences – to manipulate, confuse and control individuals. But the real subject of 1984 is the abuse of power or more explicitly, “the mind of totalitarianism. (Aldridge 1984, 79)

Robert C. Elliott sees 1984 in the same way, but comes to a different conclusion: “[1984] does not fit because utopia has traditionally been concerned with happiness and the good life. There is nothing of this in 1984, which is a true anti-utopia, a dystopia” (Elliott, 97). While some critics disassociate 1984 from the dystopian tradition, others obviously claim that it is the only true dystopia for the same reasons: the negation of happiness. All of these claims seriously destabilize any final definition of the genre.

The 1990s have seen a veritable explosion in books dealing exclusively with the dystopian phenomenon in literature. And most have been extraordinarily consistent in their understanding of the genre. In 1994, M. Keith Booker released two books on the dystopian genre: Dystopian Literature: A Theory and Research Guide and The Dystopian Impulse in Modern Literature: Fiction as Social Criticism. Both provide extensive studies on dystopia, with a consistent understanding of the definition of the genre. For Booker dystopias are distinguished by their dialogue with utopian idealism through social criticism and defamiliarization: “[... ] by focusing their critiques of society on spatially or temporally distant settings, dystopian fiction provides fresh perspectives on problematic
social and political practices...” (Dystopian Impulse 19). Booker, however, attempts to
distance the dystopian genre from science fiction:

...dystopian fiction also resembles science fiction, a genre with
which it is often associated. One recalls, for example, Darko
Suvin’s useful emphasis on ‘cognitive estrangement’ as the central
strategy of science fiction. Clearly there is a great deal of overlap
between dystopian fiction and science fiction, and many texts
belong in both categories. But in general dystopian fiction differs
from science fiction in the specificity of its attention to social and
political critique. In this sense, dystopian fiction is more like the
projects of social and cultural critics like Nietzsche, Freud,
Bakhtin, Adorno, Foucault, Habermas, and many others.
(Dystopian Impulse, 19)

Moylan would strongly disagree with Booker, claiming in his article “‘Look into the
Dark: On Dystopia and the Novum,” that the essential element of the dystopian narrative
is “the novum” (Moylan 2001, 65). The novum is a concept developed by Suvin to
explain the practice of “cognitive estrangement” as it appears in science fiction. The
novum is the “strange newness” (Suvin, 4) located in a work of science fiction. This
“strange newness” serves to estrange the reader (Suvin, 6). As Suvin further explains:

”..if the novum is the necessary condition of SF (differentiating it from naturalistic
fiction), the validation of the novelty by scientifically methodical cognition into which
the read is inexorably led is the sufficient condition for SF” (Suvin, 65-6). Although both
Booker and Moylan, inspired directly or indirectly by Suvin, agree on the importance of
defamiliarizing the reader, Suvin and Moylan would argue that the reader achieves
cognition because of the scientific plausibility of the narrative. Booker argues that
cognition instead lies in the social or political plausibility of the narrative. As put by
Chris Ferns, “dystopian fiction posits a society which – however outlandish – is clearly
extrapolated from that which exists” (Ferns 1999, 107).
Booker is not the only one to expand his understanding of the dystopian genre to include works outside of the genre of science fiction. Erika Gottlieb states that the dystopia is "a post-Christian genre. If the central drama of the age of faith was the conflict between salvation and damnation by deity, in our secular modern age this drama has been transposed to a conflict between humanity's salvation or damnation by society in the historical arena" (Gottlieb, 3). It is interesting to note that in his book *Scraps of the Untainted Sky: Science Fiction, Utopia, Dystopia*, Moylan acknowledges the evolution of dystopias towards political and social criticism, not just scientific: "Gradually...dystopia's critical sensibility is taken up by authors who look beyond technology and the authoritarian state and turn to the especial imbrication of the economy and culture that capitalism has achieved at the cost of diminishing the complexity and potential of all humanity and the earth itself..." (Moylan 2000, xii). And yet he still maintains that the *novum*, a quality unique to science fiction, is an essential part of the dystopian narrative.

David W. Sisk takes a less radical position than Booker in understanding the relationship between SF and the dystopian narrative: "Dystopia not only shares [science fiction's] concern with estrangement, but foregrounds it: a dystopian work fails if it does not move its reader to compare his or her "real world" to the fictional society and consider how the latter could arise from the former" (Sisk, 9). Again, science is barely mentioned as one of the concerns, other than the original association of dystopia with science fiction.

Sisk's observations also echo another consideration of dystopian literature: the effect on the reader.
Gottleib, in her final salient feature of the dystopian genre\(^1\), “The Protagonist’s Window on the Past: Two Time-Planes,” states that

However compelling the protagonist’s personal fate in the novel, as Ideal Reader we eventually have to recognize our distance from him or her; he lives on a time-plane different from our own; he exists in our hypothetical future. In fact it is crucial not only that we identify the difference between his time frame and ours, but also that we recognize that these two time-planes are joined in a cause-effect relationship...[T]he Western model of dystopia contains what I would call a “window on history,” a strategic device through which the writer reveals the roots of the protagonist’s dystopian present in the society’s past. Of course, what the protagonist defines as the past happens to be the present of the Ideal Reader to whom the exhortation is addressed at the time the satire is written: “Beware: the protagonist’s present could become your future.” Consequently, it is in our world of the present that we should fight the specific trends that the satirist could, but should not be allowed to, develop into the monstrous nightmare world of the future. (Gottleib, 15)

This quote encompasses many of the elements of dystopia already dealt with here: defamiliarization, the connection between the present and the past, satire. But what this illustrates is that there is intent that readers act in some way once they have finished reading the dystopian narrative. The effectiveness of a given dystopia is based on the reader’s ability to “recognize the distinction between these two time-planes as well as their cause-effect relationship [so] that we can proceed to decode the specific targets of the dystopian satire” (Gottleib, 17). According to Patrick D. Murphy: “Changing individuals is, of course, a concern of various utopias and dystopias, but changing the world predominates...Many dystopian writers would be entirely dissatisfied if their

\(^1\) Gottleib bases her features on six “classics” of the genre: *We* (Zamiatin), *Brave New World* (Huxley), *1984* (Orwell), *Fahrenheit 451* (Bradbury), *Player Piano* (Vonnegut) and *The Handmaid’s Tale* (Atwood). The other five features are: The Push and Pull Between Utopian and Dystopian Perspectives; The Deliberate Miscarriage of Justice; A Barbaric State Religion – Nightmare Vision; The Destruction of the Individual’s Private World; The Protagonist’s Pursuit of History: The Vital Importance of a Record of the Past (Gottleib, 8-15).
novels led people only to understanding and not to any type of social action" (26). But how does a dystopian author effectively instill this reaction in the reader? Murphy outlines two possible reactions to a work: sublimation and cognition. Sublimation "will lead simply to a cathartic reduction of anxiety. And whether it simply enables escapism or reinforces smug assumptions, such a work will encourage social inaction and facilitate the continuation of the status quo" (26) and will occur when "a work seems too far removed from the everyday, too impossibly wonderful, awful or simply fanciful"(26). Cognition, on the other hand, "encourages discomforting reading and social action though implicitly or explicitly commenting on the reader’s contemporary predicament" (26). An effective dystopia is then one that instills cognition:

By definition, then, the writing of a novel generically as a dystopia formally foregrounds cognition as part of the conventions of its reading and implies an authorial position that literature can effect social change by altering the consciousness of its readers, who will act in the world differently as a result of their new understanding (27).

This sentiment is reinforced by Peter Fitting who states that "[b]oth utopias and dystopias have a performative function; they are intended ideally to push the reader into action" (Fitting, 142). Glenn Deer puts the idea differently, stating:

...the [dystopian] author needs both to condemn particular social injustices and to portray the mechanisms of oppression as credible enough, as sufficiently powerful and seductive, to represent a believable evil, not an irrelevant or farfetched one. While attempting to balance ethical interests with plausibility, the ambitious author risks falling into either transparent didacticism or a contradictory fascination with the rhetorical machinery of dystopic horror. (215)

Chinmoy Banerjee also differentiates between effective and non-effective dystopias:

"The difference between a dystopia that retains its critical force and one that has lost it in
becoming a commodity, is that the former presents its negative vision as a question on the horizon of our present experience, while the latter simply accepts the vision as its starting point, as a mere condition of its narrative” (Banerjee, 76). What comes out of these statements concerning the dystopian narrative is that there must be a degree of defamiliarization, but that that defamiliarization must not become so great that the reader can no longer associate their present with the horrific future put forward by the dystopian narrative. This is so that the reader is affected by the message of the dystopia. Many of the subversions and modifications of the dystopian genre in the last ten or twenty years have occurred in order to maintain that fine balance between “cognition” and “sublimation,” association and disassociation, activity and passivity. I will move now to a discussion of what could be loosely called the Canadian Dystopian Tradition, because through this tradition, we find many of the starting points for new critical theories concerning the dystopian genre.

**Canadian Dystopian Tradition**

The MLA database will produce a few hundred results when queried about the terms ‘dystopia’ and ‘dystope’. Less than one tenth of those entries will be about Canadian/Québécois dystopias, and all save one concern themselves with *The Handmaid’s Tale*. The last one is Colas de la Noue’s article “Sciences, techniques et sociétés dans les dystopies québécoises (1963-1973).” Lyman Tower-Sargent, in his article “Utopian Literature in English Canada: An Annotated, Chronological Bibliography, 1852-1999,” lists over 70 English-Canadian dystopias, showing that there does exist a significant corpus of dystopian works within the Canadian context. The bibliography is also limited in that it does not include works written in French and
strangely has a "satire" category under which certain books could also be considered
dystopias. One such example is the novel *The Underdogs* by William Weintraub. He
calls the books a "satire on separation of Quebec from the rest of Canada twenty years
later. Quebec bankrupt. Anglos of Quebec are at the bottom of society" (Sargent, 190).
It would have been helpful if Sargent would have justified why and how *The Underdogs*
was excluded as a dystopia. But the bibliography also reveals a long list of very popular
English-Canadian authors who have produced dystopias: Timothy Findlay, Hugh
MacLennan, Matt Cohen, John Glassco. One wonders how, with so many prominent
authors producing dystopian texts, the genre remained understudied for so long.

Colas de la Noue focuses on the dystopias coming out of Quebec during the Quiet
Revolution and notes that her article represents "une première analyze systématique de
tes dystopies québécoises" (Colas de la Noue, 71). She observes that "...les oeuvres
'd'anticipation' de cette époque...sont principalement des dystopies, c'est-à-dire des
textes qui présentent un monde où le progrès et le changement sont montrés comme
néfastes et dangereux, et sont donc à proscire" (Colas de la Noue, 71) and that the
dystopias of that period are almost exclusively technical dystopias, dealing with the
influence of machines and technology on society.

Beyond these two articles, there is little concerning Canadian or Québécois
dystopias as a whole entity. David Ketterer does not use dystopia as a way of classifying
works in his book *Canadian Science Fiction and Fantasy*. In his index, there is only one
entry under 'dystopia', an article about *The Handmaid's Tale*. Save for *Brown Girl in the
Ring* and *Récits de Médilhault* which were published after Ketterer's book appeared,
most of the dystopias that Sargent includes in his bibliography are mentioned by Ketterer.
But the dystopias are introduced as “fall[ing] outside the categories...treated above”
(Ketterer, 86) or “not accounted for in my categories above” (87) and are lumped into
half-page long lists of various Canadian SF works. These categories that Ketterer refers
to include ‘Future and Alternative Canadas’ and ‘Near-Future Thrillers.’ In Perspectives
in the Canadian Fantastic, edited by Allan Weiss, there appears an article about The
Handmaid’s Tale, but never in the article does the author acknowledge or identify the
novel as a dystopia. There are several articles that deal with William Gibson’s
Neuromancer, a novel that Sargent considers a dystopia, but none of these articles look at
the narrative from the dystopian perspective.

Ignoring the dystopian perspective in Canadian SF is not uncommon. In both The
Oxford Companion to Canadian Literature (1997) and the more recent Encyclopedia of
Literature in Canada (2002), the entries on Science Fiction do not mention dystopia,
even though they both provide introductions to works that are elsewhere considered
dystopic, such as The Handmaid’s Tale or The Underdogs. Both entries instead classify
dystopias as “post-apocalyptic,” “post-disaster” or “disaster scenarios.” The
Encyclopedia, however, does have an entry called “Utopia” that deals with dystopia:

With utopian visions necessarily come their darker counterpoints,
and from James de Mille’s sensational A Strange Manuscript
Found in a Copper Cylinder (1888) through to William Gibson’s
cyberpunk novels, Canadian literature reveals no shortage of
dystopian (‘bad place’) or negative utopian visions that mark a
growing disillusionment with social institutions and conventions.
Commonly, science and technology play key roles in these visions,
often to emphasize that dreams of techno-industrial advancement
are realized only with a profound cost in human dignity and
freedoms. Although articulating notably different views of such
changes, Archibald Lampman’s nightmarish poem ‘The City at the
End of Things’ (1892), Hugh Macleans’ short fiction ‘The
Finding of the Way’ (1955), and Robert Green’s The Great Leap
Backward (1968) share with the computer-driven worlds of
Gibson's *Neuromancer* (1984) and *Mona Lisa Overdrive* (1988) a desire to fully explore the denial of the Arcadian dream through the complex and often anxious relationship between technology and the monopoly of power within a culture. Monolithic technocracy plays a central role, too, in such noteworthy dystopian fictions as Matt Cohen's *The Colours of War* (1977), set in a Canada torn by civil war and the systematic erasure of personal freedoms, and Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985), which marks dystopian literature as a site at which contemporary feminist concerns with the complicities between sex, power, and language can be articulated. (Dyer, 1158)

I include the entire paragraph that deals with dystopia for a number of reasons. This entry represents the most complete overview, after Sargent's bibliography, of Canadian dystopias. It should be noted that once again no French-Canadian/Québécois dystopias are mentioned. The over-simplified definition and understanding of dystopia, not to mention the driving force behind the Canadian dystopia should also be noted. When Dyer talks about the "denial of the Arcadian dream," he is referring to what he theorises is the basis of most Canadian utopias: "a pastoral paradise free from restrictive social hierarchies and inhibitive cultural pressures" (Dyer, 1157). This represents a not uncommon belief that dystopian authors all express some form of nostalgia for the pastoral past. While this entry in *The Encyclopedia* provides the most complete critical introduction to Canadian dystopias, it is already behind in the theories and practices of dystopian literature in Canada.

Dyer is not alone in his treatment of Canadian dystopias. Most of *Out of This World: Canadian Science Fiction and Fantasy Literature* follows the same pattern as Dyer and others, relegating the dystopian text into other categories. These are, among others, "National Disaster Scenarios" or "After the Apocalypse." It does include in its Bibliography, under the heading "Strange World and Strange People," the sub-heading
“Utopia and Dystopia” which lists eight dystopias, six of which are Canadian, none of which are French. Which is odd, considering that the two articles that deal with the dystopian genre almost exclusively deal with the French-Québécois dystopian novel. In her article “The Science Fiction Novel for Young People in Quebec: From the 1960s to the 1990s,” Claire Le Brun identifies “Cities of the Future and Remote Societies: Dystopia and Social Criticism” as one of the “major themes” of youth SF in French in Quebec. The section simply provides titles, authors and brief plot summaries of nine dystopian novels for young people. Another article, “The Female Utopia in Canada” by Guy Bouchard, focuses almost exclusively on dystopias and features five dystopian narratives, four of which are Québécois. The other is The Handmaid’s Tale.

This reflects another trend in studies of Canadian dystopias: the substantial scholarship dealing with Québécois dystopias and the substantial scholarship dealing with The Handmaid’s Tale. While many of theorists still consider dystopian narratives as post-apocalyptic/post-disaster stories, others look at the dystopias from the perspective as being “post-separation.” Allan Weiss, in his article: “Separations and Unities: Approaches to Québec Separatism in English- and French-Canadian Fantastic Literature,” never mentions the texts he studies as dystopias, but lists texts identified by others as being dystopias (he refers to the same texts as Colas de la Noue in her article “Sciences, techniques et sociétés dans les dystopies québécoises”) and even goes as far as comparing one of the works to The Handmaid’s Tale. Weiss includes about 17 works in his article, 13 of which are written in French. The article is also unique because it is one of the few critical studies that attempts to be comparative in its treatment of the genre, even if he is not directly referring to the dystopian label. He comes to the conclusion
concerning the difference between English- and French-Canadian science fiction and fantasy that “[w]hile anglophones have used science fiction and fantasy to engage in direct speculation about questions of individual and national identity, francophones have used it to explore moral and psychological themes” (Weiss 1998, 53). In this case, as he is dealing primarily with works that can also be considered dystopic, does this theory transfer or can it be applied to other dystopian narratives that do not fall under the themes of separations and unities?

Amy J. Ransom, in “(Un)common Ground: National Sovereignty and Individual Identity in Contemporary Science Fiction from Québec,” makes direct reference to the works appearing as dystopias. She explains that

[t]his present study examines how subsequent works of SFQ continue the trend towards dystopic fantasies as they manipulate and (re)project reality through alternate history and near-future extrapolations...the sf works analyzed here explore uncommon ground, revealing a wide range of attitudes towards the increasingly complex issue of national identity and the roles of both state and individual in the construction of that identity. (440)

This statement about Québécois dystopias seems to directly refute Weiss’ conclusions that Québec dystopias deal with moral and psychological themes. The six works studied by Ransom all deal directly with the issue of separation in a dystopic setting. This also refutes Weiss’ conclusions that Québec SF sees separation as a legitimate solution to the perceived problems. In fact, the Québec dystopias that Weiss studies almost all deal with a dystopian situation that is a result of not separating. Nonetheless, both studies indirectly agree that the ideas of nation and separation are the typical themes of Québec dystopias.
Although there is comparably more scholarship concerning Québec dystopias, they are not always clearly identified as such. In many cases, the analysis of dystopian texts appear in articles or volumes that identify themselves as concerning themselves with utopias. In “Quatre utopies québécoises,” Georges Desmeules is actually looking at three utopias and one dystopia. He identifies Pour la Patrie as being an essentially dystopic text, even though he admits that more traditional readings identify it as a utopia: “Bien sûr, cette lecture dystopique déforme probablement l’intention manifeste de l’auteur, mais derrière l’utopie euphorique se cache un mépris pour les gens qui occupent l’espace réel” (Desmeules, 83). In “À la recherche d’une utopie,” Georges-Henri Cloutier focuses exclusively on one particular utopia but takes the time to make the following observations: “[L’utopie] est produit d’époque aussi: le XIXe siècle soumettra plusieurs dizaines d’eutopies alors que le XXe s’illustre volontiers par des dystopies, signes de son inquiétude existentielle...Le Québec ne semble pas échapper à ce courant temporel...” (Cloutier, 25). Again, this example reflects that the readings and understandings of what a dystopia is in the Québec context often appear in utopian packages. This is not surprising in that, early on in their critical evolution, dystopias were simply an extension of utopias and often dealt with under the common heading of utopia. What is surprising is that in comparison English criticism does not even seem to deal with the utopian genre any more than it does the dystopian genre.

Another study where theorizing on dystopia is found under the utopian heading is Guy Bouchard’s invaluable article “L’Image de la science-fiction au Québec: 1960-1984.” Bouchard outlines the history of theory and criticism concerning SF written in Québec. One of his areas of focus is “SF et utopie,” under which he also looks at the
evolution of the theories of dystopia. He notes that during the period 1970-1974, “Aucun de ces critiques ne conçoit la possibilité d’une science-fiction satirique où l’anticipation, même si elle caricature en partie le monde de l’auteur, conserve sa valeur d’écart significatif...la notion de dystopie n’a toujours pas fait son apparition” (Bouchard 1993, 15-6). In the next period, 1975-1979, anti-utopia makes an appearance: “...l’anti-utopie ou contre-utopie, monde donné comme idéal mais dont on dénonce les illusions...” (23). In the next period, the discussion surrounding the definition and differentiation of the genre begins (31). But the definition is negotiated through the “classics” of the genre, such as 1984 and We, not with Québécois dytopias (39), of which there are already a fair number, as shown by Colas de la Noue. This does however show that French Québécois critics were beginning to think about and theorize the nature and definition of the genre, in Quebec periodicals and publications, such as imagine..., Solaris and even more “main stream” periodicals such as Nuit Blanche. The number of studies done by Quebec critics dealing with the dystopian genre in theory and in practice seems to far outweigh those done by English-Canadian critics in English-Canadian journals, except for one case.

**Ambiguous Dystopia/Critical Dystopia/Postcolonial Heterotopia**

Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale* has by far generated the largest volume of criticism of all of the Canadian dystopias, French or English. Harold Bloom has just edited and written an introduction to an entire collection of essays dealing exclusively with *The Handmaid’s Tale*. While a summary of all criticism dealing with *The Handmaid’s Tale* is outside of the scope of this study, I will focus on a select number of critics who focused on one particular aspect of her work; the notion of ambiguity. Chris Ferns and Amin Malak both attempt to situate the novel within the broader dystopian
tradition and how the novel pushes these boundaries. Both authors point out that one of
the major differences between *The Handmaid's Tale* and the three classics of dystopia
lies in its feminist perspective. Chris Ferns specifically looks at how women are used and
abused in the traditional dystopian novel, and points out how Atwood not only attacks
"the utopian authoritarian impulse, but also the dystopian response to it" (Ferns 1989,
381). In Fern's opinion, Atwood's dystopia:

...remains a dystopia where the lines of battle are far more
ambiguously drawn: while on the surface hardly less defeatist than
its predecessors, it avoids the sometimes oversimplified
alternatives which [traditional dystopias] present. Mere nostalgia
for the past, and the acceptance of a vaguely liberal conception of
"freedom" as the only alternative to conformity (which only
Huxley, among the early writers, seriously questions) are both
avoided. (381)

Ferns concludes that *The Handmaid's Tale* is in fact an "ambiguous" dystopia, subverting
and breaking away from the dystopian tradition. Although he does not call it ambiguous,
Malak nonetheless points to the significant shift in the novel's tone as compared to its
predecessors:

The novel's ironic tone...betokens a confident narrative strategy
that aims at treating a depressing material gently and gradually, yet
firmly, openly, and conclusively, thus skillfully succeeding in
securing the reader's sympathy and interest...[Atwood's] self-
assured depiction of the grim dystopian world gives an energetic
and meaningful impetus to the genre. (Malak, 15)

This irony leads Lois Feuer to conclude that *The Handmaid's Tale*, "refus[es] to resolve
ambiguities" (Feuer, 90). She continues, stating that

[t]he novel thus reaffirms and transforms a central attitude in the
dystopian tradition. Stylistically and thematically Atwood moves
far beyond Orwell in her wariness of "passionate intensity" about
one's righteousness. In the face of such menacing certainty as
essentialists and the religious right exhibit, the novel suggests that
the most humane response is an appropriate humility about one's
own absolutes, all except that which say our humanity is dependant
upon our remembering that one plus one plus one plus one does
not equal the abstract four (92).

What all of these critics are noting is that *The Handmaid’s Tale* deals with ambiguities
and ironies that the dystopian tradition did not. *The Handmaid’s Tale* remains in many
ways unresolved; whereas Winston Smith, D-503 and John Savage all are forced to
submit and succumb to the dystopic society, Offred achieves a level of resistance and
freedom, and is even able to escape in a multiplicity of forms. Coupled with Frens
comment about nostalgia and notions of freedom, we can begin to understand the notion
of the ambiguous dystopia.

The notion of ambiguity is one that has been applied to other dystopias, such as
*Player Piano* and *The World Inside*. In his article “Vonnegut’s *Player Piano*: An
Ambiguous Dystopia,” Howard P. Segal says:

Vonnegut’s refusal to propose escapism from technology and its
problems is also commendable. There is considerable *nostalgia* in
*Player Piano* but it is nostalgia for a *less* technological society
rather than for a non-technological society...For Vonnegut it is as
much an illusion that utopia—or, for that matter, any good
society—can come about without technology as it is that
technology is a panacea and the means to utopia. The problem...is
more human nature than technology. Hence the reduction of
technology and of technological domination would not themselves
bring about utopia—any utopia. (Segal, 174)

And as Frank Dietz points out in his article “Robert Silverburg’s *The World Inside* as an
Ambiguous Dystopia”: “*The World Inside* reveals the contradictions inherent in the
dystopian nostalgia for a Golden Age of pastoral bliss, thus questioning the very
possibility of utopia as anything short of an unfinished and unfinishable process” (Dietz,
104). The term ambiguous dystopia may appear to be relevant only in the context of
technical dystopias, which are looking back towards a more “pastoral” time without
technology. But as was shown in the case of *The Handmaid’s Tale* the term can be expanded to include nostalgia for the past of any kind, a time where the dystopian conditions did not exist, be they political or technological.

This concept is not limited to these three works, nor are they limited to seemingly recent developments in the dystopian genre. Colas de la Noue comes to much the same conclusion in her article dealing with Québécois dystopias:

> Avec leurs ambivalences et leurs contradictions, leurs tensions, avec leurs visions négatives ou statiques mais aussi leur ouverture timide sur ce qui est autre, les dystopies québécoises nous semblent pouvoir être qualifiées de ‘dystopies ambiguës’...Par la diversité de leurs images, leur opposition parfois, ces ‘dystopies ambiguës (malgré les limitations propres à la vision dystopique dont nous avons parlé) témoignent bien des hésitations idéologiques de la Révolution tranquille... (Colas de la Noue, 93-4).

Guy Bouchard looked at both *The Handmaid’s Tale* and *L’Euguélionne* by Louky Bersianik and calls them: “deux dystopie instables...Dans les deux cas, une image inchoative d’un avenir meilleur s’inscrit en filigrane dans le roman” (Bouchard 1992, 3). Ransom, in her article dealing with sovereignty dystopias, observes that “the writers of SFQ send varied and ambiguous messages about Québec sovereignty and its relationship to the issues of a colonial past, national identity, and individual versus collective rights” (Ransom, 456). Guy Bouchard, commenting on the five feminist utopia/dystopias, concludes that “the initial androcratic dystopia gives way to, directly or after certain mediations based on the inversion of the domination, to an androgynous inchoate eutopia²...[The values of the novels are]: refusal of masculine domination, refusal of a simple inversion of the domination as a final solution, and apology for the androgynous
society” (Bouchard 1995, 195). While others are beginning to see Canadian/Québécois
dystopias, the overall understanding of the dystopian genre seems to be evolving beyond
the notion of ambiguity.

Chris Ferns, in a later work dealing with The Handmaid’s Tale, adds a level of
complexity to the understanding of the dystopia:

This sense of force of historical continuity, of the overlap between
past, present, and future, enables Atwood to avoid the often
simplistic, polarized alternatives of earlier dystopian fiction. The
dualistic opposition between future and past – the one associated
with totalitarian conformity, the other with a vaguely liberal
conception of ‘freedom’ – is replaced by an altogether more
complex sense of their interrelationship. The result is a vision
which is critical, not only of utopia, or of the society to which
utopia proposes an alternative, but also of the dystopian response
itself. It is this critical – and indeed, self-critical – impulse which
may be seen to underlie a series of attempts to likewise transform
the nature of the utopian vision (Ferns 1999, 138).

This demonstrates an important shift in the language that he uses to describe what Atwood
does in her dystopian narrative. Instead of the term ‘ambiguous,’ Ferns is now using the
term ‘critical.’ This turn to the critical is reflected in a shift in theory when dealing with
dystopia. Sargent defines the critical dystopia as: “a non-existent society described in
considerable detail and normally located in time and space that the author intended a
contemporaneous reader to view as worse than the contemporary society but that
normally includes at least one eutopian enclave or holds out hope that dystopia can be
overcome and replaced with a eutopia” (quoted in Moylan 2000, 195). Moylan in fact
devotes an entire chapter to defining what is in fact the critical dystopia. He understands
the critical dystopia as being a product of the social changes that took place in the 80s.

2 “Eutopia” literally means “good place,” and is understood to be the realizable alternative to the
impossibility of the utopia, “no place.” It is a positive, possible world that is not perfect, but instead
attainable (Bouchard 1985, 185).
He explains that “several writers turned to dystopian strategies as a way to come to terms with changing, and enclosing, social realities...they did not simply revive dystopia but rather reworked it in the context of the economic, political, and cultural conditions of the decade” (Moylan 2000, 186). The movement starts, in part, with *The Handmaid’s Tale*. He calls the move towards the critical dystopia as “both a continuation of the long dystopian tradition and a distinctive new invention” (187). Moylan describes the development of critical dystopias as follows:

Although that embrace of openness (through resistance, enclaves, or even textual ambiguity) is already present in the classical and sf dystopias...it is both formally and politically foregrounded in the recent works. This, as the critical dystopias give voice and space to such dispossessed and denied subjects (and, I would add, to those diminished and deprived by the accompanying economic reconfigurations) they go on to explore ways to change the present system so that such culturally and economically marginalized peoples not only survive but also try to move towards creating a social reality that is shaped by an impulse to human self-determination and ecological health rather than one constricted by the narrow and destructive logic of a system intent only on enhancing competition in order to gain more profit for a select few. (189)

The shift of focus challenges the traditional utopian/dystopian paradigm. Critical dystopias offer an opportunity not only to critique those trends in “present” society that the author finds troubling, but also to steer the reader towards a progressive (as opposed to regressive) solution to the issue at hand.

Ralph Pordzik offers an entirely new term for understanding those dystopias that push the boundaries of the genre, particularly those created in a postcolonial context. He introduces the term “postcolonial heterotopia” in order to understand questioning and subversion of “the distinction between utopia, anti-utopia, and dystopia...by the
revisionism of western culture in the last four decades” (Pordzik, 4). He begins by defining heterotopias:

[They] are not mimetic texts embedded in a flow of congruously and purposefully related events directed towards a logical conclusion, but create themselves a fabric of spatial relations between various discourses, narratives, and points of view sustained by an endless process of differentiation and re-adjustment in the text. Heterotopia represents the site of conflict where a wide range of discourses...can be negotiated and tested against the backdrop of the strictly hierarchized closed-system model that usually informs our notion of the static uniformity of utopian or dystopian societies. (5)

Added to this concept of heterotopia is the concept of postcolonialism. What Pordzik states is the essential difference is that there “is a clear signal to the reader to acknowledge that the narrative first and foremost seeks to envisage a different world, and that the fictional space of the text has been turned upside down only to be reorganized according to a radically different, preferably postcolonial or cross-cultural, set of values and beliefs” (17). This differs from Moylan’s argument which does not prescribe to what end the critical dystopia will turn into a eutopia; for Pordzik, the end clearly leads to a postcolonial or cross-cultural eutopia. Also, critical dystopias, as Moylan understands them, begin as traditional dystopias would, but it is as the narrative evolves that we begin to recognize it as a critical one. For Pordzik, there is not requirement that the novel start off as a dystopian narrative. However, the reason why I include him in this study is because the majority of the books he does analyze in his study do begin as dystopias, an observation reinforced by Moylan himself in a review of Pordzik’s book (Moylan 2002, 267-8).

One of the clearest differences between the two concepts for understanding neo-dystopias, is the role of history in the narrative. For Pordzik, the postcolonial
hererotopia: “thwarts all efforts on the side of the reader to create a coherent illusion of history, meaning and representation in the text” (Pordzik, 5). But this also allows Pordzik to analyze the texts removed from their specific historical contexts, other than the “contextual analogy – a common sociocultural and/or historical background against which opposite writing strategies and perceptual alternatives can be developed” (18), in this case, colonialism and postcolonialism. Equally, his definition of what can be considered postcolonial in his study is problematic; he focuses on white settler colonies such as Canada, Australia and New Zealand, and also considers Ireland and Scotland in the mix. He also only studies those texts that are written in English. Moylan, in his review of Pordzik’s book, notes the weakness in the exclusion of history in the study of such postcolonial works:

Stressing a radical but abstracted openness and not engaging with actual processes of gaining and holding power (in the name of difference but also of democracy, justice, and ecological sanity) in the current period threatens to overlook one of the key places in which a concrete utopianism operates...Thus, by privileging these postmodern, postcolonial utopias as they advance global pluralism while distancing themselves from specific historical conditions and struggles, Pordzik is in danger of making his critical argument more amenable to the reified “liberal pluralism” asserted in the “millennial dreams” of a globalizing economy and culture that simultaneously denies and co-opts the very diversity and difference that gives rise to such writing in order to produce a new (albeit cosmically diverse) subject of planetary capitalism. (Moylan 2002, 270)

Essentially, Moylan is accusing Pordzik of being “utopian” (ie ideal) in his reading and turning it into his own dystopic vision. Regardless, history plays a central role in understanding what makes a text ambiguous, critical or a postcolonial heterotopia.

**Subject Area: Brown Girl in the Ring and Récits de Médilhault**
Unlike the discrepancy between criticism concerning English- and French-
Canadian dystopias, there is significant work on Brown Girl in the Ring and very little
concerning Récits de Médilhaut. Nalo Hopkinson’s Brown Girl in the Ring, published in
1998, is the most recent dystopia discussed in this thesis. The book was published as a
result of winning the Warner-Aspect First Novel Contest. Most of the scholarship that
exists about the author concerns itself with her Afro-Caribbean heritage and how she
incorporates these aspects (language, spirituality, traditions) into contemporary SF. In an
interview published in African American Review, Hopkinson denies writing any of her
stories with the goal of getting a message across: “Every time I’ve set out to write a story
with a message in it, it’s died on the vine...It doesn’t work if my fiction is really veiled
lectures on what I think people would be doing if they knew what was good for them”
(Rutledge 1999, 593). Gregory Rutledge also deals with the dystopic conditions of her
novel in his article “Nalo Hopkinson’s Urban Jungle and the Cosmology of Freedom:
Capitalism Underdeveloped the Black Americas and Left a Brown Girl in the Ring.” As
can be inferred from the title, the author traces how the capitalist system inspired
Hopkinson’s dystopian vision and how her picture of inner-city Toronto is not that far
from reality. Neal Barker, in his article “Syncretism: A Federalist Approach to Canadian
Science Fiction,” suggests that syncretism, which “entails the configuration of various
unified essences—be it the nation-state, ethnicity, race, language, the body, or time—and
the fusion of racial differences” (Baker, 220), is a solution to current social difficulties,
and as an extension, so too is federalism (227). There are also a number of interviews
with Nalo Hopkinson and essays by the author herself that shed invaluable information
concerning her works. Very few deal directly with the idea of the text as a dystopia,
critical dystopia or postcolonial heterotopia, although Pordzik does include the work in his bibliography of Canadian examples of the postcolonial heterotopia, even though the work is not discussed in his study.

*Récits de Médilhault* by Anne Legault is another very recent dystopia. Published in 1994, this short story cycle concerns itself with the interconnected lives of a handful of people living in Médilhault, a city-state we come to recognise as Montreal. Legault is an award-winning playwright, winning a Governor-General’s Award in 1986 for *La Visite des Sauvages*. This narrative is her first non-dramatic publication. Most critical work concerns her plays. Two quite positive reviews of the work identify it clearly with the dystopian tradition (Belleau, 29) along with its attitude towards history (Dupuis, 43). François Belleau states: “Je ne sais si l’écrivaine se réclame de la lignée des Zamiatine, Huxley et Orwell. Il reste que *Récits de Médilhault* est un livre riche en symboles et, aussi, une métaphore puissante de notre monde (nos politiciens lisent-ils? En tout cas je leur recommande vivement ce livre” (Belleau, 29). Simon Dupuis observes that “[l]’ignorance est un thème fort de la plupart des nouvelles du recueil et l’on ne s’étonnera pas de constater que l’histoire se répète, cyclique de façon quasiment immuable. Serions-nous les nouveaux Romains décadents sur le point d’êtres bafoués par les hordes barbares venues d’on ne sait où?” (Dupuis, 43). But outside of these two reviews, there exists very little criticism concerning the novel, dystopian or otherwise.

**Science, Magic, le fantastique and dystopias**

While it will be argued that *Brown Girl in the Ring* and *Récits de Médilhault*, with their negative futuristic views of society based on “current” socio-economic/political trends, should be considered dystopias, the question also needs to be asked: should these
narratives also be considered science fiction? This question needs to be dealt with because the dystopian genre has historically been associated with, or considered a sub-genre of science fiction, with technology at its core. Booker states that “[s]cience has played a major role in the history of utopian thinking and in the modern turn from utopia to dystopia” (The Dystopian Impulse, 5). This sentiment is reiterated, repeated, and reinforced by a number of scholars: Johnson, Calder, Ruppert, Elliot, Kumar, Hillegas, Fogg, Aldridge, Suvin, Ferns, Zaki, Baker. Also, as seen in the case of Suvin and Ketterer, dystopias are typically studied in books that deal with science fiction. Science Fiction Studies has published a number of articles dealing with dystopias. Even Pordzik and Moylan, although pointing to developments in the dystopian genre, essentially maintain its reliance on science fiction. Moylan’s book is titled Scraps of the Untainted Sky: Science Fiction, Utopia, Dystopia, and his thoughts on critical dystopias have appeared in the collection Learning From Other Worlds: Estrangement, Cognition, and the Politics of Science Fiction and Utopia and in Science Fiction Studies. In fact, Moylan offers a review of Pordzik’s book in said journal. Pordzik himself relies heavily on Darko Suvin’s theory of the novum for his comparative analysis, stating that “[the novum] can help to avoid the potential for confusion inherent in a cross-cultural approach to postcolonial utopian fiction [...] and therefore yields insights into the ways in which writers employ similar conventions to create new, original plot possibilities and to increase or maintain interpretive plurality” (Pordzik, 13). It should be noted that novum is a term created exclusively to explain, understand and theorise science fiction (Pordzik, 12-15, see also Suvin, 63-84 for a fuller discussion of the concept of the novum).
The societies dealt with in this study, however, tend towards an ambivalent view towards technology, if technology is even portrayed at all. In *Brown Girl in the Ring*, technology is virtually non-existent in the Burn. Electricity has been cut off for most people. The subway no longer runs. People walk or ride bikes because there are no cars, except of course for Rudy’s. This is not to say that technological advances have not been made: the catalyst for the story is the Premier’s search for a heart because the porcine transplant program is no longer viable, due to the appearance of “Virus Epsilon” (*Brown*, 39). Tony is given very sophisticated equipment in order to keep Gros-Jeanne’s heart viable for transplant. And while the spread of Virus Epsilon and its forcing the abandonment of pig heart transplant would seem to be a condemnation of technology, what it definitely highlights is the inequality that exists within the society: technology exists for those in positions of power and represents material wealth. On the other hand, technology is associated with the society outside of the Burn, and this outside world is ultimately called into question through the narrative.

So what are we to make of the use of technology? Technology can be seen as helping those in the Burn, shown when the street kids use projections and sounds to fool Rudy into thinking there were more of them then there actually was (*Brown*, 182-3). But Gros-Jeanne herself seemed to be sceptical of scientific advances, choosing to use her bush medicine more often then the prescription medicine/drugs that were in her possession. But of course, as science/technology can be used for good and evil, so too can Gros-Jeanne’s knowledge of bush medicine, as seen in Rudy’s use of Buff as an illegal narcotic and also in his attempts at controlling the body and the spirit. The traditional is shown as having the capability to be just as destructive as the scientific and
the technological, if not more so. Technology is never shown in a directly destructive way. In fact, it is the technology of the transplant that saves Premiere Uttley and allows for her ultimate transformation to take place. While I again defer analyzing the subject of “magic” until later, technology and magic combine in order to “cure” Uttley, ultimately, I think, redeeming technology. Traditionally, dystopias have portrayed technology negatively, while Brown Girl portrays technology at worst ambivalently, and at best redeeming and even essential.

Récits de Médilhault also has a complex relationship with science and technology. Certainly, the situation within the city of Médilhault, and also outside of the city, is one that closely resembles that which is described in the Burn, if not worse. In fact, the back of the book describes the situation as being “un nouveau Moyen Âge.” Technology is once again used as a way to differentiate between the classes/castes; those in power can travel using “flying machines.” On the other hand, the cataclysm that is referenced alludes to a nuclear war\(^3\), the ultimate negative use of technology, and a traditional dystopian fear. But we must again attempt to understand the origins and reasons behind the creation of Médilhault if we are to understand the narrative’s attitude towards technology. And this brings us to the question concerning the infamous screens mentioned throughout the narrative, both in the past as well as in the narrative’s present. The screens are the only things in Médilhault that use electricity. And they are supposed to give each caste their own version of a particular story/novel/history/knowledge.

But have books gone to the wayside because of the screens? It doesn’t seem that way. As stated in the story “Big” by the narrator: “Il avait été décidé, au nom de la
démocratisation du savoir, que les livres étaient des objets désuets et que leur contenu pouvait être transféré sur l'écran axial..." (Récits, 23). This sentiment is re-iterated by another character, Marais, who was a guardian of books: "."..Déjà, on les appelle les livres sybillins, ce n'est pas pour rien, leur continu doit être décodé et simplifié..." (Récits, 86).

The screens are a malevolent use of technology, but not inherently evil, as pointed out by Big’s father: “Les écrans n'étaient pas mauvais, ils sont tombés dans de mauvaises mains” (Récits, 24).

Were the screens not evil in the past as well? Lark addresses this concern when he sees Chaplin for the first time: “On leur avait si bien injecté l'idée du bonheur, à ces gens-là, qu'ils ont fini par être en manque” (Récits, 125). But Absalon doesn’t see this as a particularly bad thing, this ability for the screens to make one dream: "."..on a bien veillé à ce que ces maudits écrans fassent peur au lieu de faire rêver. Mais nous ne le savons même plus, nous avons oublié qu'il en a été autrement” (Récits, 23). Of course, this is far from the only reason given for the installation of the dystopic state: the story of “Épi,” which takes place in the contemporary present, does not mention screens at all. And it also should be noted that although screens are talked about at length in the narrative, they are never actually shown being used.

How can a technology so essential to the structure of Médihault be at once so physically absent from the narrative? Finally, it is a historic piece of technology that provides hope for the future for the group of one hundred: the printing press. The invention of the printing press represented a huge step forward in technology, but also in the dissemination of information and knowledge. Suddenly, access to the printed word

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3 Although it is never made clear that the disaster that occurred was in fact nuclear, Lark makes a reference to Chernobyl: “Je sais qu'il y a un endroit dans ce siècle où ma douleur existe déjà. Mais Tchernobyl est
was not limited to the clerics and those of the upper-class; books could be mass-produced at a low cost. And this piece of technology, like the books, is saved because it is understood that it can be of use to the group. Ambivalence reigns yet again in terms of science and technology in *Récits*, but ultimately science and technology is once again seen as essential to the survival and evolution of the society.

Instead of falling within the genre of science fiction, these two dystopias seem to fall more readily into the category magical realism or le fantastique. Magic and elements of the fantastic are essential to the two narratives to be studied, as essential as technology in more traditional dystopias. In an article entitle “Fantasy as an Anti-Utopian Mode,” Brian Attebery explains how, “[f]antasy and utopia are neighbours at war” (4). Fantasy, for the author, “offers a way of looking at the world and mankind that is not compatible with utopia’s hopes or dystopia’s despair” (6). Weber would agree with Atterbery’s last point concerning the dystopia, looking instead at the situation between dystopia and fantasy from a slightly different perspective: “Insofar as the anti-utopian allows us a glimmer of hope, it lies in the instincts, in fantasy, in the irrational, in the peculiarly individualistic and egotistical characteristics most likely to shatter any system of order” (88). These article appeared, however, in 1983 and 1971 respectively, long before critical dystopias appeared, when the despair is called into question, using similar strategies as those suggested by Weber. But what I am talking about for the purpose of this study is not fantasy or the irrational, but the magical or le fantastique.

The difference is outlined by Stanley Péan, who states that fantasy “relate des aventures se déroulant dans des univers indéfinis ou pseudo-historiques régis par des lois qui leur sont propres et où interviennent des êtres souvent sur-naturels (elfes, lutins, etc.) dans l’Ancien Monde...” (*Récits*, 99).
dotés de pouvoirs magiques” (Péan, 163, emphasis added). In fantasy, we are missing what Péan calls the “irréductible implausibilité” and Jean Désy calls “l’inquiétante étrangeté.” Both authors point to a type of rupture, an existence of two words in a work that is le fantastique: “Sera étiqueté fantastique tout récit introduisant un grain de sable dans la machine bien huilée de la réalité objective, sous forme d’un phénomène surnaturel...” (Péan, 162); “L’artiste a beau créer le monde le plus délirant, le plus ‘à l’envers’ et apparemment le moins conforme à la réalité, s’il ne parvient pas à juxtaposer sa création à un univers ‘réel’, le fantastique n’existe pas” (Désy, 26). Désy and Boivin et al, translate fantasy as “merveilleux.” In fantasy, the world created runs according to its own laws. In le fantastique, there exists both the rational world and the world that runs by its own rules. It is the juxtaposition of these two worlds that makes a work a part of le fantastique⁴. This idea of the juxtaposition of two worlds is repeated in Wendy B. Faris’ definition of magical realism, in fact it is implied in its name. Both the magical and the real are present, and the two worlds often collide:

The text contains an ‘irreducible element’ of magic, something we cannot explain according to the laws of the universe as we know them...(Faris, 166); Descriptions detail a strong presence of the phenomenal world – this is the realism in magical realism...(169); The reader may hesitate (at one point or another) between two contradictory understandings of events...(171); We experience the closeness or near-merging of two realms, two world...(172).

Therefore, although Attebery claims that fantasy and dystopia are in competition and in no way related, the two texts dealt with in this study are not fantasy, but in fact le fantastique or magical realism.

⁴ For a more complete discussion of the difference between “le fantastique” and “le merveilleux,” see Boivin et al. 1992, p12-14.
It should not be surprising, then, that the magical real/le fantastique are being used in the dystopian genre, particularly the critical dystopia/postcolonial heterotopian incarnation of the genre. As Maurice Émond explains:

C’est que le fantastique semble entretenir un lien privilégié avec les périodes de mutation, de crise, de quête d’identité. Il est lui-même l’écart poussé à la limite. Il y a dans le fantastique une irrévérence innée. Le fantastique est transgression. Il s’approprie le réel pour mieux lui arracher un aveu d’impuissance, pour mettre en évidence ses failles, ses fissures d’où surgissent des figures excessives, figures mêmes de l’indicible. Le fantastique s’ouvre sur le vide, une absence qu’il ne cherche qu’à exacerber...Le fantastique n’est pas au service d’une croyance ou d’une idéologie. Mais il se nourrit des croyances d’une époque pour mieux les démasquer sans être en mesure de les remplacer... (Émond, 41).

If the dystopian genre is primarily about dealing with fears and flaws within a given society, then it shares that goal with le fantastique. And as the definition of dystopia is pushed to the limit and problematised, what better tool to use than le fantastique?

Magical realism is described in much the same way as le fantastique:

Magical realist texts are subversive; their in-betweeness, their all-at-onceness encourages resistance to monologic political and cultural structures, a feature that has made the mode particularly useful to writers in postcolonial cultures and, increasingly, women. Hallucinatory scenes and events, fantastic/phantasmagoric characters are used in several of the magical realist works...to indict recent political and cultural perversions. History is inscribed, often in detail, but in such a way that actual events and existing institutions are not always privileged and are certainly not limiting: historical narrative is no longer chronicle but clairvoyance. (Zamora and Faris, 6)

In the subversions of the genre that look to push the boundaries of dystopias, but still question social and political situations, why not use magic realism, particularly in a sub-genre that includes postcolonial in its name, postcolonial heterotopia?
Quebec scholars have always historically studied science fiction and le fantastique, but have not as of yet looked at le fantastique elements in dystopias. The periodicals *Solaris, Imagine...* and *L'année de la science-fiction et du fantastique québécois* all deal with science fiction and le fantastique, as do the critical bibliographies and studies (see Boivin et al, 1993, 1994). And as stated by Michel Lord:

> Nous constatons que le continu des séquences narratives (leur rapport ‘référentiel’ à l’univers du possible et de l’impossible: passage magique ou technologique dans un autre espace, par exemple) est décisif dans la constitution des deux esthétiques, que le processus du descriptif est aussi important dans les deux genres...Enfin, le type de questionnement sur le réel, l’irréel et le nouveau peut varier, mais, au fond, l’irrationnel n’est pas exclusif au fantastique, et le rationnel, à la SF...cela montre tout de même que les rapports internes entre les deux formes sont plus étroits qu’on ne le croit généralement... (Lord, 105-6).

The strongest argument concerning the lack of scholarship concerning le fantastique dystopia in Quebec is simply that it has so far gone unnoticed. Another argument as to why no one has yet theorized the magical real/fantastique dystopic fiction is because of the complications the marriage of genres implies, particularly if one bases their understanding of science fiction on Darko Suvin’s theories.

Science fiction relies on what Darko Suvin calls the *novum*: “SF is distinguished by the narrative dominance or hegemony of a fictional “novum” (novelty, innovation) validated by cognitive logic” (Suvin, 63). The “cognitive logic” comes from “scientific cognition” and totally “differentiates SF from the ‘super natural’ literary genres (mythical tales, fairy tales, and so on, as well as horror and/or heroic fantasy in that narrow sense)” (Suvin, 65). Cognition plays an even greater role in dystopian fiction than in SF. We as readers of dystopia must believe the probability of the *novum* socially and then scientifically. As outlined by Deer, in a dystopia “the author needs both to condemn
particular social injustices and to portray the mechanisms of oppression as credible enough, as sufficiently powerful and seductive, to represent a believable evil, not an irrelevant or far-fetched one” (Deer, 215). The reader must achieve “cognition” in order to be pushed into social action (Fitting 1990, Murphy, Banerjee and Colas de la Noue all share this sentiment). The dystopian novum does not rely exclusively on scientific cognition in order to be understood, although it plays an important role. However, what happens when scientific cognition is removed from the equation and replaced by magic/le fantastique, that which is by definition unexplained/unexplainable?

Pordzik looks at what he calls “magic dystopias” in his chapter “Treasurehouses of the Unexpected: Magical Realism and the Transformation of Dystopian Space in Postcolonial Fiction.” In it, he analyzes five books that use the magical in their dystopian narrative. Pordzik states that the use of magic

 [...] undermines the cognitive constraints of the classical dystopian text—i.e. the specific rhetoric needed to convince the reader of the plausibility of the narrated world—by writing a novel that depends on the sustained opposition of two discrete systems of perception for its narrative potency and eschews interpretive closure by avoiding to let one collapse into the other. (Pordzik, 122)

While I would agree that this is one of the effects of using magic in a dystopic text, and does lend to the narratives’ ability to be critical and subversive, calling into question dominant forms of knowledge and power (130), Pordzik neglects to harmonize this view of the evolution of the dystopian genre with Suvin’s theories about cognitive estrangement and the novum, two concepts that Pordzik celebrates as the basis for his comparison in the second chapter of his study (12-17). While he does not explicitly say so, it could be inferred by the use of the term “cognitive constraints” that the novum itself
has become too constraining, dominant and homogenizing for the genre. Pordzik does not reconcile the concept of the *novum* and the idea of the magical dystopia.

Sisk also introduces the theory of the *novum* in his study of dystopian literature by first looking at Todorov’s structuralist methodology of understanding the fantastic. Sisk understands Suvin’s theory of the *novum* and cognitive estrangement as an extension of Todorov’s structural analysis of fantastic literature. According to Todorov, the fantastic is characterised by “incertitude”:

Dans un monde qui est bien le nôtre, celui que nous connaissons, sans diables, sylphides, ni vampires, se produit un événement qui ne peut s’expliquer par les lois de ce même monde familier. Celui qui perçoit l’événement doit opter pour l’une des deux solutions possibles : ou bien il s’agit d’une illusion des sens, d’un produit de l’imagination et les lois du monde restent alors ce qu’elles sont ; ou bien l’événement a véritablement eu lieu, il est partie intégrante de la réalité, mais alors cette réalité est régie par des lois inconnues de nous...Le fantastique occupe le temps de cette incertitude ; dès qu’on choisit l’une ou l’autre réponse, on quitte le fantastique pour entrer dans un genre voisin, l’étrange ou le merveilleux. Le fantastique, c’est l’hésitation éprouvée par un être qui ne connaît que les lois naturelles, face à un événement en apparence surnaturel. (Todorov, 29)

Sisk then goes on to state that Suvin, although dealing with science fiction, which Suvin himself clearly differentiates from the fantastic, is continuing Todorov’s mission: “Yet Suvin, like Todorov, resists denominating any one element (science, technology, future setting, etc.) as the key ingredient for science fiction” (Sisk, 8). Fisk shows the similarities between the two genres by stating that “Science fiction renders the real unreal and creates an atmosphere of unfamiliarity in which the reader may be brought to consider issues in a fictive context” (Fisk, 8-9). Dystopia is a further evolution of this process of “cognitive estrangement.” Sisk does not address the possible connection between the two genres any further, nor does he examine other points of intersection
between the two genres. He abandons the discussion of the fantastic and in fact, seems to indicate that the dystopia is the ultimate form of cognitive estrangement and social questioning. Sisk does not recognise the dystopic possibilities of the fantastic, although he does recognise the connection, nor does Todorov recognise the pseudo-scientific possibilities of the fantastic. Take for example how magic is dealt with in a *New York Times* review of *Brown Girl in the Ring*:

If you are wondering why a story that takes the existence of wonder-working spirits for granted is science fiction, then you have not fallen under the spell of Hopkinson’s island-accented prose. She treats spirit-calling the way other science fiction writers treat nanotechnology or virtual reality: like the spirits themselves, the spirit-callers follow rules as clear to them (if not always to the reader) as the equations of motion or thermodynamic are to scientists and engineers. (Jonas, 26)

However in analyzing Todorov in relation to how Sisk understands his relationship to science fiction and, as an extension, to dystopia, we can begin to conceptualize how we can bring together a theory that deals with both the fantastic and the dystopic within the same genre.

Moylan outlines that one of the formal features that gives the critical dystopia its force is the practice of “genre blurring.” As he explains: “By self-reflexively borrowing ‘specific conventions from other genres’, critical dystopias more often ‘blur’ the received boundaries of the dystopian form and thereby expand rather than diminish its creative potential for critical expression” (Moylan 2000, 189). Both Moylan and Pordzik deal with significant shifts in the dystopian genre and acknowledge the possibility of the magic/fantastique joining with the dystopian genre, but at the same time make no effort to reconcile this belief with Suvin’s theory of the *novum*. 
Peter G. Stillman offers a simplified understanding of Suvin's theory of cognitive estrangement: "critical dystopias provide a new world in which the familiar is defamiliarized by being presented outside the dominant interpretive paradigms, from a new perspective, and in a novel context..." (Stillman, 366). My hypothesis is that magic/fantastique aspects of the neo-dystopias can serve as that part of the narrative that defamiliarizes the reader. The dystopian situation, the familiar features of the dystopia, have become that which leads the reader to cognition, but it is the magic/fantastique that serves as the element which innovates and invigorates the genre. Perhaps this is because the technological future that we once fantasized about has arrived or is in the process of arriving. Perhaps it is because the idea of a negative future has become cliché. Regardless, as Pordzik has pointed out, magic/fantastique has arrived in dystopia, and now we are left to try and understand its role and its effects on our understanding of the genre.
Chapter 2. Brown Girl in the Ring

Brown Girl in the Ring is Nalo Hopkinson’s first novel. It incorporates aspects of dystopia, utopia, magic realism, postcolonialism, Canadian history along with Caribbean history and spirituality. The novel provides a site within which to question a variety of aspects of dystopia. Using magical realism, the novel also examines questions of hybridization of culture and history. Finally, Brown Girl in the Ring can be considered a critical dystopia, as per Moylan’s definition.

The majority of the novel takes place in Toronto’s inner-city, sometime in the near future:

Imagine a cartwheel half-mired in muddy water, its hub just clearing the surface. The spokes are the satellite cities that form Metropolitan Toronto: Etobicoke and York to the west; North York to the north; Scarborough and East York to the east. The Toronto city core is the hub. The mud itself is vast Lake Ontario, which cuts Toronto off at its southern border. In fact, when water-rich Toronto was founded, it was nicknamed Muddy York, evoking the condition of its unpaved streets in springtime. Now imagine the hub of that wheel as being rusted through and through. When Toronto’s economic base collapsed, investors, commerce, and government withdrew into the suburb cities, leaving the rotten core to decay. Those who stayed were the ones who couldn’t or wouldn’t leave. The street people. The poor people. The ones who didn’t see the writing on the wall, or those who were too stubborn to give up their homes. Or who saw the decline of authority as an opportunity. As the police force left, it sparked large-scale chaos in the city core: the Riots. The satellite cities quickly raised roadblocks at their boarders to keep Toronto out. The only unguarded exit from the city core was now over water, by boat or prop plane from the Toronto Island mini-airport to the American side of Niagara Falls. In the twelve years since the Riots, repeated efforts to reclaim and rebuild the core were failing: fear of vandalism and violence was keeping 'burb people out. Rudy ruled his posse now, and he couldn’t have cared less about Premier Uttley’s reelection platform. (Brown, 3-4)
This is the reader’s introduction to Toronto of the future. This particular passage is useful to understanding not only what has happened to Toronto, but also leaves us clues as to the political/power situation contained within. It reiterates the attitude expressed by Rudy, the story’s antagonist: “Posse ain’t business with politics. Is we a-rule things here now” (3). Rudy and his posse of drug dealers now run the core. The aforementioned Premier Uttley needs a heart transplant, and in order to ensure that she receives a human heart (due to the outbreak of “Virus Epsilon” in pig hearts that were being used for transplants), Rudy is contacted. And he is given the orders to procure the heart by any means necessary.

The dystopic situation in the novel is quite interesting. Much like the dystopian classics, *Brown Girl* presents the reader with two possible worlds: the dystopic world of inner-city Toronto, cut off from the outside world. But while the *We, 1984* and *Brave New World* presented the alternative as the natural, pastoral past, *Brown Girl’s* alternative is the suburbs, an alternative whose desirability the author actively questions through Ti-Jeanne. This questioning further differentiates the work from the traditional dystopian narrative. There are also similarities between the dystopian set up of *Brown Girl* and other dystopian narratives, such as *The Handmaid’s Tale, Player Piano* and *Fahrenheit 451*. Erika Gottlieb calls these last three dystopias “emergency” dystopias, stating that “the new [...] ruling class does not start out with a consistent utopian ideology; it promises to deal with an emergency situation, to find an allegedly efficient solution to a crisis” (9). This would best describe how the situation degenerated in Hopkinson’s dystopic Toronto. As for the plausibility of the extreme situation imagined for Toronto, Gregory Rutledge points out: “The economic problems of Miami and Detroit, both US
metropolises with predominantly or significantly non-White populations in the city proper, suggest that Hopkinson’s novel is not as fantastic as it would seem” (Rutledge 2001, 23). Although Rutledge mentions two American cities for comparison, the economic concerns that Hopkinson expresses are very real within a North American context.

Ti-Jeanne, who Nalo Hopkinson defines in an interview as representing “everywoman” (Rutledge 1999, 598), is the reluctant protagonist of the novel. Through Ti-Jeanne, the reader is forced to question and re-evaluate of the relationship between utopic and dystopic ideals. Ti-Jeanne lives with her Grandmother, Gros-Jeanne and her newborn son in the Burn, which is considered one of the worst areas of Muddy York/Downtown Toronto. They have taken up residence in the “old” Riverdale Farm, growing food and herbs in the garden while having transformed the “farmhouse” into a makeshift hospital, where Gros-Jeanne administers physical (and spiritual) healing to those who come to her. Tony is the father of Ti-Jeanne’s baby, and is a member of Rudy’s posse. He is also a buff addict, the drug of choice of the particular time. Ti-Jeanne also “could see with more than sight. Sometimes she saw how people were going to die” (Brown, 9). But she rejects these visions, and rejects her Caribbean heritage. She distrusts Gros-Jeanne’s traditional remedies, is embarrassed by the discussion of these practices in public, tries to deny the visions that have been haunting her, flee the teaching and preaching of her grandmother, and dreams of moving out to the suburbs with Tony and their child. As the story progresses, Ti-Jeanne is forced to face her gift of being a seer, accept that Rudy is in fact her grandfather and Crazy Betty (the blind woman who wanders the streets) is her mother, and, when Gros-Jeanne is sacrificed for
her heart, Ti-Jeanne is finally forced to incorporate all that she has learned in order to
defeat Rudy and restore order to the Inner-City as well as to the spiritual world.

**Utopia/Dystopia?**

One key aspect that both Moylan and Pordzik cite as being an important element
in differentiating more traditional utopias/dystopias from their more recent counterparts is
their ability to question “utopian uniformity and dystopian totality” (Pordzik, 168) and
“bring utopian and dystopian tendencies to bear on their exposés of the present moment
and their explorations of new forms of oppositional agency” (Moylan 2000, 198-9).

*Brown Girl* is no exception to this exploration and questioning of the relationship
between utopia and dystopia. Certainly, the initial description of the state of Downtown
Toronto would lead readers to believe that we have reached a dystopian state: total
isolation, abject poverty, a crime lord in charge, disinterest from those in “authentic”
positions of power (the Premier, the middle and upper-class), a wall that physically
confines those who live in the inner-city, cutting them off from entering the suburbs.
And the attitude that the situation is less-than-ideal, to say the least, is reiterated
throughout the first half of the novel by Ti-Jeanne. She is constantly dreaming of a life in
the suburbs, her interpretation of a “better life”:

> Maybe a little apartment in one of the suburban cities outside the
> Metro core. Maybe North York or Scarborough, where she’s heard
> there were jobs and people could afford to drive cars and wear
> store-bought clothes. They would both find work, and Mami
> [Gros-Jeanne] could come to live with them and leave Toronto
> people to their own hell. (*Brown*, 33).

Tony reiterates this sentiment when talking to Ti-Jeanne, justifying his involvement with
the Posse: “And what good would that [fixing bikes] do me? Eh? Penny here, penny
there, never enough to really live on, never have anything nice? Is a good way to die poor, Ti-Jeanne!” (Brown, 22). For Tony as well, the answer to all their problems lies outside in the suburbs. For these two, the only means of success is through purchasing power, “nice things.” And all of this material wealth can be obtained in the suburbs. As put by Rutledge: “For [Ti-Jeanne], the culture of romance, upward mobility, and middle-class existence, all of which stress individual as opposed to communal development, were to be preferred” (32). Rutledge goes on to explain that “various aspects of self-aggrandisement and capital accumulation...almost become a form of capitalistic mysticism individuals like Tony desperately seek to master” (Rutledge 2001, 35). So, for Ti-Jeanne and Tony especially, Muddy York has become a dystopia, because in contrast to the outside, the suburbs, where they think that they can achieve their utopian goals of “capital accumulation,” Muddy York offers no such opportunities. But how “utopic” is the world outside of the Burn?

There are a few instances where life outside of the inner-city are described. One such instance is in the old library where the librarian has put up a time-line of headlines titled: “TORONTO: THE MAKING OF A DONUT HOLE” (Brown, 10). We read on the next page the following:

TEMAGAMI INDIANS TAKE ONTARIO TO COURT: AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL FUNDS TEME-AUGAMI ANISHNABAI LAND CLAIM

FEDERAL GOVT. CUTS TRANSFER PAYMENTS TO PROVINCE BY 30%, CITES INTERNATIONAL TRADE EMBARGO OF TEMAGAMI PINE

JOBLESS RATE JUMPS 10%: TEMAGAMI LAWSUIT IS FUELLING ONTARIO RECESSION, SAYS LABOUR MINISTER
CRIME AT ALL-TIME HIGH BUT BUDGET CUTS FORCE
ONTARIO PROVINCIAL POLICE TO DOWNSIZE (Brown, 11)

The headlines go on to describe the mass-exodus of business from Toronto and the
subsequent Riots. What is significant about the first headlines is the economic downturn
of the entire province, not just of Toronto. This bleak economic outlook is reiterated by
Premiere Uttley:

They’re going to vote for Brunner, damn his tanned, muscled hide.
Or Lewis, God forbid, with her smarmy make-work programs…I
had to give the blasted Indians their blasted stewardship. I
practically had orders from the feds, what with Amnesty
International breathing down our necks. Their international
sanctions had been starving the Canadian economy for years. We
needed to be able to export Temagami pine and water again.
(Brown, 38-9)

What this reveals is that the economic condition of the province (in fact the entire
country) is still in shambles. One would have to wonder if Ti-Jeanne and Tony were
really heading for greener pastures if they left the inner-city for the suburbs with the
economy in the condition portrayed, necessitating “make-work programs” and relying on
the export of natural resources.

Uttley also represents another “evil” of the system outside of the Burn; she only
cares about being socially responsible when it is beneficial to her personal goals and
interests, in this case, her re-election. Her opposition to the porcine organ farms and her
insistence on receiving a human heart are rooted in how the polls would swing in her
favor:

Constantine [Uttley’s advisor] tapped in some more data.
‘Twenty-three percent of those polled are voters. Look at what
happens to your chances of reelection when we sway them to your
side by having you bring back voluntary human organ donation.’
He keyed in the new chart. Uttley felt her eyebrows rise at the
result: 62 percent voter support in her favour. (Brown, 39-40)
The Premier also only granted the Native group their “blasted” stewardship after the economy has suffered enough. Neither of the decisions made by the Premier that are presented to us through the narrative reflect any social consciousness nor any motivation outside of entirely selfish ones. Uttley seems to be a leader in the vein of those in 1984: power for power’s sake. Although a democratic process, Uttley’s reelection seems less about democratic process and more about manipulation, propaganda, which Gottlieb identifies as: “the seductive utopian promises of a dictatorship hiding behind the mask of the Messiah” (Gottlieb, 10). Not to mention that those inside Muddy York cannot vote. Is this world outside of the Burn truly better than the one inside the Burn?

Premier Uttley has her counterpart in Rudy inside the Burn. It is through Rudy that Uttley will procure her heart (illegally). And his reasons for assuming and holding power are equally as selfish as Uttley’s. A former buff-addict himself, Rudy used revenge and anger to fuel his rise to power:

“Oh I know you can’t see no scar or nothing on me face now. Me does keep meself young and good-looking nowadays. No scar, no scratch, that me duppy don’t fix it for me. And it take away the craving for buff, too.

“So yes, posse do for me that night. And them wasn’t the first one to do me bad, no, sir. From I born, people been taking advantage. Poor all me born days. Come up to Canada, no work. Me wife and all kick me out of me own house. Blasted cow. If it wasn’t for me, she woulda still be cleaning rich people toilets back home, and is so she treat me. Just because me give she little slap two-three time when she make mouth run away’pon me.” Anger at the injustice of it all burned again in Rudy. But it wasn’t like that now. Nobody took advantage of him now. (Brown, 131)

Rudy, according to Rutledge, is “one whose rapacious habits for socioeconomic empowerment run unchecked…” (Rutledge 2001, 35). One could say the same thing about Uttley. Uttley’s assistant is trained to produce the best election results by any
means necessary, and only questions Uttley’s decisions when they seem to indicate a “social conscience” (Brown, 239) on her part. No one in Rudy’s Posse would think to question his choices and judgment; they were all too afraid of him, for good reason. But Rudy too wears the mask of the Messiah over the face of a dictator: he offers those who are loyal to him a steady job and steady pay (something that is rare in the Burn). Given the apparent socioeconomic condition of the world outside of Toronto and the parallels between those who hold positions of power inside and outside of the inner-city, Hopkinson leads the reader to question not only the validity of Tony’s and Ti-Jeanne’s views of the outside as a better place, but also their opinion that the Burn is dystopic.

Ti-Jeanne begins to question her utopic dream of the suburbs when she is truly forced to make a decision as to whether to leave what has been her home for most of her life or attempt to escape to the suburbs: “The thought of the ‘burbs scared Ti-Jeanne. She knew it was safer. She knew that there were hospitals and corner stores and movie theatres, but all she could imagine were broad streets with cars zooming by too fast to see who was in them, and people huddled in their houses except for jumping into their cars to drive to and from work” (Brown, 111). When pushed and Ti-Jeanne has to decide if she is going to follow Tony: “Leave the Burn, leave her grandmother’s home and the people she knew, to live in the barren ‘burbs with a man who’s rather slash buff than work. Would she do it? ‘When you get settled,’ she said, ‘send word for me’” (Brown, 113, emphasis added). Throughout her deliberations about life in the suburbs, she begins to realize that she belongs to a bigger family, a larger community that she would be abandoning for the “barren” suburbs. Despite Rudy’s best efforts, Uttley’s ignorance, and Ti-Jeanne and Tony’s stubborn refusal to see it, Hopkinson shows the reader that
there is nonetheless a thriving community and sense of community that has developed in
downtown Toronto. As Donna Baily Nurse puts it in a review of the novel:

What one does come away with, however, is the suffering city’s
tenacious spirit of community. Without money, people barter for
goods. They take over public parks and build farms. Street
children protect one another and ailing individuals turn to
midwives and healers like Gros-Jeanne; Hopkinson insists that
even in the midst of evil and destruction one discovers alcoves of
kindness. (Nurse, 22)

The dystopic world contains redeeming elements that allow the community to survive.

Hopkinson explains why the dystopic setting was the ideal place for utopic
aspirations to appear:

And it occurred to me that most post-holocaust novels happen
outside the city. I wondered about the people who stayed –
because people will stay; they always do. I wondered what would
be keeping them there, what they would be doing there, what
would they have the opportunity to do there? So I came up with
communities of people who were opportunists. I came up with
people who were just too damn ornery to leave – the grandmother
is one of those. And people who can now form communities in
ways that seem right to them. That was also sort of an opportunity
to re-link things in a fashion less citified. (Hopkinson 1999, 77)

This type of questioning, of analysis of the traditional ideas of the dystopia are essential
to the narrative’s ability to transcend into the realm of critical dystopia. As stated by
Ferns: “The result is a vision which is critical, not only of utopia, or of the society to
which utopia proposes an alternative, but also of the dystopian response itself. It is this
critical – and indeed, self-critical – impulse which may be seen to underlie a series of
attempts to likewise transform the nature of the utopian vision” (Ferns 1999, 138). The
particular type of analysis and transcendence that Hopkinson narrates is reflected by
Moylan in his theory of critical dystopia:
This, as the critical dystopias give voice and space to such dispossessed and denied subjects (and, I would add, to those diminished and deprived by the accompanying economic reconfigurations), they go on to explore ways to change the present system so that such culturally and economically marginalized peoples not only survive but also try to move towards creating a social reality that is shaped by an impulse to human self-determination and ecological health rather than one constricted by the narrow and destruction logic of a system intent only on enhancing competition in order to gain more profit for a select few (Moylan 2000, 189).

Ti-Jeanne is clearly in a deficient position economically and the system of community that is discovered and, one assumes, developed at the end of the narrative is reflective of the alternate system that Moylan looks to critical dystopias to develop.

**Cultural Hybridity and History**

Ti-Jeanne, although she begins to understand the idea of the community contained in the Burn, can only see the utopic aspects of the Burn completely once she has embraced her own cultural community and history. And the Burn can only begin to truly thrive once Rudy is destroyed and Uttley becomes a symbol of the cultural hybridity that inhabits the burn. This quest for a connection to history is a common theme in dystopian literature. As put by Gottlieb: “probably one of the most typical ‘messages’ of dystopian fiction is that access to the records of the past is vital to the mental health of any society” (Gottlieb, 12). But while Gottlieb clearly favors more traditional forms of history (the written word), *Brown Girl* looks at the collective memory and oral history of a culture and community, favoring a less traditional means of enduring a connection to history. The privileging of oral forms of history “resists both hegemonic and oppositional orthodoxies” and “inscribe a space for a new form of political opposition, one fundamentally based in difference and multiplicity” (Moylan 2000, 190), which Moylan
describes as being essential parts of the critical dystopia. Brown Girl uses the traditional concern of the dystopia with history while at once critiquing its limitations.

Hopkinson explains the title for Brown Girl in the Ring:

...in the eastern Caribbean islands, you've got a girl's game, a challenge game. There is one girl in the middle, the others in a ring around her, and the challenge is, 'Show us something you can do that we can't.' The person in the middle has to come up with something the others then try to do, and the one who's closest to it gets picked to be the next brown girl in the ring. And I thought that also was an apt metaphor for a young woman who's just coming into adulthood, kicking and screaming, not very happy about it, and wants to figure out really quickly what she can do, what she must do in order to have a life. (Hopkinson 1999, 77)

Culture and history play a significant role in Ti-Jeanne's ability to "figure out what she can do" as well as discovering the aforementioned redeeming aspects of the Burn.

Displayed in the above quote is the obvious importance of Caribbean culture and folklore in this process. But Ti-Jeanne comes to see the importance of personal and public histories, the variety of cultures that she is exposed to, and learns to incorporate them in order to be able to do what she has to do in order to defeat Rudy, and join her community.

Initially, Ti-Jeanne wants nothing to do with her Caribbean heritage. Ti-Jeanne distrusts Mami's traditional remedies and when Gros-Jeanne tries to teach Ti-Jeanne the recipe for remedies, Ti-Jeanne rebels:

Ti-Jeanne didn't put much stock in Mami's bush doctor remedies. Sometimes the herbs lost their potency, stored through Toronto's long, bitter winters. And they had to guess at dosages...Ti-Jeanne would have preferred to rely on commercial drugs. They could still get them, and Mami's nursing training had taught her how to dispense them...Ti-Jeanne didn't understand why Mami had insisted on trying to teach her all that old-time nonsense. If Mami didn't know how to cure something, she could look it up in one of
the growing piles of medical books lining the walls of the cottage.  
(Brown, 36-7)

We are shown in this passage what kind of knowledge Ti-Jeanne values at the outset of the narrative: traditional western book knowledge. What she fails to recognize is the importance of the passing on of cultural heritage between generations of family. Gros-Jeanne is constantly trying to pass on to her granddaughter the knowledge that she has accumulated, not through books, but through experience and tradition.

It is not surprising then that Ti-Jeanne also rejects Mami’s spiritual teachings and tries to reject her visions. When Mami first tried to introduce Ti-Jeanne to the rituals of their religion, Ti-Jeanne fled in fear:

Ti-Jeanne had joined them that one time, but after being frightened away, she refused to join them in anymore ceremonies. Mami tired to explain what went on in the chapel, but Ti-Jeanne had become so agitated that Mami soon stopped talking about her work there altogether…Many nights Ti-Jeanne would lie on her little cot, awake and restless from the compelling sound of the drumming and singing coming from the back house. The occasional screams, grunts, and moans frightened her. (Brown, 87)

Tellingly, Ti-Jeanne is both attracted and repelled by the traditional ceremonies. But when she starts getting visions, she denies them, hoping simply that they will go away. She thought of the visions in traditional western ways, worried that she was going “mad” like her mother had. She hides the visions from Gros-Jeanne, and when Ti-Jeanne does share her visions with her, it is “[j]ust long enough to find out how to control the dreams, keep the spirits out of her head. Then she’d be free” (Brown, 105). This sentiment is repeated a few other occasions by Ti-Jeanne, and it is this rejection of the teachings of her grandmother that almost leads to her downfall. During the beginning of her face-off
with Rudy, she is tempted by his words, words that run in opposition to Gros-Jeanne’s teachings:

‘Your grandmother did putting visions in she [Mi-Jeanne] head, trying to control she. Trying to make Mi-Jeanne stay with she. Making things to frighten she.’ ...Rudy’s words echoed in Ti-Jeanne’s head. Maybe he was telling the truth, and Mami was at the root of all their problems. Maybe Mami had tired the same trick on both Ti-Jeanne and Mi-Jeanne; caused the visions and made them feel that their only chance for being rid of them was to stay with her... (Brown, 215)

Throughout, Ti-Jeanne focuses on how she can be “free” and Rudy offers her a way: by her becoming his duppy, by freeing Ti-Jeanne’s spirit from her body, but remaining at the mercy of Rudy: “Heart couldn’t hurt she...She coulda go wherever she want, nobody to stop she” (Brown, 215). And Ti-Jeanne is almost seduced by this promise of freedom.

Ti-Jeanne’s Caribbean heritage and community isn’t the only community and history that Ti-Jeanne rejects; she initially rejects any and all forms of history and community. When she looks upon the headlines that chronicle the creation of Muddy York as it existed for her, her reaction was simply: “It’s nice,’ Ti-Jeanne said uncertainly, not knowing what else to tell the man. All of that was old-time story. Who cared any more?” (Brown, 12). When Josée and the other street children come to see Mami in order to heal one of their own, Ti-Jeanne is repulsed by them and rejects their form of community:

...Ti-Jeanne sullenly herded the smelly children to the kitchen in the back of the cottage. She wished she could make them all bath before touching anything. She wondered if any of them were the ones who’d tried to pick her pocket the day before.

In the kitchen, the eldest girl said to Ti-Jeanne, “I’m Josée.” Josée’s voice was harsh from smoking cigarettes. Ti-Jeanne could smell the jungle breath and see the yellow nicotine stains on the young woman’s teeth. “I look after them. I’m, like, their mum.”
“Why? It must be hard enough to survive alone on the street. Why take on the responsibilities for other lives, too?”
“Because somebody did it for me. Old Gavin. So I show them. We stick together, we can watch out for each other, Old Gavin says. We have rules. Anybody gets out of line, they’re out.” (Brown, 67)

Ti-Jeanne also rejects cultural interdependence, as shown at the beginning of the story when she is made uncomfortable by Pavel and Paula discussing Gros-Jeanne’s home remedies: “Ti-Jeanne nodded, smiled and looked away. In the eleven years since the Riots, she’d had to get used to people talking out loud about her grandmother’s homemade medicines. Among Caribbean people, bush medicine used to be something private…” (Brown, 14). It is worth noting that Pavel and Paula are not a part of Caribbean culture (Hopkinson describes them in an interview as being Russian [Rutledge 1999, 599]), and despite Ti-Jeanne’s own skepticism towards her grandmother’s practices, she is still selfish about them, uncomfortable with sharing traditions between different cultures.

In contrast, Gros-Jeanne presents no such reservations. Rutledge notes that “the hyper-individualistic ethos runs deeply among Ti-Jeanne and most of the characters influential in her life. Hopkinson’s protagonist is a young and immature first-time mother who thinks primarily of her independence, which runs counter to the interdependence her grandmother epitomizes” (Rutledge 2001, 27). Gros-Jeanne tries to assure her own, her family’s and her community’s survival by respecting and incorporating many cultures and traditions while staying true to her own heritage. She seeks the help of other religions and traditions in order to better understand and enhance her own: the tarot cards from Romni Jenny (Brown, 49-50) and northern herbs from Romni Jenny and Frank (Brown, 141). She does not simply rely on her education as a
nurse, but also looks to less traditional (again, in the Western sense) sources of knowledge in order to compliment her own. Gros-Jeanne’s door is open to heal anyone from the street children to those she disagrees with: “Me and Gros-Jeanne ain’t alwas walk right, you hear? But is she save my leg when I get blood poisoning that time’” (Brown, 243). She respects other cultural and spiritual beliefs, evident in the respect she shows towards the dead buried in the Toronto Crematorium Chapel’s Necropolis, where Gros-Jeanne and her followers worship (Brown, 86). Those who participated in her services were from a variety of backgrounds as well (Brown, 87). Gros-Jeanne also respects the varied cultural backgrounds of her own beliefs:

“The African powers, child. The spirits. The loas. The orishas. The oldest ancestors. You will hear people from Haiti and Cuba and Brazil and so call them different names. You will even hear some names I ain’t tell you, but we all mean the same thing. Them is the ones who does carry we prayers to God Father, for he too busy to listen to every single one of we on earth talking at he all the time. Each of we have a special one who is we father or mother, and no matter what we call it, whether Shango or Santeria or Voudun or what, we all doing the same thing. Serving the spirits” (Brown, 126).

She is the figurative “heart” of the Burn, with the various churches (Korean, United, and Catholic) and various races and cultures (French, Russian, East Indian, Caribbean, Asian, etc…) and it is for her heart that she is killed. But her heart will “magically” allow Premier Uttley to compliment what Ti-Jeanne “magically” accomplishes with Rudy.

**Magic Realism and Cultural Hybridity**

As outlined the beginning of the previous section, oral histories are an important part of the narrative and an important aspect of the novel’s critical force. And magic is a central part of Ti-Jeanne’s history. But it is not the only history available to her. Cultural
hybridity allows the inscription of a “space for a new form of political opposition, one fundamentally based in difference and multiplicity but now wisely and cannily organized in a fully democratic alliance politics that can talk back in larger though diverse collective voice” (Moylan 2000, 190). Brown Girl closely associates cultural hybridity with magic; it is through magic that characters achieve cultural hybridity. By associating these two aspects, Hopkinson privileges magic as an essential element of her narrative and its critique.

Charles de Lint writes that “Magic realism forces the reader to view the world differently — past, present and future — and to understand not only the connections, but the relevance of those connections” (de Lint, 119). In Brown Girl, magic is used to represent the cultural heritage that Ti-Jeanne has to embrace in order to defeat Rudy and maintain the community. Wendy B. Faris points to two of the common traits of magic realism: “We experience the closeness or near-merging of two realms, two worlds” and “These fictions question received ideas about time, space and identity” (Faris, 172-3). This closeness and questioning are acted out primarily through Ti-Jeanne. She is our key to understanding the magical world that has been presented to us. In order for her to form her identity, Ti-Jeanne must merge the two worlds that she is able to see. Faris also points out that “[t]he reader may hesitate (at one point or another) between two contradictory understandings of events -- and hence experiences some unsettling doubts” (Faris, 171). Rutledge addresses how Hopkinson overcomes this hesitation on the readers’ part. He describes Hopkinson’s novel as “culturally challenging,” pointing to the use of idiosyncrasies and Afro-Caribbean culture (shown through magic as well as language) as a possible stumbling block for non-Caribbean readers. But because the
protagonist of the story is learning about her unique cultural heritage right along with the reader, it allows for “the freedom to appreciate culture...Hopkinson’s FFF [futuristic fiction and fantasy] allows non-Caribbean readers – including non-Caribbean Blacks – the freedom of appreciating Afro-Caribbean culture” (Rutledge 2001, 31). As well, Ti-Jeanne moves back and forth from the Western culture to her native one, fusing the two together in order to achieve a solution to the obstacles she faces in the Burn.

Rutledge also describes what he calls Hopkinson’s “hybridized methodology,” in order to make the West African mythology more familiar to the those coming out of the Western tradition:

...Hopkinson roots herself in an ancient oral tradition in which the traditional West African gods and the Greco-Roman gods, among many others, walked the land, sometimes in mortal guise. Frequently, the gods foisted chaos and hardship on humankind, which was subject to their sometimes benevolent, sometimes selfish, japes and manipulations. Hence, Hopkinson uses theology-based fantasy and Caribbean mysticism to personify the Afro-Caribbean gods (Rutledge 2001, 33).

Although Hopkinson offers us a glimpse of the fantastic, she roots it in traditions that would be familiar, and therefore more acceptable, to the Western reader. This mix of grim reality and magic that has parallels in traditional Western culture help make Brown Girl in the Ring “radically unique” and at the same time, a compelling example of magic realism.

Ti-Jeanne hybridises magic/culture in order to defeat Rudy. As Rudy is trying to steal her duppy (soul), Ti-Jeanne meets up with her spirit-father, the Jab-Jab/Legbara. She is able to experience the memories of those closest to her: Rudy beating and berating her grandmother, Rudy manipulating and torturing her mother’s duppy into committing murder, and seeing the horrors of what Rudy is capable of through the eyes of Tony
(Brown, 220). She concludes that "I can’t keep giving my will into other people hands
no more, ain’t? I have to decide what I want to do for myself" (Brown, 220). And she is
then able to come upon a hybridized solution in order to defeat Rudy:

She remembered her grandmother’s words: The center pole is the
bridge between the worlds... She thought of the building she was
in. The CN Tower. And she understood what it was: 1,815 feet of
the tallest centre pole in the world... For like the spirit tree that the
center pole symbolised, the CN Tower dug roots deep into the
ground where the dead lived and pushed high into the heavens
where the oldest ancestors lived. The tower was their ladder into
this world... She knew that the call to the heavens should be
mirrored by a call to the earth... (Brown, 221).

Ti-Jeanne calls to the spirits, calls to the dead and they together defeat Rudy, using a
Canadian icon. Ti-Jeanne is able to incorporate aspects of her present culture with those
of her ancient cultural heritage in order to form her identity. She moves from disbelief
and the denial of her own culture at the beginning of the tale to acceptance, from acting
on instinct alone as she first faces Rudy, through hybridization to self-awareness and the
ability to decide what she wants to do for herself. Although the end of the novel shows
that she is still unsure as to her role and her identity, she is clearly on the right path:

"Well, Papa, look my answer here. I go do this for a little while, but I ain’t Mami. I
ain’t know what I want to do with myself yet, but I can’t be she" (Brown, 244).

Symbolically at the end of the story, Ti-Jeanne does not join the mourners in a
ceremony for Gros-Jeanne: "She still didn’t feel a part of these ways that had been so
much a part of her grandmother’s life" (Brown, 245). But she does settle down to try to
name her as-yet unnamed baby. Firmly grounded in the present, having embraced the
culture of her past and the future in her arms, Ti-Jeanne is ready to be her own person.
This also leads to her ability to find value in other cultures and the community that surrounds her. As expressed by Daniel Yon:

Identities are never mirror images of the bounded and “imagined” communities in which they are constituted. Instead, the forgoing ethnographic details speak to the sense in which they are negotiated and constructed through ambivalence. New identities are continually being forged dialogically from the interplay of being black, young, gendered, sexualized, Caribbean, Canadian and global all at the same time. The symphonic interception and collisions of these various “sites” of identification guard against tendencies to over-determine identities by privileging one “site” over the others. (Yon, 493-4)

Gros-Jeanne again is the model for Ti-Jeanne as she leaves herself open to multiple influences, not just the Caribbean ones. And Ti-Jeanne eventually embraces her own cultural hybridity, the Caribbean culture of her past, as well as the cultures and communities that now surround her. Before confronting Rudy, Josée and the street kids save Tony, Ti-Jeanne and the baby. Ti-Jeanne repays them by tending to their wounded, despite Tony’s protests. And she discovers that communities can create their own “magic”:

A girl of about twelve returned the grin, flicking a hank of black hair out of her eyes. Her brown face was difficult to see in the dark of the tunnel. Her teeth gleamed. Mumtaz was carrying some kind of jury-rigged electronic box, about the size of a loaf of bread, held together with patchy layers of masking and electric tape. Ti-Jeanne could just make out toggle switches bristling from the top of it.

“Listen,” said Mumtaz. She flicked the switch, and Ti-Jeanne jumped as the tunnel filled with the din of hundreds of children screaming...

Mumtaz shut off the noise. “I layered all out voices. That way, it sounds like there are more of us than there are.”

“And the visuals?” Ti-Jeanne could have sworn there’d been a good forty kids.

“Deeplight projector hooked up on the subway tracks. I rigged it myself a long time ago. Keeps people out of our space. It’s a
tape I made of all of us, dubbed on six waves so it looks like a lot more.” (Brown, 185-6)

Ti-Jeanne discovers that they also have a common enemy in Rudy, and with this newfound sense of community she feels with the street kids, she leaves her baby in their care while she goes to face Rudy, now not only for herself and her family, but for the larger community. Once she defeats Rudy, she is able to understand how large the community is that she was fighting for: “By the time she was out of the market, she was juggling a half pound of rabbit pemmican...a bottle of cranberry jelly, a carved gourd rattle (“for the baby”), and Mary’s honey. Grief still darkened her thoughts, but the attentions of the market people had soothed her a little” (Brown, 232). With Ti-Jeanne’s connection to her cultural heritage broken, she is nonetheless still able to find comfort in the larger community of which Gros-Jeanne was part and about which she tried to teach Ti-Jeanne.

Language in Brown Girl in the Ring is used to illustrate the negotiation that takes place between cultures, and the effort that Ti-Jeanne has to make in order to find her hybritized voice. The issue of the close relationship between language and culture is addressed very early in the narrative, through Tony’s character: “Showing off as always for her benefit, Tony switched into the creole his parents had spoken to him when he was a child. Tony had been raised in Toronto by Caribbean parents; his speech wavered between creole and Canadian...Ti-Jeanne felt the gears slipping between the two worlds...” (Brown, 19). Previous to this passage, Ti-Jeanne had experienced her first visions of the story. We are meant to understand Tony’s difficulty with language in the same way we are to understand Ti-Jeanne’s difficulty with the visions; both are to represent the difficulty with culture, their Caribbean heritage, with which two characters have difficulty. Ti-Jeanne, however, has an advantage over Tony in terms of language.
She speaks regularly in a hybridized form of creole, not quite as strong as her grandmother's, but distinct from Tony's (and others from the Burn). It is not surprising then, that Ti-Jeanne is eventually able to negotiate between cultures and become a hybridized individual while Tony remains "too hyper-individualistic to believe in anything" (Rutledge 2001, 28). Sisk outlines the importance of language in dystopian narratives: "Dystopia forces us to wrestle for our own autonomy and control over language: not merely with language itself [...] but with those forces that will, if left unchallenged, seize control of language" (Sisk, 13). If the task of the critical dystopia is to create a new voice in which to speak to the controlling powers, as Moylan would suggest, then Tony is an excellent example of the inability to gain control over language, because of his unwillingness to experience cultural hybridity.

Mi-Jeanne, Ti-Jeanne's mother, does not have the opportunity to learn the lessons that Gros-Jeanne means to teach her and serves as an example of what can happen if one does not embrace cultural hybridity. We initially meet Mi-Jeanne, Ti-Jeanne's mother as Crazy Betty, a blind street woman who rambles incoherently. Ti-Jeanne reveals near the beginning of the story that her mother shared the same gift of visions that she does: "Ti-Jeanne's mother had seemed to go mad in the days after that, complaining that she was hearing voices in her head...Her mother had disappeared soon after the voices had started, run away into the craziness that Toronto had become. She had never come back" (Brown, 20). We discover that Mi-Jeanne went to her father, Rudy, and demanded that she be his duppy. Mi-Jeanne, much like Ti-Jeanne, rejects Gros-Jeanne teachings and her gift of sight. She also reveals that her own attitude towards Ti-Jeanne as a baby, very closely mirrors Ti-Jeanne's attitude towards her newborn son: "But the most difficult to
listen to was Mi-Jeanne’s admission of how much she had resented the daughter she had brought into the world...Shame made Ti-Jeanne’s face hot. It bit too close to the bone.

She knew what her mother had been feeling” (Brown, 242). Rudy, when trying to seduce Ti-Jeanne’s duppy into his service, uses her mother as an example. Hopkinson shows us through the character of Mi-Jeanne the fate that could have been Ti-Jeanne’s had she not embraced cultural hybridity and interdependence. Selfish in much the same ways Ti-Jeanne is at the beginning of the tale, Mi-Jeanne becomes a prisoner for Rudy, murdering at his orders, her soul doing evil, and her body an empty shell. It is only when she is able to rejoin her body and communicate the lessons she learned to her daughter that there is hope of being freed: “‘Child, if you only knew how much suffering and death I see these past few years, eh? And how much of it I cause...’” (Brown, 160). Mi-Jeanne serves as another reminder of the consequences of the rejection of cultural hybridity.

Tony’s “hyper-individualism” is also illustrated through his total disbelief in Mami’s (and Ti-Jeanne’s) spirituality as well as his use of culture for selfish purposes (impressing Ti-Jeanne, escaping Rudy’s capture). We see many examples of his inability to believe in the magic/culture that he is faced with:

“Tony had once teased Ti-Jeanne almost to tears about her grandmother: ‘What’s that crazy old woman driving over there in Riverdale Farm, eh, Ti-Jeanne? Obeah? Nobody believes in that duppy business any more!’” (Brown, 36); “‘Fucking fool I am, letting you talk me into doing this shit. And Ti-Jeanne?...You too? How could I do me so, Ti-Jeanne? Prancing around in the dark, playing duppy, I really need your help love. Don’t you understand? Rudy’s going to kill me if he finds me!’” (Brown, 102)

Even when he is faced with Rudy’s malicious use of magic, Tony cannot process what is happening beyond his formal training as a nurse: “Insanely, he remembered a lecturer at
college...Tony's medically trained mind persisted in identifying the structures Rudy exposed with his knife" (Brown, 136). This ability to look at a body being tortured clinically, rather than spiritually or compassionately may have actually aided in his quest to harvest a heart: Mami is no longer the guardian of the community and spirituality, but simply a healthy heart with the right blood type. Because he is “almost entirely a slave to the inner-city ethos qua culture” (Ruthledge 2001, 29) and unable to become a hybridized figured like Mami or Ti-Jeanne, Tony is eventually the one who kills Mami in order to harvest her heart. He does not embrace the magic, the culture, the language, and ultimately cuts Ti-Jeanne off from one of her only connections to her culture and history. This act, however, doesn’t have entirely negative consequences: it forces Ti-Jeanne to face, and ultimately defeat Rudy, and allows for one of the final instances of magic in the novel.

Tony’s ultimate betrayal of Ti-Jeanne and his culture does however indirectly bring about the transformation of Premier Uttley brought about by the heart transplant. It is significant that it is Tony who provides the means for this final act of magic and concomitant act of cultural hybridity. Despite his denial of magic and his cultural heritage, despite his blindness to the existence of the community and his having inadvertently threatened its viability, the heart is magically strong enough to live on and to ensure the survival and transformation of the community. As Neal Baker explains: “the heart of a black, Caribbean immigrant revives the health of a white, birthright Canadian. Uttley is not just any Canadian, however, but the embodiment of the Canadian nation-state. Both literally and figuratively, the body of the nation-state is fortified by the transplant of an ‘alien organ’” (Baker, 220). Once Uttley gets Gros-Jeanne’s heart, she is
transformed. She becomes a reflection of how Gros-Jeanne lived her life practicing cultural hybridity: “In every artery, every vein, every capillary: two distinct streams, intertwined. She had worried for nothing. She was healed, a new woman now” (Brown, 237). Uttley goes through almost the same process as Ti-Jeanne goes through, although notably not by choice. But one may question Ti-Jeanne’s willingness to undergo the maturation and hybridization process that she experiences. It is only at the end of the story that Ti-Jeanne truly accepts her fate; even her battle with Rudy is initially for reasons that were not her own. While Uttley is initially paralleled with Rudy, her process is then shifted to reflect that of Ti-Jeanne. And, like Ti-Jeanne, Uttley is able to see beyond her own selfish reasons and begins to recognize the community contained within downtown Toronto:

“...There’s another thing, too. We’re going to rejuvenate Toronto.”

“Premiere, you know that project has always been death to politicians. No one’s been able to do it yet.”

“Yeah ‘cause they’ve tried it by providing incentives for big business to move back in and take over. We’re going to offer interest-free loans to small enterprises that are already there, give them perks if they fix up the real estate they’re squatting on.”

“What small enterprises? The place is a rat hole, complete with rats.”

“Oh, I don’t know. Something tells me we’ll discover that there are quite a few resourceful people left in Muddy York.”

(Hopkinson, 239-40)

Baker reads this part optimistically, stating that “Uttley’s urban plan parallels the ‘intertwined’ yet ‘distinct’ streams in her blood, promising a syncretic metropolis that will join divisions between the suburbs – primarily white – and the multicultural inner-city” (Baker, 221). Much in the same way many people of different cultural heritages shared in Gros-Jeanne’s culture, here the “magic” not only represents Caribbean cultural
heritage, but the multi-cultural composition of the inner-city. Uttley’s policy also mirrors the community, this community that is found in Toronto: intertwined yet distinct.

Conclusion

Hopkinson, in numerous interviews and essays, expresses how she understands the power of science fiction as a postcolonial tool:

Science fiction, in North America particularly, is traditionally a literature of colonizing, and we’ve had a problem with that. Part of it doesn’t really speak to us. But there is so much being done in the field that does. The literature is changing, it’s evolving, and there are people who are tackling things like that head-on. But I think it’s still very much a literature that does not really include us, except as window dressing. The over-all impression you get from the book covers is that the humans are the white people, and the aliens are people of color (Hopkinson 1999, 77)

In an interview with Christian Wolff in MaComère, Hopkinson goes on to point out that “Science Fiction and fantasy appeal to me because of the subversive possibilities of them. I can…exaggerate and thereby call into question political conditions that currently exist in this world” (Wolff, 26). And in a conversation with the Quebec SF writer Élisabeth Vonarburg which appeared in Foundation, Hopkinson observes that

I think speculative fiction has the potential, often realised nowadays, to be perverse and subversive and oppositional and revolutionary. Which could make it a wonderful literature for radical and marginalised communities. But by and large people from those communities tend to see the genres (and probably somewhat accurately, at least historically) as literatures which just replicate and glorify existing power imbalances. (Burwell et al, 45)

These comments strongly resemble Moylan’s comments on the possibilities of the critical dystopia to “give voice and space to such dispossessed and denied subjects” and “go on to explore ways to change the present system” (Moylan 2000, 189). What Hopkinson achieves with Brown Girl in the Ring is a complex analysis of dystopic and utopic
expectations, using economic and social “denied subjects” as her main subjects. Through Ti-Jeanne, a young, unwed Black mother, Hopkinson suggests new ways to look at society and possible solutions to what she sees are the dystopic conditions. Ti-Jeanne has to accept her history and community as well as the histories and communities around her, and become a figure of cultural hybridization. Hopkinson expands the boundaries of the genre even further by privileging magic in her narrative. The central role that magic plays in the resolution of Ti-Jeanne’s and the society’s narrative seems to culturally hybridize the dystopic genre.
Chapter 3. Récits de Médilhault

Récits de Médilhault, a short story cycle, is dramatist Anne Legault’s first work of prose-fiction. The narrative consists of thirteen interconnected short stories, told in a non-linear fashion. The use of a non-linear form to construct her narrative leads to new and different questions concerning dystopias. Using aspects of history, mythology and magic Legault questions our understanding of the evolution of her dystopia, and the possibility of transcendance. Through these literary explorations, the narrative can be understood as being consistent with Ralph Pordzik’s concept of the postcolonial heterotopia.

Médilhault, “cité française du nord du Nouveau Monde” (Récits, 8), formerly known as Montreal, is main setting of the narrative, and serves as the center of the narrative, connecting all thirteen stories. While the setting is clear, the chronology of the story is fragmented, covering an approximate 100-year span. We are shown the different stages and evolution of this dystopian world that affects not only Montreal, but also the whole globe. The “earliest” story, “Épi,” takes place in a time before unnamed nuclear disaster, and seems to closely resemble the reader’s present. Big was born “dans la cinquième décennie du XXIe siècle” and when she was young remembers a man who remembers the École Polytechnique Massacre that occurred in 1989, and in her memory he is remembering the event “Plus de soixante-dix ans après” (Récits, 8). The final story, both chronologically and of the narrative, “Cent,” takes place many years later, after Big has been living as a slave before finally escaping and joining the group of one hundred. Although it is never mentioned, it is not inconceivable that the story takes place when she is in her forties, thus making the time-line of the cycle approximately one hundred years.
This is another of what Gottlieb would call an “emergency dystopia,” where the ruling class “find[s] an allegedly efficient solution to a crisis” (Gottlieb, 9). And the results are fairly typical of the dystopian tradition: totalitarianism (while in the story “Kiev et Kin” there is reference to a re-election party for the Protecteur, there is never a reference to an election), a walled-in protectionist city-state, the outlawing of books, screens that dispense state-approved information, a regimented class system, and the systematic persecution, exile and execution of all those who do not follow the laws of the city-state. But what makes this narrative of particular interest is Legault’s refusal to clearly outline the reasons behind the dystopian state of affairs in Médilhault.

**Utopia/Dystopia or How To Degenerate Into The Next Middle-Ages**

Once again, according to Moylan and Pordzik, one of the differentiating traits found in recent dystopian fiction the questioning of “utopian uniformity and dystopian totality” (Pordzik, 168) and the bringing of “utopian and dystopian tendencies to bear on their exposés of the present moment and their explorations of new forms of oppositional agency” (Moylan 2000, 198-9). How the dystopian narrative examines the questions surrounding utopian and dystopian attitudes of the characters is important in our understanding of the evolution of the genre. We see, however, a marked difference in how Legault achieves this discussion as compared to Hopkinson. While Hopkinson informs the reader as to how the situation in Toronto has degenerated into the condition it is in, her primary focus is how this has affected certain characters within the novel and essentially how they can transcend their situation, both through the visions of false utopias and attainable eutopias (good place). Certainly, Legault deals with how the present dystopic condition affects characters within the narrative, but because the work
spans over one hundred years, the reader is privy to the evolution of the society -- the cause and the effect. And since the clues to understanding these two elements are scattered throughout the non-chronologically told stories, the reader is constantly forced to reflect on both, rather than simply the effects. This evolution also reflects the various incarnations of utopian visions and dystopian realities, as they are understood at different points of the narrative and different points of the evolution.

Pordzik outlines that the postcolonial heterotopia “thwarts all attempts on the side of the reader to create a coherent illusion of history, meaning and representation in the text” (Pordzik, 5). Legault problematizes the idea of utopia and dystopia, by reconstructing how Médilhault came to be chronologically and how that evolution is represented in individual stories. Each story represents a different vision, attitude and understanding of the dystopia. Some see the changes as justified and necessary. Some see the causes as leading the effect. Others see the two as being completely separate. As each story and each character reflect on their present situation and remember the past, we are privy to a complex analysis of the anatomy of this particular dystopia, constantly destabilizing the reader’s expectations and assumptions. The complexity of the evolution of the society is in and of itself a critique of the idea of the simple dystopian versus utopian dichotomy.

Almost every story reveals another perspective on the reasons and justifications of the dystopian society. In “Big,” the first story of the narrative, Abigaëlle Sarrazin (Big) is immediately suffering what Gottlieb identifies as the dystopian requisite “protagonist’s trial” (Gottlieb, 10). But while Gottlieb requires that “the elite’s self-justification will be revealed to the protagonist at his own trial” (Gottlieb, 10), Big’s captors never say a word
as to why she has been captured. As we read Big’s story, which is told through a series of flashbacks, we learn that she has been incarcerated for harbouring books in her family’s restaurant. But the justification as to why this law exists is never made explicit. Already, subverting this common characteristic of the dystopian genre has disrupted the reader’s expectation of the dystopian narrative.

While the captors do not offer any insight into the reasoning of the dystopian society, Big’s family offer a few conflicting theories. Big’s grandfather, Absalon, offers the following theory:

L’éclatement était assez récent, mais il avait surpris, autant par sa force que par sa provenance. D’après Absalon, tout était venu dès les premiers écrans.
— Du rêve, des chimères, entrant impunément chez des gens qui n’étaient pas préparés à cela! Depuis des siècles, les gens simples savaient se contenter de peu, jusqu’à ce qu’ils voient comment vivaient les riches! Peux-tu imaginer, Big, il y avait des ligues pour bannir la violence des écrans? Et le mauvais goût? Mais la violence de cette richesse étalée chez les pauvres, le mauvais goût que cela représentait, personne ne s’est élevé contre ça. Les pauvres n’ont plus voulu faire les frais de la richesse des autres. Les riches n’ont rien voulu céder. Alors tout a explosé. Et quand il a fallu refaire le monde, on a bien veillé à ce que ces maudits écrans fussent peur au lieu de faire rêver. (Récits, 23)

But later in the narrative her father tells Big: “Les écrans n’étaient pas mauvais, ils sont tombés dans de mauvaises mains” (Récits, 24). Big also comments that “Toute la mémoire du monde avait été écranisée, contrôlée. Il avait été décidé, au nom de la démocratisation du savoir” (Récits, 23). There is a certain irony to the idea of the “démocratisation du savoir” in a totalitarian society that tortures those who would possess books. But as the reader tries to reconstruct the reasons behind the dystopian narrative, the conflicting explanations in the story make it difficult to construct a connection. This disrupts what Gottlieb calls the “window on history” of the dystopian narrative, the
"strategic device through which the writer reveals the roots of the protagonist’s dystopian present in the society’s past. Of course, what the protagonist defines as the past happens to be the present of the Ideal Reader” (Gottlieb, 15). Gottlieb also observes: “Each writer focuses on a different trend he finds threatening” (Gottlieb, 15 emphasis added). In this particular sequence, that which is identified as the threat, the screens, is immediately downplayed and called into question.

The conflicting reasoning in “Big” is just the beginning. The next story, “Épi” takes place in a time much like the reader’s present, possibly allowing for the reader to make that connection between the dystopian present of the narrative and their own present. But in “Épi,” no screen on any kind is mentioned: TV, movie, computer or otherwise. Instead, the story concerns the brutal beating of a poet while her young medical student neighbour watches and does nothing. The medical student is described as being: “solitaire mains pas reclus.” And he is not at all portrayed as being atypical: “Il en voyait quelques-uns [de ses amis], de loin en loin, pris comme lui. Il téléphonait à sa mère une fois la semaine, le voyait peu, comme chacun dans la famille, car la chère femme avait le don de se faire détester” (Récits, 30). The society is portrayed as an anti-community with limited contact among friends and family, and when crisis strikes, people do not act and barely react. The dispassion displayed by the medical student is also disturbing in that he is training to be a doctor, someone who is usually associated with compassion, empathy, and a need to help their fellow man.

Marais, from “Peck,” is a “quindécimvir.” Explained in the story: “Les quindécimvirs étaient au nombre de quinze, comme leur nom l’indiquait, et gardaient les
livres" (Récits, 86). It is Marais who teaches Absalon, Big's grandfather, how to read.

Marais also explains to Absalon why books are now only accessible through screens:

— Tu vois ces livres depuis des années, tu dois bien te douter qu'ils sont d'une autre époque, n'est-ce pas? Bientôt, le savoir sera accessible par les écrans, et chaque caste possédera sa version de chaque œuvre, avec sa clé d'accès aux terminaux des écrans axiaux. Il ne sert à rien qu'un petit artisan lise le même Germinal que moi, le même Capital, le même Kamouraska. La littérature peut être utile à tous, mais encore faut-il que ce soit avec discernement. Les livres iront dans des voutes secrètes. Déjà, on les appelle les livres sibyllins, ce n'est pas pour rien, leur contenu doit être décodé et simplifié. J'aurai passé ma vie à cela, sauver la littérature, la protéger contre elle-même. Toi, tu es trop jeune, moi-même je n'ai connu les grandes révoltes que par oui-dire, mais nous ne pouvons pas nous permettre de revenir au laisser-aller de l'autre siècle (Récits, 85-6).

Here we have another conflicting reason for the decline of the society, which conflicts with the one presented in "Épi" and in "Big." And there are still others. Absalon's father blamed the rich for the decline (Récits, 63-4).

In "Rats," the questions of what is utopic and dystopic and the reasoning behind such assumptions is put into sharp focus. Two rats, one European and one North American, discuss the situation on their respective continents. We learn that life for them has become practically impossible. Because society now recycles everything and anything, there is little left for the rats to eat. Berg, the rat from the Nouveau Monde, explains, yet again, the situation as he understands it: "La nature est ce que les gens redoutent par-dessus tout, elle est incontrôlable" (Récits, 94). We also find out that life in the Ancien Monde is just as bad as life in the Nouveau Monde, through Scip: "Ne croyez pas ça, nous avons décrit les forêts" (Récits, 92). And the wars were fought for exactly the same reason, regardless of cultural affiliation:
— Ici, les riches ont tué les pauvres. Bien sûr c’est moins original que chez vous, où il y a un foisonnement de cultures, donc toutes sortes de raisons pour massacrer. Ici, à part quelques vétèrines, il n’y a eu que le manque d’argent pour faire bouger les gens.
— Mais chez nous aussi, qu’est-ce que vous croyez? L’argent est la racine de tous les maux. (Récits, 94)

Not only do the rats have insight into how the disaster came about, they also offer possibilities for being able to survive and thrive within the society: getting organized and consolidating their resources:

— Allons donc! Mettons-nous en bande, comme autrefois.
— Dans la nature, il y a des bandes, des animaux et des humains aussi. Si vous voulez mon idée, leur salut sera dans la fuite. Mais qui fuite dit nature. Nous les rats, nous sommes citadins dans l’âme.

   Scip se releva prestement. Il avait le poil bien gras, le museau mobile et le regard luisant, et Berg en éprouva une envie qu’il n’essaya pas de cacher. Les rattus rattus avaient la cote, en cette nouvelle ère où les égouts se faisaient rares et la chaleur persistante. S’ils avaient pu s’unir, créer une nouvelle race, omnivore et souterraine comme les norvegicus, grimpante et endurante comme les rattus... Alors ils auraient pu se mettre en bande... Ce n’était pas impossible, d’ailleurs, il suffisait de trouver des rates, des femelles jeunes, capables de mettre bas six ou sept fois dans l’année, comme à la belle époque. (Récits, 94)

This is a revealing passage when trying to understand the utopian and dystopian implications of the narrative. In the cities, to be citizens, is to imply that one will remain an individual. But in nature, creatures band together and are able to survive. And, in contrast with the isolationist policies of the city-states, the rats suggest that inter-breeding, inter-change and exchange is the way to thrive and also that their plights are not so dissimilar. Berg is able to understand that and sees it as a way to become even more powerful. The narrative makes an interesting point that citizenship does not automatically equate community, and isolationist policies do not necessarily ensure survival.
Lark has three stories where he is able to magically travel in his mind to “present-day” Montreal (reinforcing the specific setting of the narrative):

...je m’asphyxie et je repasse dans la splendide Médilhaut, cité fortifiée où, là comme ailleurs, je suis emmuré dans mon propre corps... Montréal est mon épilepsie. Alors je vais entre Médilhaut et Montréal, entre la fin du siècle des barbares et le début du millénaire de la raison... (Récits, 98)

Lark also tries to understand and explain what happened to cause the cataclysm. The Montreal he describes at first strongly resembles the Montreal shown to us in “Épi”: most people don’t notice Lark because they don’t want to see him: “Imprégnés qu’ils sont de cirage liquéfié et de douleur granitique, au milieu d’eux je passe inaperçu” (Récits, 100). However, in opposition to this self-absorbed view of Montreal is Lark’s description of the Tams-Tams on the side of the Mountain on Sundays:

Il règne ici un singulier sentiment de liberté qui n’est pas la liberté, un loisir de faire à sa guise qui ne doit servir à rien d’autre que cela, le loisir. Ils sont de plus en plus pauvres, mais ils font ce qu’ils veulent de cette pauvreté. Leurs enfants semblent heureux. Est-ce que ce sont bien leurs descendants qui se souleveront en une seule vague, tueront et massacreront avant d’être massacrés à leur tour, exaspérés par la quête du bonheur, qu’on avait donnée à leur ancêtres justement pour qu’ils se tiennent tranquilles? (Récits, 101-2)

Is it, then, the passivity of this generation, as it seems to be implied in “Épi” that leads the people down the wrong path, or a rebellion against such passivity? It is simple to imagine the population as it is described as simply allowing the changes that took place, but, as Lark points out, it is more difficult to image the population initiating the circumstances that allow Médilhaut to evolve as it does. Lark seems to chastise the behaviour of the population: “liberté qui n’est pas la liberté,” but what condition do they
find themselves in once the revolution/cataclysm occurred? Who ends up being better off?

Lark also discovers the world of the screens, pre-cataclysm: “À Montréal, ils ont des temples sans fenêtres qu’ils nomment cinémas, désertés, comme tous les temples” (Récits, 125). And he discovers Charlie Chaplin: “...j’ai tout compris. On leur avait si bien injecté l’idée de bonheur, à ces gens-là, qu’ils ont fini par être en manque...Je conçois qu’ils aient perdu Dieu. La foi aveugle ne fait pas le poids devant la persistance rétinienne” (Récits, 125-6). This is the only time that organized religion is mentioned in the narrative. It seems that not only did the screens lead to the over-indulgence of happiness, but also drove out the God of the Catholic Church in Quebec. Lark describes the movie theatre as being deserted, much like all the temples. Why has the society also turned away from the screens, which Lark claims have infected them with ideas of happiness? And would they be empty because people instead decided to congregate together as a community at events like the Tam-Tams. And Lark undercuts his own critique of the theatres: “J’ai ri pour la première fois” (Récits, 126). And as he points out right before his death: “C’est bête, quand on a ri, on est moins pressé de mourir” (Récits, 135).

The final story, “Cent,” features a group of one hundred people who are trying to make their way to the “Ancien Monde” through the Bering Straight. Their leader is Kiev, who has abandoned his privileged life: “Je suis le seul puissant, comme ils disent, le seul tatoué. Ni torturé, ni banni, ni évadé. Un jour, je suis parti parce que j’en avais assez, parce que ce n’est pas une vie, parce que j’avais connu autre chose, parce que” (Récits, 139). Joining them in the group is Big, who has survived her captivity, and is
trying to move on. Along the way, they come across a group who has been slaughtered, leaving behind a large collection of books and a printing press. The group debates whether or not to bring the books and press along with them for the rest of the journey. It is Big who eventually sways them:

—Moi aussi, j’ai été torturée et emprisonnée pour des livres. J’ai vu le restaurant de mon père mis à sac je l’ai vu mourir, lui, et ma mère aussi, et j’ai vu le père de celle-ci mené au cachot. J’ai tout perdu pour des livres, jusqu’à des morceaux de mon propre corps. Je n’en voulais pas pour le voyage et j’avais jeté le seul que je possédais...Mais maintenant, je dis ceci: si nous passons dans l’Ancien Monde, si dans cette partie de l’Ancien Monde nous pouvons vivre en paix et libres de nos actes, les livres nous aiderons. Justement parce que nous avons tous la mémoire de la douleur, il ne faut pas la perdre. Seule, j’aurais vécu avec le souvenir de mes lectures. Avec d’autres, je préfère lire de nouveau. Qui dit que dans cent ans, nos descendants, si nous y avons, ne voudront pas refaire le détroit dans l’autre sens, et défaire ce que nous sommes sur le point d’accomplir? Les livres peuvent faire beaucoup de bien, les livres peuvent faire beaucoup de mal, mais sans eux, nous n’aurons ni l’un ni l’autre (Récits, 153).

This outlines and reiterates what Lark pointed out in his narrative: the total lack of happiness within Médilhault. Despite the intentions of those in power, life in Médilhault seems to be devoid of any form of happiness: from those in positions of power and privilege (the quindécmvir, Kiev, the messenger who escapes her lower-caste existence in “Lena”), to the lowest forms of existence (the rats, the exiled, the prostitute in “Phar,” etc.). Keeping the population ignorant does not seem to be keeping them happy, nor even under control. “Cent” comes to us in the form of a journal written by Kiev. Despite his brother’s protests and his own dislike of writing and literature, Kiev sees the importance of keeping a recorded history. At first he claims to be keeping the journal in order to keep an exact account of the passage of time, but the journal we are privy to begins each
entry simply with: “Un autre jour.” Writing had taken on another importance to Kiev, for the future.

_Récits de Médiathèque_ clearly calls into question Gottlieb’s idea that the dystopian narrative privileges one specific “trend” that the author found troubling. What Legault does instead is much like what Hopkinson achieves in her dystopic narrative: she uses the combination of many histories and voices in order to try and achieve a complete and functional picture. For Hopkinson, Ti-Jeanne represented the figure in which the process was embodied. For Legault, the narrative itself is the symbol for the multiplicity of voices and stories that a complete dystopia necessitates. Pordzik would call _Récits_ a “demythologizing dystopia in which mutually exclusive versions of history are implicitly placed in confrontation in order to stress the fact that that the past is not a set of established truths in which all further development originates [...] but rather a contested site of cultural codes each designed to preserve (or efface) a particular version of cultural and national identity” (Pordzik, 46). While Ti-Jeanne becomes a culturally hybridized figure, the reader of _Récits_ must learn to hybridize the variety of histories presented to them in order to gain an understanding of the dystopian narrative. The multiple personal histories of the narrative, however, are not the only type of history dealt with in the text.

**History and Intertext**

In “Big,” during her torture, Big remembers a “story” that was once told to her when she was a child:

> Quand j’étais enfant, il y avait un ami de la famille, un presque centenaire qui radotait sans cesse sur un massacre. Un jour, un fou armé était entré dans son école pour abattre des femmes, seulement des femmes; la fin du carnage avait eu lieu dans sa classe à lui, où ils étaient tous à plat ventre, tremblants sous les pas du tueur, qui
avait juste dit “Oh, shit” avant de se donner la mort. Plus de
soixante-dix ans après, je voyais ce vieillard très droit, très blanc,
qui chevrotait “Oh, shit,” avec des yeux remplis de peur intact.
Puis devenue adulte à mon tour, je le revois encore, parce que je
préfère une fable à ce qui m’entoure, parce que je n’ouvrirait pas
les yeux. Il fabulait, ce vieux. Personne ne le croyait. Mais moi,
si je dis un jour ce que j’ai vu ici, qui me croira? (Récits, 8)

In Médihault, the École Polytechnique Massacre is now forgotten as history, and has
been turned into a “fable.” But Big is able to see the parallels between her own situation
and the historical event that took place in the last century. Lark asks, as he watches
Chaplin movies: “Où a-t-il bien pu prendre son Dictateur? Y a-t-il eu une chose pareille
au vingtième siècle? Nous n’aurions donc rien inventé, à Médihault?” (127). Simon
Dupuis notes that “L’ignorance est un thème fort de la plupart des nouvelles du recueil et
l’on ne s’étonnera pas de constater que l’histoire se répète, cyclique de façon quasiment
immuable” (Dupuis, 43). In order for history to remain history, and not degenerate into
rumour or fable, it needs to be told, remembered and recorded. And this is why Big
ultimately escapes and joins Kiev’s group of one hundred. Big’s story is one of the few
stories in the collection that is written entirely in the first person, and has a certain
“literary” feel to it. Big’s narrative memoirs could be seen as the result of a successful
foray into the “Ancien Monde,” leaving the reader hopeful at the end of the narrative.

But just because something has been preserved in a literary form in this dystopic
society is not a guarantee that those left behind will understand their significance. Or, in
the case of quindécimvir Marais, perhaps they will understand all too well their
significance. He lists for Lark three different texts that he believes should be censored
according to caste: Germinal, by Zola; Capital, by Marx; and Kamouraska, by Anne
Hébert. Germinal deals with the social realities (poverty, exploitation) of a coal mining
community in Northern France during the 19th century who eventually strike. *Capital* is Marx's dissection of the exploitative effects of capitalism. *Kamouraska* is based on an actual murder case that took place in Quebec and is fictionalized to have been associated in part with the Rebellions. All three works deal with repression (primarily economic) and its effects. And do so in fairly obvious fashion. Why is it then that Marais feels that the books are "sibyllins" and that their contents need to be "décodé et simplifié"? These books are quite explicit in their intent, and while they deserve to be studied in depth, the three works nonetheless put across a very clear message condemning oppression. But to say that the books need to simplified? Is this a case of double-speak from Marais, or does he not understand what these books contain? And from the evidence in the text, simplified for whom? The knowledge that those in power seem to possess is shown to be limited: ".rien ne se peut s'écrire qui n'est pas connu des puissants! Ils ont peur du feu, des animaux, de tout ce qui est vivant et incontrôlable..." (*Récits*, 23-4). Essentially, those in control need to "kill" the literature, simplify it, so that they can control it. The activity of censorship is not for the good of those in the lower castes, but for those in power to appease their fears.

In "Épi," the unknown watcher makes the association for the reader: "Éponine. Prénom hugolien..." (*Récits*, 34). Her grandson is also named after a character from Hugo, Marius. Both characters are from his epic *Les Misérables*. In Hugo's story, Éponine becomes a martyr of the battle, bravely sacrificing herself for the cause. Marius is also a hero of their rebellion as one of the instigators and one of the survivors. Ultimately, however, the rebellion portrayed in Hugo's masterpiece fails. And his character's namesakes in Legault's narrative do not fair very well either. Épi does not
die, but is essentially silenced for reasons that are never made clear. It is also never made clear why Marius is exiled, and his method of escape is not very heroic either:

J’ai donné mon camarade de cachot; il était malade, se savait condamné et m’a fait cadeau de cette chance pour s’éviter une longue agonie. Je l’ai chargé de tous les crimes de la terre, mais sans impliquer personne d’autre. Je suis revenu d’exil et ne demande qu’un peu de paix (Récits, 43).

Legault’s incarnations of Hugo’s characters appear to be ironic incarnations. Instead of dying for a larger cause, Épi is silenced for no reason. Instead of being a hero, Marius is an ineffectual remnant of times past.

Médilhault itself is another good example of failed revolution, from any way you look at it: if it were because of economic reasons, the poor are worse off then they were before; if it were for hedonistic reasons, the population is more unhappy than ever.

Le Fantastique

But if open rebellion ultimately fails, how can one transcend/transform a given social situation? Much like Brown Girl, Récits contains elements of the magical, the unexplained, which are closely associated with a character’s ability to understand and possibly temporarily escape or permanently transcend the dystopic society. Stanley Péan defines “le fantastique” as:

...une forme d’expression artistique qui propose des représentations fictives d’un réel où les lois de la plausibilité scientifique sont violées ou tout bonnement rejetées. Sera étiqueté fantastique tout récit introduisant un grain de sable dans la machine bien huilée de la réalité objective, sous forme d’un phénomène surnaturel qui peut aisément conduire à un bris irréparable dans le bon fonctionnement de celle-ci. Ce grain de sable, cette aberration, cette chose innommable, je la baptise implausibilité irréductible...(Péan, 162).
Although at the beginning of the narrative there is little evidence of anything resembling “implausibilité irréductible,” we are reminded of the “fantastique” tradition found in Québécois fiction: *La Chasse-Galerie* and *L’Amélanchier*. Both mentions are seen in a negative light, at first:

--- Cela tiendra à la fois de la galère et de la chasse-galerie : nous travaillerons comme des forçats et le premier faux pas nous précipitera en enfer.  
--- Qu’est-ce qu’une galère? demanda une voix.  
--- Qu’est-ce qu’une chasse-galerie? demanda une autre voix  
--- Qu’est-ce qu’un enfer? demandai-je.  
Absalon n’hésita pas une seconde :  
--- Des restaurants d’autrefois. À ce qu’on m’a dit...  
Il se tut et nous tourna le dos... (*Récits*, 13).

The people of Médilhault have seemingly forgotten the magical/mythical aspects of the past, both secular and religious. The fact that Big does not even recognize hell is telling. Also, it recalls the construction of Beaugrand’s version of *La Chasse-Galerie*, where the conditions of the coureurs des bois so closely resembles hell, we are lead to wonder if they really have to fear the devil at all.

Later, Big comes across a book in her studies: *L’Amélanchier*. Her father angrily throws the book into the corner without telling Big what the book is really about. Once again, we can see parallels between the intertextual reference to Ferron’s novel and Legault’s narrative. Tinamer is telling the story of her “marvellous” childhood, only to reject the magical aspects of it, and then finally come back around to them. Her father serves as a guide for her marvellous discoveries. Big is telling the story of her childhood, filled with the marvel of books, introduced to her by her father. She then rejects the books, but in the final story, comes back to embrace their potential. “Quoi qu’il puisse t’arriver, Abigaëlle Sarrazin,” she was told by her father, “efforce-toi de ne rien haïr”
(Récits, 24). And, like Tinamer, Big is able to remember the lessons of her father, to her benefit and the benefit of those around her.

Jacques Ferron was of course known for his radical politics, and the political allegories found in his story. L’Amélanchier is no exception. As pointed out by François Gallays, Ferron’s book:

...se laisse lire allégoriquement comme le récit de l’évolution du peuple québécois au XXe siècle: depuis la lecture analogiquement manichéenne du monde par les clercs (le bien, la campagne, le mal, la ville) jusqu’à l’effacement de cette dichotomie accompagnée, malheureusement, du danger que s’efface aussi de la mémoire collective la trace des origines (Gallays, 23).

The world that Legault has created has regressed into a state that is exactly the opposite of what is described in L’Amélanchier: in Médilhault, nature is to be feared because it cannot be controlled, and the city is to be loved and revered because it offers protection. But despite the ideas that Médilhault tries to put forward, the city-state remains limiting and destructive. The idea of the utopic pastoral and the dystopic equivalent of the malevolent city-state is not a new one, but Legault is once again playing with the clear one cause, one effect, one solution of the dystopic tradition.

Once again, like Brown Girl, there is a very close relationship between those who can access certain kinds of knowledge/power and those who can access le fantastique. Old mythologies have been replaced with new ones, and some even still remain. Absalon himself is the “victim” of an old wives tale: he is missing “la marque de l’ange”: “Quand nous naissions, un ange vient poser son doigt sur nos lèvres, pour les fermer à jamais sur le secret du ventre qui nous délivre...” (Récits, 73-4). And improbably, Absalon can remember everything that his mother said to him in the womb: “Je t’haïs, je t’haïs, je te tuerais, je prendrais ta pisse et je te ferai boire, je prendrais ton caca et je t’étoufferai avec...”
(Récits, 65). Absalon eventually gains the knowledge of books and is able to transmit this knowledge to other: something that his boss/master Marais was unable to do, despite his position of power.

This is just the first occurrence of “implausibilité irréductible” in the narrative. And the implausibility becomes more acute as the narrative progresses: the rats seem more informed and better organised that any “regular” character we’ve met so far in the narrative. The improbability of talking rats may be hard enough to accept, but what the two come to discuss is even more fantastique: “La Mort s’est fait chair...Elle est messagère du Procteur, dans la Muraille, avec un numéro de code bien en règle...” (Récits, 95). And she is, too. Mort (Moreau, Thérèse) is the daughter of a “putain de luxe” and a bicycle messenger for the Procteur. She is identified as death by her gold tooth and golden eyes. For a daughter of a whore, she possesses an incredible ability of insight:

— Les gens des fabriques n’aiment guère rêver, n’est-ce pas... Tu voudrais les frotter leur misère à coup de brosse dans la figure, tu te vois les giffant, les giffant, les rouant de coups, et ils pleurent et c’est trop pour toi. Tu as eu honte pour eux et maintenant tu as honte à cause d’eux...La bonne époque que nous vivons, tout de même! (Récits, 111).

And of course, she facilitates people’s transition to the afterlife, as seen in the case of Kin: “Comme il remontait avec elle vers l’éclaircie ondoyante, là-haut, qu’il voyait pour la première fois, il s’aperçut qu’il n’avait plus d’odeur et que sa douleur était restée en bas...” (Récits, 123). Mort also ends Lark’s suffering, in fact she is charged with it. With the help of the rats, she is transported to 20th century Montreal to try and hunt down Lark. Of course, Lark’s ability to travel (in his mind or otherwise) to Montreal is another
occurrence of "implausibilité irréductible." When Mort finally finds Lark, they both burn beyond any recognition.

Death in corporeal form is seen in this case as a positive figure. She is portrayed in the narrative as being a figure who cannot only offer insight, but also alleviate suffering. Death in the form of a mob of gold-tooth men is destructive and negative:

...Ce qui est frappant, c’est qu’ils sont muets. Pas un son ne sort d’eux, même pas un cri, rien. Ils sont vêtus d’un uniforme casqués et masqués. Ils ne disent pas un mot, tuent d’abord les hommes et les femmes adultes, les enfants, les vieillards et gardent les filles nubiles pour la fin...Enfin bref, ils violent les filles à la fin...Ils les ensemencent...Ces filles porteront la mort et la feront chair. Amen (Récits, 149-50).

It is interesting to note that the person telling this tale, the lone survivor from this attack is "une naine," and that the new baby has been born to the group of one hundred, the result of one such attack and who has a gold tooth. The sex of the baby is never revealed. The group of one hundred carried death with them across to the old world, but will it be a source of hope or a source of despair?

Kiev, the geographer, has an encounter with le fantastique during the last story. In a dream, he is visited by his dead brother, who is once again able to provide insight into the situation: "Tu avais compris, j’espère, qu’ils ne peuvent pas venir arrêter les puissants comme de vulgaires brigands et qu’ils nous cueillent ainsi?" (Récits, 143). In the dream, Kin punctures Kiev’s cheek with his fingernails, and in the next journal entry, Kiev reports that "Dans mon sommeil de l’autre jour, je me suis éraflé le visage sur des roches ou des épines, je ne sais pas" (Récits, 145). He also is worried when the baby is born with a gold tooth, a worry that isn’t shared by anyone else in the party, despite the apparent knowledge that death can procreate.
All of those who have been shown as being successful in the narrative have been those who exist outside of society’s norms: rats, the disfigured, those who can truly access le fantastique, the nomads, those who are anti-social. The group of one hundred embodies all of these qualities; in fact its members consist greatly of members of a circus or carnival group. The mention of carnival once again strikes up images of the old subversive, but non-rebellious behaviour of the Middle Ages. Kiev, although a member of the upper-caste, rejects his heritage and turns to this neo-community for survival. Not only has this neo-community rejected city-state associations, social associations, caste associations, they seem to have also abandoned linguistic associations as well: “Quelle langue parlait-elle? J’ai oublié” (Récits, 158). Also, the rebellion that this group has undertaken is non-violent. Rather than violently overthrow the existing structure, they have instead decided to exist outside of the structure. And those in the narrative, who exist outside of the social norms, have the best luck, the best insights and the best chance of surviving and thriving. The use of le fantastique further emphasises the distancing of those of in subalteren positions from those who are in legitimate positions within the society, which is, according to Pordzik, and important part of postcolonial heterotopia (Pordzik, 24).

Conclusion

“Nous sommes aux confins du monde. Finis terrae, la fin de la terre, et son commencement, devant moi…Chaque coup d’viron nous arrache cent cris cadencés dans une langue unique. La fin du monde sera pour un autre jour” (Récits, 158). This is how the narrative closes, with the group of one hundred carrying the books and the printing press across the waters towards the old world. The possibility again exists, despite the
dystopian society, for utopian aspirations. And how those utopian aspirations are to be achieved is one of the primary focuses of this narrative. Legault concludes that violent overthrow holds no promise of achieving utopian aspirations, nor can the hope lie in those who are legitimized by the society in question. But does history play enough of a role in this tale for it to be classified as critical, or are the historical references general enough to be considered postcolonial.

As shown in the first section of this chapter, the concept of history, of how history is remembered, is shown to be problematic: history does not necessarily contain concrete answers for either the reader or the characters therein. The “realist mode...of cognitive mapping that generates a diagnostic and critical account of the totality of oppressive society as well as that of the resistant eutopia” (Moylan 2002, 269) that Moylan talks about can be seen in Legault, but the “cognitive mapping” occurs with greater difficulty. The fractious story, the multiplicity of voices, the ambiguity within the narrative, all these qualities point to a postcolonial heterotopia. The various histories that are recalled by the characters and the variety of interpretations offered by the narrative differ from the specific history recalled by Brown Girl in the Ring. While it is clear that Legault also has specific conclusion and specific critiques, they are not made completely transparent, even by the end of the narrative. And while Quebec history plays a role in understanding the narrative, so too do other European histories. And of course, how we choose to interpret and understand these histories. For these reasons, I believe that Legault’s Récits de Médilhault is more suited to Pordzik’s term postcolonial heterotopia.
Chapter 4. Conclusion

What Are We Afraid of?

Ultimately, dystopias reflect what “we” are afraid of, what we fear in our present-day society, projected into the future. *Brown Girl in the Ring* and *Récits de Médilhault* reveal some interesting fears, some similar, some dissimilar. And how do these fears differ from or are similar to the “classic” or “traditional” fears of dystopian genre, as discussed in the introduction? In other words, how has the dystopian genre evolved through these two examples? One of the most obvious differences between the two works is the cultural heritage/history dealt with by each dystopia. This, of course, leads to the difference in sub-categorization. In *Brown Girl in the Ring*, although many different histories and cultural heritages are referred to (Native, eastern European, Canadian, etc...), the primary history and culture present is the Afro-Caribbean heritage and history of Ti-Jeanne and her family. In *Récits de Médilhault*, while the specific history and culture of Quebec and Montreal is alluded to, it is presented to the reader on equal footing with other cultures, histories, and heritages. One could even go so far as to say that *Récits* deals with the recent history of the Western World as we understand it (Europe, North America).

Although the cultural background of each work differs, a common fear seems to emerge: the fear of losing said cultural history. In *Brown Girl*, it is through memory and history that Ti-Jeanne is able to defeat Rudy, and also become a part of the greater community. Those characters in the narrative who are best able to survive and thrive within (and even outside of) the Burn are those who are aware of history and cultural heritage: the librarian, Romy Jenny, Gros-Jeanne, even in a certain way, the street kids.
The street kids have created their own type of cultural heritage ("We stick together, we can watch out for each other...We have rules..." [Brown, 67]), and have a strong connection to their history. Those who cut themselves off from history and culture are destructive forces and are ultimately punished one way or another: Ti-Jeanne early in the story, Tony, Rudy, and of course, the Premiere. Premiere Uttley does not grant the Natives their stewardship, not because of historical treaties, but because of political pressure; she does not denounce porcine organ farms because of moral reasons, but because it makes political sense. And of course, she looks away when a human is killed and a family destroyed in order to save her life. History and cultural heritage is forgotten, and in its place is self-interest.

In Récits, we are witness to the constant erosion of historical and cultural knowledge. Books, the main source of cultural preservation and historical knowledge, are illegal. Once again, those in power seem to suffer from the greatest disconnection: "rien ne se peut s'écrire qui n'est connu des puissants! Ils ont peur du feu, des animaux, de tout ce qui est vivant et incontrôlable..." (Récits, 23-4). Those who can access the past seem to have the best chance at survival (the rats, Big, Kiev, Absalon, Lark). Although Absalon and Lark are killed during the narrative, the fact that they both have lived as long as they have in the conditions of the society, and knowing what they know and looking like they do, is quite amazing. In fact, it is even noted on several occasions that Lark should be dead, that this was Mort’s most difficult assignment. As for Absalon, he lived long enough for his granddaughter to learn to read and remember, and ultimately escape to the possibility of a better life. It is Big, Absalon’s granddaughter, who ultimately convinces the group of one hundred to keep the books, in
order to preserve history, and the printing press, so that they might record their own. History, perhaps, will not be doomed to repeat itself.

Although both narratives take place in major Canadian cities (Toronto, Montreal), how the two cities are conceived in said dystopian state is quite different: Toronto has become a “donut hole,” with the wealth and power evacuating the inner city for the suburbs in Brown Girl, while Récits imagines Montreal as an independent city-state. Both authors, however, use walls to cut the city off: Toronto in order to keep what is inside from getting out, while the walls of Montreal keep the outsiders from getting in. While the direction of the flow differs, the wall in both stories creates the same, stark image: isolation. Those in either of the cities are isolated from the world outside, and their access to information is equally limited. Médiathèque has cut itself off completely so that “nous ne plus laisser contaminer par cette mentalité si différente, si peu conforme à ce que nous sommes...” (Récits, 39-40).

A similar sentiment is expressed in Brown Girl: those who did not fit within the proper qualities were left behind in the inner city. While the majority of those who were left behind were mostly economically “different,” those who did not share the same mentality of those who fled to the suburbs also stayed behind, such as Pavel and Paula. They were university professors, who are usually associated with the upper class, but they nonetheless stayed behind. The mentality of the of the inner city versus that of the suburbs is often contrasted by Hopkinson, through Ti-Jeanne’s musings about life in the suburbs and the contrast between the Premiere’s attitude and Gros-Jeanne’s attitude towards community. As a result of this isolation and difference, the Burn has been cut off from the outside world, shown in the time-line preserved by the librarian. Staying
with the scene where Ti-Jeanne visits the librarian, while books aren't illegal per say, as they are in Médilhault, people's interest in them, outside of economic value, has decreased, as well as their availability. This reflects back to the first point of similarity, but is also closely related to the accessibility of information, and the isolation of the cities: books also were historically the main way to transport information between cultures and countries. The pre-industrial state that both cities have degenerated to is also similar. Neither city has access to electricity, save for certain services (the screens in Médilhault, the red-light district in Toronto). Food is scavenged and the barter system has returned in both cases. Progress has not looked kindly upon either city.

Why the cities exist the way they do, or how society degenerated into a dystopic state are once again both similar and dissimilar. In Brown Girl, a long line of complex social and economic issues led to the degeneration of the inner-city, the peak of the conflict occurring during the Riots. In Récits, it is never made clear what the catalyst for the dystopic state was: books, the screens, or economic inequality. I would have to argue that it was in fact a mixture of all three. Both narratives offer the reader with the results of severe economic inequality. The poor have rebelled in Récits, leading the rich to wipe them out and maintain power. The poor in Brown Girl are cut off from society and now live, for the most part, in social and economic squalor. But even further back than the present of the novel, we see that the situation of Toronto was caused by economic inequality: the Native demands for economic rights over their historic land claims, the province's inability to compensate for international boycotts of their natural resources, a recession, the fear of the upper and middle class of losing their wealth. Economics play an essential role in understanding why either of the cities exists the way they do in their
respective narratives. Fears of economic inequality are echoed in the presentation of both societies as being highly stratified. In *Brown Girl*, the demarcation between the two classes is clearly illustrated by the wall around the city. In *Récits*, castes are always being spoken of: the slaves, the workers, those with tattoos. *Brown Girl* also makes a strong association between economic class and race: those in the inner-city as Hopkinson describes it are almost entirely of ethnic identity. While this association isn’t as clearly made in *Récits*, there are indications that class and physical appearance (and so perhaps race) are closely related. The celebrations for the re-election of the Protecteur are said to bring out the "castes subalternes"; a term often used in postcolonial discourse (see Spivak). Also, those who are featured in the story are very often physically deformed: Absalon, Lark, Big, Paulette the midget. Although racially, the story does not seem to feature anyone from a visible minority (save for Absalon, who seems to be Hispanic), it does however feature those who are "subaltern" in terms of both economic status and physical appearance.

Another similarity between the two narratives is who is telling the story, or whose stories are being privileged. In both cases, the narratives allow us to see multiple sides of the dystopic world. In *Brown Girl*, we are exposed for the most part to Ti-Jeanne’s perspective, but also Gros-Jeanne’s, Rudy’s and the Premiere’s. We see the dystopic situation from multiple perspectives, through multiple voices. In *Récits*, the number of voices is increased even further. Kin and Kiev, from the upper-caste, are given several narrative moments in the story, as are the rats, the prostitutes, the bike messengers, the keeper of the books, the physically deformed, death, as well as those who are just simply trying to survive within Médilhault. How the narrative of each story is constructed
reflects a possible solution to the dystopic state. The most complete picture and understanding of the dystopic state can only be achieved if a multiplicity of voices are heard, thus the complete narrative is in fact a multiplicity of narratives, creating a cohesive whole, the book. And the solution offered by each book is once again the weaving together of the multiplicity of voices into a cohesive unit. In *Brown Girl*, we see that in both Ti-Jeanne’s and the Premiere’s evolution: Ti-Jeanne sees the larger community around her, comprising of various and a variety of individuals, while the Premiere’s body begins a symbiotic relationship with Gros-Jeanne’s heart. In both cases, something new appears in opposition, and as a solution to the old: “Her body and brain where hers once more, but with a difference...In every artery, every vein, every capillary: two distinct streams, intertwined...She was healed, a new woman now” (*Brown*, 237); “I go do this for a little while, but I ain’t Mami. I ain’t know what I want to do with myself yet, but I can’t be she” (*Brown*, 244). In *Récits*, the “something new” is the group of one hundred. The differences among the group of one hundred is obvious: carnival performers, former prisoners, slaves, nomads, a member of the upper-caste, even death lives in their midst. As the novel concludes: “Chaque coup d’aviron nous arrache cent cris cadencés dans une langue unique” (*Récits*, 157). The language that they are speaking is never made clear; in fact the question of language is rendered ambiguous earlier on in the chapter. What is to be noted is that this wide variety of people have formed a new community in order to survive. Like *Brown Girl*, something new, something outside what already exists needs to be formed in order for there to be hope and change for the society. Also, this change that occurs in both the narratives, this new entity, happens outside of society’s norms: the group of one hundred has divorced themselves from the
social values of city-states and castes, while Ti-Jeanne finds a community within an area that is outside of the standard (the suburbs) and Premiere Uttley can only become something new through magic.

Magical Dystopias

These two dystopic narratives have effectively incorporated elements of both le fantastique/magical real and the dystopic. And the magical elements represent an opportunity in both narratives for the characters to think differently about the society in which they are victims. This, in turn, invites the reader to participate in unconventional dialogues concerning the relationship between utopia, dystopia, eutopias and their present society. The magic does represent, as pointed out by many theorists, but best put by Todorov, “...s’agit ici comme là d’une transgression de la loi.... l’intervention de l’élément surnaturel constitue toujours une rupture dans le système de règles préétablies...” (Todorov, 174). But this questioning isn’t limited, in the case of these magical dystopias, to the laws of society, but extends to the laws of the dystopian genre. The magical elements found in the two narratives are impossible to ignore: they play a central role in the narrative, a central role usually reserved for science and technology. And magic also seems to be presented differently in this central role: while science and technology is often portrayed as being a malevolent force in dystopian narratives, magic in the case of these two examples is portrayed as a possible means of transcending the dystopian state and providing the insight to move towards a eutopia.

There are many directions that dystopian theories can take in order to absorb this shift in technique. The most useful would be to keep Suvin in the picture when trying to understand dystopias. We can attempt to reconcile Suvin with the use of magic, showing
the possible application of the *novum* and cognitive estrangement in broader terms, which would include and not exclude magic. The features that estrange and the features that permit cognition are shifted. Magic leads to estrangement, but the use of a dystopian setting leads to cognition, because the idea of a negative future as a result of current socio-political practices has become normalized. Magic has become that element that "renders the real unreal and creates an atmosphere of unfamiliarity in which the reader may be brought to consider issues in a fictive context that the same reader would not notice" (Fisk, 9). The dystopian narrative, in its more traditional forms, had lost its effectiveness because it no longer rendered the "real unreal," and magic has moved in to revive the genre.
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