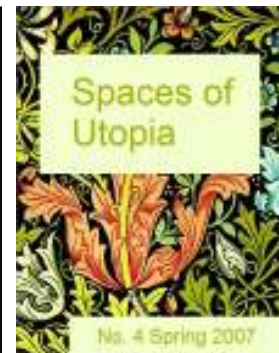


## Fragments and Crossroads in Nalo Hopkinson's *Brown Girl in the Ring*

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Is it possible to think of utopia outside western cultural values? Technological advances are often identified as something outside postcolonial "tradition", and consequently, any utopia that leans on the future rather than on a nostalgic, Edenic past, appears to be outside the creative boundaries of any postcolonial author. This is particularly evident when we examine science fiction (henceforth *sf*). As Uppinder Mehan argues, there is a close relationship between *sf* and the power structures generated by technological development: "[Sf] is as Western as Coca-Cola, big cars, and computers (...) in the Orientalist scheme the West is rational and scientific; the East is mystical and fantastic. Technology is a cultural artifact: it is value laden as well as instrumental" (Mehan 1998: 54). Nalo Hopkinson, who co-edited the *sf* anthology *So Long Been Dreaming* with Mehan, referred explicitly to this article in her introduction to the stories – all by postcolonial *sf* authors. She added a significant comment she received from an acquaintance, a black scholar:

He listened to my description of my story ['Riding the Red'], then asked, 'What do you think of Audre Lorde's comment that massa's tools will never dismantle massa's house?'

I froze (...) To be a person of colour writing science fiction is to be under suspicion of having internalized one's colonization. (Hopkinson/Mehan 2004: 7)

At the end of the text, however, Hopkinson states that she is more interested in changing a system of values that perceives technological progress as something

outside non-western experience, and consequently, literature that deals with it as a surrender to western oppression: “In my hands, massa’s tools don’t dismantle massa’s house – and in fact, I don’t want to destroy it so much as I want to undertake massive renovations – they build me a house of my own” (*idem*, 8).

In fact, many speculative tropes appear often in postcolonial fiction even though they are hardly ever identified as science or utopian fiction. This is because some issues, such as environmental control, cultural clashes and imperialism, are actually relevant to both genres. Thus, when the ideology of cultural and racial confrontation is challenged, speculative fiction becomes particularly useful in the creation of what Homi Bhabha refers to as counter-narratives. Counter-narratives, in Bhabha’s words, allow authors to “disturb those ideological manoeuvres through which ‘imagined communities’ are given essentialist identities” (Bhabha 2004a: 213). Bhabha’s view on the construction national identities (which he considers arbitrary, “imagined communities”) can easily be extrapolated to our own constructions of the Earth’s future, if we see this future as the construction of a utopian global nation, and humanity as a whole as one of these “imagined communities”. In this way, the importance of finding future-oriented utopian fiction by non-western authors becomes a key issue in our political and social perception of how, and by whom, the Earth’s future communities will be constructed. As Philip E. Wegner explains:

in the narrative utopia, the presentation of an “ideal world” operates as a kind of lure (...) to draw its readers in and thereby enable the form’s educational machinery to go to work – a machinery that enables its readers to perceive the world they occupy in a different way, providing them with some of the skills and dispositions necessary to inhabit an emerging social, political, and cultural environment. (Wegner 2002: 2)

A similar idea was expressed by Nalo Hopkinson in a 2002 interview, when she was asked to define speculative fiction (“spec-fic”), a label often used to comprise fantasy, utopian and science fictions. Her definition shows special concern with the human ability to control and change their environment. As in her introduction to *So Long Been Dreaming*, Hopkinson also uses here the concept of “tools”:

As to my definition of spec-fic, I describe it as a set of literatures that examine the effects on humans and human societies of the fact that we are toolmakers. We are always trying to control or improve our environments. Those tools may be tangible (such as machines) or intangible (such as laws, mores, belief systems). Spec-fic tells us stories about our lives with our creations. (Nelson 2002: 98)

*Brown Girl in the Ring*, Hopkinson’s first novel, deals both with tangible and intangible “tools” to transform its original oppressive environment. Her choice to set the novel in a dystopian Toronto was both as a practical and as a political choice. There is no geographical distance and very little temporal distance between the city Hopkinson resides in and the future Toronto she describes. As she said in an article about the novel for LOCUS magazine, this was intentional:

I left the setting in Toronto partly because I was writing so fast, it’s set where I live. I didn’t have to make up an environment. And partly because I don’t know a whole lot about how people live in the suburbs. If I have to describe somebody surviving in a hostile environment, that’s one I know (...) 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. (Hopkinson 1999: 77, italics in the original)

The collapse of Toronto was most likely inspired by the decay of a great amount of urban centers of cities such as the nearby Detroit or the Bronx neighborhood in New York in the 70s (Rutledge 2001: 36). In *Brown Girl*, the city

has been abandoned by the Canadian federal government and left in bankruptcy. The near-future city is virtually in the hands of a criminal organisation named “the posse”, which, as we will eventually learn, is controlled by no other than the protagonist’s grandfather, Rudy. In the novel’s prologue, Rudy is asked to go hunting for a viable heart to save the life of Ontario’s Premier Uttley, whose chances of re-election depend on her demagogic opposition to pig-to-human organ transplants. The faulty heart of Uttley is, as we shall see, a parody of situation of the “Burn”, the deteriorated urban centre of Toronto, which is occasionally referred to as the “core”. The novel portrays two opposing struggles to survive: that of Premier Uttley and the materialistic suburban world she represents; and that of the downtrodden society of the “Burn”, a society plagued by criminality and fear, but also where barter and community exchange have flourished.

More dualities and fragmentations appear throughout the novel. Thus, although *Brown Girl in the Ring*’s protagonist is Ti-Jeanne, the novel has a narrative composed of a multitude of points of view – among them, Rudy, Ti-Jeanne’s boyfriend Tony, and Ti-Jeanne’s grandmother Gros-Jeanne. In Hopkinson’s novel the story’s point of view does not belong to Ti-Jeanne exclusively, but rather, to the split narratives that oppose the complex social network of the “Burn” to the outside authorities who decide the city’s future. The story, thus, is as much the story of the “Brown Girl” as the story of the “Ring” she is found in. Split or fragmented identities appear often as schizophrenia in the novel. In fact, one of the inspirations for the novel was Hopkinson’s discovery of the great

incidence of this mental illness among the Caribbean immigrant population in the

UK:

[the researchers] had no real theories as to why, but part of their idea was that the imbalance that caused the schizophrenia was probably impelled in part by the culture shock of coming to such a different land and, being male, having fewer social resources.

The image caught me. And because I usually start with a female protagonist, I started with a woman who had some of those symptoms, but had no idea how to explain them. (Hopkinson 1999: 76)

Schizophrenia is actually a recurrent metaphor in postcolonial environments. As Homi Bhabha argues, anxiety must be incorporated as a key element in “narratives of the borderline conditions of cultures and disciplines” (Bhabha 2004b: 306) for anxiety resembles, in his view, Samuel Weber’s presentation of “a world [that] reveals itself as caught up in the space between frames; a doubled frame or one that is split” (*apud* Weber 1991: 61). Bhabha goes on to present Fredric Jameson’s view of schizophrenia as a basic metaphor of postmodern life, since “it is the schizoid or ‘split’ subject that articulates, with the greatest intensity, the disjunction of time and being that characterizes the social syntax of the postmodern condition” (Bhabha 2004b: 307).

Bhabha speaks of Jameson’s concept of postmodern time as a time where, in Jameson’s words, there is “a multidimensional set of radical discontinuous realities, whose frames range from the still surviving spaces of bourgeois private life all the way to the unimaginable decentring of global capital itself” (*apud* Jameson 1991: 413).

It can be argued that this is particularly evident for postcolonial peoples, who must reconcile a past of western imperialism with various local traditions and somehow create a coherent present from these certainly “radical discontinuous realities”. Of all, perhaps Caribbean literature is the most extreme example of these conflicts. As Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin argue in *The Empire Strikes Back*, the Caribbean is neither fully European nor African or American, and the region lacks even a language it can call its own; as the plantation economy made a strong effort to eliminate both the language and tradition of its enslaved Africans and the native Tainos, making them “subject to a tragic alienation from both language and landscape” (Ashcroft *et al.* 2001: 145). In the midst of an even more developed process of Jameson’s “decentring of global capital”, that of Caribbean immigrants transplanted once more, this time to western countries such as the UK or Canada, Hopkinson’s quote indicates how schizophrenia, both as a clinical and as artistic expression, still appears as an apt portrayal of such unresolved dilemmas.

Like the narrative, the city of Toronto itself presents another example of a fragmented reality. The first glimpse we get in the novel of this near-future Toronto is a vivid description of its geography. One of the first things we can perceive from this description is the opposition of the two communities we are already acquainted with through Uttley and Rudy:

Imagine a cartwheel half-mired in muddy water, its hub just clearing the surface. The spokes are the satellite cities that form Metropolitan Toronto (...) The Toronto city core is the hub (...) Now imagine the hub of that wheel as being rusted through and through. (Hopkinson 1998: 3-4)

The collapse of the city has been originated itself by a postcolonial conflict –

the fight over the land by the Temagami Indians, the original settlers of the area. At an exhibit made by the “self-appointed town librarian” (*idem*, 10), Mr. Reed, at Parkdale Library, we are made aware that the city has been trapped between an international embargo and the Canadian government’s disinterest in solving the problem, which results in a downsized police force. This makes criminality rise to unheard-of levels and finally leads to the desertion of corporations, institutions, jobs and middle-class citizens. By the time the Temagamis win the lawsuit, Toronto has become a “doughnut hole”, an urban space where the “burbs”, the affluent middle-class suburbs, surround a dilapidated city centre, the “Burn” (*idem*, 11). The collapse of the Bronx in New York City, which shows some parallelisms with the story of the “Burn”, is also a clear story of the devastating effects of fragmentation. The Bronx had been a middle-class neighbourhood (known as the “Beautiful Bronx”), but this changed during the fifties. Under the direction of Robert Moses, several new highways were constructed in the area, cutting across the borough. Among them was the infamous Cross Bronx Expressway, which literally split the neighbourhood in two halves and caused serious disruptions in its social fabric. The vast majority of the middle class fled to other neighbourhoods or to North Bronx, and further attempts for urban planning only managed to make the situation worse, to the point that landlords preferred setting their properties on fire rather than rent them (Birch 2001: 63-9).

While the “Burn” cannot be classified as a victim of urban planning in itself, the pattern of its downfall does reflect these issues at least in two major aspects: the flight of most of the middle-class white community and the ineptitude of

politicians to recognise and then stop the neighbourhood's decay, in great measure due to their lack of interest in what its citizens have to say.

Like the Bronx at its worst, the "Burn" is described later as a dangerous place where "pedicab runners" (as gasoline is not available and taxis cannot run) refuse to enter, and where the book's protagonist, Ti-Jeanne, must look around her constantly in order to defend herself from fights and the sexual advances of passersby (Hopkinson 1998: 9, 31). However, the "Burn" shows a strong sense of community and a strong will to survive, which can be seen in the collection of secondary characters Hopkinson introduces in the first chapter. Apart from the "self-appointed librarian", who we should assume took over the library as its original workers abandoned it, we can see a self-published newspaper that fulfilled the role of the main Toronto papers when they left, a man who reconditions bicycles and then sells them (*idem*, 12); and Paula and Pavel, two former University of Toronto professors that sell the products of their hunting and farming in the city's Allan Gardens park to the "Burn" community (*idem*, 11-13).

The strength of community collaboration is a theme dear to Hopkinson. It re-occurs in her second novel, *Midnight Robber*, and in her short story "A Habit of Waste", where one of its characters also re-discovers the possibilities of the hunting and gathering of his Caribbean childhood as an alternative to the inadequate official option, the food bank. This vitality of the inner city's inhabitants of *Brown Girl in the Ring* is the mirror image of the "burbs". The suburban gated communities are closed upon themselves and against the exterior, focusing on an individualism that causes uneasiness in Ti-Jeanne herself, in spite of its economic



and security advantages: “all she could imagine were broad streets with cars zipping by too fast to see who was in them, and people huddled in their houses” (*idem*, 111). On the other hand, the “Burn” enjoys a freedom very similar to what Mikhail Bakhtin identified in *Rabelais and His World* as the spirit of the marketplace:

The marketplace was the center of all that is unofficial; it enjoyed a certain extraterritoriality in a world of official power and official ideology, it always remained ‘with the people’(...) Thus the unofficial folk culture of the Middle Ages and even of the Renaissance had its own territory and its own particular time, the time of fairs and feasts. This territory, as we have said, was a peculiar second world within the official medieval order and was ruled by a special type of relationship. A free, familiar, marketplace relationship. (Bakhtin 1984: 153-4)

It is useful to note that the values of the Bakhtinian marketplace resemble Jane Jacobs’s own vision of working, realistic neighbourhoods.<sup>1</sup> Jacobs successfully fought and defeated the Moses administration in a plan for Greenwich Village similar to the one made effective in the Bronx (Burns *et al.* 1999: 514-520). In her introduction to *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, a book where she presented an alternative to such as Moses’ plans, Jacobs criticizes what she considers the underlying undemocratic spirit of grand urban schemes, which she identifies with a sort of “utopia” that belongs only to a planning elite: “As in all Utopias, the right to have plans of any significance belonged only to the planners in charge” (Jacobs 1961: 17). Although Jacobs appears so critical about utopian works, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* could be classified as one in its aims. The great difference from schemes such as Moses’ is that Jacobs leans on micromanagement rather than on a master plan that must be followed to the letter. The author defends the utility of the small stores such as the ones we see in

the “Burn”, and the uses of sidewalks as “contact zones”, which she compares disadvantageously with the institutionalised “projects” where, as in the “ ‘burbs” (suburbs), spaces are organised for determined uses and yet, she argues, have consistently failed to work because of their alienating, impersonal character. The difference, Jacobs contends, is that while institutional figures can be perceived as intrusive and impersonal, the sidewalk and the store owner breach the “almost unconsciously enforced, well-balanced line between the city public world and the world of privacy” (*idem*, 62).

This interlocutor role given by Jacobs to the store owners and the public sidewalk, as well as Bakhtin’s marketplace spirit, appears in a mythical form in *Brown Girl in the Ring* with its most notable supernatural character, Legbara. Hopkinson’s choice of this *vodun* spirit is well calculated. Zora Neale Hurston describes the god Legba or Legbara as an African-Caribbean deity responsible for crossroads, cemeteries and the opening of gates, including the gate of communication with other gods (Hurston 1990: 128). Maya Deren, on the other hand, emphasises his sexual role as procreator. Endowed with an enormous phallus, according to traditions in Dahomey, this “limb” is not a symbol of aggression but as a counterpart of the womb and the umbilical cord, all of which, like Jacobs’s sidewalk and Bakhtin’s marketplace, are liminal objects in charge of connecting, not bringing apart:

Whether as cord or phallus, Legba – life – is the link between the visible, mortal world and the invisible, immortal realms. He is the means and avenue of communication between them, the vertical axis of the universe which stretches between the sun door and the tree root. (Deren 1953: 97)

The three symbols Deren makes reference to (the womb, the umbilical cord and the phallus) can easily be identified in the novel as Ti-Jeanne herself, her baby and her baby's father, Tony. On the other hand, Legbara becomes in this way the ideal symbolic interlocutor between Ti-Jeanne's western, materialistic world and her family roots. The role of supernatural elements in this novel is intertwined with the complex relationship of its protagonist, Ti-Jeanne, with her Caribbean-Canadian identity, another of Jameson's "radical discontinuous realities" between the past and the present, the local and the global. Ti-Jeanne is the last of a line of supernaturally gifted women, even though she is reluctant to learn about her powers and their implications. Eventually, Ti-Jeanne is confronted by her grandmother, and after she agrees to learn about her faculties, her link with her patron spirit allows her to become an interlocutor not only for the traditions she has abandoned and her present life, but also for the disconnected worlds of mortals and spirits. Thus, for example, Legbara becomes instrumental in Tony's attempted escape from the city.

Tony resorts to Ti-Jeanne's grandmother as his last resort to escape his boss, Rudy, who has put him in charge of the hunt and murder of a heart donor due to his training as a nurse. His desire to escape it reverses the role of the city of Toronto as a land for immigration, and, by extension, of Canada as the end of the Underground Railroad that took slaves away from the US in the nineteenth century. For Tony, the city has become the opposite, a land of oppression, and his escape "out of Toronto and into the real world constitutes his only hope for an independent, safe life away from the "posse" and its criminal activities" (Hopkinson 1998: 111).

Gros-Jeanne invokes the spirits hoping that they might help her to smuggle him out of the city and into the suburbs without Rudy noticing him. Legbara intervenes by concealing his “spirit daughter” Ti-Jeanne from mortal eyes and, through her, her boyfriend as well. Hopkinson connects this episode with Afro-Caribbean tradition, as Legbara’s strategy consists in hiding the young woman “halfway in Guinea Land” (*idem*, 95). Guinea Land is the mythical land of the ancestors for many Africans transplanted to the Americas, and, as a matter of fact, many African slaves committed suicide during plantation times in order to return to this mythical native land (Dayan 1995: 259).

Legbara, with his control over life and death and transition matters, can have the power to conceal his protégés, and, on the other hand, the episode locates Tony (and, to a lesser extent, Ti-Jeanne) in a reversal of the Middle Passage – if Africans were enslaved in “Guinea” and brought over to the Americas, Tony attempts, through his concealment “halfway in Guinea Land”, a liminal contact zone, to escape to freedom from Rudy, the “posse” and his own drug addiction.

The figure of Rudy bears a large resemblance with a plantation overseer, not only in his complicity with the power structure of the Ontario government represented by Uttley, but also in his distortion of traditional knowledge in order to control the enclosed space of the “Burn”. Ti-Jeanne’s grandfather has actually received much of his knowledge from the same source as Ti-Jeanne herself, as they both have the same father spirit, Legbara. However, Rudy’s thirst for power has led him to violate supernatural laws – he uses *vodun* to blackmail or mentally control others, Tony among them, especially during his search for the compatible

human heart Premier Uttley demands. When such heart finally appears, it turns out to be the heart of Gros-Jeanne. To obtain the organ, Tony, who is being threatened with supernatural torture by Rudy, is forced to kill the old woman. Her death symbolises the death of an irretrievable wealth of knowledge, and after her loss, the balance that existed between Ti-Jeanne's grandmother and her grandfather Rudy is broken. The need to stop his activities becomes evident, and the responsibility falls on Ti-Jeanne.

Hopkinson chooses an emblematic location for her confrontation with Rudy. It is hard not to think of Foucault's Panopticon when we see that the posse leader has set his headquarters on top of the CN Tower of Toronto, a tower clearly visible from most spots of Toronto's metropolitan area. He has done this mainly because of the feeling of overpowering control it inspires:

He went to one of the windows to look down on the city that was thousands of feet below the observation deck of his tower. Toronto was in darkness now, except for the lights that picked out the malls with their independent power sources. To his left was the dark mass of Lake Ontario and the red glow of Niagara Falls on its horizon. This ruined city was his kingdom. (Hopkinson 1998: 199-200)

The transformation of the well-known landmark has a postcolonial undertone to it, as the tower has ceased to be a Toronto tourist landmark and has become, as a consequence of the city's abandonment, a watchtower for Rudy, marking the shift of power from the white middle- and upper-classes to Rudy's criminal organisation. Later in the novel, however, the tower will undergo a larger transformation, as it will be reclaimed to become yet another contact zone between worlds.

The second transformation, prompted by Ti-Jeanne, is related to power and cultural memory. Rudy's breaking of the spirit-human collaborative system we mentioned above is what brings his downfall through his granddaughter herself, who restores the traditions that her grandmother represented. As Legbara puts it: "Gros-Jeanne woulda tell you that all she doing is serving the spirits (...) Now Rudy, he does try and make the spirits serve *he*" (*idem*, 219). Only collaboration, not domination, will do. It is only after Ti-Jeanne understands this system that the tower undergoes its second transformation, from observation tool for a criminal organisation to a geographical link between the material and the spiritual worlds:

She remembered her grandmother's words: *The centre pole is the bridge between the worlds*. Why had those words come to her right then?

Ti-Jeanne thought of the centre pole of the palais, reaching up into the air and down toward the ground. 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. (*idem*, 221, italics in the original)

As Ti-Jeanne uses the tower to invoke the spirits of the dead and the heaven deities, the appropriation of the tower re-connects the past with the present, Ti-Jeanne's material world with the spirits, and the Toronto landscape with Caribbean traditions: "For like the spirit tree that the centre pole symbolised, the CN Tower dug roots deep into the ground where dead lived and pushed high into the heavens" (*idem*, 221). The tower's transformation is a parodic re-creation that opens what Homi Bhabha considers defines as the "Third Space":

It is that Third Space (...) which constitutes the discursive conditions of enunciation that ensure that the meaning and symbols of culture have no primordial unity or fixity; that even the same signs can be appropriated, translated, rehistoricized and read anew. (Bhabha 2004a: 208)

It is this “bridge”, a Toronto tourist landmark that has been, in Bhabha’s words, “appropriated, translated, rehistoricized and read anew” that allows Ti-Jeanne to summon both the higher spirits and the souls of Rudy’s dead and tortured victims, and it will be with their help that she is able to defeat him.

And as the gap between worlds is finally bridged, so are the two hearts presented at the novel’s introduction merged into one single body, as Premier Uttley receives her transplant. Contrary to what we might have expected, it is the heart (Gros-Jeanne’s heart), and not the patient, which is portrayed as rejecting the transplant. The plea the unconscious Uttley makes to Gros-Jeanne’s heart is ironically reminiscent of the discourse of governments towards minority groups: “*Stop that. You’re here to help me. Just settle down and do your job*” (Hopkinson 1998: 236, italics in the original). The heart, however, will not merely submit, rather, it will find a satisfactory solution for both Gros-Jeanne and Uttley. Just like in the case of spirits and their servers, it will be symbiosis:

*And then [Uttley] was aware again. Her dream body and brain were hers once more, but with a difference. The heart – her heart – was dancing joyfully between her ribs. When she looked down at herself, she could see the blood moving through her body to its beat. In every artery, every vein, every capillary: two distinct streams, intertwined. (idem, 237, italics in the original)*

Both Uttley and Gros-Jeanne will benefit from this new hybridized self. According to Baker, “[b]oth literally and figuratively, the body of the Canadian nation-state is fortified by the transplant of an ‘alien organ’” (Baker 2001: 220). Uttley recovers her health soon enough, but more importantly, Gros-Jeanne’s heart accesses Uttley’s power and makes her seriously consider making substantial changes in the “Burn”. This will not involve providing incentives to big business to

move in, as Uttley planned before the transplant, but rather, in a plan that Jane Jacobs would certainly approve of, the hybridised Premier will help the small entrepreneurs that have begun to bud due to the barter survival system the city's situation has fostered.

*Brown Girl in the Ring* moves, therefore, from the organ traffic ethics of exploitation to the symbiosis ethics of collaboration, and from a split, fragmented state to a state of reunion. This move, as we have seen, has strong political implications. Not only does it put the struggle for survival in inner cities front and centre, but also it allows us to glimpse an alternative future of re-birth and independence for them. This alternative future does not need to be obtained or validated by forces outside the community, but rather it is achieved through two means. Firstly, through Ti-Jeanne's reconnection of her past with her present, and the collaboration of different spheres of existence, both symbolised by the CN Tower at the conclusion of the novel. Secondly, by achieving a new hybridised body, Uttley and Gros-Jeanne overcome the conflict of polarised ethnic and economic identities in order to propitiate that "Third Space" that Homi Bhabha refers to, which would make possible "to begin envisaging national, anti-nationalist, histories of the 'people'" (Bhabha 2004a: 209). In this novel, the shift of perception needed to read supernatural and science-fictional tropes allows to discuss issues that may otherwise become blurred and hard to tackle with. Through this shift of perception, syncretism can appear as a solid presence in the figures of the CN Tower and the Gros-Jeanne/Uttley hybrid, and the dangers of surrendering to individualist ambition and suspending the collaborative system in the figure of



Rudy's downfall. On the other hand, the city, transformed geographically into a communal, global, multicultural and radically different world, embodies both the catastrophe of exploitation and the power of creativity and resilience.

## Note

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<sup>1</sup> Some of Jacobs's comments in *Death and Life of Great American Cities* have surprising Bakhtinian resonances: "There is a quality even meaner than outright ugliness or disorder, and this meaner quality is the dishonest mask of pretended order, achieved by ignoring or suppressing the real order that is struggling to exist and be served" (Jacobs 1961: 15).

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