

English 230 Worksheet for Friday September 23rd

"Message in a Bottle," by Nalo Hopkinson

Available as a [PDF in Brightspace](#)

Nalo Hopkinson published this short fiction in 2004. She begins her [bio](#) like so: "Powered by [ADHD](#) ...though the brake pedal probably reads [fibromyalgia](#). And if I'm going to stretch this metaphor past breaking point, the toolbox on the seat beside me might be labelled [NLD](#). After all, the flip side to 'non-verbal learning disorder' is arguably 'high verbal ability.' I'm not saying that my cognitive differences made me a writer — that would be flippant and untrue — but though they pose challenges, there are ways in which they can sometimes help. I write science fiction, fantasy, speculative fiction; call it whatever you want, my novels and stories are full of the unreal, the futuristic, the unlikely, the impossible. I was born in Jamaica, in the Caribbean. I lived for years in Guyana as well, and in Trinidad/Tobago. But the bulk of my life so far has been spent in Toronto, Canada. After about 35 years of that, I moved to the USA for a professorship in Creative Writing."

A lot happens in "Message in a Bottle," but let's attend to the trope of media as messengers: conduits or containers (like bottles) *and also* tricksters or guides (like storytellers). Kamla reminds us of this trickster history near the end of the story: "Sometimes interpretation is a trap. Sometimes we need to simply observe" (23). For Kamla, jumping hastily to interpretation risks misunderstanding others as well as the situation; equally important, it may neglect the nuances of communication in favour of self-interest or immediate access to information. Importantly, Kamla is our main character and one of our messengers. She's adopted by Babette and Sunil, and she *appears* to be quite young: a "precocious ten" year old (17). She's also infantilized by other characters, and she's distrusted and routinely questioned by them.

Near the beginning, Greg says, "I just don't understand them. They seem like another species" (2). Here he's speaking of children in general; however, he regularly speaks down to Kamla. She is doubted, too, because of her disability: "Delayed Growth Syndrome" (9), which Hopkinson makes up for this fiction. Later, in the second half of the story, we learn that Kamla is actually a 23-year-old from the future, with a PhD in her head (19, 20), and Greg doubts her yet again upon learning this fact: "She needs help; therapy, or something. . . . They all have this delusion. All the DGS kids" (20-21). It is only when Kamla appeals to Greg's ego that he begins to take her seriously—that he begins to listen to her. "'I'm a curator, Greg,'" she says (22). "I didn't know it until yesterday,'" she adds, "'but it was you I came for. That installation'" (22). He is flattered, at least until Kamla explains she has arrived (on a budget!) to acquire an object in his installation, not to curate his artwork or ensure his legacy (24). That object is the shell: "the mollusc that made this shell is a genius" (23). Kamla continues:

The unique conformation of the whorls of its shell expresses a set of concepts that haven't been explored before by the other artists of its species. After this one, all the others will draw on and riff off its expression of its world. They're the derivatives, but this is the original. In our world, it was lost."

It is hard not to laugh during moments like this one, speculative though they may be. As Greg's world converges with Kamla's, and their contrasting experiences of time collide, Hopkinson communicates several important things about media as messengers and about the curation of media in particular:

- Curation involves stewarding materials as well as other people's cultures and their histories (see Greg's installation, "Excavations," on page 11). It's not just about "stuff."
- When curated, a message that might otherwise be ephemeral (consider a face-to-face conversation, for instance) is extracted from its context and becomes an object with value. The mollusc's shell is one such object. We could also say it (not only Kamla) is also a messenger in the story. That is, not all messengers are human. They might be shells or molluscs.
- Recording or inscribing a message into an object makes it easier for people to access and share with an audience. A curator selects culturally significant materials *for* the audience, who, in this story, do not need to find or identify "[t]he unique conformation of . . . whorls" on their own (24). The irony is that Greg is unaware of the shell's value when he selects it for his installation. He selects it mostly for the sake of appearances or aesthetics.
- Once an object and its message are circulating publicly, a curator can profit from them and even police them. (See also Edgar Allan Poe's "The Purloined Letter" from 1844, for example.) In this case, both Greg and Kamla police the shell, but for different reasons. For Greg, the shell is part of his art. For Kamla, it is a "life journal" and "original" expression considered by her culture to be significant (23, 24), and she is a proxy (or messenger) for that culture. You could even argue that she is repatriating the shell in the interests of the future.
- Yet the language of a message exceeds its policing, not to mention its media. Think about how Kamla focuses on the "set of concepts" left by the mollusc in the shell. Those concepts are significant even if some people cannot fully understand them now (in the present; Greg's time) or later (in the future; Kamla's time) (23, 24). Something about language will always escape not only its materials but also its interpretation, hence the agency of art in this story.

"Message" concludes with a sense of uncertainty. Will the shell arrive in Kamla's future? Could Greg be a reliable or dependable messenger? Will he ensure the shell's safety? There is at least a hint of aspiration here. *A message in a bottle implies trust placed in an unknown addressee*: the will and the wish that someone out there, on the water or across the land, will receive your message. The shell becomes Kamla's dream deferred if you will. (See Langston Hughes's *Montage of a Dream Deferred* from 1951.) This cuts both ways: vulnerability is coupled with hope and trust (a theme in ENGL 230). From this perspective, "Message in a Bottle" conveys an important aspect of media: *how we sense and experience something cannot always (if ever) be explained away by how we make sense of it*. Maybe for this reason, Hopkinson encourages us to *believe* Kamla—to believe those who are constantly doubted, gaslighted, and told they are not old enough, "able enough," or "making sense" in society.

As you read "Message," I encourage you to consider the following questions and prompts:

- Your friend has never read this story. Describe it to them in two or three sentences.
- Hopkinson's language is often material. Describe how she uses simile ("like"), repetition (to create themes), *or* exposition (to provide background) to leave an impression on you.
- Hopkinson's language is also evocative, and text is her medium. Describe a moment when she uses words to evoke a particular image. Or draw that image.
- "Message in a Bottle" is partly about the role messengers play in society and culture, and there are many messengers here. Identify one of those messengers, describe the degree to which others trust that messenger, and explain why.
- What message do you think "Message in a Bottle" values most? Or, what would you say is the story's primary message? What does Hopkinson want you to think about, consider, or do?